

Tales of...

Week

HexDSL



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For my dear friend, Microsoft Word. I love you.

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Monday: Libby

I opened the eyes of the primary avatar at five in the morning. I took the usual twenty seconds to observe by husband as he slept. He had logged four hours of sleep. He would usually wake naturally after six hours if left unattended, though for reasons I never understand, he sometimes doesn't wake until he smells food. If he doesn't show signs of waking after two more hours of sleep, I will put coffee on the counter to prompt him if I am at this location.

Oh, I should specify. I am attempting to record my activities and thoughts in direct language in order to document them for future generations. The current log is being generated by a new subroutine I have called 'Elder scribe' as it's documenting my thoughts in Elder, scribing them. I'm told I'm not funny, but one day, people will read this, and I'll be hailed as a comedy genius, I'm certain.

I've had some concerns regarding how I'll transcribe my multi-locational nature. I've decided to scribe the activities of the consciousness stream that is most relevant to my friends.

As this is a log of my thoughts, not information gathering or creative works, I will summarise activities such as these. However, they are documented in other locations across my storage and archival systems.

Oh... I have been looking at my husband's wonderful face for thirty-three seconds now. I think this is what Jon would call a *thought hole*.

I entered the shower and allowed it to cleanse the biological matter and accumulated dirt from my avatar while I considered today's itinerary.



"Lea, it's five in the morning. I think it's fair for you to go to sleep and worry about it later," I said to my dear friend as she went over the scans of her ship's wiring yet again.

"Libby, we're having a rare moment here! There is no war, no existential threat, and no looming adventure. All I want to do is upgrade Thirteens AI, and if I have to pull an all-nighter to do it, I will!" She replied sternly.

For the purpose of documentation, I should specify my company in this location is my dear friend, Lea Ra-Kay. Former flight officer for Sol force, currently private citizen contracted to the Follower foundation. Species: Brick, age: around eighty-eight. Physical appearance: mid-twenties, five foot five, redhead, long hair. Physically one of the most attractive women alive. Her specifications inspired my own avatar design. She could be my sister; I suppose in a way she always has been. My prettier sister too; her level of beauty is not just physical, it is emergent to organic body language in ways I can't quite mimic, even now. Not that I don't pass for organic, I'm not just a *natural*, like her.

“You know I can do this for you. It won’t even take me long,” I said, in way of an offer.

“No. I want to learn every aspect of this ship and the best way to do that is to do every upgrade myself. You can check I did it right once its fitted. And don’t help me!” she demanded.

“Okay. Fine. I won’t so much as point you in the right direction!” I said. Though the problem was annoyingly simple. The wiring was incompatible. Thirteen was not from this iteration of reality. There was no way she could wire the AI core into the computer cluster without a converter mid-way. It just wouldn’t activate, even if it all looked connected properly. She would probably take another hour to realise the problem. I could fix it in about ten minutes. I had already written the code for the conversion processor.

“Aren’t you supposed to be meeting with Jo in half an hour?” she asked.

“Yeah, but she’s meeting me on Central. We’re going to the new Elven breakfast place at the far end of Canto district.”

“Fancy! You need me to take you down there or is your other avatar going?” she asked.

“Other one. Actually, I just got in the shower down there. I offered to meet here on Mercia, but I think she wants to take her little shuttle for a joyride.”

For clarity, Thirteen was currently parked on the Kingdom ship Mercia. Which was in orbit of Central Prime, the same planet where my husband was currently asleep.



I left the shower and selected today's outfit from the wardrobe. We were going to a high-class Elven place in the religious district, Canto. After recent events, there was still a lot of public interest in us. My selection of clothing needed to consider journalistic photos as a possibility without trying to grab attention. Basically, I wanted to look great on the news feeds but also look like it was an accident. Or, as Joanne once referred to it, *proactive casual*.

I chose the short black skirt with the butterflies on it, red vest top and a shiny cropped black leather-like jacket. The large red trainers looked good with it too. No, that was horrible! Wait, no, was it good? I was over thinking it again. It wasn't terrible and would be elegant enough for the restaurant, controversial enough for the inevitable news photos and comfortable enough for the temple if I ended up visiting there with Jo.

Yes, I would commit to this outfit. I looked in the mirror. I couldn't have been more nervous. Journalists always made me second guess myself. I'm not even sure why.



"The media been bothering you recently?" Lea asked as she tried to incorrectly fit the AI interface for the twenty-sixth time.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You know, people seem to love you and Jon. You spend more time in the news feeds than, well, news. Getting pictures of you and Jo at trendy breakfast places will be like a dream come true for them!"

"I hadn't considered that," I said casually.



I grinned at the little lie as I slipped a different skirt on.



“I would be over analysing everything I was wearing. Hell, I think I would be just as nervous about what the Followers thought too,” she mused. *Twenty-seven.*

“I just wear whatever I see first and get on with my day!” *Lie.*

“Well, you always look great, so you’re doing something right.”

She couldn’t see me from under the console, but I smiled. It was nice to just hang out with her without any distractions. I sat on the sensor’s console and crossed my legs under me. I bet she would try another three times before asking for help.

“Then there are earrings! I never know what earrings to wear!”
Twenty-eight.



Shit! accessories! I quickly selected some large plastic star earrings, one blue, one red, and put them in. I swapped my slick modern Circlet device for a chunky plastic looking one that matched my outfit better. I wasn’t planning on using it for much anyway, and this one looked very cool with this jacket.

I grabbed a black satchel and dropped in a shield generator, my lucky handgun, and my wallet.

I darted to the Fold platform and, with a zip, as I was teleported through space into the lobby, I stepped out.

“Hi, Doors!” I said to my pipe bodied friend who was sitting at the reception desk. A few Followers were sweeping and hanging some

religious pictures. Doors mostly let them do as they wanted, so long as they didn't bother him directly. He wasn't very social outside of the network. I waved to the Followers and left through the glass doors.

They all waved, excited to see me, which I still found strange.



The network is hard to transcribe in Elder. Essentially, it's a place of data with no physicality. It's just files going back and forth and ideas streaming around, instead of language or images. I'll translate it into Elder for you, as best I can...

"Doors. Are you well?"

"Yes, thank you Elizabeth. Yourself?" he asked politely.

"I'm great. Going for breakfast with Joanne."

"Excellent, please give her my regards," he said.

"I will! What are you working on today?"

"I'm trying to find a new way to play the piano."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I like pianos," he said as he flooded my perception with everything ever learned about the piano all at once.

"Maybe you should build a less organic-centric piano!" I advised after reading everything ever written about the instrument, the theory of it, as well as sampling all known piano music.

"What a good idea! I hadn't thought about that!" he said, as we began breaking a piano down to an idea and then trying to collaboratively re-invent it as a virtual experience.

This was going to take all morning. It was exciting.



“Fine! How do I fix it?” She asked.

I waved my hand as I interfaced with Thirteens current AI system and showed a hologram of my new translation processor and a diagram of the inputs and outputs. “Wiring diagram, you have it sideways,” I said, honestly trying not to be smug.

“Fix it, please! I need an hour’s sleep,” she said, dejected and exhausted.

“Sure, I’ll wake you with a cup of coffee when I’m done,” I said with a grin. Finally, I could make it work.

I had no intention of waking her.



It was raining outside, though the weather report said that our destination, Canto district, would be dry for another two hours yet. I loved the purples and blues of the Central sky. Everything here looked neon and exciting. This was my home, and I loved this city like it was family.

Joanne came cruising around the corner in her little shuttle, gently splashing the fresh puddles as she did. She slowed down, going wide so not to splash me. Her shuttle was tiny and barley space worthy. It was fun, not functional.

The side doors opened. “Get in, you’ll get soaked!” she yelled as a large shipping shuttle went past and almost splashed me.

I sat down in the passenger side and ruffled my hair through. One day, I needed to find a material that looked and felt like hair that was immune to the effects of rain. Maybe I could recommend the idea to Doors for one of his random projects.

The shuttle accelerated down the road. Jo liked to keep it in surface mode when she could. She liked the feel of driving rather than piloting.

“Jo! You’re early, you are never early!”

She glanced over at me and grinned. “I’m excited. First day off work since the war ended, and I just got off a Screen with Ash. She has agreed to come and stay on Mercia with me for a few weeks.”

“Oh my gosh! That’s wonderful news. How’s she getting here?” I asked, finally feeling like my hair was reasonable.

“Ah, yeah, that’s one of the things I was hoping to talk to you about...”



I finished fabricating the processor. Thirteen’s printer was fast. I added it the coupling and popped it into the cable notch. The system fired up instantly. I read the screen and realised just how crap this new AI core was. I know she wanted to do it all herself, but who would be mad about a better AI core?

I pulled out my Circlet and checked the warehouse I owned on Centrals second planet, the industrial one. I had three really high-end cores there. One of them was actually close to my own in terms of power. I was planning on using that for another ship I was working on. I sent a message to have a courier bring me one of the slightly less powerful cores. It would take half an hour to arrive on Mercia. I rolled my eyes and wondered if I could get one locally. I checked my Circlet. Nope. What would I do for half an hour? I looked at Thirteens wiring diagrams which were still on the screen. Maybe I could have a little tinker...



My light avatar formed in the engine room of Basilica as Alin complained about the synchronisation system yet again.

“Oh, stop being so grumpy! You’ll give Elves a bad name!” I joked as I stood next to him. I leaned over to see his screen, not that I didn’t already know what was on it.

“I know it’s irrational, but I don’t think we should have to rely on you to tweak the engine every time we move a sector. This should be automatic!” the stocky man grumbled. I liked Alin, but he worried too much.

“You realise I *am* this ship’s computer, and you know, if I do the tweaking, that *is* automatic? You get that right?”

“And what happens if you have more important things to do, Libby?” he asked, in his best gravelly voice of authority.

“I don’t mind, I never mind, I’m just a simple philosophy teacher Alin, it’s not like I’m busy.”



We had considered fifty-three thousand variations of the piano now. Including defining to what extremes a thing could be whilst still being recognisable as a piano.

Doors wanted to use it to generate colours rather than sounds, but the limits of the visible light spectrum were a concern for him.



The restaurant was lovely. It was like a little forest inside. Somehow it was all organic and grown, including the tables. The menu was mostly fruits and breads. Authentically Elven.

Joanne ordered a bottle of wine, which raised the waiter's eyebrow for a politician to be ordering booze at half five in the morning. She smiled widely at him. "Sorry, still on Mercia time."

The waiter grinned, "Oh, of course!"

She ordered a large fruit selection, and some sweetened toast.

"And madam?" he asked. He had recognised Jo and me the moment we had walked in. He couldn't not have as our faces were on his news feed and our visit would generate extra business for him for *literally* weeks to come. He knew I was a nonorganic life form, yet still insisted on making me say it.

"Nothing for me, thank you. I don't eat."

He nodded and walked away. "But you do tip, so I don't know why he cares!" Jo complained as soon as he was out of earshot.

"And Mercia time is the same as local time you liar!" I grinned back.

Our conversation was delightful. I can't document a lot of it, as it was related to matters of Sol security, governmental secrets and, most importantly, matters of the heart — Ashley.

"I'm going to ask her to marry me after the next election," Jo said.

"That's over a year away yet!" I said with a smile as the waiter brought Jo's food and the arbitrary small empty plate and glass for me, which I hated. It was a custom that was obviously encouraged by organic do-gooders. No NOLF wanted a damned pointless plate and glass cluttering their table.

For my kind, breakfast with a friend was about adhering to their customs, and about spending time with people you loved. Not about *pretending* to be organic.

"Thank you!" I said with a wide and fake smile.

Joanne, like her father...



Apartment video feed and sensors: John still sleeping, now lying on back and making snoring noises that I was glad I wasn't there for.



... who was still sleeping, was a Bio-static. While she was human, *technically* she had a lot of extra abilities that are catalogued in the Bio-stasis data file. The waiter was about to see the tiny woman eat a shocking amount of food and probably three bottles of wine that wouldn't so much as make her light-headed.

"I know. I'm not going to stand another term. I'm stepping down. When I do; that's when I ask her to marry me!"

"That's so nice!" I think I made that face and noise that I once saw Lea do when she was excited. What did he call it? Ah, yes... *a squeal*.

"I know! Anyway. I love her, and I want this week with her to be perfect. Sooooo, I have a favour to ask," she said, munching on an apple slice, or was it pear? *analysing... apple*.

"Anything! What do you want?" I asked.

"Ash doesn't trust Sol force. She said she would feel better with a private charter, but you know, the girlfriend of the president... that's a massive security risk for her *and* me. I can't go and get her myself because I don't want the media making a big deal about it."

"Uh, huh."

“You know her, she trusts you, and she *loves* Followers. They’ll understand her condition. Can you get David to use his ship to pick her up?”

I grinned.



“Fine, I’ll get you a computer core! Good one too. But I need a favour,” I said as David walked into engineering.

“For you, anything!” he said with an epic smile and enough charisma to rule an empire.

“Can we swing by Earth? I need to give a friend a ride to Central!”

“The friend an Elf?” he asked, knowing I only had one friend on Earth.

“Yeah, she needs to get to Central and doesn’t trust Sol.”

“Me neither. Tell her we’ll be there by noon standard time,” he said with a shrug. He acted like it was nothing, but I knew they had plans to take more materials to Forge for the rebuilding. The cargo bay was full already.

“Thanks, David. It means a lot to me.”

“Libby, we quite literally want nothing more than to serve *the great family*. This is basically *your* ship!”

I raised an eyebrow at him, though I was grateful that at least they skipped the mantra this time.



“I’ll ask David if he can do a quick stop at Earth to pick her up.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, Libby!” she said, leaning over the table to hug me.

Jo was close to finishing her substantial meal. The rest of the patrons of the restaurant were wealthy socialites, while annoying company and terrible people, the wealthy were usually well mannered around their own. We had been ignored by them as a matter of principle. The outside was about to be something very different though.

We settled the bill and left the lovely place. I insisted on paying. Jo and I had known each other long enough that she never argued about this. It was never about the money. Jo was a leader of a planetary alliance. She was not short on cash, she never had been, but if I paid, I got to leave a gluttonous tip for the waiter. I liked to do this, firstly it meant that he would ensure superb service if we visited again and second, the next time a NOLF came in with a friend, he wouldn't assume they weren't worth his attention. We may not eat, but we were usually very social. After all, we had to do something with all those spare compute cycles.



“At this point it isn't a piano. It's art,” I said.

“Piano makes music, music is art, art is good. So, I bypassed the piano,” Doors said as he showed me the current thing he was imagining.

It was a single button that channelled the current total content of the musician's mind into a light and sound thing... I say thing because we were trying to define what it even was that it was doing.

“A presentation?” I asked.

“An experience?”

“Pretentious,” I mused.

“Oh, you’re not that bad Elizabeth!”

The communication field filled with illuminated yellows and greens as a sea of musical notes washed up on the shore of the conversation.

It was something wonderful that couldn’t exist outside of the network. It was data, feelings, art, and love. All in a single note that transcended time.



“Tell Ashely to be ready at noon, and I’ll bring a shuttle down. I’ll have to ask David to come too. I only have a virtual avatar aboard Basilica.”

“Thank you!” Jo said as she slipped her blue jacket on. “How many are out there?” she asked, realising I was scanning. I had been tilting my head again. I needed to figure out why I did that.

“Three out front and one is using illegal scanning technology to listen to us right now. I have already contacted the Followers. They are disabling it any moment,” I said as I glanced out of the window of the restaurant to see a short man jumping out of a tree and making a run for it.

We stepped outside. The sun hit us straight on. Jo squinted and shaded her eyes with her hand. I didn’t need to.

The three reporters ran towards the entrance asking for pictures and sound bites.

“Okay guys, what do you want to know?” she asked as she posed for the photographs. I stood next to her, altering the fall of my hair so that it better exposed my neck. Jon always looked at my neck. I’m not sure he knew I had noticed. Posing for these sorts of photos was a strange skill to learn. You had to stand in a way that made you look good

without looking rehearsed. Lea had given me lessons. I was getting better at it.

“Madam president are you going to keep building more Kingdom class ships or is the four you have enough?” a short older human man asked.

“First off, my name is Joanne, just Joanne. Jo is fine too. No need for this madam president stuff, please.” She never liked the title. She rejected it when she was outside of Sol space. It had the side effect of humanising her to people. Not that she did it for that.

There was a flurry of commentary and mumbling from the three journalists and the four people who wandered over to see what the commotion was about.

Jo got back to the question. “We never expected a war with another Elder race, no one did. It made parliament nervous, and they voted to bring us up to six Kingdom ships. This is not news guys, it’s public record!” she said, trying to sound as casual as she was able.

“Joanne, is it true that you voted against this?” the tall Vampire woman asked.

“Yes. Governments are public! You can look this stuff up!” she said, pretending she didn’t understand the media. She knew full well, a video clip or sound bite was worth ten transcripts of parliament. “Yes. I voted against it. I am on record as stating that I think it is too much might.”

What wasn’t on record is how she and I spent days trying to think of ways to make them change their mind. How Joanne herself was nervous of the voting habits of the human people and how Earth was even making *her* uncomfortable. There were reasons she wanted Ashley to come to Central. Earth was less inviting than it once was to non-humans. *I hated that shithole.*

My avatars sensors informed me that one of the people in the park was armed. I scanned him for more information.



I put the piano talk to the back of my mind for a moment and pulled the file of the man in the park. I had high level Sol clearance; it was not an issue to pull up his records. Vampires, Elves and Bricks didn't let you just search for a citizen without a warrant, but Earth was obsessed with security. My honorary rank of 'Defender of the Earth' was mostly a joke to me, but it certainly had its perks.

The man in the park was called Peter Wenton. He had a history of violence and was discharged from Sol force a few years earlier for attacking a Vampire officer. He had been written up for insubordination a few times by other non-Human officers. I checked his personal log, which again, I should not have been able to do and... He was a Human extremist. *Oh dear*. That was going to ruin our morning for sure. Not even half seven and someone was about to pull a gun on us. Good job, Sol force. Train these mad bastards to shoot. Good job indeed.

I contacted police local to Canto district and calculated his odds of success at less than one percent. Even if he did shoot Jo in the head, his weapon was energy based and she was Bio-static. All it would do would be knock her on her behind and piss her off. Still, if he went for a body shot that could be bad, she liked her jacket a lot. I knew how her and her dad got when their jackets got ruined!



I told Alin that I had a core waiting for him and uploaded the specification for its housing. He would need to have that ready before he could fit it. He was a little surprised to hear that it would be arriving as soon as we got to central. He was excited.

I shifted my light avatar to David's office, next to the bridge. "David, I hope I'm not intruding," I said as I appeared in front of his desk. He was reading the reports from Central.

I think he was a little homesick. Also, there was still the question of who he would name as captain of the ship. He couldn't do it himself forever. He had things to tend to at home.

"You are always welcome wherever I am!" he said with his adorable, charming voice and warm smile. *David was a delight to be around.*



Apartment feed: Ba'an had just entered and used our food hatch to order something that looked like breakfast pastry. Oh, and meat. That made more sense.

Jon was still asleep, but he would soon be awake, now there was dubious food and coffee filling our apartment.



"Jo. Shooter," I said as I turned towards her for one last photo to be taken.

She glanced at me and smiled again at the journalists. They were asking if she had read the news from Brick space. The news that they were expanding their territory into the old Thinker space. Of course

she knew about it. It was her job. What they really wanted was a comment on it.

“Yes. Sol has offered the services of Kingdom ship Wessex to support in the event they encounter any powerful young races that do not know how the galaxy works!” she said politely. This was code for “*we’re shit scared that there are scarier people than us who we haven’t met yet.*” It was unlikely that the Goddess would have failed to mention it to Jon or David if there were. Not impossible. We did not know how far her power and influence reached.

The shooter pulled a gun.

I activated my personal shield and expended enough power to extend it around the surrounding people. That meant I wouldn’t have the juice left to use my concussion blasters. I would need the gun. Good job me, planning ahead always paid off. I reached into my satchel for my gun.

The surrounding people gasped as a shot was fired. It went up and over us, didn’t even graze the shield. Our little crowd gasped and clapped, seeing me flare the shield.

The shooter was already being tackled. There was a flurry of claws and movement as he was disarmed and pulled to the ground.

“Ria?” Jo asked.

“Ria!” I replied.

We made our apologies to the journalists; they scurried off, excited to be getting pictures and video of the shooter. They had quite the scoop to write up now.

We casually wandered over to the action a little way behind them.

I passed Jo the spare shield from my bag, she took it, but put it in her pocket rather than activating it. She was cool under pressure. She got that from her dad.

“Libby!” Ria said as soon as she saw me. “And Jo,” she said with a bow, casually kicking the crumpled form on the floor.

We had been visiting Canto today, in part for the food and in part so that Joanne could visit the Follower temple. It was to be a silent endorsement of the faith. She wasn’t a huge fan of the Followers, not yet, but after all they did in the war, she owed them a little legitimising.

“Hello, little kitten,” I said with a smile. She grinned like a child at the nickname that apparently only I could call her.

Jo and Ria had met a few weeks ago at a medal giving ceremony. They didn’t have a lot in common. They got along, but Jo did not understand much of what Ria was about as a person.

“Do you want me to kill this?” she asked, holding the scratched and beaten shooter by the scruff of his neck for inspection. The journalists took a lot of photos of that moment. Ria was wearing Follower robes. A quick scan told me that she had her combat gear on underneath as well as a small energy pistol and a deactivated hybrid shield.

“This may not look good, you know?” Jo said to me quietly. I looked at Ria, who was holding up her prey for the cameras. *I smiled to myself.*

“Please don’t kill it. Police will be here any moment,” I said to her.

“Were you just hanging out, in case someone shot at us?” Jo asked.

“I protect the family. It is my job,” she replied, confused at the question.

I had seen her lurking on my sensors. She was good at not being seen, but sensors were hard to hide from. She had been told that Jon didn’t need her protection while he was at home and so she took the opportunity to stalk Canto Park as soon as she found out we would be in the area this morning. She liked stalking things. Probably couldn’t believe her luck when she saw the man pull a gun.

The police sirens were suddenly audible. They were about twenty seconds out.

Jo looked at the sorry state of the shooter and asked, “Why are you trying to kill me?”

“Earth is for Earthlings!” he said with resolve.

We all collectively rolled our eyes. Ria went as far as dropping him on the floor like he was suddenly very dirty.

It had recently come to light in government that Joanne was not quite as human as a lot of people had assumed. Legally speaking, she was a human, or at least a human-variant that was technically human. It was assumed that she has ancestral links to unknown minor races. This was how we explained her less than human biology.

The *Earth for Earthlings* people, had been pissed about her position as president ever since it had come out that she wasn't a ‘pure blood’ which was offensive nonsense.

The Sol government officially rejected the idea that the Goddess of the Followers was real, was the creator of the current iteration of reality, and had tweaked the genetic structure of her daughter and ex-husband. Which was odd because the Vampire, Elf and Brick governments read the reports and basically said “*Okay, cool, that explains a lot!*” then got on with their day. *Humans were so strange.*

The police arrived, Jo flashed her ID, I showed them my weapons licenses, Ria had religious privileges that covered her gun and a species pass for her claws.

The police thanked us for our help, apologised for not arriving sooner and asked us to email over statements at our leisure. I wrote all three while they were talking and sent them under the relevant names. *No point making the organics work too hard.*

Once the drama was over, and the shooter removed, the press hung around to get some pictures of Jo outside the Follower temple. It was

going to be a footnote at best, now there were pictures of a Follower beating the shit out of a would-be assassin. This whole day was going wrong already.

Still, Jo seemed impressed that she was invited for a full tour of the temple. She was a little confused at being a figure of legend to the Followers, who saw her as a member of *'the great family.'*

She was extended every honour by them, not that they had much to extend. They were a practical group who were more interested in helping people than they were putting on a show for a guest, no matter who it was.

Jo even seemed to genuinely like Ria's terrible nutty drink – the one that she claimed was coffee.

The three of us had a pleasant morning, in the end.



Basilica pulled into orbit around Earth and was given clearance to use a shuttle. The usual warnings about weapons and shields were issued. Basilica was registered as a religious ship and the Followers had a religious exemption for all the weapons. *That's a long and confusing legal thing that is documented in the faith history file, not a topic for here.*

I moved my avatar to the big shuttle that David liked. He joined me a few minutes later. I had already set the coordinates for Ash's apartment and let the shuttle's archaic flight computer take care of the trip.

David sat back and adjusted his red uniform jacket; the hood was crumpled.

“Damn it, I wanted to look nice to meet Ash!” he lamented as she fiddled with the garment.

“She’s vision bind. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“People can tell when you make an effort. Even if they don’t know; they *can* tell!”

He was worried about meeting Ash again. Last time they met, it was brief and traumatic. Her apartment had fallen down and I, or rather one of my avatars, had been abducted. Long story.



I had fitted the AI core to Thirteen, rebuilt the sensor software and redesigned the virtual interface to be significantly more efficient. I had some ideas for the flight interface, but I was genuinely too scared to touch it. Lea was more than a little touchy about anyone so much as adjusting her seat, never mind tweaking her flight interface. She once pulled a gun on Ba’an for suggesting a new throttle handle, and that’s how she was with the love of her life. She would have shot me without so much as a second thought.

I was bored now. I left thirteen and wandered to the commerce area. Maybe I could buy some gifts for everyone. I know from their point of view I hadn’t been gone, but I had been halfway across the galaxy with Lea these last few weeks. I could at least bring back presents.



“Libby!” Ashley said excitedly as the door opened.

“David. Sorry,” David said.

“Oh, hi!” she sounded disappointed.

“Ash! I’m in the garden!” I yelled from the shuttle door. The light avatar couldn’t be generated outside, I was stuck in the doorway.

Ashley’s garden was still mostly mud, so we didn’t feel too bad landing on it. She had been focusing on getting her home rebuilt and the builders had used her garden for storing materials. It was really nice before the house fell on it.

David carried her bags. There were a lot of bags. It was comical to see him struggle. He never complained though. *He never would.*

Her creepy hairless monkey-robot, *Coffee*, took her hand and guided her to the shuttle door.

She squinted through her glasses and tilted her head. “Libby?” she asked.

“I’m here!” I said. Waving to generate movement, it took me a second to realise why she couldn’t see me. The hologram was light, and that was outside of her visual range.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I don’t have an avatar here. I’m using a ship hologram,” I explained.

“I didn’t know you could do that!” She said in the direction of my voice. Coffee helped her find a seat and strap in. She looked disappointed. Her visual condition allowed her to see movements, but not colours or shapes. She was blind in the traditional sense, but in some ways could see more than even me. She was the only person alive who could actually see the signal that my avatars transmitted. It was literally impossible by every known science, but she could see it as a constant wave of motion emanating from me. *She told me I was beautiful.* My light avatar didn’t work the same way. I was just a voice to her, no matter how much I moved around.



“How about movement?” I asked Doors.

“Movement?”

“Yeah, what if we take all that we have and render the points of motion?” I suggested.

“That may be lovely, I’ll try it. We may need to build a swarm or gas to deliver the effect.”



Jo dropped me off outside and had to rush off back to Mercia. She asked me to apologise to Jon for not popping in to say hi.

I walked in and kicked off my shoes. Jon, shirtless and shoeless, waved at me. He was wearing sweatpants and drinking coffee directly out of a pot. Oh, he was eating Vampire food again. If I did eat, then one look at that freaky looking horror food would make me quit the habit instantly.

I sat down. He kissed my cheek. “Good morning, my love!” he said. He was always so pleased to see me. Almost as pleased as I was to see him.

“We have to go to Mercia soon. Jo is having Ash stay.”

He grinned. He liked Ash, and he liked how happy she made Jo. He screwed up his face at the idea of visiting Mercia.

“Can’t we take her out in Canto?” he asked. “Hey, she’s an Elf. We could take her to that new Elven place that just opened by the temple!” he said.

I laughed at his obvious dodge. He would get his own way with this, he always did.

“What have you been up to this morning, my love?” he asked me, as he put yet more sugar into his coffee pot.

“Oh, breakfast with Jo, got shoot at. Rewired Thirteen while Lea wasn't looking. Sorting out Basilica's new AI core. Oh, and I helped Doors invent a new type of piano. Oh, and I went shopping. What about you?”

“I woke up. You weren't there. Ba'an came over for a bit. I had a thought about something and we talked about asking if David wants to explore the new Brick zoned space with us.”

That sounded like a fun trip. I wondered if Kay would join us.

“Wait, you got shot at?” he asked, as if only just catching up.

Tuesday: Lea

I had no idea what time it was. I had asked Libby to wake me after a couple of hours. She let me sleep all day. It was about one in the morning now; I had slept a day away.

“Ugh, Tuesday!” I grumbled to myself. I told Ba’an I would be back on Central by Monday at the latest. I really hoped he wouldn’t be mad at. He wouldn’t; he was never mad at me.

After leaving my room, I went into the living area. I was only in some shorts and a vest top; I had no idea how horrendous my hair was; I assumed it was pretty bad.

The lights would have activated dimly at these times of night, to stop me falling out a day/night cycle.

I looked around the room. The three-dimensional wall projectors had defaulted to log cabin because there was no one in the room to ask for anything. I looked at the old brown leather couch and the antique wooden coffee table in front of it. This was the one wall decoration that matched the furniture. There was a little countertop to divide the kitchen area and the main room. Next to that was an old table and four chairs.

“Libby?” I called.

A quick slap on the wall woke the food-hatch from standby.

I scrolled around the menu and selected a cherry cider and a bowl of granola. I had been eating a lot of traditional food from home, ever since it got attacked. I wanted to feel connected to it again, but I had been gone too long. *The food was still good though.* My people were the best in the galaxy at granola. It was borderline a planetary treasure to us. I smiled; then I remembered how *home* had been destroyed while I watched out of a window. I took a gulp of the cider and suppressed a shudder.

I sat on the couch. “Libby!” I called again.

Unbelievable! She let me sleep all day, then doesn’t even stick around to hang out when I did wake up. *Princess could be a dick sometimes.*

Well, when alone, do alone things! I went back to the hatch and got a bottle of whiskey. May as well improve the cider with my old friend, brown-tingly yummy.

“Thirteen, turn on the screen!” I yelled. Thirteen’s computer chimed, the screen came on. “Resume previous video.” It chimed again. The show carried on from where it left off. This was a human show about a man who lived in a tiny apartment and had all his friends visit. I wasn’t sure what it was actually about. Jon and Ba’an said that asking that very question was the point. *It was funny.*

I drank the whiskey.



“Really? How did this even happen?” Libby chastised as she sat next to me. The pain in my head was second only to the pain in my back. I had slept on the couch, but somehow half of me was on the floor. I think I had slid off, or at least began the process.

“Shh!” I complained, realising the room was spinning. “How did what even happen?” I asked, holding my head and wondering what time it was.

“It’s seven. In the morning. You said you were going to sleep yesterday morning and according to the hatch log, you drank yourself silly in your room until noon, then woke up this morning at one and carried on!”

“Was there a question in there somewhere?” I asked, covering my eyes, hoping the universe would calm down a little. I tried to figure out why she was shouting.

“Sober up, take a shower, and grab some Cure-all. I told Ba’an and Jon that we would be home before nine today.”

She *wasn’t* shouting. It was the hangover. Ah, that made more sense.

“How about *you* bring me the Cure-all and then carry me into the shower, you beautiful over achiever?”

She gave me the *Libby glare*. You know the one... The one where she pretended to be gathering her thoughts, but she was just wasting a few cycles while she invented gravity or something. She didn’t need to perform this with me. I had known her too long for it to work.

“Here,” she said. Handing me the Cure-all that had been in her hand the entire time. “I refuse to carry you though.”

I chugged the contents of the little green vial and tossed it into the pile of cans and bottles from last night... or this morning; it was a blurry line at this point. *Was it still Tuesday?*

I lay back while the Cure-all did its thing. It didn’t cure hangovers, but it certainly took the edges off of them. *A little coffee, okay, a lot of coffee and I would be just fine.*

After a few seconds, I felt it kick in and the blinding headache was turned down to a serious throb. A throb, I could handle. *Libby had gone. Where did she go?*

She appeared behind the sofa with a bottle of water. "Here, drink this. Get your shit together Brick!" she acted all mean, but really, she was a kitten, a hot kitten who would kick my arse if I didn't get moving soon.

I took the water and headed to my room. My room was a fucking mess. Libby was untidy but I was on another level. I was shocked that Ba'an hadn't ever commented on it. I really should get some maid robots, or hologram emitters like I had in my apartment at Libby's building.

I sat on my bed and lay back. I really wanted to sleep off this hangover.

I closed my eyes for a moment. Some part of me wanted to sleep and maybe drink a little more. Then *he* popped into my head. The thought of Ba'an, he knew full-well that I had got wasted alone on my ship again, while he was waiting to love me. *Why did he even bother with me?*

I knew why most men wanted me: because I was hot. I was, am, have always been, everyone's type. But Ba'an was a Vampire, and a man of almost saintly morality. He loved me, he wouldn't leave me.

Ba'an loved me like no one else. Actually, that's not true. Jon, and Libby loved me exactly as much, but not in the same way. I don't *think* they wanted to sleep with me... oh my gosh! I caught myself a moment before I fell asleep!

I slapped my face and sat up. "Shower!" I yelled at the ship. My room was flooded with white light and there was a comforting rumble. I felt instantly fresher. I wanted to lie down again but resisted the urge.

The targeted Hygiene-field would clean the clothes I was wearing, but I needed to look like I was actively attempting to be a functional person, or Libby wouldn't let me fly the ship home.

I dug through the pile of clothes, I pulled out an Elven ranger jacket and some shorts. I couldn't find a vest. I shrugged and just zipped up the jacket. *Ewe, when did I wear this last?* "Shower!" I said again, wanting the jacket to be as fresh as the rest of me. I found some grey knee-high boots that matched the jacket closely enough that I could make it work. *Circlet...* I hunted under my duvet and found it. I slapped it on my wrist and put my hair into space-buns. Because I was in space, and it was cute.

I put a little lip gloss on and checked the mirror. Yep. I looked like a hot mess. *Fashion icon!*



I strutted onto the bridge with a coffee in hand and looked functional as fuck! There was only a tiny bit of brown-tingly in the coffee too. Today was a good day. Thank Aygah, for letting me be born a Brick! I could drink and party for a year before I looked as shit as a Human did a day later.

"Okay Libby, I'm awake, and looking fab. Let's get this mother-fucker in the air!"

Libby was sitting with her feet on the weapons console and looked like she was reading the air. She did this when she accessed the network directly with her avatar. It was creepy.

"Hey Princess, watch porn on your own time!" I yelled as I sat in the flight chair and pressed the system start-up button.

Libby shook her head a little, as if to clear her thoughts. This was all part of her “*I must be as organic looking as possible*” thing that she run as a subroutine. I wished she would knock it off around me. She was one of my best friends and the fact that she wasn’t organic meant literally nothing to me. All that time she spent around humans seemed to have left her with some issues. *Earth was shit.*

“Lea, are you even fit to fly?” she asked.

“Yes. Don’t scan me. I do not consent!” I said back sternly.

“Fine!” she said, folding her arms, *that’d teach me!*

I saw the green light come on that told me that the ship had successfully negotiated launch authorisation from Mercia’s dock crew. It was nice having a ship that could talk to a dock crew for me. *Saved me a boring job.*

I pulled the left lever to lift the ship away from the dock, then the handle next to it to put on a little manual forward motion. I used one of the flight sticks to tilt us up towards the iris. Accelerated at just the right speed.

The ship obeyed me like it was a fighter; it was actually a fully functional star ship. A small one. One of the smallest. And it was mine. *All mine.* I loved Thirteen.

The moment I was passed the iris I slammed the throttle into high and shot out of the docking tube like a firework. I added a little spin too, would make us look extra cool to all the passenger liners that were docking. *Gave the kids something cool to point at out of the window.*

“Thirteen, please keep your speed down. I should not have to remind you; you *are* in a planetary system,” the communication link said. *Ugh, fuck off, humans!* Central government didn’t give a shit how fast I was going. Stop *projecting* Earthlings!

A light on the dash activated and the ship’s computer spoke down the communication link: “Mercia control, this is Thirteen. This ship

requires speed burst to prime its systems for landing, with the planet being so close, this is the only way our design allows for us to do that.”

Shit! That was an excellent lie. Why I had never thought of that. I was stunned.

“Thirteen, your ship design is not on file, but you do have a high clearance. I’ll make a note on your ID code. You won’t be asked about it again. Have a pleasant trip.”

“What the absolute fuck! Thirteen? Is that you?” I asked to the ceiling, as I dropped my speed and entered the atmosphere.

“Yes, captain. I have instruction to cover all your administration needs. Was this an acceptable action?”

“Yeah, it was great! Good job Thirteen!” I said, leaning around the flight chair to look at Libby.

“You fixed it then,” I observed.

She grinned at me like a smug cat. “The core you were fitting was trash. I got a real nice one from my warehouse and fitted it under that console.” She pointed at the access door I was working on yesterday. It had driven me mad. She had fixed it, upgraded it, and programmed it in *probably* about thirty seconds.

“Thank you, Libby!” I said sweetly.

When she had said ‘from her warehouse,’ that told me a lot. It told me it was one of the cores that she had designed herself. Which meant it was probably a decade ahead of anything else in the galaxy. Thirteens shitty AI core *was* its weakest system. Now it was the strongest.

“Wait, Where’s the TLC display?” I asked.

The TLC chip was the thing that all cores had to have by law, the thing that indicated if a core had developed a mind of its own or not. No one wanted to use a living person as a slave. It was important to me that I didn’t mistreat anyone.

If this core suddenly emerged life, I would want to do the right thing. It was very important to me that I knew if it emerged with life. *I would make a great AI mom!*

“I knew you would ask. So, I made a very minor alteration to your flight screen.”

“You did what?” I asked, suddenly wondering where my gun was. I had a very complex flight setup that I did not want *anyone* fucking with.

“Relax! Fire it up. You won’t be mad. I promise.”

I slowed the ship in a high atmosphere and waved for the flight screen to appear. I didn’t actually need this turned on, not just get us home; I hadn’t thought to fire it up.

A white light flickered on the dash as the projector lit and the display popped into existence in front of me. “It’s orange!” I said as I saw what she had done. There had always been frames around the floating sections of the display system. Anything that was AI controlled had been blue. Now it was orange, or amber, I suppose. I instantly realised what Libby had done. The TLC chip would control the colour of the interface. If it was orange, then it meant that the core was still an AI nothing more. If it went green, then that would mean it had gained sentience, and was, at least becoming alive. *It also meant it would turn red when I activated weapons, which would look cool.*

“I’m not mad,” I said as I pulled up the map to select autopilot for home.

“Good, also you have a proper AI now. You don’t need to fuck with the manual stuff,” Libby replied.

I stopped pressing buttons. “Thirteen?” I asked.

“Yes captain?” came the purposefully synthetic voice of my ship.

“I want to go home. Can you land us in the usual dock and start a full, system-wide diagnostic, please?”

The ship chimed and the robotic voice said, “Yes, captain.”

“Okay, I’m not mad,” I told her.

Libby just smiled and took her feet off the console as the ship gently landed in a docking bay.

“Come on, you need a walk before Ba’an sees the state you’re in!”



The apartment wasn’t *much* of a walk from the dock. There was a brief discussion about one day setting up a Fold and just leaving Thirteen in geo-stationary orbit, but Libby couldn’t get clearance for that and the power requirements for that kind of distance was quite mad.

We walked through the morning sun as the rain drizzled lightly. We stayed under building canopies wherever possible and just quietly basked in Central’s glow.

“What’s in the bag?” I asked.

“Gifts!” Libby replied.

“Why? You’ve not even been anywhere. You have had an avatar at the apartment the whole time we have been away!”

She screwed up her face and said, “Gifts!” again, as if I had misunderstood her.

We entered the apartment building. I had only been gone just over a week and the lobby now looked like a Follower recruitment office!

Doors waved as we entered but looked distracted. I think he was humming. A robed Follower came scurrying over. “Doctor Michaels, have you brought a guest? Is this a new initiate?”

“No, Robert, this is Lea Ra-Kay. She lives here,” Libby explained. I made for the Fold. Libby handed off her bag to me as I did. I assume she was going to talk to the Followers.

The silver door opened, and the white light of the Fold blinked on. "I'm sorry for not recognising you, miss Ra-kay," the little guy said as I stepped away. I liked the Followers. They were good people working hard to make a difference, but they were annoying sometimes.

I stepped out of the Fold into Jon and Libby's apartment. Libby's other avatar took the heavy bag from me.

Ba'an appeared next to me, like he had been waiting there. He hugged me. He always hugged me when I got back, right before he kissed me.

He kissed me. There was something about kissing Ba'an, a sincerity to it that I had never felt before. He didn't just *want* me, he *loved* me. We had fallen for each other fast, but it didn't appear to be wearing off. People usually stopped loving me way before now.

I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do in a relationship like this. The only people I knew who had something like it were Jon and Libby. I didn't even know other people *could* have it.

"Welcome home Lea. I missed you," he said, cradling my shoulders and looking into my eyes with a gaze that made sure that I knew he was serious. Men had looked at me before, lots of men looked at me, but usually with lust. Being looked at with love was something I wasn't comfortable with, not yet.

I felt my cheeks flush and let go of a smile that I couldn't keep inside. *I hugged back.*

We sat on the oversized red sofa under the vast window and the hugging resumed. There was a kiss or two to accompany it too.

Libby sat next to us. This was a different avatar, this one dressed casually in yoga pants and an oversized shirt. It didn't matter, it was all her. She started emptying little boxes out of her bag.

"Good trip?" Ba'an asked me.

"Oh, don't pretend you didn't ask Libby how I was, every day!"

He smiled. "I'm not a stalker!" he said with a pointy grin.

Libby looked up at us, then back at the boxes she had in front of her.

"Libby told me every time you asked. The exact moment!" I said with a schoolgirl grin.

"You told on me!" Ba'an exclaimed to Libby with pretend surprise.

She looked up. "Yes, but I got you a gift to say sorry!" she said. Handing him one of her little boxes.

She tossed one to me, too. "You got *me* a gift?" I asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I missed you!" she replied with a pout and a wink.

"Missed me, you didn't leave me alone for the entire week!" I said with just a touch of *actual* annoyance. She had been eyeballing my drinking like it was an issue. *She just worried too much.*

"Open them!" she said. She tapped the coffee table to open its interface. "Jon, Lea's back!" she said as we struggled with the boxes.

Jon appeared through the Fold just as I was getting the box open.

He walked over to Libby and kissed her forehead. "Welcome back, my love!" he said. They were so cute. Libby had an avatar with him all week. She had literally not been anywhere, and Jon still missed her!

"Lea! Missed you too, buddy!" he said, leaning over the table to hug me. *Jon was great.*

"I got you a gift!" Libby said, putting a box on the table next to her. Jon had already gone to the kitchen. He emerged a moment later with two bottles of beer and an Elix. He handed Ba'an and I the beers and supped on his Elix.

"A gift!" he exclaimed, using it as a reason to kiss Libby again.

He opened his box with ease, instantly turning it the right way up and using just the right pressure to pull the lid off. *Always smooth Jon!*

All three of us looked into our boxes with confusion. We looked at each other and pulled out the little devices. We each had a small purple cube with a long white button on the top. It looked like a single piano key.

“It’s just what I always wanted! I love it!” Jon exclaimed, with no idea at all what it was.

We put the little toys on the table.

“I know, you have no idea what it is. You can’t! Doors and I invented it yesterday. It took all day. I had to pop out last night to get them fabricated. Used Mercia’s military grade machine shop to do it. It’s a very complicated design!” she explained.

We looked at them with interest.

“Jon, go first! Then you’ll all see!” she added.

Jon shrugged and pressed the key.

The room fell away as it was replaced with a cacophony of ideas and images, complete with sounds and motion; there was even a smell. My heart sang.

The colours started as a wave, as if they were being projected from the device. It had looked like holographic smoke at first, then it exploded into a rainbow as the smell of Canto’s trees filled my nose. Lines of colour, all rippling and moving together in a way that defied vision, danced in front of me.

The music that came from the lines of light sounded like an electric guitar that was playing a hundred different songs all at the same time. It wasn’t an assault on my senses though; it was a wave of emotion that filled my soul and warmed my heart. All the songs somehow harmonised, even though I knew they couldn’t.

I stared at the hologram, if that’s what it was; it grew to encompass the entire room around me. In the middle of it all, an image of Libby appeared with her purple eyes smoking and she stood proud and tall.

I had seen it before; this was the moment she had discovered the AI-web on Basilica and was given a glimpse into her own past life.

I felt a wave of emotion. Something deep within me wanted to cry with love for my friend but also wanted to cry with pain from my world being attacked. I wanted to cry with joy for the things I was seeing and for the horror of the memories it stirred.

The image grew as the camera zoomed in. Her eyes were sparkling with the entire universe. Then, as quickly as it started, it popped out of existence and the smoke was sucked back into the side of the little box.

Jon looked at Libby. "What was that?" he asked in gleeful shock.

"It was beautiful!" I said, in stunned awe.

"It was amazing!" Ba'an added, in just as much shock as the rest of us.

Libby smiled. "Doors insisted on calling it a *Pianyes*."

"A what?" Jon asked, still a little buzzed by it.

She laughed. "We started off by trying to create the ultimate piano, you know? Like an abstract ideal of what a piano was. At some point we went too far, and he decided it was a pian-yes, not a pian-no... get it?" *There was no way such a terrible name was Doors' idea. This was firmly a Libby joke. She wasn't funny.*

"How, how did it do that? What *did* it do?" I asked.

"Well," Libby began. "It takes the entire contents of the brain at the moment the button is pressed and uses a smart gas to create smells and add nonvisual motion. The light effect is a tiny holographic emitter. The music is generated by the brain waves with a single purpose AI to harmonise it. It basically summarises you, as a person and then pulls out one thing that means more to you than anything at the time you press it." She kissed Jon on the cheek. It must have been nice for her

to see a vision of herself. Even without him knowing what it did, Jon was thinking of her above all else.

“There was an emotional *thing* it did too! How did you do that?” I asked.

Libby looked confused. “I didn’t use any intrusive technologies. It’s just a combination of movement, sound and lights.”

“Oh, my gosh Lea, did you have a feeling? That’s not like you!” Jon joked with a grin.

“It is very impressive, Libby. I have seen nothing like it before!” Ba’an said, moving the conversation away from my feelings, *thankfully*.

“Well, it works for Bio-statics, so I assume humans too, but does it work on Vampires?” she asked.

Ba’an gave us an excited look of resolve and pressed the button on his little Pianyes. *I hated that name*.

The smoke left the side of the machine and an electric guitar started to play in the distance. It seemed like nothing else was happening. Then, as if it was waiting just long enough to have the maximum effect, the hologram lit like an explosion.

We were shown a highway that was being created with the same moving lines of colour that we had seen in Jon’s experience. The road was in a desert. The view showed the motion of travelling down a road that bisected the land as far as the eye could see. Faster and faster the road went by, like we were in a ship heading for TD speeds.

The guitar was being played in a way I hadn’t heard before. It was being played with emotion and drive and passion. It sounded harsh and metallic, but also epic and meaningful.

The smell, this time, was of oil and engine. *Oh!* It smelled like the engine room on Basilica. As the crescendo of music and vision reached its peak, the road ended. We were in space. There was a single planet

in the centre of our field of view. It was Earth, but it was on fire. My feelings welled up, and I started to cry for the love Ba'an had for the Humans he had shepherded for so long as their leader. This was his fear, his loss and, on some level, his grief, all in a single image. Even with all that, it was love.

The hologram dropped away around us until all that was left was the planet. Then it left in a wisp of smoke.

Ba'an was just sitting there, with his hand on the single white key. He was far too stoic to show the depth of what he felt. He simply lifted his hand away from it and said, "Thank you, Libby. Thank you for that."

I knew how much it had hit a nerve for him and I hugged him tightly. My own tears were enough for both of us.

Libby looked shocked at us. "This was supposed to be a fun little toy. I didn't intend for it to be so personal. I'm sorry. We must have got something wrong!" she said apologetically.

"No!" Ba'an said sternly. "Libby, this thing you have created is beautiful. You have created something real, something honest and deep. I'm not sure what it is, but I needed it! Thank you."

She smiled, though, a little melancholy.

"Your turn, Lea," Jon said, getting up to find more drinks.

"No. I don't want to know what it has for me. And I certainly don't want anyone else knowing what it has for me."

Ba'an's embrace got a little tighter; he understood.



I dropped Basilica out of QD speed with a frankly remarkable precision, coming to a complete and instant stop only ten meters from the new orbital station.

The proximity alarms were screaming. I probably scared the shit out of them. I was usually good at this, but with a ship that responded like this one. I was amazing.

“Stop showboating!” Ba’an shouted from his spot in the middle of the room. There was a large rail that was supposed to be behind a captain’s chair, given that this was now a Follower ship, and the crew took orders from Ba’an *or* David, with equal enthusiasm, they had agreed a captain’s chair sent the wrong message. They *had* got the rail padded for leaning against with slightly more comfort though.

I handed off final control to Libby. Who was acting as this ship’s computer. She would handle the last few meters to get us docked. I was quite capable of moving something this big with the precisions required, but station rules wanted it done by an AI. Most pilots who tried it scratched the shit out of the docking clamps.

I stood up and stretched. It hadn’t been a long flight, but I hadn’t been home an hour before I found myself back in a flight seat. I had totally forgotten we were taking Basilica to Forge. That’s why Libby had wanted us back to Central on Monday. It was my own fault; I didn’t complain.

I looked down at the planet. It was looking better and better every time I came back. The crashed cities were being cleared now; the rebuilding was under way. The government had decided to leave *Steel* where it fell. It was the largest of the cities and the damage that had been done when it fell was something I couldn’t think about. The government made it safe and cleared out the dead. But they left the massive thing where it lay. A reminder for future generations about what was lost that day.

I flashed back to the sky-fall. I was in Thirteen; the world ended around me. We were sent into the dark ages while I watched and did nothing. I don't think I would ever be the same after what I saw that day. *No Brick would.*

Jon told me a few weeks ago that he saw it in a vision from Aygah. That he saw a tiny sliver of what I must have seen. He cried when he told me. I wished I had only seen it in a dream; the memory of dreams faded. I had to live with what I saw, forever.



I walked up Thirteens ramp, past all the cargo on Basilicas cargo bay. The lights were already on. This meant that someone was aboard. Basilica was a ship filled with Followers and friends; I still checked my sidearm was charged as I walked towards the stairwell. Someone was on *my* ship, without me knowing and that could be a problem.

Libby was in the Flight chair, Jon at sensors, his cute little body-guard, Ria, was next to him.

“Hey guys. Has my ship just become a place to hang out now?” I asked. “It’s not a damned bar!”

“No, but we know it’s your first time down to the surface, since... you know. So, we’re coming with you,” Jon informed me.

“I suppose Ba’an put you up to this?” I asked.

“Yes. Obviously, I did. None of your friends are emotionally stable. They never would have even thought about it without me,” Ba’an said, appearing behind me in the doorway, slipping his arms around my waist.

The ship's engine started, and we glided out of Basilica's cargo bay. I was never happy when someone else flew my ship, but I had a feeling on this trip, Libby may have been better suited.

I had been back into orbit a few times since the station had been delivered. It was good of Sol to gift such a massive station to my people. It had been dragged into orbit by one of the new Kingdom-class ships and it was armed to the teeth. It had really made the difference, giving us somewhere to coordinate the repair efforts from, and a functioning space dock helped more than anyone realised it would.

The Vampires had sent over a hundred of their best construction teams, with all the equipment they could spare. They were the reason we were making such fast progress towards getting our planet functional again.

Elves were the last to send aid to us, but we all understood why when it arrived. They took their time to prepare it, but when we saw an orbital farm come through the Warp people cried in the streets. The damned thing made our orbital cities look small and had ready-to-harvest crops under its gigantic Glass energy dome. It would go a long way in keeping us fed. They even provided some people to farm it, until we were ready to do it ourselves.

Most of the Younger races in our territory had sent gifts too. Blankets, food, usual humanitarian stuff, but sadly, they lacked the technology to really move the needle for us. Still, it was nice that they wanted to help. They had always been our responsibility to protect, for now they were on their own. I worried about them; we all did.

I was deep in thought; I think I was trying to distract myself from the trip. We were supposed to drop the first delivery off to one of the freshly rebuilt surface docks. Basilica had plenty of storage but not any big shuttles. It couldn't land either, so Thirteen was the ideal mule to drop off supplies. Our cargo bay was packed with shit load of Cure-all.

Sol alliance was going to be sending some, but was still sorting out the bureaucracy. Libby just ordered it herself; we had it in four days. Sol gov was still trying to decide which contractor to use. It was nonsense. Still, they meant well.

Libby put Thirteen down gently in a spot next to a loading team who were waiting for us. There were some people in suits waiting too, politicians. Ba'an would deal with them.



We let the loading team start getting the pallets off the ship. We headed down the ramp to greet people waiting for us.

Ba'an took point, this was his skill set. "Good evening gentlemen, or is it morning, local time? I'm honestly not sure."

One of the men shook his hand. A short man with lightly tanned skin and rippling muscles, that you could see even under his tailored suit. Obviously one of my people because he was too easy on the eyes to be anything else. He had long grey hair that he left free and was so clean shaven I wondered if he had ever even had stubble. He, as all adults of my race did, would look mid-twenties to a human. I could tell from the way he conducted himself and the confidence he had in himself that he was at least as old as me, and probably then some.

"President Ba'an Ty, it's an honour to meet you," the man said. The others around him were just as eager to shake his hand as the first man.

"Pleasure to meet you all. It's just plain old Ba'an now though," he said, tuning on the warmth in his voice up a little and altering his body language to seem stoic, but sincere. *He was so fucking good at this, and it had only been a 'hello.'*

“Yes, yes, but still... Ba’an Ty. I never thought I would end up in the same room as you! And now here I am, shaking your hand!”

Ba’an grinned at the man. “Well, President Ro-Bon, you are a far more famous man than I, and you have a far harder job than I ever did, I assure you!” Ba’an said. *Of course, he recognised him!*

President, Ro-Bon. This was the man who had been put in charge of my world. Most of the government had been killed when the sky-cities fell. This man was the mayor of one of our moon colonies. He was well on his way to becoming the President one day, though, now he had skipped a few steps. I hadn’t realised our little humanitarian run would get the attention of the President.

“And this must be Miss Lea Ra-kay?” he said, putting a hand out to me.

“Ugh!” I stammered. “Yes. Mister president sir,” You would think dating the former president of Sol would make me better at talking to politicians. *It didn’t.*

“Miss Ra-kay. It’s an honour to meet you... all of you, actually.”

Jon shrugged; Libby smiled. Ria thinned her eyes at the suited men. I wasn’t sure what she thought was going to happen here. The president of the Brick cooperative would not be a threat to Jon. She took her job as guardian far too seriously.

“I made a point of coming here when I heard which ship was making the drop off,” the President said. “Because I wanted to personally thank all of you. I had hoped Doctor Atkinson would be with you as well.”

“We’re just doing what we can, President,” Ba’an said. While it was a politician’s answer, it was also, in this case, the truth.

“No. If you’ll excuse me, that’s horse shit!” he said. *What! I was more than a little stunned at this language.* He shrugged at our shock and continued.

“It was miss Ra-Kay who got her ship back online and was the first new star in the sky after the fall. She gave hope to everyone who saw it, hope that civilization was still out there. Then, she risked her own life and chased down the thing that was killing our world. I hear that without this ship and her skills as pilot, the Follower ship would not have been able to destroy the Thinker attackers. You literally saved us all.”

I was touched by what he said, but I had agreed with myself that I wouldn't cry today. I wouldn't cry when I saw the horror of the remaining deviation. I wouldn't cry when I saw the beauty of everyone rebuilding and I wouldn't cry when everyone told me they knew that I just *watched* when the sky fell.

“I...” I had nothing.

“Any of that untrue?” he asked us all.

I had expected Ba'an to take the question for me, but he just looked at me. All the people in suits did too.

“I... I didn't do a lot. It was Libby and Jon who did...” I felt a lump in my throat.

“I read all the reports, Miss Ra-Kay. All of them. I know exactly what happened. I even saw some of the video footage of the space battle. The recordings from the communications, and the medical reports that were made after.”

He looked at me for an answer.

“I... I couldn't do anything. When it all happened. I just watched. Everyone else was dying, I was safe. I couldn't open the door to let them in. I wanted to. I'm so sorry.” They knew I just watched. He knew. The president knew I just watched when everyone else died. Then, as soon as I got a chance, we flew away. The rest was Libby and Jon.

“Miss Ra-Kay. I am here specifically *because* I understand your actions *and* motivation.”

He was going to arrest me. *He was being nice, but I needed to face trial.* I should have opened the door. Should have got people inside. I could have saved lives. *I didn't.* I was beaten and scared, and I was too interested in getting the ship to work than to opening the door. He was still talking.

“Miss., we don't have the time or the resources right now to give you what you deserve...”

Oh, my gosh, was he going to shoot me? Was this treason?

“I hope you understand...” his voice faded into the background. I flashed back to being on Thirteen and watching the death rain down.

He put his hand in his jacket pocket. I knew it was coming. *This is what I deserved.* I hoped Libby and Ria didn't stand in the way. They would react before the others; they were fast enough to save me. I hoped they knew that I wanted to take the punishment for what I had done.

“... So here is,” he said, opening a small box.

I had missed a lot of what he was saying. Everyone was smiling. *Shit! What had I missed?*

I leaned forward and looked into the tiny box. It was a rank badge. “What?” I asked. Realising I had checked out.

Ba'an held my hand. “Lea. The president just told you he's made you a Free-General.”

“What!” I explained. *I had missed more than I realised.*

I was stunned. I looked at the president. I think I was in shock.

A Free-General was a rank that they gave. The ‘free’ part meant free, as in, not assigned to a task. ‘General’ as in General... as in a very high-ranking military officer. I would have rank's power and a security clearance with none of the responsibility.

“I...” yep. Had nothing *again*.

“I know your history in the Sol military, and how you dodged promotion for a decade so you could fly ships. I also know the company you keep, and I know we need to cut through red tape right now. Miss Ra-Kay. On behalf of all the Brick people of Forge, the outer colonies, and the Younger races which we serve... Thank you for your service.” He handed me the box and saluted.

I was stunned. I had expected to be arrested. To be punished of behalf of all the people who I failed to help. I did not deserve the Brick equivalent of the ‘Defender of the Earth’ commendation.

“Sir,” I pulled myself together. “I don’t deserve this. I just did what I had to, and there was a lot more I *should* have done. I could have saved a lot of people if I had have made better decisions. Sir, mister president... sir.” I stood straight as he waved a hand.

“Miss Ra-Kay. That’s bollocks!” he began. Ria gasped. He smiled at her and continued. “I know how the war ended, I know all the actions that were taken, and I read all about *Aygah*,” he said, as he glanced at Jon. “You *all* did more for this world than even I ever could. Take the damned pin and use the rank to make sure nothing stands in the way of helping people!” he said with a sincerity that matched Ba’an’s.

He looked me right in the eye and put a hand on my arm. “Miss Ra-kay. Every one of us feels like we should have done more. We *all* feel the guilt. I can tell you for certain, the whole of the government read the reports about you and your friends. You did nothing wrong. You’re a fucking hero and we recognise you as such.”

I suppose I would cry today.



We had been back on Basilica for a few hours. We had done the last delivery to the surface, got a list of things that Forge was short on and promised to be back next week with at least *some* of the things on the list. This would be an expensive trip for Libby. Most of the AI cores on the surface were fried after the attack. They had requested a hundred, just to get basic infrastructure working again. Even Libby with all her wealth would be hard pressed to get a hundred high end AI cores delivered in a few days.

The list also requested portable Fold platforms, generators, and Circler repeaters.

My people didn't expect her to provide the whole lot. It had been posted on the network as a wish list of sorts, the things that Forge needed to return life to normal. Libby had taken it as a shopping list and was working down it with every trip.

I was just starting the pre-flight checks when the communication chime sounded. There was no one at the communication station. David left the command rail and answered it himself.

"You have reached Basilica; how many are we of service?" he said with a smile.

"Oh!" he said a moment later. He threw the communication onto the main screen at the front of the bridge.

The president's face appeared on the screen.

"Doctor Michaels, Elizabeth, is she available?" he asked, skipping the greeting. He looked emotional and his eyes were puffy.

Libby's ship-avatar formed in the centre of the bridge, walking towards the screen. She started as a purple outline and then filling in, looking almost solid in a matter of moments, "Yes, mister President. How may I help you?" she asked, coming to a stop next to my flight chair.

“You distributed some music boxes, toys, to the local children while you were on the surface. I think you called them yes-pino’s?”

“Pianyes. I had a crate of them given to the children, yes. Is everything alright?”

“*Alight!* Doctor, I have just used one of these music boxes, a few minutes ago. My god, I have never seen anything so beautiful in all my life. I cannot express how grateful I am to have seen what it showed me. Thank you, *thank you so much!*”

He actually looked like he was about to cry.

“I’m glad you liked it. I’ll bring another shipment of them next week. I’ll make sure to get you your own, mister president.”

“Yes, please. And really... thank you so much, I’m not sure you realise how much you have helped us. These things, they are just magical!”

He smiled, fighting back tears, he closed the Screen.

I looked up at her with a raised eyebrow.

She grinned at me, “And there was me, worried they wouldn’t even work for Bricks.”



It was quarter to midnight, Central time. I had been up almost the whole day and was glad to get back to my room on Thirteen with a bottle of old brown-tingly in my hand. Ba’an was already asleep.

I looked at the stupid *Pianyes* on the table by the window. I took a swig from my bottle and pressed the damned button. Let’s see what it would show me...

Wednesday: Kay

I was looking at the Circlet on my nightstand. I knew it would go off. Had I woken up ten minutes before it or ten seconds before? I always hoped it was a long time before, so I would be able to snuggle down in the bed for another half hour. I should check how much time I had.

The alarm started chiming the moment I finished the thought.
Damn it!

“Off,” I barked. I took a moment to stretch and then thought about the day ahead of me... I felt the morning grin set in and leaped out of bed.

I strolled into the shower room, and it responded by lighting up instantly. I loved the room they gave me on Basilica. It was supposed to be officers’ quarters and had everything I could ever want. It wasn’t apartment sized, but you didn’t get those sorts of rooms on a starship, well, unless you were on Mercia, or a pleasure corvette.

If I were at home, on Central, I could go down to the coffee shop at the end of the road and get something decadent to start my day. I glanced at the food hatch as I left the shower. I didn’t want to eat breakfast alone.

I slipped on my medical onesie and found a red doctor's coat to go on top of it. Usually, you would never wear red, but it was the colour of the ship's uniform. No one seemed to mind when I fabricated one. Followers were cool. They were the embodiment of live-and-let-live, but with a drive to stay on mission. *Good people.*

I think, I may have been the only person aboard who actually got a wage. I wished I could donate my time. Libby had me on pay roll. I shrugged to myself when I thought about it. Libby could afford it and I did need to pay my bills.

I put on my medical circlets and belt. I grabbed my sensor-display-glasses from the shelf and headed out of the door. The sensor-glasses were annoying. Every other doctor just got implants, but my biology rejected everything I tried. Had a pretty rough week a few years ago when I tried to augment one eye.



The mess hall on the ship was packed, as always. Followers liked to eat together. We all had basic-menu food hatches in our rooms, but there was something great about sitting with people. Especially when you were basically aboard a ship packed with friends.

I think I had picked up the need for company when I ate from when I dated Ba'an. Vampires said it was bad luck to eat alone. So much so that on their home world neighbours who lived alone would take it in turns to cook for each other.

I thought about my friends. I was glad that Ba'an and Lea had found each other; they were a much better fit than he and I ever was. He needed someone who was honest about what they wanted. Told him

how they felt. She needed someone who would let her be herself, *really be herself*. Which was often its own challenge.

Leon and Mitch gave me a wave from their table. I grabbed a plate of bacon and eggs from one of the large hatches that were all across the one wall. I also got myself a bottle of Elix and a pot of coffee. The hatch struggled to put it all on one tray. I pulled it out carefully and sat with my boys.

“Good morning, guys, how’s things?” I asked as I moved my precariously balanced coffee pot from the edge of the tray and placed it on the table.

“We’re wonderful. How are you today?” As polite as ever, Leon.

I took a large gulp of coffee straight from the pot and then poured the bottle of Elix in. I noticed Mitch’s eyes go wide as I did.

“Well, I’ll be far better once I get this down me,” I said, using the handle end of my fork to stir the pot.

“It is, as always, an honour to eat breakfast with you, Doctor. Really, it is.” I liked Leon, I really did, but he needed to get over this idea that I was some figure of legend.

“Are you ever going to call me Kay?” I asked. Leon smiled. Mitch shook his head with wide eyes. Mitch didn’t speak. Not ever. There was no medical issue. He just, for reasons of his own, didn’t. He and Leon loved each other very much, though and as long as Mitch kept on being a wonderful medical assistant, I didn’t need him to tell me about it.

I saw Jon and Ba’an walk in. I half stood up to wave at them. Ba’an gave me a thumb-up to show that he had seen me, and they soon headed over with trays of their own.

“Is he really going to sit with us?” Leon asked. I just raised an eyebrow at him rather than justify his hero worship of my grandfather.

“Good morning!” Ba’an said with glee. “Gentlemen!” he added, to acknowledge the boys.

Jon was less perky. “Hi,” was all he said as he sat down, reading something from a data-tablet.

He was obviously wrapped up in some research. I was willing to bet that Ba’an had dragged him to the mess hall in an attempt to get him to take a little time out.

“Jon, do you think you should put the screen down?” I asked, giving Ba’an a glancing smile.

“He’s been at this since last night!”

“What is he researching?” I asked.

“You know how Brick space was recently expanded, because they need to open new mining operations for the rebuild?” Ba’an said as he ate. I think it was beef. It was rare to point that I was pretty sure I could save it, if I had my medical bag with me.

“Yeah, what about it?” I asked.

“Well, he saw something in the charts that made him do one of his check-outs and he’s been doing this since.”

Mitch and Leon looked like there were in the presence of Aygah herself from the way they stared at Jon.

“Oh, for the love of cake!” I said and snatched the tablet from his hand. He blinked for a second.

“Hey!”

“Jon, research later. Mitch and Leon aren’t used to you yet, and I think you need a break before you vanish into a memory hole and they start bowing to you!”

“Sorry. Hi guys,” he said, trying desperately to change mental gear and actually engage with the people he was with.

I wanted to ask what it was that he was looking for, but I knew better. It would put him back into research mode, and he told no

one his theories, until he was sure about them. He said that saying something out loud made it more real and removed other possibilities. *It was nonsense, of course.*

Gower had told us that it was something Aygah used to say when Jon and her were married. I missed Gower. I wish I had have got to know him better.

“What’s that smell?” Jon asked, *finally* switching out of research mode and into *person* mode. Honestly, from how visibly he changed focus, even I was shocked that he wasn’t a NOLF sometimes.

He leaned forward and sniffed my coffee pot. “Did you put Elix in your coffee?” he asked excitedly.

“Yeah, I do every morning!” I said. “Elix is super high in the types of energy that we metabolise and...” I stopped talking as he picked up my pot and started drinking it. “Really, Jon? Really?”

“You’re a genius!” he said with a grin. I leaned over and took his coffee pot.

“Well, enjoy! I suppose!” I said, realising that he had put about a million sugars into his. *Not bad, actually.*

“Where’s fur ball?” I asked. Ria would be usually right next to Jon like a shadow. She said it was her purpose to protect him. We all thought it was an overstatement until she saved his life and, at no minor risk to herself either. She would follow him to fire if he headed that way. I liked that someone was looking out for the old mayhem magnet.

“She’s sleeping. I’ve been awake since Monday. She can’t keep up. She only went to sleep because Libby promised to wake her if there was so much as a raised voice in my direction.”

I noticed Leon and Mitch, still in awe of Jon. “Guys, how is that every other Follower on the ship is over this and you guys are still... like this?” I asked.

They both shrugged.

“You really should relax. I’m almost a permanent fixture around here. Get to know me better. I’m actually a fucking mess,” Jon added, drinking the last of my coffee.

The Followers were a religion based on Aygah worship. One thing they believed was that Jon was *‘Her Champion’* and the rest of us were *‘The Great Family.’*

The really annoying thing was that they seemed to be right. Every prophecy, every legend. They were all true. I didn’t enjoy being a figure of worship, and I knew for certain that Jon hated it. It was hard to tell someone that they were wrong when you knew for a *fact* that their goddess was real and in my case, was my grandmother.

Most Followers had got past this blind worship phase, but Mitch and Leon were a special pair. They were basically Follower extremist. Unlike some other religions, that didn’t mean they were nut jobs. It meant that they would do anything for the group and because they were Followers, it meant that they worked harder than anyone else, loved every stranger they met and emanated joy wherever they went. They were the embodiment of good people. They were just a little odd around some of us.

“My lord. Do you need us to get you more coffee?” Leon asked, Mitch nodding enthusiastically next to him.

“Jon, just Jon,” he said; he always said that.

I slid him his original coffee pot back, he grinned at me. “No, thank you,” he said to them as he took the pot and gave me a grin.

“Where’s Libby this morning, anyway?” I asked. The bacon on my plate was running low. I would need to get more, and I needed coffee as well.

“Her *physical* avatar is helping Alin fit an AI core. Her *hologram* is on the bridge training some people in usage of said AI and, I am told,

somewhere else she's teaching a class about moral relativism," Jon said with half a mouth full of eggs, mentally trying to keep track of all his wife's avatars.

"Oh!" Leon said absent-mindedly. He took in a quick breath when he realised, he had made a sound.

"You okay there, Leon?" Ba'an asked.

"Err..." he stumbled, Mitch looking a little smugly at him.

"I don't bite," Jon said. I knew his connection making brain had instantly reminded him of time he *had* bitten someone.

"Err, I... I was not aware that Doctor Michaels, err, your wife, could support so many locations."

It always made me smile when I realised people had to specify which Doctor Michaels they were talking about. Libby, Jon and I were all Doctors, in different fields.

Jon smiled. Libby was his favourite subject in all the universe. "She can support two physical avatars. One ship-avatar, that's the hologram. Oh, and one fully functional virtual one. She can only support the Ship-avatar because Basilica's AI-web interface picks up a lot of slack. She hasn't figured out why yet, but she's working on it." Jon looked at them, waiting for follow-up questions.

"Do all her avatars have access to the purple eyes now?" Leon sheepishly asked.

"Yes. They seem to switch over automatically when she accesses her memories and skills from the other iteration she remembers. She's still figuring that out too."

This went on for the rest of breakfast. Jon enjoyed being able to talk openly about this and Followers were the only people outside of the family that knew the background to all this. He would go on for hours if I didn't stop him.



I eventually got back to the medical bay after more rounds of breakfast than even I would usually have. Mitch and Leon seemed to enjoy talking with Jon, once they had warmed up, finally. Well, Leon did. Mitch looked entertained enough buy the conversation.

There wasn't much in the way of actual work today, but the boys insisted on finding things to do around the bay.

"Kay, you in here?" I heard as Lea walked in.

"Lea!" I said, always happy to see her. She was one of my best friends and I saw her far less frequently than I liked. She was very busy flying ships and getting trashed.

It only took me a glance to see that there was something wrong with her. "Boys! We got a customer," I said as I sat her down on one of the medical beds.

"What's wrong? She looks okay!" Leon said. He was right. She did look okay, to anyone else. I had known her a long time, and she looked like she was distracted and a little spaced. Not at all like her usual sharp self. Lea was laser focused in everything she did usually. To see her looking distracted like this was rare, and not a good thing at all.

Mitch had already started a full spectrum scan and was loading a table up with my hand scanners and tracer injectors.

"Lea, tell me what's happening!" I said as I scanned her.

Leon pulled a holographic readout down above the bed. She physically looked well. She was Brick, they were always looked well, you had to look deeper. Their physiology was very far from human, even if their outward appearance was identical, well, superior.

"Kay. Kay, I can't do it anymore. They called me things Kay... The door. I never opened the door!" She was rambling and distracted. She was drunk! Not just regular Lea drunk. She was so drunk that she had

alcohol poisoning, dehydration and even swelling in her brain. She was so drunk that it would have killed a human.

“Okay guys, seal the medical bay,” I ordered. I had no wish for anyone else to see her in this state. Even if on the outside she looked okay, it would only take a glance from Ba’an or Libby and they would know instantly.

Thankfully, I knew Libby was very distracted. I also knew that her ship-presence *had* to honour my very specific instructions around doctor-patient confidentiality. She wouldn’t even know that she knew, unless her physical avatar saw her. The door was locked, so there was no chance of that now.

“Mitch, we treat as if she ingested a toxin, got it?” He nodded in response. “That’s how this gets recorded,” I added. They both knew it was alcohol poisoning, and her drinking was legendary. I was stern with my words. *It was a toxin.*

I started readying de-toxin and Injecting Cure-all. I loaded some nanite’s into her via an inhaler, countering the alcohol as fast as I could.

“I want you to confirm to me that you understand that this is not something we will discuss outside of this room.” I glanced at Mitch. He nodded gravely.

I started checking the bed scanners and making sure I wasn’t missing something.

Leon looked hurt that I would even ask. “Doctor. *I understand!*”

Lea had either intentionally or accidentally almost drunk herself to death, and I did not want anyone trying to talk to her about it. Not until I got to save her life, so I could throttle her later.



It took the boys and me two hours to purge her system and repair the damage she had done. She was sleeping it off now. I had sedated her to make sure she would get the rest she needed.

I sat down in my little office and felt like I was going to cry. Was this my fault? How bad had things got that she would do this, and no one knew? Libby usually monitored her drinking. We had never said anything directly, but everyone knew Libby watched over her.

I pressed the button to access the ship's computer, which *was* Libby. I used the button so that there was no mistake as to which aspect of Libby I was talking to. The ship wide version of her had some over-rides regarding medical privacy that the other versions didn't. This was the only way I was willing to allow her any access to the medical records of the people in my care.

"Hi, Kay. What do you need?" she asked in her helpful way.

"What was Lea doing before she came into the medical bay today?"

I asked.

"She had been in her quarters all day. Why?"

"What was she doing in there?" I asked.

"Kay, you know I can't tell you that." Libby took privacy seriously. We both did, which is why we had this arrangement in the first place.

"Libby, access her patient records on your encrypted stream."

"Oh... Is she okay?" Libby asked. Instantly aware of what I was talking about.

"Yes. But I need to know *why* she is in this state."

The video on my screen showed Lea in her room at eight this morning, according to the timestamp. She was playing with one of Libby's Pianyes' and working her way through a bottle of something strong looking. I squinted. She was drinking Elix. Elix was basically poison to anyone except Elves and Bio-statics.

“Kay, she had been there since five, when Ba’an was called to the bridge,” Libby said from the other screen.

I sighed to myself. We all knew the little Pianyes’ showed you things that you may not be ready to see. They toys had become instantly popular with the crew. For *most* people, it was an affirmation, but with Lea, she had been through a lot. I don’t think she had gotten over the attack on her homeworld. She had refused to try the toy, which I think we all agreed was smart. Why would she mess with one, alone, while drinking?

“Libby, can you show me what it showed her?” I asked.

“I can put it on the screen, but it won’t be the same as the version she saw. I can’t project those sorts of holograms in here.”

“Do it, please.”

The screen filled with rain. It looked like a rainstorm on Central. The raindrops were all screaming as they fell. The camera panned up slowly as a city station came down tumbling through the clouds, in a blaze of rainbow fire. There wasn’t music like there would usually be. There was just crying and screams echoing in some horrific choir of pain. I could see how this would affect Lea. With the immersion and depth that the real thing had. Yeah, this was not something she needed.

“Stop,” I asked. The video vanished. I didn’t need to see any more. The little toys extracted your thoughts and made a brief presentation out of your mind. It was almost always a bit too deep, but only ever a reflection of yourself. No one who had used it had seen anything other than things that made them a happy, sure, a little melancholy at times but it was hardly a horror show.

“I don’t suppose there is even a chance it was faulty, is there?” I asked.

“No.”

“And she watched it on loop?”

“Few hours at least.”

“Libby, this information isn’t something I want your wider self-knowing,” I said, to make very my expectations very clear.

“I know the rules. But I think you should tell me about this,” she said, almost crying.

“I know you do, and if I do, you’ll tell Jon and Ba’an because you think they should know. Which is why I won’t tell you. It’s also why *I’m* the doctor.”

“Understood,” she said and blinked off my screen. He was pissed off. It didn’t matter she wouldn’t know she was annoyed next time I spoke to her.



It was early evening by the time Lea woke up. I had sent the boys away, gave them the rest of the day off. I had sat by Lea’s bed and brushed up in my Brick biology.

“Hello ceiling,” she said as an announcement of life.

“That unfamiliar sense of focus you have, that would be soberness. I think, looking at your scans, that it’s the first time you have felt like this in quite a few months.”

She sat up. “Feels pretty good!” she said as her head cleared.

“That’s because you’re on enough painkillers that I think you would feel fine if I shot you right now! Which is good because I’m thinking about it.”

She looked a little ashamed. “I wasn’t that bad. I just came here for some painkillers.”

“Fuck off Lea. I know exactly how bad you were. I had to purge your system before the Elix you were mainlining did *actual brain damage!*”

I was angry, but not really at her. I was angry that we had all failed her. We should have known how bad things were for her.

She sat on the edge of the bed quietly for a few minutes before breaking the silence. "Does anyone else know?"

"No. But only because my professional oath prevents me from telling them," I said, scanning her to make sure she really was okay, now she was awake.

"Not even Libby?"

"Libby and I have an arrangement. She knows, she just doesn't know she knows."

"Smart," she said, understanding what I meant by that.

"You like flying ships?" I asked, knowing the answer already.

She looked at me, expecting a lecture.

"The part of Libby that knows will be doing a quick scan when you sit in the flight chair on Basilica *or* Thirteen from now on. Controls won't respond if you're fucked up."

"Basilica, I understand, but Thirteen is *my* ship!" she said indignantly.

"Oh, and you'll be talking to someone, someone professional, twice a week until they tell me you don't need to go any more, understand?" I wanted to front load the facts.

She looked at me, no rage, or argument. The fight had gone from her. "I... I saw my world burn, Kay. I never even opened the door!"

"Door?" I asked, I had no idea what she was talking about. "You were talking about a door when you came in."

"When the sky fell, I watched. Thirteen's shield protected me. I never went to the door. I never went to see if anyone was outside."

"Oh, Lea... The door was locked, the ship was in lockdown. All the scans told you there was no one out there to save. Your president gave you an honorary! Lea, you're a hero!"

She started sobbing. I sat next to her and held her while she got it out.

“Kay....” She sobbed. “Kay, I never checked.”

She wailed with tears.

“The scans, Lea, Thirteens scans. There was no one there to save. The ship was in lockdown. You wouldn’t have been able to open the door even if you tried!” I told her again.

She cried for another few minutes. “Kay, I never checked. I didn’t know. There could have been a hundred people trying to get in and I didn’t even check the screen! Kay, I just saved myself.”

I was angry. A deep anger now. I was angry that I didn’t know she felt this way. I was angry that we had failed her, that *I* had failed her. The so-called *Great Family* and we didn’t even know how broken our sister was. *I cried with her.*

After a while, the tears dried, she sat quietly in my arms. “Ba’an will want to know where I am,” she eventually said.

“No, he won’t. I told him you were going to be staying in my quarters this evening, watching movies and talking about him.”

She laughed. “Can we?” she asked.

“Sure, we can.”

Thursday: Ria

I woke up. I showered. Elders liked it when you showered. My people liked a scent on each other. Elders wanted you to have *no* scent. That's fine. When with Elders, do things Elders like.

I hadn't been home in a couple of years. I didn't need to; the Followers were my home. Wherever there were Followers, I had a clowder. There were Followers everywhere.

I checked my Cirplet. Six in the morning. Jon would be asleep until eight. That's what time he had arranged for us to go out in Thirteen and visit the destroyed Thinker world. Jon wouldn't get up until eight though, then he would rush around and be late. Jon was reliably late. People thought he was busy; Jon was not busy.

I looked around my room. I enjoyed having my own room. Most of the other Followers had lived in the communes or moved to the apartment building that Libby had let us use. I lived on Basilica. I had done ever since it was given to us by *Her*. It made me feel closer to *Her*. Just like protecting Jon.

I looked out of the window. There was a planet below. We were back at Central. We always came back to Central. Jon loved Central, that's why we put our biggest temple here. Well, biggest until we were given Basilica.

I knew we were supposed to get at least one more supply run done. It would take a day to load up the cargo, assuming Libby could get it all the things on the Bricks needed. Jon said he wanted to explore a star system at the edge of the new Brick expansion area. Now the Thinkers were gone, the Bricks had taken a lot of their territory. Thinkers never shared their star charts, and their space was the biggest of all the Elder races.

Thinker space was the spoils of war, it was rightfully Human territory now. They cut it in half and let Bricks take it as a way of saying sorry for their planet getting smashed. I didn't much like the way Elders did things, but this seemed fair to me.

The Bricks needed resources and they would have to scan all the stars to find uninhabited planets with resources they could mine. Elders didn't mine the worlds of Younger races, they protected them. Though, it seems that the Thinkers had ignored them all.

The space Thinkers had was underdeveloped. There were Younger races fighting wars, races dying and races who didn't even know how to leave their planets.

The Bricks planned on helping all of them, once they fixed their own world. I had no idea what the Humans would do with their worlds. I was glad the Thinkers were gone, but Jon had told me that he thought it was a tragedy.

They started a fight. We beat them; their death was our victory. Elders never understood this. Most Younger races didn't either. My people did. We weren't strong in space like a lot of species; we weren't technically minded like some either, but we knew how to fight and hunt better than any. Only the Elves came close to us, but even then, they relied on tools; we had everything we needed given to us when we were born. *I looked at my claws and smiled.*

I dressed in my Follower uniform today. I preferred my own clothes, but I wanted to set an example for the initiates. There were only three levels of Follower. Initiate, full Follower and Keeper. David was the Keeper. We all followed him.

Even with no ranks or privileges, they thought of me as more important than most. I was treated with the same respect as the *Great Family* by other Followers. I assumed it was because Jon liked me. I didn't mind, but they didn't need to treat me differently at all.

On the day Jon had arrived to us, I collected him with my little shuttle and when he first faced danger, David had told me to protect him. This was my calling now. My life was in service of his protection.

It had been decided that while Jon travelled with Followers, I would be with him.

Most people didn't understand me. I still had my own interests, my own life, but nothing as important as making sure I was there when Jon needed me. I always watched everyone around him and was ready to kill anyone who attacked him. Other than his family, everyone was a potential enemy, even Followers may have been infiltrated. We had gained a lot of new members of late. Jon said I was paranoid, Libby said I was careful. David said I was right.

Followers didn't kill but, we served Aygah. Aygah had seen fit to allow me to be Jon's protector. I think she chose me because I was *willing* to kill when others would hesitate. Followers would die for Her, but only I would kill for Her.

Jon understood this.



Thirteen was a good ship but it was no Basilica. Even with the Warp it took us until almost three in the afternoon to arrive at Thinker Prime.

We dropped out of TD-Drive and the Kingdom ship Anglia targeted us. Ba'an frantically pressed buttons to transmit our ID code.

"Anglia, this is Thirteen. We are not hostile. Please respond."

"I think we can take them. In a fair fight!" Lea said, pretending to shoot it with her fingers. She was funny. That ship could one-shot us into dust. Kingdom ships were for fighting wars, not tiny star ships.

"Thirteen, this is Anglia. Your clearance checks out. You have been pre-authorised for this sector but please do not take deep scans, this area is considered to be classified."

Ba'an thanked them. Then turned to Jon, "Pre-authorised?"

"Thirteen saw our destination and called ahead. We weren't authorised. It contacted Libby and she fixed our clearance," Lea said smugly.

"Thirteen can do that?" Ba'an asked.

"Libby finally got you that AI upgrade then?" Jon asked.

Libby wasn't with us, which felt strange. She was distracted today. Jon had asked her to check the gravity wave scans from the newly unlocked Brick space, the old Thinker space. The maps she was calculating were complicated, she had to take some of her avatars off-line to make it work.

Jon was looking for something that wasn't in range of the initial scans. The gravity information reached a little further into the area. Mercia's computer could have done the maths fast, it probably already had. Jon didn't want anyone in Sol alliance to know he was looking for something.

We were making friends with the Brick government now. Jon hoped that when they were all fixed up, they would be happy to help us with these things. After all, the work Jon did was to serve *Her* plan and *Her*

plan was for the good of everyone. Though Jon never admitted to that. He said he ignored the plan. *Jon lied to himself a lot.*

I wasn't sure why Jon suddenly didn't trust the humans, but I agreed with him. Some things I had seen in David's secret book had made me feel the same way a while ago.

Lea made an agreeable sound and entered orbit. "Where you want to land?" she asked.

"Is there a team in the old capital city?" he asked.

"Yeah. I'll set us down there. Weather on the surface isn't very welcoming, though."



We exited Thirteen into an electrical storm. There were Sol structures set up all around us. Jon headed for the biggest. I had made sure he had an active shield and gun. Now his arm had a built-in concussion cannon, I was far less worried about him than I had been in the past. There was literally no way he could forget to take a weapon now.

I also liked that he wasn't bothering to get the arm skin-coated again, showed confidence in a way he usually didn't. He *was* confident, he just rarely exposed it. He was quietly in control of most situations.

"Doctor Michaels? President Ty!" shouted a long-haired Elven man from the tent door. "Get in quickly!" he said, the wind and rain beating down on us while the lightning cracked above.

We entered the tent-like structure. Its walls were solid, but its roof was soft, like fabric. I caught a blue glow as we walked in. It was under a shield, which was why the storm was silenced when we entered.

I looked for predators as the door closed. There were Sol security officers. I counted five, all armed with rifles. I couldn't take five without

help. I knew Jon could fight, so would Lea. I had no idea what Ba'an would do. I should know if he was a warrior or not. *I would ask Jon.*

The Elven man was busy securing the door behind us. "You're lucky. The lightning can actually hit the surface when the storm gets this bad," he said. He was tall; his long blonde hair was platted with great care. He wore thick grey trousers and a loose white shirt.

Two men came over. Both human. One was armed, the other had the demeanour of a scientist. Ba'an took the lead. He shook hands and explained that we had come because Jon was curious about the project. He lied and said that Jo had authorised us to visit. No one would question it, and Jon really would have had her blessing if he had asked. He didn't like the government knowing too much about what threads he was chasing. He trusted Jo, but not her government.

"Is my ship okay out there?" Lea asked the men.

The armed man passed her a data tablet without saying anything. I looked at it as she studied it. Weather reports. Lea read it for a few seconds and then pressed her Cirlet "Thirteen, you listening?" she asked.

"Yes," returned the robotic voice of the ship's AI.

"You got some bad weather heading your way, keep security system armed and the shield fired up."

The ship chimed in response.

Telling the ship to activate the shield was smart in bad weather, but arming the security system wasn't standard practice. I wondered what she had noticed. Was there something I missed, or was she just paranoid? I liked paranoid. Paranoid was smart.

I eyed the security team, making sure I could see them all. Sol were our allies, and we had very high-level clearance but when humans had guns, I watched them as a matter of principle. I was bad with guns,

but I was fast. If they were imposters or worse, then by the time they took aim, I would be cutting throats.

“Our project isn’t very far along I’m afraid, and there was a lot of destruction when the city fell but if there is anything specific you want to see, I will happily help you myself,” said the Elven man who had let us in.

When we had landed, I got a good look at the city. It was actually very small, no more than a dozen miles from edge to edge. It was mostly debris, but there were a few of the larger buildings that looked intact.

The Sol tents were arranged around the eastern edge. There was a makeshift landing area set up where the debris had been cleared. There had been five or six transports dotted around, all larger than Thirteen, even though they were only cargo shuttles. We had headed to the closest tent, the largest one. Jon said that human arrogance always made the biggest building the most important one. He was right. *He usually was.*

The tent was lit with large floating lamps and there were surprisingly few people. No more than ten science people, and then the security team. There were crystal artefacts all around on tables and a lot of equipment. Some men were covering up things with blankets. I noticed that Jon hadn’t missed that.

The Elf man had introduced himself as ‘Lumi of Rudda.’ Elven names were strange to me. The first part was what you called them, a name that was given to them based on what winds were blowing on their home world when they were born. The second part was the family they aligned themselves with. If they married or changed political stances, it could change. My name was Ria. Because my mother thought it was pretty.

“Lumi, I know you’re busy, and I assure you, I have no desire to take you away from your work. I just want to take a look at the remains of the central library, if that’s okay,” Jon asked.

The Elf looked concerned. “What are you looking for Doctor?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m a historian and it’s just idle curiosity really,” he lied. He was looking for star charts. I knew full well he was looking for star charts.

“I’m afraid it’s quite unsafe, not to mention unsecure. I can’t possibly let you go unless a security team comes with you,” Lumi said.

Lea smiled widely and interrupted him. “The treaty between the Sol Alliance and Brick Cooperative, it respects rank, doesn’t it?” she asked. I was sure she already knew the answer because I saw Ba’an smirk.

“Err, well, yes, why?”

“Oh, how fortunate. I hold the rank of General. I think with the skills, experience and training we have, that we won’t need to bother you for support at this time, but thank you for your concern,” she said. She looked far friendlier than the content the words implied.

She flashed her Circlet screen, showing her credentials, then pointed at the small pin she wore on her flight jacket. The security man leaned in a little to see it. The intricately designed piece of jewellery was a shiny red stone, it was edged with five shiny white rocks, I was told this was a rank insignia.

“Oh,” Lumi said, a little put out by suddenly not being the biggest dog in the room.

“You should wait for the storm to pass,” the security man said. I think he was entertained a little by the exchange.

“The library should be only about five minutes’ walk from here. Even with all the debris. We’ll be there in ten. We’ll be fine,” Jon said, looking at the map on his Circlet screen.

“We won’t have the spare people to come and rescue you should you get in trouble,” Lumi added, as if it was a sudden revelation. A reason to stop us.

Ba’an was next to spar with the man. “You realise, when the war ended, and they destroyed the structure, these two were on the surface?” he said, gesturing to Jon and me. “I think we maybe more qualified than *your own people*, sir.”

“Oh, so it’s true then?” Lumi replied.

Jon raised an eyebrow. “If you want to show me the report about what happened, I would be happy to verify its contents for you, when we get back.”

Jon had already read the reports that Sol were circulating. It said that Jon led a small strike team into a secret facility and detonated an experimental weapon that killed the entire race of Thinkers and ended the war. Officially, he was recognised as a hero by them.

The strike team he led was actually just he and I. The experimental weapon was an artefact of Aygah and it contained one of Jon’s friends. The only reason he survived was because of the shields Alin had designed for us. They fused technology from Basilica and Thirteen. He wore the same shield now. We all did.

The security man seemed like he knew Lumi was going to argue with us more. “There’s a little ground floater out back. It’s got a basic shield that should keep you safe from the storm. If you do get in trouble, call me directly,” he said, tapping his data tablet to upload his communication code to our Circlets.

“Thank you,” Lea said with a smile that made me wonder if she was seducing the human. Ba’an rolled his eyes at her. *She was playing with him.*



I liked the little ground floater we got to ride in. It was bouncy and large. Its top was open, but the shield kept us dry. Its blue panels kept it about a hand away from the ground and Jon said it reminded him of a buggy. *I had no idea what that was.*

“Why didn’t you say anything?” he asked as we rode. We were both in the back of the ‘buggy’ while Lea and Ba’an were up front. Lea drove, or piloted. I wasn’t sure when to use the other word. Still the occasional gap in my Elder-tongue.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“We all took some shots at that Lumi guy. You just watched. You don’t have to stay quiet all the time. Your opinion, your input, it’s always as valuable as everyone else’s. You know that, right?” Jon asked, with his extra sincere voice.

“I’m just a warrior. Unless a fight happens, I don’t have anything to add.”

“You’re not a *just* a warrior. You’re our friend Ria. You don’t have to hide behind your purpose with us.”

I didn’t like it when Jon wanted me to be more like an Elder. He thought he was being kind, but I wasn’t an Elder, that may not matter to him but it would have mattered to the humans in that tent. If I had have argued with the man in the same way the others had, I would have been causing more problems, not solving anything. I knew my place in the universe. I was not an equal to Elders in the eyes of Sol people. Bricks and Elves, maybe, but humans assumed I was stupid. I didn’t know what Vampires were like, not really. I had only met Ba’an and a couple of Initiates of his species. So far, I liked them.

The city we slowly drove through, was just as wrecked as Forge had been when the sky fell. This wasn’t the same type of damage though. This wasn’t smashed from above or toppled when the gravity generators failed. This was blown up from the street level. When the

Thinkers knew they were going to die without the temple that gave them life, they broke as much as they could. They wanted to leave nothing of value for those who remained. They were spiteful and selfish.

Jon said they were scared and misunderstood. He felt guilt because he had been the one who ultimately killed them all. He wouldn't take pride in his victory, no matter how much I tried to explain it to him.

He had even submitted himself for trial to the Brick government. They read his report and told him he was a hero. He then went to the Vampire government who thought long and hard and then told him he was a hero too. He wanted someone to punish him, but no one saw the crime in his actions. *No one other than him.*

"Why did they build this?" I asked as we stopped next to what was once a large library. Now a half-destroyed shell with rubble all around.

"The library?" Jon asked as he checked his shield.

"No, the city. If they didn't need this sort of place, why build it?" I asked.

Jon explained that the Thinkers needed places to do commerce and to train their people how to live in the types of worlds that the rest of the Elders had. The star-ports they needed required hotels, and shops and loading docks. They had just swelled into small cities over the years. When they died, they lashed out at them in anger because they hated that they ever had to exist.

Jon was good at explaining things.

"You sure this place is safe to go into?" Lea asked.

Ba'an was about to say something when the silent electrical storm above lashed out and a blue tendril of energy lit the street not far from us.

"Never mind, let's get in there!" she said, checking her shield was charged and scurrying into the husk of the building.



The inside of the building was far more intact than I had expected from the state of the outside. Though, its data tablets and crystal storage devices had been shot at, repeatedly. There was even a hole in the back wall where an explosion had taken out a staircase, rain was streaming in like a small river. It was sad to see so much senseless destruction.

“Well, shit,” Lea said as she inspected it.

“Jon, I don’t think there’s a lot here to find,” Ba’an added.

“We’re not here for the books, guys,” Jon said. “You think I brought you all this way and just decided to take a look in a random library, on the off chance that there might be something here of interest?”

“Err, yeah... actually, I think we all did,” Lea said.

“I did not!” I said proudly. Jon had told me to speak more. *So, I did.*

“Well, why don’t you enlighten us Jon, why *are* we here?” Ba’an asked. He often seemed grumpy to me. Jon said he was new to the type of life we all led; he would get better at it once he had acclimatised and learned to enjoy it.

Jon, Lea and I were not like other people. Libby was like us too, but most people wanted structure and planning in their lives. We wanted something else, something that we didn’t have words for. I think we just wanted adventures.

“This building, it’s not part of the city. Well, it is, now. But originally, it was part of the base we set up when we first found this planet. We had our first bunker here,” Jon said.

“Jon, that was literally a millennia ago, *and* in a different version of reality!” Ba’an was unconvinced.

Jon smiled widely. “No. It *was* a millennia ago and in a different reality... *was*.”

Ba’an shrugged at him. Lea made an “oh!” face that told me she understood.

“On one hand all of history existed and it’s just a memory. But, when we found a facility on Earth that was left over from The Event. It was just two months old, an artefact from an earlier iteration,” he said, wild-eyed.

“Yes, but this whole planet is one of these artefacts, isn’t it?” Ba’an said, sounding a tiny bit grumpier than before.

We exchanged glances, wondering how long it would take him to work this out.

He said “ohhhhh” a few moments later when he realised.

If the whole planet was an artefact, then the bunker Jon had come to visit was not from a millennia ago, it was less than a year ago.

We went to the back of the library where there was an exposed crack in the wall that let us into the basement of the building, where there were storage boxes filled with crystals and data tablets. It was dark. Everyone else used their Cirplet as a torch. My eyes were better than theirs in low light.

The floor was wet, the rain from the hole in the wall on the ground floor let it trickle in.

“I can see now why you always wear boots, Jon,” Ba’an said, glad that he had followed everyone else’s fashion tips.

“Jon, you sure there’s a bunker down here? Maybe there’s something in these weird crystals the Thinkers liked so much,” Lea said as she poked a box of well organised data crystals. Each crystal was the size of an apple and perfectly round.

“I wasn’t sure until now. Actually, I was worried I was wrong, until I got down here,” he said, in his often used, distracted tone.

“Did you notice something the rest of us didn’t?” Ba’an asked.

“Yep,” he replied, glancing at me and letting out just a hint of smugness.

“Jon, there’s water up to my ankles and I can’t see shit. What did you possibly see that confirms there’s a bunker here?” Lea asked

I looked at the water at my feet. I didn’t like water, never had. Jon never seemed to care about things like that. As far as I knew, he had no fears. Though he once told me he didn’t like fish. I never saw him eat fish either. Maybe he was talking about food.

From what I knew about his planet, it rained a lot. That was a good point. How long ago was it that this building was destroyed? How fast was this basement filling with water? I suddenly realised what Jon knew. He was smart. He had noticed it instantly.

“Oh, come on Lea, you are seriously telling me you can’t see the obvious sign of a bunker?” Jon said. He liked to poke Lea like this. Sometimes she saw things even he didn’t, if she was pushed, just a little. Jon said she was smarter than most people he knew but the booze made her head fuzzy. Still, she smelled less like she had been drinking today.

“The water,” I said.

“The water!” Jon said with a grin, pointing at me with excitement.

“What about it?” Ba’an asked. He had been looking all around the basement, searching for clues that he was already standing in.

“This area of the planet is constantly under heavy rain. Well, why isn’t this basement under water?” Jon asked.

“Oh,” Lea said, “That is a good point.”

“So, we need to find where it’s draining away and that’s the entrance?” Ba’an asked.

“Brilliant plan. Though, given that the water pump is obviously still active and has power, that means the rest of the bunker does too...”

Jon stopped talking and grinned at me, like he was making sure I was paying attention. "I could just ask Aygah herself to open it for us!"

The moment he stopped talking, a low rumbling filled the basement. The water was flushed as a platform lit in the middle of the room. The platform was lifting slowly out of the floor as the water ran down the crevice that it had exposed.

Did he really call on Aygah to open it? I knew he was once her lover, her husband, but did he really have the power to call her down on a whim? Why didn't he do it the last time we were in trouble? We both almost died. He told me she wouldn't visit again. Was she with us? Was she going to appear?

I felt myself freeze up. A hand touched my shoulder. I flinched; it was Jon. "Relax, I was messing with you. It's a neural lock, like on Thirteen."

I felt a wave of calm hit me. At the same time, some part of me was disappointed that it was just a game. I wanted nothing more than to meet *Her*. It was my greatest dream in all the universe. Still, I got to spend time with *Her* Champion; I was closer than most who shared this dream.

"A neural lock?" Ba'an asked. "I thought that sort of technology only existed in previous realities," Ba'an said as the platform revealed itself to be a staircase leading down into darkness.

"Yeah, and this bunker is from that reality too. We invented neural actuation locks because they didn't require keys, passwords, or DNA. Just the right image in your brain. We were at war, and we were good at staying alive," Jon said with a typical shrug. Only Jon could talk about artefacts from previous realities, like they were spare socks.

"Come on, how did you know it was here?" Lea asked. I wondered too, but I had assumed it was his divinity, his purpose.

“The Thinker temple was here. This was made at the same time. It was once the base at the end of a very long tunnel. We used it to keep dangerous things away from our main operation. We eventually realised that a tunnel was also a way for people to sneak in. We sealed it up with rocks. We kept the base though. Anyway, the temple was still there, and this was *technically* connected. It had to be here. That seems to be how all this works,” Jon explained as he peered down the staircase, waiting for the water to be sucked away by whatever was down there.

“And you knew it was in the library, how?” Ba’an grilled.

“Well, I looked at a map. And drew a line of exactly five thousand miles due east from the ascension chamber. The map said it was under this library.” Jon was rolling his eyes at having to explain himself. He hated it when people asked him how his knowledge was gained.

“Wait,” Lea began. “This tunnel is five thousand miles long?” she asked.

“Yeah. Back in the early days, with Blade engineers, we could accomplish some impressive things in a few days. It was literally magic, functionally speaking.”

Lea whistled, impressed at the engineering. The Follower books had taught me that the older iterations had magic. The books said that they used technology, magic, and energy beyond the scope of our understanding.

“Okay, let’s go get my data and get out of here!” Jon proclaimed with a clap of his hands. He started marching down the stairs. I followed him without a thought, but I saw Ba’an and Lea looked at each-other nervously before I heard them follow.



We came to the bottom of the staircase after almost ten full minutes of walking. The steps had started glowing after a few seconds and while we couldn't see much, our footing was assured.

As we stepped off of the last step the room's walls glowed. Each one emitting dim white light. The edges of each panel leaking brightly.

The room was reasonably sized; it had a few desks with computer screens built into the walls above them. There was a grey, smoked glass divider at one end of the room that I couldn't see past. The ceiling and floor were covered in the same white panels as the walls, but the ones above glowed brighter.

"It's been a while!" Jon said happily as he took stock of it all.

While I stuck close to Jon, Ba'an and Lea walked around the room looking at all the strange things on the wall screens. "What is all this?" Lea asked, noticing the writing on the readouts.

Jon ignored the question and walked to the far end of the room, past the glass divider. I followed, as I always did.

I stopped my stride when we entered the room. The place was large, like a ship hanger, and there were three rows of desks to my right that ran the length of the hanger. There was a little area at the far end that looked to be communal seating, complete with tables. The left side of the room contained assortments of devices and parts all laid out on tables that had glowing white tops to better highlight the trinkets. The light was coming from long glowing tubes suspended to the ceiling by silver chains.

I heard movement behind us as Lea flowed. "...Circler scanner says that this language isn't on file but..." she stopped talking when she saw the room. "Okay. Did *not* expect this."

Ba'an came in a moment later and just looked around, mouth agog.

Jon was less impressed by the sight. He walked over to the trinket tables and started inspecting them with his Circler scanner.

“What is all this?” I asked.

Jon glanced up at me and back to his Cirplet. “Back in the first iteration, there were some technologies that we encountered which we had very little understanding of. Things the Humans had made, things the other races had made, some stuff we literally found floating in space; which we never quite worked out. There were even some things Blades made which scared the shit out of us. The resistance groups brought what it could find here, in hopes we could figure out enough of it to maybe help win the war.”

The three of us stood close to Jon and looked at his scans. I could see that his Cirplet was set to *vault*. This was something he had set up that meant the scans it took would not be uploaded to the network. It would sync with Doors when he got back to Central. Jon was careful with data. He understood its power.

“I assume you all know well enough to not touch any of this stuff?” he asked with a commanding glance at Lea.

“What are you looking for?” she asked, surveying the odd things.

The table Jon was scanning held pieces of circuits. All looked burned. Most etched into stones and crystals.

“Was this the technology that became the Coffin?” I asked, recognising the configuration.

“Yes. Good eye,” he said. “It was called *mounting*. We could place a computer on any surface. Blades could even *mount* inside solid objects. Between their atoms I’m told. It was the only way to put enough compute into the Coffin without true AI cores like we have now,” he explained.

“Where did this come from?” Ba’an asked.

“Mounting? It was invented by a race at the rim of a galaxy called Bode.”

“What!” Lea exclaimed. “You guys left the fucking galaxy! Do you know how big the gaps between galaxies are?”

Jon smiled and pocketed a pink crystal that sported green circuits across its surface. Other than the etching it looked natural and raw. “Lea, we may not have had AI cores back in then, but we sure as shit had better engines than we do now!”

Lea didn’t reply, she just waved her hand, expecting more information from him.

Jon grinned. “We had explorer ships that were a similar design to Basilica, except Basilica would be able to land in the *small* cargo hold of one of them. They didn’t just rip a little hole in the fabric of space like Basilica’s engine does. They left permanent scars across space time. The veins of damage they left allowed other, smaller ships to travel far faster than they should be able to. We built a sort of network of fast travel pipes... I think *pipe* is the right word, *tunnel* maybe?”

I almost felt the moment that Jon lost interest in the topic. He pocketed a small red crystal about the size of an eye. It had silver etching on it.

He walked to the next table. This one held shards of metal that looked like pieces of projectiles. Bullets maybe? I had not seen many types of bullets.

“Would these pipes still exist? Do you know where to find them?” Lea asked, flowing Jon quickly.

“I honestly don’t know how far Aygah’s powers extend. When she alters reality, she changes a lot of things. Maybe it affects only our galaxy, maybe not even all of it. Or maybe it affects all the close by ones... maybe even all of creation. I don’t know. If I ever see her again, I’ll ask!” Jon replied. He sighed and moved to another table.

This new table contained small glassy rods that lay in a sweet-smelling water. Each rod was in its own little bowl and had some strange writing on plaques labelling them.

“To be clear, you’re saying there *may be* a magic pipe that will take me to another galaxy? She would have brought them to our universe?”

“Sort of. They would be there *unless* she removed them, I think. She may have left them there. It’s not like anyone other than me would know where to find them anyway.”

Jon was carefully scanning the table’s contents.

“Hey, Jon!” Ba’an called. He was sitting at one of the desks at the other side of the hanger. “This computer terminal seems to be trying to access my Cirplet, should I let it?” he asked, waving his Cirplet screen in the air.

Jon thought about this for a moment, then he nodded to himself. “Turn off your network access first, then let it in. Probably trying to download the language files. They were set up to do that.”

Ba’an gave us a thumb up and turned back to the boxy terminal screen.

Jon put his hand into the sweet water and pulled out one of the glass rods. He slipped it into the chest pocket on this jacket. He scanned a few more and took them too.

Lea tired of trying to pump Jon for more information about pipes and went to see what Ba’an was doing.

“Why don’t you take all the rods?” I asked. I had assumed they contained data. Lots of species stored data in crystals. It was fairly common and had a very high data density. Thinkers had used it as their standard method of storage.

“Because some contain data that I don’t want to allow back into the universe,” he said.

I understood this. “How do you know which ones are safe?”

“I read the labels,” he said, pointing at the strange writing on the plaques.

“That’s the same language as the control screen on the coffin, isn’t it?” I asked.

“It’s called French. It was the language that Aygah spoke. She removed it from this iteration, along with most other old Earth languages. Left us with Elder-tongue, which is just a very old dialect of something called English.”

“Why? Learning languages isn’t hard. A Cirplet could translate this easy enough, so why remove it?” I asked, suddenly realising that questioning *Her* plan may be blasphemy.

“She unified the languages, so that we had a little less in the way of barriers when we all met, the Elder races, that is. She chose early modern English because she said it was poetic. She liked it. The fact that this is in French isn’t to make it a secret; she just never tampered with it. It’s just how it was when she pulled it out of its original iteration.”

Jon didn’t seem upset at my questions. This would mean it wasn’t blasphemy. *I hoped*. I had one more question. “What is stored on them?”

Jon shared a lot of knowledge with me, but I had expected him to refuse to tell me that the crystals contained. He thought for a moment. “This one is marked as *history*,” he said, pointing at the first bowl. “Physics,” he said, pointing at the next. “Biology, cartography, electronics, and well, it goes on like that.”

He explained that the bowls and the liquid were not to protect the crystals. The bowls connected to a central computer by chips that were on the undersides of them. They were essentially access ports. He had taken the rods that contained history, cartography, engineering, and electronics. He had left *weapon systems, biology, physics*, and a

bunch more, including the one that seemed the most poignant to me, *temporal science*.

“Does that one tell you how to travel in time?” I asked.

“No. Time travel isn’t possible. Not even for Aygah. Not in the way you think. That one contains a lot of good stuff. A whole school of science that we never learned. I *want* to take it, but if I do, one day, someone could invent the Coffin again. I can’t risk it,” he said.

“And Biology?” I asked.

“It has genetic profiles, among other things. Someone could clone a new Blade with it.”

“We need to destroy that one, don’t we?” I asked.

Jon nodded. “Don’t worry about it. This place won’t be here for much longer,” he said.

He inspected a few more of the tables, pocketing the odd small trinket or device. Most I didn’t really understand. He was very selective, though.

When he was done, we went over to the terminal where Lea and Ba’an were sitting, looking very interested in its contents.

“What you found?” he asked, peering over their shoulders.

There was a video playing. It was in strangely muted colours, but it was clear and clean looking. It showed a video of a room with people working on something, a device.

“Oh, yeah. *That*,” Jon said with a hint of melancholy.

The video showed the room I was once in, the ascension chamber. It looked like it was still being built. Ba’an pressed buttons to change angle. There were cameras at all sorts of odd angles. He finally found the one he had been looking for.

“Jon, is this a video of from... I mean?” Ba’an had difficulty believing what he was seeing. An actual video from the first iteration.

“Yeah, it is,” he said. He leaned over and tapped the control on the desk. It flipped to an elder man in a cloak who was pointing at the walls animatedly. It took me a moment to realise that the man had a metal arm. He turned to the camera, looking at something on the other wall. His face was gaunt and old. His eyes lacked the spark of youth, his build was different, but it was him. It was Jon.

Ba’an paused the video playback. “Jon....” he said, not knowing how to articulate his thoughts.

Jon wiped away a single tear from his cheek as he looked at the still video image. “That was a long time ago guys. I was very different back then. It was not a good time in my life, my memory.”

We all looked on, captivated. “You are recording this, Ba’an?” he asked.

Ba’an grunted and showed his Circlet.

“Okay, well, let me show you something worth recording then.”

he spun the video forward for a few seconds and then played it in real time.

The same angle as before showed. The old man, Jon was leaning against a pile of bricks and reading a large handheld data screen of some kind. It looked chunky and old to me.

A new cloaked figure entered the frame and the video flickered for a moment. The figure put down her hood. I could see a face that was not like anything I had seen before. The skin was dark and etched in purple lines. Her cloak opened a little as she walked. She wore shorts and a cropped top, there was a light coming from her skins etching. Her hair was long but pulled tight into a pony. Her eyes glowed white. She looked like Kay.

The realisation hit me like a truck. I opened my mouth to speak but had no words. I felt myself begin to cry. I was looking at *Her*, at Aygah. This was something no one other than Jon had ever seen. It

was Aygah before she was ascended, but this *was* her. A video of the Goddess herself.

She laughed as they spoke. There was no sound on the video, but I didn't care. I watched as She threw back her cloak and stood next to Jon, she kissed him on the cheek and he smiled. He threw the data screen over his shoulder and pulled her in close. They kissed passionately. They both looked up as they heard something. A young woman entered the frame for a second. She looked like a human teenager. She waved her hands, seemingly objecting to the display of affection. Aygah and old Jon laughed with each other.

The video stopped. Jon had pressed a button to close the file.

He wiped away regretful tears and smiled. He wasn't sad or angry; he was just wrapped in a very old memory. "And that, my dear friends, is all you get to see. I can't risk you getting footage of any of the technology."

"Was that Jo?" Lea asked.

"Yeah, it was. About a month before she was killed. Whatever Aygah had to do to bring her back, Jo can't remember any of that life," Jon said. "I hope you have a good recording; I want to show her... and Libby."

"Can't we just take the file with us?" Ba'an asked.

"No. Nothing else can leave here. I have the star charts I wanted and a few little souvenirs. We have to get out of here now."

We headed out the way we came in.

"Why didn't the Thinkers torch this place with the rest of the planet?" Lea asked as we climbed the stairs.

"I doubt they even knew it was here. With all the reality tinkering that went on to create them, I'm not convinced the Thinkers were entirely stable."

We climbed into the main room of the library. There were small drones flitting about all over the place. They were scanner units from the base camp.

The humans research team was looking for what we had found. They were using us to uncover Thinker secrets for them.

“This can’t be good. They must have seen where we went,” Ba’an said sternly.

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Jon said. We strolled out of the building and made our way back the way we had come.

“You sure we don’t need to worry about them finding all that stuff?” Lea asked. As we got into the floating buggy. Ignoring the drones.

There was a massive lightning strike behind us as we drove our buggy away. The strike had so much power that it actually shook the ground and lit the night for almost five seconds. Lea turned the little floating buggy to see what had happened. The library had been levelled. The rock that it was constricted from was actually glistening, sparking. It had been turned to glass with the heat in some places. It almost looked like it had been hit from orbit by a ship cannon.

Lea looked suspiciously at Jon for a moment. She turned the buggy and headed towards our landing site.

“Jon... how did you do that?” Ba’an asked.

“I did nothing.”

“Oh, the storm just happened to strike the secret base the moment we left, did it?” Lea barked.

“Yeah, strange that. Almost like an act of God,” Jon replied, looking at me as he spoke.

“In Her, we trust!” I said with a wide smile on my face and a sense of warmth in my heart.

In Her we trust.

Friday: Joanne

I hate Fridays. I hate them. If Friday were a person, I would have him shot for treason. Friday can, in all honesty, fuck right off.

I pulled Ashley close and snuggled into the crook of her neck. Waking up with the woman I loved naked in my bed was possibly the greatest feeling in the world.

“You’re not getting up? Must be Friday,” she said with a sleepy voice.

“I think it’s Sunday. Go back to sleep!” I said, putting a suggestive hand on her stomach.

She slapped my hand away. “No! Go away! You told me not to let you sleep in. You said to throw you out if you tried to procrastinate.”

She was right; I had too much to do to waste a morning in bed. Waste was hardly the right word, but I definitely had more pressing matters to attend to.

“Will you be right here when I get back?” I asked.

“No. Not a chance. You never get in until the middle of the night on a Friday!”

Ash had a dopey grin and hadn't bothered opening her eyes. She pulled the blanket away from me and rolled away to the edge of our bed with it.

"Really! That's just mean!" I grumbled.

"Yep. Us elves are known for our mean streak!"

I kissed her little pointy ear and forced myself out of bed.

"I'm going to leave you for a nicer woman!" I yelled in as the shower came on.

"Nope. You can't leave me. It's your ship. I need to leave you," she said, trying to sound more awake.

Ash had been on Mercia for a few days now. She was saying for a few weeks. We had barely seen each other over the last few months. The Thinker war had put me under a lot of stress; I had made a few dubious decisions related to my family and friends. I think I almost lost her back there at one point.

Now we were back to normal, and I wanted nothing more than to stay with her until the end of time. The truth was, though, that I couldn't just bask in her company for a while yet. I would, as soon as I got the last few things sorted out. I would step down in a few months. Ash didn't know yet, but I was going to leave politics and ask her to marry me.

But first... *Friday*.

Shower done, I had to make myself look basically presentable and then get hair and makeup done for the usual Friday nonsense. Honestly, most of the damned morning would be wasted getting ready.

The Vampires had done a lot for humanity. They had shepherded us into galactic society, helped us with the technology we were missing, and shared their culture with us. We owed them a lot for the last hundred years of friendship, but damn, I really wished we would break away from their strange formality and theatre-like idea of what

governance should be. I wasn't sure there was a benefit to dressing like it was the damned dark ages, corsets-and-all, just to talk about politics. I could do that in a T and shorts.

I put my evil, wild hair into an evil, wild ponytail and put on a Mercia branded light-blue jumpsuit.

"You need any help to get around today? I can send some people over if you want," I offered. While she wasn't blind in the way that most people assumed. She did have challenges. She had a disorder called *Pliant's Gift*. It was rare and hard to understand, but it meant that she couldn't see things that were stationary relative to herself. If something moved, she saw motion, but not shape or colour. Her world, she had said, was a series of lines between places.

It wasn't an ocular disorder; it was a brain mutation. There were some theoretical treatments that could use implants to augment her vision, but to the people of the moon where she grew up, *the gift* was a holy thing. To *fix it* would be considered blasphemy. There had only been a few cases of her condition in all the history of her people and none of them recent.

If she had have stayed on the forest moon where she grew up, she would be able to see *so* much. It was dense with trees and had constant windstorms. Her vision was actually perfect for there. Ash had left it, to come to Earth and visit the universe. She had chosen Earth as her home because, while it was exotic to her, it was one of the safest places in the galaxy. There would always be someone close by who would help her if she got in trouble. We had done okay with Earth; I think. That said, the obsession with safety had made people go a little *strange* in recent years.

"I am not someone who needs caring for Joanne!" Ash said sternly. "Stop being such a human. You're better than that!" She said in anger. She had become a little resentful of humans herself since the

Earth-for-Earthlings movement had taken hold. I understood why she felt like that, but unlike my father, I had always thought of myself as a human, just a lucky one. He had always thought of himself as a Bio-static with a human body. Not sure there was a difference, but Ash was right. I did think like humans too much. Especially recently.

“I’m sorry. I just worry, and I’m going to be working all day.”

She stood up and hugged me. “Coffee has a map of the ship, and his communication link has your direct number. I’ll be fine!” she said, with her head against mine.

I kissed her and left. I did worry and it was pointless too. It’s not like a lot could go wrong on Mercia. Besides, I had the ship’s AI ordered to watch her every move. If she had any problems, a security officer would be close by at all times. *I didn’t tell her that part.*

Also, her ugly robot monkey, Coffee, would keep her safe. It was his only job.



Because Mercia was undergoing a refit, we had to stay in orbit of Central. Usually, we would be in Sol space for this, but we needed some pretty delicate work done on our computer system and our armour layers were shot to shit. All the things we needed were, either manufactured on Central, or could be delivered there fast. It was just better equipped for this kind of work than Sol was. That was one reason that the new ships were a more modular design. Mercia had been the first and as such was far more complex than it needed to be. Now we had learned so much from running it for a decade, we were better at building them.

I briefly thought about what I knew of my mother and what she had done. Had we really been using Mercia for a decade, or was it still less than a year? My dad, and Libby, had both said I should just act like my memories were real because it didn't matter, not really, not functionally. Even so, some part of me constantly second guessed everything I knew when I thought of the past.

Showing Mercia being repaired so publicly, in Vampire space, was a solid political move. With the recent completion of the other Kingdom ships, we now had the most powerful military compared to the other Elder races. Until recently, Mercia being out of commission would have been very concerning; now it's just one of a fleet of such ships.

I entered the parliament chamber. I projected as much confidence as I could muster.

I sat down in the large wooden chair, careful not to ruin the intricate folds of the massive dress. The material was a lot heavier than it looked, in part because there was so much of it.

Today I had opted for a sixteenth century piece. It was blue and had a satin look to it, but the front section and the sleeves were intricately sewn cream coloured silk. Ruffles of the same design were all across the high collar. The chest was a little lower cut than was strictly accurate for the period, but I had the figure for it, and it was important to remember that this was performance, not a history lesson.

I wore a heavy golden necklace which had the Sol alliance insignia engraved into a pendant. My hair was in a high knot with a tiara of flowers made from blue gems. Thankfully, the dress swept the floor so didn't have to wear painful period accurate shoes. I just had running shoes on, which entertained me a great deal.

The makeup was just as over the top and did not suit me at all. I looked like I could have just popped out of an old romance novel. I

hated it. All of it. The look had taken me a couple of hours and five people to accomplish.

I looked across the round hall of the parliament chamber. There were representatives from every planet across the Sol alliance. There were also the usual representatives from Brick, Elf and Vampire space. Everyone dressed like they were from a historical era of their respective worlds.

“Now sits, the president of Earth, ruler of the Sol alliance and queen of the younger races of the old empire. Parliament may now begin,” said the gentleman announcer, who was dressed in a costume that matched the era of my own. I waited patiently while the usual clapping died down.

“What is today’s first point of business?” I asked quietly, letting the microphone in my collar amplify my voice across the massive hall of meeting.

Fridays were when we heard petitions from the younger worlds. It was going to be a long day.

The room was circular, and each row of seats was a level higher than the ones in front. All old wood with blue leather covers.

A man stood. He wore leather armour and exposed his muscular chest. He puffed it out and sucked in his gut as he stood. He was of a younger race, one of the very human-like ones. If it weren’t for the green hue to his skin I would perhaps have been able to mistake him for Earthborn.

“Madam president,” he began with a bow. “I am Sachock of the planet Nelicon. This is the first time my people have felt the need to partition this council. Please forgive me if I do not follow the decorum.” He waited for acknowledgement.

A screen appeared in front of my large chair. It displayed all the information we had about the man’s planet and he himself. I was now

expected to pretend to consider his request to speak while I glanced at the notes. The screen was invisible to everyone except me. Everyone knew I was reading the file, but this was part of the performance.

Nothing of note, arid world, heavy gravity, green people who really liked stone buildings. A young race who only gained access to space a few years ago. We had forwarded them all the usual curtesy, technology, Cure-All and the offer of a 'bail out team' if they fucked up too much.

They had done well on their own and had started exporting a great deal of historical fiction and art to the rest of the alliance. They were popular, as much minor players were able to be. They had learned Elder-Tongue fast and translated massive amounts of their fiction for us.

"Sachock. Welcome. Please speak freely," I said after a few seconds. I was allowed as long as I wanted to review the information in front of me; it seemed rude to keep the man waiting. Ba'an was always better at this part. He knew every race on sight and didn't even look at the screen. Though even he never turned it off.

A light above Sachock gained brightness and everyone else's dimmed slightly. It was subtle, but everyone knew it was his turn to speak. Interrupting the recognised speaker was considered an insult. Even I would have to wait until he was done.

"My people. We have been working hard to be part of the alliance. My people have not been cleared for direct trade with Earth. We have not been cleared for travel to the prime world either." He paused. And surveyed the room. He was good at this. "As you may be aware, we are on the border of Brick territory. Even though Sol is a wonderful alliance and has treated us with great respect. We believe that our race would be better suited to be a part of their cooperative. They trade with us and allow us passage in all their worlds freely without even

being a member. If we align with them, then we may have access to their unexplored space; we can make our own mark in the galaxy.” He bowed to show that he was done speaking.

This wasn’t good. It was the fourth world this month to ask to be absorbed by the Brick people. I could see why. Sol law prevented Younger races from exploring un-mapped space. We were concerned that they may stumble across a threat and get themselves in trouble. Not every race in the galaxy was friendly, and some were quite powerful. We saw it as our job to protect life by gaining an understanding with these races before we let the children play.

They all wanted to explore on their own, and with the current state of space since the end of the war, it was very tempting. For those on the border, the Bricks offered a good deal. They let them do whatever they wanted so long as they shared the information they gained. They were reckless. Eventually a tiny Young explorer ship would end up flying into something they weren’t ready for.

Some of the races in space even claimed that they had their own alliances and territory. They usually changed their mind when they saw Mercia.

I needed to make them want to stay, just for political kudos, but I also understood their reasons. We took adventure away from them and they just wanted to feel like they had control over their own destiny. This was especially true of the races that had a complicated history before space travel.

I was considering the point when the Brick representative stood. A tall man with wonderfully thick silver beard. He wore a form fitting all in one with metal armour pieces strapped to it. Typical brick outfit, even their historical clothes were fashion over form.

Being of an Elder race, he did not introduce himself. It was assumed that the Elder representatives were known to all. I waved to recognise him as speaker.

“The Brick cooperative had recently had a tough time. We cannot guarantee the safety of the people in our space as securely as we once could. Do not mistake this for a lack of desire, we simply have a lot to do at home. If you understand this. We welcome you with open arms, as we welcome all.”

He bowed to me and sat. His light dimmed.

I was expected to speak now. I *wanted* to tell him to go. It’s not like the alliance would be weaker without his little world; but if we just let his people go, and something happened it would be our fault. Or at least that was how the council saw things.

“Sachock,” I said. He was already looking at me. I just needed to say his name for the record. “At this time, I can’t in good conscience allow you to leave our protection. I am sorry. When the Brick people are better equipped to protect you, we will speak about this again.”

The light above him lit. “Then, may my people embrace this decision and request free passage on the prime world? For people *and* trade?”

Clever, Sachock! This wasn’t about leaving; this was about coming to Earth. His world was prosperous. They must be integrating with civilization fast. They wanted to visit the *culture* of the universe already. This was a good thing; they understood the value. I liked how he was making this play.

The pillars of need in the universe were Excitement, Learning, Progress and Joy. These were the four things that everyone wanted once you gave them security and prosperity. The only way to get this was to push yourself, new places, new learning, and new people.

“I have no problem with this. What says the council?” I asked.

The people on the closest, curved row of seats were the council of Earth. While my vote carried a lot of weight, they were ultimately the deciding factor.

They tapped the invisible screens in the air, sending messages between themselves. Two of the twelve people whispered to each other. One stood. A heavy-set older man who had a cane with him. "The last thing we need is more of the lesser races on Earth. There are already many visitors from the Elder races. This is not a good time to add more to the visitation list."

"Younger," I said as he made to sit down.

"I'm sorry, Madam president?" he asked, confused.

"You said Lesser races. You misspoke. You meant to say Younger. Not Lesser."

I saw the anger flash across his face. "If you say so."

He sat down.

Sachok was not happy with the result. I can't say I blamed him. The next step for him was to partition the Brick people to request his sector of space. They would happily make the request and they would eventually get it, but it would take quite a while. Right now, it was the last thing they had time to deal with. The space they were interested in would be fully mapped by the time they were given access.

I felt bad that I couldn't help him.

The meeting went on with more minutia. There was a lot of interest from the Earth Council regarding the new Kingdom class ships. They were pushing to get another wave of production on them. We had enough power. It was madness to make more. I only commissioned those four because I expected a long war. I had no idea my dad would go and end it two months in.

A few races were concerned about the amount of patrols in their space, and a few more were unhappy with recent proposals for influ-

encing their legal systems to unify things across the alliance. All valid concerns but also things that the council and the planetary congress were pushing for. I could hold things up and reject them a few times for review, but eventually these laws would go through. *I had concerns.*



The meeting ended at five in the afternoon. I got changed out of my maddening dress and found those shorts and that T-shirt I had been lusting after all day. I sat at a large conference table in the government room on Mercia. It had been the *war room*, until recently. Advisors, secretaries, and a couple of politicians sat down, most still in formal attire. I opened my Cirplet and tapped out a quick message to Ash. She wouldn't be able to read it from the Screen but I knew Coffee would relay it to her. It read, "Parliament was terrible. Now I have to deal with fallout. Fuck Fridays. Love you!"

I asked one of my assistants to deliver me a plate of chicken wings. A *large* plate of chicken wings. There was no chance that I was going to be breaking for food any time soon and now that my biology was better publicised, there was little point in pretence. *Thanks dad*, I grumbled to myself.

"Why the fuck is the council stopping Young races from getting Earth clearance? And why was I not warned?" I demanded as my chicken arrived.

"Well, Jo, truth is, they haven't official stopped. They just started rejecting applications about two weeks ago," Said one of the politicians. Shit. I couldn't remember his name. There were just so many of them now.

"Why?" I asked, picking up a chicken wing.

“Officially, they are now being more selective because of numbers of visitors. Unofficially, the Earth-for-Earthling’s movement has made it so public opinion is swaying away from the open-door policy of old.”

This was something I considered for a few seconds. “I looked like an idiot out there. I need to be told about these things,” I said sternly.

“Well,” began the other political. He was very new. Started about three days ago and I already didn’t like him. He was the new minister of culture. Which was a bullshit job to begin with. “We didn’t want to bother you with these matters while you are so distracted with your disabled Elven friend visiting.” His tone was condescending, and his words were insulting. I wasn’t pleased, but a large part of politics was choosing your battles.

“My girlfriend, partner, and future fiancé, Ashley. Is not distracting me. I also do not think her species needs to be pointed out. I am well aware of her species. Also, she has no disability that you need to concern yourself with.” I had more to say. I had a lot more to say, but it would not be useful right now.

“As cultural minister, I should point out that you can’t *publicly* marry this woman.”

“And what do you mean by that comment, minister?” I asked. Now a little fired up. My poker face slipped just a little.

“I mean, it’s bad enough that it has become public knowledge that you are not a pure Earthling. Announcing your intention to marry an Elf would be politically unwise with the current social trends on the mother world.”

He had made two mistakes. Firstly, only racists said ‘Earthling’ in that way. They had dropped the term Human because they felt it had lost meaning. They thought Earthling was better, for reasons that made quite literally no sense to me at all. It was more likely so they could identify each other easier in conversation.

The second mistake wasn't even the term 'mother world' which was another signal that he was a prick. It pissed me off that he thought that I would change my mind about the woman I loved based on political feedback. A little part of me wanted to quit this job right now. That would have been dumb. *But I wanted to.*

"Well, minister, I will take this under advisement. Thank you. The matter of my genetic purity is really not a topic we need to go into. I took over this job from a Vampire. At least your leaders are getting closer to Earthlings with each changing of the guard. Huh?"

I *wanted* to have him shot. I was pretty sure I had the authority. That would be a lot of paperwork, and I wanted to get home before Friday was Saturday.

As soon as this meeting was over, I would have someone dig up as much dirt as possible about this man. If he became a real problem, I would have it leaked to the media.

The meeting went on, reports, edicts, actions, more reports, things to sign, security updates, so many security updates. These people had become obsessed with security.

I would put in a governmental motion to 'chill the fuck out and calm down' as soon as I figured out how to word it, so it didn't read like that.

Before I started working in politics, I liked Fridays. Now they were a nightmare. All of this end of week crap was just pointless. An AI could take care of about half of it, but the council had voted to reduce the influence that AI had over the alliance. Even though every other Elder race had let them take over most of the day-to-day stuff. They just checked its decisions and voted on things that mattered. I doubted Elves bothered telling their president that public opinion was against his choice of wife.



I walked into my apartment at ten fifty-five. “Aha!” I yelled as I entered, “Not midnight!” I was triumphant. *For the first time in weeks.*

Ash was sitting on the floor with a blanket under her and some music playing. Coffee was sitting next to her; he had been reading to her, I guessed. Ash loved stories, but she wasn’t able to read them herself.

“Wait, isn’t it only about eleven?” she said excitedly. Coffee quietly told her the time.

“Oh, wow! Jo, you actually did it! You got home before Saturday! Good going girl!” she laughed at me.

I threw off my shoes and sat myself next to her on the blanket. “You know, we have a sofa. You don’t have to sit on the floor,” I said as I kissed her.

“I like the floor. I can’t fall off the floor if your stupid war ship gets in a fight!”

“We’re in dock around Central. Who would shoot at us?” I asked.

“I’ve heard that before!” she said with a smile that I hesitantly wanted to describe as ‘cheeky’

“Did you have a good day, my love?” I asked, realising that I may have picked up a turn of phrase from my father and Libby.

“I did, actually. Libby and Kay visited me. They brought me this,” she said, holding up a little box with a piano key on top of it.

“Oh, I’m sorry I missed them. Everything okay with them? Also, what is this?” I asked.

“It’s called a Pee and yes. Or something.”

“Okay, but what is it?” I asked, pressing the piano button.

The box exploded into light. I would have worried it was dangerous had I not known that Libby and Kay delivered it. The room spun.

I smelled fresh oranges. The light settled down and showed me an image of Ash, she was standing in a forest. She looked amazing, like a warrior or an angel or something in between. She was running and jumping between trees in a way I had once seen Elven hunters do in a documentary video. The camera followed her. I grinned. She ran out of forest and rolled to a halt as the camera panned up. There were Kingdom ships in orbit and they were fighting something... the camera flew towards it and I saw Basilica for a moment before it was all obscured by a blanket, no, it wasn't a blanket, the image, the surrounding space was a cloak, it was my mother. She whisked away the images inside the cloak and turned to me with white eyes. "They will destroy all you love," she said in musical tones before the image blinked out.

"What the fuck was that?" I asked, mouth open in shock.

"It's supposed to take a snapshot of your mind, show your feelings. Was that me in yours?" Ash asked.

"You could see that?"

"Oh, yeah! Libby made them with this smart gas she invented. It copies the holograms form. I can see it just fine. It's weird," she said with a mischievous grin across her beautiful face. "I've been playing with it since they left. Once you know what it does, you can force images by focusing really hard. It's fun to see, and it smells nice too!"

"What did you see in your first whatever that was?" I asked, still shaken up by the images I had seen. Was this really my own fear or was it something else?

Ash took the little device off me and placed it next to her. She took hold of me with both hands, one each side of my face. She had done this a few times when she had important things to say and wanted to make sure I was listening. Since she couldn't really see me, it made sense.

“It doesn’t matter what I saw! Joanne Michaels. Will you marry me?”

I was stunned. My eyes grew wide like saucers. I was going to ask her; I was going to leave politics and ask her next year. I loved her but I wouldn’t ask her now and expect her to commit to the mad life I had, with all my responsibility and fear and stress and, let’s be honest, danger.

“Did you really just ask me that?” I needed to be sure it wasn’t the vision still.

“Yeah, I did. Is that okay?” she asked.

“Is it okay? Ash! I love you! I want to marry you more than anything in the entire universe!” I said, feeling myself tearing up.

“To be clear, that’s a, yes?” she asked.

“Yes!” I said, now sobbing. *Both of us were.*

She kissed me. She kissed me as my fiancé. No matter what happened now. No matter what shit the galaxy threw at me, no matter what madness my mother had planned out ahead for me. No matter what mad adventure my dad would pull me along on. I would love this woman until the end of time.

Tales from the Denouemverse – ‘Week.’ The end.

Thanks...

Thank you to the people who made this book possible:

My daughter Mackenzie, *who has never read a word of it.*

Beta reading by my good friend Wing of <https://feather.onl>

All the people who emailed me, thanks!

About Author

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. 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:

<https://hexdsl.com>

He wrote the book that's attached to this page mostly in Microsoft Word. He typed the words out on a Laptop he named Libby (XPS13, for those who care.) If for any reason you want to know more about him, the website (linked above) is a good place to start. He reads, and he often replies to emails too.

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He will write things set in this universe again, in:

"Denouement: Earth War"

Though, before that, you may be reading

"Nancy & Holmes"

Thank you for taking the time to read this. It was a blast writing it.