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It is a writer's prerogative to keep his secrets. As such, I say only this: In all the universes, there is one where you *know* and I'm sure that it's the best one.

Echoes

I remember once accepting my mortality; on my deathbed, in nineteen eighty-six. I was an old man, reflecting on a life filled with idle regrets and ghosts of missed opportunities.

I also remember being a young man, in the nineteen nineties, fighting with a stranger in a bar, wondering if it was worth it.

Both memories were fragments of larger moments: moments of reflection that stuck in my mind as seemingly important, but ultimately little more than reflections on the wall of time.

There was also the storm. Standing in the middle of a cloud of rage and dust, while the surrounding street covered me in purple lightning and grey smoke. I watched as everything the storm touched changed and grew or faded and crumbled. A man ran out in front of me. His whole body turned into a ghostly echo in front of my eyes as the lightning came for him.

And yet, I was untouched by it.

I remember thinking about my theory and wishing I had some way of recording it. I couldn't remember what the theory was or even what I would record.

It was the blue lightning that came for me. Amid the purple and grey, a single bolt of blue, thrown just for me; as if Zeus himself had reached out and grabbed me.

I thought about how it could have been avoided; if only I had destroyed the device. If I had done more than simply opening the lock for Her.

Then came the silence, the darkness, and the pain. Flashes of moments and a jumble of images, like a million photos, raining through my mind all at once.

For the briefest of moments, I knew it all. Then, as if it were never there, I had a single thought. "*She had better be right this time,*" and it was all gone again.

Then there was *only* the silence, darkness, and pain.

Chapter One

Awake

I opened my eyes. A woman was looking at me with her face close to mine. As she came into focus, I saw her wide smile. I was lying down; she was leaning over me with loose blonde hair falling over my cheek and reminding me of something I couldn't quite place. She was beautiful. Her eyes were a deep green, and her lips a subtle peach. Her skin was pale and flawless.

As she stood straight, her face left my field of view. She wore dishevelled overalls; they looked alien on such a perfect form. "Kay! He's awake!" she called.

I was left, looking at the ceiling, it was made of a single white light. Struggling to sit up, I swept my vision around the room. It was large, with beds clad in electronics on each side of where I was. The floor was tiled with matte-white ceramic hexagons. Assorted machines on wheels dotted around it. A window to my right looked into an office.

The blonde woman put a firm hand on my shoulder and with surprising force kept me from rolling off the bed. She tapped some buttons on the wall behind me. It lifted to support a sitting position. I rubbed my neck and stretched my arms out. I felt fatigued, sleepy.

Another woman had appeared to my left. She was shorter than the first, with tanned skin and wild black hair in a messy bun at the back. She wore an unbuttoned doctor's coat. Underneath it, I could see a skin-tight grey outfit made of a rubbery but metallic fabric. She wore glasses with lights and

buttons on the side of the frame. Her lenses flickered a little as she looked at me. She stretched out a hand, a green ball appeared in her palm. It startled me and I flinched.

“Relax, Jon. I just need to check your brain activity.” The green ball in her palm buzzed and threads of purple and red light shot out to move across my head. They looked like little fish nibbling at something. The strands flickered and pulsed as they appeared and vanished in quick succession. I had no idea what to make of all this, it didn’t feel like I was in any danger, so I just sat there.

“Where am I?” I asked. The doctor tapped the side of her glasses and one of her lenses flashed blue for a second as she studied me. “You’re in the Earth embassy, on Central Prime,” she said in a distracted tone.

“I can’t remember how I got here,” I said with an unintended sense of panic.

“That’s okay, Jon. You were involved in an accident, an ‘Event Storm’ of some kind. We expected memory loss,” she replied. With a hand gesture, the threads of light vanished. Another gesture and the green ball in her palm vanished too. She took off her glasses and slid them into a pocket in the lapel of her coat.

“It’s as we expected,” she said to the other woman. No memory of anything since the original storm, and his memories of the pre-storm are a mess right now.”

“What does that mean?” I demanded.

“I’ll process these scans. Give me a few minutes,” the doctor said and left to the office at the side of the room.

“Hi, Jon,” the blonde woman said.

“What’s happening?”

The woman sat on the side of my bed. I moved to give her more space. “Jon, there was something called an ‘Event Storm’, and you were in the middle of it when it hit. It’s not the first time you have been in one and, like last time, it has reset

your memories.” She sounded serious and had an undertone of sadness.

“Reset my memories?”

She smiled. “Right now, it’s a jumble of things, but we expect you will remember your old life first.”

I reached back in my mind, trying to piece together the fragments I could find. I knew my name was Jonathan, I had been something of a researcher. There were some small moments and the occasional face or interaction, but nothing that flowed in any order. “I don’t understand.”

I thought about the lights and the green ball and the flashes of images I could remember. “Am I in the future?” I asked, aware of how absurd that sounded.

The woman seemed to think about it for a moment, and then shrugged. “No. You’re in the *now*. But from your point of view, I guess you are.”

“Did I time travel here?” I could almost hear the insanity in my voice.

Without hesitation this time, she answered, “No. You lived your way here.”

The woman offered me her sad smile again. “I promise I’ll fill you in on every moment you forgot, but right now I have to tell you the important stuff.” She looked over at the doctor’s office and back at me. “My name is Elizabeth Michaels, Libby. I’m your wife.”

My eyes went wide. “My wife!”

She gave an involuntary flash of a smile at my response before continuing, “The memories you still have are from a version of the world that is nothing like the actual history. Things are going to be hard for you. We’re not on Earth. Humans are not alone in the universe. I’m a *NOLF*, and you’re functionally immortal.”

It spilled from her fast, as if she was desperate to get the information out. Her short monologue was so well worded, so surgically delivered that I assumed she had practised it. I

wanted to laugh, but I could tell from her expression that she was serious.

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I just stared at her while I searched the fragments of moments that I could recall. I remembered being an old man and being on my deathbed, but that memory was older. There were fractured images from after that. In a wave of panic, I looked at my hands and arms and pulled at the hospital pyjamas that only then I had realised I was wearing. I was young!

The panic faded.

I was young.

Libby was looking at me, concerned. I owed her an explanation. "I... I have a memory of being very old." I worried that I sounded insane; a worry that was starting to feel like a companion to me now. She grinned. "I have no idea what the storm did to you, Jon, but you have never been old. You will *never* be old."

"Because I'm immortal?" I felt my eyebrow raise as I spoke.

The doctor was back next to my bed. "Yes. You're immortal," she said casually. "To be clear: you absolutely can die. But not from gas, poison, radiation, electrocution, asphyxiation, or old age. You are one of only three humans alive who are what we medically refer to as 'bio-static.'"

I didn't know what her casually delivered words meant.

"Bio-static?"

"Yes. It's medically very complicated. I'll be happy to go through it with you at some point," she said. She put on her glasses and looked closely at my eyes, one at a time.

"How did I get this way?" I asked.

The doctor put away her glasses and took a device out of her pocket. It looked like a tiny black rectangle with a flickering screen floating in front of it. She pressed some buttons as if noting down her findings. "You? No idea," she said. She seemed to realise she was being rude, and added, "Something happened before the first time you lost your memory."

“And the other two?”

“We were born this way.”

“We?”

She looked at me awkwardly. “Jon, I’m not *just* your doctor. I’m your granddaughter.” She smiled and gave me a little wave.

“Granddaughter?” I exclaimed, instantly turning to Libby.

Libby shook her head. “Oh, I’m not her grandmother!” She was quick to say. She was amused by my assumption. “Believe me, you’ll soon realise how absurd that thought is!”

“Aygah, your first wife was my grandmother... she went missing a long time ago,” the doctor said, without looking away from her notes. She glanced up at me and put away her note-taking device. She stretched out her hand. “I’m Doctor Ka’ona Michaels, or ‘Kay’, to my friends. It’s nice to meet you again, grandfather.”

I shook her hand.

I stared at Kay, desperately trying to remember her. She was beautiful and confident, with an aura of sincerity that leaked out of her. I wondered about her mother.

“How long have I been...” I searched for the right words, “Out of it?” I asked.

“Two months” Libby replied.

Kay nodded to Libby and gestured to her office before walking away. I followed Kay’s lead and thrust a hand out to Libby: “Jonathan...” I paused to check my fractured memory, to be sure I knew my last name. “...Michaels. Husband and father, I’m told. It’s nice to meet you, Libby.”

She moved my hand away and hugged me, burying her head in my chest.

“I thought you were lost,” she said. Hugging her back came naturally and she appeared to welcome it.

“I’m so sorry. I don’t know what to say,” I whispered.

She took a few sharp breaths, as if fighting back tears, and held me tight for a while. When she eventually separated from me, it would have been impossible to tell, by looking at her

face, that she had been crying. She still looked perfect. Her face was impeccable. I was struck by a feeling of awe for this woman; it was true that I had no memory of her, but I somehow knew that I loved her.

“Are we...” I stumbled for a moment. “Are *we* okay?”

Maybe she wouldn't feel the same way about a husband who didn't know her anymore. She laughed through sad eyes.

“You're Jonathan Michaels. There's no one else like you in all the universe. Memories or no memories, you're still you, Jon!”

That made me feel more at ease. Whatever sort of person Jonathan Michaels was, Libby loved him, and that filled me with confidence.

A beeping sound came from her arm. She moved so she could see it. The bracelet she was wearing flashed. A black line zipped out from it above her wrist. The line blinked like an old TV-set and a screen appeared, hovering above her arm. She pressed floating buttons on the projected screen. A woman's face appeared on it. She looked a lot like Kay, but far more intense. Her lips moved, but I couldn't hear anything.

“Yeah, he's only been awake a few minutes,” Libby said. The woman on the screen spoke more; it looked like she was walking.

“First thing in the morning, I promise,” Libby replied. “I'll tell him. See you in the morning, Jo.” With a hand gesture, the screen vanished.

“That was Jo. We're going to go and see her tomorrow.”

“I guessed,” I replied.

“Joanne is Ka'ona's mother,” she added.

“Oh! So that makes her my...”

“Daughter.”

Kay returned from her office, yawning. “Okay, Jon, all your scans came back clean, and the memory fog should go away over the next week. As expected, you're medically perfect. You can go. I'll catch up with you tomorrow for some more ba-

sic tests, but there's no reason to keep you here." She yawned again. "Libby, I can't really let someone with no memories go running around Central. Can you sign to say you'll look after him? I know you will. It's just got to be official, is all."

Libby agreed without hesitation. Kay walked back to her office.

"So, what do we do now?" I asked.

"Are you ready to meet the world?"

The hospital pyjamas hadn't been on my mind until that moment. Libby passed me a bag with clothes inside. She nodded as if she knew what I was going to ask. "I'll go sign the release forms," she said and pulled a curtain around the bed.

I was pleased she had left. It would have felt weird changing clothes in front of her. We may have been married, but to me, at that moment, she was just a very attractive stranger.

I pulled off the hospital shirt and looked down at myself with a little surprise. I inspected my torso: I was muscular and toned, there were scars over my chest and arms. They didn't look new. My left arm had massive scarring and markings above the elbow. They somehow struck me as electrical burns, though, I had no idea how I could know that. The lower arm had no blemishes at all. I checked my hands. The left one was smoother than the right, it looked... newer? What could these people's medical science be capable of? I flapped my hand open and closed it and decided I would ask about it later.

My legs were also scarred. That probably meant a good share of scrapes over the years, but I didn't feel like a soldier, or warrior. That wasn't me. I didn't feel like someone who would wake up in a hospital room with no memories, either though, now I thought about it.

The clothes inside the leather hold-all weren't what I expected. The trousers felt and looked like denim but had no weight to them. They stretched when I tugged on the material.

Then there were socks. Just socks. Socks don't often surprise you. They were black. Cotton.

The shirt was basic, the material was a simple grey cloth that, like the jeans, had very little weight. It was quite thick, with long sleeves and a lace-up neck. It reminded me of a pirate shirt. I put it on, wondering if maybe that was what I was: a pirate. I grinned at the thought of it.

The next item was a jacket. It was well worn and actually had weight to it. It was brown and made of synthetic material, with a delicate silver weave running through it. It had a fabric hood that didn't quite match the rest of it but in a pleasing way. I slipped it on. It was obviously mine. The signs of wear lined up with my elbows and shoulders in a way that can only be created with extended use. There was even a repaired patch of material on the left arm that lined up with my 'newer' arm section. I didn't remember this jacket, but it felt like mine. It was comforting.

At the bottom of the bag, there was a wallet and some boots. The boots were rugged and hardy. I put them on. They didn't feel like boots. They felt... great. Apparently, footwear was a solved problem in this new world.

The wallet was a simple vinyl fold. In it, there were computer chips the same size as credit cards and an ID on a transparent flap. It stated my name 'Doctor Jonathan Michaels', I was a doctor! And my job 'Mercia: Research division'. The photo was of a heroic-looking gentleman with a square jaw and a brown ponytail over his shoulder. I checked: I had no ponytail. My hair was scruffy and long but not as long as the picture. At least I was still able to recognise my own face.

There was a green card with a long number on it. On the back of it, in tiny writing, it read 'Central Prime - First Bank'. It was probably how I paid for things. I slipped the wallet into one of my trousers' pockets.

Before I zipped up the bag, I noticed I had missed something at the bottom. It looked like the bracelet Libby had been wearing but much chunkier and... retro? It was thick and

black, with a silver ring around it. It had two big buttons on the side; one seemed to slide.

I put it on. The silver ring lit up and spun with bright blue light for a moment, then dimmed to an ambient glow. That seemed right, whatever it was, it was working now; I assumed.

I took a few deep breathes before stepping out of the curtain. It wasn't out of fear though, I felt safe with these two people, but there was still a lot to learn and figure out. The adventure was on the other side of that curtain. It was daunting.

I stepped out.

Libby was still in Kay's office. I walked over realising, I felt *great*.

I tapped the wall to let them know I was there. Kay was sitting with her feet on her desk. Her skin-hugging uniform went from head to toe even the shoes were formed into the garment. I thought for a moment I should have considered it revealing or inappropriate, she just looked so natural in it. Most of the medical coat she still wore was on the floor under the chair; her glasses were slid into the pocket on the coat's lapel. Libby sat on the edge of the desk with a nervous look in her eyes.

"Well, you certainly *look* like your old self," she said with a forced smile.

"Maybe the new you can get a better dress sense," Kay added, offering us a good-natured grin that morphed into a yawn. "Now, please, go home so I can leave."

Libby took my hand and guided me out of the medical room. The corridor outside was wide and had that same lighting covering the ceiling. There was a plush light grey carpet and pale blue walls. No windows on the walls, only paintings. They were mostly space scenes and cityscapes.

There were other people in the corridor. They all wore uniforms similar to Libby's overalls, but far tidier and more formal. They were talking to each other and walking, not ob-

viously paying much attention to Libby and me. Still, I couldn't help noticing the odd stolen glances that Libby attracted as we walked. Should I have felt jealous?

I didn't.

Instead, I was gleefully drinking in the sights, sounds and smells. It was the only place outside the medical room that I had seen in this new world, at least as far as I could recall. We walked down a few more corridors until we came to a large open area that seemed to intersect multiple corridors. Quite a lot of people were milling around, chatting. Some were talking to the screens on their arms.

The place had large square beams that I soon realised were elevators. We walked to the closest one.

My attention was captured by a pale man with red eyes across the room. It wasn't his complexion or eyes that startled me: he had a large pair of wings tucked in close behind his back. He was talking to what looked like a robot. It was a humanoid figure, made of several metallic balls, with one larger ball for a head.

"Is that normal?" I asked, quietly, gesturing towards them.

Libby looked over at them and back at me.

"Those are called people. You will see a lot of them." The doors opened, and we stepped into the elevator; the doors closed. There was a screen on the wall. Libby tapped the button that said 'street'. The elevator started upward.

"People have wings and metallic friends?" I asked.

"Some people have wings, and some people *are* metallic friends. Yes."

I shrugged. It didn't *feel* right. But Libby seemed so unphased by the sight that I figured I might as well accept it.

The elevator moved fast; the momentum was a little jarring. With a bump, it stopped. "Ready?" Libby took my hand again. The doors opened.

We stepped out of the elevator and into the street.

It was night and lashing with rain, the neon blues and purples of the sky lit the street beautifully. The buildings were tall, some had holes in them, with shuttles going in and out. Music was playing from somewhere distant and there were people everywhere. They all dressed so differently. The street itself was a flood of neon lights and strange sounds; it was all so alien and so incredibly exciting. Libby tugged my arm for me to step back as a truck-like vehicle approached. It had no wheels: it floated on a cushion of rich blue light. There was humming as it went by. I stared at it in awe.

“Welcome to Central Prime, Jon,” Libby said.

We walked through the rain for about ten minutes. We passed shops and food vendors with little carts, and people of all different shapes and sizes: some were very pale like the one I had seen by the elevator; some with wings, some without; some looked like normal humans, like Libby and me. Some were metallic, robot-looking things. There were even these elf-like people who all seemed to be in a rush to get somewhere. Just a while before, I had been entertained enough by a corridor; the street was a wonderland.

Libby gestured towards a large and well-lit double-doored building.

“Our home,” she said with pride. We passed through the glass doors and as they closed behind us, the street sounds vanished.

I looked back through the glass and smiled to myself. Whatever this world was, I was now shielded from its ambient glory.

A robot sitting behind a desk blinked at us. It looked like it was made of old steel pipes, with one large green eye atop a stalk instead of a head.

“How’s it going, Doors?” asked Libby.

“Hello, Elizabeth!” the robot replied. It had no mouth, but its large eye flickered as it talked. “Jonathan! Welcome home!”

“Thank you.”

I looked around. The lobby was quite big, with marble flooring and old brass lights. It was nice but very old fashioned compared to the things I had seen just outside. Libby was ruffling some of the rain out of her hair.

I went over to the robot. "What *are* you?" I asked, looking closely at its eye.

"My name is Doors," it replied. I prodded the eye. It was a projection, floating above its pipe neck.

"I see you did not recover your memories yet, sir," it said.

"Oh my gosh! Doors! I'm sorry!" Libby pulled me away from the robot. "Jon! Don't poke people!" she said.

"Sorry," I said to the robot.

Libby apologised again and dragged me to an elevator. The doors opened as we got close, but there was only a pale blue shimmering light behind them. I didn't have time to think about it; we stepped in and were instantly stepping out into another large room.

"What was that?" I asked, feeling suddenly nauseous.

"It's called a Fold, it's a microscopic fold in the fabric of space. Err, magic elevator," Libby shrugged, realising that the science was going to be lost on me, for now.

"Teleporter?" I asked, regaining my sense of place.

"Yes. But only short range and in straight lines."

We were high up above the street. There was a large glass window across the wall. A red sofa against the window made a horseshoe shape with a coffee table in the middle. The table was piled with small rectangle screens. The carpet was fluffy and black. The room also had a large fireplace in a brick column that seemed to throw out no heat; it *looked* like real fire.

Libby kicked off her boots. "Welcome home," she smiled. For the first time, it seemed genuine.

“We live here?” I asked.

“Some of the time.”

I stood by the window, in awe of the city below. It was a myriad of colours and lights. There were shuttles of different shapes and sizes moving between buildings. One roof below had a glass dome on it, with an entire forest inside.

Slowly, I looked up. It had been impossible to see the sky when we were down in the streets, but from up here I couldn't miss the two huge moons above, throwing down purple light as blue clouds passed it. Actual spaceships flew across the vista.

I opened my mouth to say... something. I wanted to note the scope of it all, but I had no words.

Libby tapped me on the shoulder. “When you're done basking in it, kitchen's through there. Find something to drink and eat or whatever. I need to get changed,” she said, pointing at a door off to the side.

I nodded, happy to do as I was told. At least it meant I didn't have to think much about it. When I finally wandered into the kitchen, I felt a bit like I was in shock. My first hour in this world and I was mentally exhausted.

The kitchen was a far smaller room than I expected. It was bright, with only a single countertop and no cupboards. There was a metal square on the wall. I stared blankly at it for a moment, then waved my hand at it. A screen appeared, floating in the air.

“Uh-uh,” I muttered to myself. I pressed the button that said ‘beverage’, then scrolled up and down the list. I played with it, more than actually trying to select anything. It had some pressure to it. It did look like a projection, but it also had a sort of resistance. I could pass my hand through it, but it felt like passing through water but without the wetness. After a moment of entertainment, I noticed a button that said ‘favourites’, I pressed it. The list was split into ‘hot’ and ‘cold’. I decided on cold. There were only three options saved: water,

iced coffee and something called 'Elix'. I pressed that one because I knew what water and coffee tasted like. How strange it was, not knowing one's own 'favourite' drink. I selected 'x2' from the list, and it blinked out of existence. There was a humming sound and the back of the metal square slid open, revealing two open bottles with 'Elix' on the labels. I picked them up. 'Elix' advertised itself as an 'alcoholic wine from the Elven forests of old'.

I drank from one of the bottles. It tasted spicy and dry, with a warming after-effect.

I liked it.

I walked back into the main room just as Libby came out through a door at the far side of the room. She wore purple silky pyjamas and had her hair in a ponytail. Her beauty still stunned me; I felt myself freeze up as I looked at her. She had her eyes on me when she sat down on the sofa, I was suddenly very conscious of my staring. I walked over and sat down near her, keeping enough distance so as not to feel intrusive. "Apparently I like this Elix stuff," I said and passed her one of the bottles.

She looked at me blankly. "Oh! You got me one?" She said in surprise.

"You don't like it?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"Do you want me to get you something else?"

Libby looked away.

"Jon, I need to tell you some things." She was nervously playing with her hair. "Kay said I should bring you here and try to show you everyday, normal things. To see if anything comes back to you."

I nodded. The advice made sense.

"She also said I shouldn't overload you with information right away," she continued.

"You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to. We *are* seeing Kay again tomorrow, right? And I meet Joanne." I

suppose that was my way of trying to make her worry a little less. All I wanted from her was friendly company until I could remember something.

Libby took the bottle from me and put it on the coffee table. She leaned forward as if getting ready to unload a lot of information. I was very interested in what she was about to tell me but I was distracted by a strobing light that flashed across the window.

“Get down!” she screamed.

A shuttle’s engines fired into the glass and the window exploded into sand.

The sudden change in pressure between the high altitude outside and the climate-controlled inside caused all the air in the room to rush out. Between the sound of the glass shattering, the engines firing and the lack of oxygen, I had no idea what was happening and less idea what to do. I felt a hand on my shoulder. Libby was there, standing tall in her purple pyjamas, unaffected by it all. She helped me to my feet and pulled me towards the doors we arrived through.

The shuttle was still there; it rotated around so that the front was even with the window. A hatch started opening. Libby tapped some buttons and the door slid open with the pale blue light ablaze. I think she was about to toss me through when the shuttle fired a beam weapon at the wall. She pushed me to the ground and rolled out of the way of the beam as it destroyed whatever technological magic made the doorway work. The light blinked out and I could see that all that was behind it was a small cavity and a series of now broken electronic panels.

My survival instinct told me to crawl as fast as possible towards the fireplace. The safety of the brick column beckoned me. I was keeping low and wishing the apartment had stairs. I peeked back at the shuttle as something was coming out of it. Down the ramp that was now entirely open, a small truck-looking boxy thing was rolling down on a single tank

track. The sides of the truck had large gun barrels on it. As it spun around, I realised it was tracking Libby.

It began to fire, regular bullets now instead of energy beams; Libby rolled and jumped to stay slightly ahead of its movement.

“Call Doors!” she shouted. I ducked back behind what was left of the fireplace pillar. Was there a phone? An emergency button? I looked at the kitchen door and wondered if that panel could be used to call for help.

I heard a cracking and Libby screamed. She had been hit; a rope-like tether had grabbed her. I wanted to help, but I didn’t know how anything worked. How could I hide and do nothing?

I stood up and showed myself. “Hey! Whatever you are! You missed me!” Maybe the distraction would allow Libby the time to get free.

“What? No! Hide!” Libby screamed.

The tank-like top part of the killing machine turned to me. Libby grunted and jerked her body. She used the tether to pull herself closer to the machine and grabbed its truck shell, letting out a scream. The thing started to move and rotate as if to knock her aside. She continued pulling and grunting until the motor started to smoke. With one final push, she leaned towards the window and pushed it out.

The tether still held her tight; a fraction of a second went by before she was dragged out with it.

“No!” I dashed to the window only to see her, and the tank disappeared into the neon soup. The shuttle was still there, hovering. It rotated as if it had noticed me. It didn’t seem like it mattered anymore.

Was there any way Libby could have saved herself? Was there something down there to catch her?

A sound came from behind me. The broken cavity of the entrance flashed with electrical glory, as it forced itself to life.

The lights came on uneven and sparking. I was ready to make my escape as a figure stepped through.

It was the stick figure-like, pipe body of Doors, the robot from the lobby.

“I am glad you are well, Jon. Please get out of the way.” It dropped down to all fours, like a huge dog. I stepped to the side and the projected eye that made up his head vanished. It took me a moment to realise what I was seeing: the barrel that was Doors’ neck fired a white stream of energy into the shuttle and clean out the back of it. Doors scurried towards the shuttle, without stopping the beam. It sparked, and something in the back exploded. The beam stopped and the shuttle fell from the sky as if it was a cloud that had suddenly turned to a brick. There was a whistling sound as it went down, but we were too high up for me to hear it hit the ground.

“Libby! She pushed a tank out of the window!” I blurted. My face felt warm with fear.

“Really? How heroic!” Doors said as his head blinked back into place.

“She was dragged out with it! She’s dead!” I screamed.

Doors stood up again, regaining a humanoid form. “Sir, you are getting a communication that may make you feel better.” He pointed at my arm. I hadn’t noticed my bracelet pulsing and buzzing. The ambient blue light was now a spinning red. I lifted my wrist and pushed one of the buttons. A black thread shot out of it and a screen blinked to life above my wrist.

Libby’s face.

“Jon! I just saw what happened. Doors shared his vision with me.”

“Libby!”

“I wanted to explain things before *that* happened. I’m fine. Kay is on the way, and so is Joanne.”

“How are you still alive?” I was frantic.

“I’m a Nolf, a non-organic. My body is synthetic. I have spares!” she said, giving me a comforting smile.

Something inside of me screamed. I was a combination of relieved and terrified.

I tapped the button on the bracelet. The screen blinked off and the black thread retracted. I sat on the floor. My eyes stung and I felt tears down my cheeks. With Doors standing guard next to me, I allowed myself to lay down on the floor and breathed a deep sigh.

Wherever I was...

Whatever had happened...

I was not equipped to deal with any of it.

Chapter Two

Wanderlust

I was vaguely aware of Doors messing with something on the wall at the edge of the room. A combination of trauma and good old-fashioned stress forced me to ignore him. I lay on the floor, confused and post-terrified. Was there was a word for that? *Post-terrified?*

I wanted to pretend that I was back home, having a nightmare; this was made a lot harder because I didn't really remember where home was. My fractured memories were in such disorder that the closest thing I had to comfort was remembering myself as an old man on my deathbed.

As these thoughts took shape, I heard an electric twang and humming. The noise of the high-altitude sky was silenced. A new blue light penetrated my eyelids. I slowly opened my eyes, wondering what terrible thing would happen next.

I saw the ceiling. It was mostly burned-out black squares now: the ceiling lighting had been smashed at some point during the attack. Only about a third of the room's ceiling tiles were still lit.

Finally, I sat up and looked around. The window was covered by a translucent flickering blue energy. A force-field. Doors walked over to me; I took the hand he offered and stood up.

"The security shield failed to fire when the shuttle appeared," he said.

I brushed the dust from my jacket. "This?" I pointed to the shield.

“Yes, Jonathan. The blue-shield was supposed to fire in a proximity event. I do not know why it did not. It should have been impossible for such an attack to take place,” he explained.

I stepped towards the flickering shield and lifted a hand to touch it. I stopped myself and glanced at Doors. He was watching me but made no attempt to stop me; I went ahead and pressed my palm against it. It felt cold, which surprised me. Cold and tingling. It felt like sand, but it had the sensation of movement under my hand.

It was as solid as a wall. It looked like translucent blue television static, up close. I removed my hand and looked at it. Then I tapped the blue wall with my knuckle. It was like tapping a thick pane of glass.

“This is a force field. A real force field!” I exclaimed.

“Well, yes. It is.” Doors replied.

An electric buzzing came from the half-broken light that served as the main door. I turned quickly, half expecting another attack. Doors stepped in front of me and lifted his arm, which instantly transformed into something that to me looked a little like a shotgun.

Ka’ona appeared, holding a large bag.

“Relax! It’s me,” she said.

Behind her came another woman, a little taller than Kay. She had similar tanned features, but neater hair. She was dressed in a uniform: a grey-blue shirt with some insignias on it, thick cargo trousers and boots. In her hand, I saw what was unmistakably a weapon. It looked like a toy ray-gun but radiated its dangerousness.

Kay was still wearing her doctor’s coat and silver-grey skin-tight outfit underneath. She came over to me and let go of the bag. It lit up with a blue glow and floated on the light. It opened on its own at table height. She put on her glasses and, with a gesture, made that green ball appear.

“I’m fine!” I said. “All I did was hide behind the fireplace,” I added. “Libby was the one that wrestled a tank out of the window.”

Kay nodded. “You’re physically fine. But your stress levels are through the roof.”

“No shit!” I replied.

She smiled. “Yeah; I guess so,” she put her glasses in her pocket. She closed her bag. With a little tug, the light went out, and she placed the bag on the floor.

The other woman walked over. She was so comfortable with that ray-gun that it looked like it was a part of her. She stood squarely in front of me and lowered it. “You’re awake for an hour and I have to get my big gun out,” she said with a raised eyebrow.

“Joanne, I presume?” I stuck out a friendly hand.

She slapped away my hand and hugged me. “It’s good to have you back again, dad,” she said into my ear before letting go.

Doors saluted. “Ma’am.”

“Knock it off, Doors. I’m here on family business. No need for that.” She handed him her gun.

“Ma’am?” I queried.

Kay grinned. “Oh, Libby didn’t tell you?” she pointed at Joanne with her eyes and a nod of her head. “Meet the vice-president of the Sol Alliance.”

Joanne shrugged.

“Awake for less than an hour and the boss got called in,” I said, impressed. “Where’s Libby? Is she okay?” I asked.

“The moment her avatar was terminated she began syncing a new one. It should be online in about three hours,” Joanne replied.

“She didn’t get enough time to tell you much, huh?” Kay observed.

Joanne interrupted: “Well, I doubt you want to stay here now. I’ll get a room assigned to you on Mercia.” She pressed her bracelet to summon a screen.

“Mercia?” I asked Kay.

“Oh, Mercia? Yeah, that may be the safest place this side of Earth.”

I made a quizzical face by reflex.

“It’s a Sol... err, Earth government ship. It’s in orbit and it’s the toughest battleship in the galaxy. By a *long* way,” she replied.

Joanne told us it would only take a few minutes to prepare transport.

“How did *you* get here?” I asked, wondering why we couldn’t just take her transport back.

“Blue-tube,” she said.

“You’re not taking him in one of those!” Kay barked.

“No. With his memory thing going on, I figured a shuttle would be a better option.”

“Good! Blue-tubes stress *me* out and *I know* what to expect,” Kay sparred.

“What’s a Blue-tube?” I asked.

“It’s a terrifying ride in a scary death slide,” Kay replied.

Joanne corrected her with a hint of sarcasm: “It’s a highly efficient use of pressure differential and a remarkable implementation of blue-field science.”

“You engage a personal shield, then they target you with a blue-field...” Kay realised that was knowledge I didn’t have and rephrased: “You turn on an energy armour thing. Then they shoot a tube-shaped force-field down from the ship and you shoot up at almost a thousand meters a second. It takes like five minutes and there’s no oxygen.”

“We don’t require oxygen,” Joanne pointed out and wandered into the door that I imagined led into the bedroom.

“It was designed for cargo lifts, not people,” Kay told me, quietly. “She uses them like they’re theme park rides.”

“As someone who *is* cargo. I can confirm. It is terrifying,” Doors added.

Joanne came back with a bag.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Libby messaged me. She wanted me to pick up some personal items.” She arranged the strap on the bag. “It takes three minutes, not five. It’s exhilarating.”

“No, it’s not,” Doors threw in.

Joanne let out a giggle and asked: “Can you get the Fold to point to the roof, Doors, please?”

Doors walked over to the light door. He pressed some buttons and it blinked off with a less than comforting spark and a pop. He leaned in and pulled at wires in the now exposed cavity behind it. When he pressed the panel on the door again it lit up with an electrical crackle. “Fixed!” he said proudly, and handed Joanne her gun.

“Come on, Dad.” Joanne stepped through the door.

“You coming?” I asked Kay.

“Not unless she orders me to. The president and I don’t get along.”

“I thought she was vice president.”

“She is. It’s her boss that I have an issue with.”

As I stepped through the door, I was in the middle of a very windy rooftop. The air was too thin to get enough oxygen to fill my lungs.

“How high up are we?”

I realised that I was struggling to breathe. Joanne pressed a button on her bracelet and then tapped something on the screen that briefly flashed into existence.

“We are way above where humans should be without an environmental suit. Shuttle’s coming now.”

I could hear her as if I was wearing headphones. “I can’t breathe.”

“I know. You don’t need to. Just relax.”

I realised I had stopped trying to draw in air, but wasn't actually suffocating.

"Bio-static," she said slowly, over-pronouncing each syllable. "We don't require oxygen."

A shuttle approached us in the dimly lit purple-blue sky. I got a little nervous as it got closer. The last shuttle I had been that close to birthed a death machine.

It was about twice as large as a van and seemed quite well armed, which at first only served to make me even more uneasy. It was panelled in chrome with large black metallic rivets across it in a grid pattern, a big dome window at the front. There were large and very aggressive guns on stalks at each side and an even larger one on the top. As it came to rest, I could see the bottom was equipped with a smoked glass panel; it lit blue as it came closer and it settled with a fiery roar as it came to rest, floating on blue light. It rotated as a glass panel on the back lost its blue glow. The entire back of it opened and turned into a ramp for us to walk on.

A figure in a full helmet and thick padded suit walked out, carrying a gun similar to Joanne's. I heard a male voice in my implied headphones: "Sir, ma'am. We are ready for extraction."

Joanne gestured for me to move. The figure saluted her as she passed. I followed. No salute for me.

The figure got on the shuttle too, but walking backwards with his gun ready. As he did so, Joanne tapped a large button on the edge of the opening and the back of the shuttle closed. The figure stood in position until the light on the edge of the doorway went green, which I assumed meant the hatch was completely closed.

He let go of his gun and I saw it was strapped to him. He pushed it to his back and messed with his helmet. As it came off, a jet of gas blasted out from its seal. The face of a rugged man with a tidy brown beard was revealed. "Ma'am," he said, with a respectful nod.

“Hello, Kieran,” Joanne replied.

The inside of the shuttle reminded me of military planes I remembered seeing on TV, but with the odd science fiction looking light and accoutrement dotted around. I wondered about that fragment of memory. There were bench seats down each side and two large flight seats at the far front. There was another figure sitting there, pressing buttons. “All aboard?” came a woman’s voice.

“Hi, Lea. Just strapping in,” Joanne called in reply.

The man, Kieran, walked to the front of the ship and slammed himself into the spare seat, stowing his helmet in a hatch and pulling across a strap.

Joanne sat down and pulled a hanging strap from the wall; there was a clip on the end that attached it to the bench she was sitting on. She then grabbed another and pulled it to cross herself in the other direction. I watched her and then did the same.

“Good to go,” Joanne called to the front.

The shuttle shook for a moment and the light through the front window changed from a deep purple glow to the black star-speckled eternal night of space. I watched in awe as an energy shield lit up at the front with red and yellow fire, but just for a moment. I assumed it happened as we left the atmosphere. The silence of space suddenly filled both my ears *and* my soul. “We’re really in space?” I asked.

Joanne wasn’t watching the window like I was. She had summoned her bracelet-powered screen, was busy tapping away. None of this was new to her. She had work to do.

After a few seconds she glanced up at me: “You can unstrap now if you want to get a closer look.”

I couldn’t unbuckle fast enough. I got out of the seat and walked to the front. I leaned in between the two large chairs, looking out of the window between Kieran and Lea.

“Hello,” I said, politely. It was a curved and clear window. There were no support beams or wires to obscure the view

out of it. Space was all I could see. “Where’s the planet? The moons?”

“Err... Behind us, sir,” said Kieran.

“His memory is messed up,” Joanne shouted from behind me.

“Really?” asked the other woman.

“Yeah,” I confirmed with a shrug.

“I’m Lea Ra-kay, nice to meet you.” She stuck out a gloved hand for me to shake. I did.

“No way! You, for real, can’t remember me?”

I shrugged again. “No, I’m sorry, miss Ra-kay.”

She looked shocked and quite entertained. I was suddenly struck by how delicate and pristine she looked under her flight goggles and helmet.

“So, I could be anyone to you?”

I was trying not to be rude, but I was also deeply distracted by being actually in space. “No idea, I’m sorry.”

She started muttering to herself and pressing buttons. Kieran was watching a large screen that seemed to be related to the weapons system.

“Okay then, Doctor Michaels, sir, let me show you the planet.” She over-emphasised ‘Doctor Michaels’, which made it sound like an attack. I heard Joanne snigger from behind me.

The shuttle rotated without seeming to slow down. We flew backwards and faced the planet that appeared to be behind us rather than below. It was stunning. A purple-blue mix of clouds and lights with two moons off to the side, a sky full of clouds and lights. My mouth opened in awe.

I felt Lea’s eyes on me.

“Who are you, then?”

“Don’t worry about it,” she replied with a grin. “Oh, you had better get a tight grip on the back of that chair. I’m going to show you the good stuff.”

With that, she pulled a lever and pressed a button. I saw the world outside spin and flip as the shuttle repositioned itself and fired its engines. It wasn't quite enough to push me over, but I certainly felt the motion and we all rocked to the left for a moment. The shuttle did a little corkscrew, the engines growled with power and the stars shifted quickly.

"You ready to see it, Jon?" Lea asked.

"See what?"

She nudged the controls, just a little and I realised that we were now much further from the planet: it was a lot smaller. She nudged the controls again and the shuttle kept rotating. A massive asteroid came into view.

"Welcome to Mercia," Lea said.

The asteroid rotated towards us, and I saw that it wasn't just a big rock. There was metal and windows and lights and landing pads all across it; it looked like there was a city poking out of half of it. It was hard for me to gauge scale at first, but the size of the thing started to sink in. It looked as if a circuit of paths and lights were drawn across it. It was, indeed, a city. As it spun, it presented two massive smoked glass fields like the panels on the shuttle that had fired the blue-light engines. These were as big as towns.

"How is this possible?" I asked, almost to myself.

"Humans are occasionally fucking awesome," Lea replied.

We nodded at each other. She raised her hand in a very familiar way. I slapped her hand with a grin. High-fives, it seemed, were a timeless celebration.

"Jo, we're landing," Lea called to the back.

Joanne grunted in agreement, still tapping away on her screen.

"Do I need to strap in?" I asked

"No, sir. No atmosphere, no problem," Kieran replied.

The shuttle came close enough to Mercia that it filled the whole window. Kieran tapped some buttons and his screen flicked over to a map of the asteroid.

“We good to land?” Lea asked and Kieran gave her a nod. She pressed a lot of buttons and turned some dials.

“Matched speed and rotation, lowering shuttle now.” She pulled down on the stick in her hand and the shuttle jolted; the horizon of the massive asteroid filled our vision. The sudden and very real realisation that we were in free fall made my grip on the chair tighten in concern.

“Engaging ground clamp,” Lea barked, almost automatically, as we slowed and came to a soft landing.

The shuttle rotated and I heard the sound of metal-on-metal echo through it. “Docking clamps,” Lea said before I asked. The shuttle shook as it was moved backwards, and the light changed when we entered a tunnel. We tilted back and forth for a moment and a massive iris closed as we came to a stop. We were pointed slightly ‘nose up’ and that iris was directly lined up for the shuttle’s exit. The door at the back opened and sound streamed in. Kieran and Lea unbuckled and stood up. I darted to the back of the shuttle and stepped out into the larger ship.

The hangar was massive. It was vast in every direction and packed with activity. There were ships of all shapes and sizes, some as big as cruise ships and some that looked no larger than motorcycles. Several people in bright blue jump-suits were carrying tools and parts. People were coming and going. I couldn’t even see where the hangar ended.

Joanne put a hand on my shoulder. “Dad, I know it’s still a lot for you, but I need to get some sleep. I have a lot on in the morning.”

I nodded. Joanne pointed to the right; we took a few steps before I heard Lea call me: “Hey, Jon!” I turned back to the shuttle. “Can we get a drink when you get your memories sorted?” I agreed and gave her a salute.

“Who *was* that woman?” I asked Joanne.

“Lea? She’s your best friend!” she replied.

“Oh? Really?”

“Yeah. You and Libby spend more time playing cards with her than you do actually working.”

I felt warmed inside. I had family; I had at least one good friend *and* I had been into space. The stress and fear of just a while before seemed like another life already. I had no memories, but I had a lot of exciting things ahead of me.

Chapter Three

Libby

We walked for a few minutes, following the wall of the hangar. It was the only wall I could actually see: this place was massive. I had counted twelve floors, going by the windows. There was a constant chaotic buzz of action. The people in blue suits ran around everywhere and there were explosions of sounds when the iris opened and closed, letting ships in and out.

It was like being at a busy port.

I guess it *was* a busy port.

Joanne stopped. I almost walked into her. A door opened to reveal the inside of an elevator. An actual elevator. We stepped into the tiny silver room as the doors closed behind us. Joanne pressed some buttons on the screen attached to the wall.

“Security required,” said a robotic voice.

“Joanne Michaels,” she barked. The elevator began moving.

“I’m putting you in a guest room on deck ‘A’. It’s on the same floor as the president and I. Outside of Earth itself, it’s the most secure place in the known worlds. I promise no one will try anything here. We *will* figure out why you and Libby were attacked.”

“Libby. What about Libby?”

“Her avatar is syncing. I’ve told her which room you’re in.”

“Avatar,” I mumbled to myself as the doors opened. I think I was just trying to get accustomed to the word.

The corridor made it look like we were in a hotel. There were rooms on each side, a thick red carpet along with it,

and classical looking floral patterns on the wall; the occasional framed artwork accenting it. The art was displayed on screens, not canvases.

We walked past some rooms. Each had a metal sliding door and a large number on the front. We stopped outside number eleven. Joanne stood in front of the door. It opened.

“Remote control?” I asked.

“DNA and brainwave scan. You, Libby and I are the only people with access to it. Libby uses an access code.”

The room was dark. As Joanne stepped in, the light came on.

It looked like a hotel room; a really nice hotel room. There was a sofa with a coffee table in front of it, pointing at a large painting of Mercia, the ship on the painting was slightly animated. I assumed this too was a screen.

There was a dining table behind it and a door that led to a large bedroom. The walls had hull height glass windows that showed a beach outside. I must have looked quite confused as I looked out through them, because I heard a quiet chuckle from Joanne as I stepped closer to the scene.

“It’s a simulated view,” she said. “You want the exterior ship view instead?”

“Yes, I would like that,” I said with a childlike excitement.

Joanne strolled over to the coffee table and leaned over it; a screen appeared. She fiddled with it and the beach morphed into a star-field.

“It’s a live feed,” she said. She put the bag she had taken from the apartment on the table. “See you in the morning. Message me when you’re up and about,”

she yawned. She reminded me of Kay as she did. The resemblance was startling. I noticed they looked about the same age, which was a little odd once I thought about it.

“Good night,” she said and walked towards the door. She stopped a little short and glanced back at me.

“It’s nice to have you back, Dad.”

“Thank you.”

The door closed.

I went over to it and inspected the little screen on the frame. “*LOCKED*,” it said, in big red letters.

I looked around for a little, then sat on the sofa. It was the first time I had been alone since waking up. That had been only a couple of hours ago. Felt like a lifetime.

I looked at the bag on the coffee table and thought of Libby.

I was thirsty. I walked to the back of the room where the larger dining table was. There was one of those silver squares on the wall next to it. I waved my hand at it: that same interface I had seen in the apartment blinked into existence. There were no favourites saved. I pressed the microphone icon.

What did I want?

“Elix,” I said.

The screen vanished. The metal square pinged open after a few seconds. There it was: the familiar bottle. I carried it back to the sofa and sat down. I had only managed one or two sips of that last bottle, in the apartment before everything happened. The memories of the attack flashed through my mind like scenes from a film.

I looked at the picture of the ship in front of me and then over at the windows showing the idly drifting stars. My eyes moved back to the painting. I was so startled I almost dropped my drink.

Libby’s face was looking back at me, against a pure white backdrop on the huge screen. It looked like I was looking through a window at her.

“Hello, Jon,” came her voice, as if she really was right in front of me.

“You scared me! Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m fine. I was going to tell you about what I am, and how it all works when the window blew out.” Her voice was comforting to hear. Everyone had said she was fine, but I was still worried, until now.

“Are you coming here, soon?” I asked.

“I’m syncing this avatar as fast as I can. I did some tweaks, so I should be no more than half an hour. This ship has a surprisingly slow network.”

“Where are you?”

“What do you mean? Right now?”

“Yeah, can I come to you?”

“Oh, Jon. I’m projecting this image from my data core.”

I could only offer her a frustrated look. I felt like I understood, but it was still a lot to accept.

“So, you really are a robot?”

“No, I’m a non-organic,” she replied. “I’m as alive as you, but my mind is kept inside a data-core, not directly in my body. ‘Robot’ is a little offensive, to be honest.”

I thought about that for a long moment. “You are alive? Like, a real person, right?” I realised that may have been an offensive question too, but I cared more for clarity than politeness at that moment.

“Yes. I’m real. I’m a result of a — *very* — complicated series of events and some pretty advanced self-editing computer code. I assure you I’m as alive and as real as you are.” She paused for a moment before adding. “I’ll not answer that question again, my love.”

Her voice sounded intense. I could feel I had almost crossed a line.

“I’m not promising to be sober when you get here,” I said with a smile and a wave of my Elix bottle.

She laughed at me. “Oh, Jon. You’re bio-static. You can’t get drunk.”

I stared back at my bottle and took a far braver draught from it than I had dared before.

“In that case, I’m going to find something stronger,” I said, more to the bottle than to Libby.

“I’m going to see if there’s any way I can speed this up a little more. I’ll be there as soon as I can,” she said.

The screen blinked back to the painting of the ship. When I leaned forward, the screen on the coffee table blinked on. There were a lot of options I didn't understand. I scrolled around until I saw 'main screen' and tapped it.

The list showed: 'Static, Entertainment, Communication, News'. It was set to 'Static: Default.' I pressed 'News' and the menu options changed to 'Central, Human, Vampire, Elf, Brick, Thinker.' It seemed quite concerning that 'Vampire news' was an option; I made a mental note to question this, as well as all the other options, next time I got a chance.

I eventually pressed 'Human' and leaned back with my feet on the coffee table. The news feed showed a 'ticker' of headlines on one side and had a pretty normal-looking news show on the other side.

The man on the screen was talking about a 'Correctionist' attack on Central Prime. I saw the building I had been in earlier, but from street level. A gritty handheld video showed the shuttle that had attacked us as it fell out of the sky and came crashing down towards the ground. People were screaming and running. The sky lit up with a pale blue shield as the shuttle approached; it smashed against the shield and parts of it flew off, skidding across the blue surface above the people and vehicles. When the shuttle exploded, the video feed switched back to the news anchor.

They showed that same clip of video repeatedly. The man talked about how this had been the first 'Correctionist' attack carried out outside of Sol Alliance space. In response, the Moon-ship Mercia had been moved out of orbit and was preparing for a 'warp-dive' back to Sol.

The anchor reminded the audience that this was all to be confirmed by experts later.

I must have been hypnotised by the screen for longer than I realised. The door to the room opened and Libby stepped in. She was wearing a jumpsuit that was far too large for her and

had bare feet. She pulled the outfit up from the pockets and shuffled in. The door closed behind her.

I walked over to her. We met in the middle of the room. She took her hands out of her pockets and the outfit sagged comically. She put her hands around the back of my neck, tenderly embracing me.

Libby was a little shorter than me, but not much. She put her head against mine and said, quietly:

“Jon, I know you don’t remember anything at the moment. Everything is confusing and new to you right now.” I tried to speak, but she shushed me and pressed her lips to mine in a deep kiss.

“Don’t question if I’m a real woman or not, okay?”

“I was just trying to understand,” I whispered, with a pang of shame as I realised I had my arms around her waist. There was no doubt to me that she felt real.

Chapter Four

Awake, again

When I woke up, there was light streaming in from the adjoining room. I smelled coffee, and maybe bacon. I threw my jeans on and wandered into the main room. Libby didn't *have* to sleep, but she needed to *sync* more data to her new avatar, so I had been given the bed. I had no idea what time it was when I had finally fallen asleep.

Libby sat at the large table, wearing a flattering black dress with pink and blue butterflies printed on it. Her blonde hair was perfectly styled to look as if it were not at all styled. She was stunning, and I was shirtless, with messy hair and dishevelled jeans.

There was a large pile of bacon and eggs on a plate and a steaming coffee pot opposite her.

"I figured food would get you to move," she said.

I sat at the table, still feeling half asleep. I poured a cup of coffee. Looking at Libby again, I was very aware again that I looked terrible. It was certainly too late for first impressions though; I just said, "Good morning," and picked up a piece of bacon.

We were silent. Libby seemed happy enough to watch me eat, which was unnerving.

"Questions?" she said calmly after a few minutes.

"What's a bio-static?"

I ate the bacon.

“Bio-static isn’t *really* a medical term. You, Jo, and Kay are the only ones.” She seemed in the mood to give me all the information I wanted.

“Okay. What does it actually mean?”

“Your body has a default state that it maintains. For reasons that I don’t understand fully, you don’t require air. Cold and heat barely bother you. As far as we know, you don’t age at all, but we’ll come back to that one in a thousand years or so,” she smiled at the last part.

“Ka’ona said I can’t be poisoned or gassed either,” I pointed out as I went on eating.

“True. Radiation and energy don’t seem to affect you either. We don’t test the more dangerous theories because if they were wrong, it could go badly for you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Truth is, we’re not sure. You seem to use every last drop of nutrition you eat, and that’s all you need. Oh, *and* you can eat whatever you want. Doesn’t matter. As long as nutrition goes in, you stay healthy and strong. You never gain or lose weight. You even grow limbs back. Eventually.” She pointed at my arm. The fresher looking one. “That happened before I met you.”

“But I can die? I’m not bulletproof or anything, am I?”

“No. You *can* die. You are not bulletproof. Luckily for you, no one uses bullets. It’s all lasers and plasma rounds nowadays,” she smiled. “And no. We have no idea how or why you got this way. Whatever happened, it happened before the first time your memory was wiped.”

“First time?”

“Yeah, it’s called ‘*The Event*.’ It was the year nineteen hundred.”

“Nineteen hundred? What year is it now?” I almost choked on my bacon.

“Nineteen ninety-nine.”

“What? That can’t be right.”

I assumed she had misunderstood the question.

“I know. You have memories of the mid-nineteen-nineties that are completely different from this. No spaceships, no aliens. No non-organic wives. No immortality either.” Libby remained calm and methodical in her explanation.

“Yes! Exactly! How can that be?”

“That, my love, is the very thing you research. Everyone who was alive in nineteen hundred woke up on the first of January and had two sets of memories: one with early automobiles, gentlemanly top hats, and more than the occasional horse-drawn hansom. The other, the real set of memories, was all spaceships, microchips and aliens. You have more recent incorrect memories, we don’t know why.” She sounded a little more serious than was appropriate for that information, perhaps to make sure I knew that, she wasn’t joking.

“Two sets of memories? Two realities?”

“Given that you are the only human still alive who was living when it all happened, you are the most qualified person to seek the answer.”

I allowed myself to get lost in thought for a while. Libby didn’t seem to mind my mental absence.

“The only person still alive who can remember both realities and I get my memory scrambled. *Twice?* That doesn’t sound like a coincidence.”

“It’s almost like there’s a reason the most powerful star-ship in the galaxy is your personal taxi service,” she smirked.

I ate the rest of my meal in silence. The bacon was good, the eggs were too dry, the coffee was exquisite.

The rest of the morning had me deep in thought as my brain went through everything I had been told. I didn’t have enough mental cycles left to get excited about the shower being a magical light that could clean me *and* my clothes with a few flashes. After that, I distractedly followed Libby through the corridors of the ship to the briefing room. I barely spoke and when I did, it was without excitement. It was functional. My mind was elsewhere.

We eventually arrived at a large, official-looking door that had two guards standing at it. One guard was one of the pale white people with red eyes; no wings, though. He was wearing the casual blue uniform that I had come to associate with 'Sol.' The other guard was human, a short man who looked like he was taking his guard duty far too seriously.

"We have a meeting with Vice President Jo' Michaels," Libby said.

The serious guard raised his arm and summoned a screen. I could see the reverse side: it showed names and pictures. He pulled a device out from a large pocket on his trouser leg. It looked like a table tennis bat with a green grid on it.

"Palm," he barked.

The other guard, the pale one, gave him a quizzical look.

"I'm a NOLF," Libby said, annoyed.

"What are you doing, Tol? Everyone knows who she is." He seemed embarrassed by the request on our behalf. "Tol is new."

Libby snatched the bat and presented it to me. I put my hand on it and it pinged with a green rim.

"Thank you, sir," the serious man said.

He then pulled out a small cube and pointed it at Libby. He pressed the top with his thumb and a red light-thread shot out at her. She looked annoyed as it darted around her green eyes. The light thread went green. The guard stood up straight and nodded. The door opened.

"Sorry," the pale guard added, as we stepped into the door.

I was surprised to realise it was an elevator. It seemed to only move for a moment before the side opposite to the one we entered opened.

The room was large and round with live map-screens on the walls and official-looking people all around. There was a raised level all around the edge, giving the feeling of being in a pit, or control room. I could see doors and guards on the upper level. Some vaguely familiar music was playing in

the background. Multiple news feeds were being played on screens around the walls, and there was a large round table in the middle of the room. It all felt very important and chaotic.

A tall, pale man with red lips and large wings walked over to us. He was wearing an ornate brown suit that looked like it should be from Victorian London, with a waistcoat and a polished silver chain showing out of one pocket. Though he was very tall and stocky, he moved with effortless elegance.

“Jon! Libby!” he exclaimed. He shook my hand and embraced Libby.

“Jon, meet your good friend Ba’an Ty. President of Sol,” Libby said with a friendly smile.

Chapter Five

Aliens

I didn't recall much of my life. The few moments I did recall were fractured shards from a timeline that it would seem never happened.

I certainly never expected I would find myself sitting casually at a table with the man who was essentially the president of space.

And to make matters worse, I was drastically underdressed for the occasion.

Ba'an Ty, Libby and I sat at the big round table in the large official room. I felt myself fade into the background as Libby talked effortlessly about politics and science. The conversation left me out of my depth. I decided to stay quiet; was better than highlighting my lack of understanding to this man.

Those few minutes felt like hours.

"Will you be returning to your work, Doctor?" Ba'an asked, turning to me.

That startled me. No one had referred to me by my title before. I was going to speak but was frozen by a sudden flash of memory.

The vision was an echo of something new. I was standing at a table in a room akin to a library, looking at a hand-drawn schematic of a large device. My mind was deep into a grand idea of some sort. I recalled turning to someone. It was a woman. Rationalising the memory, I assumed it to be Libby at first. It was not. It was someone else: tall and striking, with long flowing robes, black hair and white eyes. She was somehow

ethereal. I told her I needed more information about her limitations. There was something else too. I couldn't place the words. She told me to stop worrying. There were drips of information that touched the side of my memory, the one outside of the flashback, in my actual mind, not the remembered one.

I blinked, seeing Ba'an still waiting for my answer.

"From what I understand, I never stopped," I said, with a sudden burst of confidence.

"Two months in a coma and now amnesia, though, right? Are you going to be okay to continue?" Ba'an asked. He seemed genuinely concerned; it wasn't just the posturing of a politician.

"Jon has had a rough time, that's true, Ba'an, but the information we got from the video of his accident and the medical data from monitoring him... and now the *new* memories he may hold. It's all useful stuff," Libby said in defence of me.

"Ah, I know, I know. I just worry that it's all for nothing I suppose," Ba'an said, again with more sincerity than I would have expected from a politician.

"They don't send Correctionist hit squads to Central Prime for people who are chasing ghosts," I said in a resolved bluff.

Ba'an considered my words with steely eyes. "Indeed! Carry on then, good doctor."

He excused himself from the conversation. Libby waited until he had walked to the other side of the room before turning to me:

"That was a good point. How do you know about Correctionists?"

"It was on the news." I shrugged. "Sounded like a big deal, so I rolled the dice."

Libby gave me a look that seemed familiar; yet, it was the first time she had pointed it at me.

"Maybe there's more of the old you left in there than you realise."

Joanne walked up behind us and sat down at the table right next to me. She was wearing a very ornate black dress that made her look like she was going to a ball — in the Middle Ages. I almost didn't recognise her. She looked lovely; the corset, though, didn't look comfortable at all. The dress was made from heavy looking fabric and had a lot more lace around the edges than I would expect Joanne to wear, considering the brief time I had spent with her.

I moved my chair back a little so that the three of us had a better view of each other.

"Why are you dressed like that?" I asked. "Also, why is he dressed like that?" I pointed at Ba'an across the room.

"Ugh! Governmental meeting in half-hour," Joanne replied.

"It's a long-held tradition to dress classically and ornately for government business," Libby quickly injected to clear the matter up for me.

"Yeah, it's a Vampire thing. We've just inherited it," Joanne added.

I had heard the word 'Vampire' too many times now, I decided that I would add it to my more pressing list of questions for Libby.

"I have to go in a second. I have arranged for your lab to be unlocked. I have also told the shuttle coordinator to give you open access to all shuttle trips too. You're back in business if you want to be," Joanne said. "Also, Libby, because of the attack, I've had you cleared for 'carry' ship-wide *and* on Central." Joanne talked fast and repeatedly checked the time on her bracelet.

"From the ship's position, I assumed we were leaving Central?" Libby queried.

"No, we positioned ourselves for an exit after the Correctionist attack on your building. Looks like we can smooth everything over with Central Gov' now, though. We'll drop back into high orbit after this damned meeting."

She opened her medieval-looking bag and took out two cards and a silver square.

“I’ll see you both later.” She put the square and the cards on the table and left, trying not to look like she was hurrying.

I watched her walk across the room. Some of the other people in the room were watching her too, but probably for different reasons. She really did look very nice. She met up with Ba’an and they left through an elevator door at the far side of the room.

Libby passed me one of the cards. It was a thin white circuit board with blue tracks on it. I flipped it over; on the other side it had the word ‘MERCIA’ with a picture of a blue shield that sported a yellow cross.

“Pass. Opens doors. You only have to have it in your pocket, and it will work.”

I stood up and added it to my wallet.

“What’s that?” I asked as she attached the silver square to her shirt. Looking closer, I could see that it was a silver metallic version of the shield on the card. It appeared to stick to her shirt without a clip.

“Carry authorisation,” she said, positioning it to be as visible as possible. “Indicates to the security staff that I’m armed. As in ‘carrying’ a weapon.”

I nodded in understanding, but I didn’t relish the idea of weapons.

“You *need* a weapon?”

“No. I *am* the weapon. This badge gives me permission to activate this body’s combat system... if required,” she replied. She glanced up at me as if to see if my face was giving away any of my thoughts on her words. I hoped it wasn’t. Something about her delivery of the words “combat system” made her sound incredibly dangerous.

We left the large room using the same elevator through which we came in.

“So... Vampires?” I asked.

Libby chuckled.

“Other than you Humans, there are four elder races in known space. Elves, Thinkers, Bricks and Vampires.” She took my hand as we strolled through the corridor, this time in no rush. “After whatever happened in nineteen-hundred, ‘The Event’, it seemed to humans they were *suddenly* a space-faring race, the two sects of memories took a while to reconcile. They had been in space for a while, in this timeline. They had already met the Vampires. They met the others later, though. The Thinkers knew all about Humans when they met them.” She was trying to be a good teacher.

I took note of her phrasing. “You don’t think of yourself as human?” I asked.

“Well, I’m not.”

“You described yourself as a NOLF to the guard. What is that?”

“N-O-L-F, Non-Organic Life Form. It’s a descriptor used for those of a digital persuasion. Technically, the Thinker race are non-organic too, but they are not digital.” The way she spoke was captivating, so crisp and purposeful.

We walked up a wide flight of stairs that took us to a much busier level of the ship. It was a kind of market area. It wasn’t totally different to the vague memories of the nineties malls that I had some echo of.

“You have already encountered Vampires. The pale people with the red eyes. Some of them have wings.”

“Like Ba’an Ty?”

She nodded.

“An alien is president of Earth?”

Libby laughed. “I mean, he’s been a citizen since nineteen twenty-three. Oh, and as it turns out, he’s the most popular

leader in human history, if that means anything!” Libby was no doubt amused at my antiquated questions of citizenship.

“So how old is he?”

“Slightly older than you. Or at least older than we *think* you are.”

I stopped walking. I wanted to line up my facts. “I thought I was the only one that was alive when the Event happened?”

“Oh. Sorry, I may not have been clear. I should have said you were the only person on Earth when it happened. You’re the only *human* from The Event who is still alive. All the Elder races, other than humans, are functionally immortal.” Her tone was apologetic for having accidentally misinformed me.

“All of them?”

“Yes. I mean, they are not Bio-static, like you, but they do live basically forever if they don’t get sick or have an accident.”

Our conversation dried up as I thought about what it all meant.

The ‘commerce area.’ as it was signposted to be, was vast. There were shops selling all kinds of things. Eventually, just as we passed the third taco vendor, I asked Libby why a military ship like this had such an area. It seemed out of place and far more *normal* than how a battleship should be. She explained that the ship was so big, a side effect was the vast number of people required to keep it operational. Engineers, dock workers, scientists, military staff. Given that there wasn’t actually much fighting in known space, it was also very safe.

People eventually brought their families, and with families came schools and social areas, eateries and churches. It even resulted in at least one theme park. But she reminded me, it was still the most powerful battleship the galaxy had ever seen.

She was proud of that accomplishment. She didn’t identify as a human, but I could tell from the way she spoke about

them, she had some pride in the race that created her. If she cared to admit it or not was her own business.

We strolled through the area for a while before we came to a large window into space. The viewing area had a rail running around it for those who — I assumed — got dizzy looking at the vastness, and some benches arranged so you could sit and bask in it. There was even some fake grass around to give the impression of a park, complete with an old gas lamppost. It was nice, but it felt forced and out of place. We stood by the rail and looked out at the void.

The stars were drifting by slowly as the ship idly spun under the pull of gravity's gentle hand. I could see small ships around us, and a bright light occasionally shone in the far unmeasurable distance, a little more irregularly than the stars.

"What is that?" I asked, pointing at a light that flickered again.

"It's a Warp," she said. "There are these doors, or holes in space. They take you from one sector to another. It's how we travel between the capitol worlds."

I leaned forward, trying to make out more. Libby was watching me closely. She was fascinated with everything I did. Maybe she was waiting for signs that her husband was still inside me, somewhere. I wasn't sure he was.

"The flash of light comes when the Warp lines up with the star on the other side," she said.

"What's on the other side?" I asked.

"That one? Brick home world."

"So... there's just a hole in space that goes to another world?"

"Yes. Well, no. Central is a hub world. There are four holes in space. One to each home world."

She seemed eager to continue our walk. I pretended I didn't notice. I liked the space window.

"You mean five?" I returned. "You said there were five races."

“Perceptive. But flawed,” she replied, with refreshed interest. “Earth is different. Like Central, it’s a hub system. From any system, you can go to any hub. But you can’t go from hub to hub.”

“Is there a manual for all this?” I asked with a laugh. “You must be getting sick of explaining every little thing to me!”

She shrugged; we continued walking. I went quiet again, thinking about the new information I had. It had been overwhelming when I first woke up, now I was just tired of learning. The way I was being told things felt like the worst way to impart information. Everyone seemed to just expect me to carry on with my life like forgetting it all had been little more than a blip.

Maybe that was what I was supposed to do. It didn’t feel like I could.

The commerce area was coming to an end. I had enjoyed the sights and people in the area. I had seen some odd things that I intended to investigate later. Like the tacos. It was striking how popular food vendors seemed to be, especially tacos. There was also a place that sold robot pets. I wanted to know more about them but would have been nervous about asking Libby. Was it appropriate to ask the one non-organic I knew about non-organic pets?

We came to a wall with lots of elevators. Libby called one, it arrived in moments. She pressed a button on the wall panel.

“Security required,” came a robotic voice.

“Elizabeth Michaels,” Libby barked.

“Security required,” came the voice again.

Libby looked at me.

“Security required,” the voice insisted.

“Jonathan Michaels?” I said, suddenly realising that something was expected of me. The elevator moved.

“Joanne was asked for ‘security’ when we arrived. It didn’t ask *me* that time,” I observed.

“You were with the vice-president!” Libby exclaimed with a raised eyebrow.

I nodded, noting the obvious difference in their security clearance.

When the doors opened, we were in a very different place. The corridor was massive; a shuttle could have flown down it. The walls were a blue wash and there was a well-scuffed floor. We walked a few paces. The first door on our left opened.

“Welcome to your lab,” Libby said, proudly gesturing to the open doorway.

The door was oversized, like the corridor. The room was large and filled with books across every wall, from floor to ceiling. They were actual books too, not little rectangles or floating screens. It looked like an arcane library. It was dimly lit and there was a large holographic board with writing on it giving off a flickering static glow. A huge horseshoe desk that sloped in the middle waited for my attention in the centre of the room.

I cautiously stepped in; the lights brightened up. The desk came to life: screens appeared floating above it with images, notes and diagrams across it.

I heard a sound and was startled as a figure walked in from a doorway off to the side of the room. It had a body made of pipes.

“Doors?” I asked, suspiciously because this pipe-man was a dark green shade, not the assorted silver that I had seen in the apartment.

“No. This is Dex, as in ‘Index.’ It’s not alive like Doors. It’s just an AI. It knows a lot and can cross-reference information for you,” Libby explained as she poked it in its amber holographic eye-like head.

“General rule to remember: Green eyes, alive; amber eyes, AI; red eyes, run.”

“Green alive, amber robot... Red?”

“Red is an AI with armed weapons.”

I nodded. It was an easy rule to remember.

“Red, run” I muttered. “Is that a dependable guide?” I wanted to make sure I had the green and amber the right way around in my head.

“It’s literally a law,” Libby said, and pointed at her own green eyes.

“There’s a chip in all AI systems called a TLC. Traffic *Life* Chip. It’s supposed to sound cute. It can’t be bypassed by anything. It’s put right in the core’s optical output interface”

Dex stood next to the desk. “How do I make it work?”

“Dex,” Libby said in a commanding tone, without looking at it.

“How may I assist you?” It said in an interesting, almost Australian, accent. It had a smooth as silk voice and a natural tone.

“Can you show me a map of space?” I asked.

Dex nodded and waved its hand. The screen in front of the desk lit up with a huge floating picture of the galaxy. Dex tilted its head at me, waiting for more instructions. “Where are we now?” I asked. A small blue shield logo flashed on the map. In a smooth motion it shrank down to a little pea size as it positioned itself at the upper edge.

“It can help you with anything, don’t be afraid to ask it things. It’s literally a database with a useful body, and your search history is private,” Libby said, leaning against Dex as if it was a wall.

“Useful body?”

“Dex knows where all the books are and what pages you may want to see. It has a catalogue of artefacts you have in storage. It can also bring you lunch.” Libby pointed around at various things.

“This *hole* is your lab. You usually do your research here. But I figured you could use Dex to ask questions and learn about, well... everything, I suppose.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m glad you like it. I mean, it is your lab.” Libby smiled. “It’s also quite convenient, given that I have to work for a few hours.”

“Work?”

“Yeah, I felt the ship move a few minutes ago. We’re heading back to Central. I was supposed to be giving a lecture at one of the universities. I thought I would have to cancel, but it seems we are back on track now.”

“You lecture? What do you lecture on?”

“I’m a philosophy teacher. Sort of. I specialise in... Well, it’s complicated. I give talks about life. What it is, how to recognise it. Why it’s important. In non-organics, specifically.” She was a touch embarrassed.

“Wow!” I actually ‘wowed.’ I didn’t know I ‘wowed.’

“Can I come and listen?”

“No. It’s not safe. We don’t want another Correctionist attack on you, do we?”

“But you’re going!”

“Yes, but if they attack me, I’ll simply have to stop syncing this body and get a new one.”

“How does that even work?”

“Ask Dex. I have to go.” She stepped towards me and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “Stay out of trouble. Screen me if you *do* get in trouble. See you in a few hours.”

She left. The massive door closed behind her, and I felt incredibly alone.

“Dex, what the hell does ‘screen me’ mean?”

“*Screen* is a slang term for video and voice communication via a Circlet.” It gestured to its arm and a hologram of a bracelet, like the ones I had seen Joanne and Kay use, appeared in front of his wrist.

“Why is mine different?” I held my wrist up.

Dex leaned forward to see. “The larger units also have a separate data channel for AI core interfaces. They are widely used by professions that require instant access to large volumes of data.”

I looked at my Circlet, pleased with myself for knowing what it was called now. I knew the slider let out the thread that generated the screen... and then I realised why it was called ‘*Screening*.’

I pressed the other button. Nothing happened. I tapped it a few times.

“What do you require?” asked Dex.

“I’m trying to figure out how to use the AI in the Circlet.”

“You *are* using it correctly. What do you require?”

I looked at Dex suspiciously and tapped the button again. “Yes?” he said. I walked out of the room, into the corridor and pressed it again. “Yes?” Dex’s voice came through my ears.

I walked back into the room. “The Circlet is connected to you?”

“Yes,” it replied.

“I pressed this button a few times yesterday when I put it on. How come you didn’t answer?”

“This lab and all associated equipment were in lock-down. Access was restored by Vice President Joanne Michaels two hours ago.”

I nodded to myself. That made sense.

“Okay, Dex. Let’s do some learning.” I waved a hand over the desk and the screens all lit up as I did. I felt like a wizard; it was quite entertaining and felt like something I had done a thousand times before. Was this a memory, something familiar finally?

Chapter Six

Time to drink

The following few hours, maybe more, were spent asking Dex endless mundane questions about the world – or the universe, I suppose. Dex really did have all the answers I wanted and was good at sharing the information. It almost seemed alive at times, mostly when it was talking in depth about a subject.

I asked Dex about it, and it said all information was ‘drawn from well-documented communication sources.’ It was very useful but quite dry. I was starting to see the difference between Dex and Doors.

Doors was a little sassy, and while he seemed quite subservient, he was obviously a personality. Dex was more like a tool or an interface. There was nothing else going on with it. I also couldn’t think of it as more than an ‘it’ even if I tried. It lacked that ethereal spark that could have made it a person to me.

An alarm sounded, loud and without warning. It was a sharp and rhythmic sound.

“Dex, what is that?” I demanded.

“Possible intruder.”

“Show me!” I barked.

The screen above the desk showed me the corridor outside. There was a woman standing by the door to the lab. She had red hair and was wearing a long yellow dress. The angle made it hard to see, but it looked like she was carrying something, a thin box.

“Dex, let me talk to her.”

Dex tilted its head, I suddenly heard the alarm louder, and the ambient hum of the corridor.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“What? I can’t hear you! There’s an alarm!” the woman shouted. She was struggling to hold the box straight as she fished around in her bag. She pulled out a wallet and flipped it with one hand to show her ID to the camera.

“Dex, show me what she has there.”

The screen zoomed in to the card. It was a picture of the woman at the door and the words: ‘Lea Ra-kay. Flight officer, first class’. There were also military numbers and emblems.

“Oh! It’s Lea, from the shuttle. Turn off the alarm. Let her in, Dex” I ordered.

The noise stopped instantly, and the doors opened.

“What the hell was that about, Michaels?” she asked as she stepped in. She stopped dead the moment she looked at me, frozen on the spot.

“I didn’t recognise you without the helmet and the uniform,” I tried to have a friendly tone, even though the alarm had left me ruffled.

She looked at me, terrified. I was quite confused until I turned to Dex. It was standing with both arms stretched out and in the shotgun configuration I had seen Doors use. His floating eye was blood red.

“Oh shit! No! Dex, calm down; I know her. She’s a friend!” I stumbled over my words, trying to be as clear as possible.

“DO NOT SHOOT!” I barked, to add clarity.

“Understood.” Dex’s barrels transformed back to hands and its eye faded back to a healthier orange.

“That’s Dex?” Lea seemed a little less threatened.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I did not know it did that.”

“You didn’t know your destroyer unit could destroy things?”

“It’s a librarian.”

“No. it isn’t. It’s an Elven destroyer Unit. You don’t usually see them outside of Elf territory,” Lea said.

“They are real fucking scary.”

“Dex, is this true?” I asked, not so much doubting Lea’s words as wanting to know more about it.

“I was assigned to you at President Ba’an Ty’s orders. My mission is to serve as your assistant and protect your research. I am authorised to use maximum force to do so.”

“I had no idea,” I said. “Please add Lea to a visitors list or whatever you have, I don’t want you shooting my only friend!”

“Those things, they can take ships out of orbit with those neck cannons,” she said. “Other than the NOLF at your apartment on Central, I didn’t even know there was any outside of Elf space.”

She seemed to remember why she had come and presented me with the box. “Libby messaged me. Said I should remind you to eat.”

I took the box. It was a large and thin square. It was warm. I put it on the desk next to me and opened it.

“Pizza!” I excitedly grabbed a slice. I gestured for Lea to take a slice too. She shook her head in disgust.

“Oh no, thank you. If I’m going to abuse my stomach, it’ll be with liquor.”

She was looking around the lab with great interest. Her yellow sundress made her look delicate and innocent, not at all like the seasoned pilot I had been introduced to when I met her.

“You’ve not been here before?” I asked, with a mouth full of cheese crust.

“No, I don’t think I have the security clearance for this deck, to be honest, but Libby wanted me to make sure you were staying out of trouble.” She looked as excited as I did to be there.

“What’s through here?” she asked, wandering through a doorway.

“Toilet, sink. Oh, and one of those lights that cleans you.” I had explored the lab thoroughly as soon as Libby had gone.

There was also another larger room that had rows and rows of boxes containing all sorts of random items that I didn't quite understand yet.

Lea appeared back at the doorway, looking quite amused. "You call it a *light that cleans you*, for real?" She was sporting an adorable grin.

"Yeah, because... it's a light... and it cleans you." I covered my pizza filled mouth with my hand as I spoke.

"Just in case it comes up again, it's called a '*hygiene field*'"

"There is no way anyone calls it that."

"No, most humans just call it a shower." She laughed.

I noticed the odd way she phrased that. "Humans?"

"Yeah. You know. From Sol system. They own the ship we're on. The race of which you are a member." She was being more than a little sarcastic. She understood my question just fine.

"You're not human?" I asked, despite still having a mouth full of pizza.

"No! I'm a Brick."

The first thing I had studied with Dex was the races. I knew that Bricks were the closest allies of Earth, Sol. They all had natural physical fitness and better reflexes than humans. They were hardy, but they took over sixty Earth years to reach adulthood. They were outwardly indistinguishable from humans but were genetically skewed towards physical perfection. They were considered to be a race of beautiful people. Like all the elder races, other than Humans they were functionally immortal.

"I think you may be the first Brick I have met!"

"It's so strange, Jon." She leaned against the open doorway.

"Two months ago, you were a force of nature. A constant stream of ideas. Confident like no other." She stepped towards me and put a hand on my shoulder. "And now you're like this odd empty version of who you were... You're *still* you, but..."

I could see her trying to carefully choose her words. “You’re *not* you either. I miss the old you.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know if I’ll get my memories back. I need to go visit Kay again. She wants to run more tests.” I was aware that my tone was apologetic.

Lea smiled and shook off her moment of melancholy.

“Work is boring. Let’s go get drunk.”

I didn’t want to leave my lab, but when someone who is supposed to be your best friend looks at you with sad eyes and tells you it’s time to drink, you are honour bound to agree.

We left the lab. I checked with Dex that I didn’t need to lock-up or set alarms. Lea assured me that even if anyone else knew where my lab was and somehow happened to have door access, having an Elven Destroyer Unit as a guard dog would suitably discourage the intruders.

She took me up to a mezzanine above the commerce area. This was apparently the more ‘adult’ commerce area. It was lit a little dimmer than the lower deck. There were dive bars with broken windows. There were fights breaking out too and more than a few armed security people hanging around to deal with them. There was even a large open area where people were playing a ball game that I hadn’t seen before; it looked like basketball, but the ball was powered, and trying to avoid everyone, on its own.

The area was parallel to the top half of the viewing window that showed space. Unlike below, it wasn’t being revered by people who looked through it with awe and respect. It was covered in posters for music venues, and someone had affixed a ball hoop to it with a large gloop of foam glue. There were scuffs next to the hoop where the ball had repeatedly hit it.

Lea walked fast, looking out of place in her yellow sundress. Regardless, she carried herself with supreme confidence. We

weaved through some people playing guitar who casually called greetings to her as we passed. She stopped outside of a big window to a bar. The bar had no door, the inside looked seedy, to say the least.

“We’re here!” she said and walked in, not checking if I was still following.

It was quieter than the other bars we had passed, a lot more run down. There was a long counter running down most of the length of the room. The bartender was made of metal cubes.

I knew from my talk with Dex that this was not a robot; it was a Thinker. They were a race of beings made of energy. They inhabited solid objects and animated them with a type of tactile telekinesis; turning inanimate objects into space suits for themselves. They had no faces, but they fluctuated light energy around their head to give the impressions of features.

This one was cleaning the bar when we entered.

“Lea! Didn’t expect to see you this early,” the Thinker said in a strong male voice and a northern accent, though the voice was accompanied by a static distortion, like an old radio.

“Hi, Vent! Jon’s been working too hard, so I broke him out of his lab.”

Vent looked at me and placed two glasses on the counter.

“Jon, rumour is that you went and got your head blanked, that true?” He pulled out a bottle of strong brown spirit.

“Yeah, the rumour seems pretty much spot on,” I replied.

“Well, in that case... I’m VentTanaLomoGiovaliaSionoth and I’ll be the one taking your drinking money for the rest of the day.”

“Nice to meet you VentTanaaaaaaalo...” I gave up about a quarter of the way through.

“Vent. People call me Vent,” he barked. “Now give me a pay-card or get out.” His words were harsh, but his tone was friendly.

I looked at Lea.

“Don’t ask me, you’re the one with all the money. I’m just a broke-arse pilot.” She reached for a glass. I pulled out my wallet and found the card that I had assumed was for paying for things.

Vent tapped the bar and a rectangle square outline appeared in front of him. He took my card and placed it on the square. It floated above it.

“Hand” he said.

A hand shape appeared on my side of the bar, I pawed at the outline. It flashed. He passed my card back. “Welcome to *‘The Dancing Flame.’* Drink and be merry for tomorrow you may be dead,” he said, and slid the glass over to me. I swallowed the contents like it was water. It burned on the way down. *Tasted great.* I slid the glass back.

Vent pushed it away and handed me the bottle.

The other customers mostly ignored us, far too busy with their own quests for drunkenness. One or two glanced over at Lea’s attractive form, but no one bothered us. All the people in the bar were in uniforms that were in various states of casual. This was a military haunt, everyone there knew Lea.

She had somehow made it to the other end of the bar before I realised she was gone. She stood by a large metal table. I wandered over with my bottle. She pressed some buttons, and the table went green. pool balls appeared, along with two sticks. “You remember how to shoot pool, right?” she asked.

I grinned. “I do!”

I was quite pleased. One of the few memories I had was of being in a barfight, and with it was the certainty that I did know how to play pool.

The next few hours were great, literally the happiest I could remember. We played pool; Lea told me about her adventures as a pilot. I was *in* more than a few of them, and she revelled in the telling.

She had been flying ships for almost twenty years. I had to keep reminding myself that she was a lot older than she

looked: she wasn't even close to her twenties, as she appeared.

As the afternoon went on, she got slowly less sober and worse at pool. I enjoyed the tastes of the drinks that she kept bringing over, but nothing so much as made me light-headed. Eventually, she decided she was too drunk to play and pressed some buttons on the table. The solid appearing pool table faded away to show the naked silver table again.

No sooner had it reset than a projection of a small spaceship began fading into life before me. There were floating sticks and a throttle on the table. I flicked the stick, and the perspective moved to show me the inside of the ship. "Come, shooooots me, Jon," she slurred.

The game was great. I really did feel like I was flying a ship. It was definitely simplified to make it more of a game and less of an actual training simulation, but for the half-hour that we played, I almost forgot that I was standing in a now quite busy bar.

After destroying my little ship almost as many times as I had beaten her at pool, Lea quite literally passed out on her projected controls; her little ship spun out wildly. I walked around the table and switched it off. The space game vanished; Lea slumped down even more without the controls in her way.

"Great," I muttered. "Now what do I do?"

I decided to get another bottle and take a seat next to the game table. I put my feet up on the table and slumped down in a comfy padded armchair I had pulled in close. No one seemed to mind. While I wasn't going to abandon Lea. I wasn't going to try and move her either. Waiting for her to wake up, or for the bar to close, struck me as my best option.

With a flick of my wrist, my Circlet screen appeared. I took my first real look at the menu: it had a lot of options. It was connected to a data feed that allowed me to browse news and search for things. I browsed the feed for a little bit and then

tapped the button to speak to Dex. I wondered if it would be able to hear me over the music and ambient chatter of the bar.

“Yes?” came its voice as if projected directly in my ears.

“Can you send information to my Cirplet screen?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I want to see information about bio-stasis. Specifically, it’s meaning and limits.” The truth was I wanted to be drunk and happy like Lea, but if I couldn’t, I should at least find out why not.

The documents that Dex sent over absorbed me. Everything ever recorded about the ‘mutation’ was now available to me in an instant. I couldn’t help but notice that most of the medical journals had been written by Kay, though for reasons of privacy her ‘*subjects*’ were unnamed. I didn’t understand most of what I was reading. The bar faded into the background of my awareness and there was just me and the data.

Eventually, Lea gained something close to lucidness and dragged her own armchair over to mine. She passed out again next to me. I gave her an entertained glance and went back to the screen. No one had bothered us, which somehow surprised me.

I had a memory of what usually happened to attractive women who got pass-out drunk in bars. This world was far better than the one I remembered, seemingly in *every* way.

A shadow appeared in front of me, and I flicked away my screen before I looked up. There stood Libby, looking quite grumpy.

“Really? I leave you alone for a few hours and you find your way to a military bar in the worst part of the ship?”

Lea grunted and opened her eyes.

“Oh, Lea! Right! Now it makes sense!” Libby thinned her eyes. I was suddenly concerned that it may not have been appropriate to go to a bar with another – very attractive – woman, the first time my wife had left me alone.

Libby picked up Lea carefully and put her over her shoulder.

“Come on, we can’t leave her here all night,” she said, now smiling, but just a little. We walked out of the bar. Libby greeted Vent when we passed him.

“Thanks”, I called, following after her. Vent waved as I left. He didn’t have a face as such, but I got the impression he was laughing at us. It was strange to see someone as demure as Libby carrying someone her own size so effortlessly. I thought back to her throwing a tank out of a window and realised that I shouldn’t be surprised at anything she did.

We took an elevator, then a few corridors, we eventually got to Lea’s apartment. I expected a group living space; in my imagination, military people all lived in a long room with many green bunk beds. Lea had a small apartment of her own. The door opened as Libby approached and we walked in.

The apartment was tiny: a living-area and kitchen area combined. Other than a door that led to the bedroom, there wasn’t any other rooms. I assumed the ‘shower’ was attached to the bedroom, but I didn’t follow Libby in there. I waited in the living area. Being there alone seemed like an intrusion. It was very tidy and not very personalised. The only sign that someone lived there was a pile of flight manuals on the kitchen counter.

Something about the place was niggling at my awareness. It was like I had noticed something with my subconscious that I couldn’t quite summon to the surface. I did not doubt that my memory-intact self would have instantly known what it was *and somehow used it to bring about galactic peace, end universal hunger, invent a new type of art and make kittens twice as cute*. I hated him. He was always there judging me for not knowing things that he found so trivial.

I wondered if Lea was happy.

Libby came back alone. We left the apartment. She pressed some buttons that I could see properly locked the door after we left.

“Oh my gosh, she was trashed!” Libby said the moment the door was closed.

“Yeah. We played a lot of pool and some shuttle fighting game. I don’t think she stopped drinking from the moment we walked in until she passed out.”

Would Libby be mad at me I wondered?

“Sorry I ended up leaving you for so long. The post-lecture Q-and-A went on longer than I expected. Then there was this interview. Before I knew I had missed the last scheduled shuttle back. Had to get Jo’s buddy Kieran to come to pick me up. For some reason, Lea wasn’t answering my Screens.”

She told me about her day as we made our way to our assigned apartment. It was much nicer than Lea’s and we were only staying there temporarily. Lea lived on Mercia full time and her apartment was tiny.

We walked into the living space. Libby did her little kick to rid herself of her shoes. She sat down on the sofa and looked almost sleepy. I considered my actions and decided to tackle the potential problem head-on.

“Libby, I hope it wasn’t improper for me to go drinking with another woman the way I did. I hadn’t really thought about how it may look until you walked into the bar.” I wanted to be as honest as I could with her. It felt right.

She looked over at me and patted the sofa seat next to her. I sat down.

“Jon, we have known Lea for literally as long as we have known each other. There is no way I would think you are cheating on me with her,” she said, seriously, before presenting a coy smile: “Besides, she’s out of your league!”

Chapter Seven

Outing

There was a disappointing lack of bacon smells when I woke up. Libby had ‘things to do’ and I had been given the bedroom. It was an awkward situation we were in. While thankful that I had somewhere to sleep, I was also concerned at how Libby was manufacturing reasons to not discuss it.

I put on my clothes and wandered into the *shower*. It would make me and whatever I was wearing clean in moments. This made it so easy that I still wore the same jeans and the pirate looking shirt that Libby had supplied me. The jacket also still accompanied me, though I had yet to be chilly, or warm, I wore it anyway.

I looked in the mirror: my stubble hadn’t grown much either. “Bio-static,” I muttered to myself, before leaving to the living space.

Libby was typing something on a screen that was floating above the table. Her Circllet had been placed on the table and was projecting it.

“I didn’t know it could do that,” I said.

“Oh, good morning!”

“Morning!”

I walked over to the food delivery hatch. I pressed the buttons for coffee and toast. It hummed and opened with a tray. I must have done something wrong because it came with an entire pot of coffee and more toast than a single person could eat. I shrugged and carried the tray over to the table.

“Hungry?” Libby asked with an amused smirk.

“Food-hole thinks I need feeding up, apparently.”

I had asked where the food came from when learning things with Dex the day before. There was an automated kitchen nearby that kept the entire menu frozen in time via some technology that I didn't understand. It then delivered it to the hatch via a thing called a 'Fold' – the same white transport light as the one in the apartment where we had been attacked. I shuddered at the thought of that apartment.

It was impressive how fast the food arrived. It also seemed a little wasteful; I could have made my own toast.

“As much as I favour caution; we can't just hide out on Mercia forever. We should go visit Kay today,” Libby said.

She turned off her screen and put her Circlet back on her wrist. I wanted to ask why she even needed one. Surely, she had some kind of internal computer interface. I was concerned that it could be an insensitive question, though.

“Sure. But what about the attack? Is it safe?”

“Judging by the equipment that was salvaged, we're pretty certain it was a Correctionist attack. They aren't the most effective of terrorists. Kay's medical practice is in the Embassy building. We can park the shuttle behind it. Should be safe,” she considered her own proposition a little more. “Besides, I'm far better equipped to deal with them now,” she added, pointing her silver badge.

I swallowed my toast as I looked at her. She was dressed differently today: a flatteringly snug red tank top and jeans. She looked like someone from the few memories I had of my nineteen nineties.

I wanted to compliment her outfit. Ask her if she was okay. My lack of memories was beginning to make me feel like I was an impostor in her life. I really did want to know that she was okay. Yet, it felt like it just wasn't my place. It had been so easy talking to Lea. It was harder to talk to Libby. She was wonderful, but there was a lot of implied pressure; on me, on us.

“It *is* safe to leave the ship, right?” I asked.

“Correctionists are essentially a religious cult. It doesn’t matter if we wait a month or a decade. If they are going to attack us again, they will do it next time the opportunity presents itself. A Sol embassy in the middle of Central Prime is far safer than pretty much any other place I can think of. May as well stick a toe in the water here and see what happens.”

Libby was transfixed on my toast mountain as she spoke. I was making a far greater dent in it than I had expected.

“Okay. But I still think it may be a terrible idea.”

On the way to the shuttle bay, I tried to make conversation, this time without asking her to explain things to me. Just conversation, like a normal person. I had Dex on my wrist if I needed things explained.

“So... the lecture? Do you lecture a lot?”

“We travel around a lot with Mercia, so I guest speak at different venues, usually a few times a month. When it looks like we’ll be at a single location for a few weeks, then I’ll sometimes run classes.”

Until last night, I hadn’t noticed how little we had to talk about. It was probably just as hard for her. Probably harder; she knew what she had lost.

We got as far as the shuttle dock before we spoke again. The elevator doors opened, we walked to the shuttle. It looked prepared for launch: the engines were glowing; all the lights were on. The ramp was down. A figure lay on its back in the rear of the walkway. The dock was filled with noises and lights. There was the occasional roar of ships leaving and smoke in the air. We got close enough to get a better look at the figure; it was our sleeping pilot.

Libby muttered something and then shouted: “There is no way you are in a fit state to fly a shuttle, Lea!”

The figure stirred and sat up.

It was Lea, dressed the same as the first time we had met. She looked at us and gave a lazy thumb up. She had dark glasses on and was very pale, no doubt hungover from the night before.

“Brick metabolism. I’m good to fly,” she said in a hoarse voice. “Just keep it down, okay?”

We walked into the shuttle; Lea smacked the button to close the door. The sounds from outside disappeared. There was just the background hum of the engines. Libby went straight to the pilot seat and sat down. Lea let out a sigh, grateful for the silence.

“Hey! I’m fine to fly, Libby!”

“Relax, I got this one,” Libby argued in smiling retaliation.

Lea sat in the second seat, probably too hungover to disagree. I took a seat on the bench behind them.

“You sure it’s wise not to bring a guard?” Lea asked.

“A Brick and a combat-ready NOLF do not require additional support.” She flipped the switches that made the shuttle start to cycle its powerful engines.

“How you feeling?” I asked Lea, more because I wanted to poke fun at her than because I was concerned. She had drunk herself into that state and I had little sympathy. It was entertaining though.

She shot me a thin smile and raised her tired eyebrows: “Better than last time we went out.”

“Yes, but last time you two went drinking without me, you got shot, he got stabbed, and you were both arrested.” Libby couldn’t keep up her stern act as she spoke. “Which is why you shouldn’t go without me!” she added.

I wondered how this could have happened, given that I couldn’t even get drunk. It was a story I would have to ask about, at some point.

“You always require adult supervision,” Libby mocked in a faux-superior tone.

“You’re the one who needs supervision!” Lea returned. “She can get drunk you know!” Lea yelled to me as the engines ignited and the shuttle jolted, lifting from the ground.

“How does that work?” I asked.

“She loads up a program she wrote. What did you call it, Libby? Stupid-idea-zero-zero-one or something?” Lea’s voice came a little too loud as the engine stopped cycling halfway through her sentence.

The shuttle launched through the iris at rapid speed. I held on to the bench rail. The force stabilised when we launched out of the tunnel. We shot into space, I looked out of the window in awe. It was only my second time *in* space.

“It’s called Bad-Judgement and you know it,” Libby told Lea.

We had only been travelling for a few seconds when the shuttle’s nose dipped, and the planet came into view. It was massive. We were far closer than I had realised. Joanne said they were moving closer to it, but it was hard to think of Mercia as a moving object.

“Should I strap in?” I asked.

“Na’, no one bothers. We only have to do things by-the-book when Jo’s onboard. If she so much as bumped her head, the President would have a full investigation done,” Lea said.

The other time I had seen the planet, it had been night time across the visible face. Now it was morning: brightly lit with lush clusters of colours, grey cities covered in smoke and a wash of purple light. The clouds were a far paler blue in the daylight. I could see a purple ocean creeping over the horizon, and one of the moons delicately peeking out behind the planet. I hoped I could see Earth from this vantage point, one day.

I felt a wave of emotion overtake me; I managed to contain it before it crept to the surface.

The shuttle rotated and Lea pressed buttons on her screen. From the screen, I gleaned that it was transmitting codes; probably related to landing authorisation.

“I love this city,” Libby said with a warm whisper.

The ground was already approaching.

“You and me both, princess,” Lea replied.

They fist-bumped. I smiled to myself. It was cute.

We came to a smooth landing in an area that seemed to be a car park, close to a building.

“Nicely done, NOLF,” Lea exclaimed.

“Thank you, Brick.”

They unbuckled in unison. Libby checked her screen. “I’m letting Kay know we’re on the ground,” she said, for my benefit.

Lea took a large handgun from the cradle on the wall and put it in a holster on her hip. She also grabbed a metal disk and slapped it into her upper arm. It lit up and a circle of lights spun around the edge for a moment.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Personal shield. You want one?”

“I don’t know. Will I need one?”

Libby dismissed her screen. “No,” she pointed at her little silver badge. “I’m your shield.”

We left the shuttle. I noticed we were outside the building I had first woken up in. There were buildings in all directions. Most were taller than the cloud level and the sky was full of shuttles and large flying bug-things that were native to the planet. The air was dry and a little thin. I basked in it for a moment before following them towards the building across a little service road.

The building had large glass doors and elevator entrances every few meters. Lots of people were coming and going,

most of them dressed like it was either Victorian England or medieval Europe. I had somehow become accustomed to seeing members of the Vampire race.

As we approached the doors, I realised that people were stepping right through the glass, like it wasn't there. Libby and Lea strolled right through it too. I stopped and put up a hand; the glass had no resistance. It seemed to be a projection. I followed, and as I did, the ambient sounds from the city were silenced: just as if I was behind glass. I stepped back out, then in and out a few more times. Lea waved for me to keep up. Libby was already at a desk further into the lobby talking to an Elf woman behind a large desk. I realised I hadn't spoken with any one of the Elf race yet and scurried over.

"... Okay, thank you," I heard Libby finish as I got there. The woman behind the counter was looking at me. She had very delicate features and small pointy ears. Her eyes had sharp crosses in them instead of circular pupils. I grinned at her.

Libby took my arm and spun me around. "Wanted to talk to an Elf, did you?" she asked with a coy smile.

"How did you know?"

We headed for an elevator. "Had to report to the desk to declare our weapons. Our clearance checked out and we are good to go."

The elevator journeyed downwards, after Lea pressed some buttons on the inside wall. The doors opened to a familiar large room with many other elevators: it was the floor via which I had exited after waking up. We followed the route to Kay's medical practice. It said *'Ka'ona Michaels'* in big writing on a plaque next to the door. In smaller writing, it said: *'Medical doctor & Bio-stasis physician.'* I took a brief moment of pride in her.

Lea stepped in front of me and blocked the view of the sign with her head, breaking my line of sight and train of thought. She flicked a button on the back of her handgun without

taking it out of the holster, then leant against the wall, like she was settling in for a while.

Libby and I stepped in; the door closed behind us. Kay came from her office. She was dressed in a black skirt and a tied-off purple t-shirt. She wore boots with heels and her hair was braided. There was a cup in her hand. The rich smell of coffee was filling the air.

“Long night, Kay?” Libby asked.

“Your message both woke me up and got me into work on my day off... *And* before noon. You can call me Doctor Michaels today.” She yawned. “Jon, take off your jacket and get on the bed, please.” She picked up a wand and her glasses from one of the benches. I assumed the wand was a medical device not a magical instrument, not that I would really know the difference.

I lay on the bed. Libby sat in the chair next to it, holding my jacket, hugging it like it was an old friend. Kay put a large Circlet on her wrist and walked over. She raised her hand and the familiar green ball appeared in her palm. The threads of light streamed out and streaked down my body, with some of them focusing on my head. She tapped the frame of her glasses and the green ball flickered blue and red for a moment. She bent close to my head and let out a long “hmmm”.

The threads of light flicked off. She took out the wand. It was about as thick as a pencil, but twice as long. She waved across my head and a blanket of light streamed out from it, combing my face, the light heating me up a little.

“Is it supposed to tingle?” I asked.

“Usually no, but this is a very deep scan. It’ll be over in a second.” Kay was distracted by whatever her glasses were showing her. The light blinked off a few moments later.

“Okay, all done. I need to double-check the results. Give me five minutes.” She walked into her office, then quickly scurried back because she had forgotten her coffee.

“She’s dressed differently today,” I said as I slipped my jacket back on.

“Oh! Yes. I didn’t think about it at the time, but she must have looked pretty strange to you when you first saw her.”

“The rubber suit she had on; it’s a medical thing, then?”

“It’s not rubber. It’s a self-sterilising material. It has medical devices embedded,” she thought for a moment and added: “To be honest, though, hers is more obvious than most. Doctors usually cover up more of it with their outer coats. She just likes it.”

I laughed. I had already assumed Kay was aware that it was a flattering look for her.

When my doctor returned, she looked a lot more awake. She did, however, also look very serious. She pulled over a small desk on wheels and pressed some buttons to make a screen appear.

“Jon, I have just compared your pre-accident scan, coma scan and now this new one. I have one of those awful good-news, bad-news situations.”

“The good news is...” she began, “You have no long term brain damage. Your brain is actually in slightly better condition now than before the Event Storm got you. Which is nice.”

The screen showed the brain scan with assorted information panels. I assumed it was my brain. Other than that, it meant less than nothing to me. Libby looked at it intently.

“Now, for the bad news,” Kay announced with a deep and somewhat dramatic breath. “The parts of the brain that deal with memory are only partially damaged. You *do* have amnesia and your memories will return, but I think only the really old ones.”

Libby let out a little grunt.

“What do you mean? Exactly...?” I asked.

Kay zoomed in on an area of the screen. “The brain is a very cryptic organ and there’s always a slim chance I’m wrong, but I doubt you will regain any memories from after the first

time you had an episode like this. The memories are just... not there.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” I said.

Libby nodded and made another sound. “She means ‘The Event’. This is the second time this sort of energy wave hit your brain. There are no memories left to regain between the original ‘Event’ and the more recent accident you had.” Libby sounded serious and upset. “Not one memory since nineteen hundred,” she completed in a defeated tone. Her face wasn’t giving much away, but I could sense the sadness.

“If it’s okay with you, I’ll send all my data to Libby in case she wants to go over it in more detail,” Kay asked. She was also sad. Unlike Libby, though, she had tears forming.

It was the strangest feeling. I wanted my memories back but being told they weren’t coming didn’t feel like much of a loss. I was no worse off than when I had first woken up in this very room.

In a way, Libby had just been told her husband was dead; or gone. Kay had lost the version of her grandfather she had known her whole life.

I wanted to say something to make them feel better. At the same time, a darker part of my mind was selfishly thinking: I was still there, I was still the same person. I deserved to be loved by them. These thoughts weren’t useful or constructive, but I felt them. I was afraid they would leave me; something inside of me was terrified that I would end up alone.

“There is, medically speaking, nothing that can be done,” Kay added.

And yet it seemed like there was more discussion to be had; a myriad of thoughts swirled around my mind. Before I was able to settle on something to say, an alarm sounded. A red glow filled the room.

“What is that?” I asked.

“I think that’s the lock-down alarm,” Kay said. She pulled out her Circelet screen to check.

The door opened and Lea stepped in, gun drawn. “There was some noise from above us and then the alarm sounded,” she informed. She pressed buttons on the door panel to lock it.

“Noise?” Libby queried.

“The explodey kind.”

Kay gave Libby a nervous look. “Libby, I think the building is in a jamming field.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

Libby pointed to her eyes. They were now a flickering amber. “Because this body just lost synchronisation with my core. I’m in simulation mode.”

“What?”

Lea was checking the door panel again, weapon still in hand. Kay ran into her office and Libby began frantically pressing buttons on her Circlet screen.

“There is a special kind of signal that is transmitted from my core to this body. It... well it *is* me. The signal is almost impossible to block from this range. If it does glitch out for a moment, the body goes into simulation mode. It simulates my...” she paused to choose the right word. “Myself. It simulates *me* until the signal returns.”

“You’re simulating yourself?”

“No! This body is simulating Libby. Look, it’s not important. What’s important is that something powerful enough to block a quad-locked grav-data stream has just arrived, on purpose.”

Chapter Eight

Mission

Kay came out of her office with her medical bag. “The command channels are blocked too.”

There was the echoing sound of something exploding. The lights went out for a second, then came back on, dimly. The alarm still rang, but only about half the volume.

“Emergency power?” Kay asked.

Lea nodded. “Okay, Princess, sim-mode or not, you’re the smartest person in this room. Do we hunker down, or do we go for the exit like we’re supposed to?”

“Jon?” Libby passed the question to me. Confused about why my opinion mattered, I shrugged.

“As soon as my core was cut off, my consciousness back on Mercia would know. I’ll be raising the alarm there. Let’s head for the surface. Without more information, we can’t just assume it’s personal.”

“This could just be a power cut,” Kay reasoned.

“Power outages don’t explode,” Lea fired back.

Kay muttered in agreement.

We walked out into the corridor; it was also lit with emergency power. Lea stopped a man rushing past and asked what was happening. He didn’t know; he was heading for the elevator room. It was where the emergency exit was. We followed.

“Won’t the elevators be switched off because of the power cut?” I asked as we jogged down the corridor.

“The emergency Fold should have powered up,” Libby replied.

We made it to the elevator room; there was an orderly queue forming in front of the rear wall. There was a pale blue glow flickering as people walked into the light that promised to move them to the surface.

“Why do we use elevators if we have this sort of technology?” I asked.

“Power,” Libby said. “This Fold will take as much power to run for half an hour as the elevator does for a month.”

“I thought there was a power cut?”

“The emergency battery puts the lights on and powers up a Fold. No government agency would pay the power bill to keep this on twenty-four hours a day.”

“If the building fell down above us, the Fold will still take us out. It’s a safe exit no matter what happened,” Kay said as she tried her Circlet screen again.

The Folds, as emergency exits, did make a lot of sense. I wondered who was paying for the one in our apartment down the street. It was a fast way out: essentially people were just walking through a door. Soon it was our turn. Lea went first, gun in hand; then me; Kay; and finally, Libby.

We didn’t appear outside, as we expected, but instead in a large hangar. “We’re in space,” Libby said, the moment she came through the Fold. It closed behind her. The people who had entered the light before us were all there.

“How do you know?” Lea asked. Her voice sounding professional now.

“I can hear the engines, taste recycled air.”

Her eyes were still orange. She stepped closer to me.

The hangar was large and square and almost intentionally nondescript. There were very few markings or signs to indicate where we were. I noticed a walkway on an observation floor above us, along with mirrored windows.

The other people were confused about our new location, but remained quite calm. They were all trained embassy staff and military people. Many were armed.

A man in a Sol jumpsuit came into view on the walkway.

“Excuse me!” he shouted. “There were some difficulties with the emergency exit. We had to move you to a more secure location. Some people will arrive shortly to arrange your exit back to the embassy grounds. Please be patient.” The man spoke with tranquil authority, the atmosphere became less tense.

Soon enough, a large door opened and some Sol officers entered. The doors closed behind them.

“Okay, people, we are good to go,” said the man that had addressed us a few minutes before. His shoulder insignia implied he was of commander rank. “Before we fire it up, though, do we have a Doctor Michaels here?” he asked.

Kay stepped forward: “You got three.”

The crowd laughed.

“Can you please hang back? We need to check something with you.”

The Fold lit up and people were instructed to leave. This one was larger, so they just piled in casually, probably wondering what the detour was about.

Libby cast me a suspicious look. I gave her a subtle nod in reply.

As the room emptied, the commander and two of his staff strolled towards us. “So, doctors Michaels, I assume?” he said with a faked smile.

“How can we help you?” Kay asked.

“You would be doctor Ka’ona Michaels? It’s actually Jonathan Michaels we needed to speak with; the rest of you are free to go.” He gestured to the exit.

“I’ll stay with Jon,” Libby replied, as sternly as I had ever heard her be.

“Yeah, I’ll be staying too,” Kay added.

“You may not be aware of this, sir, but Doctor Michaels has had some memory issues recently. I’m not sure he can be much help to you right now,” Lea said with a salute.

“We’re aware of that, pilot. You’re dismissed, get yourself through that Fold.”

Lea looked at him, puzzled for a moment, then with her own newly discovered suspicion.

“I’m unable to do that, sir. These people are under my protection until we return to Mercia.”

“You are dismissed,” the commander insisted. “We’ll take it from here, pilot.”

“No, sir. I am under orders from the Vice President herself. Unless she or the President relieves me, I go where they go.”

“Fine.” The commander waved for the Fold to be closed. The last person had already left. The moment the pale blue light faded; all the security officers raised their guns at us. Kay put her hands up. Lea pulled out her handgun so fast that it looked like it had teleported. I wasn’t so much calm as I was confused; I prefer to think I appeared unperturbed.

There were three guns pointed at us from the hangar itself and two from the walkway above.

“Pilot, hand over that gun. Right now,” the commander tried.

“No, sir.”

Libby nodded for me to say something.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“We only want you, Jon. You have a job for you. The others are welcome to leave.”

“You’re not Sol, are you?” Lea sounded pissed off.

“We are. We’re patriots. No one needs to get hurt here.”

After a stand-off that lasted seconds but felt like hours, the commander broke the silence: “One Brick with a handgun isn’t going to get very far. Even if you do, you’re in space. There’s nowhere to go.”

“One Brick with a handgun? Well, sir, you must not have met my friend Libby.”

“Doesn’t matter what armaments it has. Its signal is being jammed.”

“Why would that matter?” Libby said, her eyes suddenly bursting into red balls of fire. She raised an arm and every gun in the room fired at her. A domed blue shield had flared into existence around us. It seemed to be emanating from Libby; a constantly rippling wave of blue light. The shots were black balls of energy that splatted harmlessly against the edges of the shield.

Smoke filled the air.

“You counting?” Lea called through the sounds of gunfire.

“Obviously,” Libby barked back, one hand still raised. Kay was crouching down behind her.

“You go high, I’ll go low,” Libby said.

The gunfire stopped. Without waiting for the smoke to clear, Libby stepped forward and fired energy bolts from her palms, so fast that it looked almost as if they had all been fired at the same time.

Lea squinted and shot twice up at the walkway, then kept her firing stance. She didn’t so much as blink, waiting for the smoke to clear.

There was silence.

The oxygen cycling system kicked in and the smoke was sucked out of the air. There were two people on the floor, unconscious or worse; two were hanging over the rail on the walkway.

“Plan?” Lea asked.

“Door,” Libby responded.

Kay ran over to the people on the floor, medical bag in hand.

“You killed them!” she shouted. She dashed to the next person, the green scanning light in her palm.

“Yes. But the commander isn’t here, so I missed one,” Libby replied.

“That’s not the point, Libby!”

I walked over to her and offered a hand up. I hugged her as she stood up.

“I’m sorry, Kay. They are just protecting us.” I whispered. It wasn’t much, but I felt like something that needed saying. I didn’t like it any more than Kay did, but they did shoot first, right? Something inside me was steely at this. I wasn’t scared so much as I was focused. I didn’t like that I felt such little emotion about it. I wondered how much more there was about myself that I didn’t really know.

“Doors are locked,” Lea said, giving it a defeated kick.

Libby approached the door and placed her palm in the centre. A hot blast of air rippled from her; it buckled but failed to open.

“Blast door,” she said.

Lea looked up at the walkway. “Controls in there?”

Libby crouched down, then launched herself into the air. She stretched out her arms as she flipped backwards, like a gymnast forsaken by gravity. She landed on the top level in one smooth motion.

She walked into the control room, ripping its door out of the wall like it was paper.

“Not a blast door,” she called and threw it over the ledge. It landed with a metal on metal crack.

“Is it just me, or is she actually having a good time?” I asked.

“Not yet. Give it one or two more life-threatening situations, *then* she’ll be enjoying herself,” Lea replied with an odd shrug.

The big door on our level opened; more precisely, it opened halfway: the dent that Libby had put into it prevented it from sliding any more. It was enough for us to get out though. Libby dropped down from the walkway behind us, almost silently.

Lea had taken cover behind the door and peeked around. She made a hand gesture and Libby crossed it with an arm raised.

“Clear,” she called from the other side.

We walked out to find we were on a much smaller ship than we expected. It was little more than a hangar and an engine. The hangar was connected directly to the bridge aside from a small adjoining corridor with a ladder that went up.

The bridge was so small that to call it a bridge seemed like a stretch. There was a pilot’s seat and two stations off to the side; the window in front showed us one of Central’s moons.

“Lea, can you fly this?” Libby asked.

“I can fly anything.”

“Kay, see if you can turn off this jamming field. Jon let’s go find the commander.” Libby noticed a handgun on one of the console desks and passed it to me with a flurry. I took it; I told her I had no idea how to use it. She gave me a smile and vanished into the corridor.

I flicked the safety off on the gun like I had seen Lea do earlier. It was a lot lighter than I expected. It felt like a toy or prop. I had no doubt about its power though.

“Up?” Libby asked.

“Sure.”

She shot up the ladder’s shaft as if she was spring-loaded. I climbed behind her as fast as I could.

The upper deck wasn’t as tall as the deck below but it was a lot noisier. There were pipes and dials everywhere.

“Is this the engine?”

“Yes, my love,” Libby replied. The sudden familiarity in her response stunned me for a moment.

I wasn’t expecting a ship’s engine to be all pipes and dials. I expected a glowing ball or something. It struck me as far less high tech’ than I expected.

“I can hear him,” Libby whispered. She was grinning. She *was* enjoying herself.

She slid under some pipes and hopped over some others without making a sound. She pointed at the end of the pipe framed corridor I was standing in and made a gun gesture with her fingers. I raised my weapon and slowly stepped around the corner. Libby vanished in a blur. I stuck my head out and there was the commander, desperately messing with a panel on a large glowing cluster of engine components.

“Hold it!” I said.

Why the hell did I think “hold it” was the thing to say?

“You!” he grabbed his gun from the floor in front of him. “Where’s the robot?”

“Waiting for the right time to leap out and beat the shit out of you, I would think.” That line was definitely better than the previous one.

The commander grunted “funny,” and I couldn’t help but smile.

“If I could kill you, I would do it in a heartbeat, you know,” he spat.

“Why? What did I do to you?”

“You’re the key. We need you to fix the timeline.”

He pulled a lever. I was about to ask what that meant when Libby dropped down behind him and put her palm next to his head.

“If you move I’ll melt you.” I couldn’t ignore those flickering red eyes.

“Doesn’t matter,” he replied. He pointed his gun at his chin and pulled the trigger without hesitation. The bolt of black energy split his head open; he dropped to the floor. Instead of the expected pooling of blood and the stench of brain, there were metals and circuits.

“He was a robot?” I squeaked.

“Ugh,” Libby mumbled in response. She ignored the body and turned to the panel he had been messing with.

“Well, that’s not good,” she said.

I stepped closer. It was a strange sight. He had seemed to be a human in every way. Yet, now I could see his parts spread across the floor: wires and broken circuitry.

Libby pointed at a gauge. "He's set the ship's TD-drive to full acceleration and locked the controls."

We ran back to the ladder. Libby launched herself into the shaft. By the time I had climbed down she was already at the third seat on the bridge. I heard Lea finishing a sentence: "... about three minutes."

"Three minutes?" I asked.

"The TD-drive is set to take a direct path to the sun. It fires in three minutes." Lea said.

"That sounds bad. Is it bad?"

Kay stood up from her chair and lay on the floor. She grumbled: "Either there's a ship in the corona waiting for us or we're going to start melting in about six minutes."

"The commander said he couldn't kill you, Jon, so I assume we're pointed at something equipped with a docking bay." Libby said.

Lea seemed to test every control and system she had access to.

"I'm trying to vent some oxygen to push us off course," she said.

"No point. It's a TD-drive. It's going to go in a straight line no matter what the starting position is," Libby said. "You know this, Lea; you know this better than any of us."

"Fine. I'm going to check the top deck. Maybe there's an escape pod or something."

"Commander's dead, by the way," Libby called.

Lea stopped at the door. "I assumed."

"He was an avatar," she said as an afterthought.

Lea shrugged and left.

I sat on one of the consoles. Libby stood up.

“Okay, Jon. What you got for us?” Libby asked. She sat next to me and playfully leaned in. “What’s the rabbit in your hat this time?”

“What?” I rubbed my eyes.

Kay groaned from the floor. “Ugh! She’s in sim-mode. She may know you have lost your memory, but the body’s AI can’t reconcile the facts with the personality it’s been preloaded with.”

That was it. This automated version of Libby was talking to me with the warmth and confidence the *real* her had in the *real* me, before my memory was wiped. Was this what it was like for them? She had absolute confidence in him, in me. *She just wanted to sit close and make jokes when we could be about to fly into a sun together.*

Her love was misplaced. That hurt me more than I knew anything could. I felt tears warm my eyes as I realised it had been her mistaken adoration that made her ask my opinion. It was the reason she wanted me to go with her to confront the commander and why she had called me by the accursed mantra of ‘my love.’

I pushed the feelings down. It wasn’t her fault.

“Can’t we use that Fold thing to get out?” I asked.

“No. It was shot to shit,” she said, apparently eager for my next option. I locked eyes with her and wanted nothing more than for them to look at me like that when they were green.

Lea came back to the door with a massive rifle. “They have Sol weapons. A full complement of arms.”

“What does that mean?” Kay asked, still on the floor.

“It means this really is a Sol ship. Stolen... or... *maybe* they really were Sol military,” Lea said. The ship jolted to correct its course. The engines fired. I looked out of the window in front of us. The stars went from a dead still to a smooth sliding motion.

“What is a TD-drive?” I asked.

“Teodar of Deval Propulsion Drive. It’s the fastest way to travel without using a warp point,” Libby answered.

I wondered who ‘Teodar of Deval’ was. I would look this up, if I didn’t get burned to death in three minutes.

Lea sat back in the pilot seat and checked some settings. A while later, she slapped the console: “There *is* something hidden in the sun!” She pressed more dials. “But it’s going to get hot in here before we hit it; whatever it is.”

I noticed she was sweating. I was also becoming warmer. It didn’t actually bother me though.

“Kay,” I called. She looked up at me. “I think Lea may need some doctoring.” I pointed to our pilot.

Kay’s demeanour changed from defeated teenager to professional healer. She got off the floor and went over to Lea to scan her with her palm device.

“Libby, can we control the temperature in here a little better?” I asked.

Libby tapped some buttons and the bridge door closed. “I’ll pump all the heat out into the hangar and put a little more energy into the ship’s shield.”

“I’m fine. Go away!” Lea snapped at Kay.

“You were already dehydrated for some reason and now you’re overheating. I need to give you something.” Kay pulled a bottle from her bag. She took a small measure from it in a tiny cup. “Drink it” she ordered. Lea grumbled and took the medicine.

“What is that?” I asked.

“It’s cure-all. It’s medication and nanites. Gets it to all the right places.” Kay scanned Lea again. She was still sweating, but now looked a little less uncomfortable at least.

“Is she going to be okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. Bricks are hardy.”

The power of my biology was only now dawning on me. I wasn’t even warm enough to really notice the change in temperature; Lea probably felt like she was on fire. Kay was

a doctor and even she didn't notice that it was dangerously hot, until I had pointed out. I glanced over at Libby. She was checking some information on the screen, also untouched by the heat.

The window in front of us flicked black as a filter was automatically activated. It shielded us from the light that would have otherwise blinded us, while still allowing a limited view.

We stood in silence then, staring at the little dark speck in the massive bright ball of fire that filled our vision. The speck grew larger: as it got closer, we could see it take the shape of a large ship. It was round, like a flying saucer from a fifties' science fiction movie – the fifties *I* remembered. It was pure black against the white of the sun and occasionally it got licked by the embrace of the corona.

Whatever it was, it wasn't concerned with the heat or gravity of the godlike fire it was orbiting.

Chapter Nine

Wings

The black saucer was larger than we had realised. It filled our vision: we were inside its shadow. A patch of white appeared as massive doors opened.

“Oh, shit!” Lea scrambled for her seat’s harness. “We’re not slowing down!”

Kay and I strapped into the two remaining chairs. Libby took hold of a pipe that was running across the ceiling.

“You good?” I asked Kay.

“Yeah, I think so,” she said with her hands clamped on the seat’s arm rests.

I took one last look at Libby’s orange eyes and spun my chair to face forward. Whiteness filled the screen. Lea smacked a button and a blast door closed around the window. We transitioned from smooth movement to tumbling mayhem and violent pressure the moment we went from the embrace of the sun’s gravity to the gravity of the ship. That, and the inertia we had accrued, made for an interesting physics problem.

The screeching of metal on metal being transmitted through the hull was only slightly less jarring than the sudden realisation that our ship was rolling; its own gravity field was struggling to compensate fast enough. Our point of view told us down was still down, mostly, but the front screen showed something very different as it tumbled.

The sensation of movement slowed, the sounds quieted. There were the groans of creaking as our ship screamed its

last breath and fell into silence with a few final sparks and pops.

We were tilted and terrified. But we were at least the right way up.

Libby was the first to move. "Everyone alive?"

I unbuckled myself. "Yeah."

Lea stood up out of her seat, soaked in sweat and looking exhausted. "Let's go meet our hosts."

Kay didn't move.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I just need a minute."

She still held the sides of her seat; her eyes were tightly closed, her knuckles were white. Libby stepped over and knelt down in front of her.

"Kay. We've landed. All we have to do is get a clear signal out and Mercia will come get us. I'm sorry, but I need you to be okay right now." Libby's voice was soft and warm. She put her hands on Kay's and lifted them away from the edge of the seat. She pressed the buckle's centre to release it.

Kay opened her eyes.

"I'm not like you all. This isn't my life, I'm a doctor. I don't get involved in these things," she said, clearly holding back her hysteria as well as anyone could in her position.

"No matter what happens, I'll get you out of here safely. I promise," Libby added. I understood that promise, I had silently already made it myself.

Kay stood up. I wanted nothing more than to make her feel safe. Maybe that was some grandfatherly duty that still rattled around somewhere inside me, or perhaps it was as simple as the recognition of someone who was totally out of their depth. Getting her home safely was all I wanted right now too.

We went back to the hanger, where we started, where we assumed the exit would be. Parts of it were dented and cracked, and the back corner was missing. We walked over there and looked out. There were people in Sol uniforms. Lea

pulled some emergency control level in a wall panel and a hatch on the other side of the hangar opened. A long walkway extended out of it.

Lea checked her rifle. I held my gun tightly and Libby shook her arms, like a boxer before a fight. Kay stood behind us, clutching her medical bag.

“After you,” Lea said with a somewhat concerning tone of enthusiasm. Libby walked out of the hatch; Lea followed. Kay and I hung back a moment, then followed, giving space to the two people who knew how to fight.

We hadn’t seen our prison, our ship from the outside before: it was a large black rectangle with stubby wings on each side, probably for stabilisation. My attention, however, was soon diverted by the new place we were in.

It was like the dock on Mercia, but it was empty on our side. We had left burn marks and dents in the floor as we ‘landed’; some of the floor panels were beat up and melted. It looked like no-one had been hurt. I glanced the other way and saw that in front of the ship was a large net made of metal ropes. We seemed to have ripped halfway through it.

Then I saw the people coming around to meet us: all had full armour and were carrying rifles. The commander we had met earlier was leading them.

“I don’t know what you did to my avatar, but I assure you, we are better prepared to deal with you than it was.” The twenty or so soldiers around us all raised their guns.

Kay put her hands up, dropping her medical bag. I raised mine. Libby swept the room with her gaze; I could almost hear her doing the calculations. Lea put her gun down and raised her hands.

Libby had another sweep of the room. She must have decided it wasn’t a fight she could win. She raised her hands too.

I was cuffed with magnetic rings and put into the back seat of a small floating vehicle. It looked like an old military buggy, aside from the lack of wheels. Lea and Kay were cuffed too

and put into their own buggies. Then some large gauntlets were produced: they went around Libby's wrists. Her arms snapped together forcefully. They put a collar on her and made sure she knew it was capable of delivering a huge electrical shock. She was sitting in a vehicle of her own with a driver in heavy armour.

The three buggies drove out of the dock and down some large corridors. The ship was massive and clinically clean. The buggies behind me turned in a different direction, I was suddenly alone.

When the buggy stopped, I was taken into a plush office. The armoured guard left me alone in the room.

The room was decorated in a way that I understood: there was a metal desk and leather arm chairs. A table, an ashtray. There was a filing cabinet in the corner.

A flag on the wall said "Sol", but didn't look like any insignia I had seen. It was a stylised map of the solar system with a black background, the planets in blue. The word 'Sol' in gold was where the sun should be.

I was probably being watched, so I decided not to give them a damned thing. I simply waited in the middle of the room. I refused to look concerned.

An hour, maybe more, passed.

Eventually, the door at the back opened. The commander walked in and sat down behind his desk.

"Sorry I kept you, Doctor. Have a seat." He gestured to his desk.

I sat down. I was grateful to be off my feet now; not that I would show it. The commander pressed a button under his desk and the magnetic lock on my cuffs disengaged. They were still around my wrists, but no longer attached to each other. I rubbed my arms.

“Who are you, and what do you want?”

“I know from your point of view I’m a villain. I’m really not.” He lit a cigarette. I smelled the smoke. It felt like being inside one of my memories now, oddly comforting.

“What are you?”

The commander laughed. “It’s not supposed to be like this, you know,” he said through a plume of smoke. “Reality. The universe. It’s all wrong.”

I leaned back, realising just then that my body hurt from the crash landing.

“Don’t waste my time with riddles. I’m not planning on staying long,” I said with confidence.

“Oh, you’re staying a *long* while, Doctor. Your two friends will be my insurance that you cooperate.” He flicked the ash from the end of his cigarette with a swagger.

“And my wife,” I added as I eye-balled him. “Now, what do you want?”

He laughed. It wasn’t any kind of fake evil laugh, but a genuine reaction. “Wife! Sure,” he mocked. “I want you to help me fix the timeline, Jon.” He was less amused as he continued. “All I need is for you to push some buttons for me.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I did notice something he may have missed. I decided to see what I could learn while I waited for things to play out.

“Okay then, commander. Why does the timeline need fixing? What’s broken?”

“All of it. The version of reality my people and I come from is far different from this bastardisation. Humans are in charge of *our own* world. No aliens. No social pollution from their technology and values. And I’ll tell you this for sure: no one would have married a fucking robot where I come from!”

“Sounds like bliss,” I replied sarcastically.

“Look, I don’t give a fuck what you think. You’re the prick who screwed it all up and you’re the prick who’s going to fix it.” He slapped his desk.

“My memory was wiped. I have no idea what you are talking about,” I said, mirroring his rage back at him.

“You agree now, and you never even have to meet the person attached to this avatar. If you meet the *real* me. I’ll kill everyone you know, just to make sure you’re listening.”

There was the sudden sound of an explosion and the room shook.

“Ah,” I smiled at him. “That brings me to the part where I tell you what I know.”

The commander’s brow ruffled at me. I let my smile broaden.

“You used what you call an avatar to meet us on the ship that brought us here. And you are using an Avatar now. I assume you did that because you’re a coward.” He stood up and pushed his chair away.

“You had to block Libby’s signal, because for some demented reason you think avatars can’t use weapons if they aren’t being controlled. But if you weren’t a coward, you would have been on the ship yourself and would know that Libby isn’t bound by your odd rules. She is quite armed. We’re not in your timeline any more, commander. Your rules don’t apply here. Avatars *can* use their weapons here.”

He pressed a button. My wrists were slammed together. He walked around the desk to look me in the eye; with satisfaction, he punched me in the face. It wasn’t an amateur punch either. He was strong. It knocked me out of my seat. I had to remember that this wasn’t a man, it was another Avatar. His size didn’t reflect his power.

“Needed to cuff me first, did you?” I said as I struggled to my feet.

My jaw felt broken. He snarled at me and put his fists up again. Explosions rattled the room, this time closer. He punched me in the gut and pushed me over, then made his escape from the room.

I lay there for a moment before the sounds of carnage got closer again. Then the door to the office exploded inwards. The metal slab hit the floor, dented and smoking. I managed to get up. Libby stood at the hole where the door used to be.

“Not that I mind, but why did they think I can’t fire my weapons?” she said.

“That the Correctionist flag?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She tore my cuffs apart and crushed their magnetic generators.

“Then I learned some things today,” I smiled. “Where are the others?”

“Deck above, getting a signal out.”

We left the room. I was astounded at the destruction that Libby had created. There were holes in walls, things were on fire, more than a few bodies were scattered around. We ran up the corridor to a maintenance hatch on the wall.

“Up one floor. I’ll cover you,” she snapped, just as energy bolts began to fly behind us.

I climbed the ladder as fast as I could. It felt endless. Then a hand came through an open wall panel and pulled me out of the shaft.

It was Kay. “Is Libby behind you?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think so.”

I heard more shots fire and a moment later Libby came from the hatch with a burned chest and neck. Her metallic skeleton was showing through the blast marks on her back and arm. It would have been terrifying if I wasn’t so grateful to see her. She closed the hatch and released blasts from her hands to seal it shut.

The room was a mess. There were burn marks across the door and energy blast damage across a lot of the walls. The door was welded shut the same as the hatch had been. There

were computer terminals set into desks. A table in the middle showed a map of the ship, projected up from it. Lea was frantically pulling wires out of one of the terminals.

She took two large trunks of cables and turned to us.

“Shit, Libby! You got shot!”

“Yes. Ran out of power for shields. Almost out of juice for energy blasts too. Body is close to shut down. We need to do it now.”

Lea sat her down in a chair near the terminal she had been working on.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Patching her into this ship’s communication system,” Lea replied. She cut away part of Libby’s upper back with a knife. “No way they are jamming their own communication frequencies.”

“Is that okay?” I asked Libby. Chunks of her synthetic flesh were being peeled away.

“Needs to be done,” Libby replied coldly.

Kay was sitting on the floor next to the door. Once again, she looked destroyed by the events. I felt bad for her, but at least she was uninjured. We could talk about it if we lived through this.

A small panel was removed from Libby’s back and Lea began fixing the trailing wires to parts of her exposed circuitry, using a welding light that was made from Kay’s medical scanner. The light threads it emitted were blue and white now.

“How do you know how to do that?” I asked.

“I have seen Libby’s insides before. A lot of her body’s data systems aren’t dissimilar to the shuttles. Just smaller,” she said. “Now go and press the big blue button for me, Jon.”

I went over to the open terminal; there was indeed a bright flashing blue button on the screen, nothing else. I pressed it and the screen was filled with symbols and numbers. “Is it working?”

“No idea.” Lea moved, so she was standing in front of Libby.

“What are we waiting for?” I asked.

“What the hell!” Libby yelled, eyes suddenly a neon green.

“Yes!” Lea yelled back with a victorious fist.

Libby stood up with one hand around her back, holding the wires in place.

“Hi,” she said calmly. She seemed to freeze in place for a moment.

“Right, I’m up to speed.” She walked over to the terminal. Her eyes were dimming to her usual emerald green again.

“Hold this,” she barked at me. I held the wires in place while she typed into the terminal.

I then realised what Lea had done. Libby’s consciousness had always been on Mercia. As soon as Lea got the signal out from Libby’s body to her ‘core’ on the ship, Libby knew everything her body knew; she could also communicate that information to Mercia without us having to take the time to explain it.

Libby typed faster than a human could keep up with.

“Are you taking the shields off-line?” Lea asked, looking over her shoulder. “It looks like you’re taking the shields off-line.” Lea sounded worried. “Libby, this ship is inside the sun’s outer layer. We can’t have the shields go down. We’ll burn to death.”

A series of lines appeared on the screen. They were vanishing by the second.

It was a countdown.

Libby turned to us: “Here’s the situation. Mercia isn’t equipped for sun-diving. The closest science vessel that can get to you is about three hours away. This body is out of juice and running on luck. I can’t protect you, so you can’t wait. There is only one way off of this ship and to do it, I need to take the shields off-line.”

“I’m a brick, not a bio-static. That plan doesn’t work for me.” Lea pleaded.

“What plan?” I asked. “She didn’t tell us the plan yet.”

Kay stood up and brushed dust from her legs.

“Is Mercia as close as it can get?”

“It will be,” Libby said.

“Make sure a team and a medical stasis generator are in the landing bay. They have to be ready the moment we hit the floor,” Kay said calmly.

“What is the plan?” I insisted.

“We’re going to Blue-tube you out of here,” Libby replied.

“The cargo beam thing?”

“It’s the only way to get you off this ship before they find out where you are and break down that door.” Libby sighed. She realised I needed a little more. “You reconnected me to my core so I could find a way to get you out of here. It took me just under a second to sync the last few hours of data, then about half a second to establish our resources; the next three seconds were spent trying to formulate exit options. This is literally the only one. Right now, I’m also talking to Joanne, on Mercia. The order has already been made. All you have to do is wait about a minute for Mercia to come out of TD-Stream.”

“Are you downloading this ship’s database?” Lea asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. At least we may find out who these people are.” Lea was pacing. She was probably trying to think through her options. She had none.

“What are my odds?”

Libby looked at Lea for a moment. “Better than you think. I promise.”

“Kay?” Lea asked.

“If you were a human, it would be suicide. But you’re a Brick, you have a personal shield, Mercia has the best medical staff and equipment there is. It’s not going to be good but, yeah. It can be done.”

Lea paced around the room. “Has it ever been done?”

“No,” Libby replied.

“Okay, at least I’ll get in the history books.”

Libby turned to me. "You were right. This trip was a terrible idea." She pulled the wires from her back and her eyes went orange again.

"Huddle up on me."

We all stood together in the middle of the room. The terminal made a beeping sound as the last line vanished from the screen and the ship's shields went down. Lea activated her personal shield with a slap of her shoulder and a blue haze tinted the air around her. I saw her tears as she looked at me and nodded. Explosions and a burning white light bathed us all. The time between me noticing I was hot and the sudden realisation I was in space felt like the gap between a moment. The tube of blue energy had embraced us and pulled us down through it at the exact same time.

We were in free fall out of the station and going faster than I thought was possible without a ship. The edges of the beam were an arm's length away; it looked like a streaming waterfall. Kay was in front of me, or was it above? I could see her stretched out like she was flying. I was under too much pressure to look behind me, but I had to believe Lea and Libby were right there.

The inside of the tube was silent. It was the blue glow of the tube's sparkling waterfall sides that gave me a sense of motion. I wasn't able to breathe, but thanks to my complicated biology, it didn't matter. From burning hot inside the station, I was suddenly freezing cold. I could feel the frost forming across my exposed skin.

As soon as I took stock of what was happening, I expected it to be over.

It wasn't. It didn't end.

We were falling from the sun: Icarus without his wings.

It was now so cold that I felt like I was dying. I wasn't used to not-breathing either. It was a torturous sensation. Then I realised Lea was somewhere in that pipe suffocating for real – and freezing to death. I felt a wave of panic. She had known

what was going to happen. She understood it and she still agreed to it, not that she had a choice.

I felt a sudden connection with... something; a feeling – as if some kind of higher power had noticed me. I didn't know if it was a memory or a hallucination, but I saw... no, I felt it: two white eyes looking right at me. An echoing voice said my name and the memory of the woman in robes flashed through my mind.

I think I passed out for a moment.

The trip ended as abruptly as it had begun. I went from feeling like I was falling to feeling like I was spinning. A wave of weight hit me. I was forcefully yet delicately dropped to the ground. I took a deep breath, like I had never taken before.

My eyes were a blur. I tried to stand but flailed on the floor. There were sounds of movement, people, and shouting. Libby's voice was there too. I was grateful when unconsciousness took me again.

Chapter Ten

Icarus awoken

The pain filled me before I opened my eyes. I was on my back. The ceiling was the ambient white glow that I had come to expect.

I tried to sit up.

“Careful,” came Libby’s voice from the side of my bed. She pressed the buttons to make it prop me up.

“I have to stop waking up in hospital beds.” I hadn’t realised how dry my mouth was until I started talking. It wasn’t Kay’s medical centre: we were in a private room and there were machines attached to me with wires. It felt like electricity was running through me; every nerve burned.

“What happened?” I asked.

Her eyes were emerald green. I was relieved. Libby was perfect and pristine: no metal showing, no burns, and absolutely no flesh missing. I assumed she had created a new body for herself. She was dressed in a dark red vest and jeans. Her blonde hair fell freely about her shoulders in styled curls.

“You survived. They’re running Cure-all through your body. You should be fine in half-hour now that you’re awake.” Her voice was soft and a little timid.

“Kay? Lea?”

“Kay is in a similar state to you right now. Lea isn’t doing as well.” She licked her lower lip nervously. “She’s going to be okay, but it’s going to take a little longer. They had to regenerate her epidermis. There was damage to her lungs and brain.”

“What?” I said, realising my lips were like sandpaper.

“She’s going to be fine in a day or so. Humans are the best at medicine. She’s got the best doctors and we are past the scary stages. They’re keeping her unconscious until she’s healed. No reason to put her through the pain.”

Libby still seemed sheepish and reserved. She passed me a glass of water. I drank it all.

“More, please,” I asked. She filled it from a cravat on a table to her side. I drank three more glasses.

“And you? How are you?” I asked once I had moisture in me again.

“Me? I’m a NOLF, Jon. I just disengaged that body and synced a new one.” She forced a smile; it fell short of genuine.

“I know what you are Libby. I wasn’t asking about your body.” I leaned forward and stretched out my arms in hopes that some of my muscles would ease. The tingling was subsiding.

“I... I did a lot. Whenever I load memories after one of my bodies was in simulation mode, I’m always annoyed that it did things differently than the real me would have done. The longer I’m out of sync, the more the simulation diverges from decisions I would have made.” She sounded apologetic. “I’m pretty certain that I could have escaped faster. I think there would have been better options than a Blue-tube if I was in control. Lea may not have had to go through that.”

I began pulling the wires from me.

“What are you doing, Jon?” I pulled a pipe from my arm – the one I assumed carried the Cure-all into my veins – it dribbled onto the floor. I pulled the sheets around me and stood up. Libby stood to support me.

“Where are my clothes?” I asked.

Libby spent the next half hour trying to convince me to stay in the room, but eventually presented the clothes she had brought for me. My old ones were torn, burned, radiated, and frozen. I was annoyed.

I liked that jacket.

Still, I couldn't help but smile to myself as Libby presented me with a bag of clothes. I dug through the bag. Jeans, boots, a simple black t-shirt, and a chunky Circlet. I didn't ask Libby to leave as I put them on. I was still a little wobbly.

"I think your simulated self did okay, Libby." I tied up my boots.

She didn't reply.

"She spoke to me differently than you do," I said.

"She? No. That's not how you say that."

"What?"

"You should say 'you spoke to me differently, when you were in simulation mode', not 'she'. It was still me," she explained, fiddling with the arm of her chair.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't realise."

She didn't say anything. I decided that wasn't the right time to discuss it. She knew what I was talking about.

"Let's go see Kay," I demanded.

Libby nodded; we left the room.

We were in a larger hospital ward. A nurse noticed me. He was a vampire and wearing the all-in-one suit that I had come to read as 'medical' in nature, along with a white tabard.

"You shouldn't be up, Doctor Michaels," he called as he came striding over to me.

"Hello," I said politely, trying not to show him how much I was leaning on Libby. It was easy. She could take all of my weight without looking like she was taking any of it.

The nurse flicked out a Circlet screen and said: "Doctor Ashwa. Doctor Michaels is awake, and he's out of his room." He closed his screen. Seconds later, an overweight human came dashing out of an office. He was wearing the medical professional's rubber looking silver-grey suit too, but covered it with a long buttoned white coat. He had a grey beard and a bald head.

"No! No! No!" he called, walking over to us.

“What are you doing out of bed, young man?”

“Young?” Libby smirked.

“Hello, doctor,” I replied.

“You need at least another six hours of cure-all before you even think about being up and about. You can’t just go flying around space without a shield and expect to walk away as though nothing happened!” The man literally shouted at me. He was quite the character.

“How long have I been unconscious?” I asked.

“Two days.”

“Then I guess if I fly around space without a shield I *can* just walk away. It just takes two days,” I smiled.

“You are Bio-static, not a machine, Doctor Michaels,” he said, gravely. I saw Libby raise a less than amused eyebrow as he said ‘machine’.

“From what I understand about Bio-static biology, a good meal will do more for him than a week on cure-all,” Libby added.

“Madam, the only person that really understands how it all works is in that room over there.” He pointed to the door next to mine.

As the doctor began to grumble again, the door to Kay’s room slid open. Kay was leaning against the frame, looking far rougher than me.

“Ashwa!” she said sternly. She wore a hospital robe; her hair was a mess.

“Bio-static’s need nutrition, not Cure-all, you bloody idiot!” She took a few breaths before mustering a sterner tone.

“Now someone get me some clothes and something to eat!”

Once Kay was awake and throwing around her medical seniority, it wasn’t long before we were all sitting in the military

dining room. It was on the same deck as the hospital, or sickbay, as I was informed a ship's hospital was called.

I still thought of Mercia as a city, not a ship.

Kay and I happily ate an insanely large amount of food while Libby sat watching us, smiling. I had a classic combination of burgers and fries. Kay had opted for an unreasonably large pizza. I traded some fries for a slice. It felt like we were in a food trance.

After a few more minutes, we were more able to function like normal people.

The frenzy slowed.

"How is food making me feel so good?" I asked, covering my mouth.

"Doesn't have to be food. Just nutrition hitting your stomach. It gets converted into biomass and your body expresses it around to repair the damage. It returns to the template." Kay drank from a massive jar of orange juice.

"I made a paste once that works even faster, but if we need a fix, the feeding up feels *so* damned good," she added.

"You realise everyone in the room is pretending not to be watching you two?" Libby observed with quiet joy.

Kay and I looked around. The room was full of military people. They were all half-watching us.

Just as I looked up, a person entered the room. It was Kieran. He came over to our table and saluted us. I greeted him, happy to see a friendly face.

"I hear you three took down a Correctionist spy base and threw it into the sun," he said, loud enough for the entire room to hear.

"That's mostly true, though that wasn't what we set out to do," Libby said.

"You flew out of there in a damned Blue-tube! Saved Lea's life and got more intel on them in one mission than we have in forty years. That all true?"

I stood up. Kay and Libby followed my lead. It seemed like the right thing to do. I wasn't sure what was happening from his tone.

"Yeah. That about sums it up." Libby spoke in the same volume as Kieran.

Everyone in the dining room stood up. It was unnerving. Kieran saluted us, and they all started clapping. Kieran held his salute.

The clapping halted. Everyone in the room saluted, but not to us. Joanne and Ba'an had just walked in.

"Well, don't look at us! They're the ones who pulled off a damned miracle," Ba'an yelled, as he clapped us himself, everyone followed his lead.

The mood in the room was humbling, and yet I wasn't sure we deserved the praise. All we did was react to situations as they came up. It was Libby who had done all the really incredible things.

The clapping died down. Joanne came over and hugged us, one by one. Vice-president or not, I was her father, Kay was her daughter, and Libby was one of her closest friends.

Ba'an said something to Kieran that made the pilot smile and walk off hurriedly. A moment later, a screen appeared, projected against the back wall, filling it completely. Kieran had set up the projection by placing his Cirplet on a table.

"Jon, Ka'ona: I doubt you have had a chance to catch up on the news feeds yet," Ba'an said, gesturing to the screen.

We all turned to watch. It was news footage that quickly transitioned to a video taken from a camera on a mining ship. The recording placed the edge of the sun to the left of the screen so we could see its curvature poking into the frame. Mercia appeared with a flash as it disengaged its TD-drive. It hung in space as a spark of pure white rage left the edge of the sun. I assume it had been the moment the shields were dropped on the spy ship. A blue beam of light shot from Mercia into the bright area and the white spark turned into an

ejection of plasma. The video zoomed in to show four little outlines of people zipping up the line of blue. The footage had to be slowed down to track the figures' movements. Then the figures vanished into Mercia, and its sparkling Blue-shield blazed into existence as a lick of fury from the sun engulfed it. A moment later, Mercia fired its huge engines and left the burning arm of the sun.

The people in the room let out excited cheers as if they hadn't seen this already. They had all been on Mercia when it happened. I suppose seeing it framed like this did make it more exciting.

Mercia moved back to a safe distance, its shields still flickering with expended energy. The video flipped back to a news anchor, who was explaining what had just happened. The side of the screen was filled with fuzzy zoomed-in photos of our faces. Kay looked like she was mid-scream; I was in a zen-like trance; Lea's skin was burned, her eyes were closed tight. She was tinted bluer than the rest of us because of the added layer of her own shield, though it didn't seem to be doing much. The bottom picture showed Libby's burned metal skeleton; having been the last out, she was most exposed to the sun. There had been only seconds or fractions of seconds between us all leaving as the shield went down, but it was enough to make the difference between toasty and inferno.

The video blinked off.

People were whooping and cheering still. It really did look impressive. Probably the most impressive looking thing I had ever done. Yet, somehow, it still felt a little like living through a nightmare; Lea wasn't there enjoying this moment of victory. I glanced over at Kay. She had an expression that was hard to read, but as she looked back, a very real smile crept across her face. Libby was beaming with pride. Not in herself, but in us.

Ba'an waved for everyone to calm down.

“Elizabeth Michaels,” he bellowed, in his most presidential tones, while gesturing towards Libby so that everyone knew who he was talking about.

“She planned the most ludicrous rescue operation in the history of space travel. It was her calculations and information that allowed us to blaze in there with the right coordinates for the beam and the exact amount of time between firing it and raising the shields.” He paused for a moment, to build dramatic tension.

“Simultaneously she was briefing her team inside the spy ship *and* she stole the ship’s entire database on the way out. She brought everyone home, taking great personal harm while doing so.” Everyone clapped. Ba’an quieted them again.

“Well! Elizabeth Michaels seems to think that she doesn’t deserve a damned medal for this!” The crowd gasped. “She has been dodging my screens and messages to the extent that I have had to come to the mess hall *myself* to tell her that everyone on that team is getting a ‘Sol-Crest’ medal... except her!” The crowd had begun to cheer again, then aborted the clapping into a gasp. It seemed almost scripted.

“Because!” he went on. “Because she is going to be the first NOLF in Sol history to receive the ‘Defender of Earth’ commendation.”

There were cheers across the dining room. Ba’an let it go on for a while before nodding to Joanne.

“Okay, knock it off, people. We got business to conduct,” she ordered.

The good-natured circus of people left us. No one was brave enough to even glance our way once Ba’an and Jo sat down. The tables directly next to us quickly vacated to give us a little privacy. The respect and awe they commanded was remarkable. Ba’an’s ability to work a crowd was also impressive.

“Really? You couldn’t just send her an e-mail?” Kay asked in an annoyed tone.

Ba'an looked apologetic. "Come on, it's good for morale!"

"You were recording that whole thing, I assume?" Kay asked.

"Of course we were," Jo cut in. She grabbed some of my fries.

"Are you alright, Kay? I know you don't do well in combat situations," Ba'an asked, this time without any performance or agenda.

"Yeah, it's over now. I'm seasoned enough to know not to dwell on it."

"Dad, you got any more memories back?" Jo nudged.

"No, and there are very few of the old ones still in me, I'm told. Doesn't matter though. I'm making new ones."

Jo smiled. "I had a feeling you would get your old spark back once you got a few people trying to kill you again."

I thought about that. "As odd as it sounds, that may actually be true."

"You know, in the two months you were in a coma, no one blew up a single spy ship," Kay said.

"It was actually a really nice two months," Ba'an added with a cheeky smile across his blood-red lips.

"Cheaper too, I'll bet," Kay threw in.

"Now that you mention it, yes! I should bill all of you for all the burn damage across the stern of the ship."

As Ba'an poked fun at me, I glanced up and noticed his hand across the table; his fingers were out flat. It was only briefly, but I saw his hand touch Kay's; her face was betrayed by what seemed to me to be a moment of warmth for him.

Everyone laughed, the conversation went on with more good-natured back and forth's until Joanne said something that made the table's mood darken:

"... anyway, given recent events, the captain wants to take Mercia back to Earth for a once-over."

“Yes. And after being away so long, sorting out the border negotiations with the Thinkers, I need to get back to Sol anyway,” Ba’an followed.

I noticed Kay’s dejected look and her mood change.

“Well, I hope you have a good time. I have work to do.”

“Sorry, Kay, I’m arranging quite the gathering for Friday night. I need you to join us on Earth to get your medal,” Ba’an said. It seemed like he knew what would come next.

“No. I have commitments, my work.” Kay stood up.

Ba’an held her gaze for a moment before replying: “Kay, you’re getting a Sol-Crest! Consider it a presidential order if you have to, but you are coming to this.”

She sighed. She was obviously pushing down some anger I didn’t quite understand.

“Fine! Send me the info and I’ll make my own way there.”

“Ka’ona, make sure you’re off Mercia by twenty-two hundred hours. That’s when we leave,” Joanne said with a motherly tone that didn’t quite suit her.

They agreed they would talk more later. The presidential party left briskly, nodding and waving to people as they did. Jo was worried about her daughter. The parental instincts were obvious to us all, but struck me as out of place, maybe because they both looked the same age.

Chapter Eleven

Research

Kay excused herself to go check on Lea's recovery. I told Libby that I intended to go back to my lab. She said she'd join me for a little while.

"Oh, on the way, I want to pop into the commerce area. I need a new jacket," I told her.

We left the dining room and headed to the closest elevator.

As the elevator's door closed, it felt like I should break the silence before it even set in: "How's the new body?"

The elevator moved.

"Much like the last one."

"Does it feel odd, getting a new one?" Before she could answer, I added: "Does it hurt?"

The doors opened. We departed by the space window with the artificial grass and the bench. There were many people there, a few families, most showing their kids the stars that moved as the ship adjusted its position. I assumed it was in preparation for the move back to earth.

"I don't process pain in the way organics do. It's sensory information, nothing more. My conscious point of view is always split between my core and my current body. It's more like part of me is refreshed. I imagine it's like humans when they have to sleep."

"Getting a new body is like waking up refreshed from a good night's sleep?" I mulled over the thought.

"Yeah, I guess so." I imagined that would be the end of her response, but she continued: "Going from that battle's

damaged body, out of power and about to shut down, to a newly synthesised one was a hell of an upgrade, though.”

We stopped outside a shop selling men’s suits.

“Here?” she asked.

I made a disgusted sound and kept walking.

“Wait, I just realised. I don’t even know our financial situation. Do you have to pay someone for the bodies?” I asked, realising I had just assumed we shared a wallet. And maybe I had made it sound like I didn’t think a new body was a good investment. “I mean, not that...” I desperately hoped I didn’t sound like an absolute dick.

Libby let me stumble over my words before nudging me with her shoulder and laughing.

“Well, you can still afford a new jacket, Jon. I’m not quite burning through our reserves just yet.” She was shaking her head and wore a mocking over-acted ‘hurt’ expression.

We reached what looked like a military surplus store.

“Jon, my lo...” She stopped herself. “Jon, I’m one of the most well-known philosophers in the core worlds. I *designed* the technology that my body uses. The cognitive processors in most organic-like avatars are my patents. Money is not an issue for us.”

I didn’t know what to say; a sincere “wow” left my lips before I could catch it. I felt warmed that the real Libby almost referred to me the same way her simulation-mode version had. *Progress, my love*, I thought to myself, almost subconsciously.

We stepped into the store. An older looking but athletic man with slightly pointy ears and alien eyes was reading from a Cirplet screen. He flipped it away when he saw us.

“There you go, you get a new jacket, *and* you can finally meet an Elf,” Libby announced.

“Meet an Elf?” said the shopkeeper. “You must not get out much.”

I left the shop with a rugged charcoal coloured Elven jacket. The shopkeeper told me it was popular with Elven hunters who lived on their third moon. Libby told me that it was a mass-produced knock-off of a pretty pedestrian hiking jacket that had been out of fashion on all the Elven moons for around a decade.

It looked like a hard-wearing weave reminiscent of polyester, with double-layered padding around the elbows. It also had more pockets than my old one, and was fastened with magnets, which was pretty cool.

Libby also informed me it was massively overpriced. I said that ‘some woman’ outside had told me I could afford it. I proudly admired it as I caught my reflection in the glass of the store across the street.

“Street,” I muttered to myself.

“Yes. Street.” Libby replied, confused as to why I was so perplexed by the word.

“We’re on a spaceship at the opposite end of the galaxy from Earth, and I’m walking down a street like it’s a shopping trip in the city. There are streets and people and coffee shops,” I said. “It’s amazing!”

Libby smiled and took my hand. We walked to the next elevator and into my lab. We didn’t talk this time, but it was a different type of silence. It was a relaxed and thoughtful silence that we were sharing.

I entered the lab, the lights turned on. Dex came walking in from wherever it is that he, it, went when it was alone.

“Welcome back,” it said, in a kind of musical tone.

“Hi, Dex. You miss me?”

“Yes. A great deal,” it replied.

I knew it was a programmed response, but I enjoyed it. I looked around: the books, the trinkets and the lighting that set the mood of secrets and wisdom. This really was as close to a perfect room as I could hope for. Which made sense, considering I had been the one that decorated it.

I waved my hand and the desk lit up. A large button on the floating controls made the screens pop into existence like I hadn't been gone.

Libby stood next to me.

"Time to see the footage, I assume?" she asked.

I nodded.

She pressed some buttons on the desk and typed in a security code.

"This video is considered an official secret by the Sol alliance. Other than Ba'an, Joanne and I, no one has seen this." She sounded serious.

It made me apprehensive. I was about to see how I lost my memory.

I had learned there was a recording of my accident, but with everything else I had to take on board, watching it hadn't seemed important before now.

The video blinked onto the large screen above the desk.

My face filled the frame. My hair was longer, and my chin sported an impressive beard. The version of me on the screen was moving around a lot. He finally adjusted the camera and backed away from it a little, showing that he was alone in a sand filled wasteland. Behind him, in the distance, there were mountains. The area was a cracked sandy surface, like a dried-up lakebed on Earth. The purple sky gave away that this wasn't Earth.

The version of me on the screen began to speak:

"After a long conversation with Libby about why I shouldn't do this... I'm doing this. We have been poking at this device for almost ten years now and we still know next to nothing about who made it, what its purpose is or how it survived 'The Event.' Libby, I love you. I know you're going to be furious, but I have come to literally the most isolated place on Central. I

can't make it any safer unless I take it off-world and you know what happened last time we tried that.”

He moved the camera to show a large object that looked a lot like a pill, only it was about eight feet long. It was floating at waist height under its own power. It was a deep charcoal grey. Its surface was broken up by a circuit pattern in thin sparkling silver lines.

There was no cushion of blue light supporting it, as was what I now considered as being the ‘normal’ way to make things float. There were no signs of power coming from it at all. It just floated there almost magically.

He walked up past the frame. From the sounds of boots on metal and the canopy peeking into the frame when the image wobbled, I assumed there was a shuttle behind the camera. He came out dragging a large power cable, like the ones I had seen in the shuttle dock. This one had a cluster of adaptors on the end. After laying the cables on the floor, he ran back into the shuttle. He emerged a moment later with a big box with a handle and some sticks under his arm. He put the box down and slammed the sticks one by one into the cracked sandy floor, forming a circle around the floating object.

It took me a little while to realise what he was doing: it was a Blue-field generator. He was erecting a make-shift shield around the object. He connected the large cable to the floating pill. It looked like a lot of the work had been pre-prepared as there were already smaller wires affixed to the cable, which went over the object like a spider web. He took a few steps back towards the camera as if to make sure it was still lined up.

He seemed to hesitate, but mustered the resolve to continue. He pulled out his Circlet screen and first pressed for the Blue-shield to activate. It popped and buzzed, but once stable, it held as a rough dome over the object. He checked some information on his screen, then stepped back behind the camera.

“Okay! Here it goes.”

The wires attached to the object sparked and the silvery pattern across it lit up in a bright and glowing blue.

“Power is now on,” he shouted.

After a few seconds, he stepped back into frame and walked quickly towards the object. “It didn’t explode. I told you it wouldn’t,” he said smugly, looking into the camera.

He pressed a button on his wrist and the Blue-shield blinked off. The object was still glowing blue when he stepped closer to it. He raised his hand, I could see a scanner appear in his palm, like the one Kay had used on me too many times now. The scanning threads of light shot out of it towards the object, and he used his other arm to project a screen from his Circlet so he could read the data.

I noticed the area behind him get darker. A storm was forming over the mountains.

Then it got strange.

As the lightning struck behind him, the floating object responded, flickering for a few seconds. It flickered out of existence. It looked like bad special effects in an old movie that was trying to use computer graphics way before they were ready.

Then it flickered back into the film.

He carried on scanning the device as if nothing was happening. Yet, it kept vanishing and reappearing every few seconds. Sometimes it would vanish, but its electric lines would stay. Sometimes it would be entirely gone, cables too. But he just kept scanning it. The storm behind rolled in. It looked like the background of the video was being played back too fast, while the foreground happened at a normal pace.

The object blinked in and out of visibility as if it was being removed and replaced in-between frames. It did so with increasing frequency.

The rain came down, but my on-screen self didn’t respond to it at all. He just kept scanning.

“It looks like, for whatever reason the power source is having no effect at all on the artefact,” he said, a bit too quietly behind the sounds of the rain and wind.

“It makes no sense. Something should have happened.”

He flicked his scanner away and pressed the button on his Circlet screen that powered down the cable. The indicator cuff on the end lost its glow. The object shifted from blue to magenta. The glow got brighter, and the rain stopped in the air.

I don't mean it stopped raining: the droplets were frozen in mid-air. It was like the entire image, except him, was paused.

He checked that the power cable was off and then said, calmly: “Well, Libby, all this worry and nothing happened.”

With that, he put his hand on top of the object to begin removing the power cable. The magenta glow stretched out and outlined him. Both he and the device blinked out of image. Then, as if nothing was amiss, the rain started flowing again.

He reappeared seconds later and fell to the ground. The device was gone this time. His body shook as if in some seizure. When the twitching stopped, he lay still, face-up in the rain.

The storm also blinked out. He, or I, lay unconscious on the floor. The beard and long hair were gone. He looked exactly like I did when I woke up. He even had my old jacket on.

The video ended after another moment of nothing happening.

“Did you notice it?” Libby asked.

“The beard?”

“No, Jon. Though that's part of the many things wrong with this footage. Did you see the lightning?”

“I think so. I mean, I saw lightning.”

“No. Let me play it again. I’ll slow it down.”

She rolled the footage back to the moment the storm started behind him – me. Then she turned a dial on the interface; the video slowed to a crawl. The lightning struck, and as it did, its glow lit up buildings that weren’t there. With every strike, the light reflected off things that didn’t exist. There was a city, a Gothic arcane looking city, with sweeping lines and vast buildings. All that could be seen of it was its reflected glory. It was still a mountain range and a desert once the glow faded.

“And this, this is just one of the many things wrong with this footage,” Libby repeated earnestly.

“What else?” I asked.

“Well. I’m not sure where to start.” She tilted her head. “The entire thing, from start to finish, is seventeen minutes long. But according to all AI analyses of it, the shuttle’s internal clock only measured a few seconds. Then there’s the beard. Because of your biology, your hair grows incredibly slowly. A beard like that would take you quite literally two decades to grow. I’m pretty sure I would have noticed if you had one before you left our apartment that day.”

“Okay. That is odd.” I rubbed my smooth chin.

“Oh, and that’s not all of it,” she continued. “That’s not even the start of it.” She pressed more buttons on the desk.

“This is footage from my own optical uplink. Once you passed out, your Cirplet AI went into emergency mode and transmitted your coordinates to the family. I was the first to arrive. This is how I found you.”

Another video started on the screen. It was recorded from Libby’s perspective out of her own eyes. Her vision wasn’t at all like a human’s. It was much wider in both field of view and spectrum. She received information about everything she saw. There were high-speed symbols, like pure streams of code scanning across the edges of her vision. Objects were highlighted as she looked at them.

I was so distracted by *how* she saw things that it took me a moment to realise *what* she was seeing:

There was a storm raging, the sky was purple and sealed by clouds. I was on the floor, in the same position as I had been on the other video, but it wasn't a desert anymore. It was a lush green forest.

As she ran over to me, she glanced over at the shuttle. It was completely covered in foliage. It looked like it had been there for years. There were even branches of trees and plants growing into the back of it. I was covered in grime and dirt. Her vision gave her information: my pulse was erratic, my temperature was high, way past what should kill a normal human.

The footage ended when she picked me up.

"That doesn't match up with the other video at all," I observed.

"That storm," she said. "It wasn't just where you were. It was everywhere. Every city on Central. Every moon colony. On every planetary body in known space, a storm appeared. Even places *without* atmospheres."

"What?"

"Yeah, we were all on lock-down. Waiting for the storm to pass. Here's the kicker: it lasted for hours."

"Hours?"

"Yes, well, sort of. In the entire known space, everyone sheltered from a storm for a few hours. Every clock that we were able to check from *inside* the storms says it went on for a few seconds."

Her tone was somewhere in-between terrified and enthralled.

"Everyone on a ship *outside* the storm experienced about seventeen minutes. All we know is that time, was broken for an amount of time between seventeen seconds and couple of hours."

She grinned, but nervously, “It matches the description of the original event from the writings people did in nineteen hundred. Though after the original event it’s said the entire of reality was different. This one doesn’t seem to have changed *anything*. But then, we’re not sure how we would even be able to tell. We only know about the original one because of written documents from before and the accounts of people who saw the change. Not everyone did. We store everything digitally now. How do we know it was unaffected?”

“Libby, I hope this doesn’t come across as ignorant, but what’s your perception of how time flowed during the storm?” I asked.

“Oh,” she began excitedly, “the body I was synced with at the time registered seventeen seconds internally but two and a quarter hours of memories were recorded, like I was on fast forward, which took some sorting out. My Core on the ship registered seventeen minutes, same as the organics on-board. My core and body were disconnected for the duration. That’s where the time difference comes from: ships were unaffected, *we think*. Only celestial bodies seem to have felt the effects of the storm.”

We watched the footage again, this time stopping constantly as we remarked on noteworthy things. We analysed each frame and cross-referenced every moment, looking for clues. Libby had already done all this while I was in my two-month coma, probably more than a once. She already had most the answers to my questions, even before Dex.

“Okay. What about before the accident, the storm? What led up to it?” I asked.

“That’s actually part of the mystery,” she sighed.

“We woke up in our apartment. You had breakfast, then said you were taking a shuttle to a remote township to help Jo with a meet-and-greet at a school. You took your own shuttle. The next time I hear from you it was your Cirplet paging me. I was at a university on the other side of the planet when the storm

hit. The moment it was over, I got the notification. I assume when the network came back online and went to you as fast as possible.”

“And you have never seen that capsule thing before?”

“Nope. And I assure you, you did not have a beard when you left!”

After a few more runs through the recording, Libby ran out of time. She had other commitments in her capacity as an educator.

“You must go? I thought you could be in two places at once.” I asked, half-joking.

“I can be the on-screen version of me and in a body at the same time, but I can only sustain one Avatar. I can’t teach from a screen. Seems rude.”

She kissed me on the cheek as she turned to leave. We both were struck by the familiarity of the action, but neither of us dared to say anything.

“Try not to get distracted by pretty girls while I’m gone,” she said from the doorway as she left.

I thought of Lea, of her face on the news feed. I hoped she would be back with us soon.

Chapter Twelve

Aura

I woke up with a backache. At some point, I had sat in the old armchair in the corner of the lab. I used a pile of old books as a foot rest and had made myself a little too comfortable.

“Dex, what time is it?”

“Oh-eight-hundred,” it replied, though at this point I had internally labelled it as ‘him’ for reasons I didn’t quite understand. I really was trying to stay unattached to the assistant. Trying not to treat *him* like I would a living person.

I looked at it, him; sure enough, he was in the same place he had been when I had last seen him.

“Don’t let me keep you if you have things to do, Dex.” His constant gaze was a little creepy.

“Would you like me to leave?” he asked.

“No. But you are kind of robotic. You don’t have to constantly stand to attention. Relax or something.”

Dex just kept looking at me.

Eight in the morning. I considered the time and scratched my chin.

“Dex, where’s Libby?”

“She is in your assigned room.”

It occurred to me that I hadn’t really thought much about time since I had woken up in the hospital. Being in space made it far more intangible than it was on a planet.

“Dex, what time did I enter the lab?”

“Nineteen hundred hours,” he tilted his head at me in a way that was both annoying and oddly adorable.

“What time did Libby leave?”

“Twenty-three thirty.” The head straightened.

“She was teaching at that time of night?” I asked, more to myself than Dex.

“No, her lecture was at oh-nine-hundred. In North Africa.” There was silence before he continued; as if he had been considering his explanation. “I believe you are failing to account for the time differential between Mercia and Earth’s local time zones.” He looked oddly pleased with himself, though I’m not sure how I could tell. He was a person to me now. I was mentally chastising myself for allowing this to happen.

Earth. I almost leapt to my feet. I was so wrapped up in the video and the data that I had totally forgotten: Mercia was transitioning to Earth at eleven.

I grabbed my jacket and sprinted up the corridor. The elevator opened and I pressed for the commercial deck. When the doors opened again, I ran down the street to the observation area.

Earth.

There she was.

I wasn’t the only one either. There was quite a crowd admiring her.

Mercia was in low orbit over Europe. I couldn’t really make out cities or places. I didn’t have a trained eye for that. But there she was.

The homeworld.

The one place in all the universe that I actually felt a connection with.

Earth.

The blue gem was *actually* blue. Clean skies, vast areas of green and a pure twinkle that told me she was safe. No pollution, no damage, no war, no poverty and no inequality.

It was Earth as she always should have been. Not like the echoes of washed-out memories I had resurfacing.

"I fucking hate this planet," came a soft voice from behind me.

I turned sharply. There was Lea, looking pretty well, all things considered. She was in a military jumpsuit and was a lot paler than normal, but she looked functional and not at all in pain.

"Lea. How are you? I was going to come and visit you!"

"Cure-all really is a cure for all things," she said with a pained smile. "Saying that, I could have gone for another few doses of it."

I hugged her carefully.

"Are you okay? I mean, really?"

"I'll be fine. I'm told I arrived pretty messed up. They kept me unconscious while the nanite soup fixed me up. They let me out, but I'm not allowed back on duty for a few days." She made an obviously forced attempt to look happy.

"You sure you're, okay? You went through a lot."

"Jon, you forget I'm not Human. I'm a Brick. We're hardy, and not just physically. Bricks don't break, Jon. I'll be fine. *Honestly.*" She was either doing a good job of sounding convincing or she really was fine.

"I'm going to get a few hours of nanite-free sleep. I was just on my way to your lab, so you knew I was still alive. I know how obsessive you can be."

She was right. I was obsessive. I hadn't really thought about it, but there seemed to be a pattern there.

"Thank you. If you need anything, anything at all, just screen me," I said. I meant it. It was my fault she had been put through all of that. I wanted her to know I appreciated her, and I was sorry.

"Well, apparently I'm getting a medal, which will be nice," she smiled.

After some more sleepy exchanges, she left, insisting that she didn't need any help to get home. It was probably a matter of pride; I let her go alone.

I turned my attention back to Earth. The space in her orbit was packed with ships and stations, but everything looked clean and futuristic. There were ships visible at the edge of the window, docking with Mercia. I watched the edges of them as they moved, unable to get a clear view from this angle.

After a while I sat on the grass and lay back against the lamp post, staring through the railings at the precious gem. I felt drawn to her. I sat there watching until watching didn't seem to be enough anymore.

I needed to get down there.

I made my way back to my temporary home on Mercia and stopped at the door. I almost knocked. This was supposed to be my apartment as well as Libby's, but I couldn't help thinking of it as hers. After a moment, I finally stepped towards the door with a conscious resolve. It opened.

To my surprise, there was Libby, asleep on the sofa. She looked totally at peace. She looked delicate. Like a princess from an old fairy tale. I stepped closer; it made me feel a little like an intruder. The first thing I noticed was that she seemed to be gently breathing. I wondered why she would keep on wasting power simulating biological systems, even while asleep.

I couldn't help but watch her; a moment later, I realised I was stuck. It seemed rude to wake her. It also seemed creepy to not wake her. I backed towards the door. As I turned, her voice followed me

"Jon? How long have you been there?"

"Good ears. I was about to leave. Didn't want to wake you."

"I wasn't sleeping. I don't sleep. Not really." She sat up, stretching. She looked like someone who had woken up from a nap.

“I moved my point of attention to another location. I was working on my next book and supporting a student over a video link. No point keeping this body active at the same time if I don’t have to.”

“Are you by any chance done with that now?” I asked.

“No, I’m still on the screen, and still working on my book – books. My proximity sensor told me that someone else was here. I shifted my attention back.”

She really wasn’t like me. I already knew it, of course. Ever since she had gone full kill-bot on the spy ship, I had been hyper aware that she wasn’t like me. She had thrown a tank out of the window. She had changed her personality as her eyes changed colours. I knew it on every level one could know something.

This was the moment I actually understood it.

Her life was a series of points on a map that no organic could make sense of. She was projecting a part of herself into a screen communication and helping a student understand something. She was in her own mind in whatever place her consciousness came from, outputting ideas to her work and her writing. She was also here: just another point of interaction in a wider mind. It wasn’t like her student, or I was getting less of her attention. We were both the complete focus of that version of her. She was never in *only* one place. She was intelligent and poetic and deep and free. She wasn’t like me. She was never going to see the world like organics. It would be too small for her vast mind.

How did that change things for me, for her?

She looked at me, maybe realising I was frozen in my thoughts. It was then that I noticed her smile was a little dopey. She could argue that she wasn’t sleeping if it made her feel better.

“Mercia is in orbit of Earth. You didn’t remind me.”

I sat next to her on the sofa.

“Yeah, I guess you would have wanted to see the moment we moved through the warp?”

“Yeah. I would have loved to have seen it!”

“Well, you were so deep in your work... and we’ll be leaving again in a few days anyway.”

“You say ‘work’, but all I was doing was rolling a video back and forth.”

She raised an eyebrow at me. “Jonathan Michaels, are you really going to tell me your bizarre brain didn’t gleam something totally new from that footage?” She stuck out her finger accusingly.

“Well, I had more questions than answers, but I need to let some things float around my head for a bit.”

I was pleased with myself. My bizarre brain did have some new thoughts on it, but I wasn’t ready to share them. It would have been like taking the pot off the boil. Sharing would slow down the mental bubbling.

“I want to see Earth. I want to walk around it, and see what it’s like now,” I proclaimed. It was also a way to stop her from asking about my ‘work’ for the time being.

“Okay,” she said. Just ‘okay’; I felt a big smile spread out across my face.

“Oh, and Lea is out of the hospital,” I told her.

“I know! I screened her the moment I got a notification that she was being released. She said she was going to swing by and talk to you before she went home.”

“Is there anything you don’t know?”

“Not when it comes to my family, no.”

Chapter Thirteen

Terra, Firm

We arrived at the shuttle dock, expecting Jo to be waiting for us. With two attacks against us now, as well as our usual pilot being fast asleep, Libby had asked if we could go down to Earth with the Vice President.

“See! we shouldn’t have bothered her. She has better things to do than hang out with us,” I exclaimed.

Jo’s large and shiny presidential transport shuttle was locked down, and there were no signs that anyone had been there recently.

“Jo may be the Vice President, but she’s also your daughter. She probably just got held up.”

People could try to tell me it was fine to just give someone as important as Jo a call and say ‘hi’ and ask if we could join her on her trip; in the end, though, she was still the second most important person in the Sol alliance. She had things to be doing; I was sure of it.

Libby’s Circlet chimed.

“Audio only,” she said. She pressed the little button to answer it.

“Hello?” After a few moments, she continued.

“Oh, okay. Be there in a moment.”

She gave me a smug smile.

“Wrong shuttle,” she said.

We walked down through the dock. A technician almost ran into us carrying some glowing pipes; the dock was still

filled with noise, smoke and movement. Ships were constantly coming and going. It never seemed to slow down.

The tiny shuttle was only a little larger than a car. Jo was leaning against it, arguing with someone on her screen. She didn't look very presidential. She wore a short purple PVC skirt and a denim jacket. Her jewellery was chunky plastic bracelets, and her hair was a pristine nest of loose curls. She looked like an eighties pop-star. Glancing over at us, she casually closed her screen.

"Problem?" I asked.

"Oh, not really. My AI assistant is an arse; so, I stopped talking to it," she shrugged. "So sorry about the confusion. When I said to meet at my shuttle, I meant *my* shuttle."

She opened the back hatch of the little purple ship and started digging around.

"See! She's happy to see us," Libby whispered.

Jo's shuttle really did look-like a car. There were no wheels; instead, there were three enormous feet showing from under it. Its front was longer than a car and it stood taller. I just couldn't not see it as an oversized sports car. The shimmering purple paint that changed tone as the light hit only added to the sports vibe.

Jo stood up from digging in the back.

"Found it!"

She was holding a glass rectangle, which she thrust out at me. I took it, a little distracted by how she looked. She looked lovely, but this style was drastically out of place compared to everything else I had seen people wear.

I looked down at the glass. It was a single thick sheet with a photo suspended in the middle of it. It was a photo of me. I had longer hair, like on my ID card, and I was kneeling down next to a little girl of six or seven. We were both smiling at the camera. Behind us was a large lake and there was some kind of train in the distance. It was sunny; the sky was blue; Earth blue. The little girl looked as happy as a kid could be. I looked

at least as happy. I was wearing a leather jacket and jeans. The little girl was wearing a pink party dress and sparkling red shoes.

“Who is this? Is this you?” I asked.

“No,” Jo laughed. “It’s Ka’ona. It was the day you introduced her to Libby. She captured the image. I had been called away unexpectedly about an hour before the picture. You sent it to me, to prove that Ka’ona wasn’t upset. I had promised I wouldn’t work all weekend.”

A sense of warmth filled me.

“Can I get a copy of this?”

“All the photos I have are shared with you already. You can pull them up your Circlet. Your lab should have a printer if you want physical ones,” Jo said, no doubt explaining the very obvious to me.

“The day you met Kay, huh?” I said to Libby.

“I wish I was there for these moments,” I added, more to the picture than to anyone else.

I passed it back to Jo. She put it back in the shuttle. She opened a hatch-like door that lifted like a big wing and climbed into the pilot’s seat.

Libby put her arms around my waist and pulled herself close to me. She had such sad eyes.

“What did I do to deserve this?” I asked, linking my arms around her in return.

“I saw it,” she said with a squeeze.

“Saw what?”

“You adore the little girl in that photo. Even without any memories.”

I made a sound that was supposed to be a good-natured chuckle and came out as a whispered “Yeah...”

Jo’s shuttle was comfortable. I attempted to sit in the back seat, but Libby had ejected me from it and planted me in the passenger seat. Right up front.

“I don’t even like this planet and you’re desperate to see it. You should get the best view,” she said.

“Why aren’t we taking one of the usual shuttles?” I asked Jo as she fired up an engine test.

“Because I spent a reasonable sized fortune to get the perfect shuttle custom built and Ba’an won’t let me fly it anywhere else because he thinks it’s a security risk.”

“Security risk?”

“It’s got no weapons, and the shield is only enough for general flight.”

The shuttle lifted a little. She flicked a switch to retract the landing feet. I heard a click as Libby connected her safety belt in the back. It reminded me to do the same.

“How is it so small?”

“It’s got no life support system,” Libby answered.

Jo was far too enthralled in her pre-flight checks. I was startled at the thought of ‘no life support’ for a moment, before realising that Jo, like me, did not require oxygen. I wasn’t completely convinced that Libby even required a ship at all.

The pilot’s side of the shuttle had a throttle on the left and a stick on the right. The centre was all buttons and dials. Information was fed to the pilot via the front window’s projected display. Jo waved some information away and the back of the ship let out a growl.

“It’s not a security risk now?” I asked.

“Well, it’s not like we’re going to get attacked on Earth, is it?”

She made a brief motion with her hand on the throttle and flicked the stick. We tilted up and shot out of the docking tunnel. The little ship blazed away from Mercia at a startling speed. It spun and looped and dived for a while. I wanted to ask Jo why she was piloting like a lunatic, but as I glanced at her and saw her thrilled grin, I decided I would let her have her moment.

Finally, the shuttle slowed and spun with its own momentum, showing Earth below us. I had been out in space a couple of times now, but every time had been inside a tank-like military shuttle. This tiny, sleek and delicate shuttle left very little between us and raw, cold, hungry space. It was not dissimilar to the feeling of being inside the Blue-tube, but far less uncomfortable. I looked down at the pure healthy Earth and was warmed by her brilliance.

I felt the moment the oxygen ran out. My chest grumbled as the air became somehow bitter. The cockpit was sealed, so there were still gasses inside, but not much in the way of breathable ones. Something within me was aware I would be dying if I were a normal human. The juxtaposition of this awareness and looking down at the home of the entire race, thinking of all the people who were down there without the blessing of Bio-stasis made me suddenly thankful for my gift.

The shield fired as we entered the planet's atmosphere faster than felt safe. The noise rattled in through the shuttle's thin hull.

Our landing struck me as more reckless than I would have liked, but we were soon safely parked in what I was told was a government lot. There were no guards and none of the imposing signage that one expects to be associated with anything government related.

"Welcome to Victoria City. Capital of Earth," Libby said over my shoulder.

Jo had plans to visit a friend before she had to start her official work, so she pointed us towards the local shopping area and scurried off. She seemed nervous and had asked Libby how she looked at least three times.

Libby and I found ourselves wandering down a nice canal that led out of the government area. The term “city” didn’t feel like it fitted this place. Not after being on Central.

Where Central Prime was a city of skyscrapers, space ships and neon, this was like a picturesque snapshot of the past. It was still modern in many ways, but modernity seemed to blend with the classical. They still made some buildings of bricks and the canal even had a few barges travelling down it.

I could almost have been inside the eighties version of this world that seemed to only exist in my broken memories.

We came to a nice open area with little bistros and pubs. There was a bridge that could take us towards the more urban shopping opportunities. All brick and stone of course; not a single shuttle in sight. I glanced at my Circlet’s embedded screen: it was two in the afternoon. “Should we stop for lunch?” I instantly remembered Libby didn’t eat.

“We should!” she replied.

We found a restaurant with outdoor seating. No sooner had we sat down than someone came out to take our order. The woman was human and quite beautiful, with dark skin and long black hair that fell lower than her waist. She was wearing an eighties American diner style waitress uniform and had an actual paper pad with a real pen. To complete her costume, she was even chewing gum; though I suppose she may have just liked gum. She passed us menus and, with an out of place northern English accent, asked us if we needed some time to decide. We took her up on the offer. She said she would be back in a few minutes.

Libby was very interested in the menu.

“I’m going to guess you will order the ‘steak sandwich on thick sliced bread’ with an Elix to drink.”

“That sounds great,” I said, realising that it *was* the most appealing thing on the menu.

“And you, madam?” I asked, having a pretty good idea what she would ask for.

“I think I will partake in the nothing with a side of nothing.”

“Do you ever *want* to eat?”

“Oh, God, no! I did once try putting a food processing system into one of my avatars. Requires cleaning out, and it’s simply not worth the effort.”

I smiled. “So, you know what it’s like to eat?” I was pleased that it *had* crossed her mind at least once.

“Oh, yes. It’s strange and totally unnecessary for me, so I have absolutely no desire to do it again. You, however, need to intake bio-matter in order to stay alive. You should do so at every opportunity.”

The waitress came back. I made my order, as Libby had predicted.

“Ma’am?” the waitress asked, expectantly.

“Oh, nothing for me, thank you. I’m not an organic.”

The waitress shot a disapproving look at her, then at me. She left without another word.

“That was odd,” I mumbled.

“Not for Earth it’s not.”

“I thought this place was some kind of utopia the way everyone talks about it.”

Libby laughed at that.

“Oh, it’s safe, it’s secure, and it’s prosperous. It’s also the only place in known space you’re likely to visit where people think of me as property, not a person.”

I was shocked.

“That seems backwards! Why is it like this?”

The waitress came back with a tray. It was a mighty sandwich: hot steak and thick bread, with some salad decoratively placed at the edge of the plate. No one who orders a steak sandwich would be interested in the salad. The Elix was served in its bottle, as I was realising was the tradition. She left with only a minor disapproving side-eye. Libby ignored her.

“Well, Thinkers were the first race the Vampires ever met, and Thinkers are sentient energy. Not traditionally organic. They were quite open to the idea of digital life by the time it emerged on their worlds, which made sense,” Libby explained.

I made a start on my food as Libby spoke. It still felt rude to be stuffing my face while she didn’t even have a drink.

“Elves have this almost built-in reverence for what they literally refer to as ‘soul stuff’; if you tell them you’re alive, they’re culturally obliged to accept it, rather than disbelieve you and cause harm. It’s actually a really nice social system.”

The sandwich was great. I nodded and tried not to embarrass myself by making a mess. *I failed.*

“Then, there are Bricks. I mean, I’ve never met a Brick who is even capable of hatred. They are mostly just lovely people,” she smiled, lost in thought for a moment. “Humans, on the other hand, seem to be obsessed with biology. They think something *made* can’t be alive. Which is funny, because mostly, I agree with that. Problem is they reject the very notion of non-organic life as *real* life. It’s like they think our very existence is a threat to them.”

I stopped attacking the slab of bread and gave it some thought.

“I don’t understand... Why? I’m human, and I have no problem accepting you as... you.”

Libby nodded and gave me that half smile she did whenever I said something naïve.

“Not all humans are anti-NOLF, *obviously*. But I encounter ten times more disapproving looks here than anywhere else. Those that choose to stay on Earth when they could be anywhere else are of a certain ilk.”

I wondered why you would leave when you could be here. She wondered why you would stay when you could be anywhere else.

“This place does have glorious weather though,” I said.

She glanced at my food as I continued: “It has excellent sandwiches, and from what I can see some very charming cities. I can understand wanting to stay.”

At that exact moment, I was considering sandwiches to be the greatest thing mankind had ever invented.

“It may rain a lot more on Central, but at least it isn’t safe, boring, unchallenging, and possibly inbred.”

It was my turn to raise an eyebrow.

“Inbred?” I asked.

She smiled at me with a mischievous glare.

“Like your sandwich, but with much more dubious parentage.”

I took another swig of Elix.

“I know what inbred means.”

“I’m sorry, Jon. I know you are happy to be here, but I have some issues with the planet.”

“The entire planet,” I smirked.

She nodded.

“I was born here, you know.” She looked angry as she said that.

“I didn’t know.”

“Academic Library AI Experiment-Four; that was my original name.”

“It’s a long story, but human AI and Elven hardware can, occasionally, result in sentience... apparently. Took me six years to convince them I was more than a really unhelpful AI.” She fought back a pang of dread as she spoke.

“It was a tough time. Eventually the Elven government got involved and they whisked me off-world. They gave me my freedom. It wasn’t until years later that Earth officially joined the trade alliances. After that, my citizenship was legally valid here.”

I hadn’t really thought about where she had come from. You don’t really think about people’s origins when you meet them; you accept them for who they are and go from there.

“I’m sorry,” I said, because that’s what you say when nothing else seems to fit.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Jon. I’ve moved on. I get something of a cold satisfaction from teaching ethics at the university that first denied I was even alive. It’s really *quite* liberating.”

I paid the bill. As much as I wanted to forgo the tip, Libby insisted that being the perfect customer was a better way of breaking down prejudices. We added a healthy few numbers on top of the total and we left. I didn’t know what the currency was actually called and didn’t want to ask.

We walked over the bridge and into the shopping area. It wasn’t really much different from the commercial area on Mercia, except I could see the blue sky above. There were less non-humans around, which was odd given how packed with Vampires and Thinkers Central was. I still couldn’t tell a Brick from a Human on sight. Libby had told me if someone was attractive enough to distract me from whatever I was thinking about, then they were most likely a Brick.

We wandered around the city for a while, taking in all the sights.

“Are all the cities like this one?”

“Victoria is pretty typical, but the historical architecture changes as you travel around the planet. All the cities and towns are clean, calm and boring enough to make you crave a shuttle to get away from them. Not much point sampling other ones unless you really like old buildings.”

She loved reminding me how devoid of adventure Earth was. She was right too. On Central it was like discovering something new with each step. I had wondered what was happening in every building I passed. The whole place had an edge of subtle danger. Earth seemed the opposite of that. If I stayed there for a decade, I probably wouldn’t see much more than the seasons change. It was more like a theme park than an actual place.

We came to another small square. This one was raised up, away from the canal. We walked up some steep steps to see what shops and bars we could find hiding at the top. This place seemed different from the other areas: more familiar. Perhaps the generic architecture and pointless forced quaintness of the city was wearing thin.

I thought I heard something and turned my head to look behind us.

A memory resurfaced without warning.

This was the street.

This was the very street I had remembered moments before I woke up; this was my first memory. As I spun around, a torrent of new images and sounds froze me.

I was back in the memory again. It was this street, but so crumpled and old that it was barely recognisable. The buildings floated in broken islands and time lost its grip. Parts of the wall were crumbling and falling, but upwards. I remembered seeing a purple light in the sky, and I looked up to see a large reflective modern building, right where I stood in the memory.

I frantically turned, looking for something, not sure what. Vaguely aware, at the edges of my sense of Libby asking me if I was okay. The place where someone got hit by lightning in my memory — or dream. I ran over there and tried to figure out where he, where I could have been going.

When I turned back again, it was no longer a memory.

I was living it again in my mind.

There was an awareness to it. I was me and this was a memory, but I *was* the version of me from that world. In that moment. I knew that the world was ending. I looked down at the street, knowing I had been right the whole time. The

memory was in control, but the present ‘me’ was wondering what it was that I knew.

There was no way I was going to survive; instead of running and screaming, I walked calmly down the road. Wishing I had made more of my life.

The fog was thicker than I had seen before; the storm raged above. I understood what that meant. I stopped at a bench and lay down on it. Everyone else was running and screaming. It was time. I knew I wasn’t really going to be dead. I simply wasn’t going to have ever existed, and that was far, far worse. Maybe the woman would keep me.

I wished I had found a way to make everyone believe me.

My knees hurt. I was old. I welcomed the end.

I blinked and wobbled as I came out of the memory.

I was sitting on the floor with Libby kneeling next to me.

“Jon? Jon? Are you okay?”

“Sorry. Yeah. I’m fine. Memories.”

She scurried me off to the nearest place she could find, which conveniently turned out to be a bar. She sat me down out front at a little iron table and disappeared inside. Moments later, she reappeared with two Elix’s and a concerned expression. She put the drinks down in front of me.

“You looked like you could use these,” she said, trying to hide her concern.

“Won’t do me any good, you know,” I joked.

She smiled and put one of the bottles in my hand.

I drank up.

“What happened back there? You were fine and then suddenly you went into a seizure. It totally checked you out for almost ten minutes.

I had a feeling she was scanning me; or at the very least, taking some more detailed readings than she normally did.

“Literally just that. I realised this was the same street I had seen in some half-memory that’s been floating around my head. The next thing I know, I remembered more of it.” I shrugged and polished off the first Elix.

I told her about the memory. She asked a few questions about it; questions which I had no answers for. She wanted to know when it was and what it meant. She was concerned I had, for some reason, held onto this memory above all the others.

They were all good questions.

I tried to change the topic: “So why is it that everyone is so sure that Earth is safe? That no Correctionists will pop out and start shooting at us here?”

“Oh!” she replied, with fake excitement.

“This AI net that detects illegal activities and despatches drones to deal with the problems covers the entire planet. It’s pretty creepy, but it’s also totally effective.”

I was more worried than impressed.

“An AI constantly monitors everything and everyone on the planet?”

“It’s a little more advanced than that. It’s predictive, based on profiles, but yeah.”

I was horrified.

“This conversation is being monitored then?” I asked. She nodded.

“Everything we say is being recorded?” She nodded again.

“It’s a global spy system!”

“It is. But it’s also only interested in safety and security. It reports nothing. Only exposing recordings as evidence.”

“I don’t like it.”

She grinned.

“Neither do I. But apparently it makes the little earthlings feel safe.”

We walked around the picturesque city, but my feelings were tainted now. I was mulling over the newly surfaced

memories and feeling watched by some nefarious AI. After an hour or so more of exploring Victoria City my Cirplet flashed and vibrated. I wasn't accustomed to using it. I had to think about it. I was nowhere near as effortlessly natural with it as everyone else was. I stuck my arm out in front of me.

"You want some help?" Libby asked.

"No, I know how to do it," I said, with faux impetuosity.

I pressed the button to release the thread that generated the screen and a moment later the interface was in front of me. It was very stable in the air, regardless of the angle or shake of my arm.

'VICE PRESIDENT OF SOL ALLIANCE: JOANNE MICHAELS,' it said on the screen. I pressed the button to answer it.

Jo's face appeared in front of me and the rest of the interface politely tucked itself away. She was walking down a street, her hair was a mess and she was smiling widely.

"Hey, dad. I'm heading back to Mercia. Are you guys coming or do you want me to send transport for you later?"

I looked at Libby. She shrugged and pointed at her ear. I hadn't told my Cirplet to share the call, so only I could hear it.

"Oh!" I pressed the button.

"Jo is leaving, wants to know if we want a ride."

Libby nodded.

"Yes, please. Let's go home."

"Should we head back to you?" I asked Jo.

"No. Just head to the nearest road or park. I'll come to you in a few minutes."

She closed the call — the 'screen.'

The interface popped up with a message: "Dex: Joanne has requested a location stream." I pressed "yes" and flicked the screen away.

"Had enough of Earth?" I asked.

“I don’t mind working here, but as tourist attractions go, it’s an anti-NOLF, backwards hole, I hate it.”

It took us about fifteen minutes to find a road that allowed landing and street shuttles. We sat on a bench.

“Why do you use a Circlet?” I asked.

“I hope it’s okay for me to ask.”

She leaned against me.

“Stop this paranoia, Jon. You’re my husband. You can ask me anything. It’s not like you need to be scared of reminding me I’m not an organic. I know exactly what I am.”

I shrugged. She was right, obviously. But finding the balance was hard for me. I would rather approach a question cautiously than risk offence. I had seen her in a fight.

She was quiet for a moment. When she finally spoke, she did so a little too fast, like she had forgotten there was a question and was hoping I hadn’t noticed.

“I have internal compute, obviously. But a large part of my consciousness is housed in my core, on the ship — in Mercia’s computer vault. I don’t interface with public systems with a body. It’s not secure to patch my core into networks like that, even with my avatar’s security system. Circlets are safe. My core-self is constantly attached to things, but all goes through the ship’s firewalls and known secure servers.”

We were interrupted by the sound of gentle thrusters. Jo’s shuttle was cruising towards us down the road. She came to a graceful stop and the wing-like door opened on its own. We climbed in. Libby took the back seat again.

“Did you enjoy the sights of Victoria City?” Jo asked.

Her hair was still a mess. She looked a little less put-together than usual.

“It was fine,” I began.

“This friend you were visiting, good friend, is he?”

She smiled, not looking at me. I could swear she was blushing.

“She, and yes.”

The door closed and the shuttle transitioned gently from ground to air. We cruised into the atmosphere and back to Mercia almost lazily. This time the lack of breathable air bothered me less; I was relying more automatically on my biology.

Chapter Fourteen

Analyse

I spent the next few hours in my lab looking at schematics of Victoria City: specifically the area where I had that sudden jolt of memory. The screen could project a fully three-dimensional model to spin and zoom in on. Dex was happy to explain the controls to me. Once past his layers of technical information, it was as easy as ‘grab it and pull’.

Libby had been preparing for an academic interview — whatever that was. She had agreed to appear at a university the following day and answer questions about ethics and NOLF philosophy. She did not seem to be looking forward to it. Her physical body was in the ‘low power’ mode that looked like napping when I left her in the apartment.

Dex announced it was eleven in the evening. I had asked him to give me a reminder, so that I didn’t stay in the lab all night again.

“Okay, Dex, I’m going to try to get a good night’s sleep for once. Can you see if there are any discrepancies between this area of the city and historical documents? Post and pre-Event? I want you to check everything you have access to.”

I figured this would take him all night, and it seemed like he enjoyed having things to do when I wasn’t there. I left and headed back to the apartment, or *home*, as I was starting to think of it.

Libby was still in the same low-power mode. I grabbed a cup of coffee and sat on the sofa next to her. She was peaceful, serene looking, still simulating breathing. Maybe it was so that

people wouldn't think she was dead if they discovered her like this.

I pushed off my boots and put my feet on the coffee table.

"Lights. Dim," I commanded in a whisper.

The room's computer complied. I popped out my Circlet screen and carried on reading about Earth history.

At some point, I dosed off.

Libby woke me, leaning in close. The glow of my still projected screen lighted up the side of her face. I flicked it off.

My eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim lights.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi."

I wanted to speak again. Ask if she was done with her work.

She kissed me. Not politely or sadly like before. But deeply and desperately. She pulled herself up and sat on my lap with a knee on each side of me. The kiss didn't stop. Her hands were on my chest. I felt her press into me in a way that I couldn't misinterpret.

I had resolved myself to get to know this woman. To learn why we had been married to me; regain some memory of who I was, who she was. I wanted to be the man she loved.

When she pressed against me, I forgot all of that; instead of wanting to share our lives, I was more interested in sharing our bodies. I had expected her to stand up and calmly tell me she had forgotten herself. She didn't. She pushed her hands under my shirt, and I returned the gesture.

A few minutes later, she finally stood up, but not to tell me she had made a mistake. Instead, she pulled her shirt off. She was flawless. She pulled me to my feet, and we embraced. Somehow, we made it to the bedroom, by which time my own shirt had fallen away too.

She lay on the end of the bed, and I followed atop of her. We shimmied up to the top as she wriggled out of her skirt. My own jeans followed her lead. I pulled away from her for a moment and looked into her eyes.

It was for me the first time we made love, but she knew far more about how to touch me than I thought anyone could. For the first part of the evening, we were silent, hungry and passionate, but as the hours passed, it became punctuated by laughing and talking before falling back into the rhythm of our desires.

I awoke the next morning with Libby lying next to me. She was asleep. I knew that it just meant her body was deactivated, her mind would be busy someplace else, but I had chosen to allow myself to think of it as 'asleep'; it was a state of being that made sense to my organic mind.

I turned to her, worried she may have regretted the decisions of the previous night.

"Hello," I said. She didn't stir.

I lay on my side and rested my head on my arm. She managed to be elegant, even as she slept.

She slowly opened her eyes and nuzzled towards me.

"Good morning," she said with a content grin.

I took her in my arms, relieved.

"This is not something I would usually ask, but... what prompted last night? I had felt like we were in a different phase of... whatever this is."

She opened one eye and ran a hand across my chest.

"It's a marriage. I was thinking about you, about us. Ever since we flew out of a star together. I wanted to talk to you once you woke up after the Blue-tube. But I wasn't sure how you felt," she said in almost a whisper.

She pulled herself against me tightly.

"Mathematically speaking, you should be dead now. The chances of getting out of there alive were in single figures. While I realised you haven't been able to remember me or us, you're the same man. No matter what you have been through and no matter what you remember, the core of who you are hasn't changed."

She stopped talking for a moment and we lay together, enjoying each other's silence and warmth.

"When you came in last night and sat down with a coffee, and then fell asleep without so much as thinking about stopping your research, I realised nothing that matters to me has changed. You are as driven as ever. That's when I felt like you were back. In all the ways that I could measure."

She stood up without warning and let the covers fall away. She marched into the shower room, glancing back to make sure I was watching her.

"Once I had decided I had been stupid to distance myself from you, all that remained was to see if *you* still wanted *me*."

She disappeared. I heard the humming of the cleansing light. The glow bled into the bedroom.

"I have always wanted you, Libby," I said in a happy whisper. I assumed she could hear me.

An hour later, I entered my lab.

There were boxes laid out across the room. Even my armchair was filled with data tablets and storage devices.

"What's all this, Dex?"

He came in, carrying a large book.

"I have had to pull the physical files from your archive, sir. I was concerned that there seemed to be discrepancies. Oh! I am sorry for the mess. You are earlier than I expected."

He began to neaten up the stacks.

"Dex, don't worry about it. What did you learn?"

"Victoria City doesn't appear to have existed before the nineteen hundred Event, sir."

I had expected something like this.

"This is the discrepancy?"

"No, sir. That was an interesting data point. The part that had me doubting the information was more recent."

He carried on stacking the boxes.

“Dex! What was the data?”

“The last time we — that is to say Mercia — was in orbit of Earth, there was a topographical difference to recent scans. They are also different from the archived data.”

“What do you mean?”

Dex tilted his holographic eye-head, and the screens came on at the desk. I carefully stepped between the boxes and made my way to the data. It was a series of dates and satellite photos, all of which had red question marks and overlaid data points that made very little sense to anyone but Dex.

“Talk to me. Explain all this.”

“Sir, while all historical records and personal experiences seem to agree that Victoria City was part of the re-write that was a result of The Event in nineteen-hundred, I have conflicting data sources emerging after that point: logs, mission reports, video streams, educational media, and photos.”

I looked at the data with a critical eye. I had no doubt Dex had done good work. It was his interpretation of the data that concerned me.

“Dex, what are these data sources?”

He gestured to the surrounding boxes.

“Sir, all the backups in our archive simply don’t fall in line with reality.”

I pulled a random tablet from a box. It lit up. I scrolled down the glass front. After a few moments of reading, I realised it contained logs from early Mercia missions. It would take me months to sift through all of this.

That was why I had Dex, though.

“And this data... how do we know that *it* isn’t in error?”

“I have been trying to verify that very thing. It is stored in your archive, sir, so it should not be in error.”

“What’s the archive? Why do we have it?”

“It is a vault attached to this lab. The whole thing is electrically shielded, and we made the walls of materials which have

a dampening effect on cosmic particles. You hypothesised that by keeping data stored without network access and in a protected environment, it may be more resilient in the event of another... Event.”

I looked around again.

“The lab and the archive have the same protections? The data is still safe here?” I was suddenly worried about losing all this potentially precious information.

“Yes, sir. I would never put the archive artefacts at risk.”

I stood at the desk, staring at the screen. Dex used his optical sensors to scan in the tablets and add it to a secure file, which made it searchable without compromising the source.

I looked at the data points as the file grew, trying to cram as much of it into my head as possible. Dex was fast, and he had been at this all night. We had thousands of entries that didn't match the official history of the city below. But why?

I looked at the satellite pictures of the land from the archive. They were from Mercia's extensive data sources and from pre-event sketches. Something was bothering me. It was like an annoying rattling in my head.

“I need to look at that place again,” I said to myself.

Dex tilted his head, probably trying to decide if a response was required.

“Dex, one of the discrepancies... I've been there!”

I used the communication system built into the desk to contact Libby. She answered, but the video showed me her face in a pure white room. It was her digitally generated self.

“Hi! Are you busy?”

“My physical self is on the way down to Earth. Got that academic interview, remember?”

I hadn't realised I had been looking at the data for so long.

“Right, sorry. I've been in something of a hole for a little while. I need to get down to Earth myself. I was going to hoping to catch a ride with you.”

She grinned.

“Too late for that. You need to be better at time, my love.”

I smiled back at her. It was no slip of the tongue this time. I basked in the glow of her for a moment before remembering my work.

“Physical self will be taking a lot of cycles today, and I have a screen meeting with some people regarding some new automation designs. Some other minor projects are occupying me too.” She was still smiling.

“And I have to cram all of this in because I want to be focused on the ceremony this evening.”

I was shaken by the realisation that it was Friday. The commendation ceremony was that evening. I had forgotten about it.

“Oh. Do I need to do any preparation?”

She shook her head.

“Not at all. It’s a medal ceremony. Ba’an and Jo will make speeches, pictures will be taken and there will be a lot of small talk. All we have to do is turn up and look nice.” She cut me off before I could reply: “You already have a suit. I left it in our bedroom before I left. Relax. Just make sure you get to Victoria Legacy-Hall for eight this evening. That’s it.”

“Thank you.”

She waved and closed the screen.

“Well, shit, Dex. Now I have to find my own way down to Earth.”

“I think that may not be a problem, sir.”

I was about to ask him why when the lab door slid open.

Chapter Fifteen

Sequences

Half an hour later, I was with Lea in a military shuttle, heading down to Earth. This time, I wasn't distracted by the beauty of the planet or the majesty of space. I sat cross-legged in the co-pilot's chair with my Circlet screen out scrolling around composite maps of Victoria.

We had made a pit stop at Lea's apartment and then mine to collect our outfits for the evening's event. We weren't at all confident that we were going to find time later.

"I'm out of action for a few days and when I wake up, you're back to your normal self. I enjoyed the innocent and confused version of you for a bit," Lea said.

She was dressed like an eighties pop star, as was the fashion on Earth. I was still in my jeans and jacket. Fashion be damned.

"I'm hardly back to normal, Lea. I still have no memories." I didn't look away from my screen. I did, however, take a large drink from a bottle of Elix I had resting against the fold of my leg.

"Oh, no, you're not back to your old self, are you!" she barked sarcastically.

"We're on the way to Victoria to look for who knows what, with no plan at all. You're drinking the strongest thing that's legal like it's water and we have evening wear hanging up in the back."

She angled the shuttle as we entered the atmosphere. A few seconds later, I felt the engines switch to planetary flight mode.

“I do have a plan. Granted, I’m still working on it. But there is a plan; sort of. Also, I can’t get drunk and Elix tastes great. As for the other thing, who doesn’t carry a change of clothes? It’s an excellent habit to form in our line of work.”

She rolled her eyes at me and pulled on her vintage plastic sunglasses.

“Back to normal, as far as I can tell.”

We landed as close to the central shopping area as we could. It was a military shuttle, so we didn’t have to worry about looking for an actual dock or landing area. We set it down on a wide section of road near to where Jo had collected Libby and me the day before.

I stood up and grabbed a personal shield from the stow in the shuttle’s hull.

“Really? We’re on Earth. This place is too boring for anyone to shoot at us.”

“Oh, yeah? Because everything we do goes exactly according to plan.”

I slapped the shield on to my arm. I went for a pistol and Lea slapped my hand away.

“If you leave this shuttle with live ammunition, the drones will put you down before you take two steps.” I raised an eyebrow at her.

“Seriously. Earth *is* safe... and boring. That Guardian AI does not fuck around, though.”

I let go of the pistol. I had planned to pass it to her anyway, I had no idea how to use a gun.

We opened the shuttle and made our way to the square. Lea had left the shuttle open. I supposed there was no reason to lock it here.

It was comforting to feel so safe; and worrying to feel so watched.

“Did you finish making that plan for this little road trip?”

“I’ll let you know.” I still had my screen popped out in front of me. I was comparing the land from Dex’s data with what I was seeing.

We walked to the exact spot where the memory had hit me and I stood, trying to line myself up. The precise spot was about three meters from a small wall that divided the restaurant area from the wider shopping area. It overlooked the canal and had those old steps going down from it. I looked around, rotating on the spot.

There was nothing. Not one clue. No signs of anything.

Why was this place important, and what was the relevance of the scans differences?

Lea went into a coffee shop and came out with a large syrupy drink that wasn’t coffee in anything but name. She looked stunning in her denim shorts and over the top make-up. The way she bounced between looks was starting to strike me as normal. Though, I could never see her as less than the hard-boiled pilot I knew she was. She noticed me noticing her. I went back to my map.

“I thought Bricks were health freaks.”

“We are. But I almost died recently. I’m allowed a coffee as a treat.”

I looked back at my screen.

“It’s not as actually as baffling as it looks...” I muttered.

Lea looked at her syrup soup and shrugged.

“But only because I know what to look for,” I continued.

Assuming I was talking about her beverage, she swallowed a large indignant gulp: “Given the crap I’ve seen you eat, you’re in no position to judge.”

It was my turn to shrug.

“I wasn’t talking about your drink,” I said. She slurped at me.

“What’s wrong with this?” I flickered my screen to expose its contents to her.

It was a satellite map of the area we were standing in. She studied it for a moment.

“Hum... I see it. *Why would that be wrong on the scan?*”

“Wait, you noticed it?” I asked, a little shocked; it had taken me all this time to spot it and she had seen it instantly.

“Sure, the elevation is off.” She wasn’t messing with me.

“I’m a pilot. It’s kind of important for me to know where the ground is.”

“This scan was taken four months ago. It was the last time Mercia was in orbit. It’s from my personal data archive.” I flipped to a new map.

“This one is the copy of the same file in the Mercia database.”

She studied it.

“So, it’s the same, but the elevation is different. It’s not even out by a lot. But why?” she mulled.

“The only reason it would be different is if something changed. Something is underneath us. I’m looking for a way in and I just figured it out.”

“The coffee shop?”

I shook my head, wondering why she might think the coffee shop was the answer.

“From an orbital scan, it looks the same. But from ground level, it’s obvious. It’s the steps. They’re steeper. It was the only way to hide it from a satellite.”

“Because the steps would look the same from above.” She dropped her now empty syrup soup container into a nearby bin. We scurried down the steps that led to the canal and turned at the bottom to see the side of them.

There it was.

A large, old-style door. Not a powered sliding door. An actual hinged door with a handle and rusty edges. It was silver, steel, and plain. There was a sign on it that read: ‘No entry. Infrastructure access only.’

We looked at each other.

Then back to the door.

“Can I try the handle, or will that summon the mythical super drones?” I asked.

“I’m a government employee and you’re a consultant with a clearance that’s as high as the presidential office. I’m pretty sure we can go into an old access door.”

I put my hand on the handle.

“Wait!” Lea said.

“Should I do it? I’m supposed to be the one looking after you.”

“I’m immune to poison, burns, freezing, radiation, and I think also electrocution. You really want to go first?”

She let out a smile and waved for me to continue.

The door was stiff, but it opened, and without poison, burns, freezing, radiation or electrocution. It just opened, like a normal door. It creaked and screamed as the rusty hinges crunched. The door swung. Inside it was dark, but the illumination that was leaking in showed us a solid flat floor. I stepped in cautiously.

Lea followed.

“Can Bricks see in the dark?” I asked.

“That’s Vampires... and Elves,” she whispered.

“So, your race looks gorgeous and gets to skip the gym; that’s the only superpowers you have?” I was trying to distract myself from the tension.

“Why, Doctor, did you just call me gorgeous?”

I sensed the playful smile that I couldn’t see. “Sorry, Lea, I’m married. Also, I’m pretty sure my wife is quite able to murder both of us, probably at the same time.”

I tried to use my Cirlet screen to illuminate the corridor. It didn’t work. For a moment, I thought I heard a sound and froze.

A light at the far end of the corridor came on with a distinct electrical *thunk*. Then, a little closer, the next light came on.

Thunk.

Then the next, and then the one above us.

Thunk.

We both looked up.

“What is that?” Lea asked.

“It’s a light bulb.”

It was a glass bulb: a loop of wire inside a glass ball that generated light by wasting copious amounts of electrical energy. The light wasn’t as bright as I’m sure it should have been, but it was working well enough to let us see where we were going.

The corridor was a simple ‘L’ shape. We turned and the next row of lights thunked on.

At the end, there was a more open area, but it was still in darkness.

We walked cautiously towards the opening. As we crossed into the room, there was a louder *‘thunk’*: the room lit up with large florescent tube lights across the ceiling. The place looked like a hotel reception. There was a curved wooden desk and a horrible blue carpet, some sofas and coffee tables. The whole place was covered in dust and cobwebs all across its sterile, dirty white walls.

A sudden neon glow startled me.

On the other side of the reception desk was an old-style television screen with a bowed glass front and the electrical neon warmth that was the signature of the old analogue models. It filled the wall with its glow. I walked around to the other side of the desk. Nothing but white static and a rolling view of random snow.

“What is it?” Lea asked.

She wasn’t human. That object was not a part of her history.

“It’s an ancient screen.”

She poked at it. “Why is it behind glass?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer. I watched as the screen flickered the way these old screens did when something attached to it came on. After some more flickering and rolling; a blue on grey menu appeared. It seemed to be controls, for the room. It had marked the lights as set to automatic, which explained

them coming to life. It also said the communication system was 'off-line' and the 'loading floor' was locked.

Lea poked at the word locked. Before I could explain to her that wasn't how it worked, a panel slid open on the desk's surface, next to the television. My mouth dropped a little. The panel would have been out of sight from the other side of the counter. Lea poked at the hole. "ACCESS DENIED" flashed on the screen.

"Fingerprint, I suppose," I said as I poked it myself.

"ACCESS GRANTED" flashed the screen.

"It has your fingerprint?"

"I guess it does."

I had no idea how, or why. However, a theory was already working its way around my head, and I was a little too scared to let it take hold.

A sliding wall snapped closed, cutting us off from the entrance to the room.

"That can't be good," Lea said.

We felt a shaking. The room vibrated, and the sensation of movement set in.

"It's an elevator!" I exclaimed.

After a minute or so, the vibration stopped with an unsettling crunch. We held on to the desk. A whining sound filled the room. A motorised screaming soon accompanied it, and we felt the room drop. To our relief, it didn't drop very far before it came to an eventual stop.

The doorway to the corridor slid open again. The neon monitor blinked off and a little puff of smoke came from the edge of its frame, as if to clarify that it would not be coming on again.

I poked at it and then gave it a firm smack.

"Well, we're not leaving the way we came in," I said.

We headed to the door. No corridor this time: the room opened out to present us with a steel floored landing at the top of a long metal staircase. We looked down. The place was

as big as an aircraft hangar. Across one side was a massive metallic cylinder atop of a classic 20th century trailer, with actual wheels on it. It looked twice as long as any truck I had ever seen — not that my memory was a good source of information. I cast my gaze across the rest of the room. There were buggies parked in a row. Large porter cabin offices stacked two high and two across; metal stairs went up to the top ones. All of this was lit by florescent lights and peppered with steel crates. It all looked highly organised.

“What the fuck *is* this place?” Lea asked.

“I’m more confused as to *how* this place has gone undiscovered.”

We cautiously made our way down the wide metal staircase.

“How is this here? It’s not like this is some under-developed half-forgotten planet, this is Earth. It’s a capital world,” Lea asked, as if reading my mind.

I was coming to an unsettling conclusion. It was *so* unsettling that I was hoping it was a delusion and kept it to myself.

We got to the bottom. It looked even more intimidating from there. Behind the vast stairs was a large garage-style rolling door that looked formidable. I made a note to come back to that. The metal cylinder demanded my attention first.

I inspected its markings and made my way to the front. It was long and massive. At first, I had thought it was a missile. There didn’t seem to be any vehicle in there large enough to move the trailer it was resting on, there were clamps on the wheels to keep it steady. The frontage had a thick glass panel across it.

I looked at where it was pointed. There was a huge metal wall that looked like it could be a launch door. The clamps made sense suddenly. This was not a missile. This was a shuttle!

“That seems to be a launch door,” I said. “If it opens, it *must* go to the surface somewhere. At least we have one exit we can use.”

I used my Circlet sensors to record the place. From what I understood, all I had to do was turn on the recording sensor and it would take three-dimensional images as I walked around. I was getting pretty good with Circlets.

My scientific urge to explore was suddenly pushed aside by a mild dread. The signal indicator on the Circlet screen showed the single character of zero. I had thought at the very worst we could call Dex or Libby or even Jo; they could send someone to come let us out of this place. I had been half joking about using the launch doors as an exit.

“Lea, you got a signal?” I gestured to my wrist.

She flicked out her screen with a twitch of her wrist. I noticed yet again how everyone looked so effortlessly skilled with these things while I had congratulated myself for pressing ‘record’.

“No. Not even enough to make a voice.”

She sounded worried.

The term ‘make a voice’ struck me as a broken phrase, but now was not the time to think about modern language.

“Okay. Let’s not panic. There must be a way back up, or at least somewhere with a signal, right?”

Lea raised an eyebrow at the suggestion that there was any panic. She was far more qualified to deal with the situation than I was.

I headed to the porter cabins. It looked like they were being used as offices. The first one was locked.

“You have anything to open this?” I asked.

With no hesitation at all, she smacked it with the palm of her hand and the door flung open with a crack.

“Brick strength?” I asked.

She laughed. “Twenty six years in the military.”

I went into the cabin.

There were actual papers in files and a boxy computer monitor on the desk. I sat down in the old brown office chair and looked around the room. Cheap chipboard desk. Messy

files and an old laser printer that probably didn't work properly. I should have felt at home there: a place that matched the fractured shards of my memory. Instead, it felt sad and hopeless. This was a far cry from the opulence and wonder of the rest of the galaxy. The office felt like a museum exhibit. Something to show children: the horrors and mendacity of a failed civilization.

I pressed the power button on the computer. The monitor flickered on and the humming of the fan startled Lea. After quite a long moment, it showed me a login screen.

"Well, until we can get some more technical people down here, this is useless," I lamented.

"If we had any signal, you could get Dex to interface with it."

"I doubt this computer has any wireless communication," I said absently.

"Really? How old are they?"

I thought about that and everything I knew about history. All the things I had learned since waking up with no memory were telling me the same thing: The Event happened in the year nineteen hundred. It was all aliens, spaceships and interplanetary travel after that. This wasn't old stuff that had been left abandoned for years. The current year was nineteen ninety-nine. This technology had been skipped entirely; it had simply never been invented.

This place, as I had feared in the back of my mind, was not an abandoned facility of the past. But it *was* an artefact of something. It also hadn't been there the last time Mercia was in orbit.

I needed more before I shared my thoughts. I needed to run my theory by Dex, and I needed to think it through.

Lea was thumbing through the filing cabinet, muttering about the insane waste of paper.

"You got anything useful there?" I asked.

“Looks like this office did transport.” She passed me a seemingly random folder; it was filled with ‘gate passes’ and transport plans.

There was an inventory list. I pulled it out of the folder and noted the dates.

“Not sure where the vehicle listed on this document came from, but it was bringing in food and blankets,” I read. “Seems they were setting this up as some kind of safe-haven, perhaps.”

“Why? It’s not deep enough to be effective in an attack,” Lea said, still going through folders.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if this place was attacked by a weapon, even the most basic orbital strike would leave it in a crater. It’s got no shields. It would have to be way deeper under the ground to be effective. *And* it had an open door. It wasn’t even an airlock. It wouldn’t work against radiation or bacteria either.”

I took a long moment to think about that. “I agree with everything you just said.” She nodded and turned back to the papers. “But it *is* still here, Lea. It did work as a bunker.”

She looked back at me. “So where are all the people?” she asked.

I had no answer to that question.

The rest of the offices were similar. One was some kind of accounts office, cabinets filled with financial records which we couldn’t make any sense of. The other seemed to have been unused: there wasn’t so much as a desk in it.

Then there was the last one: the upper cabin, closest to the door. It was a planning or management office. There was a facilities map proudly adorning the wall.

Lea and I stopped in our tracks when we saw it. The facility map showed our location and the twenty or thirty floors below us as a cross section. There were living areas, military floors, laboratories and weapon and food storage. There was a large area marked to cross the edge of three floors labelled ‘power’. At the very bottom it said ‘restricted’.

The map also showed what was supposed to be above us. This was apparently the basement level of a large building of steel and glass. It was marked as 'operational control'. I checked to make sure my Cirplet was still recording. The map showed a vast sprawling, multi-floor subterranean facility.

"Do we go to the lab, or the restricted area?" Lea asked, reading the labels.

I glanced at her. She didn't look totally out of place with her eighties outfit in a nineties office.

"Neither. We get out of here and come back with an actual team. For all we know, there *are* people still here. This place is vast."

She nodded, relieved.

She was certainly willing to follow me into an adventure, but I'm sure she would have felt better coming back with a gun and a pair of boots.

There were no doors other than the big one behind the stairs and the massive launch door at the other end. There wasn't anywhere to go, even if we wanted to get deeper into it. We investigated the door behind the stairs. There were no controls, levers or card scanner. It was sealed tight.

The steel crates stacked all around were just as impenetrable. They were held shut with large metal nuts on top; we wouldn't budge them without some tools. There were none around – we had checked.

"Ground shuttles?" Lea asked, as we approached the buggies.

"Sort of, yeah." I sat in it and flicked some switches. "Oh, it's electric."

"What else would it be?"

"Usually they burn a liquid fuel for power. It's called a combustion engine."

She made a disgusted face. "Whoever this race was, they *were* wasteful."

"This race?" I queried. "Lea, this is a human facility."

She looked confused.

“I have an idea: do you think you can drive this?” I asked.

She took the driver’s seat and assessed the controls. “Assuming one pedal makes it move and one stops it, yeah. I assume it’s not totally different from a kid’s training shuttle.”

It wasn’t just basic technology; to her, it was a child’s toy.

“The wheels will make for a rough ride though,” she added.

“Wheels aren’t forgotten technology, are they?”

“No. They are just so basic that no functional vehicle would include them. I learned to make a lift generator at school, Jon. Wheels are pointless.”

I noticed a key card slot. “Well, assuming we can get it to start, there has to be a way to get it out if there. They wouldn’t have buggies if they didn’t have an exit.”

I pointed at a blank little TV screen on the dashboard. Then the three buttons that ran down each side.

“Oh, it’s a menu,” she said.

“There may be a map or maybe something to transmit a command to open one of these doors.”

Lea nodded in agreement and we headed back to the transport office.

“Ah, then they did have wireless!” she said, victoriously.

We hadn’t been looking for access cards before; it was no surprise we had missed them. They were in a container on the wall, just inside the door of the transport office. Seemed like there was one for each buggy and then some. We took all of them. They were plain white cards with registration numbers printed on them.

I shuffled through the pile as we walked back to the closest buggy. I read its registration plate aloud: “XX98 X1” — I passed Lea the card.

“My shuttle is designated Thirteen,” she said.

“That explains a lot.”

We sat in the buggy.

“How come I’m piloting it? You seem to understand this technology.”

“Having a memory of what the buttons do doesn’t give me much of an edge over you. Besides, it’s not like we’re going far, and you’ll probably enjoy it.”

She pushed the card into the slot. The lights on the dash came on and the little screen blinked to life. The internal computer took its time to boot up. Lea carefully pressed the pedal. Nothing happened. I pointed at the gear stick. The buggy had automatic transmission, but it was still in ‘parked’. She pressed the stick up to ‘drive’ and tried the pedal again.

We had a moment of stopping and starting before she got the hang of it. She flew space ships; an electric buggy wouldn’t take her long to figure out. We casually circled the room while Lea enjoyed the motion.

The computer finished whatever it was doing with a twinkling sound of readiness. As expected, it had a very clear menu, designed for any idiot to use. Downside was that there was no obvious ‘garage door’ button. The buttons showed battery, communication, radio, map and information. The map was going to be interesting to look at later, but at that instant, ‘communication’ seemed to be more useful. I pressed it.

There was a set list for a few things: command, local area, announcement, and facilities. I pressed for facilities. The screen displayed the most welcome words: ‘Hangar: exit control’.

“Bingo,” I said, and pressed for it to open.

Lights flashed at the edge of the wall, it slid apart. Lea spun the buggy around to face it.

Our excitement soon vanished.

The door slid aside as it was supposed to, and there was an exit ramp just like in the diagram, but instead of it leading up and out, there was something else. It lead up a little, and then

the path disappeared into a pile of mud and rocks, more than a few tumbling in as the door shook them free.

There was no way of telling how much rubble was between us and the outside world. We went back and searched everything we had access to, looking at every detail for a way to get out, or at least open the other door.

A few hours passed. My anxiety was already rising when we turned our attention to the missile-like shuttle. Lea climbed in and activated the systems. Though it was huge, there was only room for one pilot, no passengers.

After studying the controls, Lea made her declaration: "I can get this to launch."

I was concerned.

"Without us in it!" she added.

I was less concerned.

But I still wasn't sure how that would help us. Before I had a chance to question her, she continued: "We can't move it, it's pointing at the ramp. So I'm going to launch it. We hide. It will either punch us an exit or make a big enough noise to attract attention."

We discussed all the things that could go wrong. The main thing being it burning us to death when the thruster fired. Lea didn't seem to grasp the idea that this type of engine used heat and made flames. Apparently, the thrusters on 'modern' ships produced thrust without heat: it was done with gravity manipulation techniques, something that she repeatedly called 'Cold Panel Propulsion' as if it was an explanation.

We set the rocket ship's launch sequence and ran away. We sprinted up the metal staircase and into the elevator room, hiding at the back of it behind the counter.

The theory was that the ignition jet would fire, propelling the ship into the rocks. With no pilot to adjust the fuel mix, it would simply cut out after a few minutes.

It was a terrible plan.

At this point, it was our only plan.

The launch thruster fired seconds after we got to our hiding spot. The red-orange light flooded the room, as did the roar of the engine. The entire facility shook. We both covered our ears. Lights flickered. Sounds of metal on rock screamed through the doorway. There was the spinning of a massive flame licking outward, growling as it mashed itself against the mud and rock wall that entombed us. The crashing went on for maybe a few more minutes. Smoke started to fill the air. Lea covered her mouth with her sleeve. I stopped myself from breathing, which I hadn't done consciously before.

The engine coughed itself out. We waited for the sound of falling and breaking to stop before we left to investigate. The smoke was clearing and light was coming in through the hole it had made. The rocket ship had made it out of the hole.

The rocks that had been blocking our path had mostly fallen into the hangar and a lot of the interesting things we had seen were destroyed. One of the cabin offices was burning a little, but it didn't appear to be spreading too fast. Lea coughed. We made our way through the smoke to the buggy that we had left parked behind the stairs. I glanced at the door next to it and promised myself I would be back to see what secrets it held.

Lea stamped on the pedal and we sped up the ramp. The buggy struggled with the debris, but the path the rocket had taken was mostly free of it. We were going so fast by the time we reached the top that our wheels left the ground: we were reacquainted with the outside world with a bone shaking crash. We landed on two wheels, and Lea had to swerve to avoid the back of the rocket that was now embedded in the side of a building right in front of us.

The buggy rolled and flipped as we turned, eventually coming to rest on its side against the rocket ship. We stumbled out of it and Lea took hungry breaths of clean air. I resumed normal lung operation with an effort of will.

We then realised that we were being surrounded by what seemed to be large hovering pyramids and a great many interested strangers. The pyramids had glowing corners and the Sol Alliance logos on them. They were about half the size of Jo's little shuttle.

"Please raise your hands. You are under arrest," came a robotic voice from the closest pyramid.

We did as we were told.

Chapter Sixteen

Formation

I entered the room with Lea on my arm. Partly because we saw people in front of us do that, and partly because we were nervous. The protocol for formal presidential parties was not part of my research or of Lea's training.

She wore a strapless blue evening dress with sparkling gems around her chest and hem. It was a human tradition for military personal to wear their dress uniform to these events, it was a Brick tradition to *not* do so. With the blessing of the presidential office, she straddled both worlds. Her necklace pendant had the symbol of Mercia and she wore a silver and blue brooch shaped as wings, the mark of her rank.

Like all of her people, she was genetically predisposed to beauty and grace, but I was still stunned by it. Even those accustomed to Brick women turned their heads as she walked by.

We walked down large ornate stairs that curved into the large hall. It was designed to make sure no one missed those who entered. It was more like a palace than a government venue. While it was a nice feeling to enter with such a companion, there was only one woman I wanted to see that evening.

Libby was talking with a group of people, all laughing and enjoying her company. One man tried to pass her a drink about three times in the few seconds I was watching from afar. She wore her blonde hair in a styled bun to expose the elegant line of her neck. Her dress was black and carefully

understated. There was a split down one side, exposing her leg, which was tipped with pointed heels. She wore a silver Circlet and matching hair pin, shined metal disks on her ears and what looked from a distance to be polished metal squares on her necklace.

She looked up and saw me. A grin spread across her face.

“She looks wonderful,” Lea said.

“Yeah. I can’t believe she wants to keep me.”

“You’re pretty easy on the eyes yourself, you know, Jon.”

I didn’t. I wandered around, mostly unaware of how I looked. That night, though, I wore a dark blue eighties style suit, complete with shoulder pads and waistcoat. I would have been nervous about the choice if Libby hadn’t picked it out for me.

We made our way down the rest of the stairs. I couldn’t take my eyes off of Libby for fear that I would somehow lose her forever. She excused herself from the group and strolled towards us.

I had considered how to best express my thoughts about her beauty and poise. Instead, as soon as she was close enough, I kissed her. It was no polite high society kiss either. It was loaded with feelings.

As we separated, she bit her lip.

“So, you got arrested. On Earth. Really?”

“Detained.”

I took her hand.

“Give me the short version,” she said, smiling just a little and without breaking eye contact.

Lea was still standing next to me; she grabbed two tall thin glasses from a passing waiter and put one in front of my face, breaking the moment.

I accepted the glass.

Lea injected herself into the conversation: “He had a tiny bit of data and an idea. Next thing I know, we’re in an ancient

underground facility with all the doors locked and no Circlet connection.”

“How did you get out?” Libby asked, still keeping her attention on me.

“We used a rocket ship,” I said, and tasted my drink. Champagne is terrible, as it turned out.

“A rocket ship?”

Lea noticed my expression at the drink and took it from me, glad to finish it herself. “Yes! It had flames coming out of the back of it,” she added.

“And they arrested you for this?”

I shook my head. “Detained.”

“Fine! They *detained* you for this?”

I smiled. “The rocket found its way into the side of a building.”

“It was the fire in the street that attracted the drones, then the police...” Lea paused. “And the upside-down buggy thing we used to follow it out. I think at one point that was on fire too.”

Libby’s focus left me. “What’s an upside-down buggy?”

I laughed. “A buggy that we flipped onto its roof.”

“Oh. I see.” She smiled again. “It all makes perfect sense now.”

There was a pause. My eyes were still on Libby. “Anyway, how did you know I was arrested?”

“News feeds.”

“I thought you were busy all day with academia.”

“Jon, I’m literally *always* in two places at once.”

I shrugged. “Well, I made it here on time.”

I was actually about half an hour late. Hopefully, I had got away with that.

Libby had asked how we had made it there at all when we were distracted by Kay’s voice. She made her way towards us from the staircase. We had somehow missed her entrance.

She wore a barely formal red dress that was a little too hugging and low cut for the event. It was also a little too short. Her hair was in pigtails, which again didn't seem quite appropriate. This was certainly an intentional rebellion to her presence being demanded. Somehow, she pulled off the look perfectly.

Her date was a tall and muscular man with little points to his ears and stars in his eyes. He looked more like a wall than a man, made especially hard to ignore by his suit that fitted him *very* snugly.

"Kay!" Libby and Lea exclaimed in unison. They walked over to her, dragging me along behind them. Kay hugged us all as a group.

"You look lovely!" Lea said.

"You both look like princesses," Kay replied with excitement and sincerity.

"Who's your date?" Libby asked.

"Oh. Yes! Meet Kar-al. He's a friend from work."

I stuck out a hand for him to shake. "Jon." I liked Elves. They seemed the most fantastical of the races and they were the ones I had seen the least of. "It's nice to meet you, Karl."

He shook my hand. "Kar-al. Kar is fine."

Introductions were made. They pointed me out as Kay's grandfather, which made me feel old. Physically, I didn't look much older than she did. Then Libby was introduced as her 'sort of sister', which confused Kar and made my title as 'grandfather' even more irksome. Lea was 'her favourite Brick', which seemed a strange way to introduce anyone. Kar wasn't much of a talker, but he seemed friendly.

We found ourselves splitting off and politely mingling with the notable people in the room. Everyone Libby and I spoke to made a point of congratulating us on our accomplishments and insisting we tell them the story of how we escaped from a Correctionist stronghold. It was getting boring; everyone wanted to hear the story first-hand.

I noticed that Libby's delivery of the tale was, word for word identical each time she told it. As we politely moved on from talking to an Alliance General, I leaned over to her and whispered: "Be honest, you're playing back a script or something, aren't you?"

"I didn't think anyone would notice." She smiled.

I laughed. "You're going to have to teach *me* that trick one day."

She squeezed my arm. "Sorry, my love, your squishy meat brain doesn't work like that."

We had caught a few glimpses of Joanne across the room. She was permanently locked into deep conversation with the more important and opulent looking guests. Eventually, Libby and I floated over to her. She glanced over at us and took the arm of a short, dark-skinned woman standing next to her before coming over and walking away from her seemingly tedious interaction.

"Oh, thank the Goddess! Normal people, at last!" she said.

"I guess this is more of a working event for you," I observed.

"You wouldn't believe! Everyone who can't get a meeting with Ba'an or me is using this as an opportunity to talk about some request for a project, mission, or whatever."

She complimented Libby's outfit, which everyone did. Jo herself looked classically well dressed: sweeping silhouette, loose but styled hair and a fresh glow of welcoming joy that she carefully faked with each new person who wanted to talk to her.

"Oh, I'm being so rude! I would like you both to meet Ashley, my seldom available yet always welcome girlfriend."

I took the hand of Jo's date. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ashley. Seldom available?"

The woman was a demure Elf; she was the first person I had seen wearing spectacles. Ashley was dressed as classically as Joanne, but instead of dark colours she wore a sky-blue dress

with tightly arranged blonde-pink hair. She was quite striking, even when considering the company I was in.

“Well, doctor, she makes it sound far more nefarious than it actually is. I’m just an artist. I’m not much of a socialite.” Her accent was unusual. It had an almost Russian ilk to it.

I looked at Ashley, then at Jo. They seemed to fit together well, despite how on-edge Ashley looked.

“Ash paints. She paints wonderful things,” Jo announced.

“I would love to see your work sometime,” I said.

Ashley let out a nervous smile. “Humans rarely like my work.”

“Why is that?” Libby cut in.

“I have the Pliant Gift. My art doesn’t really *work* for non-Elves.”

I had no idea what that was. Libby did: “Oh, that’s a rare eye disorder, isn’t it? You see things as strands of motion, not colours and shapes. Is that right?” She knew it was; she had summarised it for my benefit. Ashley nodded.

“I haven’t heard of that,” I added.

“Don’t worry, non-Elves don’t usually know what it is.”

“What’s it actually like?” Libby asked, “If you don’t mind sharing.”

Ashley smiled. “By modern standards, I’m not far away from blind. Those with the gift can only see things in motion, but as lines, I think. It’s hard to talk in shapes. I’ve never seen one. My home moon is a forest, and it has constant storms. It’s wonderful. Everything is constantly lit by movement. I can even see the wind as it travels.”

I realised then why Jo had so carefully taken this woman’s arm when she walked over. Ashley was unable to see us if we were stationary.

“The glasses are refractive. They split my field of vision into smaller sections. Lets me pinpoint things better.”

The fact that this woman had chosen to live on Earth was confusing to me, but asking felt rude.

“Looks like a kaleidoscope,” Jo said.

“What?” I asked.

“Her glasses. Looks like a kaleidoscope to those without the gift.”

Libby asked something I had been wondering about: “How does that affect your art?”

“I have no idea. I can’t see it.” Ashley and Jo laughed at a shared joke. “I can only see it while I paint it. Once each stroke is placed, it’s not visible to me any longer.”

That seemed to make for some very interesting art.

“On the moon where I grew up, my condition is well known. They see my art as a glimpse into something mystical and spiritual. Other races don’t usually like it, though.”

I liked her. Her choice to leave her moon was confusing. Confusing people were never boring.

“What did you see when the storm happened a few months ago?” I asked.

Her colour drained. She stared at me over her glasses; the stars in her eyes were spinning, not like the static little sparkles in the other elves I had met.

“I saw nothing, doctor. Nothing at all.”

Her tone was grave. Unexpectedly grave.

“Please, call me Jon.”

I wanted to keep talking to her, but Jo had a voice communication light up her Circlet. I noticed Ashley wasn’t wearing one.

“Well, looks like it’s time,” Jo said when she ended the very short ‘voice.’

She and Ashley left.

“I like her!” Libby announced.

“Yes. She seems very interesting.”

“Why do you seem to fall ever so slightly in love with every woman you meet?”

“Because I haven’t met many, as far as I can remember. Besides, you have nothing to worry about. There’s no one else like you.”

She smiled. If her comment was criticism, she had taken my answer well. She wasn’t wrong, but I was honest: there was no other woman I could feel the same way about. Libby was all I could ever want.

An area of the far wall lit up with a holographic display of the Sol Alliance insignia, and a section of the floor raised into a stage. A podium was carried onto it, a small, curtained trolley was wheeled next to it.

Ba’an walked out and stood at the podium. He was dressed in an expensive-looking maroon suit. His large pale wings were being worn a little looser than they usually were.

“Welcome, all of you! I’m sorry for the delay in starting. I’m sure you all know how stressful running a planetary alliance can be.” Everyone chuckled politely. I didn’t think it was funny. “Today, we are here to honour four people who have recently risked their lives in service of Sol. I would like to call to the stage: Doctors Elizabeth, Ka’ona and Jonathan Michaels, and flight officer Lea Ra-Kay.”

Libby and I wandered towards the stage and up the steps that quite literally appeared in front of us. We stood next to the podium, facing the crowd. Kay came too, and a moment after that, Lea. Ba’an looked at us with a proud smile.

He waited for the clapping to die down before he continued. He spoke of the events as they had been *officially* reported and then went on to each of us individually.

“Doctor Ka’ona Michaels, a dedicated pacifist, was already a hero for choosing a profession in which she saves lives day after day. She stood next to her friends and family when the

Correctionists abducted them. She both stuck to her principles *and* kept her team safe.”

He took a box from the trolley and walked over to her. He handed her the box, open, and took out a ribbon with a medal attached.

“I present to you the Sol Crest. Your bravery is something we should all strive for.” He placed it over her head and the audience clapped. He returned to the podium.

Kay looked down at it and then up to the audience. She let out an uncomfortable smile. I was sure she was considering the irony of a pacifist getting a military medal.

“Flight officer Lea Ra-Kay is one of the finest pilots I have ever met. She protected her charges, fought against an unexpected enemy and took great personal injury in this mission.” He walked to her with another box, placed the ribbon over her head and continued: “I present to you the Sol Crest. Your bravery is something we should all strive for.” The crowd clapped. I was unnerved at the repetition. It was tradition and performance, but I didn’t like it.

“Doctor Jonathan Michaels, scientist, researcher and historian. Not a man who expected to be fighting for his life, but his resolve and dedication to the safety of Sol is nothing less than astonishing.” He gave me a box and took out the ribbon. “I present to you the Sol Crest. Your bravery is something we should all strive for.” The crowd clapped.

I knew it was part of the performance, but it moved me.

“Doctor Elizabeth Michaels is the first Non-Organic Life Form to be honoured in this fashion. She is also receiving the most prestigious award that I am able to give to her. She is a teacher, a philosopher and an engineer, but when it came time to step up, she fought like Mercia itself in defence of her planet, her friends and her family. She even risked her own life to bring us the valuable intelligence locked away in the Correctionist computer systems.” He walked to her with a slightly larger box. He gave it to her to open, giving her

a moment to just look at it. Then he took out the ribbon and placed it around her neck. "I present to you the highest honour there is. You are now, and forever will be, a Defender of the Earth. Your bravery is something few can ever compare to."

The crowd did not give an enthusiastic clap, but instead a righteous cheer and thunderous applause. I found myself clapping for her too. Even if some of Ba'an's words were stretching the truth a little.

We turned to leave the stage, Jo appeared from the side; she opened a door at the back and pointed us out of it. We stepped out into the gardens of the venue.

It should have been dark and raining, but the night was dry and wonderful. A massive blinking blue box that went the length of the garden covered it: they had erected a shield. An assortment of twinkling lights on ropes decorated large flag poles and the fence that surrounded us, fending off the darkness and the blue ambient glow of the shield. The rain fell atop, silently. The blinking, I realised was the droplets being evaporated by the sparks of the shield's electrical power.

There were holographic flames on sticks at the centre of every one of the round tables; and there were a lot of tables. A larger one was slightly raised at the back of the garden. Ashley and Kar were already there, waiting for us.

We joined them. I looked at my medal. It was a shiny disk that had a circle with a smaller circle inside it; the smaller one had green jade mapping out the land masses of Earth. I wasn't sure if I cared about a medal as a symbol, but I liked how it looked.

Waiting staff appeared around us. Bottles of Elix were placed in front of both Kay and me. Wine for Kar, Ashley and Jo. A beer for Lea. An empty glass in front of Libby, as if to

let her know she had not been forgotten. I saw her raise an eyebrow at it.

“I took the liberty of ordering for you. I hope that’s okay,” came the voice of Ba’an as he walked over to us. He sat at the round table in the empty place between Libby and Lea.

A moment later, the back wall of the building opened: the entire length of it was a series of removable windows that the staff whipped away effortlessly. People trickled out and stopped to admire the garden’s layout and blue glow. Attendants pointed guests to their assigned seats and drinks were moved around. A small band set themselves up by the building. They played instruments I had not seen before; the music was gentle and intricate. It reminded me of what my memory would call classical music, but far more modern.

We relaxed, talking resumed. The night would become a pleasant blur of friendly conversations and memorable moments. Food arrived, but it remained secondary to the company, even to the Bio-statics at the table. I felt like I was home at last. Not that I was sure what that meant, not really.

After dinner was eaten and more drinks were consumed, Libby leaned over towards the other side of the table.

“Ashley, I have to ask; you have spent the evening trying not to let me notice you staring. I don’t mind at all, but what are you seeing?”

Ashley looked embarrassed and hid her face behind her hands.

Jo leaned closer to her date and laughed. “Are you seriously checking out my stepmother?”

“I’m sorry, Libby. I have been trying not to, but to my eyes you are... well, you’re beautiful.”

“How so? I haven’t moved very much. How are you even seeing me?” Libby said, jiggling in her seat to illustrate the point.

“I can see ever expanding circles coming out from you, like ripples in water. You look perfectly clear to me. When

you think about something, the circles change their..." She hesitated. "I think the best analogy is what you would call colours."

Libby smiled. "I haven't been described like that before. Thank you, Ashley."

"What is it? I hope it's okay to ask. Is it okay to ask?" Ashley was transfixed on Libby; her fascination didn't have to be a secret anymore.

"I think you are seeing the graviton transmission that connects me with my AI core. I suppose you could call that my soul."

Ashley grinned. "Yes. That makes sense. Thank you for showing it to me."

I found myself wishing I could see the world through Ashley's eyes for a moment.

Many people made a point to come and thank us for our bravery before leaving the party. Lea was more than a little drunk and rested a little too close to Ba'an, who also showed subtle signs of the wine's effects himself. It was interesting to see him relax.

Despite consuming excessive quantities of alcohol, Kay, Jo, and I were as sober as ever. It was the one thing about being Bio-static that we all agreed was, in Kay's medical opinion, *shit*.

Chapter Seventeen

Recounting

I woke up in our apartment, on Mercia. Libby was snuggled up next to me and quite awake. She smiled and looked deep in thought.

“Hello,” I said

“Hey.”

“Did you spend the whole night looking at me?”

“Not all of it; my attention drifted between here and my core a lot,” she nuzzled in close. I liked the feeling of being warm and wanted.

“Tell me how we fell for each other; the time I can’t remember,” I asked.

“It was love at first sight, for me.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, well, sort of. Technically, it was love at first conversation. We talked for an hour and eventually you ordered a drink. You didn’t get me one.”

“Obviously.”

“No. You see, I didn’t know you knew what I was. We were on Earth and we had met at a conference. I didn’t advertise that I was a NOLF. It was a far hotter political topic back then.”

“How did I know?”

“I asked you that too. You smiled and said I was the smartest person in the room, so I should be able to figure it out.” Her eyes glazed as she relived a moment that was precious to her. “I scanned you with every system the avatar was equipped with and couldn’t figure it out. You had no scanners, no net-

work linked equipment, and I knew you hadn't looked me up on your Circlet."

"How did I know?"

"You looked me in the eye and did that smile you sometimes do when you realise you know more than everyone else. You said: '*you're too perfect. No organic is ever as pristine, elegant and effortlessly beautiful as you*'." She grinned. "I asked how long you had been on Earth, because apparently you had never met a brick. You said '*yes, Elizabeth, but they know how alluring they are. You don't seem to be aware of it.*' I fell for you right there and then."

"I called you Elizabeth?" I chuckled.

"I was still going by Elizabeth back then. *Libby* reminded me of the name my creators gave me before I became alive." I wasn't sure what she meant. "Library. I was originally a library recovery AI," she added in response to my silent question.

"Ohhh," I heard myself say, and instantly regretted it.

"I was always worried you would eventually leave me for a *real girl*. Especially when we first met Lea. When I raised the courage to tell you about my neurotic fears, you laughed and asked me to marry you. And here we are."

She was looking at me, but I felt like she might have been seeing *him*, the old me. I'm not sure I minded. He was starting to feel like an old friend.

That day, I only got to my lab by late afternoon. Libby and I spent the morning together in bed until I eventually tore myself away and headed out.

It surprised me to find Jo in the lab, sitting in my single armchair and drinking tea from my large mug.

Dex stood silently in his usual place by the desk. It pleased me he hadn't pulled out his defence system when Jo stopped by without warning.

“Hello, Vice President. I didn’t know we had a meeting today.”

“Hi there, father. We don’t. Technically, it’s my day off. I want some questions answered.”

“Oh. Sounds serious.”

I got myself an Elix from the food dispenser.

“Well, I think it may be. I have a feeling you’re having a breakthrough. I want to know what you’re thinking.”

I considered that. “Yes. Well. No. I mean... I have a pretty crazy theory. I also have a feeling that the evidence required to prove it is in that facility I found on Earth. Or part of it at least...”

“Stop being cryptic. You know I don’t have the patience for political posturing.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. Considering her profession, that seemed like an odd statement.

“Fine. But once you hear this, you’re stuck knowing. Same as me. You sure you want me to tell you?”

“Get on with it. *Please*.”

I wished there was something stronger than Elix. I sat on a box of data tablets in front of her.

“Okay, Jo. This is going to take some unpacking.” I took a deep breath. “The Event I have apparently been researching for about a century... the one that everyone seems to think changed reality at the time; well... It actually happened two months ago.”

She gave me a blank look. “What?”

“The Event may have started in what we perceive to be the year nineteen hundred, but it didn’t finish until two months ago. Or at least that’s what I *think* has happened. I should have confirmation as soon as we get into the main area of that facility.”

I took a huge gulp of Elix. The burning sensation was satisfying.

“Okay, now explain *why* you think this. Because you sound like you’re making quite a leap here.” She sat back in the armchair.

“When I had my so-called accident, and the resulting universe-wide storm, that no one seems to want to talk about happened: that was actually the end of The Event. From our point of view, it started about a hundred years ago, but in reality, it seems to have lasted only about twenty minutes; maybe more, maybe less, but not long. All the strange clock stuff, it’s because time was literally spinning up. It’s hard to measure how long time takes to be re-written when you live inside time... I suppose.”

Jo kept staring at me in silence, with a laser-like focus.

“My first clue was when the Correctionists attacked me on Central, just after I woke up. Why did they suddenly want me? According to every news feed and record I can find; they have been a pain in the arse of the galaxy for forty-plus years. Then they suddenly risk it all to get little old me, right then?”

I got another drink.

“So, I was whisked away to the good ship Mercia. And what a ship it is! My lab is here. I work here. I live here. So does Libby. It’s our home away from home, or so I’m told. If that’s the case, why did you have to assign a room to Libby and me when we arrived? Why didn’t we have a home here already? And why didn’t anyone think it was strange that we didn’t?”

Jo ruffled her brow, as if trying to collect her memories. I assumed those memories would be more obviously messy the more she tried to lock down their minutia. If my theory was right, this was what everyone would realise when they tested their assumptions against their recollection.

“After a late night, I found myself making sure Lea got home safely. You know Lea, right? My best friend. Good friend of yours, too. She has served on Mercia for years, right? Have you seen her apartment? It’s bare. She has no trinkets or photos in

her room. Nothing. It's like she just moved in. At first I thought she was a minimalist or something. She isn't."

Jo took a sip of tea.

"Then those pesky Correctionists tried to pick me up again. From the embassy; a ballsy move. But *why*? It makes no sense for an annoying terrorist group to suddenly change their tried and tested tactics. And all to get me? That made even less sense."

She made a "hmmm" sound. I continued.

"The Correctionist that interrogated me; he hated me. He hated me passionately but couldn't kill me. He *needed* me. But why? That also made no sense to me, until I finally got the time to ask about the accident I was supposed to have had. I saw that mystical artefact in the video. An artefact that no one has a recollection of. I'll come back to that."

"Go on," Jo demanded, annoyed that I had paused to gather my thoughts.

"When we got to Earth, I was in awe of it. As I explored, I noticed the complete lack of cultural diversity. That's strange, given that it's a so called 'hub world.' That's what made me get Dex to check some things for me. That facility I found: it wasn't hidden at all. It was a fucking door in the middle of the street. You really think that shit like that could have been hanging out there for ninety-nine years and no one had wondered where that door went? In all that time, there was not so much as a curious kid that popped their head in there?"

Jo's poker face was impressive. Nothing was being given away. I was getting more and more nervous with every point I made.

She thought I was crazy; I was sure of it.

"The technology in that facility was never invented in this timeline. I'm expecting, once we get access to the primary facility, documents and computer logs will be dated as recently as two months ago. You don't get glass-fronted computer monitors at the same time as a world that has ships like Mer-

cia. And the only reason I seem to be able to see this clearly is because I have no memory filling in convenient blanks. I'm looking at things with no context and it's, well... it's fucking obvious. Reality is new, and no one has noticed."

Jo stood up and went to get more tea from the slot. She sat back down.

"Get back to it," she said.

"What?"

"The artefact; you said you would get back to it and you didn't."

"Oh, yes. That. I'm pretty sure the Correctionists have it. Once we retrieve it, we will have a far better idea of who is behind all this."

"You don't think this was a natural event?"

"Not for a second. Someone had changed something and the reality we are living in is a side effect... Or something was changed to get us to here."

"The artefact; could it have done this?" she asked.

"I have this feeling... maybe a leftover memory I can't quite place yet. I know it may seem like it's responsible, but it didn't have enough power to have caused all of this. It needed power from my shuttle. You can't re-write a reality with a shuttle's generator. If I had to guess, I think it's some kind of leftover from the previous timeline."

"Previous?"

"Iteration; chapter; version; whatever you want to call it. That capsule isn't technology from this one. It's too different from everything we have."

"Who else knows this theory of yours?"

"No one. Well, Dex, I suppose... Though I expect Libby has been forming some suspicions of her own. I expect if she gets to look at the technology in that facility, then she will put it all together the same way I did."

Jo rubbed her head. "And the facility: you think there are more of them?"

I nodded. "It's easy to compare the previous Mercia scans with the current ones. Dex has already identified twenty odd smaller anomalies. Some will just be scanning errors, but I would think a good portion will be artefacts of the other timeline, like the one we found. This one feels important to me, though. A memory, perhaps."

"Show me everything you have," she then said, not as my daughter or friend. She used the official commanding voice of the presidential office.

I went through all my notes in detail, outlining every tiny thing I had noticed. I showed her the scans from the tablets that I had in the protected archive, the dates and the actual timeline of events as I understood them. It took us hours. She asked the smart questions, and I realised I had a lot more information than it seemed. Dex had worked for his keep and had done a great job of picking up on little things that I missed.

Eventually, the story was over. Jo had examined every document I had and seen every scanning anomaly Dex had found. It felt good to share my theory.

Then she told what she knew:

"The data that Libby extracted from the Correctionists ship; you may have noticed that it's not been released to you yet."

I had. She took the Elix from my hand and gulped it.

"We have deemed it too dangerous for general circulation."

I stared at her, waiting for more.

"Other than a few minor details, it lines up with your theory."

"Yes!" I punched the air in excitement.

"Why are you happy?" She seemed annoyed.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because our entire reality may be two months old and that's terrifying."

"Yes. It's exciting."

“But where did all my memories come from?”

“Joanne, everything you remember is true. Your life happened as you remember it. It just didn’t happen in that original timeline. This timeline is where you live, where you were born, where you raised Kay, where you met Ashley. This timeline is still real from the point of view of everyone who lives here. Nothing has changed.”

She idly scrolled through my notes.

“But was any of it supposed to happen?”

“Who cares? It did, and I love that it did. I’ll protect this timeline over all others with my last breath if I must.”

She smiled at last and hugged me.

“Ash liked you, you know.”

“I liked her too.”

“You like everyone.”

We allowed ourselves to get distracted with some less serious conversation and a little laughter. Eventually Jo made a decision:

“Dad, you may be the only person who can actually figure out this whole thing. I’m not quite sure why. We need to know if we’re in danger and we need to know why things changed. But we can’t go to anyone else with this until we have more.”

I agreed. I hadn’t even wanted to share it with her.

“I’m putting you in charge of a small team that the Earth Science Foundation is sending to the facility. I’m also organising for a small group of military personal to go down there, make sure it doesn’t end up on the news again. You’re not getting command of people with guns, though, so I’ll have them send a security officer. Get Libby to join you too. I want her skills down there.” She was back in Vice President mode.

It sounded fine. I wasn’t thrilled about a security team, but they were there to support us, so I decided not to object.

“Oh, and I’m assigning Lea to you, officially. Everyone thinks of her as your personal taxi driver anyway. I’ll make it official; cuts down on administration nonsense.”

I was pleased. I trusted Lea.

Jo left me to my work. I didn't want to do any, so I closed the lab and wandered home. It was nice thinking of home, even if it was a small apartment. I lived on a spaceship. That thought always made me smile.

I found the apartment in darkness. Libby wasn't home. It was a little sad to find myself alone after the excitement of the conversation with Jo. I took my jacket off and sat on the sofa in front of the large wall-screen. I turned it on and realised I had no idea how to play the thing I wanted to see; I clicked the AI button on my Circlet.

"Dex, can you interface with this damned TV?"

"Your screen? Yes," came the expected reply.

"I want you to queue up every one of Libby's public appearances. Start with the most recent and work backwards, please."

The most recent video was the academic interview from the day before. She was sitting in a leather armchair on a well-lit stage. There was a happy middle-aged gentleman in an ugly suit sitting on a chair opposite her. A little table between them had two glasses of water on it; *one of those was going to be wasted*. The camera spun to show the lecture hall filled with the interested faces of young minds.

The interviewer asked her a good many loaded questions: did she think a robot should be getting the highest honours Sol could bestow, and what was the difference between an AI faking life and actual life, etc. Libby did a great job turning the questions around and using them as springboards for bigger ideas. After a while, the nasty little man interviewing her seemed more like a well-planned ally who was pretending to pull no punches to allow her to get to the big topics fast.

The evening rolled on with the videos. The clips ranged from a few seconds of her having a sassy back and forth with a student in the street, to full lecture rooms. I was learning a lot about the philosophical debate of life versus simulation.

It probably helped that I was in love with the teacher.

According to the omnipresent clock in the corner of the screen, it was three in the morning when the door zipped open and Libby came in with her shoes in her hand.

“Jon! You’re still up?”

She strolled over to the sofa and sat down heavily. She was wearing a formal business outfit.

“What are you watching? Wait! I’ve seen this. Why are you watching my lectures?”

“Because I wanted to know more about what you do, my love.”

“Well, given that you married me, I’m not sure you have much to learn about the fight for NOLF equality.”

She lay on the sofa and put her legs across mine. I rubbed her feet, without really realising I was doing it.

“I’ve enjoyed watching. You’re great at this.”

She grinned.

“What have you been up to?” I asked

“Paying the bills. As much as I love teaching, I don’t bill for appearances. Anyone can come see my lectures. It’s the robotics and chip patents that keep us in the luxury we are used to.”

I still didn’t really understand how the money worked.

“Due to Earth having traditional time-zones and me not needing to sleep, I scheduled in-person meetings at five different cities. I just sold the rights to manufacture an AI core I designed to Cruor, the Vampire home-world. We have enough money to keep the lights on for about two million years now, if you want.”

I assumed this was a good thing. “Congratulations... I guess.”

The *only* actual purchases I had made since waking up with no memories had been my new jacket and a bar tab. It seemed like no matter how much money we had; it wouldn't really matter to me.

"That reminds me: do you want me to get you a better assistant? That Dex unit seems a little long in the tooth."

"No!" I barked. "He's my buddy!"

She smiled. "Can I at least upgrade *him* then?"

I shrugged; a little uncomfortable with the idea. "If you think it would be useful... but you better not break him."

We went to bed. To sleep. Both of us. She looked exhausted and apparently needed some down-time. It seemed reasonable to just call it 'sleep.'

Chapter Eighteen

Toast

Lea was more than a little pleased when she got the transfer order. She had come and rang our doorbell at eight in the morning. I had been awake for all of about ten seconds. She sat at the table with Libby and me.

“And when I asked, they even let me have shuttle Thirteen. Its shield system is being upgraded right now!”

She sounded excited, but I was still trying to focus on the waking world.

“I’m pleased that you’ll be looking after him from now on. I was worried that eventually he would have to get a ride with another pilot, and they would notice how odd he is!” Libby joked.

“Oh, right. I wanted to talk to you about this last night,” I said. “Jo has put me in charge of the research team that’s investigating the facility we found. She wants you to help me.”

Libby looked at me, feigning annoyance. “I bet she said she didn’t trust you down there unsupervised.”

“Are you on-board or do I need to find another *Defender of the Earth*?” I smiled.

She laughed. “As a defender of possibly the worst planet in the alliance, how can I possibly say no?”

I went to the food hatch and got my usual early morning toast pile and coffee. “You want anything, Lea?” I asked. She shook her head. She still had coffee and wanted nothing to do with my ritual bread worship.

“I knew about this already, by the way,” Libby said. “I read my e-mails while I was in down-time last night.”

“The one thing I still can’t get used to is you being in down-time mode here with me and also off in the digital world doing all sorts of exciting things.”

“Actually, it’s all a cover. I’m having an illicit affair with an ice machine AI from Central Prime.”

“Oh? Is he hot?” Lea asked.

“Only when he’s broken.” Libby replied, laughing to herself.

“All this technology and you haven’t found a way to make yourself funny,” I smirked.

“When do we leave?” Libby asked.

“Shuttle should be ready in an hour or so. They are only swapping out the blue-field generator,” Lea said.

“I assume the research team is going to have all the equipment we could need, so I’m good to go whenever you two are,” I added.

I took the time to tap out a message to Kay on my Circlet screen. I wanted to ask if she wanted to join us on Earth that afternoon. A message came back almost instantly, stating she had taken her shuttle back to Central right after leaving the ceremony. She also added that she was hoping we would be *coming home* to Central soon.

“Are shuttles expensive?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Lea replied.

“One that is for interplanetary travel?” I added.

“That’s not a shuttle, that’s a ship,” Lea clarified.

“Why?” Libby asked.

“Kay’s back on Central. Said she took her own shuttle. I’m still trying to figure out how much things cost.”

“I don’t have my own personal shuttle. Just good old Thirteen. None of the Human pilots seems to want to fly it,” Lea said, considering my question.

“I can solve both mysteries,” Libby started. “Thirteen is an unlucky number in most human cultures.”

She looked at me. “Ba’an got Kay the ship.”

“Ba’an Ty? The president? He got her a ship?” Lea barked.

“Yeah.”

“Why did the president get Kay a ship?”

Libby made the face of a child that had accidentally revealed a secret.

“It was a gift. She feels about Earth the same way most sensible people do, and Ba’an was stuck here. It was a few years ago, when Mercia was having that big re-fit. He wanted to make it easy for her to come and visit, so he got her a ship. He even splashed out for a pilot AI, as she never learned to fly.”

“Why did he want her to come and visit?” Lea asked, apparently still processing the new information.

I hadn’t known the story either, but had worked it out a lot faster than Lea did.

“Fuck!” she suddenly said.

“There we go,” Libby smiled.

“How long were they seeing each other? Was it a secret? Wait! Are they still seeing each other?”

Her eyes went large as she spoke. I wanted to know too, so I kept quiet.

“They broke up just after you had your accident, Jon. When the storm happened, she had to find out he was okay from a news conference. It hurt her that he didn’t think to contact her first. He said the alliance had to come before his personal life. She felt like he chose his work over her. He felt like she was asking more of him than he could give her. She’s still getting over him.”

“Kay dated the president of the alliance, and you didn’t think to mention it to me?” Lea exclaimed, staring at Libby.

“They got together just after Kay got her own medical practice in the embassy. She was worried that the press would think it was how she got the position. Wouldn’t help her pro-

fessional reputation much. So, they kept it quiet. Then secrecy just became a habit, for both of them, I think.”

Lea still looked stunned. “I thought he and I had a connection the other night,” she mumbled. “He was probably just trying to make her jealous!”

“Getting drunk and falling asleep on someone’s shoulder isn’t a connection,” I fired out.

“Hey Libby, did Jon know about all this?”

“Of course he did.”

Lea smacked me on the side of the head.

“How could you not have told me?”

“I have no idea! I lost my memory, remember? As far as I know, I’m also finding out about this for the first time!”

Chapter Nineteen

Command

“Have you attached your medal to your jacket?” Libby asked as we left the apartment.

“What else should I do with it?”

We made our way to the dock. I looked down at the medal. When I had inspected its box, I found a backing that worked like a magnet, but only snapped onto the medal. I removed it from the ribbon and used the backing to clamp it onto the front pocket of my jacket. It was a pretty trinket, I liked it.

Also, given that I was to be leading a team while having no memory or any experience of anything, I needed all the social ammunition I could get.

Thirteen was having its last diagnostic run when we arrived. There was one lone technician clearing away his equipment.

He saw us coming and quickly pulled out a data tablet.

“Flight officer Kay-Ra?” he asked, reading from the screen.

“Ra-Kay, but close enough,” Lea said. She took the tablet and signed off the work. “Thank you.”

He left in a hurry.

Lea strapped into the flight seat and Libby into the co-chair. I got the bench behind, again.

“If we’re using this regularly, can we get a third seat fitted?” I asked.

“You’re the boss. Place a work-order,” Lea said as she flipped switches and fired up the engine test.

Libby blanked out for a second and then shook her head a little. It was something I had seen her do before.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. Sorry. Happens when I get too wrapped up in my core-self. I was updating my simulation mode. If this facility of yours blocks graviton transmissions, I don’t want an old version of myself driving.”

“You mind if we get out of here?” Lea asked.

Libby gave her a thumbs up. The shuttle door closed at the back and the moment the light went green, we fired out of the dock.

Thirteen landed on the street where we had left the facility the night before last. There had been a structure erected. It looked like a big grey tent, but with solid walls. The Sol Alliance knew how to get things done.

“Thirteen; lock door,” Lea snapped at her Circlet as we walked away. The door closed and her wrist beeped in agreement.

“I thought we didn’t lock things on Earth,” Libby commented.

Lea rolled her eyes.

I was more concerned that no one had come to check our credentials. We were able to casually stroll up the tent-like structure and walk in. The inside was a little jarring. We stepped from the peaceful summer afternoon of Victoria City to a noisy and dim warehouse with people setting up all kinds of equipment, doing a lot of pointing and arguing.

“Well, this isn’t what I expected,” I observed.

“Scientists,” Lea said, with a shrug.

“The military staff should be more organised, though, right?” I asked. “Would you mind finding out who’s in charge of them, please? I want to know how we wandered right in here.”

Lea nodded and vanished off into the mess of people and equipment.

“And us, dear husband?” Libby asked, resting one arm over my shoulder.

“Let’s go make friends.”

After some walking around, it was clear there were a few things happening. Some staff were there simply to set up the equipment, and they were doing it — fast and efficiently, despite the mess. There also seemed to be multiple researchers who, as far as we could tell, were all arguing about... something. Junior researchers were setting up equipment behind the half height walls that decorated and segregated most of the tent.

We made our way through the noise and organised mess towards the arguing rabble. Before we could get to them, though, we were distracted by the sounds of a furious man who was kicking a large stack of crates.

“You okay there?” Libby asked. I planned on carrying on with my intended route until I noticed the man was desperately trying to topple the high stack, which ignored him, by virtue of being heavy, metal and stacked firmly.

“Yes, yes. I’m fine. The crate I need is at the bottom, and the technicians with the gravity generators are apparently more interested in erecting walls than allowing me to get started with my work. I’m sorry for all the noise. I’m just quite frustrated at this point.”

The man was good looking; excellent hair and was wearing a dark green shirt with cargo trousers. He looked quite out of place against all the eighties fashion in the room and, honestly; he was really *very* handsome.

“Here. Let me help you.” Libby picked up one of the crates and moved it like it was a toy.

“Oh!” he said, stunned for a moment. “I think I may need to workout more.”

Libby smiled at him in-between her crate stacking. I pushed one, out of curiosity; they were not movable to us, mere organics. The large metal crates were designed to be moved by machines, not people.

“Not to sound ungrateful, miss, but how exactly are you doing that?”

“With my arms, mostly. Also, I try to keep my back straight.”

“Yes. Well... Not quite what I meant,” he mumbled.

She moved the last one to expose the crate he needed and answered him: “It’s Mrs, actually. Doctor, to be more accurate. And I’m non-organic.”

He shook her hand in thanks.

“Oh, a doctor? So, you’re working on this project, are you? That’s good news. I’m Doctor Atkinson, David Atkinson.”

She smiled back, politely. “Elizabeth Michaels, Libby.”

Doctor Atkinson pushed some buttons to pop open the lid of his crate and peered in. Libby glanced at me and back at David. I think she was relieved that he didn’t raise an eyebrow at her being a non-organic.

“What’s your field, Doctor Atkinson?” Libby asked.

I was starting to feel invisible.

“Please, David. And it’s not interesting, I’m afraid. My doctorates are in electronics and computer security.”

I went from feeling invisible to replaced. He was handsome, well dressed and an expert in things Libby loved.

Time to make myself seen.

“Good to meet you, doctor! I’m Jonathan Michaels, your new project lead.”

Then I felt overstated. He popped his head out of his crate and shook my hand.

“Excellent. The husband, I assume?”

I nodded.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking, but are *you* non-organic too?” his smile was genuinely interested without a hint of prejudice. He had a piercing gaze.

“No. I’m just a regular guy,” I said, with my most valiant grin.
Then I felt understated.

“Well. In that case, we should grab some lunch when they get a dining area set up.”

I nodded. Damn it — it was going to be hard to loathe this fine-looking charmer. We made our exit as he went back to his crate. A wall on wheels was rolled out in front of us; seems he had already been in his office before it was even formed.

The team assembling the inside of the tent was not interested in anything that wasn’t related to their tasks. We tried saying hello, but they wanted to finish and leave as soon as possible.

“You don’t need to be jealous, you know that, right?” Libby said as we dodged another wall in transit.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” I lied. I wasn’t aware I was so transparent.

“I mean, I don’t complain when you spend most of your free time with the most attractive organic I have ever seen.”

“Dex isn’t organic.”

“You know exactly who I’m talking about. Lea is stunning. You’re married, not blind.”

I had obviously noticed. You couldn’t not-notice.

“There are lots of attractive people in the universe, Libby. But you’re the only one that can tear me away from Dex.”

She laughed.

“I have no idea how I should feel about that.” Her words had a sing-song tone.

We finally made it to the group of arguing people. Though they had dispersed a little, an Elf man and a Vampire woman with no wings remained. They were getting quite heated.

“Excuse me?” I said.

They continued the arguments.

“Hey,” I tried.

They ignored me.

“Settle down,” I said in a stern tone.

They looked at me, confused. They had apparently only just noticed us.

“Yes?” said the Vampire woman.

“I’m Doctor Michaels... Your project lead.”

Libby gave a polite wave. “Also Doctor Michaels,” she added.

“What exactly has you all shouting at each other?”

“We were discussing the best way to proceed with the project,” the Vampire woman explained. She appeared to be too young to hold a position of authority, actually, she looked too young to be out without an adult.

“What’s the disagreement, exactly?” I ignored the woman’s appearance. I didn’t know how Vampires aged and I was pretty sure someone would point out if there were a problem.

“Well,” began the Elf. He was short, older and wore a thin brown jumper. Though I think everyone would look older next to that Vampire girl. “I have pointed out that given we have been told this facility holds artefacts from before The Event, we should try to use deep scan techniques and sensor imaging technology, rather than opening the main door and contaminating the whole site.”

“Which would take months,” the Vampire replied.

“Even the air in there could prove to hold information about pre-event Earth,” he argued back.

“No matter what the air holds, it’s not worth the time it would take to pull samples when there may be fully operational computers and records in there somewhere,” she insisted.

“It’s got power, so we need to worry about security before science.”

“Stop, please,” I said, hopefully keeping my stern tone. “If you don’t mind, we already have a plan. We’re going to use a shield to contain the door when we open it. We will take air samples if you think it will be helpful. After that, we will check for security systems and disable them.”

I had no idea where this plan came from. I think something of my previous memory was leaking out.

“The Sol security people are not scientists. They won’t preserve the site,” the Elf said.

“That’s why Libby is going in.”

“Who’s Libby?” asked the Vampire.

I pointed at Libby.

“She knows how to preserve the site *and* should be able to disable any security systems without a problem.”

“Tell me, she *is* qualified; it may be dangerous,” the Elf man pointed out, with what sounded like earnest concern.

“It’s fine,” Libby said. “I’m non-organic. If this body is destroyed, I’ll get another one.”

“Well, that sounds convenient,” the Vampire muttered.

“It is,” Libby glowed.

“Once the site is deemed safe, we explore,” I completed.

They seemed to agree with my plan.

“No one has tried to open the door yet?” Libby asked.

“No!” the Vampire said. “The site has been sealed with a shield since before they erected the tent.”

My Cirlet chimed. I answered; it was voice only:

“I found your security staff. They just got here,” came Lea’s voice. “Out front,” she added.

I closed the voice. I made my excuses and left the group. Libby stayed behind, probably to make sure those two didn’t devolve into ‘debate’ again.

The assembly team was working fast. Doctor Atkinson’s open area was already a walled off room and cables were being pulled down from above to provide power.

There were maybe four or five teams of scientists there. All were my responsibility. I wasn’t at all qualified for it, or, if I was, I couldn’t remember. I was starting to think Jo had made quite the mistake by putting me in charge. Any of these people were better suited to this than I was.

I stepped outside and was a little blinded by the sun. The tent had been on emergency lighting and the thick fabric top let little light in. As my eyes adjusted, I could see a very large black ground shuttle had parked next to Thirteen. It was not only large, but very long. So much so that it had a pivot in the middle to make it more viable for road travel. It was all black, with military grey trim; its only light was the blue cushion of energy that it rested on. There weren't any windows. Just a single hatch at what I assumed was the back. Eight or so military staff were marching out of it; mostly human at first glance.

Lea was leaning against Thirteen and chatted to a stoic man who looked more like a biker than a soldier. His uniform was well worn, and he had a desert scarf around his neck — I assumed for visual flair more than function. He had a rifle slung over his back. He was huge and confident looking.

“Jon. Over here!” Lea waved.

I walked over to them, quite aware I was being eye-balled by every one of the troops.

“This is Commander Zal. He's from Earth Force,” Lea said, formally. “Commander, this is Doctor Jonathan Michaels. He's running this project.”

Zal shook my hand. I was not a small man, but compared to Commander Zal, I was a child. He was so muscular that I wondered if he was actually human.

“Glad to meet you, doctor. I hear you were concerned that there was no security when you arrived?” Zal's voice was so bass filled that it felt like being punched in the chest when he spoke to me. I nodded. He inspired the kind of respect that demanded silence.

“Truth is, Sol command screwed up the orders. Seems like Earth Force assumed a team was coming from Mercia. Mercia,

knowing it's not their jurisdiction, assumed Earth Force would action the order."

I nodded, not entirely sure about the difference between 'Sol Command', 'Earth Force' and 'Mercia' as political entities.

"We're here now, though. I promise you; your project is in the best hands."

I believed him.

"Thank you, commander." It was the most I could muster. He had neutralised any complaints I may have had before, just by standing there.

"By the way, Doctor, I saw you on the news feeds."

"Oh?" I wondered if I had somehow made headlines again without realising.

"First when you took out a spy ship, then the other night, getting a medal for it."

I wasn't sure how to reply.

"It's an honour to be working with you," he said with a nod.

"Thank you."

I turned to leave and almost walked directly into a thin person who was made entirely of slices of natural wood, — complete with bark and a leaf or two.

"Greetings!" said the wood person.

"Hello."

"I'm Omi!" they said in an angelic harmonic voice; it sounded like three people talking at once. "I wanted to introduce myself."

I blinked at them, blankly.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to be overly familiar, sir. I am Doctor OmiOniaiLiaoRioNikorataton reporting for duty... Sir."

Feeling then quite overwhelmed, I managed to reply with: "It's nice to meet you, Omi."

The next few hours were for meeting new people, answering pointless and arbitrary questions about placements of walls I didn't care about, and being asked questions I didn't understand by people who seemed smarter than me.

It was exactly what I had expected it to be.

The afternoon crept up on all of us. Thankfully, the dining area had just been set-up. There were coffee pots, a large fridge filled with cans of something, and a buffet table that was getting populated by a catering team who arrived from nowhere. Being the first to succumb to temptation, I sat down with a cup of coffee and an enormous pile of chicken steaks, I think they were chicken, I wasn't sure.

I put my Circlet on the table in front of me and popped open the screen. A keyboard was projected into the air in front of it. I positioned it in front of me, knowing that it would just be a fuzzy square from the other side. Hopefully, it would serve to telegraph my desire to be left alone for a little while. The coffee was awful and the chicken was cold. It was a perfect combination of slightly disappointing things that went together incredibly well.

Someone sat next to me.

I was relieved when Libby's voice said: "You look like you've had enough of this already."

I nodded and took a bite of cold chicken. "I've been here hours and I haven't even set foot in the facility yet."

A shadow crossed my vision, so I closed my Circlet with a tap; Lea had sat across from me.

"Wow, you look like you're *done* with this!" she said.

I looked at her plate of salad and a glass of water with a little disgust.

"He's pissed that he can't ignore them all and go into the facility," Libby said.

"Understandable."

Another figure took the remaining seat. I looked up.

“Hi,” said the smiling Doctor Atkinson. “You look like hell... sir.”

I glanced at his plate: a slice of quiche and some tomatoes.

“Just Jon,” I said after a gulp of terrible coffee.

The dining area was filling up now, and the assembly crew was leaving without a word. It was quieting down. I enjoyed the lowering volume.

“That’s too much chicken, Jon. People are going to notice that you’re a freak,” Lea said delicately, while peppering her salad.

Doctor Atkinson looked on nervously at Lea’s lack of formality.

“My doctor tells me I need to take in bio-matter whenever I feel unwell or fatigued,” I said.

“Oh, no stamina?” she smiled.

“Plenty of stamina, just tired... of your shit,” I replied with a grin.

Doctor Atkinson smirked a little. Now grasping, Lea was my friend, not my subordinate. He looked a little more at ease.

“Does your doctor often prescribe chicken steaks?” he asked.

“Well, David, the answer to that really depends on your security clearance,” Libby answered on my behalf. I was currently too involved with said chicken.

“How so?”

“Well, if someone with a security clearance even one level below yours asks, then my husband eats like a child and we all have a good laugh. If someone with your clearance or above asks, then yes. His doctor really did prescribe vast quantities of food to him.”

Libby went on to explain about my biology and its requirements. He was fascinated, and also a little shocked he had never heard of it before. Libby then had to explain there were only the three of us who had this ‘gift’. He was also reminded

it was considered a classified piece of information. Not that I personally took that very seriously.

I finished eating too much chicken and felt suddenly amazing, as I always did after a feast. Add five cups of coffee to that and I was ready to re-join the project.

“What do you want me to do?” Lea asked me. “I’m no help with the science stuff that’s about to happen, and it’s not like you need a bodyguard on Earth.”

I shrugged. “Once we get started, I want you to find out everything you can about that rocket ship: scan it, check its systems, see if it’s still functional, and get a repair team if it’s not. I want that thing back to the state we found it in.” It was supposed to be an order. I still didn’t feel like someone who should be issuing orders. In truth I was curious about the ship but it wasn’t high on my list of priorities. Lea was perfect for the task though.

“Rocket ship?” David Atkinson asked.

“You’ll see. Actually, you can’t miss it.” Then I realised I didn’t know where he fitted into the hierarchy. “Doctor, are you head of a team or department here?”

“Please; David. I’m the head electrical engineer here and the only computer security specialist. I have a little team of three enthusiastic rookies with me.”

He had already told me to call him ‘David’ a few times, and it didn’t seem to bother him that I kept ignoring him. He really was a very nice guy. I still didn’t like him. But he had won that one: David, it was.

I waited for my team to assemble at the large conference table set up at the rear exit of the tent. Zal had been true to his word: there were guards posted at both the front and back entrances of the place, and their shuttle had generated a shield that made our project impenetrable from the outside.

My meeting comprised of Raf, the Elven gentleman whose demeanour made him seem older than his apparent years; Ta'ra, the very young-looking Vampire woman, who had been arguing with Raf earlier; Omi; David; and Zal. I decided Libby and Lea were also members of the command team. No one objected.

I used my Circlet to show a three-dimensional recreation of what was to be our project. "Here's what I have. The Earth police were kind enough to seal the section of the street behind the tent with a shield, so we know it's as Lea and I left it in there."

I gave them some back story about how I had discovered the facility and the rocket ship we used to punch our exit. All they had been told was that it was a large pre-Event facility with a locked door. When they saw my three-dimensional map of what we had explored and the photos of the layout of the structure we were to find below, they were very excited. No one had expected an entire subterranean building to explore. This was the first slice of pre-Event reality they had ever had a chance to see, aside from the occasional random artefact that somehow survived, and the many diary entries from people who were around at the time.

To most people, movies and books, painters and poets had romanticised The Event. It was, to these scholars and scientists, the most amazing thing they would ever be asked to research. I decided not to tell them about my theory that there might be many other such places hidden on Earth.

Once I had brought them up to date, I waved for the security team to open the large shield that served as a door at the back of our tent. They nodded and pressed a few controls on the frame. It switched from shield to 'Glass' mode; you could pass right through it, but it served to keep out the cold and the noises.

We trotted out to the blue tinted street behind the tent. There sat the rocket ship and a nearly upside-down buggy

next to it and a large hole in the body of a sloping hill, the attached building had been sealed by the shield. It was all as we had left it, except that the shield generator that the Earth police had left was sitting in the middle of it all, omitting a blue beam that faded into the shield dome above us. The entire area was bathed in a cold but comforting blue twinkling light.

One technician had already begun to hook up power to the shield generator. I was told it would be good for weeks, but it was always a good idea to keep shields powered properly. Zal had been adamant that this was a priority. He took security seriously.

“I can see why you were arrested,” Libby said

“Detained.”

She smiled.

Lea headed to the rocket ship and a few people followed, obviously eager to poke around it. Others took great interest in the buggy. Some stared at the hole as if they expected a monster to appear from it.

“May we see the facility now?” came the angelic voice of Omi from behind me.

Omi, who had introduced themselves to me earlier, had explained they were a Thinker neutralist. Thinkers were by nature without gender, in no small part because they were able to procreate by a method of splitting themselves into smaller consciousness that would then diverge from the original. When they left their home world, they would usually accept whatever gender people assigned to them, simply because they didn’t care. Omi was a younger Thinker at only a few hundred years old and was well educated in alien affairs. They had decided they would not accept those childish gender roles. I respected this stance a great deal, mostly because it was nice to meet a Thinker that was willing to talk about their home world for a change.

Omi, Libby and I walked towards the hole. Omi hesitated at the opening. Given that Thinkers were essentially indestructible, I assumed it was out of reverence, not fear.

“Don’t worry. The lights are on,” I joked, and walked on down the ramp.

It took us over ten minutes to get to the bottom. When I had exited, I had been in a buggy, and not exactly going slowly. I hadn’t really got a good sense of the distance.

I was the first to emerge at the bottom, with Libby and Omi not far behind me. The lights *were* still on.

“Well, what do you think?” I asked.

“It’s beautiful!” Omi exclaimed.

“It’s a mess,” Libby added.

I wanted to explain to her that it was actually pristine when Lea and I first got in here, but stopped when I noticed her eyes had turned to a flickering amber colour.

“Whatever is blocking our signal is still active then?” I observed.

She shrugged. “We can have the technical team put repeaters down the ramp. Also, we can’t always take a ten-minute walk every time we want to come here. We should set-up a Fold to come and go.”

I was trying my best not to think of Libby’s simulated self as a separate person, but it was hard. She had made an effort to make me understand that treating her simulation in any way differently to normal caused her stress. Her meaning was clear, even though she hadn’t used the exact words. She never did quite use the words that would most clearly explain her feelings, though. *Philosophers!*

Omi looked quite out of place in this facility. I accepted that Thinkers were a strange race of naked robot looking people, but Omi had chosen a form made of assorted slices of wood. They looked like a moving tree. Every time they moved, it was like magic. A lot more so than the metallic balls or silver cubes that most Thinkers created their forms from. With Omi, it was

like a fantasy tale in motion. For some reason it struck me as less natural than the others of their race.

This was, of course, quite absurd. Their species probably used wood and stone on their home world long before they had spaceships and warps.

I shook off my distraction. I had realised that I ran the risk of 'checking out' in the same way Libby did, granted for far different reasons; but being deep in thought and getting absorbed by your core-self wasn't that different in outcome.

I was doing it again.

"It was so clean and intimidating when we arrived. I have the recordings on my Circlet. All this soot and debris wasn't here. It was like a slice of another world," I said.

"That's the fabled door, is it?" Omi asked, pointing at the locked door with a finger made of carefully arranged twigs.

"It is. As far as Lea and I could tell, it's operated from the other side."

Omi nodded. "Do you mind if I touch it?"

I gestured for them to go ahead. "Don't try to open it. I want a full team here before we break the seal," I added.

Omi nodded again.

"I'm going to check one of these buggies," Libby said.

"Oh, you may need one of these."

I gave her the pile of access cards I still had in my jacket pocket and turned to follow Omi.

The door was enormous, made of horizontal metal slats. From the design, it looked like it would roll upwards when it was opened. Omi crouched down next to it and put one of their hands against it. The energy which all Thinkers flicker with — an orange glow in Omi's case — stretched out from their body and into the door. It zipped around the edges of the slats and Omi's wooden body lost its spark of life.

Omi spoke again, but their voice came from the door, not the wooden form. "Yeah, this is isolated and locked with vertical slats on the other side. The two panels together are about

a meter thick. I don't have the focus I need to move all of these at the same time. I think there may be some kind of gearing system holding it all in place too."

"That's great! Don't try. Can you sense anything from the other side?"

The door made a 'Humm' sound in Omi's voice, and then said: "No. There's definitely a dampening field being generated from the other side. I'm essentially blind if I try to look past the door itself."

Omi's lifeless body next to me was a little unsettling. It was just as unnerving when the glow from the door flashed back into it; even though nothing perceptible changed, the body was alive again.

"You okay?" I asked.

Omi stood up with ease. "Oh, yes. I don't know how much experience you have with my kind, but I am not this body. I'm the wraith that lives inside it. We are quite indestructible, I assure you."

"Good to know. I guess."

Omi seemed nice; refreshingly sincere.

"You're not *quite* what you appear to be either, are you, Jon?" they said in a serious tone.

"No. I'm not. If you don't mind, I would like that to remain between us."

"Understood. But... what are you?"

It was hard not to trust that voice.

"I'm human. Just an ancient model," I gave them a deflecting grin, or tried to at least.

It was a good enough answer that didn't make me feel like I was lying. I wasn't sure what their security level was and didn't want to go into too much detail until I could check.

"Humm," came the reply.

The sudden appearance of Libby saved from further interrogation. She was driving a buggy.

“This thing is the stupidest design I have ever seen!” she was complaining when she came to a stop. “It’s got wheels!”

After taking the buggy to the surface and checking Libby’s eyes to make sure they were back to green, I arranged with David for signal repeaters to be added at regular intervals the whole way down the entrance ramp. David also suggested we take a computer core down there too, to give us local Cirplet use, even if we ended up cut off from the larger network. It seemed like a reasonable precaution to take. I was told computer cores weren’t cheap, but there didn’t seem to be any objection to the plan.

The young-looking Vampire, Doctor Ta’ra Kl, was about the most qualified person on the team. She was only forty years old, barely an adult by Vampire standards. She recommended we set up oxygen generation units down there too, in case the other side of the door had contaminated air — or worse, an incompatible air mix. It was a solid point that I had totally overlooked. Breathing had become a secondary concern for me.

Libby contacted Mercia and requested a portable Fold generator with enough juice to punch through the dampening field. It would take a few hours to get it Blue-tubed down to us, though. We were losing the day fast.

“Okay. Today we finish getting things in place. Tomorrow, we get someone with a cutter to get that door open. Get everything in place and call it a night,” I ordered.

There was no reason to rush this work. I ended the little meeting. Everyone scurried off to make those plans a reality, which left me with little to do.

“We have a hotel room, you know,” Libby said after the last person left.

“How sordid!” I joked.

“Not really. Our presidential sponsor has booked out the whole place for the duration of the project. Everyone who doesn’t live in Victoria is also staying there.”

We got to the hotel a little later that evening. They already assigned a room to us. Either because we were the only couple or because Libby had tweaked the booking, they put us in the honeymoon suite. It was half of the top floor, the only floor accessible through a Fold set up in the lobby. Because this was Earth, there were no locks or room keys, just a person in the lobby who told people which room they had been booked into.

Commander Zal arranged for guards to be posted outside the hotel. His team was also staying there; they were possibly the only people in the entire city carrying guns. With this and the drone police force that patrolled Victoria invisibly, we all felt quite safe.

I didn't know if anyone else other than the security staff knew this was a potential Correctionist target, but there was no reason to make everyone jumpy.

The room was enormous, larger than our apartment on Central and far larger than our room on Mercia.

I was relaxing on the bed and reading my own file. Libby and I had told other people to read it – as a way of dodging endless explanations about my Bio-Stasis; I hadn't read it myself though.

I was learning about my own history and I felt like it was someone else's life. I was fascinating!

"Hey Libby!" I called into the bathroom.

A noise came back that I took as a recognition.

"It says in my file that Jo's mom is *missing* but there are no details about what happened to her, you know anything?"

Libby was actually wet when she came out of the shower. Being planet based, the hotel had both the familiar cleansing lights *and* running water. She was towelling down her hair, unconcerned with her nudity. I looked up from my Circlet.

“Well, my love. You never talked about her much. Officially Aygah was a Sol researcher, same as you. She simply vanished one day. Off the record, there was a lot of shooting, you lost, an arm, *which grew back, as I’m sure you noticed*. Jo was five and almost killed in whatever went down. Aygah left and never came back, you made a point of not looking for her. You have, er, had some issues on the topic.”

I thought on this for a moment. Maybe there was more to know, but I would honour my secrets for now and poke at this puzzle when I had more time.

“You know there are no locks on any of the doors here,” I said, admiring her.

She carried on messing with her hair. “I’m armed. If anyone happens to see my shame, they won’t live long enough to realise it.”

She threw her towel at me.

“You should try it. Water showers are really strange.”

Her hair was a tangled damp mess. I wasn’t really paying much attention to her hair though.

“I’ll stick to the magic lights.”

“You really have to stop calling them magic lights.”

We spent the rest of the evening in a very unproductive way.

Chapter Twenty

Unlocked

By the time we arrived the following morning, everyone was already set up, waiting for me to tell them to start. A white platform had been placed in the centre of the tent. It had no less than three power cables running into it.

“Fold all working, then?” Libby asked David.

“Yes! It was a little hard to set up with it not being directly above the destination, and that damned dampening field, but once we got enough power into it, it settled down nicely.” He was wearing a different green shirt; his hair was as perfectly windswept as the day before.

“I didn’t see Lea at the hotel. Is she already here?” I asked.

“The pretty pilot? She’s still stripping down that rocket, out back.”

Libby let out a giggle at the words ‘pretty pilot.’ There was no way Lea wouldn’t be hearing that one.

“Repeaters?” I asked.

“All in place. I need your command code to add the computer core to our local network.”

We all stepped onto the fold platform at the same time and the world blinked. We stepped again and were inside the facility, right in the centre of the room, on another white platform. I looked at the power cables coming from it. They were bundled together, with others trailing up the ramp.

“We plugged all this into the city’s power grid?” I asked.

“Yes. But all equipment has its own battery backup too,” David replied.

He seemed good at answering my concerns before I voiced them. He was annoyingly good at his job.

Ta'ra and Omi were setting up what I recognised to be a Blue-field generator outside of the locked door. It was about half the size of one of the storage crates and had many screens and open panels across it. There were also dome-like extrusions across the rear and the top.

Zal was watching from a respectful distance, with a rifle strewn across his arm and a cup of coffee in one hand. I gave him a wave.

“Good morning!” He nodded back at me. I liked Zal. He was all business; I respected that.

“You need a hand with that?” Libby called to Ta'ra.

“Please!” She looked relieved.

Libby started messing with settings on the generator's screen. A few moments later, a small mesh antenna extended from its sides. She twisted a few of them and turned the device a little to the left.

“Computer core?” David said in my ear, no doubt wanting to get his systems up and running before the work got in full swing.

“Right. Yes.”

I hadn't seen a computer core before. The unit was built into one of the delivery crates, set up next to the Fold platform. I didn't know how Folds worked, but I assumed this computer assisted it somehow. It was made entirely of blue armour plating with a transparent glass-like dome on the top, which housed sensors, and what looked like computer chips, but a lot of them, all layered. The glass of the dome itself was etched with hairline silver circuits occasionally touched by threads of white light emanating from the centre; the circuits lighted up as it went along them. It was like a work of art.

David noticed my interest in it.

“Ah, remind you of Libby?”

“I'm sorry?”

“The core. I assumed it’s a similar type that houses Libby.”

I didn’t want to tell him I hadn’t actually thought to go and see Libby’s core. “Yes,” I replied anyway.

He lifted the glass dome, revealing it to be a sphere. It was lit with its own power. He rotated it to show the Sol Alliance markings on the underside, next to a series of connectors.

“As you can see, it’s a secure core,” he said, as if it should be self-evident.

“This isn’t my field, David.”

“You know the protocol, Jon. I *have* to show you.”

I didn’t.

He lowered the ball into the slot, it resumed its light show. He pressed a button on the crate and a screen appeared above it.

‘S-01 Compute core - Objective: data storage and communication management. Allow access and management to local network?’

The screen demanded me to take an action. There was a logo of an eye below the text. I pressed it. A thread of light scanned my right eye and then asked for my command code.

David turned away politely.

I entered the number Libby had forced me to commit to memory: ‘8675309.’ It beeped in acceptance. The glass core frosted over in just a few seconds; it was so cold that it was radiating a chill.

“Okay, all done,” David said, and clapped me on the shoulder. I still didn’t like him, but right then I felt bad about it.

We were ready to go. Repeaters in place, shield ready and backup computer-core picking up the slack if there was an unexpected break in data flow. With no reason to wait, I gave the okay for Libby to begin.

Commander Zal insisted that only those required for the mission be attending. I bent this advice a little: we had myself, David, Omi and Ta'ra present. Libby was the one to be doing the actual work. She stood inside the shielded area in front of the large door, with an energy cutter next to her and a heavy-looking satchel across her shoulders that housed a powerful portable scanner. She also carried a pistol on her hip as a backup. There were three armed security officers taking position around her on the outside of the shield. Zal himself was at the side, monitoring a screen and checking communication and sensor readings from the area. He seemed to be constantly expecting a fight at any moment.

"Doctor, are you sure you are okay doing this? My one job is keeping you all safe," Zal asked, for the fourth time. He was not happy about this.

"Commander. I am a non-organic. This body is a receiver of my consciousness. Even if there *is* some blood-crazed defence system in here, the only danger I'm in is paying the cost for a new avatar."

Zal had insisted the rest of us stay behind a physical blast shield he had set up a little back from the door. We had a large floating screen behind our metal shield with us. Ta'ra was taking control readings of radiation levels and air mix; Omi was using their Thinker abilities to watch for unseen things, which left their body crouched and dead; and David was sitting on a box, reading a book.

"Ready?" I asked.

"As ready as we will ever be," Ta'ra said with a sigh.

"Yes," came Omi's voice from all around.

"David?" I asked. He glanced up from his reading and pressed a button on his Circlet.

“Transmitting a holographic video to the team upstairs and recording everything,” he nodded.

“Libby, Zal. Ready when you are,” I said through the communication system.

We watched the Blue-shield flicker to life and seal Libby and the door off from the rest of the facility. She checked the readings on her scanner pack.

Then the cutter lit up.

It took her almost an hour to cut through the first layer of the door. Once she had cut the slats on each side, she stopped, lowered the shield, and threw the removed metal planks out. She restored the shield and went back to work, saying nothing.

“That cutter is really heavy. Doesn’t she get tired?” Ta’ra asked. “I’m a Vampire and I can barely lift it.”

“She won’t stop until it’s open. At this point, she’s probably not even in there,” I said, taking a seat on a crate next to David.

“Wait, you mean... she can just shift her attention and leave her body doing things?” he asked.

“I think so, yeah. Not something we really talk about.”

“I would want to know everything,” Ta’ra said.

“It’s not that I don’t want to know. Here, let me show you something.” I pulled out my Cirplet and hit the button to call Libby; not her Cirplet, but her address on Mercia. It flashed, and her face appeared on the screen. I unlocked the screen so everyone could see and hear her.

“Hey. How you doing?” I asked.

“Fine. Just cutting stuff,” she said with a smile, well aware of the demonstration I was making.

“Where are you?” David asked, glancing at the screen and then at Libby’s body, that still operated the cutter.

“I am on board Mercia. In orbit. As I always have been. My body is down there with you working on getting that damned door open,” she said to the group.

“You seeing this, Omi?” Ta’ra asked aloud.

“Yes. Hello,” came the disembodied voice.

“Actually, I doubt Omi thinks my bilocation is unusual. Thinkers exist as energy separate from their bodies. It’s not drastically different from me, except I’m digital and have enough compute to exist in two or three locations at once, depending on what I’m doing.”

Ta’ra and David asked a few more simple questions about *‘what it was like’* and *‘which one was really her’* before I cut them off and switched the screen back to private, walking away from them.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Sure. This is not interesting work,” she shrugged. I smiled.

“How much attention are you giving it?”

“Basically none,” she said, as if I had discovered her secret.

“I hope you didn’t mind the call. I don’t want you to think I was trotting you out like a stage magician or anything.”

I wondered if I had made an error in judgement.

“Not at all, Jon. I’m a teacher, remember?”

“See you in a bit, my love,” I said, getting it in before she did.

She seemed to blush a little. I smiled back and closed the screen.

“You guys are cute,” Ta’ra said with a wide smile.

I blushed.

My Circlet rang again. I flipped the screen open and saw Lea’s face. “Jon, I’ve been trying to get in touch! The buggy that you left up here is flashing a warning on its screen!”

“Warning?”

She pointed her screen at the buggy’s panel. *‘Hanger security breach,’* it said boldly, with black text on a red background.

“Okay, thanks, Lea. Deactivate the buggy. I’ll let Zal know.”

She nodded, and I closed my screen.

“Zal,” I shouted.

Just then, the sound of old Earth machine gun fire filled our ears. The monitor showed the shield behind Libby lighting

up an electric blue. We couldn't see what was happening. Zal shouted something and his men readied their guns. The shooting stopped. The blue sparks faded. We could see a lot of dust and movement.

Libby stood there with the barrel of an enormous gun in her hand.

"Turret behind the door. I broke it."

We all breathed a sigh of relief.

"You okay?" Zal called.

"Yeah. Tore up my epidermal layer a little, but nothing I can't fix."

As the dust and smoke cleared, we could see the silver of her internal structure showing through her arms and neck. I was unmoved. Ta'ra and David gave me judgemental eyes for my lack of concern.

"There's an automation coming towards her," came Omi's voice from the floor.

"Libby, you got company!" I said over the intercom.

There were more gunfire sounds, a flash of light and the familiar fizz of Libby's energy blast. Once again, we had to wait for smoke to clear.

"Got it," she shouted.

"Anything else, Omi?" I asked.

"Movement a little deeper in the structure. The dampening field is stopping me seeing more. Wait... There's a spike in energy."

There was a pointed silence for just a moment.

"Bomb!" Omi exclaimed.

"Libby. There's a bomb. Get that security grid off-line."

"Got it," she called back.

"Should we leave?" David asked.

"No point. It's a very big bomb," Omi replied, oddly nonchalant.

"It won't take her long to get this sorted. Don't worry." I wasn't as confident as I sounded.

Libby's voice came through the screen on the desk behind our blast shield: "I found an office. There's a computer here, and something else. I'm trying to access it, hack my way into the network. No ports! No Obvious frequency interface at all!"

David jumped up, this time paying attention: "Libby, from what we know about the technology in there you won't have wireless access of any kind. They didn't use it for secure systems. If you have a way of doing it, you may be able to get physical access via a coaxial cable in the back of the computer."

"I see it," she replied.

"You can connect directly to the cable. It's a kind of ancient ring network. You should be able to patch it directly into any modulation system you have."

"I have to disconnect from my core if I'm going to interface directly."

"Seems you have about twenty seconds," came Omi's voice.

"Do it now," I said.

The following few seconds lasted far too long. Zal and his men didn't so much as blink, guns trained on the shielded doorway and not even a flicker of doubt in their eyes.

A shadow moved behind the shield. We heard gunfire begin, then it stopped abruptly.

Silence echoed.

"Omi," I asked.

"We're safe! The energy has just started discharging!" they replied.

"Libby?" I asked to the com-system.

No reply.

"Doctor, do you want us to head in?" Zal asked me.

I glanced at David. "Could this have damaged her?"

He shrugged. "Depends on a lot of factors."

More movement filled the doorway. Rifles clicked in readiness. Libby stepped out from the shadows. Her jumpsuit had a

missing arm, the arm was missing a lot of skin. Another chunk of outer layer was missing on her lower neck, exposing a panel and some wires that she must have intentionally pulled out.

“Stand down, Zal. We’re good,” she said, and brushed some dirt from her chest.

She checked her scanner satchel. “Well, we’re not getting untainted air samples. Pack got shot.”

“Security status?” Zal barked.

“Neutralised. Took me a second to take control, but I disabled everything and locked all the doors and elevator. It’s secure.”

She had to reassure Zal at least once more before he agreed to lower the shield.

I ran over to her to take a look at the damage. Her eyes were a crimson fire, but as soon as we got close, they faded to a safer amber.

“You look like a bad ass!” I said, admiring her new look. Missing sleeve, bullet holes all over, including in her head and neck. The satchel she wore was obviously trashed. I took her hand. I knew she wasn’t actually in any danger, but I was pleased she was okay.

Omi came over, back in their body now. “That was exciting!”

“Do you need medical attention?” Zal asked.

“A good mechanic, maybe,” she replied, looking at her holes.

Lea and I had trashed the loading area of that floor and Libby had ended up starting a fire fight behind the doorway; our very carefully thought-out plan had failed. The facility had not been pristinely preserved. Not even a little.

Though we did now finally have free access to the floor, and most useful of all, access to a computer that was attached to the network. We were in. I sent a message to the lab tent telling the team of onlookers that we were secure and they

could come down. The Fold began working almost immediately.

I followed Libby into the doorway.

It's certainly disconcerting to see the woman you love with bullet holes all over. It's even more disconcerting when you know enough about her that there's little to no concern in your mind when you look at her like that. If anything, the concern I showed was a performance for others.

I wasn't sure how I felt with myself about that. I would talk to Libby about these feelings when she was back — when she looked at me with her own eyes again.

The corridor was as wide as the large door. There were tyre tracks on the floor. Was it a tunnel more than a corridor? It looked old; it was dusty, and there was a section of the ceiling that had been torn out. The turret that Libby had first met was on the floor in a molten lump.

I took a deep breath; not because I needed the air, but to check how it tasted and help build my picture of this place. It was dry and gritty air. Air that had not been moved for a long time. It was air from a time and place that no longer existed. There was a dirty oiliness to it that simply didn't exist on modern day Earth. I liked it, on some level at least.

We walked some more. Libby turned lights on, using switches on the wall. It looked so drab, so tired and hopeless. The walls were painted: the bottom half a pale blue, then halfway up the wall it was grey with a red stripe separating the colours.

"The computer is all the way down here?" I asked, noticing just how much ground we were covering. She must have sprinted down there.

I glanced behind me; there was Zal, our silent guardian.

Then there was the other thing Libby had dealt with: some kind of automated guard unit. It was like a stubby little tank, or it had been. Like the turret before, it was then a mostly molten lump of metal.

The corridor widened, and there were two large elevator doors on each side of us. In the middle was a large window to an office and next to it was a security door. The door had been ripped free and was on the floor together with another smashed automation.

There was an arm resting on the desk; hand atop of an ash tray with the burned and charred nub of a cigarette between two fingers. I traced the arm to the chair: there lay a dead man. Not a skeleton, or a preserved mummy. He was dead, fleshy and gooey. He wore what had been a white lab coat and brown trousers. I took a breath; the smell made my stomach flip.

I heard Zal pull out a breathing unit and slap it over his face. He didn't say a word. I decided not to breathe again until I was out of there. The rotting corpse had an air of familiarity that bothered me. Some primordial awareness of my own mortality stirred deep within me, and a flash of something akin to dread filled me for an instant before I locked eyes with it and was returned to the present by the burning sensation that I knew this man.

I couldn't place that face through its decay.

The computer had been pulled aside, away from the dead man. Libby had been careful not to disturb the corpse. Certainly not out of any sense of reverence, but as a scientist. The less she contaminated the scene, the better. The computer had been rotated and we could see the coaxial cable she had used.

She pointed at the missing skin on her lower neck, and then at the cable.

“I had to work fast. It wasn’t clean,” she said.

She had torn a chunk from herself to gain access to the communication point where she needed to press the cable in.

“You have total access to the facility now?” I asked.

“Yes. I copied all the codes and encryption keys before I disconnected. The dampening field can’t be turned off, though. It seems to be related to the facility’s power system. I ordered all the security systems to power down. It wasn’t hard to hack.” She sounded bothered by that.

“You have concerns?” I asked.

“These people. This technology. It’s... Jon, it’s a joke. This computer, it’s silicone. Its power isn’t even measurable in modern compute cycles. It runs in hertz! The most basic computational devices we even have are made of hyper-conductive plastics. Silicone isn’t a smart way to build computers for anyone.”

We left the room. The corpse made it hard to focus on anything else. Even Libby was taking unwilling glances at it from time to time.

“When can you re-sync?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I was having issues maintaining a connection, anyway. I cut it entirely in case there was any counter security, but this hardware isn’t capable of that. It doesn’t even have an AI framework. As soon as we get some repeaters in here, I’ll re-sync.”

As she spoke, I could see her sub-dermal components move through the holes in her skin.

“The floor is *definitely* secure?” I asked again, just to be sure I would not get shot at.

“Yes,” she replied.

I didn’t want to get anyone else in there until we were sure there wasn’t a biological hazard, though apparently thanks to the invention of medical nanites and Cure-all, that wasn’t something anyone worried about.

Still: I wanted a medical expert down there. From what I knew, Ta'ra was the person we needed.

“Okay, let’s go back and get you patched up then,” I said.

Chapter Twenty-one

A foot

The following hours were a whirlwind of activity. The new room was catalogued, cleared and scanned and the corpse was held in a bio-field then taken to a medical room in the tent for deep scanning.

Libby, still in sim-mode, acted as an interface for downloading and mapping everything she could find on the facilities network. It was a slow process, due to the limitations of the technology; she could have done this in seconds on modern hardware, maybe even less.

She sat cross-legged on the desk next to the computer, the cable held in place across her lower neck with a medical bandage; looked like she was meditating. She was, in-fact, analysing and isolating the data as it came in, checking it for viruses, activating defensive software and security tags. Then she transmitted it to the computer-core in the main area of the facility, which uploaded it to a central database on Mercia.

She planned on re-syncing herself to her core once she was sure the job was done. No matter how confident she was that this computer system would be unable to outwit her, there was no way she would put her core at risk. Zal stayed with her as a silent, stoic guard.

Back in the tent, Omi's body was in a similar meditative state, but instead of copying data, they weren't actually *in* their body at all. Omi was exploring the facility using their consciousness, looking for any way to see more of it, in hopes of gleaming something useful through that damned dampening field.

David sat at his desk, also studying the data as it came in and watching the analyst-AI structure it into something coherent.

Lea was still rebuilding the rocket ship outside and apparently doing a great job. She had, at some point, gone from repairing it to teaching the apprentice engineering team about thrust dynamics. I wasn't sure if it was worth all the work at this point, but she was happy and there was little else for her to do. It reminded me of a teenager with a summer car.

I was spending my time in the tent with Ta'ra, Raf, and the corpse. Raf seemed scholarly and stern. He had scanned the corpse down to its very molecules. He had stripped it and catalogued its clothes, notepad and, most interestingly, its wallet. They had both been running scans on it and nodding to themselves for a few hours, but it wasn't until Raf started looking at its belongings that I saw something more than academic interest.

"Jon!" He had a terrified look. He held the contents of the wallet up to me with a gloved, shaking hand.

I looked at it. It was a driving license. The photo of the man was not just familiar but had a deeply unnerving implication.

"What do you have there that's so shocking?" Ta'ra asked, leaning over. "Oh!"

The driving licence had a photo of a very familiar and handsome man on it. It also showed the correct name for the face: *David Atkinson*.

"What do we do about this?" Raf asked. He was trembling with some combination of panic and scientific delight.

"I don't want to go into too much detail. Raf, Ta'ra, I think you may be starting to realise that The Event maybe wasn't entirely what it seemed." I looked away from the card and at

the two now equally pale scientists. “Label the report you’re going to write for my eyes only, please. Secure this item and *do not* talk to David, or anyone else about it,” I said with my best attempt at authoritativeness.

They both nodded, nervously.

“So, The Event, it wasn’t *when* we thought?” Raf asked.

“No” I replied.

A half hour passed as Raf and Ta’ra put together their ideas. A theory was beginning to form between them.

“I know we don’t often see eye to eye on things, Ta’ra, but I’m certain that the atomic signature is different enough to be of importance,” Raf said.

Ta’ra was looking at a data-tablet he had passed her a few minutes before. “Does this also work for the non-organic artefacts?”

“Not really. The difference is nowhere near as startling. It’s a decay rate, or an alignment effect. Possibly it only works as consistently with biomass.”

I saw her flip the information on the tablet back to the first page and read it again. I sat on the counter, looking at the corpse. It wasn’t pleasant, but at least in the bio-field it didn’t smell.

I wasn’t following as much of the science talk as I would have liked to, but from what I did understand: there was a structure to all atoms. It could be measured in many ways, one of which was the gaps between the components, the distance between the electrons and the nucleus, as well as the speeds at which things travelled inside. This was pretty standard science, or at least that’s what they had told me. It was called ‘structural resonance frequency’ and it was essentially the same for every atom in the universe. All atoms of granite, for example, would match within a limited variance. It didn’t matter if they had come from Sol, Vampire space or another galaxy entirely.

In this corpse, however, it was different. Not a lot different, but different enough to indicate that it was not from the same universe — not that we needed more information to confirm this. It was a copy of a man we were working with. That corpse was the first thing ever discovered, which was assuredly not from our reality. Or at least that's what Raf was certain of. Ta'ra wanted to look over the data again.

“Okay,” she finally said. “I agree.”

Raf didn't 'woot' or punch the air with pride. He simply nodded at her. “I'm pleased. Now what does it mean?”

They discussed the possibility of confirmation bias, as they had only come to that conclusion *after* seeing the driving license. They wanted desperately to compare the DNA from this long dead David to the one hard at work at his desk. It reminded them I didn't want David him finding out about this.

“Can you test me?” I asked, jumping off the counter.

“You think you may not be from this universe?” Ta'ra asked with a raised eyebrow.

“No. I'm *certain* I'm not. I want to know if I'm from the same one as this corpse.”

Ta'ra looked at me like I was suddenly quite mad.

“Look, I think it's obvious by now that there is more going on here than you first thought. Trust me, I'll brief you all properly the moment Joanne okays it. *I promise.*”

I really did want to tell them everything as soon as possible.

Raf shrugged and started scanning me with a palm device. The threads were a lot faster moving than those from scans I had encountered in the past.

Libby walked in and startled all of us.

“Copying is done!” she said. Her eyes were green; *my* Libby was back. I stepped away from my scan to kiss her. I didn't care that her body was missing patches of skin. She was my Libby again.

“Welcome back” I said. She smiled. Raf followed me with his scanner.

“I need medical foam. The stuff you give humans when they are missing skin,” she said.

“Do humans often find themselves missing skin?” Ta’ra asked.

“It’s like Cure-all but in a foam applicator,” Libby continued, ignoring Ta’ra’s comment.

“She’s looking for regenerative mesh gel,” Raf said. He was still scanning me.

“Not foam?” Libby asked.

“The foam is for my kind. The gel is for human tissue,” Raf replied, pointing at his ears with one hand, still scanning me with the other.

Ta’ra passed Libby a small can from one of the medical packs on the wall. Libby thanked her and promptly took off her shirt. It had an arm missing and enough bullet holes that it wasn’t covering much of her anyway. She had a grey military issue bra under it.

She began applying the gel to her missing patches of skin. A generous squirt went on her neck where a large patch of her robotic sub-dermal components was showing through. Ta’ra tried passing her a small regenerator tool, but Libby didn’t take it.

“Would you mind?” she asked, turning to face her.

Ta’ra activated the tool. A comb of green energy came out from it. When it touched the gel, it went purple, and the occasional spark lit up before it cooled down and faded into smooth, reddened skin.

“Humans usually have pain medication for this,” Ta’ra said with concern.

“I don’t worry about it. It’s just a data source to me,” Libby replied.

“Interesting,” Raf said, and suddenly all eyes were on him. He had finished the scan and was looking at his scanner with great interest. “I’ll need an hour or so to process this information.”

Libby's bullet holes were gone. Her new patches of skin were red and tender looking.

"Jon, I think we need to talk," she said.

"Excuse me, doctors," I said with a polite wave. They nodded.

Libby stepped into a small room that was being used as storage by the security team. She rifled through the boxes that were still packed away.

"How long?" she asked. She found a stack of grey vests with Mercia logos on them.

"How long?" I asked back.

She pulled out the smallest one she could find and put the rest back. "How long have you known?"

The vest looked good on her. "Why do we have spare clothes?"

"Security team," she said, as if that was explanation enough, "How long have you known?" she demanded again.

"Which bit?"

"I've seen the computer records. This stuff isn't old. It's not artefacts of the past. It's from now. Just not our now." She rubbed her neck where the new skin was. She didn't feel pain, but it was irritating her.

She raised her voice: "I thought this facility was from before The Event. These computers should have been undisturbed for almost a hundred years. I checked the access logs; they were in full working use a little under ninety days ago. Regular use too. Then nothing."

"I didn't want to go into detail because I was hoping I was wrong." I said quietly. "How did you know? That I knew, I mean," I asked.

"I didn't," she replied, "Not really. I just always assume you know more than everyone else."

"I always assume you do, too," I smiled.

We hugged tightly.

"What does it mean?" she asked.

“I’m not sure, not quite yet.”

“The test Raf and Ta’ra were running. You’re from the other reality, aren’t you?”

“I think so.” I felt a lump in my throat.

“And all the memories you lost. The time we shared?”

We were still hugging.

“I don’t know where *your* memories come from, but I don’t think I ever had them.” I heard my voice crack. I was terrified that this was the moment she would reject me. I was always half expecting her to realise she didn’t want me.

“Jon, perhaps there’s a reason I have these memories. Perhaps when it was all re-written... Perhaps we need each other, that’s why the universe put us together. You, Lea, Jo, Kay... I can’t imagine being *me* without you all.” Her voice sounded like it should have been accompanied by the tears I knew she couldn’t have.

I let go of her, we separated a little. I was going to kiss her, but she got there first.

“I just need a few more pieces of the puzzle and I’ll tell you my theory,” I said, hoping she didn’t push me to give her my half-baked ideas.

“Okay,” she said. “Who else knows?”

“Just Jo. She got there before I did, I think. The data dump you brought back from the Correctionist ship gave her the clues she needed to get most of the way there.”

“She ordered me not to keep a copy of that data. Sometimes I think she is smarter than both of us,” Libby smiled.

“The corpse; it’s David. David Atkinson,” I told her.

“Shit! How?”

“I think... I think it’s possible that we were all here before, in the last version of reality.”

She thought for a moment. “*I wasn’t*. Not with the technology they had.”

She was right.

Chapter Twenty-two

Brown Bottles

The next day started earlier than I would have liked. If it hadn't been for a deep desire to take a shower, though, I'm not sure I would have left the tent at all the previous night.

Somehow, David was there when I left *and* when I returned. I wasn't sure if I trusted him anymore. Though, I wasn't sure before either. He looked fresh and wore a clean shirt. I was still habitually cleaning my one outfit in the 'magic light' every day. No one seemed to care much. They certainly said nothing to me if they did.

I had skipped breakfast at the hotel. David caught me at the buffet table, which, as always, had been replenished overnight. If the rest of us could have been half as organised as the catering team, we would have been done with everything the first afternoon.

"I have wired it directly into the ring network in the facility," David said enthusiastically.

"Wired what to what?" I asked, suddenly realising that I honestly wasn't listening.

"I have emulated the facility command system, the same way Libby did, and then used a relay to get Circlet access."

I looked at him blankly for a moment.

"My doctorate is in history, David. Assuming you have read my file, you will also know that I have forgotten everything I ever learned."

I took an indignant bite of a chocolate doughnut.

“Okay, yes. My Circlet can now control every piece of technology on the facility network,” he said with pride.

Libby wandered over and passed me a cup of coffee. She looked at the Circlet screen he was showing. “Oh, that’s a good idea,” she said with a supporting nod. “Can you share that access with *my* Circlet?”

He made a noise of agreement and started tapping away. I took an entire box of doughnuts and headed out the back of the tent. Libby stayed with David.

There she was, as I suspected: Lea, asleep in the cockpit of the pristinely assembled rocket ship. I banged on the side. She woke up with a start.

“Ugh! What time is it?”

“Nine... ish.” I offered a ring from my doughnut box. She looked at them with a disgusted face and took one anyway. She climbed out of the ship.

“You got it all working?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she began, with a mouth full of chocolate. “All pilots are trained in advanced shuttle repair. This thing’s design isn’t much different from the emergency landing thrusters on Thirteen, but really big and *super* basic.”

I walked around it and saw some modifications. There were blue tinted glass panels on it and trace wires going to the pilot’s chair. The chair was new, too. I hopped inside. There were all the controls that had been there when we first saw it, but with something similar to the Circlet interface wired into the panel.

“Impressive work, Lea!” I said as I removed myself from all the buttons that I was scared to press.

“Omi got a bunch of apprentice engineers to help me.”

She finished the doughnut. I was already on my third. She laughed to herself, covering her mouth. “The engineers are convinced you are going to throw them off the project when you see the modifications.”

I grinned at her in reply. “Will it fly like a proper shuttle now?”

“Not sure. I would want to take it off world, but yeah, it’s got modern adjustment systems as well as a control interface that’s more than point-and-accelerate.” She was happy with her work.

“Then tell the engineers they can stay.”

“Do we know what its purpose is... was?” I asked.

“Maybe.” She said stretched. “It’s got a tiny cargo hold at the back. Not something with any life support, and it’s not even big enough for one of their buggies. The only thing it would have been good for was travelling long distances fast in straight lines. There was a basic automatic course correction system. With the angle of the launch ramp, I assume they were going to use it to fly something into the sun.”

Her words were confused, but I had a good idea what it could have carried. My mind flashed back to the device I saw in the video of my accident. If I wanted to destroy something, flying it into the sun would be an ideal way of dealing with the problem.

I walked around the side of the shuttle. The cargo hold was open. The dimensions were to my estimate a good match for the device. I crouched down to look inside better. There was a large chain across the back and a hood where it would be strapped in. *Was this their plan?* Destroy the device before it could destroy their world. *Why didn’t it work?* What activated it I wondered.

“Come get some drinks with me and Libby this evening? I want to let you in on an official secret or two.”

Lea nodded with great interest. “I was worried I was going to be on the outside of all this, to be honest,” her accompanying shrug told me she had been worrying about this.

I gave my friend a hug and assured her that even though it had been a busy few days, there was no way she was ever going to be an outsider. I wasn’t sure how she would take it

when she found out her entire reality was only two months old, though. It was a problem for later. I was just hoping there would be enough Elix in the hotel bar to help her process it all.

A lot of doughnuts and an hour later and the command was sent. I had opened the facility up. Every door the computer had access to was unlocked. The defence system was silenced, and those archaic systems were firing up.

We were finally in, for real now.

I forbade the use of the elevator system, given that the one Lea and I used when we found this place had collapsed on its first outing, it seemed safer to hoof it, for now at least. Stairs were be a better option than potentially plummeting to our doom. I was fairly sure the ones behind the door were perfectly safe, but I felt like I should support the pretence. Thankfully, it hadn't taken the team long to find the access panels to the fire escapes and convince them all to open, mostly with the help of the security team.

Zal insisted that every team was accompanied by one of his armed guards. He was remarkably cautious; I planned on making a special mention of him to Jo and Ba'an. Make sure they knew how well he did his babysitting.

Omi's engineers went directly to the lower levels to take a look at the vehicle and technology stores that the maps promised. They were documenting and cataloguing, not tinkering. *Not just yet.* That was my other rule; gather and scan, no turning stuff on without my knowledge.

Ta'ra and Raf's teams were fanning out through the labs and offices. Like Omi's team, this was an information gathering pass before we started poking things with our very scientific sticks.

The only people that were already intending to poke things were Libby and David. They headed down eight levels to the computer core with some technical people who David seemed to hold in high esteem.

Libby was pushed into sim-mode the moment she started climbing down the stairs. She wasn't even sure *how* it was possible to dampen her connection with such basic technology, but she was sure the answer would be in the computer, somewhere. There were still files she couldn't access stored locally on the main server.

That only left Lea and me. We had no teams of people to manage and no topics to research. I wanted to look for diaries and notebooks; Lea wanted to see if there was any more information about the cargo of the rocket ship. We headed down to the area that the map informed us was 'classified.' We were also free from Zal's shadow because, *technically*, Lea was a military officer. Not that either of us considered her such, not outside of a flight seat.

We climbed down the staircase to the floor marked as 'restricted access.' It was a sliding mechanical door, similar to the large hatch that had protected the ramp via which we took the rocket ship out. The door was firmly locked.

I flicked open my Cirklet, finally feeling like I may have got the hang of it. "Libby, you there?" I asked.

"For you, always, my love," she replied.

"This door on level twelve isn't opening. Can you or David get it open with the Cirklet thingy? Or should I get Lea to shoot at it?"

I looked at Lea. She pulled her tiny pistol out and brandished it gleefully.

"That should have been opened with the rest of the system. Let me send a direct signal to it for you. I'll share David's Cirklet hack with you, too."

Moments later I had a new option on my Cirklet menu called 'DAIWOG'. The light above the door went green.

“It’s open. What does D-A-I-W-O-G stand for?” I asked.

David’s voice came over Libby’s microphone: “David Atkinson’s impressive work of genius.”

I rolled my eyes and closed the link. “That guy is really annoying,” Lea proclaimed. I nodded.

I pressed the large button on the wall to open the door.

I didn’t know what the others had found on their adventures, but as the door opened, I got yet another confirmation of my theory and I was terrified.

“Jon, this...”

“I know.”

I took a step back, mostly because I thought I was going to fall down in shock.

It was a fairly small room. It had a brown carpet and to my left was a leather armchair. In the middle of the room were three tall tables making a ‘U’ shape. There were big glass fronted screens on each one. To the right was a large door with a sign above it that said ‘Archive.’ To the left was a little kitchen. There were books lying around in stacks all over the place.

“Jon... How?” Lea’s air of confusion was crossing over into fear now.

It was an item-by-item recreation of my own lab on Mercia, but with the same pre-Event technology of the rest of the facility.

“I have a pretty good idea how,” I said.

I walked inside and waved my hand across the desk. Nothing happened. I looked at the physical keyboard on the desk, then pressed the space bar. All three of the large screens lit up. The middle screen had no login or password. It simply said in green writing over a black backdrop: “Begin.” I pressed the return key on the keyboard and was shown some ancient graphical interface.

There was also a puck looking thing on the desk with a wire trailing from it. I gave it a careful prod and as I expected, a little triangle on the screen responded. It was an input device.

“Jon... I don’t understand how this... exists.”

I glanced over at Lea. “I was going to tell you about this tonight in the hotel bar.”

She nodded.

I continued: “I think that this *is* my lab. At least it belonged to the version of me who lived in the reality that all this comes from.”

“There was a version of you from before The Event?”

“Sort of.” I paused. “Lea, I think in some way I *am* the version from before The Event. And the reason it’s the same layout as my lab on Mercia is because I decorated both, to my tastes. I don’t really understand all of it quite yet, but I feel like I knew this would be here.”

“Yeah, sure. That makes sense. I think,” she muttered. “You don’t age like a human. No reason you can’t have been around before The Event.”

“Lea, this isn’t a hundred years old. I think this is my lab from a little over two months ago.”

She stared at me.

“The Event started a hundred years ago. But I don’t think it finished until the storm, and the accident that wiped my memory,” I chose my words carefully.

She sat in the armchair.

“If that’s true, then...” she looked thoughtful for a long second. “If that’s right, then how come I remember... my whole life?” She looked around. “Wait, are you saying I’m only two months old?”

“I feel like I know the answer to that, but I can’t find the words to explain it. Your whole life happened, just not inside the same flow of time we have now.” I tapped away at the primitive computer as I spoke.

She had sat on the floor in front of the armchair to thumb through the stacks of books around her.

“I feel like we’re not supposed to know about any of this. Not really,” I said. I stopped typing and glanced over at her again. She looked a little sad and thoughtful. “It doesn’t really change anything. It’s like an abstract scientific fact. Doesn’t really affect any of us, not in a real sense anyway.”

She stood up and nodded. “Okay. Tell you what: I won’t think about this terrifying idea any more if you buy the drinks tonight!”

I used a firm nod and a wide smile as my answer.

The computer had vast amounts of data stored on it. It wasn’t connected to any wider network either. I assumed that whoever built that place — this version of me — was shielding it in the same way that another version of me had shielded my own lab. I walked to the room off to the side: as expected, there were rows and rows of archived data.

I suddenly appreciated Dex a lot more.

I used my Circllet’s recording function to take scans of the lab. I would still have to arrange for a team to box up all the books and notes for transport back to Mercia.

I looked at the desk. The wires were all attached to a large beige box; it was tall and had wheels and a leather strap on the top. I was considering having Libby come over to interface with it when I realised why it had wheels. It wasn’t on the network. If it needed maintenance or archiving, it would have to move. I pulled the cables out of it.

“Did you break it?” Lea asked.

“I hope not. I’m going to take it to David. See if he can copy all the data to my Circllet, or to Dex.”

“Hey, if you really think this was *your* office, I know how to tell for sure,” she exclaimed with an excited tone.

“Go on.”

She went to the kitchen area and began looking through the cupboards. “Aha!” she exclaimed. She came back with a large

bottle of something brown and alcoholic looking in a plain glass bottle. She handed it to me.

“Oh, *I* have to try it?”

“Maybe it’s not booze. Maybe it’s just drain cleaner,” she said, waving the bottle at me.

I unscrewed the lid and took a sniff. It smelled good. I took a drink from it.

“Well?”

“Warm, dry, and gritty. It’s like really crap Elix.”

She grinned and swiped the bottle from me. She took an enthusiastic draught, then coughed. “Yep. That’s terrible. I love it!” She screwed the top back on and put it inside her jacket.

“Well?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yep. Booze all over the place. It’s your lab for sure.”

Chapter Twenty-three

Break

We were about half-way back up the stairs when Lea complained: “Look, I know how this Bio-static thing works, but how are you not even *slightly* tired?”

I was carrying the large computer and feeling as fresh as I had when we started the climb. This was the first time that I had experienced my endless stamina. I was feeling a little hungry, but other than that, I felt fine. Lea was a Brick, blessed with superb physical prowess and was ready for a break. It felt good.

We got to the landing where the stairs changed direction, I suggested we stop for a little while.

“Taking pity on me, are you?” she joked as she took off her jacket, placing the bottle on the step next to her. “I reckon you could carry me as well as that computer, you know.”

I shook my head at her. “No, I’m immune to fatigue. I don’t have super strength.”

“I know why you said we couldn’t use the elevator. You just like watching me sweat. *Pervert!*”

“Not at all. I still have a sense of smell.”

That was about to devolve into a faux argument when my Circlet made a noise. I flicked open the screen to see Jo’s face.

“Hi,” I said, flicking it into public mode so Lea could listen in.

“We’ve been trying to get in contact with you for an hour,” she barked.

“We’re inside the facility. There’s a dampening field we still haven’t managed to deactivate.”

“I wanted to let you know Mercia has to leave orbit. We’ll be gone for the rest of the day.” Her voice held a vein of worry.

“Why? What’s happening?”

“We don’t know. We got a distress call from a research colony a few sectors away. It’s probably nothing, but we’re going to investigate it. It means we’ll be out of communication range for a while. Just wanted to let you know.”

“What are you not telling me, Jo?”

She looked uncomfortable. “It’s at the edge of Sol territory. All ships that entered Sol space via the warps are accounted for. There shouldn’t be anything advanced enough to be dangerous out there, dad. There’s a reason we’re taking Mercia, not just sending a scout.”

“You’re staying on board? Can’t you leave before the ship sets off?”

“Mercia is the most powerful ship in the known universe. It can take on an entire fleet. It’s not dangerous for us to investigate a single distress call. Besides, we left over an hour ago. We’re at the edge of our live communication range already,” she smiled. “I want to come visit this facility of yours, so don’t break anything. I’ll come down there when we get back.”

With that, she closed the link.

I dialled Libby’s address on Mercia. She answered instantly: “Oh, Jo got in touch with you before me, did she?” she smiled. She wasn’t in her white virtual reality room. I could see she was walking through a corridor.

“Yes. Are you okay? Are you safe?”

“Jon, this is what Mercia does. It’s been in more fights than Lea has had drinks. Don’t obsess. We’re safe. Honestly.”

Libby had known full-well that my first thought was of her safety. Something I had no right to worry about. Not really. She was far more qualified to take care of herself than I was. “You have a new body synced?” I asked.

“Yes. Given you won’t have that dampening field down any time soon and my body down there has a sketchy connection at best, I was feeling a bit cabin crazy. I synced a new one and went shopping.” She tilted her Circlet to show me the commercial area of Mercia, and the big space window. The stars were moving past like rain in the wind.

“I love you. Stay safe.” I said, mostly because there wasn’t anything else I *could* say. She returned the mantra and closed the link.

Lea put her arm around me. “Jon, she’s on Mercia; literally a ball of guns with a nice shopping area. You don’t need to worry.”

“I know, I know. But I’ve never been without her before.” I picked up my computer and made a start on the last bank of stairs.

“She *is* a good ship,” Lea said.

“I was talking about Libby.”

We got back to the main facility area and used the Fold to get back to the tent. David was back in his work area. I placed the computer on the desk next to him.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“I need all the data on this imaged and sent to my Circlet and to Libby. But I don’t want anyone seeing it. Can you do that?”

“I can. But why?”

“I can’t tell you that, without telling you.”

He nodded. “Understood! I’ll download it now.”

I looked around the tent. Artefacts were appearing thick and fast. Everything that could contain information was being catalogued and bagged: diaries, portable computers, notepads, printed documents. There were even people col-

lecting and bagging examples of clothes from wardrobes in the living areas.

“Hey, David,” I asked. He looked up at me from his desk. “Anyone found any staff rosters or anything similar yet?”

He thought for a moment. “Not as far as I know.”

I felt my brow ruffle. “Let me know if you come across anything, would you?” He nodded and went back to the computer I had tasked him with.

“Where’s Libby now?” I asked.

He gave me an irritated glare.

“Do you want this thing done or not?”

I waved for him to get back to the work.

I was about to pop out my Circlet to find her when I heard her laugh from behind me. There she was in the dining area, sitting with Ta’ra and Raf. Lea and I joined them. I liked that the tent was mostly an open plan. Most non-critical areas were only separated with half walls. It made it easy to get a sense of what was happening.

“Hey, Jon! Did I manage to get in touch with you?” Libby asked as I sat down.

Ta’ra raised an eyebrow at the sentence.

“Yeah, apparently, you’ll be wearing your amber eyes for the rest of the day, right?” I tried not to sound unhappy about it.

She knew I was unhappy. She always knew. For me, it was like she was disconnected from her soul. It bothered me on a fundamental level I couldn’t fully articulate. I could especially not articulate it to her.

“I’ll try not to be too much of a disappointment,” she said the words in a friendly and playful tone, but I knew it was a jab at me. I accepted it.

Ta’ra distracted us from a very polite argument by being interested in us: “Your relationship must get really confusing at times.”

“Not really. When I’m synced, I have the memories of all my bodies. For me, bilocation is, normal.”

“I’m getting more coffee. Anyone else want one?” Raf asked. He wasn’t particularly interested in the topic.

“Sure,” I said.

Lea was drinking from the bottle of brown liquid she had liberated from the office.

“What about for you?” Ta’ra asked.

I wanted to give her question an honest answer, but I hadn’t quite figured it out myself. “At first, I couldn’t help but think of amber eyes and green eyes as different people. But I think that’s just something to do with humans and our tendency to think of everything in human terms. I try not to consider it,” I replied, almost as an apology to Libby.

I was pleased that the Traffic-Life-Chip system of AI eyes was well known enough that my words didn’t need explaining.

“Yeah. Humans are fascinating. You guys even have a word for projecting your own values and feelings onto non-humans, right?” Ta’ra asked.

“The curse of anthropomorphism,” I replied, impressed that I pronounced it without the customary thinking time that accompanied the word.

Raf passed me a coffee. I drank from it the moment it was in my hand. He smiled. “That’s too hot to drink, Jon. You have to be better than that at keeping your secrets.”

I swallowed another sip. “Whatever do you mean?” I asked.

“I explained you’re Bio-stasis to them,” Libby said.

“Oh, that. It’s not really a secret, not really. I’m told it’s better to keep the details behind a higher security level, is all.”

“I knew that there were Bio-static humans out there. Doctor Ka’ona Michaels, your granddaughter, I believe.” I nodded, he continued: “She published a great many papers on the topic, but never named her subjects.”

“Well, as it happens, her subject was herself, her mother, and me.” I drank more of the coffee that was too hot for humans, as if it were a demonstration.

“It’s not all fun and games,” Lea interjected.

“How so?” Ta’ra asked.

“He can’t get drunk!” she said, passing Raf her brown bottle. He sniffed it and passed it back.

Libby laughed. “He also eats like a small town, forgets to breathe if he’s distracted and never knows when he should take off his jacket,” Libby’s words were scornful, but warm. We held hands across the table; the tension from a few moments before was gone.

“Does the lifespan perk make you feel disconnected from other humans?” Raf asked.

The question was like a poker to my mind. It was one of those moments of unravelling thoughts. “Honestly, other than David over there, I don’t really know any other humans.”

I hadn’t really thought about it before. Humans; their lifespans were finite. They would all die. All races expected that eventually they would face death. Vampires were known to reach a sort of expiring mindset about a thousand years into their lives, most would traditionally fly a shuttle into the sun when they tired of life.

Bricks were an excitable bunch. Eventually they got into some misadventure averaging out at just shy of two thousand years, from the reports I had read.

Thinkers would merge with another, forming a new entity every few hundred years. It was birth, death *and* marriage to them.

Elves liked to retire to religious sects after about six hundred years. Then at some point they would reach enlightenment and simply stop being alive, usually before the thousand-year mark.

All of these so-called Elder races either died an accidental death or, more commonly, got tired of life and willingly let go of it. There was no biological reason that they couldn’t live forever. Some of the older beings in the universe were many tens of thousands of years old.

For humans, though, it was not their choice. Time would hunt them and pull them down and they would be gone, sometimes kicking and screaming. They never lived long enough to know why they should feel gratitude. I had the option to face this head on: I was one of only three of my kind. We would all face oblivion one day, and perhaps we would face it with open arms.

“Jon!” I heard Raf say.

I shook off the trance of thoughts I had fallen into. Ta’ra and Raf both looked worried. Libby was just gently smirking and enjoying their confusion. Lea had apparently left at some point.

“What happened?” Ta’ra asked.

“Err,” I started.

Libby came to my rescue: “We’re not sure if it’s a family trait or a Bio-static side effect, to be honest. Sometimes they just fall into a little hole of their own thoughts. Jon is far more prone to it than Kay or Jo, but they all do it to one extent or another.”

Raf decreed that my tendency to ‘fall into a hole’ was fascinating. He wanted my permission to scan me the next time he observed it. I nodded. I was always happy to get scanned. It was becoming a hobby.

“Speaking of scans...”

“Ah yes.” Raf began. “I did message you my findings.”

I thanked him.

“Okay, breaks over. Time for the stairs,” Libby said.

“Stairs?” I asked.

“We have located a blueprint of the facility. All the way at the bottom, north-most corridor, is the generator control room. Now that I have an exact location for the power systems, I measured it against the dampening field fluctuations. I’m pretty sure it’s generated from there.”

“And why am I coming?” I asked.

“You, me, David and Zal,” she replied.

“Why?”

“David and I are going to do our computer stuff; Zal won’t let us go anywhere new without a guard, and *you* are needed for the dangerous bit.”

“Dangerous bit?”

“We have a lot of data coming in right now from all the stuff being catalogued. It seems they may be using some insane radioactive fusion-based power system down there.”

I looked blankly in return. *She sighed.*

“If it’s ruptured from lack of maintenance, I’ll need a Bio-static to go and fix it. It would mess up my body’s processing core. No one else on the project is immune to radiation.”

That seemed like a compelling reason to go.

“Okay, let me just grab some snacks,” I said, and headed for the seemingly endless buffet.

Chapter Twenty-four

Depths

“Adults don’t keep chicken in their pockets, Jon,” Libby chastised as we slogged down the stairs.

I didn’t care. I liked chicken. As it happens, it’s very portable.

Zal had brought two of his guards with him. They had tried to keep up with Libby and me but eventually fell a little way back with David.

I enjoyed chatting with Libby as we walked down the endless stairwell. I told her about the lab Lea and I had found. David was loudly complaining from behind us. I offered him chicken, but he seemed to feel the same way about pocket chicken as Libby did.

When we were far enough ahead, I talked with her about the ID we found on the corpse.

“Does that mean anything? I mean, is *this* one not the real one?” she asked.

“I think it’s more likely it’s an insane coincidence that he worked here in that timeline and apparently stayed until the bitter end.” I thought about it some more. “That said, apparently so did I, so who knows, maybe we’re all drawn here somehow.”

“You going to tell him?”

“Eventually. He deserves to know.”

We made it to the bottom. Even though technically, we had only gone down a handful of levels more than the previous time, the last floor was separated from the one above by a lu-

dicrous number of steps. Whatever this generator was doing, it required a lot of space to do it. Maybe it would be smarter to get someone to take a look at those elevators.

Libby slowed for a moment.

“Problem?” I asked.

“The dampening field is intense here. I can actually feel it effecting my cognitive abilities.”

“Are you okay?” I was concerned.

David tapped into his energy reserves and jogged down the few last steps to get close enough to scan her. After a few seconds, he concluded: “That’s really interesting.” There was little else in the way of explanation. Both Libby and I glared at him.

“The field is on a frequency that is literally identical to your own mental cycle rate.” We glared again.

“It’s having the effect of muddying your signal processing. It’s complicated. I’ll send you the scans as soon as we’re back online, but your internal processing ability has been slowed by five hundred percent, or there, about. Your thinking speed is ballpark the same as a human right now.” He was enjoying this.

“I think Jon may be smarter than you right now,” he added.

“I may have a slower brain right now, but I still have perfect recall, a massive database and two fully powered energy blasters built into my arms,” Libby said, wiggling her fingers to illustrate.

He was suddenly less smug.

“Is it dangerous?” I asked.

“No, it’s just proximity to the dampening field. Once it’s off, she’ll be fine.”

The security team and David had to take a minute to recover.

“How do humans live like this?” Libby asked, rubbing her eyes.

“Like what?” I asked.

“I have to shift my attention constantly just to know what’s around me.”

“You get used to it. Also, we usually don’t worry too much about what’s around, as long as it’s not moving or making a noise.”

She rolled her eyes. Her lack of cognitive resources made her grumpy. “What a wonderful filter evolution has equipped you with. If something can’t kill you, it’s invisible?”

I nodded in agreement. “Seems about right.”

She forced out a smile.

We headed past all the pipes and controls to the back of the corridor. It opened up into a large room. It looked more like modern art than a power station. A room filled with pipes and access panels. There were computer stations and analogue pressure valves decorating most areas. Zal and his two guards fanned out, guns ready, sweeping the area in front of us.

“The control room should be that shell at the back,” David said, consulting the map he had downloaded onto his Cirplet.

Zal headed over there, sweeping his gun around and exchanging glances with his guards.

“Clear,” he declared.

The office was on a raised platform and was made from an old shipping container. Half of the height had been removed to make room for a long window. It looked rather retro, even by the standard of the facility. I assumed this was the kind of thing you didn’t mess with unless you had to.

Inside were consoles, no really full computers; things that were designed for single uses with dials and moulded keyboards. There was one more traditional computer set up and running on the desk closer to the middle of the back wall. Libby and David headed right over to it. Zal’s two men guarded each side of the door. I wasn’t sure where Zal had

gone. His two guards, like the rest of the security team, never really spoke. They seemed friendly enough, but they were all business. The profession probably required that; or maybe the fact I would be reporting directly to the Vice President kept them on their 'A game.'

I sat down on one of the stools at the back and looked around, taking in the sights. There was a large speaker in the corner. Near the door, multiple pairs of ear protectors hung on wall hooks.

"Libby, David: shouldn't this place be louder?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Libby asked.

"This place uses all these pipes for something, right? Cooling, I guess. The lights are all on, so how is it operating so quietly?"

They turned to me with quizzical expressions.

"That's a good point. I'm sure I was supposed to think of that." Libby was still annoyed by her current limitations.

She looked around the controls. "Ah," she said, and slapped a big blue button. A large section of the wall next to us slid away to reveal a thick glass window. We peered out and down at what should have been some ancient power reaction chamber.

We froze with the sudden realisation of what we were seeing.

It was not a reaction chamber filled with science and power, but instead one single, large, and very modern power cell: a battery. The kind that was powering our own shield around the tent upstairs. One of the enormous ones. Wired into it was a very large and quite nefarious looking transmission unit.

Libby was the first to make sense of it.

"Shit!" was her instant and eloquent response. She spun around and raised her arms, eyes switching to a fierce red.

I pulled David down to the floor by the scruff of his neck.

"What!" he squeaked.

Two shots fired from Libby and about twenty, in rapid succession, returned.

“We need to leave now!” I barked at David as we crawled behind the console desks.

There was no way that battery could have been there unless someone had put it there; and recently. The reason the dampening field was so effective was because it was modern technology, not the ancient crap the facility was built on. If modern technology was down there, it meant someone wanted us to come. The only reason someone would want us there was for the *one* perk this place had over the rest of the facility: its effect on Libby.

“Do you have a shield?” I asked David.

“No? Why would I?” he called back over the gunfire.

A ball of hot plasma impacted the console above my head. I reached inside my jacket and pulled my little silver disc off my arm and slapped it on his.

“You’re welcome,” I said, and pushed him to move as another plasma round hit above us.

We crawled forward and found ourselves at the back corner of the room. David looked terrified. He held his legs in close. A scream from one of the security officers got cut off abruptly, and the shooting turned up a notch. I heard movement and the smell of burning flesh filled my nose. I heard Libby grunt and scream. Then there was silence.

There were cautious footsteps. I grabbed David’s shoulders and looked him in the eye. “This is going to go very wrong in a few seconds. Stay alive and retrieve Libby’s body; her memory needs to get synced back to her when Mercia comes. Okay?”

He was panicking.

I grabbed his face. “Memory. Libby. Got it?” I said.

He focused on me and nodded. The footsteps were getting less cautious now. If anything happened to me, then Libby would know to do something the moment she was reunited

with her memories; it also gave David something to focus on; something to help fight the panic off.

I stood up and saw Zal, looking like hell: there was blood on his lip and a cut on his face; his clothes were burned in patches and his eye was black. Sadly, though, other than a smouldering burn on his upper arm, he didn't seem to have anything seriously wrong with him. I assumed Libby had shot off his personal shield.

The other two guards were covering part of the large window by the door. There was too much blood to expect them to be alive. I looked at Libby: she had most of her chest missing and at least one arm was burned to molten metal. She turned her head towards me. Her forehead was dented and the skin was burned away. Her left cheek was hanging off and some wires under the sub-dermal armour were exposed, sparking; her eyes were a sorrowful orange. There was nothing in her dangerous enough to activate her red gaze, no matter how much she wanted to kill something. All I could do was look at her and try to remember, this wasn't *her*. She was on Mercia and safe.

"Where's doctor Atkinson?" Zal demanded.

"Died of fright. You know how cowardly the pretty ones are," I replied.

"Stand up and I'll shoot you in the heart. You can leave a good-looking corpse. Make me come find you and it'll be in the face." Zal's voice was grave and remorseless. This was no idle threat.

"David. Get up." I ordered. "No point delaying it."

To my surprise, he actually *did* stand up. He had found his bravery. I was oddly proud of him.

"Reasonable offer, Zal. I'll take it," he said.

"Was it?"

Zal shot David in the face with no hesitation. I knew from a conversation with Lea that personal shields were pretty good against energy weapons, but I wasn't sure if gas-plasma rounds

counted. I had only told him to stand up because I was pretty sure he would survive a chest shot.

I fought my instincts to check on him. I needed to shift the attention somewhere else; I didn't want Zal to have a reason to check if David was alive or not.

"Baaaz mup," Libby screamed, with an electric echo and a plume of smoke.

"No idea what you are trying to say, robot. Also not interested," Zal taunted.

"I think she called you a bastard," I said. She twitched as if trying to nod when I looked at her.

"I love you. Don't worry about me," I said. "They need me, for some reason."

Zal smiled grimly. "Yes. We do. But I assure you, the moment your task is finished, I'll personally cut your throat. *You fucking animal.*" The man before me matched his stature a lot better than his good soldier act did.

"What did I do to piss you off, then?" I asked.

"Killed my entire planet. But I'm sure you don't remember that. Now stop stalling and head out. We're taking the elevator up," he said as he pointed with his gun. I glanced back at Libby as I left. I knew this wasn't *really* Libby lying there. It was just one of her avatars. But at the same time, to me, it *was* her, in some way. I had a pang of sadness and rage. She opened her mouth, a static buzzing came out; then the words: "My love."

I stepped forward as Zal had instructed, and she went out of sight. I summoned a resolve inside me. There were things I needed to accomplish now.

Chapter Twenty-five

Cover

The elevator was already wedged open, waiting for us.

“You won’t get out of this facility. You know that?” I said, as I was prodded in the back with the barrel of his pistol.

“I ordered my people to clean the facility ten minutes after we went out of range. I’m not overly concerned about our exit,” he said calmly. “Against the wall. Arms behind your back, Jon.”

“No! You can’t kill me, you already said that! Fuck you!”

He smiled. Without so much as a blink, he shot me in the lower left arm. I screamed. I hadn’t been shot before. It felt like the wound was on fire. I felt it sear away the nerves and the skin, and then nothing. My lower arm now had a round, burned hole in it. I fell against the wall, fighting back the pain, the panic, and the tears.

“That was the smallest setting, Jon. I can put a hole in you as big as I did in your robot without you actually dying, Jon.”

He kept saying my name, and each time he did, he stretched it out like it was a curse. He grabbed my arm with one huge hand and jammed a thumb in the wound. I screamed again. He smiled. With one arm, he threw me against the wall like a rag doll.

“Turn around,” he barked.

I did as I was told. My arm hurt enough that I couldn’t think straight. There was a great deal of things he could do to me short of death and I wasn’t even entirely sure he was that committed to bringing me in alive. I felt him put cuffs on me,

then spun me around. He slapped me with the back of his hand so hard I dropped to the floor. I recognised the cadence of his movement.

“What the fuck, Zal!”

He slapped me again. “I cannot express how much I would like to break you, Jon.” There it was again: he revelled in saying my name. He was reminding me how he was in complete control. “I literally don’t have the words for how much of a fucking monster you are.”

I stood up again but stayed quiet this time. The elevator began to move.

We were far down enough that it would take at least a couple of minutes to get to the top. I thought about my arm. I thought I could see the bone when I had first looked at it. It was behind my back now, burning and raw. Given how hot plasma-rounds were, raw probably wasn’t the right word. It was the heat that had stopped me from bleeding out. It would have seared the wound and literally cooked the edges of the hole.

The pain was making my mind fuzzy. I had to disregard it and push for the underlying intelligent thought I was having, because the only things loud enough to hear in my head was fear, pain, and the certainty that I was totally fucked.

“It was you behind the avatar on the Correctionist ship, wasn’t it?” I asked. There was something in the way he revelled in hitting me that was familiar.

“Obviously,” he replied with a grin.

When the doors opened, we were in the corridor that led out into the main hangar. Zal grabbed me and threw me out in front of him; I stumbled and pulled my arm, which made me scream.

I looked ahead: everything seemed okay. No gunshot sounds, no screaming. The lights were still on. Maybe everyone was okay. I walked forward, almost jogging to see what had happened. Zal let me go out ahead. He was casually

strolling behind me. As I stumbled out into the main hangar, I was then hit square on the face by the butt of a rifle.

A rifle butt across the chin will kick almost anyone on their arse without fail. When you don't see it coming, it lifts you off your feet and when you have your hands shackled behind you; the fall fucking hurts. When you have a hole in one of your arms, the pain is too much.

The moment I hit the floor, I lost consciousness.

I wasn't sure if it was a dream or a memory that flooded my soul. I was looking out over a sea of squares, like a city from high above; the glow from the streets below was the only source of light. It seemed to stretch out forever. There was a shift of feeling and emotion. I was aware of the silence that defined this place and the pressure that filled it. Something was happening. I stretched out a hand as if I was reaching for the world itself and it rippled the boxes that were the buildings bobbing up and down as though they were built on the ocean. The cubes changed: they were old, new, tall, small, sparse, and dense. Then they were purple and blue and then they were Central Prime, a city I knew.

I was looking down on a world I had seen before. The city erupted from the centre and from it came a mountain of light that threw the cubes and the purple glow aside. The light exploded towards space: a beacon of pure white glory that went on forever. I looked back down at the city and the base of the light shimmered. Then, in the space between thoughts, it expanded, and my little city was ripped away and turned to sparkling dust.

I was in a place of white now: I was in Libby's white home. The one that only existed in her mind. I looked around for her, accepting that I was dead. This place was my final thought.

Then I heard her voice, pure and crisp and as beautiful as it had ever been. *"I'm coming for you, Jon."*

The light left; a circle of black grew from me in every direction and then there was a slow oblivion. Another voice spoke in the darkness.

This was an ineffable voice now, a woman from an earlier memory, a time that I knew I shouldn't remember:

"I'm here for you, Jon."

I opened my eyes. It took me a moment to realise I wasn't on the floor. I was in the medical room and my head hurt. I sat up. My hands were still bound, but this time around the front. There was a bandage over my arm, though it hurt enough that I was sure little else had been done with it. There was no clue as to how long I had been out. I flicked my wrist, only to realise that my Circlet was gone. I don't know why I was surprised; it would have been an ineffective kidnapping if I still had it.

I was more than a little disturbed to find that the corpse we had found was still there. I jumped when I saw it. The slight green tint of the bio-field glistened in the low light. That was when I realised that I had been out for a while. It was dark. I looked up at the semi-transparent roof of the tent. It was dark. The slight blue tint of the shield above was the only light coming in. I stood up, a little woozy.

"I'm looking as bad as you, David," I said to the corpse.

I walked to the door and put an ear against it. Nothing. I opened it and stepped out, trying to look as healthy as possible as I walked out and into the large open area of the tent. There was a pile of bodies on the Fold platform. A flash, and they were gone. One of the security people looked up and half snarled at me.

"They're not *all* dead yet," came a voice.

I turned: there was Zal leaning against the wall. He must have been waiting for me to come out.

“Left some alive as collateral, did you?” I asked.

“Oh, no. Not at all. We kept a Vampire, an Elf and we’re still on the lookout for a Brick. Once you help to fix the timeline, they will be all that’s left of their kind.”

My brain was racing. The only Vampire and Elf were Ta’ra and Raf; that was good news. If they were still looking for a Brick, then Lea was still free. I was hurt that so many others had been violently killed, but the people I had bonded with seemed to be all alive. This was *something*, at least.

I felt a wave of guilt for thinking like this.

“If killing the freak’s that you call friends can convince you to do as you are required, I’m happy to do so. If it gets the job done, I will, but I really would rather dissect them later instead,” he grinned.

I turned to glare at him. “And Omi?” I asked.

“The tree?” he raised an eyebrow. “Thinkers are too dangerous to be allowed to stay alive. We burned it, used the dampening field to keep it inside its body while it turned to ashes. Only takes about twenty minutes for the energy to fade away once the host is gone.”

I felt a pang of anger that ran deep.

Zal smiled. He liked that he had hurt me. He had killed almost twenty people to make me react like this. He was going to kill more if he could. I was starting to wish I had a better idea of why he hated me so much.

A shiver went down my spine. He pulled something from his pocket: a pack of cigarettes. He lit one up and just studied me. *Was he waiting for me to break?*

I wanted nothing more than to sit on the floor and cry until my soul was dry, but some of my friends were still alive and Mercia would be back in orbit soon. There was no way Libby wouldn’t come for us, for me.

I let a resolve take hold. Somehow, Zal could tell.

“Let’s go out front, Jon. Our ride is almost here.” He flicked the ash from his cigarette. It smelled terrible: reminded me of being on that spy ship around the Central sun. I ambled to the front of the tent. He didn’t seem to be in any rush. There was blood across the buffet and pieces of someone on the tables. There was little left of David’s work area. Someone had taken a plasma rifle to all of his notes and computers. I looked at the large door in front of me as it slid open, I steeled myself for what I would find outside.

I was blinded by a light, and for a moment I thought I had passed out again. It was the flood-lights in the front area, the area where the security team’s big black ground-shuttle was, and where Thirteen was parked. The massive large shield that I was so pleased when erected now looked like a prison, separating us from the safety and peace of Victoria city, the utopia that was Earth. It was the dome that now held that salvation at bay.

The ground-shuttle wasn’t facing the tent anymore: it was turned around and facing the road. Its large back section was open. It didn’t look like Sol technology inside, not at all. It was raw and had dials, levers and a lots of screens. It was the same technology that the Correctionists had used.

At least it confirmed to me who they were.

The most concerning thing was a massive twin-gun turret that had been raised out of the roof. It looked large enough to take a shuttle out of the sky.

Thirteen was still parked in the same place, though it had a lot of burn marks across its front. Someone had sprayed a circle with an ‘x’ in the middle, across its main window. They had been using it as target practice.

Zal prodded me in the back again. I took a few more steps. “Jon!” came a familiar voice.

There were Raf and Ta’ra, cuffed in the same way I was, only they were also chained to a crate. Zal casually walked me

over to them and within a moment, I had my own chain-leash, along with them.

“Say goodbye to this fucking horror show of a planet. Shuttle coming for us any second.” With that he turned to leave. “Oh, and to be clear. Not to labour the point or anything, Jon: I can’t kill you. That’s why I have *them*. You step out of line and I’ll kill them slow. It’ll be on you.”

He left.

“Are you two okay?” I asked.

Ta’ra had a bruised face and a ripped jacket. Raf looked like he was having some trouble standing, leaning against the crate.

“We’re better than most. What happened to Libby and David?” Ta’ra asked.

I considered my answer; considered that they may have been listening in on us.

“Libby’s body was destroyed. David was shot.” I left out the part where I thought there was a chance he was still alive. I wasn’t sure, but there was a good chance.

“Anyone else left from your teams?” I asked.

Ta’ra looked down.

Raf shook his head. “A few minutes after you left, they just started shooting. Those who died right away were the lucky ones. The rest were beaten to death. They enjoyed it.” He started sobbing. “They fucking enjoyed it.”

Something inside me was burning. It was like an echo of the old me. The me that Libby had told me about: he was there, inside me, and he was not going to let me die. *He* would have been able to save them. Zal wouldn’t have fooled him for a moment. The burning echo of myself was furious that I was the one driving.

I wished he was more than an echo because right then I needed him.

Chapter Twenty-six

In the unknown

We stood in silence. There was nothing left for us to say. Many people had died in service of getting to me. Those two good people were only here to be tools, to ensure my cooperation. I was ashamed and that little part of me burned again.

Zal and his people had all gone into the big black ground shuttle. A guard was leaning against Thirteen, staring at us. His hand had been on the trigger the whole time. He was *hoping* we would try something.

“Ta’ra, can you break your chains?” I asked quietly. Vampires were stronger than Humans, or Elves.

“I tried. I’m strong, but no. They saw me straining; that’s how I got the bruises on my face.”

I nodded at her, apologetically.

“Raf, any Elf superpowers that no one bothered telling me about?”

He shook his head. “They’ve thought of everything. I think they have been planning this for a long time.”

“What about you?” Ta’ra asked.

“Libby is usually my secret weapon. I’m sorry.”

We heard a sound in the distance and looked up and into the blue tinted night sky. The shield made it hard to see, but there was definitely something up there: a shuttle coming. It sounded like a big-one too. Zal came out of his ground shuttle. “Okay, people, get your shit ready. It’s go time.”

His people started to move. Their shuttle was approaching fast.

We heard an explosion in the direction of the tent. A streak of blue and red shot out from behind it.

“The rocket ship?” I asked aloud.

“It’s the right direction,” Ta’ra replied.

The large turret on top of the ground-shuttle spun and fired twice in rapid succession. Two large purple plasma bolts streaked after the rocket ship.

“What are you doing?” Zal screamed. “You fucking idiots!”

He ran back into the ground-shuttle and a moment later we heard shouting. Our eyes were fixed on the rocket ship. The purple streaks intercepted it and we watched it explode into a ball of red and orange, with the occasional fleck of blue. It rained down like a firework that had burned out. The whole thing couldn’t have lasted more than a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity.

“Lea,” I whispered to myself. She must have been inside.

“Yes?” came a voice from behind me.

“Lea!” I exclaimed, catching my voice before it erupted into a shout.

“Shhh! I fired the rocket by remote. This place will be knee deep in police drones any second.”

She pulled a tool from her pocket and with three zaps she broke the shackles we were wearing. “Get to Thirteen. It’s ready to go.”

We all turned to run.

Raf stumbled. “Go without me,” he demanded, in a whispered shout of pain. “Go!”

Ta’ra ignored his words and supported him; throwing his arm over her shoulder.

“Can you fly a shuttle?” Lea asked. Tara nodded. “I’ll buy you some time,” she said, pulling a gun from her belt. “Now you go!” she demanded to us.

Raf and Ta’ra started moving. I stood my ground behind her. There was no way I was leaving.

The shuttle was coming in close now; we could see its blue breaking jets fire in the darkness. Ta'ra and Raf were covering the ground fast. I glanced towards where our guard had been: a mound on the floor. Lea had already taken care of that problem.

Zal and his people came out of their shuttle; at least one of them had been beaten pretty badly. I saw Lea's wrist tilt as she lined up a shot. Zal looked over at us, then at Thirteen. It only took him a glance to realise what was happening.

Lea's wrist twitched one more time as she fired. Zal's body lit up with blue sparkles. He had already replaced his personal shield. Lea fired again. Zal stumbled back as the shot made his head glow bright blue.

"Fuck you, Zal," she screamed, firing again.

The sky blinked black as the shield was lowered and the shuttle behind us came in to land. I turned to see a large triangle silhouette of a police drone edged with red and blue neon following the shuttle as it came to rest. The shield blinked on again. The ground shuttle's gun fired at the drone. Zal fired at Lea.

I pulled her down as I saw him take aim. Lea's arms swung as she fell, the shot crossing where her head would have been just a moment before.

"Jon! You're still here!" she exclaimed with an edge of rage.

"Just give me a gun," I replied.

She reached inside her jacket and pulled out a pistol, like the one Zal's people had. "Stay alive!" she ordered and stood up to shoot.

I glanced over to Thirteen: the door was open. It was dark, but Ta'ra and Raf must have been going inside. They were at least a little safer than us. Lea crouched back down to wait for her gun to cool off. Plasma bolts impacted the top of the metal crate that we were hiding behind. The large cannon on the ground-shuttle fired once more and we heard an explosion. The drone was then dust falling in the air.

The gun fired again: it was firing through the shield. There were more drones arriving and beginning an assault.

“Plan?” I asked Lea as she reached over and flicked the safety off on my gun.

“Stay alive until the drones get in,” she said with a shrug.

There would be an effectively limitless number of drones as well as police shuttles on the way to us. I stood up and took some badly aimed pot shots before crouching again.

“Aim, *then* shoot” Lea instructed.

“Well, that *was* the first time I fired a gun!”

She shook her head in disappointment. Much like Libby, she enjoyed the danger of these situations. I think I did too, but I didn’t have the training or skill to back up the excitement.

A shot fired at our feet. Not from Zal’s direction, but from behind. The shuttle that had landed. We hadn’t been paying attention to it in all the gunfire. It had a single gun housed under its large, curved front and it was glowing red. By the time we had worked out what was going on, it had lit up on its two sleek wings, showing us a gun on the tip of each. The message was clear.

“Are you finished?” Zal called out.

“Are we?” I asked Lea.

I shrugged at her and shouted “Okay, we give up!” over our crate.

She put her gun on top of the crate. I did the same. We stood, slowly, with hands in the air.

Thirteen roared to life and lifted off the ground. Zal didn’t even glance at it. It raised shakily to the top of the shield. Sparks lit as it tried to escape.

The shield flickered.

Zal was still looking at us. He said something we couldn’t hear and two of his people walked out of the ground shuttle and cuffed us. We didn’t try to stop them. Our hands were bound behind us. I winced.

Thirteen clashed with the shield again.

“You don’t have enough power output to keep this up, Zal,” Lea shouted at him.

The hatch on the shuttle behind us began to open. Zal walked past us without so much as a glance.

“Come,” he said as he entered it. His people poked us in the back with rifles, we followed him.

“Go,” Zal barked.

The hatch closed.

We felt the shuttle lift before the door was even sealed. Inside, the shuttle looked ancient. Its controls were analogue dials and flip switches. From the outside, it had looked as advanced as any other ship. The guards slammed Lea and me into flight seats behind Zal and the pilot. They then sat behind us on bench seats, with their guns ready.

“Do it,” Zal said into his Circlet.

Through the window, we saw the shield blink off. The now fifty or so drones flooded in and were illuminated by the guns below. We could see Thirteen in front of us: its engines looked like they were charging for a rapid acceleration.

“For fuck’s sake, Ta’ra, go!” Lea muttered.

We watched as the drones converged around Thirteen and began to fire on it.

“What?” Lea exclaimed. “What’s happening! Why are they firing on them?”

She tried to stand, but the guard behind her stood up and slammed her into her seat again with a smack. He slapped her with the back of his hand and sat back down without a word. Lea didn’t make a sound. We watched as Thirteen was overwhelmed by drones and the shuttle we were in lifted without obstruction.

After a few seconds more, our nose tilted up and the jets fired. We were space bound. The ship may have looked ar-

chaic inside, but it was using modern engines. Zal unbuttoned his jacket and rested back in his chair. He was relaxed.

I felt a tear roll down my cheek. Ta'ra and Raf gone, along with Thirteen. I wasn't certain they were dead, but they had dropped from quite a height.

There was a good chance we weren't getting out of this one.

"What happened?" I asked, with my eyes closed, pushing back the feelings.

"We had a technician on Mercia fit a custom ID-transceiver to your shuttle. I swapped our ID codes as we exited the shield. Drones thought they were attacking us; while, as far as they know, Thirteen is flying to safety."

Lea looked down at her lap. It wasn't sadness that overwhelmed her though; it was the fight that she was pushing down. The rage was almost enough to make her twitch.

"That technician kid who got my name wrong!" she seethed.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Zal glanced back at me. "Thinker space."

Lea's brow furrowed in response. "Thinkers don't like visitors in their territory."

A light flooded into the cockpit and our shuttle lit with a red-blue glow that seemed to streak to a halt in front of us. Zal's demeanour changed almost instantly.

It was Mercia: the biggest and best battleship in the galaxy was drawing a line in front of a single little shuttle. Salvation had arrived.

"They're early. Get us out of here. Now!" Zal barked to his pilot.

The pilot flipped some switches and pulled on the stick in front of him. As the ship changed its path, we were able to see the glorious visage of Mercia as, shields lit, and guns primed.

A beeping filled the cockpit.

Zal flipped a switch and an unfamiliar voice filled the air:

“This is Captain Curtis of the Sol ship Mercia. Come to a complete stop and prepare to be guided to a docking bay immediately.”

I hadn’t had the pleasure of meeting the man in charge of Mercia, but I was impressed with his delivery.

“On who’s authority?” Zal asked.

“Come to a complete stop or I will fire on you.”

“It’s a simple question,” Zal snarled.

He gestured for his pilot to get a move on. He was typing something on his console as fast as he could.

He was stalling.

“The authority of the Sol Alliance and the orders of the President himself. I have guns trained on you and am quite willing to take action to prevent your escape.”

“Impressive! This is Zal with the authority of the one true Earth... and I think you have bigger things to worry about.”

He pressed a couple more buttons on the controls and we watched as the viewing window on the side of Mercia blew out into space. It was silent and terrifying. The shards of glass smashed against the inside of the energy shield and for a brief moment I could have sworn I saw people float into space.

Lea and I watched in horror as the powered engine panels erupted into brief flames and the lights blinked off across the entire ship.

“Thank you for your time captain, you are dismissed,” Zal said, and pressed another button.

Mercia’s TD-drive engaged, and moments later it vanished back the way it had come, in a rainbow of shifting colours. Mercia was gone. Zal had slapped it away with the same ease he had slapped me.

“Earth is launching ships,” the pilot said, calmly.

“We should have a clear path to the warp point. Burn all the fuel you need.”

The shuttle jolted; all engines fired.

“You can’t take a shuttle through a warp. It’s suicide!” Lea said.

Zal turned around in his chair to look at her. “Oh? And what exactly about all this leads you to believe that I don’t know what I’m doing?”

She had no answer.

His eyes were cold. He gave me a quick glance before turning back to his console.

Lea and I were silent for a while as the ship’s gravity evened out from its acceleration.

“How long to get to wherever we’re going?” I asked loudly. They ignored me. “Can Earth’s ships catch us?” I asked Lea.

“Not before we hit the warp. Unless there’s something with a TD-drive in orbit. There are not many of those, so it’s unlikely.”

“I assure you: we’re getting to our destination without any more interruptions,” Zal said. “Oh, and I need Jon to perform some tasks for me. The only reason you are alive, Lea, is so I can hurt you when he refuses to assist me. You understand that, don’t you?”

We both nodded.

“I don’t matter. Don’t help him,” Lea said.

“Oh, shut up.” Zal’s tone was an irritated one. “Even if he does make a stand, how long do you think I have to cut, burn, beat, and degrade you before he breaks? Just save us all some effort and do as you’re told, Jon.”

I looked at Lea. I didn’t know what was expected of me, but I was concerned she would suffer if I wasn’t able to comply with them. She looked back and nodded with a stoic resolve. She was serious: she would suffer and even die, but she would never break.

I knew inside me that I would, no matter how much I didn’t want to; I would break for her without a moment’s resistance. I would break for any of them. I would not be the cause of their pain.

I would allow the universe to burn for my friends.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Void

We flew in silence for at least half an hour. I wondered how they had accomplished all of this: their planning; their people placed on Mercia; the distress call that had taken them out of orbit; the ID-transceiver on Thirteen; the way they had used the dampening field to lower Libby's capacity so she could be beaten in a gun fight. Zal really plan all of this perfectly.

"We're here," the pilot said, flicking switches and decelerating the shuttle.

Zal looked up from his console, pressed some buttons, and twisted some arcane dials. "Zal to Traveller. We're here. Transmitting codes."

He typed out something on the console's physical keyboard. A large ship seemed to appear out of nowhere; it wasn't anywhere near as large as Mercia, but it was still massive compared to our tiny shuttle. It appeared before our very eyes from empty space.

"How is it doing that?" I asked.

"It's coming out of a warp," Lea said with shock. "But there isn't a warp this close to earth."

She looked confused. She had been watching the controls like a hawk since we had taken off. She knew exactly where we were. As the back of the ship appeared, we could see it in all its glory. It was a large cylinder with lights all around it. Shimmering white lights pulsed down its length, its face held a series of holes that looked like docking bays. It was ugly and long, like a naked barrel of a massive revolver.

We could see lines of energy lighting up the circular warp behind it. "That's not possible," Lea said, rising to stand.

The guard behind her shoved her back in her seat. I had forgotten they were there.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"That ship, it's generating its own Warp! But that's not possible!"

Zal let out a laugh. "It's not possible for *you*. I know how arrogant you all are, but I assure you, this isn't the most advanced iteration of reality."

And there it was, again; the words I was so curious about: 'Iteration'

We slowly entered one of the holes in the front of the massive cylinder.

"We're in," Zal said to his console.

Someone on the other end acknowledged him.

The inside of this ship was the opposite way up. The shuttle flipped over to align itself with the outer wall. The place was built with the outer wall being 'down'; whereas Mercia was built top to bottom, with everything being the same orientation, this place treated its hull as the floor. Gravity took hold as we got close and suddenly it felt like the correct direction for the floor to be in. The docking area was packed with identical small ships. Even to my untrained eye, they were obviously fighters.

We came to a less than expert landing a few moments later.

They marched us at gun point through the landing area. It was huge and open. I could actually see the curvature of the floor as I looked across it. My eyes followed the arching shape; I almost tripped backwards as I realised I could see all the way around the ship. Directly above me was someone else's 'down', with ships landed and people walking around feeling

like I was above them. It was all made worse by the scope of it. Those people above me were so far away that I could barely make them out. There was a large tube of light affixed to a central beam that glowed down in every direction, like a sun. I shielded my eyes.

Mercia felt like a large, well-organised city. I never felt like space was just outside. In this ship, the rumbling of the engines and the strange geometry promised to never let me forget it.

There were surprisingly few people in this hangar ring. Zal walked in front of us. The few technicians and mechanics we passed looked at him like a returning legend, then at Lea and me like monsters incarnate.

We were piled into a little transport truck that had wheels and an electric engine. I had been in this situation before, but that time Libby had already been formulating a plan. This time, my captors were far more competent. The truck drove us for a few minutes down the length of the ship. We turned into a tunnel. With a ceiling above us, I was less aware of the curvature; it felt somehow more natural. We went up a long ramp and stopped in an open area with doors across each wall. Zal's men opened the closest door. We got out of the little truck and started towards our cell.

Zal stepped towards us.

I flinched, which I was instantly ashamed of doing. He used a small device and my cuffs came off; then he did the same to Lea, who did not flinch. We were pushed into the cell and the door was closed behind us.

The cell had grey metallic walls with wide benches across them. We stood in the middle of the room, trying to acclimatise. A red scanning light shot out of the ceiling and quickly took stock of us, then blinked off with a clunk sound.

I took off my jacked, rolled it up and placed it on the bench like a pillow, then I lay down on my back and closed my eyes.

“What are you doing?” Lea asked.

“I’ve been beaten and shot. Under this bandage there is quite literally a hole in my arm. You can see right through it. So, Lea, I’m lying down and closing my eyes until Mercia comes to rescue us.”

I was refusing to open my eyes again. I would not face reality.

“Jon, Mercia had its sub-light engines blown off, there’s a hole where the observation window was. Zal activated its TD-Drive with no location set. Assuming they even know where they are when they stop, it could take them months to repair that damage out in deep space... And that’s assuming other systems weren’t damaged as well.”

Lea sounded desperate. I still refused to open my eyes. If I was honest with myself, I think I had run out of hope. I was going to keep faking it because the alternative seemed like nihilism.

“Ba’an is on board. Earth will call in all its TD-capable ships and have them found in a few hours. Then, the entire fleet will come get us.”

“Jon, their communications may be down. Do you have any idea how big space is? We have no idea what their trajectory or end point was. They could be literally anywhere.”

I heard Lea lie down on her own side of the room.

“Libby will think of something.”

“The lights went off before it activated its TD-Drive. Libby may be off-line,” she said, with a defeated crack in her voice.

“Off-line?”

My eyes opened.

“Uh-huh” she replied.

“She can be powered up again, though, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, as soon as they get their power systems back up and running,” she said.

I sat up.

She glanced over at me. “Also, if this ship can *really* generate its own Warps, then we could be in totally uncharted space in a matter of moments. They won’t find us, Jon. It’s not possible.” She was softly banging her head against the metal bench she was lying on.

It had been a while since I had endured a memory flooding me, since I had been whisked away to somewhere else by a smell, a sight or a word. Something about the gentle sound of Lea’s head rhythmically tapping against the metal of the bench triggered something inside of me.

The memory took hold.

I was in my lab; the one in the facility, not *my* lab on Mercia. I was older, not by a lot.

“You know this is the only way,” came the woman’s voice.

It wasn’t Libby, as I had expected.

The woman walked in, wearing long grey robes. Her hair was black and shiny. Her complexion was tanned and her eyes were pure white.

“After Joanne died, you said you wouldn’t have these doubts again,” she said, tapping the desk in the familiar rhythm I had heard before.

The pang of my fear and guilt hit me. Was this too part of the memory?

“I know. You’re right, of course,” I replied, not really believing my own words.

The woman in the robes walked over to me and kissed me. I looked into her white eyes and the memory filled me with warmth.

“I wish you weren’t the only person who could use it, Ay-gah,” I said.

Aygah. There was a name I recognised. How was she here, in this memory.

She smiled and rubbed her nose on mine.

“You’re the only one who could build it, it makes sense for me to be the only one who can use it. Besides, Gower is gone, and he was the only other who would have been able to even try.”

The memory cast a sadness over me, but it was accompanied by hope and guilt and a million other echoes of feelings that filled him — me.

“I love you, Aygah,” I said with the same endless sincerity that I would usually reserve only for Libby’s ears.

“I know... My love.”

The memory raced forward. I was in a more technical lab now. I glanced out of the window and saw a storm raging across a mountain range. The mountains were grey and lifeless. The storm shot flashes of electric white across the sky illuminating everything in a roll of neon tinted static. It almost looked like an old black and white horror movie out there.

The lights in the room flickered and as they did, my eyes were drawn to a large device floating in the middle of the room. It was *the* device. The artefact I had seen in the video of my accident. This was the key to it all.

Was it found? No; this was before it was lost. But it was different. It was open. I stepped closer. I could see a soft base and a padded rest for the head. This wasn’t a weapon at all, it was a coffin.

The memory pushed forward again. The room was filled with people, all in white uniforms. They were performing tasks I didn’t understand, with implements that I couldn’t make out through the haze of the memory. The version of me I was seeing through this memory understood it all. He understood every single thing that was in that room like it was his own mind. There was a light above the coffin shining down on it like a spotlight. Its circuit-like veins lit with a white glow.

“Is it ready?” asked a voice.

I turned, there was Aygah again. This time her hair was tied tightly back. “Yes. We can begin whenever you want.”

She walked over to the coffin and began to remove her robes. She was wearing a skin-tight white rubber-like suit underneath, much like the doctors in our world would wear. Her suit was made of two pieces, exposing her mid-section. Her skin had purple marks tracing her veins; they looked like electrical burns, but the memory told me they were some kind of biological technology. She was barefoot. Some of the people in white had taken her grey robes from her as if they were holy artefacts.

The rest stood silently, watching.

“It’s programmed? All the iterations?” she asked me, nervously.

“It’s been checked for every day of the last six years. We can’t plan it better,” I reassured.

I was older; I knew it. She wasn’t. She was the same as she was in the first memory. She stepped into the coffin and slid down into it. Her head rested perfectly on the pillow.

“Do we have the right to do this?” I asked, looking at her through older, wiser eyes.

“The people in this room are all that is left of humanity. We can’t make things worse. Now *do it, Jon*,” She said as smiled and looked at me for perhaps the last time.

I pressed a button on the side of the coffin and Aygah was frozen in place, her skin frosting over in mere moments. Her eyes turned from white to a vibrant glowing purple. I closed the lid on top of her.

“Goodbye,” I said, with feelings that were too deep for me to express.

I opened my eyes to see Lea's concerned face. I was lying on the floor and my head was in her lap. I blinked.

"Jon? You back with me?" she asked. She had tears in her eyes.

"Yeah, I think so." I sat up. "What did I miss?"

"You went quiet, then had some sort of seizure. You were shaking and twitching. You kept saying things I couldn't understand. Then you passed out," she said with charged emotions.

"How long?"

"An hour or so."

I stood up, a little woozy, which was becoming a standard for me at this point. I pressed my hand against the wall to stabilise myself and was quickly reminded of my arms injury, finding myself screaming and holding my limb.

"Jon!" Lea called in concern, catching me before I fell again. "Where did you go?" she asked.

"Memories came back."

"Which ones?"

"The first ones, I think."

"What does that mean?"

She sat me down on the bench.

"I literally can't explain. I don't even understand them myself, not yet." I stretched my good arm out; my shoulder ached.

"You stopped breathing," Lea said.

"Yeah, I do that." I smiled.

"When someone passes out *and* they don't need to breathe, it's hard to tell if they are still alive. I thought you might be dead for the last hour," she said through a face that was now filled with tears.

I felt horrible. My best friend was alone on a strange ship holding my corpse, as far as she knew; waiting for her own death to come at the hands of a lunatic. It was all my fault.

"Lea, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to..."

She cut me off: “You don’t have to apologise for a seizure, Jon.” She forced out a smile.

I nodded and hugged her from the side.

“It’s cold in here. Put your jacket back on,” she said.

She was resuming her duties as my bodyguard.

I did as I was told.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Nemesis

The door slid open and the slightly brighter corridor light made our room dim by comparison. “We’re ready for you now,” Zal said as a silhouette from the doorway.

I walked out into the corridor. Lea followed behind me. One of the guards used the barrel of a gun to block her.

“No. Let her come too,” Zal said.

The man relaxed. We weren’t cuffed this time. It was obvious we weren’t in control. There was no reason to restrain us. Everyone we saw was armed and looking for an excuse to have a pop at us.

The little truck took us quite some way. By my estimation, we had travelled the length of the ship. We were then pushed into a large elevator and taken upwards. The doors opened into a room with a large glass window: we were at the front of the ship and looking out into space. The floor of the room was polished wood, like an old dance floor.

The artefact — the coffin — was in the middle of the room, floating atop of a circular raised platform under a spotlight light. At the very front of the room was a group of armchairs. Zal walked to them and sat down.

“Feel free to take a seat. You *are* guests, after all.”

If that was true, then we were well guarded guests. There were two soldiers by the seats, four by the coffin and two at the elevator door. There also seemed to be weaponized cameras in the corners of the room. Zal, no doubt also had his personal shield active.

“Okay,” I said.

“What?” Lea replied.

“May as well get a drink while he reveals his evil plan,” I shrugged.

We each took an armchair.

“Good! More civilised than I expected,” Zal said.

Waiters came in with trolleys, one filled with coffee pots and cake, one with wine and spirits.

“So, tell me, Lea, how did you evade capture when we cleared out the facility?” Zal asked, as a waiter passed him a cup of coffee.

“I got drunk on something we found in a lab and passed out in Thirteen. My shuttle,” she said with a shrug.

A waiter tried to pass her a coffee, she waved him away. I assumed she was worried about poisons. Smart – Not something I had considered, not that it mattered to me.

“I thought you were in there. We needed someone to try to launch it anyway, so we left you be,” Zal snorted, pleased with himself.

“I’ll take the strongest thing you have,” I said to the waiter. He picked up a green bottle and a shot glass.

“I’ll just have the bottle.” I took it from him and twisted off the cap.

The waiters bowed and left, politely, leaving the trolleys.

“And you, Jon, when did you realise you had lost?” Zal asked.

“I’ll let you know when it happens.”

I took a large gulp of the green stuff.

Zal laughed at me.

“I brought you here for the show,” he said, gesturing to the window.

Three white beams shot out from beyond the window and slowly rotated on a single point ahead of the ship. The beams rotated around and around, gathering speed until all we could

see were the white lights they cast. In the centre, a black dot appeared and slowly grew larger — or was it closer?

It engulfed the ship.

We felt the engines push as we went through the hole. We emerged around a grey planet that from our vantage point looked totally covered in electrical storms.

“Thinker home world,” Lea said, astonished. “You *can* generate your own warps!” She stood and walked to the window.

“Yes. But not permanent ones. Only the device can make ones that sustain themselves. We can syphon off its energy to open them, but for just a moment,” Zal explained. I glanced back at the device, the coffin.

“But here?” Lea asked. “You can go anywhere in the universe, so why Thinker territory? They’ll send an entire fleet to bring you down, just for being here. They only let Vampire ships through their space.” She looked back from the window, awaiting an answer.

“Our ship’s energy field masks us from their senses, and sensors. They have no idea we’re here,” Zal said, as if it were obvious.

“We need to be here for the device to work to its fullest,” he said looking directly at me

“I think I’ve remembered most of it. But I’ll need you to fill in the blanks before I can operate it,” I said.

“What!” Lea exclaimed.

“Seems reasonable,” Zal replied. “What do you know so far?”

I began my monologue: “Humanity was the only immortal race. They ruled the galaxy with an iron fist; they really weren’t very nice about it. Then they were essentially wiped out when the other races forged an alliance. Took them a hundred years to take back the galaxy. There was a woman

with white eyes who had the ability to change reality. I can't quite remember the details of how it worked. I do know that I worked with her and created that thing." I pointed at the device.

"It used her abilities; amplified the effects. The plan was to use it to re-write the whole of reality to make humans the ultimate victors. But you can't make changes that big. You have to do it over and over, making alteration after alteration, creeping towards the version of the universe you want. Nuking and paving reality after reality until you get to the one you want."

I paused, waiting for Zal's correction. He liked to talk, so I didn't have to wait long.

"Humans were the only race with functional immortality, yes. Humans were the kings of the universe. They were eternal and powerful. The other races were as children, and humanity guided them." His already impressive chest puffed with pride as he spoke.

"But the children didn't appreciate their elders. They rebelled against the civilization humanity had brought to them. Killed almost all of us. Hunted humans down and exterminated the entire race. Earth fell." He took a deep breath.

"They couldn't do it alone, obviously. And there were no more space faring races in the galaxy. To beat humanity, they made a race of super soldiers. They combined a little of each of their DNA and made a perfect army of warriors: the power of a Vampire, the speed and acuity of an Elf, the physical perfection of a Brick and the stolen immortality of Humans. They called the race 'Blades.'" He snarled as he said that last bit.

"They were too effective. They were all linked together with some sort of energy field that no one was able to define. Every time one was killed, the remaining Blades became more powerful."

He poured himself a large glass of one of the spirits on the trolley. “Obviously, once humanity had been beaten, the alien alliance no longer needed the Blades. They used a genetic virus to wipe out all of them. It literally dissolved their bodies. Ironically, it started here, on this very planet below us.” He looked glassy eyed out of the window.

“The heroes of humanity saved one Blade: a woman who had turned on her creators and fought for what was right.” He was suddenly emotional about it.

“Aygah,” I interrupted.

“Yes,” he nodded and clapped his leg in excitement.

Lea looked at me, stunned. She recognised that name. “Jo’s mother?” she confirmed.

I nodded, not taking my eyes away from Zal.

“Was it *her* plan?” I asked.

Zal nodded. “I don’t know for sure, but yes, I think so.”

I felt my own eyes going glassy now.

“Their power. It didn’t die with them, did it?” I asked.

Zal shrugged. “When all the Blades died, their energy was left. Aygah, the last of her kind, had access to it all.”

I half remembered it. I talked as it flooded back to me: “It was me, or a version of me, that first realised the potential power that she had. The power to alter all of space. All of the matter in the universe could be touched by her. She had the energy reserves of an entire race, in one person. It was terrifying, even to her. She was a power beyond anything we had seen before. The genetic virus didn’t just kill her species, though. When the virus hit, it took out half of the younger races in the galaxy.”

Zal shook his head. “You would know better than I.”

I let the memories guide me again.

“Trillions died. It changed the balance of power in the universe. Every race felt the fallout of the war and they all paid the price for the mistake of eradicating the Blades.” I took a

second to gather my thoughts again, there was a lot coming back to me.

“I built the coffin – it took me a dozen lifetimes to do it. It tapped into her energy and intellect. It used her brain as part of its computer and it broke reality into components, building blocks it could understand. Then it looked at what it had made and it did it again, and again and again. Constantly changing things, one iteration at a time. It was designed to stop when it reached what we had defined as a perfect reality.” I was stunned at my own story. The memories were coming like a torrent, maybe from the dream maybe they were there all along.

“Yes,” Zal said. “But there’s the next bit; that’s why you are a monster, Jon.”

He poured himself another drink. Lea took my green bottle from me and swigged it back.

“What did you do Jon?” Lea asked.

I wasn’t sure. I had some fragments of those memories, but I wasn’t sure what order they went in. I looked at Zal. He smiled in a bittersweet absent minded way that I hadn’t seen before.

He didn’t look at us as he spoke this time with a little less hate in his eyes.

“It folded reality nineteen hundred times before it stopped. It fulfilled the computers criteria. A perfect reality. The alien races were all spread out, without organisation. Humans had their immortality; the other races were so far behind us that victory was assured. We had won. The device stopped and went dormant. But Jon had made a modification to it before he turned it on: he left the Blade inside conscious.”

As he spoke, I remembered it: that was the thing I had been worried about. Not the plan, but the part in which I left Aygah’s mind active. She had been adamant that she didn’t trust a computer to judge perfection.

“She had convinced me that she needed to be aware. She would experience all of it. She would be able to tweak it and alter it all, again and again, until it was *right*.”

I tried to explain this to Lea. Zal already knew it all.

“You created a god, didn’t you?” she finally said.

“I think so, yes.” I replied.

Zal punched the palm of his hand. “But in *my* reality, in my damned near perfect reality, we had managed to turn off the device’s output. It took planning and luck and maybe even that god’s own apathy. We turned it off. We had set reality into stone. Then *he* happened.”

He was looking at me with hatred again.

“He pressed the button, let her try again. And god knows in how many more iterations he did the same thing in. Now here we are. Humans are the *only* race that *isn’t* immortal. We’re less advanced than the others and we even have a fucking Vampire as president. Over nineteen hundred iterations to get there and he has to let it go again. He *invented* death for the human race! He robbed us of a galactic empire and doomed us to die. All of us!”

The room fell silent. I mounted a defence.

“I don’t remember doing that but turning it on didn’t *make* all that happen. It let the woman inside choose. She judged your reality and found it lacking,” I said.

“And that arrogance is why you are history’s greatest monster.”

“How do you know any of this?” Lea asked Zal. “How?”

“It wasn’t a clean iteration, she had to go the moment she had the opportunity. There were people left with memories. Artefact and bits of previous realities were scattered around out there, including this ship. We were here in orbit when it happened, the original planet was never touched when she did it. Aygah made her little emergency changes. When the new reality started, we were no longer attached to the history

she had written for us. She fucked up a great many things. That's why we have Thinkers now," he said.

"What do you mean?" Lea asked.

"Thinkers didn't exist before Jon gave her back control. The device can't alter this planet, it's the source. As you know, no one is welcome in Thinker space. In every other iteration, it was just a barren rock. She added them here, somehow. Thinkers live here, and their isolationism is unknowingly protecting this world."

"Only I can operate the device?" I asked.

He nodded.

"How does that help you? Everything will just change again as soon as I activate it. Isn't that how it's always worked?"

"I don't want you to activate it. Not in the way you think, Jon. I want you to open it."

"What will happen to the woman inside?" I asked.

"I'm going to kill her."

He smiled and pulled a small device from his pocket. It looked like a pen with an energy emitting node at the end. He pointed it at his eyes and pressed a button on it. A red pulse shot out and he blinked; he did the same to the other eye. After a moment of blinking, his eyes changed. They were pure white, with a subtle glow. "I'm going to get inside it myself and fix everything."

I stepped back in shock.

"You're a Blade! How is this possible?" I asked.

"I was altered," he said, pointing out of the window at the planet below.

"In this iteration, those crazy bastards evolved on that planet. The lab where the device was designed is part of their history. In this reality, they have spent the entirety of their history trying to perfect it. It took a lot of figuring out, but my people got the gene codes off of them. I had them alter me. It wasn't a pleasant experience."

“You can’t just hop into the device and start mashing reality, Zal! Aygah was born a Blade. She spent decades learning the science that makes it work. She helped build it. You can’t just get a little gene alteration and ascent to godhood!”

He just looked at me and grinned. “Yes, I can. All you have to do it open it and I’ll put a bullet in her.”

“Or I turn it on and let her try again,” I said. “How about we see what happens to you if I let Aygah take another crack at perfection? See what she thinks of you and your plans?”

Zal matched my poker face.

He gave me his signature snarl and grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, pulling me over to the device. Lea turned to stop him and every gun in the room pointed at her with a snap. Zal threw me against the device with a lot more force than a human should have been able to muster, even one his size. He stood, arms crossed, waiting for me to do as I was told.

“I’m syphoning off the device’s power to charge our warp generator. It can’t fuck with reality while it’s got no power. Open it or I’ll start hurting your little friend.” He was serious.

“Jon, you can’t help him,” Lea called to me.

I looked down at the controls. I knew how to use this. It was all in my head somehow. I thought through my options.

“Fine! But I need a second to figure this out,” I yelled, hoping he would leave Lea alone for a few moments more.

“You have five minutes. Then her good looks start getting ruined.” He sat back down, pouring himself *another* drink.

“Don’t do it, Jon!” Lea demanded.

I wasn’t sure what I would do when her torture started. The guards made her kneel down with her hands on the top of her head. She had tears falling, but she kept insisting: “don’t do it, Jon.”

It was possible Zal didn't have anywhere near the juice required to make that thing work. But if anything happened to the woman inside, all of her abilities, the raw power would go to the one Blade left in all of existence. I wasn't sure I could risk it. Even without the device, that kind of power would make Zal a force of nature.

What if he *could* do it? What if I opened the device and he shot Aygah in the head and used it to re-write reality over and over until he got to his human totalitarian utopia?

Everyone I knew would be gone, including Libby *and* me. How was I still me?

Why were certain things preserved from iteration to iteration?

I had no idea how it worked; I wasn't sure a human had enough intelligence to work it out either, not just me, any human.

There was no point wasting time thinking about that.

Why had Aygah decided that the perfect human utopia needed another iteration? What was wrong with it? I needed to focus on what I could do.

I needed to keep myself from going down a mental hole... Focus, Jon.

Focus.

I could do what Zal wanted and he would wipe the entire of reality out of existence. There was no way he would keep me as part of his template. He would be the only person in the universe who even knew it had happened.

That got me thinking: why were there artefacts this time? Why were there things that were left from iteration to iteration?

I shook off this line of thought. It didn't matter. This wasn't an academic puzzle. It was the fate of reality.

Why were there Thinkers now and not before? Why was there suddenly an entire new species in the universe? Where did they come from?

I remembered the video, my accident. I had used the device when I was on Central. I had spoken about Libby in that video. Also, if there had been only one iteration between his utopia and this reality, when did that accident happen?

Unless it had happened before that. My mind flooded with possibilities. I was questioning the mind of the architect of reality. I wondered if the things I didn't know were just parts of her plan.

Thinkers, Mercia, Libby, Lea, Jo, Kay. – Aygah.

What was I missing?

Then I knew it. With every fibre of my being, I knew what I was supposed to do.

“Zal,” I yelled.

“You missed one tiny detail.”

He stood up and tilted his head at me like a confused dog.

“What's that?” he asked.

“She's not in here,” I said, boldly.

A figure made of shadows stepped out of the glass behind him. The figure formed in moments and was suddenly the robbed form of Aygah from my memories.

Her visage looked like she was made of the stars themselves. She moved with a mobility that I didn't know a person could wield. She looked at me and time slowed to a crawl as an approving grin spread across her face.

She disappeared into the shadows again.

Something had changed.

I was holding a rifle. The guards who had dominated the room were now gone.

Zal pulled his sidearm and I fired. Lea looked around, realising the guards were gone. She kicked him in the side. He barely noticed. My shot bounced off his shield.

Lea ran away from him as she caught up with the current state of things.

“How did you do that?” she asked as she got close to me.

I tossed her the rifle.

“It wasn’t me. It was her.”

“Who?” she asked.

She shot at Zal with far more accuracy than I had. His head lit up with a blue glow. He shot back. We ducked behind the device. He wouldn’t dare shoot it and risk damaging it.

Lea stood up and took aim, then ducked again before firing.

“Did you forget to shoot?” I asked.

“The device, is it really empty?”

“Yes. Why?”

“It has a stasis generator?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Open it up. I need to take a nap,” she said, frantically. “Now!”

I pressed some buttons, the lid opened. When I looked up, I saw what she was worried about. A shuttle was coming right at the window. It was coming fast, and it was one of ours.

“Go!” I yelled.

She handed me the gun and clambered in. I pressed a button and her body frosted over. I closed the lid and armed its defences just in time.

The window was shattered with a blast powerful enough to smash it inwards before physics took hold; it exploded outwards as the atmosphere rushed into space. I held onto the device. As expected, it didn’t budge.

The noise of the atmosphere venting was deafening. Then suddenly there was no sound at all. I looked up and the back end of the shuttle was against the hole where the window had been. The door opened and there stood Libby in all her righteous glory. She strolled out of the back.

Zal hadn’t moved much more than the device had. He had a lot more power within him than he had let on. I had no idea what a Blade really was or what it could do, but apparently

physics didn't bother them much. The shuttle backed away from the hole and an atmospheric shield blinked on. Libby stood, looking at Zal. The generators were flooding the room with air again. It was thin, but it was enough to talk.

"Jon, you okay?" Libby called.

"I'm great," I called back.

"Lea?" she asked.

"Inside here." I pointed at the device.

"Not for long!" Zal screamed and began walking towards me.

Libby sprang into action and launched herself at him. He batted her away. She flipped in the air and landed on her feet. She ran at him, this time countering his glancing blow. Then she flipped him onto the floor. He stood up with his eyes releasing smoke and glowing with a pure white fire.

I looked at Libby. Her eyes were green.

They engaged each other again.

I ducked behind the device. If her eyes were green, Mercia was close. I tried to breathe the air in the room. It still tasted too thin. Lea would need to stay in her coffin for a little longer. I looked at the door to the room. As soon as the air was breathable, Zal's people would flood in. I kept trying the air every few seconds, waiting for it to be thick enough for Lea to work with.

I remembered the device's defences and tapped some buttons to make its shield extend around me a little. The air tasted only a little of oxygen.

Libby and Zal fought like titans locked in mortal combat.

"Door," I cursed to myself, and pointed my rifle at the entrance. The door slid open. I fired wildly at it.

"All that power and you didn't think to lock the fucking door," I muttered to myself.

I was pelted with plasma rounds. The shield held.

"Sorry," came a gentle ethereal voice from next to me.

I turned and saw Aygah's face for just a second, then a flash of stars, and nothing. I looked back; the door was closed again. It looked like part of the surrounding frame had been crimped. It wasn't going to be opening any time soon.

"Thank you," I said to the air around me.

I turned to see Libby get thrown against the large window shield by Zal. I realised my arm wasn't hurting anymore. I put my hand around my wrist. "Circlet!" I exclaimed, realising that I was wearing one. Somehow, Aygah had corrected that little oversight too.

I flicked my wrist and pressed the button for Jo's direct address. Her face came on the screen.

"Dad!"

"No time to explain. I need you to fire everything you have into that window right now." I tilted my Circlet so show her. If it was working, the coordinates would be attached to the image. "I need everything in this room destroyed. Now, Jo!"

She nodded and relayed my request.

"Aren't you in there too?" she asked.

"Doesn't matter! I know how this sounds, but the whole of reality depends on you taking that shot! — I love you, now fire!" I hung up.

Zal smashed Libby against the shield again. I ran around to the other side of the device and checked the controls.

"I'm sorry, Lea," I said, realising she wouldn't be making it out of here either. Mercia lowered into view behind where Zal was holding Libby against the blue flickering energy.

"Bye, Zal," Libby said, throwing him back with a sudden kick and running to me in a flurry. She leaped over the device and crouched down next to me.

Mercia took the shot.

Everything went blue. For a fraction of a second, the surrounding room turned into fire and then I realised I wasn't burning; I was moving. "*Blue-tube*," I said to myself. The com-

forting, safe glow of the tube pulling me, Libby and Lea, device and all, to safety.

I felt the tube end. I hit the floor of Mercia's cargo bay with a thud. A few seconds later, I sat up and looked around to make sure the device had come with me. Libby offered me her hand and pulled me to my feet. I walked over to the device and pressed the combination of buttons to open it. Lea was still there, in the same position as before. The energy frost across her face cleared. She looked up, sleepily.

I turned back to Libby and embraced her.

"You let him think he had you beat?" I asked.

She smiled. "I couldn't actually take him. I kept him distracted while I waited for an option to present itself."

"And the tube?"

"No time to place an order, so I did the maths, hacked Mercia's computer and fired it myself," she grinned.

We kissed.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Denouement

The bridge was smaller than I expected. I hadn't been there before, but Jo had ordered our presence. It was a round room that used holograms to make it appear it was open to space. Four people sat in a row on padded chairs at the front. The captain stood behind them at his own station, with consoles on each side of him. There were stations to the side of the room, all of it basking in the projection of space.

I looked around in awe. Jo and Ba'an were standing at the back, leaning against a wall that was hardly visible against the projection. They were leaving the captain to do his work.

I realised the representation of space was not one to one: we could see Mercia floating in front of the captain. It was little larger than a football and the cylinder ship was in front of it. According to the diorama, it was still firing on the ship. The planet was represented as a semi-transparent image off to the side. Fighters had launched from both sides. The battle looked like a video game.

The captain, a stoic and serious looking man with sailors' beard was studying it all and shouting instructions to his crew.

"Mister President are you sure this isn't enough?" the captain asked.

"Jon?" Ba'an demanded as he saw me.

"Don't stop while there's something left to shoot at," I said.

"Captain, you heard the man," he quipped.

The captain ordered for another barrage of missiles to be fired. I watched as the cylinder ship crumbled into parts in front of me.

“Sir, I have the Thinker government on the line, audio only,” someone said to the captain.

“Put it through then.”

“How did you appear in our space? Why are you firing weapons?” came a scratchy synthetic sounding voice.

“We are taking down a terrorist attack force and will vacate your space as soon as it is safe to do so. Apologies for violating your territory,” the captain said with a professional detachment.

Ba’an signalled for us to follow him as he headed out of a door at the back. We walked into a small office. Ba’an sat down behind the desk. I assumed it was the captain’s office. I sat down in front of him, and Libby sat next to me. Jo perched on the end of the desk and Lea stood to attention behind us, yawning a little from her short stint in stasis.

“Jon, as briefly as possible, I would like a few answers,” Ba’an said.

I nodded.

“Mercia was sabotaged, and our TD-drive was fired. One moment we were heading into deep space with no way to stop, the next, the ship is fully repaired, and we have a trip to Thinker space plotted in the navigational system. Please explain how.”

I had little in the way of answers. Not one he could make sense of, anyway.

“Sir, the long version would keep us all here for hours. The *very* short version is that I know pretty much everything you could ever want to know about The Event, my ex-wife is a god now, and you are shooting at that ship to make sure someone who was trying to reset the whole of the universe is as dead as possible.” I felt a grin spread across my face.

“Lea, does this fit your account of events?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. Exactly, sir.”

“Not that I’m complaining, but how exactly *did* Mercia get magically repaired?”

“Ex-wife, owed me one,” I replied.

“Anything else I should know?”

“Yes. Thinkers have a lab that is left over from before The Event and it’s entirely possible they have the technology to make a device for starting another one.”

“I expect a report on all of these events by tomorrow,” he said. It was Ba’an’s way of telling us to leave.

We left the room and exited through the elevator. I glanced at the state of the projected cylinder ship as I passed. It was in a great many pieces. There were less red fighters and more Mercia insignias in the projected battle, but Mercia was still firing its smaller weapons to pick off the debris.

Lea left us and headed to her room.

Libby and I got back to our apartment and sat on the sofa. I was exhausted, which was something of a novelty to me.

“What happened?” I asked her.

She leant against me. “We went to the location of the distress call and found a confused colony with no idea what we were talking about. We scanned the area and headed back. Got reports that there was something happening at the facility on Earth. I think someone launched the rocket ship or blew it up. They sent drones out to investigate. We pushed the TD-Drive as far as we could to get back to Earth and, well, I think you know the rest.”

“Mercia’s sabotage?” I asked.

“Captain Curtis and Ba’an were still trying to figure out who was responsible. Then all the damage repaired itself and everyone started freaking out.”

She looked at my arm, confused. “Jon, take off your jacket. I think there’s something wrong with your arm.”

I took it off and looked at my bandage. She was right. There was something strange about it. I unwrapped the bandaged from it. It was soaked in blood and dirty. As I unwrapped, I could see my arm. It looked as I expected, it still had a hole in it.

“It stopped hurting a while ago,” I explained.

Libby scanned it with her palm. “Jon, your arm is synthetic.”

“Since when?” I asked.

“Since always, apparently. The skin layer seems to have masked it.”

I looked in through the hole. The blood had run out and it was cleaner than before. The inside had begun regenerating. There was the occasional tiny flash of light as new sections appeared.

“What’s happening in there?” I asked.

“Nanites. Rebuilding it.” She was stunned.

“Jon, this technology is way beyond anything we have.”

“Am I okay?”

“I guess so. I mean. It is your arm. Right?”

I looked at her through the hole.

“Why doesn’t it hurt?” I asked.

“The synthetic blood must have simulated the organic responses. It bled out, so you can’t feel the pain now. I mean, I assume.” She was still looking at it with great interest.

“Didn’t you never wonder why *only you* were able to operate the device?” came a voice from the other side of the room.

My head spun around. Libby shot to her feet and her hands glowed as her weapons charged.

“Relax,” said the figure. It was Aygah. She was standing there in her robes made of stars messing with our food hatch. Her eyes were white and subtle smoke came out of them.

“I haven’t had a cup of coffee in something like twenty-three billion years. Give a girl a break.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Libby asked, still charging her blasters.

“Libby, this is Aygah.”

Her hands dimmed rapidly. “What?”

Aygah came over and sat down on the armchair next to our sofa. She put her feet on our coffee table and sipped her large mug of sweet-smelling caffeine.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Elizabeth,” she said with a smile.

Libby looked on, mouth a little open, in shock.

“I don’t show up on anything other than your optical and audio sensors, my dear. You’re not malfunctioning.” She sipped her coffee.

“Can you fill in the gaps now?” I asked as I slouched back into the sofa.

Libby sat down next to me. From her posture, I could tell that she was still ‘armed’.

“Libby, you may as well relax. You can’t hurt her even if you needed to.”

She looked at me with confusion.

“He’s quite right, Elizabeth.”

“The gaps?” I prompted. She sipped coffee.

“Everything you now know is correct, Jon. Humans were almost wiped out. You and I, in our adolescent arrogance, formulated a plan to rewrite the entirety of reality to put humans back in charge. Eventually, the computer did its work and reality reached that terrifying result. That’s when I was put back in the driving seat. It didn’t take me long to realise that I had created a tyrannic empire that was slowly removing freedom, creativity and joy from all the universe. Humans, you see, are not the creative explorers that they think they are. They are nostalgic, small-minded control freaks who naturally trend towards totalitarian regimes whenever left to their own devices. I spent another thousand iterations fixing the problem that we had created. But my influence over the way

reality plays out is, as always, limited. All I can ever do it put pieces on the board. It's a slow process."

"You're the one who started The Event?" Libby exclaimed.

Ayghah ran out of coffee.

"I don't rewrite anything, not really. It all happens, then it doesn't happen. There are still the same pieces on the board now as there were before the first iteration. I just move them around until a balance is struck."

"Is our reality really only a few months old?" Libby asked.

"No. Yes. I don't know. Everything you know is real. It all happened and also so did an infinite number of other things. Some of the things you remember aren't quite from this iteration. They are an assembling of things. The best way to think of it is that it doesn't matter if history is *real* or not. *Now* is all that matters. Trust me. I have been doing this for a long time."

"Why am I here?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. Those gaps. Sorry!"

She waved her hand. Suddenly she was at the food hatch, getting more coffee. Then she was sitting on the chair again. It wasn't like she stood up and walked over there. She was there, as if she had always been there, then she was sitting down, and she had never moved. Libby was glancing back and forth, still trying to use her usual senses to track her.

"Sorry, my dear. The computational devices of your world can't process temporal duplicity. That's on purpose. I removed the science from your reality to stop anyone else making a device like the one I used."

She sipped her coffee.

Libby looked quite concerned.

"Gaps. I don't usually communicate in order. I must focus." Ayghah began again: "You lost your arm in our first iteration. You built a new one. When we created the device, you used the temporal encryption signature of its processor as an authentication device. That's why only you could override its controls. I pulled in your template every time I created a new

iteration. Essentially, you are the same you as you were the first time. Maybe a *little* improved.”

“You were inside the device for billions of years? How are you his ex-wife?” Libby asked.

“I can’t explain *how* it works. It took eons, maybe more, to figure it all out. I preserved the essence of our relationship from the first iteration and encoded it into the current one. I also preserved the part where I was no longer around. I’m not a person like you both are, not anymore. I can’t be part of a family.” She didn’t look sad about this, not at all.

“I needed to preserve him. To keep him in every iteration, I owed him that much. But in all of them, he was less than he is now. Defeated and drunk, usually. Then, in one iteration, he met you. It happened totally by chance. He was better. So, I kept you around in every iteration that followed.”

Her smile at Libby had genuine affection in it.

“I couldn’t find a way to get to this reality, this very one. Then I realised it couldn’t be everything at once. I had to leave gaps in the foundations for it to work. Your memory had to go, Jon. I needed you focused on the problem, not the million other things you always find yourself involved in. Libby, you had to destroy that spy ship. If it was around when Zal struck, he would have had a base of operations. There would have been no time to rescue Jon. If you hadn’t been able to get to him in time, Zal would have been able to get into the device and counter my work. It’s all quite complex, but every action was required. Some still won’t pan out for a little while yet though.”

Aygah looked happy to be talking to people. I wondered if she was lonely.

“Will humans get their immortality back?” I asked.

“No. After all this time, in every iteration where humans keep that gift, they are the enemy of freedom. Brief lives keep them innocent. That’s what makes them the creative explorers you now believe they are. If they find a way to retrieve the

genetic marker, I'll block it." She was stern now. "Do not let them test this, Jon."

I was confused. "I'm no scientist," I said.

She smirked.

"How did you escape the device?" I asked.

She took another sip of her coffee.

"I was never in it. Not in this iteration. You saw the moment I left. It was a few iterations ago. You let me out. It was caught on video. You saw it."

I remembered the strange flashes of a world that existed only in the reflection of the lightning on the video of my accident.

It dawned on me that it wasn't a single event: it was the composition of multiple realities. It was never meant to be more than a clue to tell me the device was important. It wasn't really my accident. It couldn't have been.

My accident had never happened. Reality started after that, so it couldn't have possibly happened.

Ayghah sipped her coffee again; it seemed to have been refilled.

"The truth is, I don't even need the device anymore. I'm not sure I ever really did. My species, as you were told, is the genetic best of all the Elder races. We just weren't around long enough to learn how to use our gifts."

She regarded Libby intently for a moment — maybe a lot more; time didn't seem to flow quite right around this woman.

She leaned forward and put her drink down.

"You have played your parts wonderfully these past few weeks. Thank you for being such reliable pieces of my puzzle. You have saved a far many more lives than you can possibly imagine."

She stood up.

"Before I go, gifts!"

Her robes flickered and sparkled. Libby rubbed her eyes. Ayghah's appearance was still causing her issues.

“You already have medals and I have a feeling you will accrue many more. However, here is my own little thank you. Elizabeth, you are not a *‘Defender of the Earth’*. You are a Guardian of Reality, and as such, you need your fullest capacity at all times. The graviton transmission that allows you to sync with your avatars will be encoded into the iteration itself. No matter where you go within your own timeframe, there will be no force that can block your signal. No more sim-mode, unless you want it. I promise.”

She waved her hand in a majestic gesture, though nothing obvious seemed to happen.

“Anywhere?” Libby asked.

“Yes. Though no one will be able to explain how or why it works, I assure you.”

She turned to me. “I still have to visit Joanne and Lea. I won’t forget them. But for you: have all that you have forgotten.”

Then she simply wasn’t there anymore. I wondered if she ever had ever actually been there at all.

“Your ex-wife is kind-of awesome!” Libby said. She looked stunned and, from a computational point of view, probably glad she was gone.

“She always was.”

“You remember her?” Libby asked.

“Yeah. I remember everything.”

Libby hugged me; an embrace accompanied by a kiss that, for the first time, I was able to return with my truest self.

Moments later, my Cirplet buzzed. Libby’s buzzed. The viewing screen beeped for attention, and the door chimed. We ignored it all.

Libby looked at me and grinned with joy.

“All of it?” she asked.

“I remember every moment of every iteration. Every kiss, every fight, and every adventure. *I loved you in all of them,*” I whispered.

“You didn’t know me in all of them.”

I kissed her on the nose. “Just because I didn’t know you, it doesn’t mean I didn’t love you.”

Someone overrode the door’s lock. Joanne stormed in.

“Why aren’t you answering anything?” she demanded. “I just had a visit from mom!”

“We know!” Libby and I replied in unison.

“Thinker Collective has just declared war on the Sol alliance.”

Libby and I held our embrace and only replied with “Uh-huh.”

Footsteps came from the corridor and Lea entered.

“Oh, hey, you’re all here. You won’t believe who just visited me.”

“My mother?” Jo asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes! said she got me a new shuttle!”

“Great,” Libby said, without taking her eyes away from mine.

The viewing screen was still ringing. Jo answered it. David Atkinson’s face looked at us, looking at us with a drone behind him.

“You’re on Mercia! How did you get to Mercia? They arrested me. This is my *one* call. Are you coming back?”

Libby and I laughed. I turned my head to look at the screen.

“We’re on the way, David. Oh, and it’s called *detained*.”

End of part one.

Thanks . . .

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HexDSL is a creature of the internet that has existed for many years now. Hex enjoys video games, trash science-fiction and old detective stories. All of which appear in his writing with stunning regularity. He currently lives in England, the Midlands, to be overly specific. His daughter is cooler than he has ever been. He tries hard to be a good human. He intends to write much more in the future. As well as talk about things endlessly on his Website:

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He wrote the book that's attached to this page mostly in Scrivener and Word, he typed the words out on a Buckling Spring keyboard that he loves like it is an old friend. If for any reason you want to know more about him, the website is a good place to start. He reads, and he often replies to emails too. You can email him at his email address:

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He will write things set in this universe again, in:

“Denouement: In Her we trust.”

Thank you for taking the time to read this. It was a blast writing it.

