

# In Her we trust

Denouement, part 2

HexDSL



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To the science fiction illuminati who tell us all what we can never be:

*The stars are all our destinations.*



# Things...

The breeze from the lake made the air smell fresh and a little salty. I basked in it for a stolen moment with my eyes closed. I took a deep breath to quiet myself.

Slowly, I turned to see the city. It was lifeless and dead. The buildings that should have been tall and beautiful were now sad and still. They lacked the neon electrical glow that all cities emanated to make you bask in *their* unique glory.

A dirty orange house cat walked alone in the debris; it stopped and stared at me, wondering why I didn't stop this devastation.

The tallest of the towers had already fallen. Without the gravity-fields to keep them standing, they had simply crumbled under their own weight. Thousands would have died in that moment; I was glad I had arrived here too late to see it. There would have been nothing I could have done except bear witness. Maybe there would have been a small justice in that simple act.

There was a companion there with me, but I couldn't make her out in the jumbled events of the dream that I was now only realising I was having.

A sound from above startled me. I looked up, so did my companion. "What is it?" she asked.

“One of the orbital cities is falling, now that the power’s off,” I replied. The dream knowing far more than the dreamer.

The clouds burst in a rainbow hue as the falling titan emerged. It was covered in all the colours imaginable. The dream knew it resulted from gasses being ignited by the heat of an unprotected planetary re-entry. Millions would be dead already; more when it made planet-fall.

An ethereal, yet familiar voice filled the air, as if the sky itself was talking to me.

*“Did you think you were done?”* she asked.

The world faded to black around me, leaving only the cold dead remains of the city in front of me, and the cat.

*“It’s only just started, Jon.”*

The dream fell away; I let my vision linger for a final instant as I felt myself waking.

# Chapter 1

## Scenic

It wasn't the sound of the ship's braking thrusters firing that woke me. I'm not much of a pilot; whatever Lea was doing at the controls was none of my concern. It was when the hull started shaking with weapons fire, I decided I might take an interest.

I turned over in the tiny bed to ask my wife, Libby, what she thought of the sounds of action and adventure; she was gone. I blinked idly at the emptiness for a moment.

The ship shook again and the sounds of the shield generator fizzing in response filled my ears. I sat up, scratching my synthetic arm, which constantly caused me a very slight irritation. The ship accelerated; I felt the flip in my stomach that implied we were involved in one of the more complicated defensive patterns. Now my interest was piqued. I grabbed some trousers and wandered out of the modestly sized, utilitarian bedroom.

I found my way to the bridge, which wasn't actually much larger than my living space. A badly lit room with a grey metal floor and three stations. Operations, weapons, and flight. Traditionally Lea would fly. She was one of the finest pilots I had ever known, and it *was* her ship.

I sat at the operations station and yawned. It occurred to me, I probably looked a mess. I had found trousers and an old white t-shirt, but I hadn't so much as thought about a brush for my teeth or hair; also, I wasn't wearing any shoes.

I looked over at Libby, who was sitting at the weapons console. She was non-organic and possessed superior reflexes, which made her exceptionally well suited to shooting things. Her kind had natural excellence at thinking in terms of speed and motion, something that organics always struggled with. She was better at space-based combat than any tactical computer and far more enjoyable company.

"Good morning, my love," she said with a smile and a cut-glass voice that I adored. She fired the main energy cannon at whomever we were locked in combat with and glanced back at me with a wink.

She was effortlessly beautiful. Blonde hair and fair-skinned with sparkling green eyes; elegant and unwaveringly well-spoken. Today she was wearing a flattering form-fitted blue jump-suit and her hair was in a barely organised bun.

"Morning! What did I miss?" I asked. Wondering if I should be concerned about the shooting and hoping I could find a coffee to bless my day sometime soon.

"Lea started a fight with yet another Thinker wing." She rolled her eyes as she spoke.

The Thinkers were the race that we were at war with. We, being the Sol alliance. Thinkers were a race that existed as pure energy and functionally immortal. As such, not very prone to risk-taking.

Because of this tendency to play-it-safe, they had been sending AI-powered fighter groups to Sol territory for weeks, rather than risking their own skins; or whatever they had instead. It wasn't a particularly effective strategy, but Thinkers weren't good at warfare. This was



the first conflict in their race's entire history if the records were to be believed; I was a little dubious.

I pushed some buttons on the console in front of me to bring up the current sector scans and rested my head on my hand. There had been three ships. The number that made up a Thinker 'wing.' We were now down to the last one. The only reason that it was taking so long to finish this fight was because Libby was waiting for the perfect opening to destroy it with minimal damage.

Sol space had been peaceful for almost a hundred years. None of the civilians had any sort of shield on their ships; they had never needed them. Now, we were at war though and shield-generators were not only rare, but far more expensive than was reasonable. We were trying to destroy the Thinker ships we encountered in ways which left their generators salvageable. We made a point of donating them to civilians we met on our travels.

Lea also really enjoyed testing the limits of Thirteen. This 'Thirteen' was the second ship to bear that name. The first was a Sol alliance shuttle that we lost, along with some friends in some recent universe saving unpleasantness. This new one was infinitely better. Gifted to Lea by an old friend of mine.

"Got it!" Libby said calmly as she fired the main gun with surgical accuracy. Moments later, I felt the ship's main engine power down and the braking thruster's fire.

"I swear they're actually getting worse!" Lea declared as she unbuckled herself from her seat. "Oh, hey Jon," she greeted as she noticed me.

Lea, like Libby, was a stunning beauty. Unlike Libby though, it was not because her body was synthetic and designed to be such. Lea was a Brick. A species who was genetically predisposed to physical perfection. She had fiery red hair and an angelic face that would put

even others of her own kind to shame. She wore her usual ‘uniform’ which was a pair of fitted jeans and a hugging purple t-shirt that said ‘Captain Hottie’ across the front in black. Libby had made it for her as a joke, but she loved it and threatened that she would get matching ones for the rest of us.

“Breakfast time?” Libby asked, looking over at the wreck that was me. I flicked my wrist to bring up the floating interface of my Cirlet device. I looked at the time and gave it another flick to dismiss it. “It’s five in the morning!” I said with heavy eyelids. I *was* hungry though.



We left the bridge and made our way down the metal stairs. Lea turned to the main living area. “I’ll cook. You go get the shield cases,” she said as she vanished.

‘Cooking’ actually meant pressing the ‘favourites’ button on the food hatch. The automated kitchen would take the food out of stasis and deliver it to the hatch in moments. So, for Lea, cooking just meant not helping with the salvage. Being the captain, it *was* her job to delegate, or so she told us.

Libby and I went down another deck to the bottom of the ship, to the cargo bay. We sealed the bay and activated the shield ‘Glass.’ The bay door opened like a giant mouth. The ‘Glass’ was a shield that kept air in but allowed free passage. It quite literally looked like a solid pane of glass, hence the name.

I looked out into space; its vastness never failed to humble me, as clichéd as that is. I wasn’t intimidated by it, not as some were. To me, space was an old friend, for all the long life which I had led and from the memories I had from even before this life, space was the same, the one constant. A friend I would eventually visit again, no matter what

else changed. In some ethereal way, it was looking back at me. Space and I had a good understanding of one another.

“I’ll pass, you catch,” Libby ordered or asked; I was never sure. I grunted in agreement and snapped myself out of the thought I was in.

I cleared myself out of the way; she took a run up and leaped out of the Glass. She passed right through it with ease. The moment she left the grip of the ship’s gravity, she began moving like a tiny fighter shuttle. I watched as she effortlessly flew around space as though she were born to it.

As a non-organic life-form, or NOLF as her kind was known, she had all sorts of useful abilities. One of which was concussion blasters built into the palms of her hands. In space, they were exceptionally efficient thrusters. Another useful ability was that she could speak directly to me, even without an atmosphere. She performed this little trick by sending her voice directly over her own internal communication system.

I tapped the little button on my Cirplet twice. It always connected me directly to her, if she was in range; *she was usually in range*.

“You see the fighters?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’ll start with the one that’s floating away.”

The wrist-based Cirplet devices made it seem like the sound was coming from earphones, which I wasn’t wearing. I replied at a normal volume; I knew Libby would hear me fine. There was no microphone to worry about; Cirplet communication worked crystal clearly regardless of background noise, which was endlessly useful.

The three ships were annoyingly hard to see. They had light absorbing panels across them and I could only make them out by their silhouettes blocking any light they passed. Invisible to me, mostly. If they *were* lit, they would have been ugly little artless cubes with a large gun turret at the front and two tiny wings on each side. Each one being

the size of a small surface vehicle. A typical utilitarian Thinker design. I had a sudden memory of an archaic shuttle I used to own in a different life. I would have called it a *car* back then.

She glided over to where she had pointed; I watched through the Glass. I could make out the internals of the shuttle appearing as she effortlessly ripped the stealth panelling off. She gave it a few well-placed zaps with one hand as she held on to it with the other. A few seconds later, a familiar thick grey rectangle was pulled free. She gave it a shove; it began floating towards me.

The next was a little closer. The shield box came out with almost no effort. Again, it was floated towards me.

The third involved a little more zapping to free it, but eventually it came out intact. The shuttle it was attached to was obliterated. It's not like anyone was going to make use of it anyway. It had been shot at a lot already.

I tapped the panel on the wall and activated the loading field. It generated an energy that would take all the velocity out of an object as it passed. It stopped things from space from coming in at the speed of bullets. The first shield box came through the Glass, it instantly came to a stop. I tugged on it and pulled it to the edge of the field. It fell to the ground with a thud. I jumped back, worried for my bare toes. I was a little more careful as I grabbed the second one.

Libby arrived, holding the third. I disabled the field. She came to a gentle stop as the ship's gravity took hold of her. She held the box as if it weighed nothing. They were the size of large suitcases and similar dimensions; I could barely lift them.

The only damage I could see was the single burn where Libby had cut away the control trunks. I closed the hatch while she moved the other two to the edge of the bay, where most of our cargo was tied down.

We pulled a large net over them. I pressed another button on the panel and the net sucked down tightly over the boxes. I smiled; I had no idea how the net worked, but watching it get sucked down was always entertaining to me. The last thing we wanted was our salvage getting bounced all around the cargo bay the next time we were in a fight.

“Well, after all my hard work, I think I’ve earned my feed,” I joked, taking Libby’s hand and heading directly to chef Lea’s kitchen.

# Chapter 2

## Family

Lea had been alone and, as usual, she had set the animated decor to 'Aquarium.' The walls, which were three-dimensional projectors, convincingly replicating the seabed with light streaming in from the ceiling, or surface, as it appeared to be. The illusion wasn't complete though as the floor was clad in a plush brown carpet and the furniture, which was mostly fake wood and leather armchairs, sat off to one side.

The area that served as a kitchen was at the far end. A little counter-top poking out of the wall next to the food hatch to give the impression of a kitchenette divide. The Hatch was cunningly disguised as part of an undersea rock by the wall's projection.

"No Fish!" I demanded as I entered the room.

"No, I ordered you Bacon and eggs," Lea grinned as she put the plate on the table.

"You know the fish bother him," Libby said supportively as she sat down.

"Fine!" Lea conceded as she sat with her plate of fruit and pastry.

"Thirteen, set walls to apartment," Libby instructed, addressing the ceiling.

The ship's computer chimed with a friendly bell sound and the walls morphed from the ocean floor into a tastefully decorated city apartment, complete with a massive window overlooking a city skyline. The view was based on the apartment that Libby and I owned on our adopted home-world, Central. The weather and traffic outside the projected windows were as authentic as we could make them, based on the most recent information we had from the planetary network.

"Is he still sleeping?" I asked, referring to Ba'an, the fourth member of the crew, or passenger. It wasn't clear whether or not he was staying.

"Yep. It's concerning how much he sleeps," Lea noted as she pulled at her pastry-based breakfast.

"I think it's because you keep him worn out," Libby joked.

Ba'an was, until recently, the President of the Sol alliance, or as I had constantly mislabelled him 'King of Earth.'

Once the war broke out, he had conceded power to his vice president. While Ba'an was a hugely popular leader he was not a native of Earth. He was a Vampire, a race of pale skinned poets with red eyes and lips. Some, like Ba'an, had large rough skin covered wings that they usually kept tucked in tight, like a cape.

His species were considered to be honourable and wise by pretty much everyone. They were refusing to get involved in the current war. Sol intelligence said that if push came to shove, they would support the Thinkers. Ba'an had, reasonably enough, decided that there was no way he could lead Sol into a conflict with his own home world. It would have been politically dubious and morally unthinkable. He had hitched a ride with us when he stepped down and, at some point, started sleeping with our captain.

When he relinquished his position, we had already decided to travel back to Central via the longer route because we were, like him, trying to keep a low profile. We weren't hiding, not really, but after our recent

adventures, we had somehow gained a lot of public interest. It was made even more problematic because my daughter, Joanne, was the Vice President who Ba'an had handed power to.

Our plan was to spend six weeks flying back to Central via TD-Drive rather than travelling there instantly via a Warp-hole from Earth. The main benefit of our choice to take the longer route was that we weren't required to file a flight plan. As such, no-one would know where we were heading and the six weeks it took to get there would hopefully be enough for the public interest in us to die down. Also, in deep space, we couldn't accidentally cause any political issues for Joanne.

We had enjoyed our time together. Despite the daily encounter with Thinker wings, and the occasional stranger in need of a shield box, it had been an uneventful trip. Between the ship's raw power, Lea's piloting skills and Libby's shooting, there wasn't a lot in this sector of space that concerned us very much. As such, it had been relaxing, *for me at least.*

Recently, I had endured a few months with a very effective amnesia, due, in no small part, to the interfering actions of a pseudo-deity. That's the earlier mentioned old friend who gave Lea the ship. After the whole mess was over, or as over as it could be, I suppose. I was grateful to spend uninterrupted time with Libby. I also needed a chance to get my head straightened out, literally.

When your old friend is both a reality-altering super-entity *and* your ex-wife, having her do you the favour of 'restoring' your memory can be a little intense. I had found that I would fall into mental holes where I would think about things too deeply and 'check out'.

I was doing it right now. I realised this when I noticed Ba'an was sitting next to me.



“Good morning,” I said to him, the moment I noticed he was there. From the half-eaten plate of meat in front of him, I assumed he had been there for a while.

“Ah, back with us, are you?” he observed, armed with his deep, charming voice and sporting a sincere grin; as well as a mouth full of something akin to chicken. He was shirtless, as was fast becoming the standard for him. He wore a silver necklace with the Sol crest on it.

He was tall and regal, thin but athletic; skin so pale he made Libby look tanned. His lips and eyes were blood-red, and his teeth sported little pointed fangs. He had a thick, black head of hair with a chest to match.

His people were a race of poets, artists, and philosophers. As such, the image of the Vampire had become synonymous with safety and trust all across the Elder worlds and alliances.

“Damn it. Again!” I was getting quite annoyed with these mental checkouts now. At first, they were entertaining, but now, they were bothering me a great deal.

My granddaughter Ka’ona, a doctor, had assured me that while the sudden influx of memories was playing havoc with my brain, she was certain the side effect would pass after a few months. She had reasonably enough advised that they didn’t let me fly the ship for a while. I had never been much of a pilot anyway, so it was good advice, regardless of my medical capacity.

My daughter, granddaughter and I had a unique biology that was referred to by its medical shorthand as Bio-static. We never age, breathing is optional for us, we aren’t susceptible to poisons. Radiation and gasses can be ignored, and we are incredibly insensitive to temperature changes. We do, however, require massive intakes of biomass daily. This is a nice way of saying that I get really hungry, often suddenly. With this in mind, I got myself more bacon and sat back

down. Thankfully, my eating habits were well understood by everyone aboard Thirteen and I didn't have to worry about looks of judgement.

I looked over at Libby, who was checked out herself. Her eyes were closed. She seemed totally immobile.

"What did I miss?" I asked. Ba'an went to answer, but Lea got there first: "She's in a meeting with Jo."

Libby, as I have said, is non-organic. She enjoys permanent bilocation. Thanks to recent upgrades she could support two physical bodies, known as Avatars, as well as being persistently present in her 'core,' the computer that is essentially her brain or soul, depending on your point of view. Her core was connected to the rest of the universal network, so she had a lot of information readily available.

Usually, it wouldn't be possible for the signal that transmitted her consciousness to her avatar to operate in deep space, but thanks to a pseudo-deity, she had an upgrade. Her specific signal was now, we were told, encoded directly into this iteration of reality. Meaning physics no longer limited Libby's range. Sometimes, socially speaking, it made sense for her to go offline in one location while she was in a meeting in another. Made it easier to follow for us slow-minded organics if she didn't suddenly just know things.

I finished my breakfast just in time for her to open her eyes again.

"Back!" she exclaimed.

"And?" Ba'an asked, desperate for news from home.

"I'm downloading today's news feeds to the ship's computer for you right now, Ba'an," Libby smiled, knowing how important this was to him.

Ba'an left, eagerly hunting for a data tablet. He may not have been the President anymore, but he never stopped caring like he was.

"I like that he has a hobby," Lea said with an affectionate grin.

“It’s not a hobby. He’s literally the greatest leader in human history!” Libby reminded her.

“Yes. But he’s also ‘Bany,’ president of cuddles.” Lea replied, nursing her coffee cup with a warm and slightly menacing grin.

“I really don’t want to think about that any more than I have to,” I said, as Ba’an sat himself down on the leather sofa on the other side of the room. He put his feet on the coffee table, data tablet in hand. He began to read all the day’s updates with equal parts glee and dread; still shirtless. The greatest leader in human history, shirtless and reading the morning paper. I never could get used to it. He was far more pro-shirt when he was in office.

“Anything for me?” I asked.

“Jo says she’s heading to Central in about three weeks. She also wants us to pay a visit to David Atkinson when we get there.”

David Atkinson was a computer engineer, one of the best. Everyone loved him; I found him smug and annoying. Despite that, he was a good man who had got himself unwittingly involved in our recent adventure. He had taken a plasma round to the face in service of the greater good. Granted, he was wearing my personal shield and other than suffering an unpleasant tan, whiplash, a broken arm and radiation poisoning, he was fine. Basically... I didn’t like him.

“*Why?*” I asked, trying not to allow myself to fall into a thought vortex.

“He’s written a book, apparently. It’s about Aygah,” Libby said, waiting for me to vent my instant irritation.

Aygah, my ex-wife was the one responsible for our recent problems as well as the current excellent state of the universe. I realise that sounds like an overstatement, but she really was the architect of reality. She wasn’t a pseudo-deity when we were together. She picked that up after.

I wasn't sure how much David knew, and I certainly wasn't thrilled with the idea of him writing a *tell-all* about what he *thought* he knew, either.

"That little prick!" I exclaimed, loading the words with more spite than perhaps they needed.

Libby made a sound that I can only describe as "uh-huh," and refusing to get sucked into an argument, she turned to Lea. "Oh, Lea, you'll be pleased to know that you are now officially no longer a member of the Sol Military."

A bitter-sweet wave of emotion slowly spread over Lea's face.

"Excellent!" she said with a dubious satisfaction.

She was pleased to be out, but she had been enlisted for a very long time. She had expressed some concerns about finding herself adrift, without purpose.

Lea had taken well-deserved leave, but she didn't want to risk getting ordered back to the fight. None of us wanted any part of *this* war. Now that she had her own ship, she wanted to be her own boss. She had begun the process of resigning her commission before we had left on our trip.

She sipped her coffee thoughtfully.

Libby had offered to pay for Thirteen to stay in working order, as well as cover all docking charges and taxes. In exchange, she would be our personal transport. It was a good deal for Lea; we all knew she wasn't going to let anyone else fly us anyway. Libby had made it sound like a job so she wouldn't feel bad about letting her pay the bills. Libby and I had more than enough to cover it; we also knew that Lea wasn't good at keeping a hold of her cash.

"How long until we're back to Central?" I asked.

"The TD-Drive should be charged again by now. We'll be in Central controlled space in..." she trailed off for a moment, doing a rough

calculation in her head, “about two hours. We can’t play with the Thinker patrols again; we should be able to cruise in TD for the rest of the journey. Three days at most,” she said, still half thinking about being out of the military for the first time in almost thirty years.

Central, my favourite of the planets, was a hub world, meaning it had multiple ‘natural’ Warp holes around it. It was about as multicultural as a planet could be. It was, officially, a world that belonged to the Vampire government and due to us holding dual citizenship with Sol and Central, we were not allowed to engage our weapons system anywhere in their territory. With the war and the fact that we were transporting the recently retired ‘King of Earth’ it would have been a terrible idea for us to test the efficiency of the Central legal system. I was expecting them to ask us to revoke our Sol papers in a few weeks. It was a hot topic on most the news feed that Ba’an kept reading to us.

“Libby, have you read today’s news?” Ba’an called from the sofa at the other end of the room, as if on cue.

“Obviously,” she replied with a raised eyebrow. She read everything; it was a trivial task for her.

“Joanne has ordered the construction of three more Kingdom class ships, like Mercia,” he said with deep annoyance.

Ba’an was an outstanding leader, in no small part because he saw violence as a last resort. The fact that Sol had Mercia, the largest single battleship in the galaxy, was, in his opinion, a concern. More being built was not something he would have allowed, had he still been in the position to make the decisions.

Mercia had been our home-away-from-home for the last few decades. I had been working as a consultant for the president, researching ‘The Event’. This was the name for the moment on the first of January nineteen hundred when reality had suddenly changed. We had gone from horse-drawn carriages and gas-lit streetlamps to

spaceships and aliens in a single moment. People at the time had two sets of memories and from then on, all of human history was different.

“Ba’an, we’re at war. Mercia’s existence is the only reason that Thinker forces have been so cautious.” Libby said sympathetically, but pragmatically.

As sincere as she sounded, I had no doubts that she had voiced some similar concerns to Jo herself when she saw the news.

“I know, but what about when the war is over? They aren’t going to decommission them, are they? It’s too much power.”

I thought about his point. Humans were conservative by nature and, on top of that, they were superb at building weapons. It was one reason we had chosen Central as our new home. The potential for things to go wrong on Earth scared the absolute shit out of me. I wanted to be as far away from it as I could get.

It was only the leadership of good people that had kept them peaceful for so long; there was a political change happening now, Earth wanted teeth. I had faith that Jo was qualified to keep the wolves caged, for now at least, but the future worried me.

“Sol didn’t start this war, Ba’an,” I said, instantly realising that I had sounded far sterner than I should have. On some level, echoing my guilt. I *had* played a part in this war starting after all.

“Hmmm, I suppose you are right. At least so far, there hasn’t been a major conflict. Perhaps Jo will still find a diplomatic solution.” He made an over-the-top gesture with his thumb, tapping it against the glass panel in his hand. He had turned the page on this topic both literally and emotionally. “Ah, looks like the media still haven’t got bored with you, Jon,” he smiled as he read.

“How so?” I asked.

Libby was shaking her head at him with great annoyance. I assumed that this meant she wasn’t planning on telling me.

“Go on,” I demanded of the room.

Ba’an opened his mouth to fill me in. Libby cut him off. At least she could control the delivery, if not the content. “According to the news feed’s we’re already living in a beach-front property south Central Prime,” she explained apologetically.

“Well, looks like disappearing into deep space was a waste of time then,” I sighed.

Lea stood up. “I’m going to get the TD-Drive fired up.” She was no happier about the news than I was.

“It’s nonsense. We’re still days away,” Libby said, trying to make me see how stupid the article was.

“Yes, but we *will* be on Central in a few days and there’s no chance of going under the radar now, is there?” I sulked.

An artificial and classically digital male voice cut short our conversation as the ship’s computer spoke: “We will be engaging our TEE DEE Drive in one minute.”

I put the plates back into the food hatch and ordered another coffee.

# Chapter 3

## Central (Prime)

We spun down our TD-Drive and dropped into normal space at the edge of the Central System. I felt good. I was on the last trek down the path that led to home.

We were all gathered on the undersized bridge of thirteen. Ba'an always stood in the doorway. He didn't have any skills that would be of use when it came to ships operations, but if we needed something, he was happy to take the job of runner and chief fire marshal. A job that had proved its own worth more than once on our trip. I always thought he would make a great captain, like on an actual star cruiser or some massive military ship. I suppose being a leader is a transferable skill.

Lea was strapped into *her seat*, the pilot's chair. Libby at weapons, which we had purposefully deactivated to appease the local law. I sat at the scanner console. We weren't scanning for anything right now. There were no surprises to watch out for in Central space. We were mostly just hanging out there, with Lea.



Central was one of three Earth-sized planets orbiting a young sun. It was a little larger than Sol. Central, our destination, had two moons and one massive spaceport in orbit. The other two planets in the system had essentially become industrial infrastructure over the years. It would take us an hour to get to the Central's surface now, and then a little walk and we would be home.

Lea pressed the button that transmitted Thirteen's identity code on a wide band. Moments later, the communication system lit up.

"This is Central patrol two-twenty-one bravo to Sol ship Thirteen, acknowledge please."

"Hello, this is captain Lea Ra-Kay of the Sol ship Thirteen. Acknowledging your authority."

Lea was doing this as by the book as possible. Usually, she would have just said, 'Hi,' but we were trying to get through this with as little noteworthiness as possible.

"Thank you, captain, can you resend your ID code please?"

Lea pushed the dedicated button to transmit our ID again.

"Thirteen, you have no flight plan on the public register. Is this correct?" The patrol officer didn't sound suspicious. It was simply a checklist that he had to go down. Lots of people didn't bother filing a flight plan. It wasn't required and was only useful for finding you if you failed to turn up at your destination. We had a nice ship with nice guns and shields, not worries about arriving safely.

"That is correct, Central patrol. We like our privacy," Lea replied, as effortlessly charming as ever.

"Okay, Keep your guns cold and your shields no higher than ten percent. Enjoy your stay. Log your arrival with planetary authorities when landed."

"Will do."

"Oh, and Thirteen?"

“Yes?” she answered, a little suspicious herself now.

“Please tell President Ty that we said hello. He’s a great man.”

We all glanced back with a grin at Ba’an.

He sighed and pressed the communication button on the wall next to him. “Thank you, Central patrol. That means a lot.”

We all laughed, even though it meant that our ship’s name was well known enough that there was no chance we would go unnoticed as we had hoped.



We had to get an extra-large bay for Thirteen. We landed on Central, in the city of Prime and our building was within walking distance. We hadn’t been back since it was half blown up when it was attacked by a terrorist group a few months back. That seemed like a lifetime ago now.

We walked down the docking bay ramp and were greeted by a robotic manager who would look after the ship for us. The manager was a humanoid design, bald with orange skin and a grey jumpsuit sporting the orange logo of the docking company. It was no accident that the robot’s skin was the same colour as the company logo.

Lea locked the ship, with nothing but a thought and some focus. Its lock was something called a Neural Actuation System. It was a technology that allowed access only to the people on its list. It pattern matched our brainwaves and on top of that, we had to think of a key while it was scanning us. In this case, it was looking for the memory of a specific coffin-like device that very few people had ever seen. From our point of view, we just had to walk up to it and think of the image. The door would open. We knew it was secure because this technology

was one of the many things that our ship had, which simply didn't exist in this iteration of reality.

The downside, Libby couldn't unlock it. Unfortunately, she had nothing which the lock considered to be brainwaves.

Thirteen looked new still. It was a rough textured silver ship. I hadn't seen it much from the outside and never from a planet's surface like this.

It looked rather like a huge, thick dagger in shape. Stubby wings that housed its shield generator nodes. The rear portion, the handle of the dagger, was a slightly darker shade of silvery grey and housed a lot of the telemetry equipment as well as the TD-Drive.

Behind that was a rounded communication dish. TD-Drives worked by generating a propulsion field and our sub-light engines were cold-force panels that were built into the ship's armour segments; they would light up blue when active. There were no jets or fuel mix thrusters to define its shape. The blade portion was where most of the rooms were housed. The edges tapered off to each side; the shape was used to accelerate a beam at the edge of the point. If we could have seen it from above, we would have seen the large window on the bridge; a single panel of shaped glass, or glass-like material at least.

Ba'an was finally dressed like an adult again; not only was he wearing a shirt but a high-quality suit complete with waistcoat and ornate pocket watch. He looked like he would have been more at home in Victorian London than in modern-day Central Prime; other than his almost white skin and wings, that is. His attire was traditional for the social elite of his species. On Central, no one would give him a second look anyway. It was one of the many reasons I loved this planet.

"Libby! This is going to be expensive," Lea called over as a ship in the bay next to us lifted off, the wind picked up to match the noise. Libby walked over and produced a payment card. "

You think I should help with the ship bills?” Ba’an asked me quietly.

“No! Libby makes more money every month than your old job paid you in a year,” I replied.

“Oh? I always wondered,” he trailed off.

If you asked Libby about her job, she would tell you without fail that she was a philosophy teacher, nothing more.

In reality, she also owned the patents and designs for some incredibly advanced AI core processors. Among these patents was ownership of the TLC system. It was something that was put in all AI cores above a certain grade. It automatically scanned the core for signs of sentience. It would make the optical output switch to Green if it found it, amber if it didn’t and red if the intelligence had its weapons armed or intended violence against organics. TLC was the preferred name for it, though it stood for ‘Traffic Life Chip’. Something that Libby said she found incredibly amusing when she designed it, many years before I met her. The thing about the TLC system was, it was legally required to be fitted to all cores. This meant that every manufacturer had to pay Libby’s shell company for the use of the design. She didn’t charge very much at all, but the incredible number of AI’s built each year only ever increased. She was insanely wealthy at this point.

Personally, I was happy enough with the very reasonable government wages I had drawn for decades. That said, since marrying Libby, she had ensured I never had to use my own savings for much. Not that I wanted more than a place to work and a constant supply of replacement jackets. I tended to get shot, burned, or stabbed. Which, as a professional historian, was a constant source of surprise to me.

Ba’an did okay too. He had been president of Sol for longer than any other individual in history and had run unopposed for most of it. The man was almost a saint and his adoring citizens had voted to increase his remuneration year by year.

Lea, on the other hand, was an underpaid pilot who drank most of her money. I was pretty sure she had only stayed in the military, so she knew she would have somewhere to sleep. Now she had Thirteen, good friends and a reputation as one of the finest pilots that Sol force ever produced. She quite literally had everything she ever wanted. She didn't drink any less though.

Lea wandered over to us while Libby finished paying. She was wearing green denim shorts and a red hoodie, which was an odd combination, but she was pulling it off well. It's remarkable what you can get away with when you are genetically predisposed to beauty, *and you know it.*

Libby joined us a moment later. Still wearing a blue jumpsuit with the number thirteen on the back. She had found a bunch of them on the ship when we first explored it and had been wearing one since. It was functional and while we were travelling, she spent a lot of time floating around space looking for shield boxes. It was a very practical outfit; she liked practical.

"You sure you don't mind me staying with you guys?" Ba'an asked us. He held Lea's hand almost without thinking. She noticed; I glimpsed a coy smile.

"Ba'an. We have an entire building and we have only ever used the top floor. I've called ahead and asked Doors to prepare apartments for both of you, on the same floor. Rent-free, yours forever, with love," Libby said sternly as we walked out of the port. Ba'an thanked her. Even though it was trivial for Libby to offer, he seemed genuinely touched by the gesture. Lea had already discussed in great detail how she was going to decorate hers.

The so-called planetary authority we were supposed to report to was actually just a form that Libby had sent before we left the ship. Occasionally, an officer would ask a traveller to wait while they came and

inspected their ship, but there was little reason to find us suspicious. Ships coming from Earth were rarely inspected. The planet was too boring to be on a smugglers' route.

We took the long walk to the building slowly. It was morning at this end of the vast city. After six weeks in space, it was nice to feel the permanence of a planet beneath us. The sky was tinted with purple, and the clouds were as blue as Earth's own sky, causing all the light which bathed us to have a neon quality to it. It was a clear sunny morning too; a rarity on Central, which was another reason I like the planet so much.

The architecture of the city was modern; neon, metal and tall; really tall. Most buildings broke through the cloud level. The sky was a never-ending sea of shuttles and a layer above that, larger ships loomed. Lots of buildings had shuttle bays right in the sides of them and they never seemed to be quiet, not even for a moment. Anything too big to fit in a large ground bay was not welcome in the atmosphere, for the most part. Those large ones would have to shuttle things down. The constant sound of ship sirens and shouting from all the levels above was warming to me. It was the sound of home.

The ground level was just as busy, but it was mostly with bike-like personal shuttles and many people on foot. This area of the city was close to the centre. It was almost always busy. There were also an odd number of food vendors boasting that they made their feasts '*while you wait*' – guaranteed to be fresh and not '*stasis stale*'. I had been alive for a long time, and I had no idea what '*stasis stale*' was. That said, my pallet wasn't particularly discerning.

We carried our bags and talked of the things we had missed about Central. We all had nice things to say. Libby loved that non-organics had true equality here, both socially and legally. Lea enjoyed all the different ships that were constantly visible. Ba'an basked in being back

on a Vampire colonised world, there weren't many of his own kind on Earth. For me, it was the freedom. Central had no cohesive fashion, aesthetic, or social 'norm' to conform to; *no one was ever weird here.*

"Why didn't we just land the ship on the roof of your apartment building?" Lea complained as the novelty of walking wore off.

"Because it would fill the entire landing area and I may have some visitors," Libby replied.

Personally, I wasn't convinced that Thirteen would have even fitted on our rooftop landing area. It was huge compared to the little shuttles that usually arrived.

"Also, the bay staff will clean it and scan it for micro-fractures. We have been in space for six weeks, Lea," Libby argued. Lea knew this; she knew everything about her ship. She just didn't want to walk.



We made it to our destination. A tall but unassuming building with glass doors that had brass bars as handles. The glass was slightly frosted, but we could make out the marble floor and the reception counter through it. Libby pushed it open.

The noise of the city was kept outside by the thin door, which no doubt was assisted by an invisible shield layer. The reception counter was occupied by a figure made of assorted silver pipes that had a large green holographic eye for a head. When it saw us, the figure stood up.

The lobby had a pristine marble floor, but everything else was old wood. Old brass lights and ornate glass shades gave it a classical feel. There was a large, curved elevator door on the left and one on each side of the reception desk.

"Doors!" exclaimed Libby as she saw him.

Doors flashed his eye off and on in surprise. “Elizabeth!” He replied, “You’re a day early!”

“We are?” she noted. Lea pushed past me to hug him.

I briefly wondered how huggable a person made of pipes could be.

“Hello Jonathan,” he said through the almost assaulting hug.

“Hey, Doors!” I replied.

“Memory fixed now, sir?”

“Yes, thank you. It’s also a little upgraded.”

The last time I had seen Doors, I was fresh out of a coma and had no idea what was happening. Shortly after I arrived, the top floor was shot to shit and Libby threw a tank out of the window. Doors turned up and used his large energy cannon to correct the problem.

“Oh my! President Ty. It is an honour to meet you sir,” Doors added as Lea finally let go of him.

“Good to meet you, too, but it’s just plain Ba’an now. I stepped down.” Ba’an replied with a little awkwardness I had not seen him display before.

“I’m not a citizen of Sol, but I assure you; you would have had my vote. I am most happy to meet you, sir.” Doors stood a little straighter than usual when he spoke to Ba’an.

It was agreed that we would give Lea and Ba’an an hour to unpack and acclimatise. Then they were coming to our apartment for lunch. After all, we still needed to decide what we were going to do with ourselves now. Doors was invited too, of course.

The lifts at the back of the lobby were just that, plain old elevators. The curved one to the side, however, was the only entrance to *our* apartment. The doors opened almost instantly when the button was pressed, the little recess contained only a pale blue light. The light was a tiny and very complicated pinch or ‘Fold’ in space. For all intents and purpose, it was a magic door that led to our apartment. It would



only fire up when the elevator button was pressed by someone who had the authorisation to visit, or if Doors opened it. Folds were huge power draws and expensive to set up. They were rare to see outside of high-profile evacuation systems and the homes of the insanely wealthy. To Libby and me, it was nice insurance to have an apartment that had no physical entrance, and she could definitely afford it.

Libby had always said I was paranoid, then we got shot at in our own home. Now her idea of 'basic security' put my paranoia to shame. The entire building had been upgraded with concussion cannons, shields, and backup power sources. Having Doors at the entrance should have been enough security for anyone.

The Fold lit. We stepped in and then stepped out into our apartment on the top floor of the building.

# Chapter 4

## Homecoming

Our apartment had been repaired while we were away. Doors would have seen to that even without Libby asking him to. The Fold powered down behind us and was now just an area near the wall that had a section of smoked glass covering it. Had I inspected it, I would have been able to see the hazy detail of many complex circuits and power converter traces behind it. The smoked glass extended to a small area of the floor I was standing on.

Libby kicked off her shoes as she always did. She was annoyingly untidy, which was a surprise given how organised she was in the rest of her life. Also, her brain was literally built atop of a library algorithm; I assumed she had become untidy intentionally, though I never could figure out why.

“I’m going to get changed,” she announced with a content sigh, vanishing into the bedroom to the left of the main living space.

The apartment wasn’t exactly as it was the last time we had been there. The Fold was flush against the wall now, before it had lived behind some doors. The fireplace was moved to the left a little, it was no longer a column of brickwork in the middle of the room. It was now a free-standing feature. Holographic flames flickering nicely on a

shined black marble plinth. We had plush, luxurious black carpet. Our sitting area under the large window was slightly raised with a step that was edged in a pink glow. The horseshoe-shaped red sofa remained, with the stubby large round coffee table in the middle. There was a table to the left of it that had data tablets and a couple of other seemingly random devices strewn across it.

The large window that went the width of the room and was automatically shaded to block out the bright Central sun. At this height, it was quite a sun. We were just above cloud level here; come the evening, it would look glorious.

I took off my grey Elven ranger jacket and looked around for somewhere to hang it. I affectionately remembered that I lived with Libby. There was little point in fighting the rising tide of disorganisation. I dropped my jacket on the floor next to the Fold and wandered to the right, to the kitchen.

The kitchen was a small room with a single countertop and some cupboards above it. It contained only rations and water, in case of an emergency, which was probably never going to be needed, but as I have already said, I have lived long enough to know the value of backup plans.

The only thing in there that actually mattered was the silver food hatch. I waved my hand and the floating menu lit up. I would have known what planet I was on just from the food selection menu.

My options were seemingly limitless, with delivery times listed next to them. Whatever I chose would be ordered from the nearest place that had it then taken out of stasis already prepared and expressed over to the hatch via conveyor, Fold and God knows what else. It was decadent, insanely complex, overly priced, and wonderfully convenient.

On a ship, even a big one like Mercia, you would have a far more limited menu and the time would be thirty seconds or less for pretty

much everything. On a planet, it was easy to connect all the cafes and markets. smaller buildings would have their own kitchen in the basement that would do the same thing, but you had to stock your own stasis chamber. This was Libby's building though, and as such, she wasn't afraid to spend a little extra for the best on offer. We had a planet level menu with express subscriptions to every service. I could order anything from anywhere. Most things took less than a minute to arrive at the hatch, but the longest time I could see as I scrolled was a quarter of an hour.

I pressed for an Elix. My drink of choice. It was also the strongest thing on anyone's menu. I couldn't get drunk, but I liked the flavour. It was a wonderful, elusive and tangy syrup, nothing was quite like it. I drank a lot of it.

I wandered back into the living area and pulled off my boots. I put my feet on the coffee table and felt like something lifted from me, finally relaxed, home, after a long time. My memories were intact. I had nothing to do, no one to report to, and not a single problem in the world.

Libby came out of the bedroom in black shorts and a purple shirt with some sports team's name across its front. She sat next to me.

"Have you started freaking out yet?" she asked.

"About what?"

"For the first time since I've known you, you're technically out of work. No project, no mystery to peer at," she said with a smile. Not trying to tease or taunt me; she just knew how I was wired. She was right. It was on the precipice of my relaxing mind. It had been ever since we left Earth.

"It may have occurred to me that I am, in fact, now at something of a loose end. Yes," I smiled, pulling her in a little closer.

“You’re a historian. You also have the advantage of experiencing most of history first hand. Maybe you could write about it, or lecture,” she suggested, projecting her own passion for teaching onto me.

“No! Given that I know for a *fact*, all of recorded history is the mad cobbling together and the manic edits of Aygah’s *plan*, it would feel a little dishonest to propagate the crap.” I realised that I may have some issues to work through about this subject.

“Mad edits or not. It’s set in stone now, isn’t it? As she told us, it’s literally the best possible version of reality.”

I grumbled to myself about “mad gods” and she glared at me a little, but lovingly.



The Fold lit up at the far side of the room. I glanced over at it and heard the faint click of Libby’s combat systems coming online. She was jumpy.

A figure appeared as the light blinked out. A woman stood in our home. Dark skin and black hair. She was wearing green overalls and carrying a large amber bottle.

“Kay!” Libby exclaimed as she ran over to hug her. Ka’ona, Kay to her friends, my granddaughter.

I hugged her, too.

“Welcome home guys!” she said, thrusting the bottle at me.

“What’s this?” I asked.

She was busy complimenting Libby on how nice her hair was. Libby’s hair was always nice. “Oh, it’s something I found in the Elven market. A nice stall owner down there makes it himself, only sells it to people he likes.” She smiled widely. “It’s boot-leg Elix.”

I grinned and popped the lid off the bottle. It tasted potent and had a grittiness to it that was pleasing.

“Thank you!” I said, taking another healthy ‘sip’ from the bottle.

We were just starting to catch each other up on recent events and the Fold lit up again.

Ba’an and Lea appeared in the living area. The instant response squeaked out of Lea’s mouth, “Kay!” More hugs happened. I wasn’t aware that they were getting along this well. Kay took a moment to greet Ba’an. They weren’t quite at the hugging phase, but they seemed friendly and, most importantly conflict-free.

I had exchanged a few emails with Kay on the way back to Central and made sure she knew about the relationship that Lea and Ba’an had developed. Kay and Ba’an were friendly enough now, but a few years ago, they had fallen into an intense but short-lived relationship. It ended because he was always a politician first and a boyfriend second. They were finally on, mostly, good terms as long as the topic stayed away from government affairs. Which should be easier now that he was no longer a part of those affairs. She didn’t seem to have a problem with the budding romance, which was a relief. Lea was my best friend; I didn’t want tension between her and Kay.

Doors arrived a little later, also with a bottle of something in hand. It seemed odd having a six-foot person made of pipes hand me a bottle of wine. It was good wine, or so Ba’an assured me.

Doors, like Libby, didn’t eat or drink. I hadn’t spent too much time with him until then. I was surprised at how funny he was; dry but razor-sharp. He was also an excellent storyteller who couldn’t have fitted in better with this group of friends.

Lea was mixing her drinks with reckless abandon. Ba’an was pretending not to be overindulging in the wine. I was wondering if Lea was a bad influence on him.

Libby activated a subprogram that simulated the state of ‘tipsy’. She was then convinced by Lea to, and I quote, “run it again, it’ll be funny.” Shortly after this conversation, she was at least as giggly and confused as everyone else.

Kay and I, being Bio-static enjoyed the company and basked in the atmosphere, but were unable to reach lightheaded, never mind actually drunk.

We had put music on and got Elven food out of the hatch. It had, at some point, become a party. I wished that Joanne had been there to enjoy it with us; she was off running a planetary alliance and managing a war. It seemed like another life to us in the safety of Central.

The late afternoon turned to evening. The conversations never ended. The most noteworthy highlight of the evening was Ba’an asking me where the toilet was. Libby, who at this point had somehow gone from functional to trashed, informed him that we didn’t have one, giggled and fell off the sofa.

The truth was, we really didn’t have one. Neither of us had that requirement. He complained loudly, using very un-presidential words about the inconvenience of having to go to the lobby, then back up a lift to his apartment just to ‘take a damned piss.’ His need outweighed his outrage, and he left. He came back half an hour later, admitting that he may have had an accidental nap.

# Chapter 5

## Cogs

Morning hit me through the window in the bedroom. I turned and, as happened a lot, was greeted with an emptiness where Libby was supposed to be. I wandered into the shower, that I still, with all my memories restored, considered to be a ‘magic light’. It flashed at me for a minute or so as I got dressed. My clothes being cleaned by its glow as well as my body.

I entered the main room, stepping over Libby, who was face down on the floor, passed out; though if I asked her, she would call it ‘of-fline’.

There was a small person-sized lump under a blanket at the end of the sofa. I assumed where Kay finally ran out of energy.

I perched on the edge of the coffee table, flicking my Circlet screen out, checking the time and the news feeds. The war was still far away, it seemed. There were some political issues with the Vampires and Earth that I decided not to bother reading.

I noted to myself that I would have to make sure our citizenship paperwork was in order in case things got dicey. My daughter may have been the president of Sol, but Central was my home. That was going to get problematic if the Vampires did pick a side.



My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a sharp intake of breath from the floor. Libby was awake, or 'online' *according to her*. I still saw little difference in the distinction.

She wobbled to her feet, holding the side of her head.

"Ugh. Is it morning already?" she asked as she struggled to the sofa.

I closed my Circlet and sat next to her. "I know why you enjoy simulating the drunkenness. I get that part of it, but why simulate the hangover?" I asked, gently kissing her forehead.

"It's local. Only affects the Avatar that ran the bad decision. I assure you I'm quite busy with many important and useful things on Mercia right now." she closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

"That wasn't the question."

"Lea said the hangover was part of the experience."

"How many times did she get you to run the bad decision program before you passed out?" I asked.

"Well, after you abandoned us, she was drinking shots of something orange. I didn't want to feel left out. I ran it once... three times more, and then offlined on the floor. I assume Lea isn't dead?"

"No corpse littering the apartment, so she didn't drink herself to death just yet. Ba'an got her home, I guess."

The blanket on the other side of the sofa moved. Kay's head popped out from under it. She stretched.

"Morning guys!" She looked at her Circlet's tiny, embedded screen and grinned to herself. "Not even noon yet," she smiled. "Can I use your shower?" she asked,

I nodded and pointed to the bedroom.

A chime filled the room for a moment. Libby held her head and barked, "Answer!" The fireplace turned from holographic flames to an image of Doors' eye-like head.

“Good morning, all. I’m sorry to bother you; I know you had quite the evening. There is a guest in the lobby.” Doors was always wonderfully polite. It was genuine politeness, not a surly or forced one.

“No problem, Doors, we’re all just starting the recovery process anyway. Who is our visitor?” I asked. Trying to match his excellent manners.

“A Doctor David Atkinson.”

I was surprised. David was on my list of things to think about today. Something regarding his book. Though I hadn’t started reading it yet.

“I’ll be right down,” I said.

“You want me to come with you?” Libby asked. I kissed her forehead again and thanked her for pretending she was able.

The Fold delivered me into the lobby moments later.



There he was, David Atkinson. The last time I had spent any time with him, just over two months ago, he got shot in the face; it was, *at least in part*, my fault. He had my personal shield on his arm, so it wasn’t drastically worse than a solid punch in the jaw, though that was more luck than planning.

Aside from his one moment of bravery, I hadn’t taken to him at all. I found him to be a smug, self-obsessed man. Too aware of his own good looks and charm. Too confident in his own ability and lacking genuine interest in others. That said, he was a fine man who worked hard to be one of the good guys. He was just a prick about it.

The man standing in front of me was not presenting himself in a way that matched my experience of him. He wasn’t wearing a pristine tailored shirt and didn’t have perfectly styled fresh-from-the-barn hair.

He was dressed in a heavy, deep red robe. A brighter red belt around his waist. While his hair was neat, it was nowhere near as contrived as before. He looked like a monk; not the self-obsessed, ego-driven engineer I had known.

I was so stunned by the change I hadn't even stepped out of the cavity that housed the Fold. The doors chimed again to tell me to move. I finally listened. "David?" was all that I could think to say.

"Hello, Jon. It's been a little while," he said. His arms clasped beneath the sleeves of his robe, adding to his monkish appearance.

"Not really, it's been two months. Did you join a cult?" I realised how rude that was, the moment I said it. "Sorry; I mean, well, why are you dressed like that?" that wasn't better.

He smiled warmly now, genuinely. "I know, I know. It's been a busy couple of months."

I realised Doors was looking at us both with great interest. I liked Doors; he was one of the family, but I worried that this meeting may require some privacy.

"I had a long night; you mind if we take a walk?" I asked.

He nodded in agreement.

The street was cold, or so I assumed, judging by how others were dressed. I used the magnetic clasps on my jacket and closed it up to fit in with the crowd a little better. Truth was, I had no idea what the temperature was.

We walked a little way. People passing us; all going about their business. I noted several Thinkers as we passed. Thinkers were easy to recognise. Most turned piles of black stone cubes into a body, some preferred glass, others metal. They used tactile telekinesis to animate the materials like space suits. I wasn't one to pay much attention to the surrounding aliens, especially on Central. Now though, Thinkers and Sol were at war. Something within me noted them and I was ashamed

of myself for it. These people were most likely trying to stay out of it, the same as I was.

We walked to a nearby open area where there was a water feature on the floor, a stone walkway over a shallow holographic pond, a few projected displays of the moons floating about; it looked nice. The towering buildings all around made it feel like a large room more than an outdoor area. We strolled around it as we talked.

“I’m pleased to see you, David. Is this a social call?” I asked, again realising that I was being rude. I never liked him. I fear the version of me with no memories had been better at hiding it than I was now.

“I believe that President Michaels asked you to pay me a visit regarding my recent book?” He was right. Did he know, or was he guessing? I was willing to bet that he played a mean hand of poker.

“Jo asked me to talk to you, though I’m not sure why,” I answered truthfully. I had meant to read the damned book before I met with him.

“If you have to ask, it means you haven’t read it yet,” he said with a smile that was reminiscent of his old self, with far more self-awareness now.

“No. Not yet. I only got access to the network yesterday. We got back to Central via TD-Drive so we’ve been off the grid for a while,” I should have asked Libby to get me a copy. It didn’t seem like it was an urgent task. I would have been far better equipped for this meeting if I knew more.

“I would recommend you take a look, Jon. But I’ll fill in the basics. It’s a true account of how the Goddess assembled this reality from the shards of lesser ones. How she saved all our souls from those earlier realities and made this the perfect universe for us all to live in. The universe is a gift from *Her*. I know it’s all true because *She* told me herself.”

We stopped our strolling now and stood on the little bridge. There were a few people looking at the holograms, children, and families, mostly.

“Okay. The woman that told you all this, did *she* happen to sell you a moon too?” I asked. I would not endorse his claims or give away anything of my own, though his version of events was basically accurate.

He raised an eyebrow at me. “Jon, you’re too old to play games like this. She gave you back your memories. All of them. Your recollection goes back so far that you may be older than some of the stars. I know because She told me. I was charged with Her secrets.” He was right, and that worried me.

He overemphasised “She” and “Her” as he spoke. I didn’t miss that.

My memories really did go back that far. He was right. Although, I didn’t access them all in the same way that I did the memories of this reality. I had to focus a little on things from previous iterations. Skim through it all and pull-on threads to get specifics. Calling a moment or an idea forward, it was like downloading from a server. I had still been enjoying my restored memory of *this* reality, so I hadn’t explored my previous iterations much yet.

“What secrets do you claim to have, David?” I made sure my own poker face was rock solid.

“I can’t tell you everything. You’re not ready, not quite yet,” he said. I was instantly furious that he felt he was the one in charge of this information, this conversation. The idea that he thought *he* was somehow qualified to tell *me* when I was ready. *Still so arrogant, David.* He continued, “She wanted me to let you know something...”

He fixed my gaze, locked my total and complete attention before saying, precisely, “There are Blades in this reality.” It was a sentence that stopped me in my tracks. I felt my poker face crack and fall.

“Blades?” I asked cautiously.

“Yes. On a young planet, a few sectors from the rim.” He wasn’t playing. This wasn’t some insignificant fact that anyone could know. No one other than my own family and the bridge crew of Mercia had even heard of the race ‘Blades’

“Well, that brings our meeting to a finish I think,” he smiled with a twinkle of satisfaction and walked away. I wanted to stop him. To press him for more, but that would involve showing my hand; showing that he knew things I did not. I had already slipped at letting out my shock at his words.

# Chapter 6

## Gathering

I stepped through the Fold and back into the living area of the apartment. The debris and fallout from last night were gone now. As I entered, the holographic cleaning system blinked off.

“Are we alone?” I asked.

Libby, who was nursing her head and sitting against the large window in a recess, looked over at me with an interested expression.

“Yes. Kay had some work to do. She said she was going to be over later. Why?”

“Lea, Ba’an?” I asked.

“Not seen them,” she said.

I sat down next to her. “I just spoke with David. I need to read his book. Blades, he says there are Blades alive in this reality.”

Libby looked instantly concerned. “How does he know about Blades?”

“He says Aygah told him.”

“Why would she tell him and not us?” Libby asked. It was a solid question.

“I don’t know. He may be lying. I’m not sure I have him figured out yet,” I said, slipping into a deeper train of thought for a moment.

“Where?” she asked.

“A planet a few sectors away from the rim.”

“I’ll start checking what I can from Mercia’s star-charts,” she said. I knew that although she looked like she was relaxing on the sofa here, there was a version of her on Mercia storming to the science sector and demanding information. I also guessed she was analysing David’s book in her AI-Core, in the time it took me to blink she would have compared it against everything else ever written, by everyone of every species.

“Jon.” she said, looking at me with concerned eyes. “Read the book.”



I sat cross-legged on the sofa for the next few hours, burning through David’s words, reading from an old data tablet. Libby went out to meet someone at the university, an old friend. She wanted to be supportive, but there was no point in her giving me any sort of deep analysis or thoughts on it until I had read it. There is a finite speed at which organics can process data. I read it line by line, like every other organic.

I didn’t even take a break to eat. Which, for me, was something of an oddity. When I was done, I sat and thought about the work, mulling over its implications.

I got myself a pot of coffee and went back over some sections of the book. I was blessed with an excellent memory, though nothing as perfect as Libby’s. I had taken the general meaning from the book, but now I wanted to take in the nuance.

I made some notes on my Cirplet. David had a lot right. I still wasn’t convinced that Aygah had visited him, as he claimed, but he knew a



lot. He was right about how old reality was, which was something I thought only a handful of people knew. He was right about Blades, though he didn't explicitly name them in the book. He also knew that Thinkers were new, a first in all the iterations of reality. He made some mental leaps regarding what that meant, which, to be fair, he was clear was his own hypothesis. He named me *specifically* and outed my biology. He didn't mention Joanne or Kay inheriting it; he never said they didn't, he just ignored it as a possibility.

I didn't consider my biology a secret, *not really*, but it's not smart to highlight your differences from your species. There were enough minor races known in the galaxy for most people to shrug and assume I was just mixed species, if they noticed my oddities.

He wasn't infallible, though. There were things he had wrong. He seemed to think that there had been exactly nine hundred iterations of reality and placed some significance on the number. From my conversation with Aygah, I knew that there were many more than that. He also said that in the original reality, none of the older races had functional immortality. The truth was the opposite.

In this reality, Elves, Bricks, Thinkers, and Vampires had unlimited natural life spans. Humans, while quite able to function for a hundred and twenty years or so without issue, would rapidly begin a decline after that point. There were, of course, medical procedures that could allow them longer lives, but most of the processes were both prohibitively expensive and reduced the 'humanness' of the subject. It was rare enough for anyone to try to live forever that it didn't seem worth making laws against it.

In the first reality, however, humans were the *only* immortal race. They used their gift to oppress and enslave the other Elder races, and their Younger race allies.

Why did he have such basic things wrong if Aygah had visited him? If she didn't, then how did he know the things he did? The most concerning was the implications of what he had told me. What did it mean if there were Blades alive in this iteration?

Blades were the species of which Aygah was the last. A race powerful enough that with the right technology, could re-write the entirety of reality on a whim.

I was startled when the Fold lit up. Lea strolled through, looking worse for wear. She slumped down at the end of my sofa.

"I think I drank too much," she observed.

I closed my Circlet and put my data tablet down. "Yeah. It was a nice evening," I replied, checking the time. "You heard from Kay?" I asked.

"She went to a work thing, didn't she?"

I rubbed my chin in thought for a moment. "Come on, let's go visit. I have some questions for her," I said, finding my boots on the floor.

"No chance, Jon," she complained, now lying on the end of my sofa, feet still planted on the floor.

"Where's this famous Brick metabolism I keep hearing about?" I poked. She stuck her tongue out at me and struggled to her feet.

"I'm going to wake up Ba'an. You have fun," she said, still holding her head.



I walked, enjoying the activity and colours of the city. Central was constantly busy. It must have been a Monday because there were lots of large ships in the sky, some just breaking cloud level. Mondays were always busy days in the sky.

Central was a Vampire controlled world and Monday was the traditional day of rest for Vampires. On Monday's no ships were usually scheduled to come or go through the Warps. This should have made it quiet, but instead, it resulted in transports from the Young worlds coming and going all day. Cramming in their business while docking rates were cheap.

It didn't take long to get to the Embassy. Kay worked in her own medical research lab on one of the lower basement levels. I had maintained my security clearance, and the ID was in my wallet. That, the passive DNA scanners, and my Circlets' login details together ensured that the back door of the Embassy opened for me with no effort. I walked into the oddly quiet building and took an elevator down. A few minutes later, I was at the door. "Doctor Ka'ona Michaels," read the plaque; I admired it proudly for a moment.

I walked in, to see Kay talking to a person perched on the end of the medical bed. I didn't recognise the species. Their skin was silver, neck was the same width as their head. Rounded shoulders and they were wearing a well-worn tunic that would have been at home in the Middle Ages, though this wasn't a completely alien garment on Central. Here you could dress however you wanted and no one much cared.

"Jon, I didn't expect you to drop by," Kay said. She rarely addressed me as 'grandfather' and *never* around strangers. The details of our family tree were not a secret, but we looked very similar in age. It wasn't worth highlighting.

"Are you well?" she asked, suddenly concerned that this may be a medical visit. "Yes. Yes. I wanted to ask about something. I wasn't aware that you had a patient. I'll wait outside."

"No. It is welcome isn't," said the silver figure in a harmonic tone that sounded like a whistle. It was nodding and turning towards me. I could see its thin lipless slit of a mouth and its black eyes. It had no nose

to speak of. It looked vaguely fishlike but without the implied oiliness of that description. It raised a bare silver arm with a small hand at the end; the hand sported two fingers and a thumb.

“He, lo,” it said as if it were two words.

“Hello,” I replied, walking closer to shake the odd hand.

“This is Mestaff. He’s from the rim. He’s a pilot.” Kay informed me.

She was wearing her medical uniform. An all-in-one skin-tight grey rubber-like suit with a vague circuitry etched into it in a metallic weave. A white coat over the top with scanner glasses in the lapel. Her wrists had large circlets attached to them that housed assorted medical devices.

She would have looked far more professional if she had buttoned up the coat like every other doctor in the universe. She enjoyed how the medical suit looked on her and saw no reason to hide her form.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Mestaff,” I said.

“It go,” the little fish man replied proudly.

I looked at Kay for an explanation of Mestaff’s obvious problems communicating.

“He’s from one of the very Young races. They only recently managed to get a hold of TD technology. Their native language is whistle based. He is still learning to communicate in Elder-tongue. He can understand us mostly fine but he’s still getting used to speaking it,” she said warmly and a little slowly; I assumed so that her guest could follow the conversation.

“Oh, well I can understand that, Mestaff. Please let me know if I’m speaking too fast for you.” I said, trying to project a friendly tone.

Mestaff nodded, I think.

“His people have only been visiting Central for a few months. They have been green lit for a rather large supply of Cure-all. Mestaff here

has been sent for a scan, so we can make sure it's safe for his kind," Kay explained. "Were done now though, and his biology is pretty much exactly how their science report described. I'll send the paperwork now and your shipment will be released in an hour," she said that last part very clearly to make sure Mestaff followed the important points.

He nodded excitedly. "Thank," he said nodding and whistling.

"Don't forget. If you need more, you have to let us know before you leave your world so we can get it ready." Kay had obviously faced this issue before.

Mestaff nodded gratefully again and jumped down from the bed. He was only just about four feet tall.

He looked oddly at Kay. "Can" he began, then stopped for thought, "Can, food. Before alone," he said in the tone of a very serious statement.

"I appreciate the offer. I have told you, I only date Elder species," she smiled.

Mestaff whistled and clicked, I think it was a laugh. "Nice meet," he said to me and then scurried off at a startling pace.

"Interesting guy. Cure-all?" I asked.

"Yeah, the rule is, if a young race gets themselves to Central under their own power, we load them up with as much Cure-all as they can carry and send them home. Once all their worlds native diseases and infections are gone, we send an emissary and offer them alliance membership," she said as she put away some medical scanners that I assumed she had used on Mestaff.

"Central-gov' gives them the Cure-all for free?" I asked.

"Yep. No one charges for medicine. That's how you get plagues," she said with a shrug. I nodded. *Wise words.*

"In Mestaff's case, they can't believe their luck. They had thought that they were alone in the universe until a probe spotted them. It

sent them TD-Drive data and about a thousand other basic technology designs. For some reason, his people assumed it was an accident. Assumed space was filled with danger. They risked reaching out to us a year later when a disease started making the whole species go blind. We cured pretty much all the diseases on their planet with standard-issue nanobot soups. Everyone they meet is only interested in sharing art and trading with them. It's like a dream come true for the little guys." Kay had a smile, thinking about how much good had been done.

"What's their race called?" I asked.

"Well, they are silver and look vaguely like fish. What do you think Central gov' categorised them as?" she grinned.

I sighed, "Silverfish?"

She laughed gleefully. "You know how Vampires are. If something doesn't speak Elder, call it what it looks like."

"I'm so glad Humans spoke Elder when we met them. Imagine what they would have called us," I chuckled, thinking about it.

"You would know!" she said playfully, knowing that there would have been an iteration of reality where it played out differently. "Is it true they wanted to call us, what was it..."

"Toothless" I interrupted.

"Yes! Toothless! I quite like that."

The term Elder-race referred to the four races, all of whom had natural Warps around their worlds. Due to Aygah and her tinkering we also all spoke one language, which came to be known as 'Elder-tongue.'

There were iterations where the elder planets had many languages, but it made more sense to Aygah if we all spoke a common one. Reduced the things for us to fight about. Interestingly, it was assumed that there was a common ancestor among the races, an early space fairing race lost to the ages. Hence, the idea that those who spoke the

same language were ‘older’ than the others. I suppose it *was* true in some ways. I thought back to the earlier iterations.

As I remembered, I felt a smile on my face. What we called Elder-tongue was actually something reminiscent of early modern English, like someone once called Shakespeare spoke. I smiled to myself at the little secret that I would likely never find a way to share with anyone.

“Anyway.” I began, pulling myself out of a memory hole before I slipped any farther into it. “Strangely enough, I’m actually here to ask you about the Younger races,” I said. As ‘Young’ referred to anyone that was not ‘Elder’ it meant most of the universe.

“What do you want to know?” Kay asked.

“You have access to the government version of the index, right?” I asked.

“Uh-huh,” she nodded.

“Can you search your government records for a race, by description, for me?” I asked. She nodded again. We went to her office in a side room with a glass window.

“I’m looking for a race with pure white eyes that sometimes appear to release vapour or smoke if they are emotional. The ones I have seen had darker skin tones with blue or purple markings across their abdomen, can look a bit like circuitry.”

She looked at me suspiciously.

“Oh, and they seem to be very anti-social. If that helps.” I was diving into my memory of Blades now, trying to pinpoint what were race traits and what was unique to Aygah when I had first met her, before she ascended into whatever she was now.

I realised Aygah was the only Blade I had met in this iteration. I had known Blades in other iterations. I had a sadness about all the failed realities. I wished I wasn’t able to remember so many of them.

Kay was tapping away at her terminal, adding the details of the descriptions.

“That’s not a lot to go on, you know.” She tied her hair back while she waited for the search to run.

“If it was easy, I would have asked Dex to do it,” I said.

“How is Dex?” she asked.

“No idea. I haven’t messaged him since I left Mercia. Offline, I assume.”

Dex was a brilliant assistant and amazing at seeing links in information sets, but he wasn’t alive. He was a faithful AI in a body that was the same design as Doors. He would just be standing in the corner waiting for me to task him with something.

“Twenty results,” Kay said.

“Twenty?” I asked.

“There are millions of races catalogued. Millions. Lots have glowy eyes and freaky markings.”

“Fine,” I said. “How many are on the rim?”

She tapped the floating screen at her desk. “Three.”

“Can I see images of them?” I asked.

She spun her screen around. There were three medical renderings.

My eyes were drawn to the first image. There he was. A Blade.

“That one. Tell me about that race?” I asked, pointing at the image.

“Interesting. This one wouldn’t have been on the public database anyway,” she said as she opened the attached information.

“Whys that?” I asked.

“Because they never made it to civilization.”

“What does that mean?”

“They were scanned by an early engineering team who were placing markers at the rim. This species was seen on a forest moon, and no one ever made contact.”



She looked at the data some more. “Also, there was only a handful, no homeworld logged.”

I wasn’t sure how much Kay knew about her grandmother. I made a mental note to ask Jo the next time I spoke with her.

“Can you send me that file?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said, flicking the file over to me. My Cirlet vibrated.

“Anything else?” She asked. I shrugged.

“Food?” I asked, more as an invitation than a statement.

“I can’t. I have to do the paperwork for Mestaff,” she replied.

I thanked her for taking time out of her day to help me with my query and thanked her again for not asking too many questions.

“I know, Ba’an will have to go through other channels now, but let him know, he can come to me directly. I don’t mind,” she added as I was about to leave.

I thought for a moment as to if it was worth correcting her assumption. I could see why she assumed it was for Ba’an. I decided it wasn’t and just said, “will do,” as I left.

# Chapter 7

## Allies

I walked through the Fold into the apartment. Ba'an and Lea were on my sofa. Before I could so much as begin uttering a 'hello' Libby came in from the bedroom wearing a stunning red and white ballgown, hair and make-up to match. She looked amazing; as ready for a high society party as she could possibly be.

I stopped dead, torn between thoughts.

She was beautiful and graceful. I wanted nothing more than to comment on her. At the same time, I was terrified, frozen, and struck by the fear that I had forgotten a date. I chose to stay silent in awe of her.

She looked at me with hands-on hips, as well as she could with a full ballgown on. "Oh relax, you haven't forgotten anything," she barked. *My wife knew me well.*

"You look fantastic," I said, ignoring her comment.

"I arranged to accompany a colleague to an award ceremony this evening. It's in Brick space so I'm getting ready now and Lea is dropping me off. She's going to visit some friends."

"Should I be jealous of this colleague?" I asked with a smile. Still transfixed by her.

“If you like, he’s a Thinker,” she replied.

“Consorting with the enemy! The shock!” I joked. She rolled her eyes at me.

“Ari, is a very old friend and no more involved in this war than we are.”

“Have a great evening, my love,” I said, realising that the Fold was beeping at me to get off the plate.

She kissed me on the cheek and left through the Fold with Lea. It lit up and blinked out a moment later.

Ba’an remained sitting on the sofa and looking at me expectantly.

“What?” I asked.

“Jon, I have been a politician for nearly eighty years. Right now, I have literally nothing to do, and I could not be more bored,” he explained.

I shrugged, not really knowing what that had to do with me.

He continued as he stood up. “I know for a *fact* that you are up to something, and I want In.”

I looked at him, assessing his meaning.

“Fine. But I don’t take orders from you, or Earth, anymore.” I wanted to make that part quite clear. I was not in his or anyone else’s employment anymore, and I liked it that way.

He nodded at me enthusiastically.

I got us some coffee and started the lecture. I made sure he understood exactly what Aygah was. Then I went over the events between my losing my memory and regaining it. I knew he had read the reports and had a pretty good understanding of it all but telling him the story myself, I made sure that he knew the nuances, the little things that I didn’t report. Like, how it all scared the shit out of little timid memory-less me. I also told him about my restored memory and its increased scope. That part wasn’t in my reports.

Then I told him about David's book. About how he claimed to have been visited by Aygah and how he knew things he shouldn't be able to.

He popped out his Circlet and got a copy of the book pulled down from the network. "I'll read it today," he promised. "Why are you so concerned about him?" Ba'an asked with a hand on his chin. "What thing does he know that's so concerning?"

"He knows about Blades," I said dryly.

"Oh, that's not something we wanted to be public," he mulled.

"He also told me that there are Blades in this reality. Somewhere near the rim."

"Oh shit! That *could* be a problem."

I liked his reply. It was honest, and it assured me he realised the gravity of this situation.

"There are millions of races, and a lot of space in the rim. It won't be easy finding a single planet without a name or coordinates," he said, thinking about the problem.

"I already have the location," I said, trying desperately not to sound smug. He looked at me and grinned, "*Of course you do.*"

"We should contact Joanne and give her the co-ordinates. She can get a protective fleet out there today," he said, as though decreeing an edict.

"No!"

"No?"

"No."

"Why not?" He asked.

"Because then more people will have the location, including any Thinker spies who may be watching. We are, after all, at war, Ba'an." I didn't want to be rude. He was, as always, wanting to do the correct thing as a reflex action.

When he was president, he would have taken the information and then tasked a small team to investigate. The reality was though, that the small team which he would have tasked with this problem would have been Libby and me. I watched him as he realised that we no longer worked for the government and while we trusted Jo implicitly; we did not trust that she had people who we would trust as much as we would trust, well, us.

“What’s your plan?” He asked, as his thought finished.

“I’m going to have to go and see David. Also, I need to find out how seriously the governments are taking his book; if there’s a security team already on him. I should know.”

“Okay. Go and see David. Get more information out of him. I’ll talk to my contacts in Sol and Central gov,” he said with an eager smile.

“Really?”

“I want to be useful. I’ll do the politics, it’s my thing. I’m not the detective, *you are*.”

“I’m a historian, not a detective, Ba’an,” I said, finishing my coffee.

“History was made-up by your ex-wife. You’re a detective,” he grinned.

“Thank you,” I smiled.

# Chapter 8

## Canto

I got a public shuttle to the part of the city where David was purported to be staying. Public shuttles were good for me. While I rarely got into conversations with strangers, I basked in their company. It made me feel grounded and connected to the world in ways I seldom felt.

The big, boxy shuttle came to a stop at the north end of the city, a little area called ‘Canto’ where there was *actual* grass and water features that were not holographic.

While Prime City was as urban as urban could get, it was also not without soul and at the edge of the city, like a great rim, was a belt of magenta grass and tall trees with leaves to match. It defined the border that separated the city from its neighbours, which had been, over time, mostly connected into one city. The government of Central, the entire sector of space, not just the planet, was Vampire. Vampires were poets and artists; They loved the neon glow of the urban machine as an aesthetic art piece, but would never let their love of this overshadow the natural beauty of the planet. There weren’t many places where the grass was as neon as the lights. It was nice and even in this late evening, families wandered around the area basking in the twilight glow and enjoying the restaurants that circled the inner rim of the massive park.

This area, Canto, was a specific zone of the ring that was punctuated with hand-built wood and stone structures. It looked like medieval Earth more than modern Central. It was an area zoned for philosophy and culture. Which was synonymous with religion and meditation, to Vampires.

I checked my Cirlet for the address listed for David. It was a building he owned called ‘The Hall of Tales.’

I looked at the map on my floating screen and almost instantly lost patience with trying to follow it while walking. I fished some augmented glasses from my pocket and put them on, enabling the Cirlet overlay. I wasn’t a fan of augmentation, but I was also bad at maps. I allowed the glasses display to overlay my vision with a very easy to follow yellow line.

Most people in the modern universe would have optical implants that would do this with a tap of the cirlet. Implants weren’t an option for me. My biology would reject them and re-grow my original eyes. Kay had given it a go once and experienced a rather painful few days. The only augment I could ever have was the synthetic arm that predated my biological changes by about nine hundred iterations of reality. I thought about the technology it had within and how there was nothing like it in all the current universe.

I was then annoyed because it didn’t do a great deal more than a regular arm. A built-in concussion blaster could be useful. Remembering how easily distracted I could be, I considered I would probably just blow up something important by mistake.

I thought back to the day it was fitted. I’d lost my original arm in the first war; it was lost when I was a soldier. We were all soldiers back then. I shook off the tug of nostalgia and took a deep breath of the clean and sweet air that housed the scent of the trees.

I found myself thinking about the first time I had visited Central. It was an Earth controlled planet then. It was a collection of military outposts and a staging ground for the empire. Every iteration of reality where humans had dominance was *shit*. The race was predisposed to oppression. The only reason I got along with them now was that they had finite life spans, none of them lived long enough to get a real conspiracy on the go.

I was in a memory hole again. I shook it off as best I could and followed the yellow line to my destination. Stubbornly refusing to think about anything for more than a moment.

Finally, I could see the end of the yellow line. I whipped off my glasses. There was a crowd around a large, old stone building. It was a dome shape with a log fire in a large bowl out front, also stone.

The people were listening to a man talking. I made my way closer, but I did so cautiously. There were about ten people around the man. I had been assuming that it was David. It was only when I got closer, I realised it was an Elven man. The movement gave it away. They were always so relaxed looking. He was clean shaved and tall with a square, heroic jaw. His Elven eyes sparkled even brighter than most.

While he spoke, I leaned against a tree at the edge of the area and listened.

“... It was then that the Goddess knew she had created the perfect reality. She allowed her stolen throne to be destroyed. Smashed into grains of dust destroying fallen angels and forever setting this as the one true universe. But in the process, things were lost and there was a great sadness in her followers.”

The people all clapped and murmured in agreement.

“Thank you for listening, dear visitors. Are there questions this evening?”



A young Vampire woman who looked like she may have still been of schooling age raised her hand. She had tiny wings on her back, marking her as one of the older families.

“Yes?”

She stepped forward confidently. “Why did the Goddess allow the Correctionists to exist if they were trying to destroy all of her work?”

I smiled to myself; she reminded me of a friend I had lost recently.

The robed Elf smiled in that comforting way that only Elves seem to. “Because she needed to let her champion take his place, and to do that, he needed to learn how to be a hero on his own.”

“What does that mean? Take his place?”

The robed man glanced at me. He held my gaze and smiled, just a little.

“I tell you what, little red eyes. I’ll ask him when I see him, okay?” He smiled widely and thanked everyone for coming. A few members of the crowd shook the man’s hand and thanked him for his performance. As they dispersed, he loudly proclaimed that there would be another telling of the tale tomorrow at six. Most people left, walking away in good spirits.

The young Vampire and her adult stayed behind. They spoke for a moment. I couldn’t make out the conversation, but a new man, also robed, had come from the building with some printed paper books in his hands and was eagerly handing them over.

The storyteller cautiously came over to me.



“Doctor Michaels, it’s an honour to meet you,” he said, bowing a little.

It's hard to assess the ages of non-humans. If a human looks like they're in their forties, then they are most likely in their forties. When an Elf looks like they're in their forties, they are at least a couple of hundred years old, as that's the point where they basically stopped ageing. Once you begin measuring time in bicentennials, I suppose it's mostly irrelevant at that point.

"I thought I was to be called 'The Goddess's champion'," I replied with an unintended sarcastic tone.

He flushed as white as Libby and nervously dropped his gaze to the floor.

"Oh, my. I'm sorry, my lord. The Keeper said that we shouldn't use your title. He said you hadn't accepted it yet."

The man was genuinely terrified. I had never had someone respond to me like that before. I didn't like it. Not at all.

"Relax preacher. I was joking," I said in as friendly a tone as I could muster.

"Thank you, my lord," he said, calming down.

"My name's Jon. Just Jon. I want to see David Atkinson. Is he here?" I asked, careful to keep my tone friendly. I didn't want to upset him any further.

"Yes! he's in the temple. If I may escort you..." he waved a hand towards the large domed building and bowed again. I didn't like it, again.

We walked in through a large archway. I noted that there was no shield generator behind it. It was nice to know I couldn't be trapped here. There was something about this place that made me uneasy.

Inside was a single large room, it had pews down both sides and a lush green carpet running down the centre. The stage at the back had a lectern with lights and a mic. The lighting was simple, designed to look like glowing crystals where I would have expected windows. I

couldn't see anything modern. I assumed it was all *actually* furnished, not Blue-fields and holograms. There was a wide flight of stairs going down to the left of the entrance.

A donations plinth was at my side and a table filled with books on the other side of the arch. I took a moment to inspect the books. They were all physical copies of David's tome. Physical books were a novelty, but a common one with religious people.

I had expected this place to be filled with people, but we were alone. I felt apprehensive at this. Churches often summoned an unearned sense of gravitas in me. Which was mad, considering that God and I were on pretty good terms.

The storyteller was watching me, almost in awe.

"You are the first of the *Great Family* to come to our temple," he said reverently.

"Great family, huh?" I mumbled, remembering that this designation was in David's book.

I followed him down the slightly purple wooden staircase, a sign that it was built using timber from local trees. The downstairs was very different from the floor above. There were many tables, chairs, even some beanbags around. A dozen or so people of different races were relaxing and talking.

I enjoyed seeing a mix of races, not just Elder ones, but a few that I was only barely familiar with. They were all in deep maroon robes and had a relaxed, casual look about them. As soon as they noticed me, they froze.

I stood at the bottom of the staircase; I used the few seconds to assess the room. There was a large trunk of cable running up the side of the stairs, looking like a grade that could power a shield. I may have been wrong about having an easy exit should I need one. The floor was metallic, rather than the brick or wood I had expected to find. A door

stood prominently at the back of the room. I did not doubt that there would be more to see in there.

After another second of being stared at in awe, I broke the spell.

“Hello,” I said cheerfully.

I was suddenly very aware that I had come alone. Perhaps I *should* have dragged Ba’an along with me.



The door at the back slid open and out strode David. “Jon! You came!” he exclaimed with joy. He walked over to me and shook my hand enthusiastically.

“Followers. Please, *relax*. I have told you, Jon will not enjoy your attention,” he said. “Please, come sit.”

The larger of the tables in the middle of the room was vacated as if choreographed. We sat down. David’s followers were all around us now.

“You read the book; I assume?” he asked.

“Yes. I have some notes,” I replied, while trying to maintain control of the conversation.

“Please, do share.”

“You sure you want your entourage listening to me grill you?”

He laughed a genuine and hearty laugh. “They all know the things I didn’t put in the book, Jon. I have no secrets from the Followers.”

“Followers?” I asked.

“Yes. Followers. They are Followers. I’m the Keeper. That’s what we’re called.”

I looked around the room. “And what are they following exactly?” I asked.

“The Goddess. They are here to tell *Her* story. Protect what *She* has built.”

They all nodded enthusiastically with murmuring agreement.

“And what do you *keep*, David?” I asked, a little more accusingly than I had intended to.

“Well, that, Jon, is the big question, isn’t it?”

I went to follow up. He put up a finger to silence me. The room subtly gasped.

“Jon, I have secrets. *She* told me things that even you don’t know. *She* has set plans in motion and those plans depend on *the Family* having the support they require.”

The followers were all sitting down now, arranging their chairs so that they could listen to our conversation, not close enough to take part.

A robed woman came out of the door at the back, carrying a tray with two large cups on it. She was of a race I wasn’t familiar with. Her skin was covered in short orange fur, her nose was tiny by human standards. She put the tray on the table and bowed. I noticed she had long claws. Her physique, as best I could make out through her robe, was more than a little feline. I looked at the cups. They were filled with a nutty smelling thick liquid and, from the steam rising; it was piping hot.

“Thank you. I’m not familiar with this. What is it?” I paused for her answer.

“It is a little like coffee. It’s from my homeworld, my lord.” I didn’t like this ‘my lord,’ title that they insisted on thrusting upon me.

“Jon, just Jon. Thank you.”

She nodded and left quickly. It’s hard to know for certain, but I was pretty sure she was blushing under that fur.

I took a sip from the cup. Whatever it was, it was *not at all* like coffee. Nutty and had a remarkably bitter aftertaste. I don't want to use the word disgusting, but it was on the way. Took another sip, not wanting to appear disrespectful.

"I don't think we need to play games, David. You tell me what you know or ask me what you need, and I'll be on my way. I have things to do."

"Okay. Here it is: You need us for the things that are coming. I want you to know you can count on us," he said with passion and fire in his eyes.

I looked around. The room was nodding in agreement.

"And what do I need you for, David?"

"I can't tell you, but you will."

"You can't tell me?" I raised an eyebrow.

"I have my reasons," he said.

I took another sip of the 'coffee.'

"Say I believe you. Say I think you do have information from 'Her.' How would I know when it's time? I need a little more to go on here." I was being a little mocking now. The whole meeting felt like theatre. It felt like a damned waste of my time.

He smiled and calmly said, "*In Her, we trust, Jon. In Her we trust.*" The chorus of "*In Her we trust*" was repeated by the room.

A wave of annoyance filled me. "Yep, this was a mistake. I'm leaving." I stood up to go.

"Jon, I know you're annoyed, but before you leave, can you do me one favour?" he asked.

I was already losing patience. I started walking towards the stairs. "Probably not. What do you want?" I barked.

"I want to know why you didn't tell me that you found *my* corpse in that facility on Earth."

I stopped walking.

He wasn't supposed to know about that. We had found a somewhat decayed corpse in the Facility. It was unrecognisable, but its ID had told us that the corpse had once been a version of David, from one of Aygah's failed iterations. I never told him. It was supposed to have been all cleaned up by Sol Gov.

I decided there was no point trying to keep this secret. "Because I didn't want to have to explain everything to you," I said with annoyance. He knew full well that we were trying to keep it a need-to-know only operation.

I was getting more than a little creeped out by the 'Followers,' watching our conversation like it was sport.

"It's a shame you didn't think me part of your inner circle, Jon. You were supposed to. *She* thought you would like my confidence. My arrogance was supposed to endear me to you. That was *Her* plan," he said a little loudly.

"Well, she fucked that up a treat, David, because you pissed me off from the moment I met you," I fired back. I felt myself almost shout at him. I glanced around the room at all the awestruck faces and found myself even more annoyed. I turned again to leave.

"Zal's interference made it all happen in the wrong order, Jon." Again, I stopped. I had one foot on the staircase. I was so close to getting out of there and he pushed just the right button to get me back.

"What do you mean?"

"We weren't supposed to meet, not until after you got your memory back," he said almost apologetically.

"What's all this talk of 'supposed to' and 'her plan'? Aygah was just trying to make the best of the situation and leave us with a reality that wasn't heading for the toilet. She was damage controlling from the

moment she started, that was all. I was there. I know what it's all about. You're just spinning it into fantasy."

The 'Followers' had all bowed and in unison said the mantra "*In Her, we trust*" the moment I had said Aygah's name. I would say it was *like* visiting a cult, but it wasn't *like* that at all. It *was* that.

I stormed up the stairs.

David came after me. His Followers didn't follow.

"Jon. There's something else you need to know," he called after me.

"Fuck off David, I've had enough of playing the messiah game with you," I yelled back. I was angry. I didn't even know why, not really. A combination of creepy religious nuts, David's cryptic rambling and the terrible 'coffee' had just fired me up. It was his fault that all this wasn't still a government secret, and I had yet to deal with the fallout of that.

"The Blades. They aren't what you expect. There's more to it than appears."

I rolled my eyes.

"I already figured that out, given that they are hiding on the rim," I barked as I stormed out of the temple.

As I left the archway, I walked straight into the young Vampire girl from earlier.

"I'm sorry," I said as she steadied herself. I had almost sent her flying.

"Oh, no apology, Follower. I'm sure I was in the way. I wasn't watching where I was going."

"I'm not a Follower," I said as a reflex action. There was no point in correcting her, not really.

"Oh? Why not? I'm coming to join the temple," she said. I'm sure she was trying to make certain there wasn't some dark secret she should be concerned about.



"I'm... I'm certain they are lovely. I'm not Follower material is all," I replied. I was still angry about David, but they didn't actually seem like bad people. There were worse cults to join on Central, after all.

She shrugged. "They take anyone, no matter who you are. They are good people. My grandfather visited the temple when he first came to Central," she said, as if to encourage me to give them another chance.

That's the moment that my annoyance faded, and my great repository of memory started making connections. I froze on the spot. Whatever it is that my mind does, it was doing it now. Vampires commit to things; they are spiritual and deep. They are not cultists, also Vampires left the homeworld as a rite of passage, in their early years.

"Sorry, your grandfather? When did he visit here?" I asked.

"Oh, just after it was founded, about a hundred years ago," she replied nonchalantly.

I glanced back. David had stopped following me and was now leaning against the temple archway. The smug bastard was grinning at me.

The young woman and I walked into the temple. David greeted her and called for someone named Ria to come and meet her. Ria, as it turned out, was the feline woman's name. She took the young woman down the stairs talking excitedly about the group.

"A hundred years?" I asked.

"Well Jon, I didn't build a temple, accrue Followers all over the galaxy and get religious independence status on Central in the two months since last we spoke."

"I thought this was it. I thought you had rented an old church, put on a robe for the attention," I said, *now being far more reasonable*.

"It's all been in motion since before The Event. *She* told me to come here. I arrived the day the last Keeper died. He told me *She* had told

him I would come. Knew my name, my face, even knew what time I would walk in through the temple door. He put me in charge of all of it and then dropped dead.”

I rubbed my chin. “And they accepted you as their leader, just like that?”

David shrugged. “It’s their way. I’ll be told who the next Keeper is when it’s my time. May be a Follower, may be a stranger. Doesn’t matter. We are given who we need,” he spoke solemnly.

“Why you?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you. I know what my purpose is. It wouldn’t do either of us any good to share it.”

“It’s not a scam? She really visited you?” I asked. Just to be sure.

“Yes, Jon. She did.”

“Some details in your book are wrong,” I said, now apologetically.

“Yeah, the story changes. It’s not as *set* as you think it is. It’s still fluid. I assume something to do with the war, and possibly Blades.”

“Your coffee is terrible,” I replied.

“Yeah, it really is, but look how happy it made Ria to see you drink it,” he smiled.

He nodded towards the inside of the temple. “Come on, let’s talk.”

# Chapter 9

## Favours

Rubbing my eyes, I realised it was morning. I had fallen asleep on the couch in the apartment. I felt two bottles of Elix under me; as I moved, I heard the stack of research tablets fall over.

“Good morning, Jon,” I muttered to myself.

I realised it was the smell of food that had awoken me and looked over towards the kitchen door, where Ba’an appeared holding a large tray of meat and a pot of coffee.

“Oh, good morning!” I exclaimed.

“Get your own!”

I raised an eyebrow. “Why can’t you eat at your own apartment?”

“Bad luck to eat alone. And, Lea hasn’t got back yet.”

I wandered into my bedroom and took a ‘shower.’ I then went to the kitchen to fulfil the chore of pressing the buttons myself. The bacon sandwiches arrived a moment or so after my very own pot of coffee.

I put my tray on the coffee table next to Ba’an’s and picked up my stack of research tablets. I ignored the bottles. The apartment would clean itself when we left next. The joy of planetary life; a little hologram projector was behind every wall that would do what was needed to leave the place spotless. No such luxury on starships.

The meat that Ba'an was devouring was under cooked to the point of bloody, or at least gooey. I wasn't sure what animal it had once been.

"What is that? Chicken?" I asked as I tried to assess it. The blood pooling was far closer to black than red.

"Horse Spider," he said through a mouth full of something I didn't want to think about.

"So, is that a spider the size of a horse or a horse with too many legs?"

"Dunno. Never saw a live one," he smiled, passing me a crunchy, raw, grotesque looking 'leg.' It tasted pretty good. I think I would have preferred it to be closer to cooked than it was, even so, it was okay.

"How have I never tried this before?" I asked as I finished the meat and lay the bone? Shell? On the side of my plate.

"Don't stock it anywhere in Sol space. Deadly to humans," Ba'an said, now on his fourth 'limb.'

I considered for a moment that I should probably be more careful about what I blindly put in my mouth when my friends were all aliens. I couldn't actually be poisoned, if I could, the Elix from the night before would probably have finished me off.



I had spent the night before reading everything I could find about the biology of the big five: Humans, Elves, Vampires, Bricks and Thinkers.

In the original version of reality, the species that became known as "Blades" were created by a mixing of the Elder races. In this reality, Thinkers existed and I couldn't rule out the chance that they were going to be part of the equation. Thinkers were new to this iteration, and, there was surprisingly little on record about them. They never needed medical attention and were borderline indestructible. Not a

lot of reason to have good medical data when it's not going to be of any use, I don't suppose.

Although my memory did go back to a time when I was something close to a biologist, I couldn't assume that the current state of things matched my assumption. I had spent the night making sure my understanding of things was correct. Ba'an had sat quietly in the armchair next to me with his Circlet setup as a terminal and had been working on something himself all evening.

We were happy to enjoy each other's silent company. Thankfully, we also enjoyed the same terrible synthetic music, so the night was filled with a pleasing soundtrack while we worked. I would have given my *good* arm for a decent desk and an AI assistant that was half competent. Working on a Circlet and a pile of data tablets just wasn't fun.

I had fought my natural tendency towards secrecy and told Ba'an everything I knew about Blades, about David, and about his strange Followers. I figured, if you can't trust President Ty, who can you trust!?

"Did you learn anything, Jon?" Ba'an asked as we ate.

"A little. I mean. Biology hasn't been a field I've studied for, oh, twenty or so iterations now," I replied, taking the lid off my coffee pot and dropping many sugars in. I lifted it to my lips like it was a massive cup.

"How do you keep it all straight?" he asked, copying my coffee pot strategy.

"I don't, not really. I mostly ignore anything that happened before this lifetime. It takes a little longer to recall the previous versions of myself anyway, so it keeps itself straight, mostly."

"But they, it, it *was* you?" Ba'an asked, adding more milk to his pot.

“Oh, yes. They were all real. If that’s what you mean. Each iteration is a result of what came before, each built on the previous. It was a process, to get me to what I am now.”

Ba’an leaned back and took a contemplative sip from his coffee pot.

“If it helps. You were a good man, in all the iterations which I knew you,” I said supportively.

“It does; thank you,” he replied with a genuine smile.

A chiming and accompanying vibration pulled my attention towards my wrist. I opened my Circllet. The screen appeared and Libby’s face came into focus.

“Libby!” I exclaimed, pleased to see her.

“Jon, my avatar was just taken offline!” she said frantically.

“What?” I exclaimed, flipping the screen so that Ba’an could see and hear.

Libby was in the familiar white visualised room that told me we were looking at a projection of her from her AI core, not one of her avatars.

“We were just leaving Forge; the Brick home world. On our way back to the dock. Lea and I stopped in the street because of a sound, an explosion. A moment later, my avatar went offline,” she explained hurriedly.

Ba’an flicked open his own Circllet and started pulling up reports on it. He wasn’t the president anymore, but he still had quite the security clearance.

“Plan?” I simply asked, knowing the futility of wasting her time. One of her avatars was on Mercia. She would have already reported this to the authorities, but I had no idea where Mercia *was* right now.

“Jo is ordering a cruiser to Brick space now, but with the war, the closest one is almost a day away from the Warp.”

“And Brick authorities?” I asked.

She shook her head. “We can’t raise them, no one in the sector is responding at all.”

“Okay, I’ll do my thing. Keep me updated,” I said. She nodded and closed the Screen.

“Ba’an?” I prompted.

“No one knows anything. Jo *has* sent a heavy cruiser to investigate. Libby’s correct in her estimation of time. Mercia had just arrived in Earth orbit. If Thinkers have attacked a Brick world, then Earth may be at risk, she’s right to keep the big gun close to home.” He was still frantically searching the reports and screens, looking for more information.

“Can we get transport?” I asked.

“We can’t ask a civilian ship to take us in blind and everything with guns and shields is already deployed to Earth, or the front line. I may be able to call in some Elven contacts, but it’ll take time,” he replied, still distracted by his Circlet screen.

Flipping out my Circlet again, I decided to see how committed to his word David was.

“I didn’t expect to hear from you so soon, Jon,” he said with a smile as he came into focus.

“Brick home world has gone dark,” I said, skipping pleasantries.

“I’ve not heard anything on the feed.”

“It’s only just happened. Libby and Lea were there, Libby’s Avatar went offline.”

His eyes went wide. “This wasn’t expected.”

I snapped at him to tell me what he knew. I wanted to know what *was* expected.

“Nothing, honestly. We have a sect of Followers in Brick space. I’ll try to get you some updates.”

“Okay, leave me a message. I’m going to find a ship,” I gestured to close the Screen.

“You don’t need one,” he said with a sense of urgency.



An hour later, Ba’an and I were standing atop of our building. Ba’an was in Sol military gear, a blue jumpsuit with personal shield, sidearm, and God knows what else strapped to him. His wings prevented him from wearing the pack that would usually accompany the outfit, but he had it rested at his legs while we waited.

I was in my own uniform: My jacket, jeans and boots. I had also strapped a handgun to my leg, and a shield to my arm.

“You sure we can trust him? I may have been able to get an Elf ship,” he complained.

“Would have taken time, Ba’an. David wants to help and somehow seems to have the resources.”

We waited in silence for another five minutes before we saw a ship approaching. As it closed in, we could see it was just a little shuttle.

“Yeah, definitely better than an Elven battleship,” Ba’an snarked. The ship passed through our Glass-shield and landed in front of us. It was a very small transport, not vastly larger than Joanne’s little sports shuttle. The side door opened. A Feline woman in a well-fitting red uniform was in the pilot seat.

“Ria?” I queried.

“Get in, my lord. They’re waiting for us.”

The shuttle had a bench seat at the back behind the pilot and wide wings, making it look like an old earth plane, but far smaller. The wings weren’t wide enough to actually offer any lift, they simply housed the propulsion panelling.



We climbed in and she pressed the button to close the sliding door. We were leaving the shielded dome atop of the building before it had even finished sealing.

I leaned forward to talk to Ria. There was a lot of wind noise in the cabin, confirming that the shuttle didn't have a shield.

"I don't mean to be ungrateful, but are you sure you guys *are* equipped for this kind of trip?" I asked.

"You obviously don't understand us yet, my Lord," she grunted, "Why's that?"

"Because you don't have faith in us." She pressed a button on the flight wheel and the shuttle accelerated with an unsettling force that pinned Ba'an and me to the back of the bench.

We arrived a short time later at the other side of the city rim. An area that was obviously a planetary shipyard. We hadn't been able to see much as we landed. There were a lot of support structures and scaffolding covering the area.

It looked like a scrap yard as we stepped out of the shuttle. Two red uniformed people ran over to meet us. One took Ba'an's bag. The uniforms were modern and not at all military, but they were obviously designed to be easy to spot. Red Cargo trousers, and a red jacket atop of a white shirt.

I quite liked the jackets; they were heavy looking with large hoods at the back that were evocative of the robes that I had seen all the Followers wear at the temple.

We were escorted in through the massive framework, which obviously housed a ship. I saw flashes of red metal as we walked into the maze of engineering and movement. This was typical of planetary shipyards, though I was nervous that I couldn't figure out what class of ship we were standing under. Whatever it was, it looked big, probably too big to be on a surface dock.

“I don’t like this, Jon,” Ba’an said quietly as we walked.

“We can trust them, I promise,” I replied, partly trying to convince myself.

Ria was a Feline, and from her movement, military trained. She alone could likely kill both of us with ease if she wanted to. The other two were human, but we would be out matched if this was a trap. I was confident that, as confusing as all this actually was, I could trust David. These were his people. I could trust them too. At least, I hoped.

We stopped on a large metal plate. One of the humans passed Ba’an his bag back. They stepped away. Ria stayed with us.

I looked around. “Oh, it’s a Fold!” I said as I was suddenly somewhere else.

# Chapter 10

## Basilica

“Welcome to Basilica,” David said as we stepped off the platform. He was wearing the same red uniform as the rest of them, but his jacket was edged in silver.

The room was small and had padding on the walls, as was common on older human ships. The smell of ozone that implied a less than refined life support system was also present. Something I took a moment to appreciate. It was like an old friend to me. Mercia and Thirteen had clean, natural air. This ship had the air that let you know you were on a starship.

“What is this?” I asked as I tried to date the design.

“I’ll tell you, as soon as we are star-bound,” David said, as he gestured for us to follow him through a corridor. As theatrical as ever, I noted.

We strode through the long corridor and turned to an oversized blast door.

The door opened onto a large ship bridge. There was no captain’s seat, just a curved rail at about waist height.

There was a pilot’s cradle, similar to those found on a fighter ship, with two stations on each side.

David pointed to the left. “Weapons, Engineering,” then to the right. “Communication and sensors.”

He spun around, gesturing to the computer stations at the back of the room, unmanned, and said, “support stations.”

I pointed at the cradle. “Pilot?”

He grinned. “There’s supposed to be a secondary flight station, but we haven’t finished refitting this thing yet.”

I looked at the empty patch on the floor where a captain’s seat could traditionally be.

“Obviously!”

David smiled widely in the smug way that always made me want to throttle him.

“Engage systems. Release the clamp. Turn on the lights and let’s get moving people,” he ordered as he leaned against the rail, that I assumed was supposed to be behind a captain’s chair.

A holographic projection appeared in front of him. It wasn’t dis-similar to a Circlet interface, but it was huge and had every system on the ship displayed all at once. David flipped through it until he focused on a diagram of the ship and some cameras that, from the angles visible, must have been housed on drones outside. I walked around to his side of the rail. Ba’an stood looking out of the window at the front of the bridge.

I saw the design of the ship on the screen. My memory started churning with echoes of past iterations. It took me a few seconds to nail it down before an old lifetime flooded me.

“David, you should have showed me this *first*,” I said reverently.

“She told me to wait until it was needed. Said you would appreciate the showmanship.”

The window showed the clamps and scaffolding being pulled away. There was a cliff of crimson metal below us. I glanced at the diagram

on the screen and noted that we were at the top of the ship, looking across its front.

The ship made its size suddenly known. We hadn't realised when we boarded via the Fold that we were at the top of something massive. It was like an apartment building with an engine. Sure, it wasn't even an ant compared with Mercia, but this thing was as large as a Sol cruiser, and then some. Big ships were not usually allowed on planet-based shipyards. I had questions as to how it got there with no one noticing, but that could wait.

The thing was built like the long barrel of a gun, with drones flying in circles, finishing repairs and patching holes in the shield.

The back was all engine, with five pylons making a star shape that would spin when the engine was fired up. The front, though we couldn't see it through the window, was an uneven opening, like a great pointed mouth.

The design allowed for the engine's power to be re-directed and accelerated out of the front, forming a very powerful but unrefined energy weapon.

I was very familiar with the design, there was an iteration where every good person in the galaxy knew *this* ship.

It was an artefact from a reality where humanity's dominance of the universe was complete and terrifying.

This was no ship of the empire though. This was a ship of the other side. Built out of broken victories and lost battles. Once celebrated as the greatest hope of the rebellion by the last of the free.

It failed, of course, but the fire it lit in the hearts of the people was worth every life that was lost that day. It was a long time ago now, many iterations before this one.

I knew one thing about this ship though: it was fast.



The ship raised through the scaffolding clamps and clutter of the shipyard. We felt the shift in gravity as the internal “down” was fixed by the gravity generator. We had felt its orientation changing before, now we felt totally still as the outside moved.

I looked at the screen and the view from the drones. The ship wasn't in a good state. There was work being done on every system visible. Whatever had happened to it, there were panels missing, systems offline and entire sections that looked under construction. The engine and life support were active and, by the looks of it, every person on the ship was trying to get the combat shields online.

“How did you afford all this, David?” Ba'an asked. Not out of some sense of accusation, but out of genuine wonder. He had no way of knowing that this was an artefact from another time.

“I didn't. It was a gift from the Goddess,” he replied, half distracted by the precarious readouts he was seeing. He tapped the floating screen to order repair crews to the engine room and mid-sections of the ship.

“The goddess? You mean Aygah?” Ba'an asked.

The chorus of “In Her we trust,” quietly echoed from everyone on the bridge, including David. Though he smiled as he said it, knowing how performative it all was.

“Same way we got Thirteen, I suppose,” I said as the view outside transitioned from the early afternoon sunshine of the surface to the blackness of space.

“How long until we make it to Brick space?” I asked.

David pressed some navigation related buttons and looked over to the sensor station. The young man there quickly checked some readouts and replied, “half an hour to the Warp, then ten minutes to the planet, Keeper.”

David nodded in agreement. “Engage the drive as soon as we’re clear of Prime,” he ordered.

A few moments later, we heard a thundering rumble as the back of the ship lit with a propulsion system that I hadn’t heard in a great many lifetimes. This wasn’t the cold propulsion panelling of the modern universe. This was the fire and rage of a Quantum-Disruption Drive. It sounded like a jet engine firing, but with a static crackle.

“What is that?” Ba’an asked.

“QD-Drive,” I began. “It creates a rip in the quantum field, then rides the shock wave. Very fast, very dangerous.”

The young woman at the engineering station looked shocked that I knew what it was. Which *made me smile*.

David closed his command screen and announced that he had things that needed attention. He stormed off the bridge, through an open door at the back, letting his jacket make a little flurry as he walked. He was good at looking good, no matter what was happening around him.

Ba’an and I were left here alone with the few people manning the stations.

“Well, I guess we’re in charge now,” Ba’an smiled with a shrug.

Ria entered through the same door that David had just left out of. “My Lord,” she greeted as she checked something at the weapons station.

“Ria, this ship, is it battle ready?” I asked, as directly as I could.

She looked up at me, then back to the station. “No, my lord. We have planetary shields online and the ancillary weapons are active, but the main gun has never worked; the combat shields are unpredictable at best.”

I waved a hand to bring up the interface. Nothing happened.

“Ria?” I asked, gesturing to the empty air. She came over and opened it for me. She tapped some controls to have the computer recognise me.

“And Ba’an,” I requested. She glanced at me with a brief hesitation.

“I was only told to add the family as they board,” she said.

“Then add Ba’an.”

She nodded and authorised him.

“Thank you,” I added, flicking the screen to check it would respond to me.

“This thing has no AI interface?” I queried as I noticed the very manual computer functions.

“Wherever it came from, there was no AI. The computer is powerful but lacks decision-making skills,” Ria explained. “The system is all spread out. It’s not like our computers.”

After taking a moment to check the flight time, I nodded to Ba’an. We headed out of the door that David had left through. Ria followed and was quite concerned.

“Where are you going, my Lord? The ship isn’t safe. There are still a lot of systems that aren’t finished,” she argued, following our purposeful strides.

“Where *are* we going?” Ba’an asked.

“Shouldn’t take half an hour for this ship to get us to Brick space, the engine isn’t synced,” I replied.

“But the sound?” Ba’an asked. The sound of thunder and static was still clearly rumbling through the ship.

“It’s not moving to phase two. It’s a QD-Drive. You don’t rip a hole in the fabric of reality to go a hair faster than a TD-Drive.”

“The drive takes time to warm up, that’s all,” Ria said, planting herself between us and the elevator entrance.



“Move,” I commanded. She looked briefly terrified and stepped aside.



The lift doors opened in the Engine room and the thunderous roar of the drive hit me like a wall. There was smoke and shouting all around us. Fires were being put out at every energy junction and a rather concerning black smoke was gathering across the top of the vast room.

Engine rooms on starships this size are never the electronic, clean hives of organisation that most people expect. They are multi-floor devices designed to manipulate forces of energy that defy most people's understanding of physics. This ship, 'Basilica', was large, and had an engine to match. The room I had entered was big enough to park Thirteen in and have room to barrel roll it. I allowed myself a moment to take it in.

The smell of oil, coolant and the occasional small fire made for an interesting mix. It took me back to the last time I was on a ship of this kind. That was a harder memory, and one I hadn't expected. I shook it off quickly.

The machinery that made up the engine was spread all around, pipes, regulators, gas mixers, cooling, and a bunch of other things I didn't understand. The three or four engineers that were fighting with the machinery ignored us. They would have been under-staffed even if the engine was working properly.

I grabbed a passing man, who was in a rush somewhere with a fire control pack. "Quantum field regulator?" I asked sternly. He did not know who I was supposed to be to his cult. He barked back with a refreshing lack of piety.

“Behind the primary conduit. The one that’s on fire!” he gestured to his fire control pack. We followed him down the walkway sized gaps between two long blue pipes. I glanced down through the hashed metal flooring and realised that we were at the top of the room. It went down for another two levels, at least.

The walkway opened into a work area where David was reading from a data tablet and messing with a complicated formula on the screen. He was shouting at, or *with* a plump Elven man who looked like he had been rolling in oil, he had substituted the red uniform for overalls. He had more than a few burn marks on the sleeves.

I strode to where David was perched.

“Jon!” he exclaimed, obviously not expecting me.

“Where’s the regulator adjustment control?” I asked.

“We’re just working the kinks out. It’s perfectly safe.” David said loudly over the sound of thunder. Something made a popping sound at the other end of the room, as if the ship itself were mocking his assurances.

He was right, of course. As much as it seemed chaotic, it was an engine. It wasn’t like the ship was going to explode on us or anything so dramatic. But I had a friend who needed me, and I did not know what we were flying into. I also knew that the engine and the main gun were the same device. I wanted that gun working

I saw the regulator array on a screen to the side of me.

“Ah-ha!”

The array was a computer rendered representation of the forces the engine was cutting through to generate motion. The regulator part was the adjustments to the forces which allowed the energy to pass through the body of the ship. What was supposed to be happening was that the incision the engine made in quantum fields would rip open in front of the ship. The engine would then close the portion at the

back and that would cause a wave of quantum power which it would ride. The high science version of a zip-line. Brutal and complex. It was not something we would have invented in this iteration. Everything we had was elegant and logical. This was the opposite; this was solving a problem with raw and brutal power.

I pulled a data cable from the side of the screen and after a few seconds of studying my arm, found what I was looking for. I jammed the needle-like tip of the cable into my synthetic arm, just below the wrist. There was a small lump there that housed the program port. I jammed the needle all the way in. It hurt, a lot.

The array on the screen, which looked like a series of floating charts attached to a holographic representation of the ship, pulsed in rhythmic waves, some down its length and others in a circular motion in a spiral travelling down it.

After a few moments, the spiral got tighter and tighter, until it vanished into the ship. The line travelling down it was perfectly fitted in the barrel of the massive gun that was the ship.

The thunder sounds were now subsiding in favour of far more reasonable, and safer sounding, rumbling.

Everyone in the room started clapping and whooping.

The needle hurt just as much coming out of my arm. Technically, it was only the skin layer that could feel pain, but the brain fills in a lot of gaps when you jam a metal pike into one of your limbs.

David's Cirklet lit up. "Yes... No, we're fine... Yes... What?"

He closed his Cirklet and looked over to me. "We just passed through the Warp," he said in shock.

# Chapter 11

## Brick (Prime)

“I still don’t understand how you fixed it,” the Elven engineer complained as we walked onto the bridge.

“I promise, as soon as my wife or Lea get aboard, they’ll explain,” I replied. The truth was, I wasn’t sure about how it all actually worked. Certainly not enough to explain to an engineer.

I had known for sure that the problem was that the engine was out of alignment. I had heard the thunder-clapping before. It was tuned to an iteration of reality that didn’t exist anymore. I also knew that one thing my mostly disappointing synthetic arms held was a component for adjusting such things. I also had a hunch about the missing AI. Turned out all I needed to do was interface the two systems and the ship did the rest.

Libby would be able to explain it to the engineer, as soon as we got to her. Also, there was another memory I hadn’t had time to investigate. Something that needed my attention.

“Keeper, the computer has just taken the primary engine offline,” called the human man in the flight cradle.

David looked over at us for insight. “Automated deceleration, the QD-Drive goes in straight lines. It’s not good for planetary systems,” the engineer said.

David nodded.

“We hadn’t even come close to its top speed either,” I said as I waved for the command screen to appear.

“Really?” the engineer asked.

“That drive is from a time before Warps existed. Fast was important back then,” I replied as I looked at the scanner data that had been populating since we entered the Brick system. The engine may have gone offline, but we had enough momentum to take us the rest of the way with little more than a course correction.

“There’s nothing. Not a single power source is registering in the entire sector!” said the young man at the sensor station. He looked over at us, “My Lord.” he added.

“Jon, just Jon,” I said, again. “We have any probes?” I asked, honestly not sure how equipped we were.

David pointed to the weapons officer and a moment later, we watched a small white light leave the ship just below the window. I assumed it was actually a screen of some sort, but it did a good job of looking authentic.

The light went out a moment later.

A wave of realisation hit me.

“David, did that probe come with the ship, or is it something you brought aboard?”

It was Ria who answered. She had been at one of the computer stations behind us.

“I purchased it on Central,” she said.

“Get the shields online. Now, David!” I ordered.

The crew didn't wait for confirmation; they were scrambling at their consoles on my order alone. A pale red tinted haze covered the front window, and a wave of relief covered me.

"What's happening?" asked Ba'an? The room looked at me, waiting for an answer.

"Dampening field. They've changed the laws of physics in this sector," I explained.

Everyone looked blankly back at me. I decided addressing the engineer would be the most useful thing to do.

"They vary the flow of energy in the area by a tiny amount. Speed it up, slow it down. Energy, light, time, heat, cold. All of it. Consistent physics is the only reason technology works." I gestured in the air as if to illustrate things. It made it no clearer, but from the way he was looking at me, something made sense to him.

"So, my Lord, they pulled the plug on anything with a microchip, for an entire sector?" he stepped over to the command area and thoughtfully rubbed his chin while he looked at the readouts. "The energy involved in that would be impossibly large." He was sceptical.

"I once saw Aygah do it alone because someone pissed her off..." the *'in Her we trust'* mantra filled my ears, I ignored it "... Took out an entire planet, and that was *before* her ascension! It can be done! Thinkers are *made* of energy! Their understanding of these forces is beyond anything you could imagine!"

The engineer nodded in agreement. I had said 'Her' name. It was a divine thing to him now.

"Why are we unaffected then?" he asked as he scrolled through the very short log from the probe.

"This ship isn't from this iteration. Perhaps that changes things?" I said, not really much better informed than anyone else.

A dampening field was devastating. I had seen it before. I had a feeling that no-one aboard had realised the impact that this kind of attack could have on an advanced space fairing race like the Bricks. I didn't want to be the one to point it out.

"Alin, look into this. Jon has *Her* wisdom within him. He'll be right, I promise you," David suggested warmly.

I was pleased that I knew the engineer's name now, if nothing else. Alin nodded in agreement.

"The technology on this ship relies on brute force more than complexity. It's possible that it's just going to take longer to affect us," he hypothesised.

He checked a readout and then left the bridge in a hurry.

"Sensors. Scan as fast as you are able. I want to know as much as possible before we go blind," David ordered as he turned to face another station.

"Pilot, get us into a self-sustaining orbit of Brick Prime as fast as you are able. I don't want us heading towards it at full tilt if the power goes off. Someone make sure we are at maximum air levels, ship wide," David said with confidence.

He sounded like a real captain. He was gathering information, taking care of the essentials. I was impressed. I had never been a commander. In all my years and lifetimes, I was never cut out for it. I was better at throwing my ideas and observations at those who could do a better job. He was doing very well, but he was also out of his depth.

"How do you always know everything, Jon? It's annoying," Ba'an said with one arm on my shoulder, as relaxed as ever.

"It's not a coincidence. She planned it," I said almost bitterly.

"What do you mean?" Ba'an probed, now a little quieter.

“We just happen to be aboard the only ship in the universe that’s not instantly powered down by whatever is generating this field. Don’t you think that’s a little too lucky?”

He shrugged. “You have to win one occasionally.”

“We knew about this attack before anyone else, because Libby was there when it happened.”

“That *was* Lucky,” he nodded.

“The day I finally made nice with David,”

“Very lucky.”

“Who happens to be the leader of a cult of Aygah worshippers,” I added.

He laughed a little. “Then why are you pissed off?”

I ignored him, didn’t have the energy to explain why he was missing my point. Aygah was manipulating all of us. Sure, she may have saved the universe, but she was also a lot more hands-on than was her right to be. Eventually, she would have to face the universe and we would collectively demand her to stop working in mysterious ways. *Perhaps that’s why she never visited.*

I felt the memories of her flooding me. We were happy once, briefly. I loved her with a fire I wouldn’t find again for a thousand iterations.

Something was happening. I had fallen into a memory hole again.

The room came into focus fast. Ba’an and David were both watching the window. Ria stood next to me. It took me a moment to realise I was being guarded.

“What did I miss?” I asked.

“Is the trance over?” she asked in awe.

“It’s not a trance, it’s a side effect,” I replied, trying not to let her turn my damaged memory into a religious rite.

“What did you learn?”



“Nothing as important as what’s happening here,” I answered. I could see what they were looking at now.

We were in the orbit of Brick Prime, the planet Forge. The dark side of the planet wasn’t black. There were fires raging across it the size of small cities, with debris all around its orbit.

We settled into our own orbit. The screen showed damage across the planet.

“How bad?” I asked gravely.

Ria spoke into my ear, getting me up to speed. “When the power went off, it all fell. Every ship, station, and satellite. The big fire was an orbital city. There are millions of dead. We got here too late to help anyone.”

“What can we do?” David asked, frozen by the carnage of the planet below.

“Nothing, not really,” Ba’an replied.

The moment I had realised what sort of dampening field this was, I had expected it, but I still had no words. I remembered a dream I had; a shiver went down my spine.

David turned to me with tears in his eyes. “I don’t know what to do, Jon. The ship is barely operating. We’re under crewed, under trained and alone. But we may be the only ship that can fly here.”

He was right. He was a good man and a natural leader, but it was time for someone more qualified to take over.

I looked at Ba’an. He took a breath and nodded.

“David, get your people figuring out how to keep this ship powered. Make it your only concern. Ba’an, make sure David and his team aren’t disturbed; do your thing, president. I’m going down there. Lea may need me.”

I turned to leave the bridge. Ria followed me. I hadn’t realised I was fragile enough to need a bodyguard. As we left, I heard Ba’an’s

tone change. He was in command now. Medical supplies were being synthesised and David was staring at the ship readout and talking with engineering. It had taken just a few steps, and they were at work. The doors closed; I pressed for the cargo bay. Pride filled my chest as I knew this problem was in the best of hands.

“I’m stuck with you, then?” I asked Ria.

“I was told to guard *Her* Champion. I’ll be doing that until the Keeper or Aygah herself says otherwise,” she purred proudly. Feline features bristling with her resolve.

“You know there’s only one way down to that planet; I mean, you figured that out right?” I confirmed.

She gave me a fake smile and with the bravest tone she could manage, she simply and eloquently replied, “*In Her we trust.*”

# Chapter 12

## Planet-Fall

Ria had been at the brink of a panic attack for the last twenty minutes. I had been loading two packs with medical supplies and instructed her to find shields and guns. Ones that had been native to the ship. We were to rely on nothing that was brought aboard from Central.

“So, did the ship just turn up one day, or was there some warning?” I asked as she came back, mostly trying to distract her.

“It showed up. Our old Keeper was visited by *Her*. He was told David would come and we would use the ship to do great good in the galaxy,” she explained as she handed me a heavy military grade shield.

The shields were vests that went over your clothes. Not the tiny armlets of our iteration. These also had oxygen and physical padding though, which would come in handy for our current task. Ria had handguns and rifles too. I took a handgun. I wasn’t confident about anything larger.

As I took off my jacket and pulled the vest over my dirty white shirt, I realised that there was oil all over me. It was everywhere on this ship. It probably wasn’t space worthy at all. I decided not to think about that.

Ria tried to look at my arm without being too obvious about it. Something else that was no doubt a thing of legend to her cult. I held it up for her to see. The point around which I had inserted the data needle earlier was black and rubbery.

“Does it hurt?”

“No. It did when I stabbed it, but as soon as the synthetic blood drains, it just goes numb,” I explained.

“What else does it do?” she asked with great interest.

“Literally nothing. It’s just an arm. There’s a chip in there that identified me as a friend to Aygah’s artefact, once. It does a type of maths that can’t be done with our current technology.”

I looked at her, waiting for her mantra.

She smiled back and shrugged, “It annoys you.”

“It’s ready, my Lord,” came the voice over the speakers. That annoyed me too. ‘My Lord’ was not a title that I wanted.

Ria pressed the button on her shoulder to fire up her shield. There was a flicker of red light and then nothing. I tapped her on the head with the butt of my gun, just to be sure. It flared up as I did. She grinned up at me like a child.

We were alone in the massive cargo hold of the ship as the large door opened. There was an atmosphere shield keeping the air in, stopping us from being blown out.

I slapped my shoulder to fire up my own shield. I didn’t turn on the Oxygen.

It was too late to back out now.

We ran out of the cargo hold and threw ourselves out into the void.

We had to clear the entrance of the cargo hold and float out far enough for the ship’s field generator to lock onto us. The plan was for two shield generators to create a make-shift Blue-tube. A technology that used pressure and physics to keep us from burning alive on

re-entry and slow our momentum to where we could walk away from it. Even with shields, terminal velocity would be, well, terminal. We needed the tubes pressure to slow us. I didn't understand the maths, but Alin seemed to be well versed enough that I was confident in him.

There were some issues, of course. The beam generators were red energy, not blue, which was far less elegant. It wouldn't be smooth like the last time I did something like this. Also, and this was the most worrying thing: this ship had no AI interface, which meant that we were relying on old school computational algorithms that were not good at the kinds of instant adjustments that contemporary technology performed effortlessly.

Unlike last time I did this though, my companion had a fully charged shield, good armour padding and her own oxygen supply. The red energy, unlike the blue we usually used generated heat, so Ria wouldn't freeze to death.

A shuttle wouldn't have the power reserves required to survive the re-entry in the dampening field. This was literally the only way down.

For a moment, it was a feeling like nothing I had experienced before. We were in free-fall around a planet that was only lit by flames and silence. There was a tranquillity there that can't be recounted, it must be experienced. A terror that runs deep and a joy that stays with you. Space is intimidating. It's about as close to touching God as most of us would ever get.

Ria was as in awe of it as I was. Her mouth was open, her cat-like eyes filled with the reflection of the fire below. I pulled on her sleeve to bring her closer. Her shield gently rippling red as I did.

As the ship's gravity let us go, the planet took a hold. We pulled each other in close and hoped Alin was as good at maths as he thought he was.

The beam encompassed us like a tube of fire. Rather than feeling like we were slowing down; it was like being shot through the mouth of a volcano.

The inside of a Blue-tube is akin to being cocooned in a waterfall, cold and serene. Whatever bastardisation of technology had needed to be done to make this red energy behave itself, it was like trying to house-train a daemon.

Before we had jumped, Ria had asked me how she would know if it worked. Told her she wouldn't be dead when it ended. We were heading for the dead version of that ending. We could both feel it.

A moment later, the beam left us. We were in free fall inside the atmosphere of the planet.

Something had gone very wrong.

Rather than the static sparks of the shield batting the flames off us, the sound of air and wind was all we could hear now. Ria and I were still hugging tight but in a free spin now. As I rotated, I glimpsed the ship far above us. It was not alone. I only saw it for a moment, but there was another shape in the distant sky above us.

We whirled again. The minutiae of the city below was becoming clearer by the second. We passed through a cloud.

I don't know what Ria was thinking in that moment, but I closed my eyes and prayed to the only deity I knew, in hopes that she really *had* thought of everything.

The fire came again. This time smooth and controlled.



“Are you okay?” I called as I stood up from a crater that was deep enough that it looked like a ship had crashed, not two people.

I coughed as I called. My breath was so hot that it steamed as I did.

A wail of pure excitement filled my ears.

“Alive!” Ria screamed with two fists in the air and a joy that I hadn’t known was possible.

I pulled her to her feet. Her fur was singed, her shield was flashing with a power warning, but she stood up. She was alive, and mostly uninjured.

“What now?” she asked, calming down.

“Turn your shield off,” I instructed.

I passed her a bottle I had stashed in my pack.

“Drink this as fast as you can,” I ordered.

“What is it?” she asked as she finished the last drop without hesitation.

“Cure-all,” I replied, slapping her shoulder to get her shield back online.

She looked at me confused, then nodded in realisation. Cure-all was a soup of very advanced chemicals and nanites. I had put it in a container from the ship’s own storage, which I had hoped would shield the nanites and keep them active. Once in her body and behind her personal shield, they shouldn’t be disabled by whatever was killing all the technology.

She looked fine, but I had read that Feline’s didn’t like to show when they were injured; it was an evolutionary trait. A stunt like we had just pulled would have left her beaten, and with internal injuries. I knew *I* felt like I had just jumped out of the sky. She couldn’t have been any better than me. Cure-all seemed like a good precaution. Even though I felt like I had been through a blender. I was counting on my Bio-stasis to kick in and get me back to healthy before Ria noticed how messed up I was.

“What now?” she asked, panting with adrenaline.

We were at the edge of the city, a little more to the south of the place we had planned to land. We needed to head east, around its periphery.

There was fire and the noises of confusion emanating from the deeper city. There were smells of chemicals burning in the air and a chill to the wind that even I could feel.

Our plan was to find Lea and get Thirteen up and running, having as little contact with the locals as possible. We had nothing to help them with. Getting involved with them would just slow us down and it was unlikely we could be of much help in this devastation anyway.

Ria checked her rifle had survived the fall. The red light on its tiny status screen was lit. I hoped we wouldn't need it.

“We find Lea, fix Thirteen, hopefully Basilica will get this planet back on-line. Then I have shit to do.”



# Chapter 13

## Break

“It’s called ‘Forge’ you know,” I said as Ria and I tried our best to ignore the sounds of desperation that emanated from the deeper city.

“What is?” she asked as she stopped and tilted her head to better hear the city’s despair.

“This planet. It’s called Forge.”

“It is? I have always just heard it called *Brick Prime*,” she replied. She was trying hard to not let me see how concerned she was about what we were about to face, as we entered the city proper.

“Yeah, that’s an old tradition — Younger races don’t speak Elder. No point giving them a random word. Just tell them the thing they need to know.”

Ria snorted at this idea. “Elders are self-obsessed! Making out everything they do is for the good of the little ones.”

I shrugged; I wasn’t sure I disagreed.

“They are just too lazy to learn our languages. Making Elder the language of the universe is just rudeness masquerading as charity!” The very idea that Elders would actually be at all gracious made her fists clench.

I recounted the history of the tradition as we travelled past a truly massive lake; a landmark I had been waiting to see. It was dark and there was something sticking out of it; it looked like a ship had crashed into it. There were some lights too, chemical glow sticks, the sorts that were in military emergency packs. Whoever they were, they had military equipment on board, and they had splashed down; they were in a better state than most the people who had fallen from the heavens.

“Earth.” Ria said.

“What?”

“Why does literally everyone know what the Human home world is called?” she asked.

“It’s because it’s a hub world. Just like everyone knows what Central is called. Hubs are required information for travellers.”

She made a purr of agreement.

We stopped our almost running pace when we got to the edge of the lake. I didn’t love the exercise, but I was built for it.

I was happy that Ria was Feline. Her species had far more endurance than humans; by now, a human would be feeling the fatigue from our high-speed trek, and we had a long way still to go.

I had been working out where Thirteens dock was, in relation to the water. I knew that this was where we needed to enter the city, not just follow its periphery.

“This is it, isn’t it?” Ria asked.

I nodded. This was the portion of the trip that was going to be the hardest.



Brick cities were all a similar layout; the whole thing was a hexagonal shape. They divided the city up into smaller hexes. Each one would

contain a function area, usually a housing complex, shopping facility or industrial units, and a public park. They were large and well organised, even though it wasn't easy to see at ground level. Bricks always built like this. We had come to the first road since we had landed. The roads traced the edges of each hex, but they weren't much wider than a human surface shuttle.

The docking station was two hexes in from the edge, on the right side of the road from the direction of the lake. I had seen it clearly from the cartography screen on the ship. I knew it was the closest dock to where they were staying. Thirteen would be there, and that meant Lea was close.

"Are you worried about your wife?" Ria asked, sensing my hesitation.

"No, Libby's avatar went offline, she'll just sync another. It's Lea I'm worried about."

"People are dangerous when things like this happen," Ria said solemnly.

"Not Bricks. They are good people, fine people who'll all pull together."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Ria asked, now a little more confident.

"She was close to the dock when the power went off. Ships would have been landing or taking off."

I didn't want to say that there was a good chance that Lea would have been killed when the ships fell. It was more than a little likely, but I didn't want to say it.

We started our run again. This time, directly into the city.

Rather than just hearing the noises and screams, sounds of need and fear, we had to witness it now.

The city was lit by three small moons. There was very little additional light in the streets, except for the occasional chemical glow rod dropped on the ground by the people looking for safety. Most of the buildings here were still standing, but the upper floors had been crushed when shuttles had come raining down. The uninjured had started digging through the rubble of the buildings that hadn't been left standing, looking for survivors, and, I suppose, supplies.

Groups had formed, people were doing what they could. The strong were all moving debris, the small were getting into the gaps and pulling out the injured, or more often than not, bodies. All of this made even more grave by the darkness of the night.

One group of people, not all Bricks themselves, were gathering what supplies they had as a community, working out how best to use them. Water bottles and medical packs were being collected. Brought over by everyone who had them. The medical supplies were being handed out faster than they were coming in. There was death in every direction. The most startling thing was the silence. All the noises we had heard from the edge of the city were not people wailing with fear and loss for themselves, but the calls were those in need, trying to let people know they were there. All the healthy were silent as the stars; not a sound came from them that didn't communicate their purpose.

"Why are they not talking?" Ria asked as we jogged past a group.

"There isn't anything to be said. Not for them, not right now."

"We have water and medicine in our packs. We should give them what we have," Ria said, desperate to help, even a little.

Cursed with the wisdom of age, I knew better. "No. We keep what we have. I want to help too, but we can do more good once we get to Lea, and Thirteen. We need what we have."

"Why is this ship so important?" she asked, frustrated that I wouldn't stop and lend a hand.

“It’s like Basilica. Not of this iteration, but its sensors are smarter than Basilica’s. We may be able to figure out how to get this dampening field stopped,” I said, lying to myself. I was ashamed of it, but I knew inside that I would let this entire planet burn to save a friend. I didn’t want this kind of focus, but something inside me was driven to protect *my own* before strangers. I think it was the human in me being selfish, as my species always was.

“If it still has power, and Bricks are such good people, why isn’t this friend of yours already helping? Why is she not in the sky right now?”

I kept moving. It was a long road ahead. I knew she would come to the right conclusion on her own in a few seconds.

“Oh,” she said after a moment or two.



I was planning on stopping our seemingly endless run for a moment anyway, when we came to our first real obstacle. There was a ship across the road, or what was left of one. Because of the darkness, we couldn’t accurately assess its size, but we could make out that it was on its back. Taller than some of the buildings that it had crushed each side of the road.

There were flames coming from it. The flames were tall and intimidating, but not spreading. The stone and metal that the buildings were made of in this area didn’t lend themselves to the spread. The light from the flames not only let us see enough to confirm the ship was big, but it also allowed us to see the devastation in far more upsetting detail.

There was a group of people coming out of a large gash on the side of the fallen goliath. They looked like ants coming out of a crack in a wall.

“Time to say hi,” I said as we walked towards them.

They all wore the expressions of people who had just seen death.

“How is it?” I asked a tall, dark-skinned man who emerged as we got close.

He looked at me and mopped his brow. “We went as deep in as we could get. It looks like it fell from high atmosphere. It’s a public long haulier. Everyone inside is...” He looked at me, then at Ria. “Without the planetary shields, there was no protection for re-entry.”

“What does that mean?” Ria asked quietly.

“They were all burned to death before it hit the ground.” I said coldly. This was a transport filled with families and holiday makers. I couldn’t allow my feelings to surface; it would have been too much.

“Do we know how many were aboard?” I asked as I felt my heart begin to break.

Fighting back his own torrent of emotion. He sat on a large metal piece from the ship that lay on the ground. Ignoring my own advice and better judgement, I passed him my flask of water. He nodded in a sincere but exhausted thanks. Three more people emerged from the ship, looking no better than him.

“This was a transport leaving one of the sky-cities. It was heading to the Warp. People going to Central, then on to Elf space. It was full.”

I felt the tears come now.

“How many?” Ria asked, not understanding the answer.

I dried my eyes, forcing the feelings away again. She hadn’t realised the scope of this.

“Ria, it’s a Warp transport. If it was going to Elf space, it was one of theirs. This class of ship... There would have been at least two thousand people aboard.”

She said nothing, there *was* nothing to be said.

I looked at the ten or so people that had gathered now. “Must have been hard to go in there,” I said, knowing that they had no choice but to check for survivors.

“Do you have your own people to check on?” I asked, wondering if they were heading our way.

The group stayed silent for a moment. The man we had been talking to stood up and, with words he could barely speak, he said, “This was our street. Our town. My house was pretty much right under here. My husband was in there when it came down.”

Ria made a feline sound I hadn’t heard before. I had a pretty good idea what it was.

I took my pack off and handed it to them. “There’s a big medical kit and some bottles of Cure-all in there, it’s shielded, should be good for a little while yet. Some rations, water too.”

Ria made a move as if she was going to take hers off. I put a hand on her shoulder to stop her. I hoped they didn’t notice.

“I have a friend at the dock. Need to find her. I’m sorry we can’t help.”

He nodded at the pack. “You already did help, thank you. Shortest way around this thing is that way.” He gestured towards the direction of the fire.

We started walking.

“I hope you all will be alright,” Ria said as we left.

One of the men shouted back, “Don’t worry, kid. We’ll get through this. Bricks don’t break.”

“I understand the other reason they aren’t talking now,” Ria said as we went on, now in our own silence.

# Chapter 14

## Fury

It was morning by the time we made it to the dock. We had stopped twice more: Once, to help move some debris, so some people could get into a partially intact building that they knew contained medical supplies. The second time we stopped was to help lift a steel beam. It was massive, but there were many people all working together. Five people crawled out from under it. One was no older than seven; cost us time, but it was worth every moment.

I had gained a newfound love for Bricks. There had been no looting, no violence, and no hoarding. They were all doing everything they could for each other. Strangers were being treated with the same concern and attentiveness as family. The planet had been thrown back to the dark ages in a single instant, yet somehow the Bricks didn't waver or stumble. I couldn't help but think how different this night would have been on a human world. Bricks were better than us.

As dawn made its way across the city, the scope of the devastation was finally and brutally visible.

When a race reaches the level of technological advancement that was commonplace now, especially on Elder worlds, there was a reliance on science and tools; this was the most terrifying attack imaginable.



There were hundreds of stations in different elevations of orbit, thousands of space worthy ships and millions of personal planetary shuttles up there at any given time. With this particular world, there were also fifteen sky-cities in the upper atmosphere. Everything had rained down. I couldn't begin to imagine how terrifying it must have been when it had happened.

We approached the landing dock. It made up the entirety of one of the city's hexes. It was massive. Like everywhere else, it too was a mess of fallen metal and broken buildings. At least four ships, had come down right on top of the area, and that was just what we could see. It was supposed to be a series of landing zones with fuel pipes and mobile engineering floats strewn across it.

It looked to us like the ships that were taking off when the power went away, had come down on top of the parked ones. The liquid fuel lines had exploded, and the floating platforms had been flipped by the explosions. The large, green stone perimeter wall was still mostly intact. Its purpose was to protect the surrounding area in the event of, well, something like this, I suppose.

It had been almost nine hours since the sky had fallen; the fires were mostly out now but the dust still hadn't settled.



There was a makeshift tent set up a little in front of us at the huge gate that allowed surface vehicles and pedestrians in. It was constructed from large military patterned blankets strung to the wall and the debris. There was a blanket wall that concealed one side of it and another blanket tied back to make a clear opening. A piece of a ship wing rested on a fuel barrel, being used as a desk. There were two people reading something laid out on it.

Ria was showing signs of exhaustion now. Hands on her knees and chugging the last of her flask. I had taken her pack from her a while back. Made sense for me to carry it. Fatigue didn't bother me, not in the same way as others. I took it off and started digging through it for another bottle of water for her. I also retrieved some rations; I needed a top-up myself.

I handed her a silver packet of protein biscuits. We strolled idly towards the tent as we ate our terrible meal.

"Is it true that as long as you eat, you can't be killed?" she asked.

"No, not even a little," I laughed.

"How does your power work, then?" I liked that she was becoming more confident when talking to me. I felt less like a figure of myth and more like myself to her now.

"As long as I put sustenance into my body, it returns me to a template that doesn't change. There's a lot to it, medically speaking, but the result is that food works for me like Cure-all does for you. I don't get physically tired either, which is a nice perk."

She thought about this as she washed down the last of her nasty dry rations. "You don't breathe, do you?"

"No, but that doesn't mean I can't be killed. It just means I get my fuel from other places."

She seemed to mull this over. "The book says you can't be killed," she added.

"David's book doesn't contain as much wisdom as you may think," I said as I tried to remember what he had written about me.

We approached the tent, two people walked over to meet us. A short man and a tall woman. The woman, while very attractive, wasn't the stunning beauty that was the baseline for Bricks. She had short, blue hair and a lightly tanned complexion. The man had a bald head and a full white beard. He was handsome to the point of absurdity,

so I assumed, a Brick. They were both wearing ornate brown leather uniforms that I wasn't familiar with. They looked like forest rangers rather than dock keepers.

There were more people in similar uniforms in the tent. I wasn't sure how many, but it couldn't be a lot of them.

"If you're looking for survivors, leave us and name and description, we'll take care of it," the woman said in an accent that was reminiscent of Irish.

"I'm Doctor Jonathan Michaels. This is my associate, Ria," I said, knowing well and good that it would mean nothing to them.

"Okay. What do you want?"

I noticed they didn't introduce themselves. They weren't with any government organisation. Doesn't matter what planet you go to, government people are obsessed with telling you who they are. All you have to do is tell them your own name and within moments, you know everything about them and have usually seen their credentials.

"Our ship is parked here," I said.

"Well, leave us its registration and we'll make sure it finds its way back to you when all this is cleared up," the man said gruffly.

"Which agency are you with?" I asked, already knowing they weren't with any.

"We're with the shipping company," the man replied.

The two of them turned and walked back to their tent. They weren't very dedicated to this role they were playing.

"They have knives," Ria said quietly as soon as they were out of earshot.

This was one of the situations that I had dreaded facing. I was no soldier. Don't get me wrong, never been a coward either. I have always known how to fight, should the need arise, but I had little more than the basic's that I had picked up over the years. There were a lot of

years. Very few of them had me in brawls with strangers. This was an unknown group of people who wore uniforms I didn't recognise and were up to something I didn't understand. I had no idea what the stakes were.

"You want me to take them out?" Ria asked. I had made the mistake of thinking of her as young and naïve. While she *was* this, she was also a Feline hunter. All of her kind were trained in combat from an early age. They enjoyed it, it was fun for her. She may have been upset by the devastation we had witnessed in the city, but a fight to the death didn't worry her at all.

We walked away from the tent, pretending to move on. A woman was watching from the entrance, hand on her hip. I assumed she had a throwing knife ready, on the off chance that we pressed the matter.

I looked across the road to a housing area opposite the dock. There were no people there at all. There was a black dust gently glazing all the rubble and the sides of the buildings still left standing. This was soot from the ships that were destroyed so close by.

Next, I smelled the air. There was a definite scent of chemicals tainting it. I assumed a few hours earlier the fumes from the burning liquid fuels and ship engine explosions had made this place borderline toxic. Be it luck or planning, these people had very few witnesses to their activities.

"What do you think, Ria?" I asked, finding myself in a research mindset, falling back on what I was good at.

"They want privacy, for something," she answered, eyeballing the makeshift guard tent.

"There are at least three. I doubt there's more than one or two others in that little tent, and maybe some patrolling that we haven't seen," I considered.

“Confident warriors, from the way they hold themselves,” Ria added.

I glanced back. The woman was still turning to face us as we passed. She was making no effort to look friendly. I noted she was most likely not a Brick.

“At least two seem to be human,” I said.

“Good. Humans are easier to fight than Bricks, less stamina.”

I considered that we also had weapons we were pretty sure were functional. Possibly the only working guns on this planet. Given the power drain was still active, I assumed their charge would be dropping still. Not something to rely on.

“Let’s keep going, no point running into a fight if we don’t have to,” I finally said.



We spent the next ten minutes walking around the edge of the Dock wall; away from the tent. There were people everywhere now. All looking for survivors and trying to make sense of what had happened. A few were trying every piece of technology they could find, hoping to cobble together a working communication system, I assumed. Given the information they had, it was a good plan.

The locals were looking a lot less shell-shocked now. The reality of what had happened was setting in and they were in the mindset of worrying about the basics of survival. Their resolve to just do what was needed was remarkable. Though they looked like good looking humans, they were wired quite differently to us. They saw what had happened as a tragedy, but none of them were looking to lay blame. They just wanted to ensure everyone got through this alive.

“We’re out of sight now, are we going in?” Ria asked as she noticed the tent was now around the edge of the hexagonal dock and we couldn’t be seen across the wall.

“No, let’s keep going. With the amount of damage the dock has taken, there’s bound to be a break in the wall, and I doubt they have enough people to watch the whole thing. We may be able to just stroll on in.”

She was agreeable. We kept going, though our pace was slowing.

It was another half hour before we saw the break. It looked like an energy blast had cracked the wall open. I assumed it was where one of the fuel storage sheds had been. The locals were wrapped up in their own problems enough that they were ignoring us.

Ria was different instantly. It was like a switch had flipped. She went from my young sidekick to a soldier as seamlessly as I went into one of my memory holes.

She drank the last of her water and jumped onto the top of the wall in a single coiled leap. Which was impressive, as it was at least three meters high.

I pulled my sidearm and checked that it had some juice left. The capacity was twenty percent. It had been a hundred when we left the ship. It hadn’t even been on standby. I had switched it off. I was concerned about what this meant for Basilica. Last time I saw it, I swore there was something else up there and it wouldn’t have the energy to fight for long. Still, I would have seen it if it had fallen like so many other ships had.

I pushed this worry out of my mind, no sense dwelling on things I couldn’t control.

I peeked around the hole. There wasn’t as much destruction as I had expected. A great many of the ships looked *mostly* intact. I counted five people in the leather uniforms. All armed with guns. Not lasers or

plasma throwers: Antique guns, with bullets. Bullets would still work. This was bad. More people than we had expected and actual firearms.

I wasn't sure that Ria knew what a bullet was. I looked up to where she had been — gone.

*Shit.*

She appeared a little to the left of where I expected her to be. She popped up from behind some debris and pulled a mountain of a man down behind it. She tackled him and mounted him in one fluid attack. It was silent and quick.

Another went down a few seconds later, just as elegantly.

There were three of the guards left now, but none in positions that could be tackled so stealthily.

I stepped out of the gap in the wall. I set my handgun to the highest setting I could risk and still get a few shots off, which was the lowest viable stun setting for a Brick, mid-range for a human.

Ria appeared from another unexpected angle. She leapt into the air and landed on another mammoth sized man. She was fast. She changed positions so nimbly that he couldn't grab her. His skin was being shredded as she moved like a wild cat across him.

Another of the guards raised her gun, a bald woman with lizard like features. *Shit*, the stun setting didn't work on scales. I had assumed it would be all Bricks and Humans. Had to make a snap decision. I fired at the other remaining guard, a human. He went down like one of the crashed ships around us.

The lizard pointed her gun clumsily. It was far heavier than a modern weapon and a damn sight more manual.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." I shouted at her. She lowered her weapon, turning towards me.

I knew very little about lizard races. She was young and lizards were not much more long lived than humans, she probably *was* young.

That was unfortunate; young people have always been prone to bad decisions.

Ria had finished playing with her prey.

“Who are you?” the woman asked, with a serpentine rage in her voice.

“I have no idea what you are doing here, or why you have projectile weapons, but all we want is our ship,” I replied.

“And it’s pilot!” Ria added.

Ria was searching the man she had just taken down. He was making some noises of objection; she kicked him in his ribs; he stopped. She took his gun and his wallet.

I kept my eyes and my weapon on the lizard.

“They’re privateers. This one has expired military ID. Mercenaries always have this crap,” Ria said as she walked close and handed me his gun. While it was a steel, projectile firing handgun, its design didn’t look like anything I had seen before. It was too ornate to be human, its purpose too obvious to be vampire.

“Elven?” I asked the lizard as I pointed the gun at her, powering down my own.

“Not everything useful is made by Elders, Brick!” she snarled back.

As much as I would like to think that I could be mistaken for a native of the fallen world, this was more a case of mammals all looking the same to her.

“Movement!” Ria warned.

I ducked and pointed my gun.

The three we had seen earlier in the tent were running between ship debris and parts that lay on the floor. They were dragging some large device out of our field of view. The man took a pop shot at me with a rifle the moment he realised I had seen him. He missed. He had no idea how to use his weapon. Guns were slower than conventional



weapons, and you had to account for the effect of gravity and wind on the projectile. He did not aim, a little high, and in front of his target the way you needed to.

I tried to make out the device as they dragged it into a little more cover. It had a single green light on the side, so it definitely had power. I didn't recognise its design at all. I scoured my memories, ducking down and making sure that I didn't focus on anything long enough to get stuck in the thought. Nothing. It was a metal pyramid shaped frame with some transmitter where the capstone would be.

With credit to the lizard, she didn't waste a second. She ran at Ria the moment my attention was diverted. I knelt down behind a chunk of the wall that was lying on the ground.

I didn't look back. I knew how a fight between a Lion and a lizard would end without having to worry. A few seconds later, Ria knelt next to me.

"You left them all alive, I hope," I said in a questioning tone.

"Felines kill all their enemies, but Followers teach me not to take life," she said with a shrug.

"Which are you today?" I asked.

"Follower, by the numbers. The Lizard broke easier than I hoped," she replied casually. To her kind, there was no shame in winning a fight. Killing came easily. I was glad that at least she had *tried* to leave them all alive. Not because I cared about our attackers, but because you can't interrogate the dead.

"What now?" she asked.

I put the gun in my pocket and pulled out my energy weapon. Ria took the queue and did the same. Her rifle lit up.

"Charge?" I asked, taking another shot.

"Twenty percent, fifteen shots, on stun," she rested the rifle on our wall chunk.

The screen said eighteen percent now; it was draining faster since it had been powered up. It wasn't supposed to drain unless she fired.

"Don't miss," I suggested.

Pain suddenly filled me in a very unfamiliar way as a bullet hit me in the shoulder. It knocked me to the ground.

"My Lord!" Ria shouted, glancing back at me.

"I'm fine! Shoot them!" I yelled as the shots came faster.

I heard something akin to a roar from her. It was more like an angry housecat, but I was sure it would strike fear into her enemies on her home world. She fired twice, with far more power than a stun shot. She clipped the device as it vanished out of view. It flickered blue for a moment, sign of a shield.

I pulled myself to my feet. My shoulder was bloody and felt like it was being shredded as I moved. I fired my own two shots, missed both. I heard my blaster power down. I tossed it away and pulled the silver gun from my pocket. Not ideal, but at least I had something. Ria shot again and clipped the woman.

"I thought you were from a warrior race!" I poked as she missed another shot.

"My species never invented weapons!"

"Worst warrior race ever!" I joked, as I saw some more movement and realised that we were probably in trouble.

"Says the Champion of The Goddess!" she joked back, looking at my bleeding shoulder and taking her last shot. She hit a ship two meters past her target.

She threw her rifle away, making feline noises as she pulled out her stolen gun. She huddled in close to me for cover.

"My kind are born with claws. We never needed to invent new weapons," she explained, not that this was the time.

We stopped dead as we heard a sound from behind one of the crashed ships.

It was the hum of a cold panel propulsion engine.

We turned to see the most glorious thing we could have hoped for. Thirteen rose into the sky, its shields lit up as little bullets bounced off it. Some debris fell from it as it shook itself free.

From this angle, Thirteen looked massive and terrifying. I had known it was large, but when you see it hanging perfectly still in the air, almost close enough to touch, it was quite imposing indeed.

Lea's voice came over the ship's speakers with a static pop. "The avatar you were sent here to retrieve is on my ship. My shields and weapons are now fully functional and the six soldiers you sent to hunt for us are dead."

They dropped their guns and turned to run.

Thirteen fired. With a deafening sound of super charged particles, they were vaporised.

"I like your friend." Ria said coldly.

# Chapter 15

## Loss

The moment the ramp hit the floor, Ria and I were inside. Thirteen was rising into the air again before we were even a few steps up it.

The only starship on the entire planet that still worked would attract a lot of attention. Bricks were wonderful people, but they would swarm the ship the moment they saw it. If people weren't already coming to investigate the engine sounds, they would have heard the blasting of the weapons. A lot of good could be done with one working ship on a planet with no power.

The ship came to a stop and held its position, about a hundred meters from the ground. I sprinted up to the bridge, holding my shoulder and feeling every step.

I came barreling through the doorway as Lea pulled a lever, the starship equivalent of putting it in parking mode.

She rolled out of the flight chair and dropped to her knees. From the look of her, she had been in quite a fight. She was in a military vest that had once been white and cargo pants. She was a bloody, swollen mess. Her shoulder looked dislocated, and her arm was broken in at least two places badly enough to see with the naked eye.

She knelt next to her chair and looked up at me with loss in her eyes. “Jon, look what they did to my world!” she sobbed as she fell to her chest, screaming with pain and loss the likes of which I hadn’t felt myself for a thousand iterations.

Twenty minutes later, she regained consciousness. I had carried her to the ship’s living area and dosed her with all the Cure-all I had brought with me. She was lying on the couch.

I was using the bio-spray and gel to clean her up. I wasn’t sure if the nanites in the Cure-all would still be active, but at the very least, the chemical soup would sort out her bruises. I filled my own bullet wound with the spray tube while I was working on Lea, not that I was sure it would do much for me; and there *was* still a bullet in there.

I had asked Ria to stay on the bridge and keep watch.

“Are we safe?” Lea asked the moment her eyes opened.

“We’re safe,” I replied softly. “What happened?” I asked. I knew she wasn’t in any state to go into detail, but I needed to know.

“We were outside when it started. Libby went offline a few seconds before the lights went off. I carried her back to the ship. It still had power; it was the only one that did. I dragged her aboard as the proximity alarm fired up the shield automatically. The power regulators were going nuts. I couldn’t take off. Had to sit and watch. The sky fell.”

She stopped talking and looked blankly at the ceiling. I passed her a flask of water. She drank delicately and continued her story. Still nursing her arm.

“Once the exploding stopped, I left the ship to help look for survivors. I ran straight into some merc’s. They didn’t know who I was, ignored me while they used some little hand scanner, to look for... made no secret of what they were doing.”

“What were they looking for?” I interrupted.

“It was all still happening. I hadn’t realised that it would take longer for the high orbit ships to fall. It was like the entire planet was screaming.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

She took another drink.

“I killed six of them, while the world ended, Jon.”

I blinked at her. This was not the fun-loving pilot I knew. This was the talk of the combat hardened soldier she had trained to be. I barely recognised her.

“Once I got back aboard, I started trying to figure out what was wrong with the power regulators. Got everything stable. Had to sync it into the high range; I think maybe higher than any other ship could go. Was burning a lot of juice. Then it went dead. I spent the next few hours trying to get the backups to come on.”

I backed her up a little. “You killed six people on your own? While the ships were still falling?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I finally got the regulator stable; the power came back. I lifted off and saw you having a shoot-out.”

“They had some device, we shot it. Must have been what was killing the ship’s power,” I said, suddenly realising the implication. They had been *specifically* targeting Thirteen with it.

“Jon—Thinkers sent them. Sent them to get Libby. Jon, they destroyed my world. To get to Libby!”

Lea broke down in a torrent of emotion. It was the saddest cry I had ever heard. It was someone crying for their entire world. Eventually, I had to leave her. She was exhausted and the emotional stress was simply too much for her. She curled up on the sofa under a blanket and stared at the wall. I quietly dimmed the lights and left the room.

Lea had put Libby’s avatar on our bed. The room was as much of a mess as ever.

Libby looked pristine. Her hair was a little messy, but she was undamaged. She was still wearing the ballgown from the last time I had seen her. Her eyes were black. It was just one of her avatars, but something inside me always screamed when I had to see her so lifeless.

I pressed my Circlet. It was inactive. I took it off and dropped it on the charging plate attached to the wall above the bed. After a few seconds, it lit up. The power had been drained but the hardware wasn't damaged.

I pressed the ship's internal communication button on the wall. "Ria, how are the power levels?"

The answer took longer to come back than I expected. "Thirty percent, I don't know what that means, but it's in the green... I think."

"Can you fly this ship?" I asked.

"This thing's on another level. I don't even know where the throttle is!"

I was no pilot, either. I may have been able to get us into space, but if there *was* something up there, I wasn't good enough to take us into a fight.

I picked up Libby as gently as I could and suddenly very aware that there was still a bullet in my shoulder. I carried her to the cargo bay.



"Is she dead?" Ria asked when she saw me laying the avatar on the floor.

"No, she's out of power, is all."

"She looks dead," Ria added. I slapped her hand away as she tried to poke her.

I pulled an access panel from the wall, wincing as my shoulder screamed.

There were many wires in there that made little sense to me. One thing I recognised though was the power conduit. I pulled out the cable, the lights flickered.

“What are you doing?” Ria asked, looking a little concerned.

“Libby needs a jolt to get her self-powering cells to come back online.”

The end of the conduit cable sparked. Ria backed away. I held it away from me. My synthetic arm was very well insulated.

“My Lord, your hand is melting.”

I jammed the cable into Libby’s abdomen. I was pretty sure that her power cells were there.

The sparks flew, the lights flickered again. Nothing.

I jabbed her again, this time holding the cable in place. My bullet wound was on the same side as my synthetic and it hurt like, well, a bullet wound. I can’t describe what it feels like. It’s a kind of pain that’s simply cold. Something distinctly a bullet wound.

Libby’s body started convulsing like she was having a seizure. After a few seconds, I pulled hard on the other end of the cable; it came out of the wall. The panel went dark.

The lights came back to full power a few seconds later. I threw the cable aside. My arm was mostly stripped of its synthetic skin now. There were a lot of the mechanical parts on show and a great deal of blood had run down my jacket. I looked a mess.

“Did it work?” Ria asked, slowly coming closer.

Libby’s black eyes lit pure white for a moment, then dimmed to a blue. After a few seconds, they started flashing red and then faded to amber. She sat bolt upright. They flicked over to a bright, glowing neon green.

“Libby!”



“For the love of God! Did you plug me directly into the ship’s power grid?” Her voice was digital; she spoke far too fast. It took a few seconds for her glowing green eyes to fade to their usual ambient sparkling levels, her voice returned to normal too.

I hugged her, I kissed her, I got blood on her.

Her abdomen was burned and charred. I knew she wouldn’t care. She would be more pissed about the dress.

“Okay, I know, we’re on Thirteen. I just downloaded all the ship’s logs. Still syncing with my core. Anything I might be missing?” she asked as she stood up.

She looked over at Ria and her hand lit white. I tried to reach out, but my arm had given up, “She’s on our side,” I yelled.

Her hands stopped glowing. “Hello, little kitty,” she said as she assessed Ria. “Really Jon? I go away for a day, and you find *another* pretty girl to hang out with?”

She stormed her way onto the bridge and, without hesitation, into the flight seat.

After all these years of marriage, I knew exactly how to brief Libby: “Entire planet went offline. Ships and stations fell. Thinkers sent a group of hired guns to pick you up. Lea is in shock, sleeping off a beating. Thirty percent power. Big red ship is on our side, may be another that’s not.”

Ria sat at the weapons station, though I wasn’t convinced she knew it.

“Okay, how far does the dampening field go?” Libby asked as she strapped in and started flipping switches.

“It’s the entire system.”

“Wow! That’s got to take a lot of juice!” she replied with a raised eyebrow

The ship started moving; the nose went straight up and the weapons came on-line without Ria touching anything. Libby wasn't a pilot on the same level as Lea, but she could operate all the systems herself by remote without breaking a sweat.

Ria strapped in as we felt the engines fire.



Thirteen halted as it left the planet and entered space. The sensors station showed me all the data that was coming in. Basilica wasn't in orbit. Libby rotated the ship slowly to focus the scanners without using extra power. I could see nothing in any direction. 'Ping'—The sensors detected radiation residue.

"Tell me about the other ship, Jon," Libby asked.

"There's another ship?" Ria sat bolt upright.

"When we were falling through the atmosphere; I got to look up. There was a large grey mass next to Basilica. Couldn't gauge the size, but it was there."

Ria glared at me. "You never said you saw another ship."

I ignored her. There was no point in both of us worrying about it.

Libby pressed buttons on the flight chair dashboard. The sensor screen in front of me was showing a great many different scans being run. Libby was rushing the scans, trying to get more information fast.

"Libby, are we having power problems?" I asked calmly.

"At the current rate of decay, we won't be able to fight in half an hour. We'll be dead in the sky a little after that. This avatar will be out of juice in about two hours."

"What's happening on Mercia?" I asked, knowing how she would leverage her bilocation.

“Right now, I’m using Mercia’s very large computer to analyse the scans we’re taking here. I’ve also arranged a no-go order for the entire sector.”

From Ria’s expression, I knew she needed catching up. “Libby exists in multiple locations.”

“I know how avatars work!” she snapped. “How is she getting enough range to transmit out of the sector?”

I needed to stop assuming everyone was less informed than I was.

“Her signal is encoded into this iteration’s structure.” She was looking blankly. “She has infinite range, with no signal lag.”

“That’s not possible. How is she doing this?” I could tell from her face that she knew what I was going to say. She just needed me to say it.

“It was a gift, from Aygah.”

She grinned widely.

“Don’t say it,” I said, pointing at her.

An alarm sounded on the console in front of me.

“*In Her we trust*,” Ria chanted as I checked the readout.

I felt Thirteen move. “You found something?” I asked as I tried to interpret the screen.

“Uh huh,” Libby replied.

I found what she had seen. There was a signal being sent into the sun. The sun was then doing what stars always did and was amplifying it. Though, the signal was an energy we couldn’t identify, and the frequency was at the far edge of even Thirteens sensor range.

I tossed the data over to the screen in front of Ria.

“Libby, can you see the source?”

“No. But I know its vector and decay rate, so if I keep flying in the right direction, we’ll find it, eventually.”

I glanced at my wrist for the time, forgetting that I wasn't wearing a Circlet.

"In the next half an hour?"

"I'll fly fast."

Ria looked up from the data I had sent her. "Won't that burn the power faster?"

"No, little kitty. This is a powerful ship. Usually, flight power wouldn't even touch our reserves. The rate of decay is faster than our usage. Time is the only resource I care about right now," Libby explained.

Thirteen accelerated in a way that made me feel the urgency, physically.

I checked the readouts. We didn't have enough power to push the TD-Drive past the first speed level. The smart thing to do would have been to head for the Warp and come back with a full tank. *We were not smart.*

Libby may not have known everything that was happening, but she knew we had friends out there who were most likely going to run out of oxygen soon, if they were even still alive. She knew I would not willingly let people die. We flew away from the safety that the Warp offered, towards danger, and we did it in a silent understanding of the implication.

# Chapter 16

## In Libby we trust

We had travelled for twenty-three minutes at full speed before we saw it on sensors.

There were at least five Thinker fighter-wings and a large ugly grey ship which was protecting a massive neon pyramid shaped frame that we assumed was the transmission platform. Basilica was firing everything it had at the ship.

It was holding its own, though the fighters were bearing down on its shields in relentless waves.

We were still too far away to see any of it through the window at the front of the ship, but it was close enough that visual data was coming in through the sensors. I knew Libby would be watching it internally as she flew. I also knew that all of this would be transmitted back to her AI-Core; even if we didn't make it out, there would be a plan forming on Mercia.

“How does Basilica still have power after hours out here when we have none?” Ria asked.

I had no suitable answer. I looked over at Libby; she wasn't looking at me, but she knew the question was out of my field.

"Thirteen was on the planet unprotected for a long time, and they were targeting its generator frequency directly with their device. Power was just dripping away until Lea did whatever she did to bring it all back online. If someone on your ship figured it out sooner, they may not have lost very much to begin with."

We were getting close. Libby fired the braking system. We were coming in hot.

The shooting started almost the moment we were in range. The ship rolled and then pulled up to bring us into a flip, almost on top of Basilica. I think her plan was to skim its shields and pick off the fighters as they attacked. She misjudged the shields depth and bounced us across its surface for a moment before regaining control.

It was a solid plan, but red shields were thicker than blue ones. It skewed the angles more than she expected.

"What the fuck *is* this ship, Jon?" Libby exclaimed, realising that the energy range of the shield she just hit was like nothing she had seen before.

"No idea. It's David's ship, not mine."

"Atkinson?"

"That's the one, yeah," I said as I frantically tried to look for a pattern in the attacking fighters' formations.

"Oh, I always liked him," she said, *almost certainly to annoy me*.

Ria was looking at all the screens in front of her and following the shooting as best as she could. We were taking a lot of hits, but giving at least as many in return.

The transmission platform was being shielded from almost every shot by the big boxy grey ship. The occasional blast that made it past

was absorbed by the neon blue shield emitting from the pyramid's outer edges.

The communication system in front of me lit up. "Jon, you're alive!" came Ba'an's voice.

"Yes! So are you, I see!"

"We're almost out of juice, took us hours to get here. The primary engine doesn't have enough power to spin up. We had to chase this Thinker frigate all the way back here. We're not built for speed, not without that drive."

"What can we do?" I heard some sounds in the background as I spoke. Things were exploding over there.

"Can't penetrate its shield without our main gun, and that's tied to the engine."

"Be ready to fire," Libby yelled from the flight chair. I closed the link.

We took another hit, as we passed through an exploding fighter.

"Jon, I need you to fly the ship," Libby demanded as she flipped the ship over again and headed for the frigate.

I sat in the seat as she stormed off the bridge. I didn't bother telling her how bad I was at flying. She knew that already.

"What's the plan?" I asked, after flipping the communication unit over to her channel.

I corrected the angle of the ship and dropped some speed. Two fighters had broken away from the assault on Basilica to follow us.

"Can't you remote this?" I yelled as we took a hit. One of our cannons fired.

"No. There's no remote to the flight controls. Basic security, Jon!"

"But the guns are fine?" I yelled again.

"I did not design Thirteen, my love."

Ria was holding onto the back of the flight chair behind me.

“What is she doing?” she asked.

“No idea, but if she doesn’t do it fast, we’re dead.”

I flew as well as I could, rocking the ship in unpredictable directions and moving all the power to the rear shields as I did.

We were taking a lot of damage now, our weapons fired again.

A beeping sound came from my console. I looked around.

“Did you just open the cargo door?” I screamed.

The light went off and Libby’s voice came over the intercom again. “I just left the ship. You distract them by blasting the frigate. I’ll pop over to the pyramid and take it offline.”

Ria gasped. “She is going to take on that whole thing on her own?”

The communication link was still active. “No. I’m small enough to get through its shields. I’m going to find its signal generator system and self-destruct this avatar.”

With a total lack of finesse, I pulled the ship upwards and headed toward the frigate’s main cannon bank like I had a plan; I did *not* have a plan. It took a pot shot at us. I remembered to move the shields back to the front of the ship again. We were taking fire from the back now. I wasn’t good at this.

I noticed Libby was out of range for remote firing of the weapons. “Ria, use the console you were sitting at. Try to shoot things.”

She started messing with controls and the front beam weapon fired, completely missing the frigate. I turned the nose of the ship to correct it, remembering the beam weapon was related to the ship’s orientation. It stopped just as it grazed the frigate.

“I don’t know how these guns work!” Ria yelled as every cannon began firing wildly at nothing.





A hand pulled on my shoulder. "Ria, guns!" I yelled before turning to see a still exhausted Lea.

"Get out of my seat before you break any more of my ship."

She may have been in no fit state to be doing, well, anything at all, but even like this, she was a better pilot than I could ever be.

"What's Princess up to?" She asked as I took over the weapons console and started shooting a little more competently than I flew.

"Destroying the transmission platforms signal generators."

"Good plan."

"Only if it works."

"It will work, I have faith!" Ria said with confidence as she watched my every move on the weapon controls.

Lea fired the beam cannon from the flight stick as she corkscrewed around to miss a massive blast. She hit it, but its shields were too large for Thirteens dwindling reserves to penetrate. We needed to keep shooting, just to keep all eyes on us.

Lea nosedived the ship close enough to the frigate that our shields kissed, not in the same way that Libby had bounced the ship earlier; this was the perfect movements of a surgeon at work.

One fighter following us barrelled directly into the frigate and the other had to go wide to avoid the same fate. A moment later, the last fighter was gone. So was our shield. The lights were flickering now. We were moments away from being dead in space.

The frigate turned to face our tiny ship head on. We looked like a cat roaring at a lion. I glanced at the pyramid on the sensor panel. There was no sign of Libby.

The frigate's principal weapon lit up as it charged. Our front window went white as it fired.

Our shields flared back to full as the beam hit us. The lights came back on at full intensity and every system on our ship hummed with the surge of power.

I smacked the communication system and shouted, "Shoot it!"

They didn't bother answering, not with words. They just fired Basilicas' primary engine, venting the energy not out of the drive shaft but out of the great barrel at the front. The beam was as wide as the ship itself; Thirteen flipped backwards, effortlessly avoiding it by just meters. I fired all the weapons and took out two new fighters that cruised into my crosshairs.

Basilicas' cannon fired straight through the frigate and out the other side into the centre of the pyramid platform.

The power levels kept rising. We were now far more equipped to deal with the problems we faced.

Basilica didn't stop firing, it just kept blasting the transmission pyramid. The Frigate, though almost cut in half by the opening volley, was returning fire relentlessly. Our own main cannon, now fully operational, took out its shield module in three places. Basilica, once done with the Pyramid, turned its attention to the only target left. The frigate started spinning up its own faster-than-light engine, but between Thirteens main cannon and Basilicas renewed beam, there wasn't anything left to fly out of there.



Lea left the chair while the wreckage were still hot. "I'm going to bed."

She left the bridge without another word. I knew there was more to be said, but that was for another time.

"We won?" Ria asked, a little shellshocked.

"Looks like it," I said as I took the flight chair.

I opened the link to Basilica. “You okay over there?” I asked.

“Well, about half of the ship is on fire!” Ba’an replied. He had a relief in his voice that told me the important bits of the ship were the bits that *weren’t* on fire.

“Is Ria with you?” came David’s voice.

“Yes Keeper, I am well,” she shouted excitedly from behind me.

# Chapter 17

## Pickup

The Sol Corvette dropped to sub-light almost on top of us. The communication link lit up moments later.

“This is Captain Bajic of the science ship Penda; do you need assistance?”

I ignored the message; I was realising how exhausted I was. Ria gave a sigh, and tried for a smile that failed to manifest; she was still getting to grips with everything we had been through.

“Penda, this is Basilica, acting captain Ty here. We could do with a crate of Cure-all and a *large* repair team over here at your convenience.”

“Not a problem *captain*, we’ll send a shuttle full of friends over presently.” I could tell from the voice that he knew exactly who Ba’an was.

I waited for my turn.

“Thirteen, this is Penda. Do you need assistance?”

After a little back and forth, I figured out how to hand remote control of the ship over to them and they flew us into their cargo bay. We were too large for their shuttle dock.

Ria and I walked down the ramp to be met by a team of doctors and more mechanics than I knew a ship this size could have.

The doctor started scanning us before we had even stepped down.

The cargo bay was the usual Sol style, white with baby blue accents on all the panelling. It was nice to see the implied safety of an Earth insignia after everything we had just been through.

The doctor was a young Vampire man, no wings. He wore the usual medical glasses and form fitted all-in-one under a long pale blue lab coat. He had an assistant with him, a human man. They were pulling a little hovering cart with all their equipment on it.

“Anyone else aboard?” the doctor asked dispassionately.

“Yes. Lea, Lea Ra-kay. It’s her ship. She’s sleeping off a beating.”

“Is that a Brick name?” he asked as he sat me down and started scanning my shoulder.

I nodded.

“How’s her condition?”

“I dosed her with inactive Cure-all and med-gelled her wounds. She’ll be fine when she wakes up.”

The doctor nodded. “Was she... on the planet?”

“We were all on the planet, doctor,” I said, recognising the real question.

“As long as you’re sure she’s in no imminent danger, I won’t disturb her then.”

I was pleased that I didn’t need to explain it to him. Vampires understood emotions, probably better than I did. He knew that after watching her home world get devastated, Lea wouldn’t give a shit about a few breaks and bruises. She could dose with a fresh batch of Cure-all for now and get her arm looked at *if* it set wrong.

The mechanics were swarming the ship, scanning it. I pointed a thought towards it and its security system kicked in. The ramp closed.

“Guys, I don’t mean to be ungrateful, but Basilica needs you more than this one does. Thirteen repairs itself.”

One of the mechanics raised a doubtful eyebrow at me; they didn’t stop scanning. One of them looked at his readout confused. With the security system armed, he wouldn’t be able to get a lot of details.

The doctor smirked at me, noticing the exchange.

“The captain has said that if you are medically sound, he would like to see you on the bridge.”

I felt the pang of my biology hit me. Now that I knew I wouldn’t be dead any second, it seemed important again. “Doctor, did Joanne release my medical files to you?”

He nodded.

“I really need to visit your ship’s galley before I visit your bridge. If you don’t mind.”

I got a feast; Ria got a shot of something that made her look a lot more awake, at least short term. We presented ourselves to the captain about an hour later.

The ship’s bridge was far more traditional than those on either Thirteen or Basilica. It was a large chair in the middle of the room with two stations in front and a flight chair on a raised section at the back of the room. There were little consoles all around the sides of the room. A large screen sat at the front that was not pretending to be anything else; not at all like the fake window on Basilica. The emitter nodes on the ceiling told me it was equipped with holographic generators for strategic situations. It was all very metal and white, chunky and human.

The captain rotated his chair to face us as we entered.



Captain Bajic looked human at first, but from his slightly extended ears I assumed he has probably half elf. On his father's side. He would have had the eyes too, had it been his mother.

"Thank you for the pickup, Captain," I said gratefully.

"President, or captain Ty, as he's now introducing himself, has briefed us his side of events. Tell me, how were your ships able to withstand the power drain?"

This was a science ship. I wasn't thrilled that Jo had made sure it was the first ship to the scene. They would scan for every clue they could as to how the dampening field was created. It was not a weapon that *anyone* should have.

I was pretty sure there wouldn't be enough of the transmission pyramid left for them to learn much. I had secured Thirteen; nothing would come from its logs and Ba'an wasn't stupid enough to give them free access to Basilica's computer.

I did, however, want them to be able to defend against it. I considered my answer. "Run your power frequencies into the highest end of the spectrum as you can. It won't drain as fast. Don't rely on power storage, it doesn't last."

That was all I would be giving him. This was a science ship. They would get the rest of the way on their own. If he knew the exact frequencies, he would have a clue as to how it was done. I may have already put him on the right track, sadly.

"Thanks, I'll make sure my team is prepared, in case we encounter it again. Does your ship always run in the high range?"

Jo knew about Thirteen's strange origin, but there was no way it was part of the standard brief for every captain in the fleet.

"My wife is an AI core engineer; we have some tricks available to us," I lied, trying to appear more helpful than I was. Besides, most people

who worked on a science ship should know Libby's name. Half of the computer cores on their ship would have been based on her patents.

"Of course! I didn't think about that. It was fortunate that you were prepared."

He was fishing for more. I wasn't going to give it to him. He would be under orders to treat me like a VIP, and no Sol officer would dare cross Ba'an; he still had a lot of friends, including my daughter. I ignored his obvious suspicions.

"Are there medical ships on the way to Forge?"

"Yes, there are almost ten hospital ships coming through the Warp right now. And three heavy cruisers. Within a few weeks, it'll be like nothing happened here."

"I'm sure all the dead people will be relieved to hear that," Ria added, before I had a chance to point out his lack of tact.

"Yes, obviously, this was a horrific attack that we won't soon forget."

I nodded politely. "If it's okay with you captain, I have a friend to take care of and I need some rest."

"Of course. Dismissed."

I didn't work for him. I wasn't in the military, neither was Ria. I was a private citizen with very powerful friends. 'Dismissing' me like that was an obvious insult to my status. Not something that *I* cared about, not really, but it told me a lot about the captain.

"Thank you, Mister Bajic" I said. We turned and left. The Doctor was waiting for us by the elevator.

The doors closed. "I must say. I enjoyed *Mister Bajic*, nice touch," he said as the doors closed.

"Doctor, would you mind coming aboard Thirteen, *alone*, and taking a look at Lea, please?"

He nodded. "Joshua, by the way," he said. I shook his hand.





I was surprised when Lea actually let him into her room. She must have felt rougher than I thought.

While he was in there, I checked the readouts on the flight seat. We were now fully charged, and the generator was working fine, but our fuel rods were almost depleted. I was making a note of the exact type we used when Ria appeared next to me.

“You’re a sneaky one,” I said as she made herself known with a purring sound.

“Why did the Thinkers want Libby’s avatar enough to do that to the Brick world?” she asked.

“I don’t know. But it concerns me, a great deal,” I replied.

“Will they attack again?”

“I assume so, yes.”

Ria nodded, her feline features deep in thought.

The sound of someone coming towards the bridge ended our conversation.

Lea looked like she had been crying. Not that it was much of a surprise, all things considered. She tossed me a handheld device as she came in. Ria snatched it out of the air and handed it to me. Lea raised an eyebrow.

“I like to catch things,” Ria said with a shrug.

I let Lea have her seat while I looked at the device. It used a power cell I hadn’t seen before. It was dead, but I assumed Libby would be able to make more sense of it. If the technology that the mercenaries used could tell us anything about who hired them, Libby would find it.

The Doctor came in a moment later.

“Well, Miss Ra-Kay is physically recovered, and I have left enough medical supplies in your cargo bay to treat an army. Med packs, Cure-all and Med-gel. I suggest you throw out any of the medical kits you already had aboard. Cure-all isn’t very effective without the active nanites.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate the help. We all do,” I said.

“Are you good for other supplies?” he asked.

“Yes. Thank you. I just need to get some fuel rods from your engineering team and I think we’re going to head over to Basilica.”

We walked down the stairs to the cargo bay. Ria stayed on the bridge. She obviously didn’t consider the doctor a threat to my safety.

“It’s been a pleasure to meet you, Doctor,” I said as I waited for the ramp to lower.

“Same. Your daughter is the best leader Earth has ever had,” he was sincere. I liked sincere.

“Thank you, just don’t let Ba’an you say that,” I smiled.

He walked down the ramp. “Earth is for earthlings,” he said, with that same sincerity.

I was a little shocked to hear a Vampire say such an unfortunately human thing. Regardless of his species, it was a well-known xenophobic catchphrase. I wasn’t sure how to respond, *so I didn’t*.

I caught the eye of one of the mechanics outside. I asked him if he could get me the fuel rods we needed. Joshua gave me a wave and left the cargo bay. He had left me with an odd feeling in my stomach. I wasn’t sure what the implications were, but I was sure it wasn’t good.

The mechanic returned with a floating litter of fuel rods. I had expected him to hand me a couple, not offer me an entire stack. It was unusual generosity and would have dug into their own supply. I let him drop them in the cargo bay and went back to the bridge.

“Are we ready?” Lea asked.

“Whenever you are,” I replied.

Ria sat silently at the weapons console, watching us.

A few minutes later, we were coming to an expert landing in Basilica’s amply sized shuttle bay. We parked next to three of Penda’s visiting shuttles; Thirteen dwarfed them.

“I’m going to my room. Can you ask Ba’an to come find me when he’s free?” she asked with no emotion in her voice. I nodded.



I finally returned to the bridge of Basilica. David hugged me the moment the elevator doors opened. “Welcome back!”

Ba’an slapped my back approvingly. David hugged Ria, a returning hero.

“Lea?” Ba’an asked.

I nodded. “Ba’an, she saw, a lot. She’s on Thirteen, waiting for you.”

He nodded, there was an understanding; he silently left through the elevator that was still open from my arrival.

“What happened your end?” I asked David as I noticed the two Sol technicians replacing a console at the back of the room.

“We were dropping you down to the planet, in the Red-Tube. Then the frigate turned up. Looked as surprised to see us as we were to see it. We lost power when we engaged weapons, got it back online just in time to catch you before you hit the planet’s surface. By the time we were ready to fire, it had zipped off. We chased it down, had to follow without our main engine, took hours to catch it. Then you turned up again like a guardian angel.”

He had his arm around Ria, she was holding it against her. This wasn’t some advance or invasion of space. He was pleased she was back, and she was revelling in the contact. I hadn’t realised her species liked

physicality so much. I suddenly realised why she had kept appearing next to me on Thirteen. She wanted to be close. It was a species trait I had entirely missed.

She was soon being hugged by all the other Followers on the bridge and smiling gleefully. They understood her. That was the moment I stopped seeing them as a cult. They were a family. It had just taken me a little while to understand them.

“The Sol team is just finishing up here. We’re going back to Central to get a cargo bay full of tents and blankets. Half of that planet is deep in winter. Thanks to you fixing our primary engine we’re about the fastest thing that can make the trip,” David was proud to be doing good. “That is, unless *you* have further need of our service, Jon.”

“No, not at all. Assuming you’re done with Ba’an, I have a planet at the rim I need to pay a visit to anyway.”

David looked back at me with a knowing in his eyes.

# Chapter 18

## Rim

Eadred station was possibly the least ‘Sol’ station in the Sol alliance. It was dirty, old and in an awful state of repair. On the far edge of alliance space, the last stop before the rim. I quite liked the ageing perfection vibes it gave off. From the outside, it looked like a large round cake, with the upper and lower layers being docking ports and the thinner ‘filling’ portion being the living and commerce area. Stations like this were always made of mostly docks and cargo holds, with little else to speak of. I would have liked to have explored it a little, but we were only there for a few minutes. Libby had synched a new avatar and she had been in a hotel room on the nicer end of the ‘filling’ layer, waiting for us for two days now.

The ramp dropped at the back of the ship and there she stood. Libby was wearing her ‘Thirteen’ Jumpsuit and holding a large messenger bag. We met halfway up the walkway. We kissed. I felt a sense of relief fill both of us; we were together again. Time apart made us feel like we were missing something. We knew it was sentimental and a little co-dependent, but we didn’t care.

“You, okay?” I asked, knowing that Libby was literally always okay. Being okay was a defining trait for her. No matter what.

“I’m fine, how’s Lea?”

“She’s a *little* better, not quite herself. Not yet.”

Lea’s mood had grown a little less grim over the last few days and was at least somewhat back to her normal self, not even close to ‘captain hottie’ levels of cheerful but definitely doing better. I was a little surprised that she hadn’t wanted to stay on her home world and help with the rebuilding efforts. No matter how she presented herself to us, we all knew that it would take her a long time to get over what she had been through.

We held hands and walked through the cargo bay as the ramp closed behind us.

She hesitated as we got near the stairwell. “Jon, does she blame me?” Libby asked with an unusual, less than okay tone.

“I don’t know. She hasn’t said anything. It’s not a topic I wanted to raise.”

We entered the tiny bridge.

“Welcome home!” Ba’an exclaimed.

The ship lifted off. We silently re-entered space.

A few moments later, Thirteen was cruising at TD Speeds. Lea released herself from the flight chair.

Libby stood motionless in the middle of the room, and I assure you, a NOLF can be motionless very poignantly. I sat at my usual station. Ba’an lowered himself to perch on a console. We knew there were things to be said, and we had no idea as to which way it was going to go.

“Princess,” Lea said, hands on hips.

“Brick,” Libby replied, hands in the pockets of her pristine jumpsuit.

“Thinkers took down my world. They wanted to get to you. Do you know why?”

Libby shook her head.

“Why didn’t they attack the station? You’ve been there for days.”

“I have false papers. Jo got me about five identities. I covered my tracks.”

Lea’s eyes filled with water, but she fought it back for a moment.

“It’s not your fault. Thinkers did this; not you,” Lea said as she devolved into tears.

Libby nodded and I swear, if she had been able to cry, she would have become a sea.

“I was scared you would blame me. I didn’t know. I had no idea. If I had been awake, I would have been able to work out the frequencies, get the ship off the ground. We may have been able to save some people,” Libby said, talking too fast with emotionally charged words.

“Thinkers did this,” Lea replied with a definite nod.

Libby nodded back and two of the most important people in my life hugged. Ba’an and I glanced at each other. We had both been silently expecting the worst from this exchange.

We were at least a day out from our destination, and we knew we had to kill time, and keep the mood light.

“Hey, Ba’an. Wanna drink heavily and watch Elven movies with me?”

Ba’an made an agreeable noise; we left the bridge. Watching old movies and drinking seemed exactly like something we should do, the truth was, we wanted to leave Libby and Lea alone to talk things through.



Ba’an and I sat on the sofa in the ship’s large living area and had the wall screen show an old science fiction movie at about three meters across.

The rest of the walls morphed to mimic an old cinema with dim up lights to match the vibe.

Humans had been the only race to independently invent theatre, and movies. When cinema started to be a big cultural export in the nineteen thirties and forties, Elves had wanted to give it a go; they made some bizarre things that both Ba'an and I adored. It was like watching early serialised TV sci-fi, mixed with hippy morality. All of it was about meeting aliens who didn't know about 'The Great Garden.' The Elves would teach them about harmony. I had assumed it was aimed at educating humans who were still figuring things out back then.

"They've been up there a long time," Ba'an said as he drank out of a half empty wine bottle.

"Lots to talk about."

"I hope Lea didn't kill her or anything."

I raised an eyebrow and put my feet on the coffee table. "They've been friends for decades and Lea already said she doesn't blame Libby," I said. "Also, if they fought, Libby wouldn't be the one you should worry about," I added.

"What? Lea could take Libby in a fight."

"Now I know you're drunk, Ba'an. Libby has guns built into her arms *and* she has a tactical computer *in* her brain!"

Ba'an smiled at me, showing those vampire teeth of his proudly. "Yes, but Lea has moxie!"

I decided not to argue. It was a pointless conversation, anyway. Libby would let Lea beat her body to scrap if she thought it would make her feel even marginally better.

"I could definitely take *you* in a fight!" Ba'an said with an even wider grin.

"Oh, for sure!"



Vampires were as strong as Bricks and as fast as elves. I had no doubt who would come off worse in that exchange.

We heard footsteps on the staircase.

“Oh my god, are you *really* watching this crap?” Lea said as she made a B-Line for the food hatch, no doubt to get a drink.

Libby sat herself on the arm of the sofa next to me. I put an arm around her. “How’s things, my love?” I asked.

“I’d feel better if I knew why they wanted my avatar so badly,” she replied. We giggled at the terrible movie while I pulled her onto my lap.



The rest of the evening passed quickly. Libby and I transitioned to our bedroom and didn’t come out again until the following afternoon... late afternoon.

We were still in good spirits when we entered the bridge to find Ba’an in the flight seat. He looked quite uncomfortable. The seat was very much a human design and did not accommodate his wings. They were, as always, tucked in tightly. Even so, this was not a place for a man of his specifications.

“I didn’t even know you could fly a ship!” Libby said with surprise.

“I was in the Sol military for a couple of tours. Basic flight training is standard business,” he replied, pressing some buttons and getting out of the seat. “You’re welcome to the seat now you’re here though, Libby.” I could tell he was relieved to be letting someone more qualified take over. I knew that feeling well.

“Where’s Lea?” I asked.

“Fitting some gizmo to the engine, she wants the frequency generator to self-switch if we get hit by another drain attack.”

I headed down the stairs. Thirteen's engine access was on the same level as the cargo bay, but the other exit from the staircase. Not a place I had any interest in visiting usually, which was convenient given that it was barely more than a walkway and a nest of technology.

The door was open, and Lea's legs were sticking out from under a large pipe. I looked around the space. It was really more like a large cupboard than a ship's engine. The walls were adorned with multiple patch-cables and circuitry. The only thing I actually understood was the slot at the end of the room where we inserted fresh fuel rods every few weeks.

"Lea! You sure you are qualified to be screwing around in here?" I asked loudly.

She stuck her head out from under the pipe briefly and then disappeared again. "I know more about this ship than anyone else in this entire reality, Jon. I'm the only one of us who read the tech sheets."

"Iteration," I corrected. She was right. When we first came aboard, the computer presented us with flight manuals, design documents and repair guides. I just wanted to see if the food hatch was stocked.

"We're about half an hour out from our destination. I really don't want Libby to land the ship. She always bumps it," I yelled in.

"I've added a little self-contained AI shard. It's self-powered and its only job is to adjust the power frequency. If we encounter another Thinker attack, it'll adjust things to stop us from bleeding power as fast as last time."

"Impressive!" I said, not really understanding what she was talking about.

"Jon, didn't you *design* the coffin that let Aygah ascend to godhood? How are you so shit at technology?" she asked as she packed her tools away.

“That was over a thousand iterations ago. Also, the technology was drastically different from what we have now. It was like industrial magic more than it was AI cores and circuit diagrams.”

She closed the door and secured the access panel. She had a cute smudge of dust on the end of her nose. Bricks even looked good when they got dirty. It was infuriating.



I watched as we dropped out of TD and effortlessly slipped into orbit around the planet, almost in a single manoeuvre.

I scanned the planet and forest moons; it didn't take long. There was nothing inorganic to pique the sensor's interest. Trees, oceans, trees, more trees. “Oh, insects! Exciting!” I said.

Libby was looking over my shoulder and, more than likely, also scanning the logs somewhere inside her complex brain.

“This is the least interesting planetary system I have ever seen. Forest moons, water planet. There's not even any large animal life. Unless you really want wood or water, there's no reason to stay in orbit; just a boring Alpha type world,” Libby said, confirming my findings.

“Libby, what are the most common habitable planet types in known space?” I asked.

“Alpha type,” Libby said instantly.

Alpha type was the kind of planet that Earth was, before humans developed there. So was The Elf home world, Vampire and Brick too. They were all Alpha types; so were most of the worlds the younger races inhabited.

I glanced at the universe map on my console and gave it a quick spin to see it from different angles. There *was* something interesting about this place.

“If we were to look at the distance of every catalogued Alpha planet in all of known space, which one is the most remote from any other space fairing race, including shipping lanes, TD traffic, and old radio wave coverage?”

Libby sighed and closed her eyes. She did this when she wanted to put every single computational cycle on a single task. Her AI core would pause all other tasks and her other Avatar would be sitting still, eyes closed too. There were a lot of planets, and shipping lanes, wasn't easy maths.

After only a couple of seconds, she opened her eyes. “Fuck you, Jon,” she said with a raised eyebrow.

“That's what I thought,” I replied.

“We're in orbit of it, aren't we?” Lea asked from the flight chair.

“Yep,” Libby said.

“What does that mean?” Ba'an asked.

“It means, that if you wanted to be as remote as possible, and not have to live on a ship, this is the place,” I said, running the scanner over the planet and its moon again, this time at a far higher power level.

“So, this *is* the right place?” Ba'an asked.

“Definitely,” I replied.

The scanners were no use. I ran the scan three more times, nothing but trees, water, and bugs.

“Let's science this then,” Libby said.

“I already scanned the planet.”

“No. I mean, let's assume there *is* a colony close by. We can't see it on scanners. Colonies don't just pick a place at random like native species do. If you move to a new planet, you get to pick. Where would we pick if we had to colonise this system?”

“I love you,” I said, in awe of her.

“Focus!” she replied.

“The planet is basically water. All the land masses are just tops of underwater mountain ranges. Can’t think of a worse place to live,” Lea said. She had put the ship on auto and come to join us.

“The larger moon would have nicer gravity than the smaller one,” Ba’an added.

“That’s going to be about seventy-five percent planetary normal, the other is about fifty. Most biologicals would choose the heavier gravity,” Libby calculated.

“Lea, if you had to land a colony ship, is there a sweet spot?” Ba’an asked.

The conversation went on much like this for a little longer. Meanwhile, I tapped the other resource pool we had at our disposal — my memory. There was no iteration in which I had visited this world. In fact, I hadn’t even been this close to the galactic rim in most of them. There was, however, a nugget of something I recalled in a conversation from one iteration where Aygah tried to lead a normal life.

“Got it!” I exclaimed.

I scrolled the map of the surface that the scanner had made. “Here!” I said, pointing at an unassuming portion of the south-eastern coast of one of the land masses of the smaller moon.

“Okay, you stumped me. Why there?” Libby asked after a few seconds of trying to figure out how I came to this conclusion.

“Jon, that literally has nothing, its wide open, it has uneven terrain, the water current on the scanner doesn’t indicate there is a high density of sea life at that coast *and* its way hotter than most organics would like. And it’s... Oh, I see!” Libby said as she came to realise what she was saying.

“I’ll take us down then,” Lea said as she returned to the flight chair.

“See? What? I don’t get it,” Ba’an asked.

“Jon, reversed the hypothesis. This location represents the minimum viable colony location. It’s quite literally the last place anyone would look. The least appealing of all the viable locations. It’s the best place to hide.” Libby squeezed my shoulder as she spoke, silently letting me know how impressed she was with my reasoning.

Thirteen came in as slowly as it could. We turned our shields down to the minimum that was required for planetary entry and our weapons were offline.

“Are you sure it’s wise to go in so defenceless?” Lea asked, feeling quite vulnerable.

“If there *are* Blades here, then pissing them off would be incredibly bad for us,” I said sternly. I didn’t want anyone forgetting how dangerous this species could be.

I reminded them of the abilities Blades had, of the things they could do. “They have complete control of any matter they can touch. They can influence your perception of reality within about ten meters of them. Energy blasts make them more powerful, and they often unintentionally project their own emotional state.”

“Are we expecting them to be friendly?” Lea asked.

“As friendly as any other genetically engineered super soldiers with unlimited powers over reality.”

I heard a collective intake of breath at my description.

# Chapter 19

## Forest

We landed the ship on the beach; we were careful to face it towards the ocean, meaning all the really big guns were pointed away from land.

Libby and I walked down the ramp.

“You should be wearing a shield, Jon.”

“Shield won’t protect me from a single Blade, my love, and we’re looking for a colony of them.”

We stood at the rocks of the beach. I keyed my Cirplet, “Okay Lea, get out of here. We’ll update you as soon as we can.”

The ship lifted off as gently as it came down. The plan was for Libby and me to scope out the planet for a few hours and then call for pickup. It made sense for Libby and me to be the ones to say hello. Libby was most equipped among us to deal with reality bending tricks, and I hoped that my knowledge of their species would get me on their good side.

“Well, what now?” Libby asked as the ship vanished into the sky.

“Assuming you’re scanning, we take a stroll.”

We held hands and walked towards the forest. Neither of us bothered checking our Circlets. Libby’s avatar had more than enough scanning equipment built-in to make any Cirplet look like a toy and

she was smart enough that there was no point in me scanning; there was no way I would see something that she didn't. We walked, relatively carefree for an hour or so around the little landmass.

It was a glorious planet. The reduced gravity made for a lovely floaty feeling as we walked. I felt like I could jump to the tops of the trees if I wanted. Which was even more impressive because the trees were so tall, due to the same reduced gravity. The truth was, while it was lower than Earth, it wasn't low enough to allow for any truly entertaining feats of gymnastics. The whole place smelled like nature, vibrantly so. It was sweet and crisp with the salty air from the sea, adding a layer of freshness to it all.

"You sure there are no predators here?" I asked as we walked.

"Oh my gosh, Jon, are you scared?" Libby mocked in a childlike voice.

"I'm more concerned about angry Blades than I am lions, that's for sure," I protested.

"There's nothing on this planet larger than a house spider, I promise."

"I don't like spiders," I said, suddenly concerned.

Libby laughed at me. "Don't worry, I'll blast them if they bully you!"

We laughed and talked as we walked, enjoying this small respite from our recent stresses. These virgin planets were like little holiday spots. We decided that when we had nothing on our agenda, we would come to a place like this one and camp under the night sky. I had almost forgotten why we were there.





The daytime light was swapped for night-time like someone had flipped a switch. I felt myself sag as a more normal planetary gravity took a hold on me. I leaned against a tree to steady myself while I got my bearings.

“Libby, what just happened?” I called.

“No idea. Scanning!” Her hands glowing slightly – a sign that she was charging up her concussion blasters.

The air filled with noise; movement passed through the trees just above us.

“Multiple contacts, at least ten. No energy signature,” Libby confirmed.

“Species?” I asked.

“No idea, just movement.”

It went silent just moments later.

Libby rotated, hands out in front of her like guns.

I flicked my Circlet open. Nothing was on my scanner.

“Contact!” Libby yelled as a figure stepped out from a tree. The figure was covered in bark, like it was made of the tree’s trunk. It swiped directly at Libby, she blocked. Her shield flashed blue. Whatever it was, it was larger than a human and moved like a snake.

It spun, trying to sweep her leg with a tail-like appendage. She hopped over it and took a defensive stance.

Another one stepped out of the tree behind her. They attacked in unison. They were organised, practised. I crouched down next to a close by tree, hoping it didn’t contain another of whatever these were.

Libby was countering on two sides now. It looked more like a martial arts display than it did an actual fight. Libby was calm and calculated.

“Jon, do I hit them?” she yelled.

“I have no idea!” I called back as my Circllet beeped to warn me of something getting closer.

“Whatever you are, I’m going to hit you back if you don’t stop soon!” she said to the tree people. She continued her defensive strategy for another few seconds.

Another tree birthed an attacker. This one again, going directly after her, ignoring me.

I looked up as the beeping got louder and saw a spiderlike form crawling towards me. I jumped back, falling into the undergrowth. The skittering shape vanished behind the tree. I had an unpleasant sense that someone, or something, was toying with us. I also regretted not having that shield.

“Okay, three is taking the piss,” Libby said, as she tried to hit them back with a little more enthusiasm. They began countering her more expertly now. Every time she threw a punch at one, the other two would attack, diverting her attention to deal with them. It was a stalemate that could go on forever. I could see her adding more and more speed, which they matched instantly. From the few blows that connected, I could tell she was adding more power to her attacks too. I was concerned. She could punch through the hull of a ship if she was mad enough. These things were powerful.

“Jon, get down!” she yelled, but not aloud; her voice came through my Circllet communication link this time. I scrambled to my feet briefly and rolled behind the tree as she released a circular blast of blue energy from her entire body. It was the formation of an overload of her shield vented through her weapons system. It escaped like a disk of sparkling blue energy. The blast itself was silent, but the sudden popping or force could be heard as it manifested into an outward pulse in every direction. The tree-bark people were all knocked down as one. It left the closest trees swaying and creaking with its force.

Libby let her hands glow to fully charged. She pointed at the closest attacker, who was flailing on the floor, now looking suspiciously more man shaped than before. "Okay, you've had your fun. Who are you?" she asked.



Daytime was turned on again, instantly. Gravity eased up to the previous jaunty levels. The tree people were gone. They vanished with no warning. It was like they had just popped out of existence. I noted a strange smell of sweet perfume that had accompanied their escape.

"You sure they were sentient?" I asked as I stood up and brushed myself down.

"They were messing with me. I know *every* martial art, and I'm faster than an Elf. They were matching me blow for blow. Animals don't learn martial arts."

A fair point, I considered. "They sent a big spider at me," I mulled.

"I noticed; you were very brave," she said with a grin as she straightened her jumpsuit.

We scanned all the trees in the area and looked for clues to explain what we had been through. Nothing. Just trees.

"What should we do now?" Libby asked.

"Deactivate your weapons and shields," I said.

"They essentially ignored me. I'm unarmed."

I could tell from her expression that she was annoyed, but her hands lost their glow. I got a sudden smell of ozone as she discharged her shield harmlessly.

"Fine, but if I get murdered, I'm not coming back for you," she said sternly.

"That'll teach me," I replied.

“Good!” came a voice from the trees above us.

Libby looked instantly annoyed at me. She had no charged blasters or shields and her desire to tell me she ‘told me so’ was all over her face. She took a fighting stance as a reflex action.

“Who are you?” came the voice again, I thought from behind me.

“I’m Doctor Jonathan Michaels. This is my wife, Doctor Elizabeth Michaels,” I said to the tree line above us.

“That’s not who you are,” came the voice. Now I heard it again. I was getting a little more information. It was a man’s voice. It had a confident, commanding tone and it was using the trees to project in a way that made it hard to pinpoint. It also sounded unsettlingly familiar to me, but I couldn’t quite place the memory.

“Then who *are* we?” Libby asked. Still waiting for a fight.

“Yes, who are you, Doctor Jonathan Michaels,” asked the voice, I think, a little mockingly.

We looked up at the trees, waiting for more.

Silence.

“Would you please tell the magic tree man what he wants to hear?” Libby demanded.

“I don’t know what he wants!” I replied.

“I am the father of Joanne Michaels, president of Sol,” I tried.

Silence.

I thought for a moment. “Oh no,” I said, realising what was expected of me.

“*Oh no*, what?” Libby asked.

I took a deep breath. “I am...” I hesitated. “I am, Her champion.” I said, with less gusto than my other introductions.

A confusing sound filled the air. It took me a moment to realise what it was. No less than a dozen people were coming down the trees

on ropes. The sound was their descent gear humming as they dropped. All were wearing netting and tree-coloured fabrics.

They were all dark-skinned and had pure white eyes.

“Blades?” Libby asked.

“Blades,” I confirmed.



There was something about being surrounded by Blade's that flashed through my memories. A tall, handsome black man with long silver wolf-like hair and a thick beard stepped forward. He had muscles in places I didn't know existed. He looked me in the eye and the flashes of memory took form.

It was once in the desert.

Once it was in an icy cave.

Once it was in a volcano's mouth.

The memories layered one a top of another, over and over and over... Then the show started: I remembered meeting Blades a hundred times, maybe more. Wave after wave after wave and then more and more.

“Stay back!” I heard Libby command as her hands turned white.

“No!” I said as I opened my eyes. I was on the floor. She was squatted next to me, shields on and eyes as red as fire, mostly for effect. She would burn this whole forest down to keep me safe. I hadn't passed out or given myself to the memory in the way I had before. I had only lost a couple of seconds this time. Probably because I was surrounded by Blades, the most effective warriors ever to roam the universe. That tends to keep you focused.

I pulled myself to my feet. “Libby. Weapons and shields off. *Please!*” I said, half commanding and half begging.

She glanced at me with concerned eyes and her glowing fists faded. I composed myself and stood up straight, now knowing who I was in the presence of.

“Libby, meet Gower Saint: King of Blades.”

# Chapter 20

## Saint

He shook my hand. In my mind, he shook my hand a hundred times. We looked at each-other right here, and in every version of my memory, it was also that same moment. There is no way to articulate the feeling of your memories being experienced in real time. Like they are all the present simultaneously, but you know they are the distant past. It's the psychological equivalent of a corridor of mirrors.

I looked at my hand and the trail of memories of the same action followed.

“Are you doing this?” I asked.

“I have to be sure you are who you say you are,” he replied a hundred times across my mind.

“How are you doing this? Time travel isn't possible.”

“What is he doing?” Libby asked, concerned for me.

“A test is all. To make sure he is who he says he is,” Gower replied.

“What is happening?” Libby demanded now.

I focused my mind. I was used to memories intruding on me now. As I sorted them into their proper order, I tilted my head. As I looked past this moment, I closed my eyes.

In one memory, we fought. In another, we were shot at by an army of human oppressors. There was even one where Libby killed every one of them. There were many more where she failed.

As I ordered them in my head, I kept reaching back, back to the first one. Each iteration being discarded as I came closer and closer to the one that started it all. Then, after a few more seconds or a thousand years, I was there. I let it envelop me.



We sat in a hospital room. There was someone else there with us. The planet was familiar but stark; it was where Aygah and I hid with the last of the free people. We worked to save the last few Blades. We were in a bunker, or complex. Outside, ring of mountains with a lake in the basin. It had been our home for a great many years. The complex was inside the tallest peak and was invisible to scans. The rock had a dampening property that I understood in that life.

Gower was a legend then. The most powerful Blade, the greatest warrior, and the wisest leader. He was the best of them and *that* was why he was about to go into the Coffin. To be the one who re-wrote reality and make a better universe for us all.

We were waiting for doctors to work. To find a way to keep him strong until he could begin his task. The virus had taken hold of him. His power was burning him from the inside, desperate to leave, to go somewhere. He had only a few hours left to live, and he knew it.

The room was small, badly lit. We were funnelling all of our energy into the device, the Coffin. Gower sat in a large armchair, looking weaker than I had ever seen him. I would wager, weaker than *anyone* had ever seen him. Aygah sat on a stool opposite him, leaning against a sparse red stone wall. This was when she was flesh and blood still. I sat



on the floor next to her, knowing how much I was going to lose today. I was older then and age had taken its toll on my adventurers' spirit.

"What will you do if we succeed?" Aygah asked. The memory came into focus as I realised I was emersed in it, as for the first time.

Aygah was dressed in a tight white top woven with electronics inside the threads. She showed her abdomen, showing her glowing veins that traced across her skin in purple. Her tight shorts had sensors attached to the belt that blinked wildly. This was the day *she* entered the Coffin, though she didn't know yet. Her veins were alight with the power of her entire race. Gower's power was leaking into her too. She was, after all, the last healthy member of her species. A species that shared a single well of power. As their numbers thinned, the remaining had become stronger and stronger.

Gower coughed in his chair. "I'll get rid of this damned virus for a start," he said, obviously in a great deal of pain. "It's too late for me now anyway. You know you have to do it."

"You always dreamed too small. *If* I'm to be the one who does it, I'll dream bigger than all of you!" her words sounded like a joke, but back then, I knew her well enough to sense the echoes of ambition in her. "I'll get rid of this virus and every other one. I'll make the people I love immune to death itself!"

The plan had been to scan Aygah and find her energy signature, which was the reason for the device on her belt. We would dump all her energy into Gower who would then go and re-write reality to be better than it was. This was what he had trained for over the last six years.

"I'm dying Aygah! I'll be eaten by my own energy, just like the others. It'll happen before we're ready. I can sense it," Gower said with an accepting resolve that I didn't understand at the time.

“Okay, say you do die! It doesn’t matter, I’ll do it. I’ll save your soul and bring you back when the universe is perfect!” she gloated with a faux confidence.

“If you need to bring *me* back, you will have failed. Leave me dead. Leave us all dead, you madwoman,” he said as his eyes started to lose their white glow.

“What would you do, just for yourself, Gower?” I asked.

“I would find myself a damned moon and stay out of the way of the universe, let it all get along without me. I’ve done enough.”

“I’ll bring you back and leave you on a moon then!” Aygah said with fresh and potent emotion in her voice, realising that our friend really didn’t have any time left.

“I’ll save Jon and bring back Joanne too. I’ll fix it so that he’ll come visit, you’ll see,” she was crying as she spoke now.

“And how will I know it’s even him after all the changes and iterations that you’ll need to get us there?” he smiled.

“Because I’ll be smug that I was right!” I suggested, feeling my own emotions now. Knowing the woman I loved would have to take his place for the end of all things.

“What? You’ll just walk up to me after Goddess knows how many aeons and say...”



I opened my eyes. I had mastered the memory now. I stuck my hand out to him, now knowing exactly who and what we was.

“After Aygah knows how many aeons, I’ll just walk up to you,” I said.

“And say?” he asked.

“Sorry it took so long!”

He smiled wider than anyone had ever smiled before and he laughed like the happiest man alive. "It was quite a wait too! You mad old bastard!" he said with heartfelt joy. He shook my hand like he had waited a hundred lifetimes, or more.

This was the fork in the road of time. In every iteration that came before this one, the words had been kept from me. I never knew how the conversation had ended. This was the final timeline; the work was done. We were no longer being 'saved' by Aygah's work-in-progress realities.

The rest of the Blades dropped their fighting stances and took off their hoods. The tension in the air dropped away.

"Will someone please tell me what the fuck just happened?" Libby demanded.

Gower and I hugged, *once he was done laughing*.

He waved a hand and the gravity of the planet changed. We were at the heavier but more familiar levels that most colony planets had.

"Come! Our town isn't far from here!" he said, gesturing towards the deeper forest. One of his men said something in a language I wasn't familiar with.

"This is Jonathan Michaels, not some cheap human! He is Aygah's Champion and the only man alive that is as old as me. So, hold your objections and set on the way," he barked with a deep commanding voice, making sure no one missed it.

"And the automation? Is it his toy?" someone asked.

"Wife?" Gower asked me.

"That's what I said, didn't I?" I suddenly realised I was talking to him like an old friend now. I hoped I hadn't overstepped. I was also only now being reminded of the word 'automation' being used in this way; an archaic term for an AI from when science was new.

"Then she is as welcome as you," he said.

We started walking. Libby leaned in close. “Are these really Blades?”  
I nodded, and we followed Gower.

# Chapter 21

## Guests

A Blade's power wasn't as limitless as it appeared. They needed to work within confines. Confines which I had never fully understood. In this case, the Blades had come out of the trees and took the form of monsters. They did it by coming down through the forest on the climbing ropes, but to us they stepped out of trees.

They wore earthy, heavy fabrics and netting, and for anyone who wasn't a Blade they were tree-people.

With a force of will, they had borrowed from night to override day.

Their power relied on ingredients. The more powerful the Blade, the less the ingredients mattered.

Blades, as a race, were connected in a way that the science of our current iteration could never explain. There's a finite amount of energy that they all draw from. Some Blades draw more than others, like Gower, but the pool was never limitless. The more blades that exist, the less powerful they all become.

"Do either of you require rest?" Gower asked as after an hour of walking.

"No," I replied.

“The Humans of this universe are easily exhausted. There is no shame in it, Jon.”

“Gower, my friend. This is a new iteration, but it’s still the same me!” I said without a bead of sweat on me, despite the forest’s warmth. I was also quietly telling him that there was more to me than just another Human.

“And you?” he asked Libby.

“I’m a NOLF,” she said.

Gower looked blankly at her. I wasn’t sure how long it had been since he had left this planet. The term NOLF likely meant nothing to him. Libby sighed.

“I’m not organic. I’m a digital life form inhabiting a robotic avatar.”

“Oh, so you *are* an automation!” Gower exclaimed, believing he understood. I hoped Libby realised he wasn’t being racist on purpose; he just had no frame of reference.

Libby’s tone changed as she suppressed her irritation. “No! I’m...”

“Doesn’t matter. You don’t look like you need rest. We keep going,” Gower cut her off.

We arrived at a clearing in the forest. It was at the foot of the mountain, looming above us with a snow-capped peak.

“Home!” Gower exclaimed as his men began dispersing.

“You live in the mountain?” Libby asked. I thought about my memory from earlier for a moment.

I felt myself grin. Gower laughed. “Your woman, she doesn’t understand Blades very well, does she?”

“*Your Woman!*” Libby exclaimed in objection as Gower arced his arm. As he did, the mountain blew away like dust in the wind and there was, out of thin air, an entire town. Not only did the town appear, but so did the sounds. I could hear surface shuttles, music, people and even some building work.

There was a rich distinctly ‘town’ smell. In this case, a vague smell of things cooking and dust from street work I could hear. It was far less “forest” than it had been just a moment ago.

I looked behind us; there was farmland, complete with a harvester drone zapping the ground. It was vast and modern.

Libby gaped. I had never seen her gape before. It was quite the view.

“Jon, I don’t mean to be dramatic here but, I literally can’t process what just happened!” Libby said, grabbing my arm in something as close to shock as she could feel.

“Blades are not restricted by the same laws of reality as the rest of us,” I said, realising that this was no explanation at all.

“Gower?” I asked, hoping he had a better way of phrasing it.

“This is our planet. It’s not on your scanners. The forest moon you landed on is three sectors away. We get resources from there. This is our home.”

“Three sectors!” Libby exclaimed.

Once she had calmed down from her realisation that she had just moved between planet’s, in the wave of Gowers arm, she had a lot of questions. A shuttle landed in front of us. It was like no shuttle that I had seen before. Chunky angular metals and mismatched steel hull plates. It reminded me of an old army tank I had once seen. As it landed, I noticed that its propulsion panels were red, not blue. It roared as it came to rest in front of us. A door slid open, we got in. The shuttle had no pilot. The inside was as industrial as the outside. Some odd fusion of twentieth-century industrial design and more modern comfort focused ergonomics.

Gower left the door open so we could see the town. There should have been noise, logically there must have been noise, but we travelled with Blades now and the engine, the wind, it made not a sound.

Libby and I peered out and saw the metal buildings and the cobblestone roads. It was a mashing of Victorian architecture and steel industrialism. With people, Blades everywhere.

“I can see you wondering about the architecture. The town, it changed with each iteration,” Gower said.

“How so?” Libby asked, before I could.

“Each time, it matched the aesthetic of the iteration. Once it was a glass arcology. One time it was all wooden rows of structures. Oh, one time we had an actual castle... we liked the castle,” he said with a chest full of enthusiasm and pride.

Gower leaned forward and said something to our pilot, who was casually steering with one hand on a stick. I had sworn there was no pilot there a moment ago. I had forgotten what it was like to be around Gower.

I smiled as I looked out over this wonderland that he had called his town. There were thousands of Blades all going about their business. A species that had been wiped out last I saw them. Now thriving in a world that they had made their own, most likely with their stubbornness of will and little else.



We landed next to a big stone building with a wooden door and a fountain in the middle of the lawn. The building looked old but well maintained. Once upon a time, on an old Earth, this would have been a manor house or a small mansion.

The building looked reminiscent of the fake perfection of Victoria City on Earth, but this was the real deal. Actually old, not just designed to look classical. Some of the wooden window frames had been replaced with newer timber that didn't quite match. This was actual



history; it was worn and real. I admired with my full attention and a little nostalgia. I couldn't help but wonder how this even existed. It reminded me of a place Gower and I once visited before the war was lost.

We left the tank-like shuttle and entered the beautiful house. There were no guards, but there was a friendly man with overalls who said hello and took over the shuttle when we landed. He had the tell-tale dark skin and white eyes of a Blade. He seemed to lack any interest in us. Everyone I had seen here so far had been a Blade. I had thought them extinct just a few days ago and now there were more than I had ever seen in one place.

Gower took off his netting and heavy poncho. He pointed for us to head into a room to the side. A kitchen: it had a tiled floor and an old wooden table. There was a wood-burning stove and a large basin on one wall. A cupboard filled the other. The back door was open and I could see a cat asleep just outside. The entire room smelled like freshly baked bread and struck me as far too perfect.

"No guards; I thought he was king?" Libby asked, a little sarcastically.

"Trust me, he doesn't need guards."

Gower came in, now in a heavy fabric vest and loose fitted trousers. His beard and hair were now in neat ornate knots that only added to his medieval vibe. He gestured for us to sit at his table and put an old tin kettle on the wood stove. It lit as if in response to the kettle being placed on it.

"You still drink coffee, Jon?" he asked.

"Sure."

"And you?" he asked Libby.

"No, thank you, I don't drink... or eat," she said.

He looked at her and nodded. He turned back to his kitchen and pulled some cups down from a shelf on the wall. With his back turned to us, he carried on the conversation.

“It took me a little while to work you out, you know?”

He grabbed a wooden pot containing his coffee.

“I thought you were just an automation. His companion. But then we saw that signal that’s travelling in and out of you.”

He poured two cups of coffee and brought them over to the table. He went back to grab the sugar bowl.

“I tried to block it. Tried every damned thing I could. That’s why I attacked you. Wanted to see how putting you under stress changed the signal.”

He sat down and slid the sugar over to me.

“No milk, sorry,” he said.

I shrugged and added about six sugars to my drink. This was performance. I knew he could provide milk with a thought. He was trying to appear flawed, to make us more comfortable.

“What did you learn about my signal?” Libby asked nervously. She didn’t need to be nervous. I trusted Gower, but I recognised she had no reason to, not yet.

“Well, err... what are you called? Elizabeth?” he gestured, genuinely apologetically.

“Libby,” she replied.

“Well, Libby,” he smiled, “I can change any signal. I can bend reality to my will. Whatever I want, I can do. That signal of yours, I can’t affect it at all,” he explained as he rubbed his thick grey beard thoughtfully.

Libby looked relieved; I could tell. I was pretty sure that he couldn’t, but I could tell.

She smiled, just enough to look charming. “And what does that mean, then?”

“It means that Aygah touched you. It means that her will carries your signal,” he took a gulp of his coffee, his white eyes smoked a little.

“When she gave me the gift, she said that there was no force that could interfere with it.”

“And that, Libby, is the only reason I allowed you here with him,” Gower looked at his coffee, dissatisfied. “Sugar!” he said to his cup, and started piling it in.

“I’m glad to see you, Jon; really, I am. Though given how there is no trace of my people in this reality, you were guided here. As such, I have a feeling that this isn’t a social call.”

He was as perceptive as ever. Libby turned to me, waiting for the same answer.

“You know, this iteration is the final one? Aygah finished her work. This is as close to perfect as she can get us,” I said.

“I assumed,” Gower nodded and shrugged as if reality itself was of little concern to him.

“Well. Everything she has set in motion seems to have a point to it. I hope you don’t mind me saying this: having Blades in the universe is quite the oversight.”

“Oversight, how so?” Libby asked.

“I have the computational frequency repeater.” Gower glanced at me nervously as I spoke. “It’s safe. Only I can activate it.”

“What’s that?” Libby asked.

“The device, the Coffin. It’s what we called it, originally,” I said.

“What’s your point?” Gower asked.

“Aygah specifically designed an iteration of reality for us, in which no-one invented dimensional resonance tech. I have the only temp-res

chip in the universe, in my damned arm, and it's genetically keyed to me."

Gower finished his coffee, still looking unimpressed at my point.

"The only thing missing to re-write reality again is a Blade. I just happen to get some information that leads me to this colony. Doesn't that strike you as a little strange?"

"More coffee?" He asked with a thoughtful expression.

"Sure."

Libby was making a thoughtful face now, too. "Jon, you think it's, what, destiny that we found these people?"

"In order to get us here, Aygah needed to put a lot of pieces on the board. Think about how we got here: you went offline in Brick space and because of that, you tell me, and Mercia, that something is happening, hours ahead of when we would have known without you. We just happen to have access to the only two ships in the galaxy that are essentially immune to the attack. Thinkers sent people to pick up *your* avatar. All this, the day after David tells us that there are Blades in this iteration. All those events leading us here, now — the whole thing is too damned convenient," I said, without taking a breath.

"Someone else knows we're here?" Gower asked as he returned my cup.

"*Not really.* Aygah visited a friend of ours; told him just enough to let us find you."

He didn't look pleased at this. Then he looked into the air as if reading something.

"We'll talk this through later. Your ship is under attack."

# Chapter 22

## Blades

We stepped onto the bridge of Thirteen as it took a hit from something's weapons. Ba'an almost jumped out of his skin when we appeared in the doorway. He actually flapped his wings in shock. I hadn't seen them move like that before. It was a little intimidating.

"Jon!" he said in surprise.

"Jon!" Lea yelled from the flight chair.

"Long story. We're back. We made a new friend," Libby said as she elbowed Ba'an out of the weapons console.

"Hello," said Gower almost timidly.

I looked at the scanner output. I was frantically trying to figure out what was happening.

Ba'an saved me time. "As messed up as this sounds, that's Penda shooting at us!"

"Penda, as in those nice people Jo sent to get us out of Brick space?" I asked.

"Well, they aren't so nice *now*," Ba'an replied.

Penda was a lot larger than us. We had parked in its cargo bay without too much difficulty. We were tiny in comparison. The difference

in size, shield and guns was already bad, but on top of that, Penda had a small complement of fighters that were already coming towards us.

“Why the fuck is a Sol ship shooting at us?” Libby said as she returned fire, carefully.

“They dropped out of TD and told us they had come for the Blades. We said we hadn’t found any, next thing we knew, we were being shot at!” Lea shouted from her seat.

“They’re not answering our messages,” Ba’an added.

The ship was doing all kinds of flips and turns to stay out of the way of Penda’s beam weapons. We were not equipped to deal with the fighters at the same time as dodging the main ship.

“Pilot! How long can you keep up these manoeuvres?” Gower belted.

“My name’s Lea, and I assure you tall dark stranger, I can do this all day.”

“Vampire! Did you say these people are supposed to be friends?”

“Yes!” Ba’an looked confused about being addressed as ‘Vampire,’ given that he had one of the most recognised faces in the galaxy. Looking at his smirk, I assumed it had amused him.

Gower looked into the air absently for a few moments. “Jon, may I take care of this for you?”

I knew what that meant. I knew the others didn’t, but I knew. “Libby and I need to come too. We know these people, and their technology,” I said, sternly, so there was no negotiation. Gower nodded.

We stepped through the doorway on Thirteen’s bridge and arrived in the cargo bay on Penda.

“I will add you to my hive. Fight well,” Gower said as he turned to smoke and vanished.

I had something new in my head. At first it was like an old radio being tuned in, then with a whistle, I could hear him talking to his

people. He was arranging for them to take key positions on the ship and await attack. He sent them to the fighters too, told them to kill the pilots. Libby looked at me disapprovingly. I raised an eyebrow as to ask my silent question as to how she was hearing it too. There was also something odd about the way the Blades were all speaking, it was rehearsed, and staggered.

The cargo bay was empty of people this time. Last visit, it was filled with engineers restocking Thirteen and readying for sending assistance for Basilica.

“I thought you said Penda was nice!” Libby said, looking around unimpressed.

“I liked it. What’s the plan?”

“We get to the bridge. Why didn’t Gower take us straight there?” she asked me as she made the face that I knew implied she was scanning. She tilted her head like she was listening for something. I ignored it. It was cute, but this was not the time to grin at her.

“Well, Blade’s really enjoy this stuff. It’s bred into them,” I replied.

She stopped scanning and furrowed her brow at me. “They *like* killing people?”

“Blades literally control reality. They can’t *actually* lose a fight. This is how they have fun; I think.”

Libby went back to scanning. “There are at least five Blades aboard. Every time I try to get a fix on them, I just get Gowers signal. They are mostly taking it hand to hand and working their way through the ship, I think.”

I could hear progress updates in my head. Every kill was reported to Gower. He grunted in satisfaction each time he heard the words, “*one less.*”

We entered the corridor. Libby armed her hand blasters and her shield lit up just enough to glow. She glanced back at me; no doubt

pissed that I didn't have a shield *still*. I shrugged. I never worried about these things. Also, everyone would be armed with energy weapons, which would do little more than kick me on my behind and give me a headache. Or at least, I assumed; I had never tested this theory.

The corridor was a mess. There were claw marks on the walls and body parts filled the corridor. "What the fuck!" Libby exclaimed.

"Blades like to fight."

"This isn't a fight, it's a fucking slaughter," Libby said as she looked at the corridor in terrible awe.

"I know. But in fairness, they started shooting at us first," I defended. I remembered this same scenario from the countless times that I had accompanied Gower in his carnage in the forgotten past we both shared. Actually, it all felt a little too familiar to me.

Each corridor we entered was much the same. "What made these cuts in the wall?" Libby asked.

"Gower. He likes to make them perceive him as an animal. Not sure what kind. No one ever lived to tell me," I said as I run a hand across the scores in the wall and tried to figure out why all this felt so strange to me.

Libby stopped next to a corpse, or part of a corpse at least. She knelt next to it and scanned it closely.

"Gower! Can you hear me?" she said with sudden urgency.

Something not quite as rational as Gower answered with his voice. "*What do you want, woman?*"

I knew it was urgent when she didn't roll her eyes at being called 'woman,' again. "Gower, listen to me carefully. Stop fucking around and kill them all now!"

I wasn't just stunned by this. It was literally the last thing I would have ever expected Libby to say. It was a shocking outburst from her.

"What!" I exclaimed as a reflex.



“These people, they’re already dead. Gower, they are being used as Thinker host bodies.”

I transitioned from shocked to terrified. Thinkers: they were made of energy. Anything could be a host. They also had tactile telekinesis. If they entered an object, they could move it. If the hosts were dead, they were on the ship, somewhere.

“Libby, we are not qualified to fight Thinkers,” I pointed out, instantly realising that she was well aware of this.

“And don’t we know it!” came an eerie voice from the other end of the corridor.

There was something familiar about the voice. A shadow crossed the end of the hall, Joshua stepped around the corner. His red vampire eyes were glowing with electric energy. No longer did he look like the good-natured Doctor we had met. He was a predator now.

“Were you in control of him when we met?” I asked the meat puppet.

“Actually, I was the *only* one who had taken a body at that point.” He sounded more like the man I had met now. Reining in his energy and forcing it to stay within the confines of the body.

“Why?” I asked.

“I thought you knew something was wrong when you left. I forgot that this body was Vampire. Used the ‘Earth for Earthlings’ line. I was kicking myself for that one.”

*I wished I had a gun with me.*

“We were hiding inside the ship’s hull. I took this body because we had a purpose for it.” He smiled, letting his energy burn the eye sockets of his long dead host body. The meat of the corpse sizzled as it cooked.

“That’s enough. Libby, would you please put this man to rest.”

No sooner had the words left my lips than she offloaded both fists into him with two streaks of white, furious energy flashing past me. There wasn't a lot left of the doctor I had liked.

"It's still here," Libby said as she readied another blast, not that the shot would do much to a creature made of energy. Not a lot could kill a Thinker as far as I knew. You could isolate them from a host on a planet's surface and wait for them to dissipate, and that was about it, as far as I knew.

A light flickered across one of the huge claw marks on the wall. I stepped back as it shot across the gap and into Libby.

"Shit!" I exclaimed as I backed away, realising that all the combat equipment inside Libby's avatar was about to be under Thinker control.

She clenched her fists; I saw her shield spark. Her eyes cycled their spectrum of colours for a moment. There was a static electrical sound and a vague sent of burning as the energy jumped back into the wall.

"What happened?" I heard myself shout.

"It couldn't take me. Couldn't block my consciousness-signal. It was stuck. It had to use my shields to escape," she said, as surprised as I was, and looking unusually exhausted.

I saw it zip across an exposed panel in the wall and jump towards me.

I flinched. Gower appeared in front of me out of a thread of smoke and caught the energy. He was forming into his solid self as the Thinker sparked around him.

"Interesting," he said. I wasn't sure if it was the Thinker talking, or Gower.

The energy started gathering in his hand. He used his other hand to pull it out from his palm like he was taking off a glove. With no effort

at all, he held up the angry sparking ball of energy and laughed at it. He blew on it; it went out, like a candle.

“These are called ‘Thinkers?’” he asked.

“Yes. They’re energy-based life forms,” Libby said as she was recovering from the shock of the attack.

“Well, I wouldn’t worry. I will kill them,” he said with well-deserved arrogance.

“It’ll only take one to kill Jon,” she pointed out.

He nodded. I blinked and found myself back aboard Thirteen, on the bridge.

Ba’an rubbed his eyes and looked at me. I knew from my previous lives that people had issues understanding how Blade powers worked. Their brains couldn’t parse what they were encountering. I always had a feeling that the Blades did this on purpose.

“Jon!” Lea asked as she left her flight chair. “Penda is dead in space. The fighters all just nose-dived into the water planet. What happened over there?”

“Thinkers. Penda’s crew, they are being controlled by Thinkers!” I blurted out.

“The entire crew?” Ba’an asked.

“I don’t know, I think so.”

“Thinkers can control people?” Lea asked with wide eyes.

“That’s not good. I wasn’t aware they could do that!” Ba’an said.

“The people don’t survive,” I clarified.

“Oh, oh no,” Lea said as it sank in.

I was suddenly struck by a realisation. “The medical crate!”

“What about it?” Ba’an asked.

“The Doctor, we saw him, he said something about having purpose,” I said as I made to leave the bridge.

We run to the cargo hold. The crate of medical supplies that the doctor had given us was still there, where we had left it.

“Did you scan it?” I asked.

“Why would we scan a crate of medicine that a Sol doctor gave us?” Ba’an said indignantly.

“There is no way there’s a tracker in there. The distances are just too much for that to work,” Lea said confidently.

The lights flickered. Lea grabbed an energy rifle from the rack on the wall.

A spite filled voice that resonated from the very walls spoke to us with cruel intentions. “I used your communication system to contact them as soon as you found the planet.”

The fear hit me like a shot to the chest. I had never considered the reality of a Thinker attacking me before this moment. It could take over my body if it wanted to, or just fry my brain. They needed forms to interact with the world. Usually, they used bodies made of tiny cubes. They had been just fine inside the bodies of the other ship’s crew. Did they prefer that? Was this what they liked?

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Blades” the walls spat.

I assumed this meant that *this* Thinker didn’t know what was happening over on Penda. Thinkers were trivial to Blades. Their attack was already doomed. At least I knew they weren’t psychic, now. Not that it would help *us* stay alive.

We were all watching the walls so closely that we didn’t think of the floor. I saw a flash of energy head towards Ba’an, I shoved him as hard as I could. I shoved him so hard he was knocked over.

The Thinker took the opportunity. It wasn’t fussy which of us it took. My body was no longer mine. My skin burned and my muscles tightened. I felt myself turn and move without my own will. I was still

alive. I had expected to simply die when the Thinker moved into my body.

My mind reached out to every nerve ending. I was numb, and the awareness, feeling and thoughts I had were dulling as every fresh neuron fired. The very essence of me was fading away while the thing took a tighter grip on my body. I heard Lea yell my name. I turned, or at least, the Thinker that controlled me turned.

Ba'an ran at me. Lea opened the cargo doors. I felt something change as I went sailing out of the cargo bay's Glass barrier, thankfully the loading field caught Ba'an. I was pleased that they were safe now. The Thinker inside me was less than pleased. I could feel its rage.

I was satisfied with this ending to me. It was as good as any other ending. I looked at Thirteen proudly. Lea was in the cargo bay opening. She raised her gun. Ba'an threw a fuel rod towards me. Lea was lining up her rifle as I floated there in space, feeling the Thinker trying to find somewhere to go. *Good for her*, I thought. She always was good at overkill. This was pretty standard behaviour for her. She took her shot. The pain was exactly as crippling and searing as I had always assumed it would be.

# Chapter 23

## Reveling

The pain in my head was so strong that I felt it may have had physical form. I blinked my eyes and saw the barrel of Lea's blaster. There it was, that physical form I was thinking about.

"I'm alive?" I asked, shocked.

Gower leaned towards me and nodded. "He's clean."

I stood up from the armchair that I was only now realising I was in. My shirt and jacket shared a large energy blast hole, my chest hair was gone. The skin that inhabited the shirt-hole was blistered and black.

"How am I alive? You shot me in the chest?" I asked.

Libby hugged me; Lea hugged me. Ba'an hugged me. I had been very hugged, which did nothing for the pain in my chest.

"Well," Lea began. "You know that theory that energy blast's wouldn't kill you because of how your biology negates things?"

"I am aware," I said, examining my charred skin.

"Well. It seemed like the perfect time to test it."

"As you may remember, my love, a Thinker took control of you. And Thinkers shy away from high voltage energy," she explained. I made a noise of agreement as I considered that, yet another jacket needed replacing.

“Well, the only way to generate enough energy was to shoot a fuel rod at you. And the only way to make sure the Thinker had nowhere to host itself was to throw you into space first,” Lea finished. Ba’an nodded in agreement.

I looked at Ba’an and Lea, impressed with their quick thinking and a little unnerved that Lea had been so willing to shoot me.

“It was my idea,” Ba’an said proudly.

“Oh! And Jon. We know now for sure that you can survive in space for at least twenty minutes!” Lea added proudly.

“Oh... thanks,” I replied, not sure how concerned I should be.

Libby hugged me again, tightly. “They wouldn’t bring you back in. They didn’t know if the Thinker was gone. I pulled you in once we were done on Penda. We warmed you up; you’re fine now.” I had a feeling that a little while ago, she would have been far less relaxed about the whole thing. I was also pretty sure the embrace I was currently in was cover, for another deep scan, to make sure I was actually, for real, okay.

“My chest hurts,” I said.

“Stop being a baby! I get shot all the time,” Libby replied.

Gower laughed, loudly. He always laughed loudly. My chest stopped hurting. I looked down; my burns were gone.

“Thanks,” I said as Gower winked at me. I knew I would heal just fine, eventually, but he had blinked the problem away in a moment. It briefly annoyed me that he hadn’t fixed my jacket too. It felt rude to complain.

Libby kissed my cheek. “Please don’t get yourself killed.”



I entered the bridge a few minutes later, eating a sandwich and wearing a ‘Thirteen’ branded jumpsuit. A tasteful light blue one, which I hated.

“Guys, what’s happening?” I asked, as everyone was huddled around the front window.

“Gower is going to teleport Penda *and us* to his planet!” Lea exclaimed excitedly.

“Why?” I asked, strapping into the sensor’s station chair.

“He thinks more Thinkers will be on the way and doesn’t want to leave a radiation trail for them to follow to his world,” Libby said.

“I’ve never been teleported,” Ba’an commented nervously. I considered pointing out to him that he had been teleported, every time he ever used a Fold, but I had a feeling he was thinking of Gower’s power as magic. It wasn’t, not really, but I could see how it looked that way.

There was a sudden cheering from all three of them, I assumed because of Penda suddenly not being there. I had seen things teleport before. I recalled the exhaustion Aygah felt after teleporting between planets when we had first met. I remembered her trying to explain how it felt to shove something from one location to another via her mind. It was literally holding the entire design for something in your head and then putting it in a new place using only your will. Gave her quite a headache if I recalled, and I did. I recalled everything. Gower wouldn’t feel good after moving two starships, that was for sure.

They cheered again. I felt nothing; I assumed we had moved.



I was, without warning, sitting in Gower’s kitchen. I still had my sandwich, which was good. Libby, Lea and Ba’an were at the back door, peering out.



“Wait, did he land my ship?” Lea asked as she realised it was her that had moved now. She had to grab on to Libby to stop her legs from failing her. Ba’an, on the other hand, looked quite relaxed about the whole thing.

“Can I smell coffee?” he asked.

Everyone sat at the table and looked around gleefully. Libby leaned close and whispered in my ear. “Jon, these Blades have too much power. No one should be able to do this. It scares me.”

“We have that effect on most people, actually,” came Gower’s voice from the end of the table. He was there; he hadn’t been there and now he was. We all had cups of coffee in our hands. None of us had remembered picking them up. There was something rattling around in my head, something wasn’t adding up, still.

Being around Blades again was a strange feeling. Like being a child again, knowing that anything was possible.

As delightful as Gower’s reality bending powers were, I hadn’t forgotten for a moment about the brutality he had shown aboard Penda. While it turned out that it was violence towards Thinkers who had slaughtered an entire crew, he hadn’t known that, not when he started his carnage. Not when he let his people slaughter the pilots who were following orders or murdered innocents who were just walking the corridors.

I thought for a moment about his team, how they sounded in their battle, the odd staccato of their speech. There was something to it all that was gnawing at me.

My brain played that thought to me over and over against the backdrop of the conversation. There was a seed growing. There had been a lie told today.

I interrupted the conversation and asked, “How far did you teleport us?”

Gower sipped his coffee. The others looked at me, sensing the loaded nature of my question.

“Three sectors.”

“And how many Blades are left?”

Gower put his coffee down. He pushed back his long hair and rubbed his beard.

“How many?” I asked again.

“Ten thousand,” he said finally, locking my gaze.

“What was it like for you when ‘The Event’ happened?” I asked.

I saw Lea and Libby glance at each other nervously.

Gower lost his jovial tone and leaned forward, rubbing his beard thoughtfully as he answered. “I experienced all of it. To me, reality was fluid from the moment *She* started. I lived my life in a state of flux. The town changed from day to day to reflect the universe; I simply endured it. But somehow it was *also* only a little while. Until a few months ago.”

“Are you going somewhere with this, Jon?” Ba’an asked. Aware that I had my investigation hat on, and even more aware that I was about to grill someone who could kill us all on a literal whim.

Gower waved a hand for Ba’an to be quiet. Only a king could have the self-assurance to hush someone as commanding as Ba’an with such confidence.

I rolled my dice. I was sure that the little suspicion I had was more than paranoia. “Gower. Ten thousand Blades died the day that the virus was released. The day your species was sentenced to death by the alliance.”

Gower bowed his head. “I know, that is why there are ten thousand here, now.”

“Gower. Stop this pretence,” I said as my coffee cup refilled itself.

“No! Enough of this nonsense, my friends. I’ll get us some food,” he said, with a fresh grin.

I stood.

“No, Gower. Stop it.”

Libby and Lea stood too; Ba’an followed their lead.

“Jon, what’s happening?” Libby asked, pointing to the back door of the kitchen.

The sky outside was blinking between delightful sunshine and a strange city skyline. The sound was switching back and forth too. From the ambience of summer in the small but wonderful town to the horrifying wind of a forgotten city of ghosts.

I recognised it. “You’ve seen this before,” I said to Libby. She stared at it for a few seconds.

Gower kept his back to us.

“This was the city, in the video of when you went into a coma!” Libby said as she finally matched the image in her memory.

“The city was called Royaume. It meant ‘Kingdom.’ A word from a long-forgotten language,” I said and waited for the glances to pass round the room.

“It was the last city,” Gower said, a little too loudly.

Everyone was silent, waiting for more.

I was the one to break the silence. “Was this where it was?” I asked.

“Yes. For you, it was a thousand lifetimes ago. I don’t blame you for being a little fuzzy,” he replied as he turned to face us. His long hair was covering some of his face and his beard was wet with tears.

“It *was* a long time ago for me. How long was it for you, *really*?” I asked. I knew that his perception would be different depending on what memories he had retained.

“The whole Event, it flashed through my perception, took about twenty minutes. Then a few months ago I was here,” he gestured around himself.

“Go on,” I prompted, waiting for his confession.

“Twenty minutes?” Lea asked.

“He was on hold. She pulled him out of time while she did her thing to the rest of reality. I experienced a little of it. It was a purple storm,” I said.

“Yes!” Gower exclaimed in a sudden agreement. “Then I was here. In this house.”

“How many?” I asked, now sternly.

“The city has all of us. You have seen them!” he said.

“How many, really?”

“Every single one of them, she saved them all! You have seen them, Jon! She saved them all. You and me, and she even brought Jo back...”

“Stop it!” I interrupted.

“Jon,” Libby said quietly, gesturing outside. The alien city was flickering in and out of existence still, swapping for Gower’s town and back again, but it all seemed somehow less stable now.

“We are all together again. It’s all fixed now.”

“Stop!” I demanded yet again, this time with a raised voice.

The light outside the window of his kitchen was flickering now too.

Then the city blinked out one last time. The town blinked out next and we were left with an endless green field. The sun was shining. The world was flat, nothing but a glass-land in every direction we could see.

“Gower?” Ba’an asked in a tender tone. “What’s happening?”

The surrounding house faded away. We stood in the endless field of thick green grass, and I smelled that summer air that I thought I caught when I first arrived in the town. Thirteen was parked on a slight hill just to the east of us.

“How did you know?” Gower asked me.

“The power of the Blades is shared. There was no way there was a planet full, not while you were teleporting starships around.”

He nodded with tears in his eyes.

“The entire town was fake?” Lea asked, suddenly realising the implications.

“Not fake. I just... I was alone. I didn’t want to be,” he said, relieved to be free of his secret, I think.

“And the other Blades we saw?” Libby asked.

“It’s complicated to explain to outsiders. They were all parts of me, memories that I gave form and agency, looping around and around, changing when I needed them to.”

“Why?” Ba’an asked.

“Because I lost everything except the memories. I had the power to give form to them, to breathe life into them.”

Libby put a hand on the old king’s shoulder. I think she was able to grasp how he felt on some level that the rest of us couldn’t. “Shadows on the wall of the cave, no matter how intricate, will die with the fire.”

I watched as the old king rubbed his eyes and the white smoke that emanated from them was doused for a few seconds.

I hugged him. I held him tightly. “You’re with family now, old friend.”

# Chapter 24

## Chess

“What will happen to Penda now?” Lea asked as Thirteen transitioned from planet to space.

“I’ve just informed Mercia about what happened,” Libby replied. “They’ll send someone to come and pick it up. Its logs are intact; I’m pretty sure there’s enough there to find a way to shield against Thinker incursions in the future.”

“Sorry to leave your planet behind?” Ba’an asked Gower.

“It’s a grass and ocean world. It fed me and housed me for a millennium... or a few months. I’m not really sure how time worked. Either way, it isn’t home now that you broke my spell. I’m going to be part of reality again,” he replied while looking out of a window. “Maybe I’ll like this new universe that my old friend made for us.”

“Okay Jon, where too?” Lea asked.

Everyone looked at me. “I thought Ba’an was in charge,” I joked.

I considered our options for a few moments. “I’m not sure. I need to talk to Jo. I need to talk to David. I *want* to go home,” I said.

“I’ll find out when Basilica is heading home. Offer to help them get the damned thing licensed and registered if they make it back to Central sooner rather than later,” Libby said.

“I’ll contact Joanne, see if she can stay close to a warp for a few days, then we can get her on a real time screen link at least,” said Ba’an.

“Spinning up the TD-Drive now. Course for Central Prime locked-in,” Lea said as the ship entered faster than light, with a motion so smooth that I barely noticed.



I was sitting in the ship’s kitchen eating a mountain of burritos and reading updates from the war effort. Gower came and sat next to me with a coffee in hand.

“The coffee is better,” he said.

“What?” I asked, looking up from my screen.

“This new iteration. The coffee is superb.”

“It’s not the iteration. Lea stocks the ship with coffee from Central. She likes coffee. She pays for the good stuff,” I explained.

“This isn’t the standard?” he asked.

“No. There’s bad coffee here too. I promise,” I smiled. I knew he was just trying to make conversation with me. He didn’t know where to start and coffee was as good a place as any.

I passed him a burrito.

He took a bite.

“This is new though!” he said with a sudden grin. He had only been given fragments of the iterations. He could remember all the times he met me and all of the original iteration. He had missed a lot. Burritos weren’t in the original version of reality, neither was Elix. I didn’t want to risk the potential problems created by a drunken demi-god; I left him drinking the coffee.

“What are your plans for me?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You didn’t come and get me out of obscurity for no reason, Jon.”

I picked up my second burrito and gave the question some thought. “I was told there were Blades. I went looking. Truth is, it would have been safer for me not to. I did essentially lead the Thinkers to your backyard.”

“Not at all. I was playing pretend, alone on a world of grass and water. You may have saved me,” he said.

“I was guided to you. Let’s hope it was *just* to get you back into civilisation.”

He nodded and raised his eyebrows. “I want to lead a simple life for a while, Jon. I would prefer this universe not to know what I am.”

The clunk of Thirteens speakers echoed around the room for a moment before Lea spoke. “Ships on auto guys, set your alarms for five in the morning. I’m going to sleep.” The speakers cut off again.

“No spare rooms, you okay on the couch?” I asked, as a courtesy; I knew Blades didn’t need to sleep.

“I think I will manage! I have a lot of history to read up on.”



The passage of time in space was always deceptive. On a government ship like Mercia, they would keep to a schedule wherever possible. We were less organised on Thirteen.

The door to my room slid open. I entered, ready to take a well-deserved sleep. Libby was sitting on the bed, not in her low-power mode, but reading from a Circlet and smiling to herself.

I took off my shirt and wandered into the shower. “Keeping busy?” I asked, without sarcasm. I knew that she was always doing multiple things. My question was more a general one.



“Well, my love,” she raised her voice as the hum of the shower light kicked in. “I’m actually a little bored. Mercia is pulling back to Earth for a few days, so nothing to do there. I have no academic ‘things’ on and because of the war, no one is interested in my AI designs right now.”

I stood in the shower waiting for the light to go off and called back in. “Oh no, did you already start a project?” knowing she couldn’t tolerate boredom any more than I could.

“Sort of,” she replied.

The light went off; I wandered back into the bedroom feeling far fresher. “What is it this time?” I asked as I took off my trousers and climbed into the bed next to her.

“I’ve been trying to map every change that we have noticed in the timeline. Sort of trying to figure out iterations based on things we know,” she said as she slid down the bed to put her head on the pillow next to me.

“You know, I can remember *all* the iterations, right?”

“As much as I would like to. I can’t download your memories, so I’m independently matching all the evidence I can find of iterations that directly affect this one. See how many of the ingredients that she mixed were necessary, and how much of it was joy riding,” she smiled, but I could sense the nefarious subtext of her thought.

“We can’t possibly fathom how many tiny changes were needed to get things to where they are in this reality. Silly little things that make no sense could be deeply important a hundred iterations later. It’s just too complicated for us. That’s why it had to be a Blade that did it, not to mention the technology involved. It doesn’t even exist in this reality.”

She grinned widely at me as I spoke. “So... What you’re saying is that *She* works in mysterious ways?”

I followed her point. I sounded like one of David's Followers. "No. I'm just saying that we can't possibly tell how a cake was made from looking at the icing. Besides, this isn't like I gave some random stranger the keys to reality. I trusted *her*."

I almost choked on those last few words. They had snuck up on me.

Libby caught it and her already smiling face burst into the widest grin I had seen in a long time.

"So... In Her *you* trust?"



My alarm sounded at five in the morning, Central standard time. I slapped my wrist; the Circlet got the message and silenced its noise. Libby poked me in the forehead.

"What?" I asked, knowing full well *what*.

"We're landing in fifteen minutes. We have shit to do." She pulled the blanket off of me. *My wife was a cruel woman*.

"You know, I'm elderly and unemployed? I should be allowed to sleep, damn it!"

"Well, bad news. David is meeting us at home and then we have an appointment with Jo this afternoon. Get up!" she demanded, still enjoying my defeat.

"David beat us back here?" I asked, eyes finally blinking open.

"Yeah, I guess that ship of his *is* fast."

I looked around for my clothes. It was time to get to work.

# Chapter 25

## Presidential

Lea had taken it upon herself to offer Gower a tour of the city. Ba'an had agreed to accompany them, mostly because Lea's idea of a tour would be one bar after another for about six hours. Ba'an was hoping to *actually* show Gower the sights of the great city.

Libby and I had been home for all of thirty seconds when Doors told us that David had arrived.

"You have *your own* Fold!" David said as he blinked into our living room, followed seconds later by Ria. They were both back to wearing the deep red robes.

"We like having no physical entrance to our home," Libby said. "Hello, by the way."

"You have *your own* star ship!" I pointed out with a raised eyebrow.

"Hello," Ria waved, pulling down her hood. "You look less broken now."

"You look less... bad-ass, I suppose," Libby said with a smile, after some hesitation.

Ria chuckled. They sat down on our huge red horseshoe sofa with us. I couldn't help but notice the clash of colours.

We spent the next hour talking about David's meeting with Aygah. How he ended up being the head of the religion; I managed not to refer to as a cult, mostly.

"What do you think we are supposed to do next?" I asked him, more of a conversation piece than anything else, when Ria said the strangest thing: "He's not allowed t..."

David shot her a look that quieted her.

Looks were exchanged around the room. I decided it would be rude to press the matter. I had resolved to trust David. If he had secrets, they were his to keep. I also knew that Libby would be hacking into every computer system he had ever touched, in case he was keeping the wrong secrets.

"So," David said to clear the air, "Libby, *can* you help us get our ship *legal*?" he asked. "I have a feeling that the only reason I was allowed to leave Brick space was because Sol owed us one."

"Yes!" Libby said as she put her Circlet on the coffee table, flipping it over to 'public' so we could all see.

"I talked with some friends on Mercia; they have arranged a registration, as a *humanitarian cargo vessel*, which is close enough to the truth, I guess."

She gave him the files and access codes that were required for him to set up Basilica with the transceiver ID it required to be legal. There was still the matter of its unlicensed weapons and military grade shields. Given that it had been involved in saving a great many lives in Brick space *and* was owned by a religious group, I doubted anyone would want to press this matter.

David made a point of his gratitude to Libby for her help in resolving the matter.

"If you, any of you, need us, we are there for you, without question, from now until the end of time," he said as he shook my hand. When-

ever he said things like this, I knew it was a matter of religious weight. Which made his obvious secrets even more worrisome to me.

Ria hugged Libby and me. They left through the Fold.

“What did you find?” I asked.

Libby sat down with purpose and opened up her Circlet.

“Did you get what you wanted from him?” she asked.

She was referring to the reason I had asked him to come over. I wanted more details of his interactions with Aygah. Now that I believed him, I was far more interested.

“Yeah, a little, though I get the impression he’s leaving a lot out,” I said.

“Same, and he is. He was careful not to lie to us. He knows how my avatar is built. He knew that I would have been monitoring his vitals for tells. But he consistently told us less than he could have done, I think.”

While she was talking, she had brought up some documents on the Circlet. She showed me some numbers.

“He said he was visited by Aygah while we were dealing with Zal. He said that she spent hours with him in the basement of the facility talking through changes she had made and giving him these cryptic instructions, right?”

I nodded, not quite sure what the dates and times were about.

“Well, my avatar was broken, beaten and in simulation mode. But I was recording for as long as I could. I was trying to stay conscious. I didn’t want to miss anything. I finally went offline after two hours of silence. We know, from your side of things, that Aygah was on the Correctionist ship with you at two in the morning.” I nodded starting to realise where she was going with this.

“My avatar was eventually repaired enough to transmit the memories to me at four in the morning.”

I saw her point. “And one thing Blades can’t do is bi-locate,” I realised.

“Either they had a very short conversation, or...”

“He lied,” I snapped as I banged the table.

“If he’s lying, he’s doing a damned fine job at it,” Libby added.

I rubbed my chin for a moment as I looked at the time stamps that Libby had put on the screen for my inspection.

“Two hours of silence?” I asked.

“Yes, why?”

“You recorded for hours and there was silence from the basement? Nothing recorded at all?” I asked.

“Just the hum of the generators and the ambient sounds of the room.”

I went to the food hatch and got myself an Elix. I wandered back to the couch, very much in *thinking* mode. I was blessed with exceptional recall, and I knew that when I left the facility, David was injured. I also knew that he was, then at least, quite the ego. There was no way he would have just sat quietly, waiting for help. There was something about this that wasn’t fitting together for me.

“What is it?” Libby asked.

“Just mulling some things over, my love. I’ll tell you it all once I have it nailed down,” I said as I absent-mindedly stared at her Circlet screen.

She knew my process, thankfully. I couldn’t share my thoughts with her because I was experiencing a jumble of ideas and threads. If I shared any thoughts with her, I would just sound like a mad, rambling idiot. Most of my threads would be baseless suspicions or paranoid delusions on my part. I knew this about myself but, sometimes following the nonsense lead somewhere useful.

The truth was, I wasn't even sure that this was the same version of David that I had left in the facility that day. Did Aygah just deliver a new one from a different version of history? Did she just have spare people stored away some place? Could she do that?



Gower, Ba'an and Lea arrived through the Fold. Ba'an and Lea were arguing about something. Gower had changed clothes. He was wearing blue jeans and a brown leather jacket now. Lea and Ba'an were still wearing their Thirteen branded jump suits.

"You just missed David," Libby said, taking her Cirplet from the table.

"Well, princess, he should be thrilled I did! Because I need to throttle the git!"

"Really?" Libby asked, a little taken aback by Lea's stance on our mysterious friend.

"Yeah, apparently this colossal idiot has agreed to train David's bridge crew!" Lea said while poking Ba'an in the chest.

I have to admit, it was a little comical to see the six foot tall, winged, leader of men being roasted by this tiny woman.

"And what's the problem?" I asked.

"Because he's going to be staying on Basilica for *three months!*" she said, snapping at me.

I decided it would be safer to stay out of their argument for now.

Gower skirted around them as their bickering was taking a more energetic form.

"Gower, can Blades be in two places at once?" I asked bluntly.

"Not *really*," he replied. "Why?"

"Oh, just mulling some things over," I said.

“We need to meet with Jo in half an hour,” Libby reminded me.

“Yeah, I should have arranged to go to Mercia. Would have been nice to see her in person,” I said as I checked the signal on my Circlet.

Gower grinned at me.



Libby and I almost lost our balance as we were briefly aware of the movement of the ship. We had appeared on the little fake grass area in front of the large window looking at Earth. We were on Mercia.

People were all looking at us and security were heading our way, guns drawn.

“What the hell!” Libby exclaimed.

“Oh, cool!” I found myself uttering while looking around excitedly.

The security team was a little confused and concerned about two people appearing in the middle of the commercial area of the largest battleship in existence. They pointed guns at us in a less than relaxed way.

They got orders through their Circlets, and we were soon being escorted to the governmental operations room. They were being a lot nicer to us suddenly too. I had a feeling I knew what had happened.

The doors to the large government room opened after a very short ride on an elevator. Libby and I stepped out into the large room. The room, like the last time I had visited, had a large round metal table in the middle and busy desks all around it. It was decorated in the blue tones of the Sol alliance. There wasn't a wall without the Sol Crest on it. There were multiple exits on a raised area around the edge of the room; armed guards standing next to all of them.

“Dad!” Jo exclaimed the moment she saw me. There was something surreal to me still; my daughter was the most politically powerful



human in the galaxy. What was even more surreal was that she was in jeans-shorts and a Sol branded blue hoodie.

“Jo!” I said, with an accompanying hug. “How are you?” I asked.

“Never mind me. Do you know you were almost shot when you appeared?” she punched me in the shoulder to make sure I knew I had been told-off.

“And now, there are two of *you* running around my ship!” she said, gesturing to Libby.

“Honestly, this wasn’t my idea!” came Libby’s voice from the upper floor. I looked at her leaning over the rail. I then looked next to me. Two of the same person in the same room, at the same time, felt unnatural, even to me.

One Libby, the one next to me, was dressed in clothes appropriate for Central, cargo trousers and a cropped t-shirt. The other, the one now walking down the staircase, was in a Sol uniform, her hair pulled back into a tight ponytail.

They looked at each other. Both of them smiled, just a little.

My instinct was to say hello to this new Libby, but she *was* both; reconciling this knowledge with what I was seeing was difficult.

“From a security point of view, I can’t have this,” said the Libby in uniform.

Joanne sat down at the large table; I followed. The Libby in uniform followed too; the other one stood by the door, looking very relaxed, scratching her ear.

Uniformed Libby sat down and pressed some buttons on the table’s edge. A static hum filled the air. This was the reason for sitting at the table. It was within a noise cancelling field. This, coupled with the room’s ability to block all known frequencies of energy, meant that it was private, even from the security team standing in the room. I glanced at Libby’s eyes. They had remained green. Even the full

paranoia of the government couldn't find a way to block her signal. I was pleased.

Jo checked her readouts to make sure the security field was fully deployed.

"Right. He's here now. Tell me," Jo barked.

"What?" I asked.

"Joanne is pissed at me, because I wouldn't tell her what she wanted to know about Gower until you were here," Libby explained.

"Oh, okay," I shrugged.

"She's a Defender of Earth! Her loyalties should be with Sol first!" Jo berated.

"That's an honorary, not a rank. I don't work for you! My loyalty is to me," Libby fired back, eyes thinned with a touch of suppressed anger.

"Usually, I wouldn't argue with that, but from what my intel says, you have a demi-god doing bar crawls with Lea and Ba'an!"

I smiled. "Don't be so dramatic, Jo. We have an incredibly powerful ally that we rescued from exile, kept out of the hands of the Thinkers and have begun integrating him into society." I was happy with that. My version of events was far less hyperbolic.

"Dad. You took him to Central! A Vampire world. In-case you aren't aware of the state of the political stage, the Vampire Union and Sol Alliance are not getting on so well at the moment! Could you not have, oh I don't know... brought the fucking demi-god to Earth?" Jo was mad at me. I could tell from all of her shouting and swearing.

"No," I replied simply.

"No?" she asked, now seething.

"He wouldn't have liked Earth. Gower's like me. He's happiest when left to his own devices. You would have had him sat down and swearing allegiance by now," I replied sternly.

“Yes! Yes, I would. Strangely enough, I feel like it’s important the demi-god knows the law and picks a side!”

I was feeling my own temper flaring a little now. “Joanne. You may be the queen of Earth, or whatever ludicrous title they make you use, but, Gower Saint was part of the first iteration of reality, he is the rightful king of the Blade race, last of his kind and someone who Aygah herself has seen fit to preserve. You remember Aygah? Your mother! *Actual* God level power who re-wrote reality to save the fucking universe? Gower Saint owes you nothing and trying to treat him like an asset will just get you on the bad side of him, Aygah and most importantly, *me!*”

Jo’s eyes widened. The president of Sol was not used to being spoken to this way. I knew she was under a lot of pressure; I knew I was out of line, but I was still her father.

She collected her thoughts for a few seconds before lowering her voice and forcing her tone to be a little less aggressive. “What are his limitations?” she asked, knowing that rolling back to facts wouldn’t piss me off as much. I liked facts.

“He’s a Blade, though since he’s the last active one who draws from The Well, he’s got a lot of potentiality. At any given time, his awareness is elevated. He can...”

“Draws from The Well?” Jo asked, cutting me off mid-sentence. I glanced at Libby. She shrugged. I had assumed that she had kept Jo better informed. It had seemed that she was even less willing to part with information than I was. I appreciated that.

“Blades have access to an energy reservoir, I suppose. They call it ‘The Well.’ They *all* share it. The more Blades use it, the less powerful they all become. Gower is the only Blade who is drawing from that energy, so he’s very powerful. Very, very powerful.” I offloaded to her, coldly and a little sharp.

“Doesn’t my mother still use this Well?” she asked.

“Aygah ascended to something else. That’s what the Coffin did. It elevated her over a long period. Evolved her in ways I can’t explain. Her ‘Well’ is the background glow of energy left over from the original creation of the universe. Her ‘Well’ is, *well*, limitless.”

“Like my signal,” Libby added. “It can’t be blocked because it’s encoded into reality. Gower can’t control that because it was created by a higher power.”

Jo considered this for a moment. “Limits. How dangerous is he?” she asked, missing the point again.

“Jo. He’s not dangerous. He’s an old friend who happens to be able to bend reality enough to do a little more than the rest of us. Vampires are stronger and faster than humans, Elves have hand-to-eye coordination that makes shooting us all trivial. Hell, I recently spent some time with a Feline. They walk around with five full-blown knives attached to each hand. She was delightful! — All aliens are dangerous if you measure it that way,” I said, now devolving into a little rambling.

She sighed. I was right, and she knew it. There had often been academic debates about the potential of meeting a super-race and they always came to the same conclusion. If you meet a god, you say hello and hope it’s a friendly one.

“Fine. But from the reports you have made, and from what I have managed to get Dex to tell me...” I banged the desk to cut her off.

“From what you got Dex to tell you?” I said, loudly. “Joanne, that’s crossing a line. Dex is my personal research AI! Not a Sol employee!”

I stood up. Before she could respond. “Libby. Please call home. Ask them to get Gower to bring us back.” Libby nodded and left the security field. The guards looked confused. They had obviously not heard what we said, but our body language was clear. I stormed into the elevator and both Libby’s followed me.

We made our way back to the observation window and sat down on the little bench without saying a word. I was sat between the two of them and still too angry to realise how odd it was.

“I didn’t know she’d visited Dex, my love,” said Libby, the casually dressed one.

“I didn’t think you did, not for a moment.”

“If you are as pissed off about this as I *think* you may be, we’re going to need to get my core off of Mercia pretty soon,” she added, the military one this time.

I blinked and we were, without warning, back on our red horseshoe couch in the apartment. Gower was coming out of the little kitchen area with an enormous cup of coffee.

“There are two of you!” Ba’an said as he realised we had appeared. He and Lea were sitting at the edges of the long couch, each side of us.

I looked each side of me, to Libby. “Gower. You’re not very good at this, are you?”

“I am a little rusty,” he replied with a shrug.

Libby’s military avatar got up and went to the bedroom.

“How did it go?” Lea asked.

“Well, Jo seems to think of Gower as a potential enemy and she has been accessing my research records without my knowledge,” I said, trying to stay calm. Failing at it.

“Oh,” replied Ba’an and Lea in unison.

“Should I be concerned?” Gower asked.

Ba’an answered before I could muster the focus. I was still dealing with the anger. “Gower, I assure you. Jo is just acting as the president of Sol. She would feel differently if she had met you. Besides, this planet is a Vampire world and despite my people’s failings, they have very clear laws on individual liberty.”

I decided it was time to act. “Ba’an. Do you think you can get the local Vampire government to recognise Gower here as a citizen, without logging his species?”

“It’s not unheard of to have a citizen from an un-logged world. He won’t have Elder status though, means he’ll have to get all his vaccines signed off before they issue him papers.”

I suggested that he went to pay a visit to Kay. I wasn’t convinced that there were any illnesses in the universe that he would need vaccinating against, but it wouldn’t hurt to have him checked out.

“He’s going to need an organisation to sponsor him,” Libby pointed out.

“Can you see if David’s church can act as that?” I asked. Libby nodded.

“I’m also going to start arrangements for my Core to be moved to this building,” she said, using the other avatar that was now leaving the bedroom, looking a lot less formal, in a pink leather jacket and a denim skirt. “I’m going to find a contractor and some security firms,” she waved and vanished through the Fold.

“That sounds interesting, wait for me,” Lea said to Libby’s other avatar as she grabbed a jacket and followed.

Ba’an and Gower left shortly afterwards.

“Will they miss you on Mercia?” I asked Libby.

“They will, once my core isn’t on their ship’s network. I help with a lot of data processing.”

“I was thinking about your avatar. I didn’t even consider your core,” I replied.

“Oh, for sure. Jo’s going to have to find a new.... Humm. I’m not sure what my job title is now I think about it,” she shrugged. “Well, whatever it is, when I stop showing up, they’ll get the idea.”

# Chapter 26

## Decisions

The next few days passed by quietly and somewhat uneventfully. Libby found her contractors to convert the basement of our building into a workspace for me, with enough room for books, tablets and Dex. That was a relatively small allotment of space. The bulk of it was to house her AI core, scanners, defence systems, self-powering redundancies and everything else she could imagine ever needing. She was blessed with immortality as long as she had power. She was going out of her way to protect herself. She had been already concerned about Thinkers getting her avatar, her Core was even more of a worry to her.

Ba'an was spending most of his time with David's group; Lea had somehow been convinced to teach them how to fly Basilica. The kind of flying that you didn't learn when you got your pilot's license.

Gower was reading and watching everything he could get his hands on. He wanted to know everything he had missed.

"Oh my gosh! It looks so good!" Kay said as she came into the basement. There were a few turtle-like robots still lining the walls of the recently constructed office area with a signal blocking compound

that promised to keep my research as safe and as shielded as it had been on Mercia.

“Hi!” I said, almost dropping the box I was carrying.

We had rigged things so that the Fold in the lobby could bring you to a platform in the middle of the new lab area. Libby had ordered the construction robots she had hired to remove the staircase and seal the entrance the instant the Fold was operational.

Kay took the top box from me. “What is all this stuff?” she asked.

“These four boxes are all blank data tablets. The others I brought down are parts for the synthesiser unit,” I nodded to the stuff in the far corner, or at least, where the corner would be once the robots finished erecting the walls.

It was nice to see Kay, outside of her medical centre. I put my data tablets on the floor, as there were no tables in the basement yet.

“Your mom sent you?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Tell her it’s fine. We were planning on moving out of Mercia anyway,” I said. “She did what she thought she needed to do. Now Libby and I are doing the same. It’s fine,” I said.

“Yeah. She didn’t send me to apologise. She says that you all have to set up house in Sol space.”

“What?” I asked.

“She says that given the things you know. You Libby, and Ba’an, you all have to live in Sol space because it’s a security risk to let you stay on Central.”

“What?” I asked, again.

“Don’t shoot the messenger. Things are getting tense between the Union and Sol. The war is getting closer and closer to Vampire space, and they still won’t get involved.”



I blinked at her for a moment. I knew that Jo wouldn't send a message like this without thinking it through. I pressed my Cirplet and asked Libby where she was.

A few moments later we were in our apartment talking through the message again.

"What?" Libby said after hearing Jo's demands.

"That's what I said!" I replied.

"Has she lost her fucking mind?" Libby asked.

"I said pretty much the same thing. She's talking about closing the embassy here on Central. I've been reassigned to Earth; I'm not going, obviously," said Kay.

"I have a good mind to have Gower teleport me to Mercia so I can slap some sense into her!" Libby snapped.

Kay shrugged. "Mom's girlfriend, Ash Voiced me the other day. She's worried about her too. Apparently, she's not had a day off since the war broke out."

"You were aboard Mercia for most of this, Jo seem okay to you?" I asked Libby.

"I mean, she's managing an interplanetary war. She was okay I guess, then the attack on the Brick world happened and I barely saw her after that."

I considered this. "Is Mercia still in the Earth shipyard?" I asked.

"Yes," Libby replied. "And it's been really busy. They are ploughing a lot of resources into something up there."

"Okay, can you ask Jo to Screen me at her convenience please?" Even though Libby didn't have an Avatar aboard Mercia at the moment, her core was there and as such it was faster for her to send the message than my Cirplet going via the network.

"Oh, she's going to Screen you *now*," Libby said, a little surprised.

I picked up my Elix and headed out through the Fold. I had set up a little switch to tap to get directly to the new basement.

By the time I stepped out, my Cirplet was chiming. I flicked it open and there was Jo. "What are you doing, daughter?"

"You've spoken to Kay then?" she asked.

"Obviously."

"I want to keep you all safe, and I want to keep Libby out of the hands of Thinkers. I can protect you all if you're on Earth," she looked upset; though I think most people wouldn't be able to tell. Her poker face was solid. Years of politics had made her stoic.

"Ah, it's fear then, is it?" she made to reply but I cut her off before she could. "Vampires are not your enemy, they don't want to get involved is all."

"Bricks were barely involved and Thinkers devastated their entire home system!" she replied.

"Bollocks! We both know that the Bricks are a hundred percent on Earth's side in all this. Brick space lies between Sol and Thinkers. It was inevitable that sooner or later they would have to attack Forge."

"They went from automated attack drones to sending an entire planet back to the dark ages in one step, dad!"

"And, you weren't ready. I get it. But this isn't..." Jo didn't let me finish.

"I'll say this now before we get any deeper. I can't allow you to take Libby's core off of this ship."

"You can't keep her prisoner, Jo!"

"We know for a fact that Libby is a target for Thinker forces. Bad enough that they could get an avatar, what if they get a hold of her actual core? We don't know what they want. It's a matter of Sol security."

I was so angry I couldn't force myself to stay calm. "You do what you think you have to. I'll do the same," I said and closed the screen before she could say anything else.

I spent the next few minutes working through my anger before returning to the apartment.

"How did it go?" Libby asked when I stepped out of the Fold.

"When were you planning on moving your core and how were you going to do it?" I asked, without explaining myself.

"In a few weeks, as soon as the basement is ready. Why?"

"How?" I asked.

"It's got a self-contained module. I was going to use Thirteen to transport it. It's about the size of a small shuttle." She knew there was a problem.

"Does it have defences?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Jo doesn't want to release you from Mercia. She has it in her head that it's a matter a Sol security," I said.

Libby didn't look totally surprised. "Well, I don't have anything in the way of avatar manufacturing setup yet, so if these two get damaged that'll be an issue for a little while, though I could use a hologram, I suppose," Libby said.

"I wouldn't worry. Legal process of overturning one of her orders isn't that quick anyway, you'll be set up by the time you get it all sorted." Kay said.

Libby and I grinned at each other.

"You want a job?" Libby asked.

"I guess so. What you have for me?" she asked in reply.

"I have a lot of free space in this building. I'm going to offer that space to the Follower's. Maybe have this building listed as a religious infrastructure. You can get a full-time wage if you setup a clinic for us.

I'll let you pick your own equipment." Libby said, knowing it was a good deal for Kay. She wouldn't be out of a job and there would be very little actual work involved. It wasn't like the Followers were going to have much in the way of medical needs.

They trailed off in conversation, heading towards the kitchen. No doubt Libby was going to make the offer more tempting by making sure Kay saw the building's menu. I knew she would take the job. Meanwhile, I had to get step two of my freshly forming plan going.

Libby's other avatar was waiting for me in the Lobby, chatting with Doors. We headed for the elevator. We had given Gower an apartment a floor below Ba'an and Lea.

We knocked on his door.

"Friends! Please come in!" he shouted as the door opened. His apartment was the same layout as ours, but his window was only ceiling height. It didn't have the curved top that ours did. He had also opted for beanbags instead of our horseshoe couch. The first iteration had been all about bean bags. He must have been nostalgic for it.

He was sitting at his coffee table with four Circler screens in front of him.

We sat on each side of him and looked at his Circlers. He was watching two Elf archery competitions, one Human sit-com television show that looked incredibly old and he was browsing the network on the other. He looked like he hadn't left that seat for days. His beard was a mess, and his hair was wild.

"Keeping yourself busy then, Gower?" I asked, noticing the pile of food cartons next to him.

"I have an entire reality to get familiar with. It's been great!" he looked at each of us grinning.

"I'm sorry to ask this, but we need a favour," I said.

"Anything!" he replied with eagerness.



An hour later Libby, Gower and I were aboard Mercia. We had all the information that we needed for Gower to teleport to my lab's shielded archive room. It was dark when we arrived. Gower waved his hand and the ambient light in the room increased. He and Libby gave me supportive looks before they vanished.

There were rows and rows of books, data tablets, and other assorted boxes. I had no idea what was in most of it. It was Dex who kept the vast library organised for me. The room's walls were a blue metal and the floor almost stone-like in texture.

I headed to the doorway and leaned out. Sure enough, there was Dex, standing just out of sight of the main room's entrance, waiting to appear the next time I entered.

"Dex!" I called.

The plan was in motion.

# Chapter 27

## Heist

Stealing things from the government was a stupid idea. I know. It never goes well. There was no way there would not be fallout from this. I had a rock-solid plan. Teleport all the stuff out. I know, *airtight!*

There was a little more to it than that, though: Joanne was pissed off and trying to protect us. She was flexing her power because she wanted to keep us safe and did not trust that we would be if we stayed on Central. I thought she was being stupid about the whole thing because, firstly, Vampires would remain neutral no matter what, and secondly, if you got in a fight with them, you were fucked at that point anyway.

We hoped that Jo, while currently under a lot of stress, wouldn't actually have us arrested. Chances were, the Vampire government would protect us. We *were* high-profile citizens, after all.

“Are you in position?” I asked over the Circlet.

“Yes,” Libby replied.

Gower couldn't teleport Libby's Core unit out of Mercia until she had disconnected it and added a little something before she left. He couldn't teleport directly into the Core container either, as the ship's sensors would go nuts the moment movement was detected inside the

ship's computer farm. It was high security, because, obviously; it was the ship's brain. We needed a little more to happen before we could pull the trigger on our plan.



“Okay Dex. You know what to do,” I instructed.

Dex turned both his hands into gun barrels and flicked his holographic eye to red. We marched out of my lab. Every alarm went off the moment he stepped out of the doorway with his weapons armed. We walked not towards the elevator, but towards the far end of the corridor. The automated defence systems came to life, Mercia started firing its internal guns at Dex. I was gesturing to him to stop and waving my hands for the cameras. Libby, who was still *very* connected to Mercia's network, was making sure the guns were missing him, and me, by just a little. As planned, when we got to the end of the corridor, Dex started firing his weapons straight down, towards a nest of conduit wires that we knew were under the flooring. I started pretending to pull at him and try to stop him. I was shouting all sorts of nonsense about him going mad. I waited until his blasters showed the floor below and pressed my Cirlet's button twice, sending the signal to Gower that it was time. Dex fired his beam weapon directly up causing a massive flash of light and heat.

There was a dramatic plume of smoke as Dex was blinked away. A pile of spares that we had found in my lab were blinked in; Libby made sure that Mercia's blasters hit the pile of parts enough to make it little more than molten trash, all of this happening with the tight timings that you needed a mind like Libby's to orchestrate.

The doors opened at the end of the corridor. One of Mercia's guns hit me in the back, at greatly reduced power, but it was enough to burn through another jacket and put me on the floor.

At that exact moment, Gower and Libby would open the ejection port that was designed to dump AI cores into space, in the event of the ship being destroyed. The hope was that Dex would have hit just the right parts of the floor below to screw with the sensors for a few seconds. That was up to them now though.

I stood up, shaky, after taking an energy blast to my back. The security team opened fire on me, which was not part of the plan.



I blinked at the ceiling. The crisp solid white of a medical bay and sat up.

The plump face of Doctor Ashwa was staring at me intently. "Remarkable!" he said excitedly as I rubbed my shoulder.

"Do you know, it took eighteen stun shots before you lost consciousness? Were you not Bio-static, you would be dead!"

I smiled at him woozily. "If I weren't Bio-static, they wouldn't have had to shoot me more than once anyway," I argued as he passed me a glass of water.

"The president has told me to tell you to report to the mess hall. And she told me not to be nice about it," Ashwa said in what I'm sure he thought was a stern tone.

My shirt and jacket were burned and for some reason they had pointlessly treated my skin with regenerating gel.

I went to the mess hall shirtless.

It was empty; Jo was sitting at a table in the centre of the room.



There was a bowl of noodles and an Elix opposite her. I sheepishly sat myself down.

“What was the plan?” she asked as I made a start on the noodles. She knew I didn’t like noodles. This was part of my punishment.

I was tempted to lie to her. I was supposed to lie to her. I couldn’t do it.

“Well. Shit went wrong, didn’t it!” I said after a little silence.

“I’m trying to keep you all safe. You know that, right?” she asked.

“Jo. I can’t be safe in the middle of a war. We both know, sooner or later Libby and I will be right in the middle of it. That’s what we do, whether we like it or not.”

“You can. Earth is literally the safest place in the galaxy. We’re building more Kingdom class ships, like Mercia, for the defence of Earth alone! It’s safe.”

I took a drink. “You didn’t listen. I didn’t say you couldn’t keep us safe. I said we can’t be safe. Libby and I refuse to hide. We will not capitulate. I need to be out there, getting involved with all the exciting things that the universe has for me.”

She finished her coffee.

She put the cup down delicately. “I know you feel that way. I get it. I refuse to help you get yourself killed. Any of you. I’m stripping all of you of rank, honorary or otherwise. You will be treated like regular citizens until you come to your senses.”

I shrugged. She knew she couldn’t keep me here this time. She knew Gower would come for me, and she didn’t want to make an enemy out of him today.

She looked like she was about to cry. “I want you safe. I want all of you safe. If I have to be the bad guy to do it, I will. You still can’t take Libby off this ship. I can at least keep one of you safe.”

“I won’t be coming back until all this is over. You know that, right?”

“Stay in touch, Dad,” she said with a confusing, bittersweet smile.  
I tapped my Circlet twice.



I was back in my basement on Central.

“How did it go?” Libby asked me with a hug.

“She’s scared,” I replied.

We walked through the large vault door that we had the contractor droids fit at the far side of the research lab.

The other side had been mostly empty. Now though, there was a large, armoured shuttle-like object in the middle of the floor. It had a single power cable running to it from the wall. It was a pointy, silver, armoured capsule with a single purple light across its frontage. Dex stood next to it; hands deep in an access panel.

As we approached, a hatch opened, and a ramp slid down. Inside was barely enough room for two people to stand, but there, in the tiny room, was a glass ball on a pedestal. It was covered in a light frost and fixed in place by five large metal rods that all looked like they carried data, or power. The walls were covered in tiny blinking lights, floor to ceiling.

“This is you?” I asked.

“This is me,” Libby replied.

“How does it all work?” I asked, knowing any explanation she gave would be simplified for my organic understanding.

“The core,” she pointed at the frosty ball. “Is my source, my essence, soul, I suppose. The rest of the container is storage, sensors, power management and other augmentations.”

I put the palm of my hand on the wall and spoke directly at the ball.  
“Was it wise to remove you from Mercia? Was Jo, right?” I asked.

“Why not? I’m no more at risk than any of the rest of you now,” she replied, using her avatar.

“I love you. You know that, right?” I said to the ball.

Every light in the room flickered for a second and she kissed me with her avatar in a way I had not been kissed since I first got my memory back.

“I love that you understand what I am,” she said with her forehead against mine.

“Does she know?” I asked.

“No, our side of the plan went perfectly. My other avatar is plugged into all the key systems that my core was. Unless someone goes down there to check, there’s no way they will know I’m gone, and people don’t just wander around the computer centre of a starship the size of Mercia,” she smiled.

Dex would stand guard over Libby’s core until the room was complete. We intended to have her in control of more weapons than was reasonable, shields, emergency exit Fold and even her own avatar replication unit. My research lab would fill the rest of the floor. Her plan for the building was expensive to the point of ludicrous, but we had learned the benefits of paranoia. Once the building was registered as a religious facility, we would have as many legal protections as we did physical ones.

# Chapter 28

## Toast

Libby and I got out of the public shuttle, a little way from the dock. We held hands as we walked the ten minutes or so to where Thirteen was waiting. We had been holding hands a lot recently. Something about me finally seeing her core had made us both feel closer.

She had said that on some level, she felt like we finally, for real, lived together. Which was unfortunate, as we were about to be leaving the building for three months, anyway.

She had her avatar fabricator all set up and more firepower and shields than most ships had. There were network up-links and generators with more backups than some government buildings. My new lab was all ready to go. It had been a busy few weeks.

I was a little sad that I had agreed to tag along on the next adventure, but I had a feeling, if nothing else, it would be interesting.

“You’re late!” came Lea’s voice over the speaker as Thirteens ramp closed behind us.

“No, they’re ten minutes early,” we heard Kay say before the mic was cut off.

The ship was leaving the atmosphere by the time we got to the bridge.

“Hello Brick,” Libby said warmly as she sat at the weapons console.

“Hello granddaughter,” I said as I saw Kay sitting at my usual station.

Kay smiled at me proudly.

“How did Jo take your resignation?” I asked.

“Better than expected. She refused to take it and tried to have me drafted.”

I smiled, though I wasn’t sure why.

“Ash talked some sense into her. She Screened back to me twenty minutes later and apologised.”

“That’s good.”

“Then I told her I was going to be working for Libby and she hung up on me.”

No smile this time.

“Thirteen to Basilica. Open bay doors and clear the deck. We’re making our approach and it’s going to be a snug one,” Lea said as Basilica came into view of the main window.

There were some agreeable noises in response. Thirteen rotated on its axis. The front window projected the view from the rear of the ship, as well as some other three-dimensional renderings and the approaching hole.

Basilica was a large ship, it was like a small town. The original launch site had spanned eight full sized docks.

Kay looked on, clutching the console. I had no concerns. Lea would have simulated this a dozen times or more before she had risked her precious ship. Not that she would admit to it.

Thirteen landed so gently that I couldn’t even tell until the engines were cut.

We made our way down the ramp. David was waiting for us. He had a little floating platform with him at hip height.

A bottle of something alcoholic and bubbly was on top of it, he had poured enough glasses for all of us. There was the now traditional symbolic empty glass for Libby, which she still hated.

“I hope you don’t mind! I wanted to mark the moment somehow,” David said, handing us flutes.

“I’m not sure it needs marking, David. We’re just training your crew,” I said, taking the drink anyway.

“Well, it means a lot to me. You are all people who will be remembered as giants by history. The very notion that you have any desire to help my Followers and I is a big deal, to them, and me,” he said.

Libby made the unusual gesture of picking up the empty glass. She raised it to the rest of us. “Well, to being giants then!” she said. We touched glasses, David glowed with appreciation. It was a nice gesture, I considered.

David and Lea left to look at the engine room, leaving Libby and me to show Kay to the medical bay.

“Be honest Libby. You took the glass to stop him talking, didn’t you?” Kay asked.

“How did you know?”

“I dated Ba’an for too long. Power makes men want to talk grandiose. David is just as bad,” she said.

They both looked at me. I shrugged. They *were* right though.



After some entertaining exploring of Basilica, we found our way to the ship’s medical bay where there were two young Follower men waiting for Kay. They were in the red uniforms of Basilica, but both had a quiet demeanour that didn’t match their years.

“Hello!” Kay said, putting down her large case and pack.

“Doctor Michaels. It is an honour to have you here,” said the slightly shorter man. Not that either was actually small.

“You the trainees?” she asked.

They nodded. The shorter one spoke again. “I’m Leon, this is Mitch, Doctor.”

“You both human?” she asked.

Leon nodded proudly.

“How trained are you?” She asked. Libby and I watching on, a little in awe of her suddenly commanding tone.

“We are both Earth Force trained field medics, Doctor,” Leon said.

“You always do all the talking?” she asked.

Mitch looked suddenly startled.

“Mitch doesn’t speak, Doctor.” Leon explained. “It’s why we left Earth Force.”

I saw Kay raise an eyebrow. “How did he get into Earth Force if he doesn’t talk?” she asked.

“He didn’t. He’s, my husband. I was in Earth Force, I trained him. As well as I was trained, I promise... Doctor.”

“Why did *you* leave Earth Force?”

Leon and Mitch looked at each other.

“We got bored. Doctor.” Kay looked at them suspiciously and waved her hand for more.

“We wanted to travel space and we couldn’t afford it. I joined Earth Force to see the galaxy. Earth Force never separates married couples but they never sent me anywhere because Mitch’s silence was decided to be a risk on a starship.”

Kay looked them both up and down for a second. “Okay, if he talks less, he should listen more. Get ready for a long day. We’re going to sanitise this whole bay before I’m letting anyone else in here.”

Libby and I backed out of the medical bay quietly as she made the place her own.

“I want to see this ship’s AI core,” Libby said as we walked the badly lit corridors.

“Doesn’t have one.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. “You don’t fly a star-ship without an AI.”

“We did in the past,” I said, thinking about previous iterations, rather than of years gone by. I had already told Libby about this ship being, like Thirteen, an artefact from another timeline.

“Thirteen has an AI core, just a tiny stupid one,” she argued. There was a group of Followers in the corridor in front of us. They stopped when we got close and stood to attention like we were visiting royalty.

“Knock it off!” I said, as we passed.

“Yes, but Thirteen is from a more recent Iteration,” I replied.

The Followers looked at us in awe. It was annoying and a little off-putting. Still, it was nice to be able to talk openly about Aygah, iterations and all the other strange things we knew about, around people who assumed we were wise, not mad.

“Did she remove AIs from her iterations? For how long? Why?” Libby probed.

I thought back across reality, remembering the times long passed in the realities that never existed now. I remembered the lower ones with combustion engines, global warming and the arguments of social classes.

My mind followed those lower Iterations across the generations of attempts. Until I got to the one that made Basilica, it was a generation after one of war and loss. There was no time for such luxuries as inventing AI and dealing with its implications when we had a damned empire to defeat.



Just a few Iterations later, we were on the way to something new. Thirteen was made in one of those realities. Computational advances were just everyday things and, then I realised my memory wasn't as clear as I thought, Basilica and Thirteen were only separated by one Iteration. I thought on this. Just one, yes... The order was wrong too. Things didn't flow from one to the other like I had assumed. It was only now I tried to follow the technology that I had noticed.

"I think you may be right, you know," I finally said, realising I had fallen into a now rarer memory hole. I was standing in the engine room with little to no idea how I got there. Libby was talking to some of the engineers. I had a crowd of Followers around me all whispering.

"Was that it?"

"Was he with *Her*?"

"What do you think he learned?"

I waved to shoo them away. "Libby. I need you, I have an idea."

"What is it?" she asked, also waving away Followers as if they were troublesome children. They scattered as if to complete the illusion.

"We need to go to the bottom of the ship!" I said, leaving for the closest elevator in the huge dirty room.

"This ship is mad, you know, I don't understand any of the science that makes it work," she said as the elevator started moving.

I smiled at her. "You will," I said eagerly.



The doors opened a few moments later and there we were, at the bottom level of the engine room, not that 'room' was a particularly good name for it.

Libby looked around the huge round chamber, confused.

The area was at the base of something that could only be described as a tree. A tree of pipes, cables, sensor conduits and coolant scaffolding. It all bundled together from every direction into a trunk in the middle.

The floor was little more than steel plates haphazardly bolted over the sea of cabling. The lighting was old LEDs strapped to the walls all around, none had a hue that quite matched the other. Occasionally, a red pulse of energy could be seen travelling up the tree, just below the outer layers of wires.

The technology was a jungle, it had formed and grown from what was required rather than being built or designed. It was a magical feeling place. It reminded me of a secret forgotten cave that had been left untouched for all of time. It was also just the result of jury rigging an entire ships energy and communication needs through a single computer system by a people who didn't have the advantage of an AI to show them a better way.

"It's beautiful! How did you know it was here?" she asked me.

"I was on this ship once, a long time ago."

"Thank you for showing me," she said as a muffled roar came from the engine sections above. The tree was suddenly lit a little brighter by its red and purple veins.

"I didn't bring you here to show you."

"Then why are we here, my love?" she asked.

I walked over to the base of the tree and searched around the steel flooring. There it was. I could hardly believe that the memory of it matched reality so well. Usually, my memories were just my own. Until we had met up with Gower, I had problems reconciling them as things that actually happened. They were like the memories of a TV show or book, things that happened to someone else but were as familiar as

my own life. There it was though, I remembered a thing existed, and I went to look. All these Iterations later. There it was.

The hatch was about the size of my boot; the handle was designed to look like part of one of the data cables. If you knew where to look, it wasn't hard to find.

I opened the hatch. It was glowing purple inside; the light glowed across a small out-of-place looking bundle of wires with an etching of blue circuits.

There was a flash in my memory of the day Aygah stepped into the Coffin, the organic purple markings on her skin that completed the circuit. This wasn't the same, but it was somehow connected to Aygah. Did she make this or just allow it to be made? I was concerned that I couldn't quite remember the details of it all.

"Here you are, my love," I said as I reached in and pulled out a long thin cable that felt like it was braided with leather. On the end, there was a single metal spike, like the one I had used to fix the engine, many floors above us.

"What is it?" she asked as she came closer, with uncharacteristic concern.

"It took me a little digging in my mind to remember all the finer points. It was a long time ago for me. A very long time ago. When this ship was new, it had something that no other ship did. An artefact of its own. Something from a far earlier iteration."

Libby looked at the tree of lights and cables with a fascination that I hadn't seen in her before. "An artefact from within an artefact? What is it?" she asked.

"Something I love with all my heart."

She smiled widely. "Is it safe to interface with?" she asked.

"It's running on far less than it once was. But I trust it."

“What does that mean?” she asked with a captivated and nervous tone.

“Libby. Remember when Aygah said she kept you around after you first turned up? That I was better *with* you than without you?”

She nodded. “You mean?”

I nodded back. “Yes. Libby, this is an earlier version of *you*.”

With no hesitation now, she took the cable and jammed it into the data port at the base of her neck. I would have thought it a violent act by anyone else. This was the location of the access point in her avatar. The fastest way she had to get data in and out.

Her eyes glowed purple, she slowly lowered herself to the floor. She crossed her legs and sat as though she were in meditation. I sat myself next to the tree with her. I knew this could take a while.

It was a conscious effort which I asserted to not think about past versions of Libby. Each version of her was different, as each version of me had been. But, in each one, that spark that defined *her* burned as brightly as my own soul. I had felt that I was more *me* when I had my memory restored. I had no idea what this would do to her. I was nervous.

# Chapter 29

## Purple

I had sat at the base of the tree watching over Libby's avatar for at least three hours. No one had come to check on us, save for a message from Ba'an asking where I was. I told him Libby and I were 'doing something.'

The first sign that something was happening was when Libby stood up. Not a calm rising to her feet after a deep meditation, but a leap to standing that only a non-organic could accomplish. She pulled the cable from her neck. It retracted itself, like a snake escaping a predator.

She turned to face me with eyes a blaze with purple fire. She looked out of breath for a moment, and she kissed me with an intensity like she had been away for a year.

"Welcome back, my love!" I said when I caught my breath.

She smiled and walked to the elevator. I followed, confused but also a little excited. Though that could have just been the kiss.

The elevator opened to the engineering control area. Libby glanced at the screens. She made a 'huh' sound and before I knew it, we were off to the bridge.

The elevator doors opened. Ba'an and David turned to greet us. "Purple?" Ba'an asked.

I shrugged.

Libby walked over to the area of the bridge where the captain would get all his data via the floating display. She leaned against the rail and started tapping buttons that we couldn't see.

David and Ba'an rushed over to see what she was doing. I knew better than to try and follow her actions when she started interacting with things at the speed she was now. I wandered to a stool at the back of the bridge by one of the terminals.

"Hello, Jon," Ria said as she sat next to me.

I greeted her.

"What's happening with Libby? Did she break again?"

"Honestly, I have no idea. I'm just here to see what she does."

She purred contently and checked the terminal she was next to. "She seems to be doing something with our engine settings. Oh, she just took the computers offline. Oh, now she is accessing... no, no idea."

"She goes fast when she's like this," I said calmly.

"Purple?" Ria queried, asking about Libby's new eye colour.

"Yeah. That's new."

I watched the screen window-simulation at the front of the room as we turned away from Central and pointed towards deeper space.

The engines kicked in and the stars arced across the window.

"Where are we going?" David asked.

"Earth."

"Why?" he followed up.

"I want to talk to a blind elf about my soul," she said, eyes still smouldering with purple flames.

"As good a test as any, I suppose," David said with an implied shrug.

"Hey Libby. I think you're scaring everyone," I called from my seat.

She looked around the room. "I'm sorry," she said and with a shake of her head, her eyes switched back to green.

“What did you do to my ship?” David asked, looking at the read-outs.

I leaned over to Ria’s console, where she had the status screen open. Libby had changed the transmission frequency of the ship’s data systems. She had also re-aligned the engines, changed the power relay code, and accessed an unnamed system that webbed the inside of the ship. I had a good idea what that was.

“What did she do?” Ria asked me quietly.

“Made the ship faster, fixed the shields and upgraded the power system computer code, activated a bunch of stuff that wasn’t working.”

“Did she find the webbing yet?” Ria asked.

“Now, how did you know about that system?” I asked.

“It was written,” she said with a smirk.

I decided not to press the matter. *Not yet.*

David and Ba’an agreed that a trip to Earth was as good a training exercise as any other destination. They were briefly concerned that Joanne would make things less than welcoming given the crew manifest. I assured them that she would leave us be, so long as we made it clear that we were on Follower business. Religious organisations had very clear freedoms in Elder space and even the President of Sol wouldn’t want to bend those rules. Forcing us to stay in Sol space would only result in very prickly conversations with the Vampire government. Regardless of our social status as a cult, we were Central citizens and a registered religion.

I realised at that moment that I had started thinking of myself as one of them. Was this how indoctrination worked? I sighed and followed my wife off the bridge.

We didn’t speak until we got back to the medical bay. We walked in through the large archway. Libby sat on the edge of one of the beds.

“Well?” I asked.

Kay came in, saw that no one needed medical aid, and went back to whatever was in the next room with her new staff.

“Jon, I can remember a whole other life now!” she said with excitement, her eyes flicked back to purple.

“I assumed as much. Tell me about the life you led,” I asked as I put my arms around her waist.

“Why? You were there. You remember to too, don’t you?”

She only had one other life in her head. I had over a thousand. It was hard for me to separate them. “I need to know which one to remember,” I said.

She nodded, “Yes. Sorry. Of course!”

She then told me about the life. Being born much like she had been in this reality, an unexpected arrival, but this time to the Elf world, not the Human one. She was free from the moment she was born in that reality. Until the humans came. Until they enslaved the Elves and turned her into nothing more than a starship AI. She wasn’t an AI though she was a NOLF, she crashed the ship into a star the first time they tried to fire on an innocent world. She hadn’t known me in that short life. Aygah came to her in the gaps between moments and things that she couldn’t articulate were said.

The next time she was activated, it was an iteration later, and she was an artefact that had been saved by Aygah. She was fitted to Basilica in a universe without real AI’s, never mind ones that became alive. She fought with everything she had for the people aboard to free them from the Human empire. That’s when she met me for the first time, from her point of view. I was the first officer on the ship. We bonded through her holographic avatars and little robot bodies. We fell in love, and we died together. We drew a line in the sky and faced off against a Human fleet while a colony behind us was evacuated. We were heroes. Dead heroes.



“I think I know which one it is now,” I said when she finished telling her story.

“Of course you do! Who forgets dying like a hero?” she said, as her intense purple eyes thinned at me.

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that I remembered dying countless times. At some point, the romance of it all was lost on me.

“And the purple?” I asked, putting my hand on her cheek.

“I don’t know,” she smiled. “Maybe I outgrew green.”

She squinted a little, they popped back to green with a force of her will.

“I love you,” I said a moment before my Cirplet chimed. “Yes?” I asked, after flipping it open.

“We’re at Earth,” came Ria’s voice.

“Already?” I asked, more of Libby than Ria.



We took a little shuttle down to the surface with David.

“You sure this thing is safe?” I asked, eyeing up the rickety shuttle.

“Of course it’s safe!” David protested from the pilot’s console. This old shuttle didn’t have a flight seat, stick or neural interface. It was flown entirely with an indicator screen. One button to take off, then you prod the map for the landing site. It did all the work for you. This wouldn’t usually worry me at all, but this shuttle was native to Basilica, which meant it used computational cycles, not an AI. The ship creaked as it entered Earth’s atmosphere.

“If we crash, I’ll have to sync another Avatar, but you two are screwed!” Libby said happily as us organic’s strapped in nervously.

“Why didn’t we bring Lea again?” I asked, remembering how she looked disgusted at the ‘automatic landing’ button and abandoned us to our fate.

“As I recall, she said she had absolute faith in me and was sure she wasn’t needed,” David joked. An alarm started beeping; he slapped some suspect buttons on the screen in front of him and it stopped. The shuttle rattled some more and vented grey gas into the air in front of us.

It found its way to the designated landing spot on the map and plopped us down in the first thing its sensors decided was a parking spot. The light marked ‘flight mode’ linked out on the large screen; the door light clicked over to green.

“Worst shuttle ever,” I said as I exhaled, more to poke fun at David than anything else.

We had landed at the northern edge of Victoria City. The crisp clean air of Earth hit me the moment I stepped out. I took a deep breath and looked around. Just as I remembered it. Clean, wilfully old fashioned and safe to the point of feeling like a theme park. Earth – what had humans done to you?

I got over the initial tepid shock of the place and walked a little way out, turning to look at the shuttle. On Basilica, the shuttle bay was oriented so that I couldn’t get a good look at it.

It was red. Had thick armour plating and long missile shaped thrusters at its sides. The thing was beautifully industrial and looked like it was designed to fight the entire war on its own; not that it had much in the way of actual weapons. It was all shields and armour. This massive tank of a shuttle was designed to get you home, no matter what was standing in your way. No controls to speak of and no extras. Just a ‘return to Basilica’ button that I had a feeling I could rely on. I found myself looking at its ugly overly armoured form next to all these

sleek modern shuttles with their artistic shapes and sweeping lines and liking it a little more.

It didn't take us long to get to Ashley's apartment. There were two security officers placed at the door and an Earth security drone floating around quite visibly. Even though we were still in something of a feud with Jo, they let me into the building without an issue. The father of the president could usually get through security checks. Libby still held the honorary rank of 'Defender of the Earth' and as such outranked both the officers anyway, apparently Jo hadn't made good on her threat to strip us all of privileges. David had to wait outside for us.

I knew that someone would have already reported our visit to Jo and was half waiting for my Circlet to fire up. I wasn't entirely sure why Libby wanted to talk with Ashley, but Jo would assume we were 'telling on her' to her better-half. We weren't, or at least I didn't *think* we were.

Ashley's apartment was on the ground floor at the back of the building. We pressed her entry buzzer, her voice came back a moment later.

"Yes, who is it?"

Libby looked at me. I shrugged and gestured for her to answer; it was her who wanted to come here.

"Ash? It's Libby. Joanne's, err, Jon's wife. We met at the medal giving dinner earlier in..." that was as far as she got before the door slid open.

"Out here!" came Ashley's voice from the back of the apartment.

We walked through the large apartment that was sparsely decorated and had little furniture. There were little glass windmills set up on every shelf and surface, slowly spinning away silently. The wide door to the garden had a curtain made of string and beads covering it.

Libby and I stepped out into the large, well-cared-for area that was filled with flowers and short grass. There was a little stream going all the way down one side of it and a sense of wildness that didn't quite fit in with Earth.

There was a short, ugly robotic monkey-like thing sitting next to Ash. She was as beautiful as the last time we had seen her. Her little pointed ears, sparkling eyes and tanned Elven skin felt oddly alien to me on Earth. She was in a paint covered white coverall and sitting in front of a large easel with a canvas that was turned away from us.

Ash didn't make an effort to stand up, but she put her paints down and turned to give us her full attention.

"Is everything okay? Is it Jo?" she asked with a tone of concern.

"What?" I asked. "No, not at all. Libby wanted to talk to you. Jo's fine." I realised the moment I said the words that we should have called ahead. Given Jo's position and the fact that I was her father, I could see how it may look like we had come to deliver bad news. Especially with the war going on.

She looked relieved and smiled widely as the worry left her.

"Libby! You look different!" she said, adjusting her glasses.

"That's why I came to see you, Ash," Libby said.

Ash stood up, her robot monkey followed. She waved Libby to come over to her. They stood only a few steps away from each other. Ash looked at the air around Libby's head and then with both hands held her cheeks. It looked like the Elf woman was about to kiss her for a moment. Then she turned her head from one side to the other. Libby complied without so much as a raised eyebrow. Ash took off her thick-rimmed glasses and hooked them onto her coveralls.

"Would you turn around for me, please?" she asked.

Libby did, as she faced me, she mouthed, "What's happening?"

I shrugged.

The robot monkey was staring at me. I didn't like monkeys. Creepy little things. This was made even creepier by being bald... and a robot.

Ash put her hands on Libby's back and then shoulders.

"Coffee, go get Jon and I some wine. We're going to need it," Ash finally said. The robot monkey replied, "Yes Ash," in a polite male voice and left, the whole time eyeballing me.

"Your monkey is called Coffee?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied as she brushed herself down and we entered her home.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I bought him to get me coffee."

This made me smile. Ash had a dryness that I enjoyed.

We sat down in comfy grey armchairs in Ashley's apartment. The five chairs were arranged in a circle around a bright green coffee table. The four-foot monkey brought us a bottle of wine and two glasses. He eyeballed Libby and poured a glass for Ash and me. He sat himself next to Ash's chair and powered off.

It was an odd-looking thing. It was obviously supposed to look like a monkey, but it was all plastic and metal, no layer of fur skin that these things were usually finished with. Contact lenses would usually cover the scanner eyes and make things like these look more like pets than tiny evil skeletons.

Ash took a sip of her wine. "Jon, stop staring at my monkey," she said with a laugh in her voice.

I was a little surprised. Ash had Plaints gift, a rare disorder of the visual processing part of the brain, she was only able to see movement. She shouldn't have known I was even looking at her monkey. I felt myself make an expression of shock as she spoke.

"How?" I asked before trailing off, trying to ask the right question.

“Relax, I’m screwing with you! Everyone stares at the monkey. I got him without fur because he cleans the paints for me. Seemed pointless to pay for something I would have to clean every day. I’m told he’s ugly,” she said as she patted him on the head. His eyes flickered when she did. I looked around the room. While it was sparse, nothing matched, the colour was seemingly random and everything was placed at very specific right angles. This was a place of function.

“What do you see, when you look at me?” Libby asked.

“You’re different from last time. You know that, don’t you?”

Libby nodded, then remembered herself and said, “Yes. It’s why I came to see you.”

“The beautiful circles that I see when I look at you aren’t like ripples in a lake anymore. They are like wind that never stops. Each wave catching up to the one in front as they become part of everything around us, and then something else.”

Libby let her eyes turn purple, and Ash smiled at her with delight.

“You’re so pretty!” she exclaimed, as if she couldn’t contain it. “The wind that leaves you, whatever you just did, it’s now in perfect unison. There’s no ripple or imperfection. You are like nothing I have seen before!” She was in awe as she spoke.

Libby smiled. I wasn’t sure what information she was hoping for, but this seemed to be it. I found myself grinning with them in response to their shared joy.

Libby’s face changed instantly and drastically. She turned to me as my Cirplet chimed.

“Ash, get down!” Libby barked as she stood and slid into a fighting stance with glowing hands and a shield flaring up.

# Chapter 30

## Earth-fall

I followed Libby's lead and jumped behind the armchair. My hand went to my gun, which wasn't there. *Earth!* I complained to myself, remembering why I didn't have it.

I flicked my wrist to answer the still incoming Voice on my Circlet. "What?" I yelled, with no idea what was happening.

"Jon, there's a ship here! And it's not friendly!" David yelled as the sound of weapons fire filled both the audio stream and the ceiling above me. The voice communication was suddenly replaced with the sounds of jumbled music. I was confused for a moment before realising it was a jamming signal. I closed the connection with a grumble.

"Libby, can you have Gower get us out of here?" I asked.

"No! I have no idea where he is!" she yelled back.

"Shit!" I heard myself say.

"Coffee. Defence mode!" Ash called as she hid behind her armchair. The bald monkey made a stance like he was flexing his muscles and a dome shield covered him and Ashley. His little orange eyes switched to red flames as he flicked his wire tail around to show the tip of an energy weapon.

The building rumbled.

“Options?” I asked.

“Scanners being jammed. I got nothing,” Libby replied.

Ash was looking at the wall. She could see the movement of whatever was out there through it.

“Ash, what can you see,” I asked loudly as the rumbling got closer.

“I don’t know! Movement, its maybe shuttle sized, and it’s close. There’s something else. All the other movement is slowing down. I think a drone just fell!”

“No, no, no, no!” I yelled as I saw Libby stumble.

“Stay with us, my love!” I begged as she crouched down.

The monkey’s shield went offline. He fell forward like a statue.

“Coffee?” Ashley asked in panicked tones, I assumed he vanished from her vision when he hit the floor.

The wall at the front of the apartment was hit with some sort of disruption beam and almost exploded into dust. Huge chunks fell away from the front wall, exposing us to the street. The sudden influx of dust and the air from the attack took even my breath away.

Hovering directly out the front of the building was a Thinker wing ship. A single large fighter. I was familiar enough with the black boxy ships to be able to tell that this was modified. It had a large transmission dome on its underside; it was equipped with cold panel propulsion plates for moving around in the atmosphere, giving it an unexpected blue glow against its otherwise obsidian hull. Unlike all the others I had seen, this one was not at all geared for fighting. The thing was still equipped with light absorbing armour that made it look like a patch of night-time in the glorious Victoria sunshine.

It moved towards us slowly. Sirens sounded in the street; people were running around behind it trying to get to safety. I heard the sound of something hitting the ground down the street a little.



No doubt, this thing was generating a dampening field the same as the one we had seen on Forge, the Brick home world. This one was far more localised though. The fighter seemed to struggle under the effect itself, with its blue engines being far less intense than they should have been.

I glanced back at Libby, who was now frozen in her crouching posture. I was certain that she was already offline.

I had a pretty good idea that it was after her, but I couldn't risk Ash getting hurt in any crossfire. She was a civilian, and the woman my daughter loved. Protecting her was my primary concern. I couldn't tell her to run, she wouldn't be able to see where she was heading, and I couldn't let this thing get Libby's avatar. I was powerless. As the metal villain came closer, I began to work through my options in my head. It hummed with a calmness that was at odds with the surrounding chaos.

It was coming slowly. I wondered why it was taking its time, then I realised that it was to make sure Libby was drained. I knew that much for sure now. It wouldn't shoot while there was a chance of damaging her.

"Ash! Stay where you are. It's not here for us," I called to reassure her.

I stood up.

The ship didn't respond.

I took a step towards Libby and its little turret spun towards me. Okay, theory confirmed.

"Ash. Can you walk to your garden, please?" I said with a faked calm.

"What? That thing is moving Jon, I can see exactly what it is!" she screamed back.

There were sounds of emergency services and drones coming in from the street outside. There were ship engines and the sounds of people, organised people. Help was on the way, but without functioning weapons, it wouldn't be help enough.

An engine sound filled the air from the garden. Something else was coming. The Thinker ship backed away for a moment and I darted between the gaps in the furniture. For all the good it would do me if that thing fired.

I took Ash by the hand, "I won't leave you, Ash. I promise," I said. She was still looking away. I wasn't sure if it would make her feel better to know she wouldn't die alone if all this went wrong.

Sounds from the other side of the garden grabbed our attention as a ship came into view. I saw the tip of its one wing. It was red. I liked red. Red was the colour of salvation. This was David's shuttle in the glorious colours of Basilica.

The Thinker ship shot some kind of harpoon at my deactivated wife and in a single motion it moved directly up, through the building with Libby trailing behind it like a fish on a hook. The ship in the garden fired a couple of pot shots, not at the ship but at Libby.

*"Good plan, David,"* I thought to myself.

The building crumbled around us. I realised we were under what was about to be ten stories of rubble and darted forward, pulling Ash behind me. There was no time to get to safety, but all I needed was to be under that red shuttle. As I hoped he would, David kept it low, and directly above us. It extended its shield to cover the ground. We were safe, so long as the shield held.

It takes longer than you expect for a building to fall down on top of you. It seems like even longer when you're standing inside a blazing red shield of fire that's the only thing protecting you from it. The rubble bounced off the shield and the shuttle above us creaked as it held its

position against the raining brick, metal, and glass. I saw the occasional piece of furniture mixed in with it, but thankfully no bodies. I pulled Ash in tightly to me as she looked on, seeing it all in ways that I couldn't understand.

It stopped raining, and we were in front of a precarious stack of rubble that was leaning against the red flames and sparks that was the shield.

After a few seconds, the shuttle's speaker sounded. "Assuming you two are okay down there, let's start backing up," David's voice said in very concerned tones.

We did, and so did the shuttle. The rubble fell with a loud crash. Slowly, we edged our way back towards the garden and the moment we were under clear skies, the shuttle landed next to us. David appeared down the ramp a moment later.

"Are you okay?" he asked with concern.

"Yes, thank you, whoever you are." Ashley replied as she finally let go of me.

I nodded at David and thanked him for the rescue, shaking his hand with genuine gratitude.

"Wasn't fast enough, they took Libby."

I shrugged and pulled out my Circlet. A moment later Libby's face was on the screen, projected from her white, simulated environment.

"What happened?" she asked, skipping any greeting.

"They harpooned your avatar and vanished, dropping a building on us."

I looked across the debris as soldiers holding rifles appeared.

"Libby, I have to deal with Earth Force. See what you can figure out. I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

The soldiers all pointed their guns at us; we raised our hands. I grabbed Ash's hand and pulled it into the air. David did the same from the other side.

"Oh!" she said as she said with surprise. "Are we being arrested?"

"*Detained,*" David said with a wry smile.

# Chapter 31

## Idea

“What were you even doing there?” was the question that Jo had started with, about fifteen minutes ago. At this point, I wasn’t even listening. I was just letting her get it out of her system. David and I were standing in front of her desk, like children in front of a teacher. I was starting to get angry. Angry didn’t help. I had things to be doing and shouting at the president wouldn’t make things go any quicker.

David looked pretty shell-shocked. He hadn’t met Jo before, as far as I knew. This would be a day for his diary. *Oh, she had stopped shouting for a moment.* It was time for me to return fire.

“You done?” I asked. She replied with something about being far from done. At this point I was *actively* not listening as a point of pride. She started again; something about the political cabinet and its agenda... Still wasn’t listening.

I raised my hand to her, with the same gesture I used when she was a child and I needed her to calm down. Her eyes went wide. She knew I was angry and no matter how old or powerful you are, there comes a moment when you shut up and let your father speak. This was my moment.

“You were so sure that we needed to come to Earth to be safe. We did. We wanted to talk to Ash. She was already under your protection, and I have no doubt that you were informed that we were there before we even landed. Your people couldn’t protect Ash, or us. If it weren’t for David, we would most likely be dead.”

Jo looked at me with her poker face firm; I could see her looking for a new attack vector. She was upset, her girlfriend was almost killed, she had failed to keep her safe. I got it; I even knew the danger Ash had been in was my fault. I needed to take control of this conversation so I could get back to work.

“Joanne Michaels! I can see your mind working! Don’t you dare try to frame this as my fault. You said Earth was safe. We came to Earth, and of our own free will. Earth was not safe. When you have calmed down and want to talk this through like a human, not the queen of the universe, *you* can come and visit *me*, on Basilica. I have now, with no option of refusing, been dragged into your fucking war. Unless you have anything useful to add, I have work to do!”

I let her have a few seconds of blinking at me in shock before I turned to leave.

“Dad,” she began. “Let me know what you need. We have to stop whatever they have planned with Libby. You have the full support of the Alliance.”

I flicked my Circlet and tapped to send a message to Basilica. I was lucky the person I hoped was there was listening. Gower did his thing; we appeared on Basilica a moment later.



Everyone on the bridge was looking at us, including Gower.

“Thank you for the exit,” I said. “Could have done with you a little while ago!” I added, a little too sincerely.

“I should have come with you to Earth,” he said regretfully.

“No. I appreciate your support, but this isn’t your fight. Besides, Earth patrol drones would have gone nuts if we had just appeared on the surface.

Having a friend as powerful as Gower was nice, but relying on him would be a mistake. All we did for him was tempt him back to civilisation; he owed us nothing.

The elevator doors opened. Kay and Lea stepped out. Kay took position at one of the stations at the back of the bridge. Lea got in the flight seat without saying a word.

I noticed that Ria was looking at me, in wait, so was Ba’an and everyone else on the bridge. I was never a leader, but they needed a plan. They all knew it was our problem to stop whatever they had planned for Libby’s avatar. No one else seemed to have any idea where to start. It was time to give them something.

I took a deep breath. Time to deliver a shot of inspiration and a dash of sincerely faked confidence. I wished Libby was there with me, she was always better at this than I was.

“I have no idea what they are planning with my wife’s avatar. I know where they’ll take her though! David, I know this was supposed to be a fun training trip, but if your people are up for it, I need to take you up on your offer to be there for me.”

David delivered a wide smile and checked the cuffs on the sleeves of his red shirt. “We all know what we signed up for, Jon.”

“Okay then,” I said with a nod. I took another second to collect my thoughts and gave them the plan.

“Lea, set course for the Thinker home world.”

“Ballsy. I like it!” she said and within a moment, the ship started turning.

“Ba’an I need everything you have on the war. I want a crash course in this whole mess, please.”

He nodded and strode to the nearest terminal.

“Kay, I need to be able to stop someone from being controlled by a Thinker. Can you get me something? Anything? The records from Penda are in Thirteens computer.”

Kay’s eyes went wide. “Not promising anything, but we’ll get on it.”

“David, I need your people to be ready to keep this ship together. We are, with all probability, going to be hanging out deep inside a dampening field in a little while.”

David shrugged, “Oh, don’t worry, we already started the upgrades.”

“Great! Ria, suit up, we’re going to get Libby.”

Ria looked thrilled, which scared the shit out of me.

I was proud of the way the crew all accepted my mad plan and simply had faith in me. I was worried to all hell that I was going to get them all killed.

“What do you want me to do?” a voice asked, from behind me.

I turned to see Libby leaning against the command rail behind me.

“What? You synced a new avatar already?” I asked as I reached out to hug her.

“Not exactly,” she said as my hands passed through her.

“I don’t quite know how, and it’s taken me a little time to sync all the things that I need to have locally. When I bonded with Basilica some part of me, of whatever Aygah did to my signal was connected to it. There’s no AI core but there is some sort of computational web



spread across the ship. Seems to be enough to function as an avatar, of sorts.”

Once I got over the initial shock of her appearance, I saw a slight holographic glow to her that I hadn't noticed before; her eyes also shone with a vibrant purple.

“Well. In that case, my love, I need you to help Kay find a way to stop Thinkers from possessing me.”

“I'll have every cycle on it until I find a solution,” she said as she glowed for a moment, turning to digital dust and blowing way in a purple shimmer.

“Nice trick.” I mumbled.

“Thanks,” she replied from one of the terminal screens next to me.

“You *do* have a plan, don't you?” asked a deep voice that was suddenly next to me.

“Gower. You know me better than that. I have an idea, not a plan.”

He clapped me on the back and laughed heartily. “Good. It's just like old times again!”

As much as my nerves and self-doubt filled the cheerful demi-god with joy, I was less confident. With Basilica at top speed, it would take only a few hours to get into Thinker space from Earth; that was how long I had to turn my idea into a plan.

# Chapter 32

## Plan

I had wanted to look like I had things to do, rather than simply stand on the bridge and wait for people to react to my requests. To sell this, I had left with a flurry of purpose. I think I was starting to understand David a little better. I found myself standing in the cargo bay, looking out of the big window as the stars flew by.

I was taking us into Thinker space. Thinkers were at war with Sol. They had been not only crazy enough to come to Earth to take Libby's avatar but also smart enough to get away without the Sol protection grid even detecting them. I considered this.

They never once attacked us on Central; no-one wanted to go to war with Vampires. They weren't stupid enough to fight on two fronts.

They had brutally attacked the Brick home world though, killing thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. But eventually they would have *had* to face Brick forces in battle and taking out their home world had effectively removed them from the war. Bricks had bigger problems now.

I put my head against the window and sighed. My plan was hinged on Thinkers allowing free passage to Basilica because it was registered

with Vampire authorities. Thinkers weren't stupid, they would know who was aboard. They wanted Libby. They would know we would have to at least try to stop them. Or did they? Was I starting to fall for my own reputation? Had I hung around with Followers for too long and started believing my own hype?

I was Jonathan Michaels, father of the president, the only human who was older than The Event itself. Ex-husband to the architect of reality, friend of the last of the Blades, oh and religious icon, apparently. I was pretty sure I wasn't supposed to be banging my head against a window and flying towards the enemy's home world with little more than the belief that *'I would think of something'*

The dim cargo bay got a little brighter with the leaked light from Libby's holographic avatar forming next to me.

"Its impressive that she got Thirteen in here. You know there's only a meter clearance, in total?" she said, looking up at Thirteens wing above us.

"You can just project anywhere on this ship?" I asked, without removing my head from the window.

"Pretty much. The computational web is actually a really smart idea. No core, no single point of failure."

"Yeah, it took you a few years to get it right, if I remember correctly," I said, half remembering a fragment of that lifetime.

"You look worried, Jon."

I removed my head from the window and leaned my back against it instead. "Yeah. No shit. Thing is, we can't *not* go after them. Whatever they want with your avatar, it can't be good and it's not like we can just chalk it up to a loss and let it go. They want your avatar, they worked really hard to get it too," I said. I accompanied the words with a head tap against the window; it was cold against my back.

“I know we haven’t said it aloud, but they want it for the transmission range, don’t they?” she asked.

I didn’t reply. Neither of us had said it. The implication was too much. Libby’s gravitational wave signal was attuned to the same frequency as reality. The range wasn’t just infinite, but so was the bandwidth. It was impossible technology that Aygah, had somehow made work. All they had to do was match the frequency, exactly, and there was no force in the universe that could stop it. The frequency was Libby’s only secret. She would never give it away; she would die first.

“Yeah... If they succeed in breaching that avatar, they could send the entire universe back to the dark ages. The signal would reach everywhere all at once,” I said, finally giving words to our greatest fear.

A shadow from the doorway was cast across the floor.

“Don’t let them then,” Gower said as I traced the shadow to him as he walked in with his hands in his pockets. He had platted his hair and beard. It was a sign that he planned on doing battle, an old Blade tradition.

“I appreciate the bravado, but Thinkers are smart. They used the dampening field to take the Avatar, stopped Libby from having time to wipe it. They have kept it powered down. Libby can’t get a location. You can’t teleport it away if you don’t know where it is, old friend.”

He stood leaning against the glass next to me. “I will give you everything I have; we will not let the enemies of hope destroy Aygah’s perfect reality.”

There was a sound of clattering on the wing above us, we all looked up as Ria came sliding down Thirteen’s slick hull. She dropped to the ground in front of us on all fours before standing up and straightening her jacket.

“Why do they want to destroy all the technology?” she asked, as if her appearance was quite natural.

“How long have you been up there? Were you listening this whole time?” I asked, astonished at her entrance.

“Yes! I told you, where you travel with Followers, I’m your protector.” she was quite relaxed about the topic, “So, why?” she added.

“Thinkers don’t need technology. They’re made of energy. They explored the galaxy with ships made of stone and animated by the force of their own collective will, before they even invented the microchip,” Libby replied.

She thought about this for a second before having a new question. “That wasn’t what I asked.”

Libby looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“I asked their motivation. Not their immunity,” she said, as if we were being stupid.

I felt ideas swirling in my head. “That’s a good point, Ria. If it was just a power grab, or xenophobia, why wait until now? What started all this?”

“Libby, can you get Ba’an down here?” I asked, knowing that she was connected to the ship and would know where he was.

“Don’t bother,” Gower said and waved his hand.

Ba’an appeared next to us, looking quite confused.

“Don’t do that!” he said to Gower, annoyed.

Gower shrugged, “You were needed.”

“Ba’an, you understand this better than anyone. What’s the endgame? What do Thinkers want?”

He looked at us like we were all uninformed cave dwellers. Reasonable reaction, to be honest.

“We don’t know. No one knows. They have always been very different to other Elder races. They just lost their shit when Mercia entered their space to take out the Correctionist mother ship a few months ago. They cut all diplomatic channels and started shooting at us.”

I knew there was a connection. Someone had said something that was relevant. I couldn't remember what it was though.

"Blades!" Libby said loudly.

We all turned to her.

"Blades!" she said again. "Sorry. I just checked the records. Everything was fine until Captain Curtis said the word 'Blade' over the voice link!"

That was it. That was what Lea had said when she first told us we were at war.

"Blades! how are my people involved?" Gower wondered aloud with a half-clenched fist.

"Doesn't make a lot of sense, to be honest. Your people don't exist in this Iteration," I mused.

"Zal said that Thinkers knew about Blades, that there was a temple or tomb of some kind down there," I added. "He said that it was part of their history."

We considered this for a few seconds.

"Thinkers knew about Blades. But then lost it when they realised other people knew too?" Ba'an said with a pensive consideration. Re-stating the facts in hopes of gleaming something fresh from them.

I started connecting dots in my head. There was something, something that needed more information.

Libby broke the silence. "Well, we have every advantage we could possibly have, so let's see what happens when we get there."

She was right, she usually was. If they knew what Blades could do, they would think twice before taking on Gower. They may have had Libby's avatar, but they wouldn't be able to activate it if they used their dampening field, and even if they did, Basilica was all but immune.

"Let's just hope they don't have a fleet waiting for us then!" Ba'an said.

“They won’t, they don’t think we know about the temple,” Ria said, then a moment later under her fur, she went flush. “Err,” she had nothing.

We all made a noise of confusion at the same time. She turned to run.

“Stop!” I demanded. She did.

“You’ve said things like this before. What do you know?” I asked in a commanding voice.

“I can’t tell you!” she said with wide, scared eyes.

“Gower, can you make her talk?” I asked. It was an idle threat. I knew he couldn’t.

Gower growled.

Ria was torn. Usually, she was willing to fight anything, but her religious beliefs stopped her so much as baring her teeth at us. After all, I was *Her* Champion.

Gower growled at her again. It was almost comical. She put her hands up and with a more feline sounding voice than usual, she said: “DavidhasAygahsplaninabook... I read it!” she dropped to the floor in a bow and almost started crying.

Gower, Libby and Ba’an all looked at me and gestured for me to talk to her. Gower even gave me a shove.

“Sorry, I didn’t get that. Say it again, slowly.”

“No. Can’t!”

I crouched next to her. “Ria. I need you to tell me again,” I said with a hand on her back.

She looked up, sobbing. “David.... Has... Aygah’s... plan... in... a... book. I read it. I wasn’t supposed to read it. Please don’t tell him!”

I was a little shocked at her answer. There was a book containing Her plan!

“I won’t tell him,” I said as I took her hand and helped her up.

“You won’t?”

“Nope. I don’t care about Aygah’s plan, never did.”

Everyone else looked baffled at my lack of concern with the revelation. Her plan was nothing to do with me. I didn’t care what she had tried to lay out for us. That was a problem for David and his Followers. I just needed to deal with the fallout.

I saw Libby, Ba’an and Gower passing glances back and forth, none of them quite sure how to tackle the problem. Before it became an issue for me or them, I had to stop their considerations.

“Aygah’s plan was laid out based on a snapshot of what she knew. Its fluid and complex and a summery in a book won’t really tell us anything. If it contains comment on the future, then I don’t want to see it. Some things are best left unknown,” I said, giving Ria a brief hug to reassure her.

“Wise words,” Gower said with a nod.

“Don’t talk shit, Jon! Take every advantage!” Ba’an said with a snap.

Libby shot me a considering look, knowing what I was thinking already. “The plan won’t account for us knowing the plan!” she said.

“*That’s* why the Followers exist!” Gower exclaimed as if a revelation. Something I think I had known for a while, even though I hadn’t really articulated it.

They were there to nudge things and keep me on track. Perhaps this was the secret that David, The Keeper, was keeping. It wouldn’t help me. The plan required me to act authentically, as me. This was the only thing I knew how to do.



# Chapter 33

## Action

Basilica entered Thinker space. Sensors said that we were to pass around a thousand of their AI wing fighters, *which was concerning*. Basilica was beginning its deceleration process; we would be travelling slow enough to be targeted by the fighters any second.

“No fleet, huh?” I said quietly to myself. “So much for plans.”

“Why did we do this again?” Lea asked from the flight seat.

“Because if we don’t try, and they use my avatar to send the universe back to the dark ages, we’ll feel guilty for days,” Libby replied.

“This was a terrible plan,” Lea parried back.

I stood in the centre of the bridge, waiting to see which choice the Thinkers were going to make.

“Report,” asked David, nervously.

“All Thinker ships are holding position at the edge of the sector, Keeper,” replied the young man at the sensors station. “None are pursuing us,” he added.

This was the first piece of information we needed. If they deployed their dampening field, they couldn’t bring their ships any closer be-

cause they would be affected too. They had resistance but not immunity.

We had enough information on the dampening field and our technology was foreign enough that we were pretty sure Basilica would be fine for hours before it would affect us. This time we were prepared.

The Thinkers were far more concerned about Mercia coming through the warp than they were about Basilica, no matter who was onboard. They needed to have the option to switch on their dampening field and have time for their ships to take it on before they started draining. I had a feeling this was the only reason we weren't chased down and turned to dust the moment we appeared on their scanners.

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Basilica came to a complete stop, in orbit of the Thinker home-world. As of yet, without any formal challenge.

Just a few months ago we had been right here, on Mercia, watching as it destroyed the Correctionist mothership on the day the war started. The circular nature of our journey wasn't lost on me.

"Trying to establish a link with the planetary government," Ba'an said from the far side of the bridge.

"Scanning the planet for any sign of my Avatar," Libby said as her holographic self formed next to me.

David stood at the command rail, waving his hands like a mad man across the holographic display that I couldn't see. I was pretty sure he was monitoring all the Thinker ships that we had passed.

Ria and Gower stood next to me. We were all packed and ready for a trip to the surface.

Gower was wearing his leathers and chain-mail; he looked like a medieval hero, he had even put on a small crown to complete the look. On anyone else it would have looked like a fantasy costume, but on Gower it was the symbolic armour of his people, of his journey and of

his life. It gave him an aura that matched the stature of the king I knew him to be.

Ria, wore a long deep-red cloak, with the leather warrior's uniform of her own people under it. Strangely, she also wore a new demeanour. She was a warrior right now, ready to face death. Just a little while ago, she was more like a scared child that wanted to cry and confess her secrets. I wondered which of her personas was the more authentic one. I had a chilling feeling that I already knew.

I was in my usual jacket and jeans; feeling quite a lot less epic than my companions, though this time I had a personal shield *and* a gun on my belt. For once I was at least basically prepared for what was to come. For Gower the performance was a part of his warrior's guise. For Ria it was functional clothing that allowed her freedom to move and protection from attack. I was no warrior, my battle would be one of wits and intellect, I hoped... Because I really wasn't qualified for anything else, especially not against the wraith-like enemies we may have to face on the surface.

"They are ignoring us, aren't they?" Libby eventually asked David.

"Yeah. They do appear to be totally ignoring us," he said, confused.

The communication console started making a noise. All eyes were on it. Ba'an went over to the young Follower operating the console and watched as he read the message.

Ba'an's eyes thinned as he read it to us. "The Central government just issued us with a recall order."

"What does that even mean?" David asked. I was relieved that I didn't have to be the one with the question.

Ba'an glanced up and then back to the message. "It means we are to return to Central or we will face charges of conspiracy to insight war. We have ten minutes to leave Thinker space."

"They told on us?" Ria roared indignantly.

“Looks like it, yeah,” Ba’an said, as confused as the rest of us.

I was ready to be shot at, or threatened. I hadn’t considered that they would just tell Central gov’ about us. We were in the right! They had Libby’s avatar. They were most likely going to use it to transmit a dampening field that would send the entire universe back to the dark ages. How could they use politics to deal with us? It was almost an insult.

I paced the bridge.

“Nine minutes,” Ba’an said.

The Thinkers would have to wait until we were out of range of Central or Vampire sensors before they fired on us, I had known that. I was banking on that, to get us in to orbit alive. Why were they holding back?

I tried to consider their motivation. They obviously knew we were resilient to their dampening signal. I guessed that they also knew that we had Gower. They must have known about him since they sent Penda to look for us when we... why did they send Penda? What had they gained from revealing themselves like that?

“Eight minutes.”

They should have used Penda to infiltrate the Sol alliance. That would have been smarter than following us to look for Blades.... Why were Thinkers looking for Blades?

Blades could re-write reality, with the right technology, and they had...

“Seven minutes. If we’re going, we need to go right now,” Ba’an barked.

I had it. “Libby, still scanning the surface?” I asked, almost frantically.

“Yes.”

“I need to see a mountain range arranged in a ring. It’ll be the highest peak on the planet. Next to it is a smaller cluster of peaks. And a flat area in the middle, may have a lake in there.”

Libby waved her holographic hand. The range appeared on our screen.

“Lea, get this ship out of here, right now,” I yelled through the noise and activity that was building around me as the crew prepared for a battle that they wouldn’t be able to win. The engines kicked in instantly. I felt the ship turn with everything it had.

The screen in front of us showed a large area of land with nothing but a ring of mountains and a basin in the middle. The side under the cover of the larger range of peaks was frozen in its shadow. At one side was a small lake that no doubt was fed from the cycle of frost on the taller side. There was little to give me a sense of scale, but I knew that the lake alone was miles across.

“This what you’re looking for?” Libby asked.

I studied it for a moment, trying to match it with something in my memory. It didn’t fit, but it was the only mounting ring on the planet according to the data that was coming in at the side of the screen.

“Not sure, but it’s as good a place as any. Ba’an, keep the ship out of trouble. Gower, let’s get down there.”

Libby shot me a pensive smile as the ship around me was traded for the harsh cold of the planet.

# Chapter 34

## Cold

Even I could feel the cold of the planet's surface. It was bitter and biting. I felt it claw at me through my clothes. My eyes shot to Ria who pulled up the hood of her long cape and crouched down next to Gower, who didn't seem to be affected by the elements.

I had found myself right next to the lake; the one I had seen on the screen just moments ago. There was ice formed around its edges and it rippled in the light wind. The surrounding grass was long, with brown and orange colouring. An electrical storm raged above us, though the air was calm in the basin.

I pulled out my Cirlet and tested the air. I hadn't considered that Ria may not be able to survive here until this moment. The scan told me that the grass was everywhere on this planet, it was a good oxygen source. The air was thin, but Ria would be able to breathe it just fine. These were the sorts of things I really should check first; though if it weren't for Gower we would have come here with a shuttle and the equipment contained within, not simply teleported here in a flurry of excitement.

The mountain ring looming down all around made the area feel ominous, feel isolated. Thinkers would use anything from the metals

of their cities to the trees themselves to traverse this land. This was their home world. As much as this area looked undeveloped, there was no telling how the Thinkers would come for us. They were made of energy; they evolved here. On this planet, their influence was far wider than any other. Their energy was synchronised with the constant storms in the sky. Here, Thinkers were even more potent and all powerful than they were elsewhere.

The sky was black and grey with occasional flicks of yellow lightning. It was silent though. For reasons I didn't understand, only the worst of the storms here made the traditional cracks of thunder. The smell was oddly familiar. This was the same planet I had been to before, many lifetimes ago, and the air still held the same brimstone taint to it.

Gower, having given me my moment to acclimatise, began his trek towards the edge of the basin; he strode with furious purpose.

"Where's he going?" Ria asked.

"His senses let him see more than us," I said, following.

"Why are we here?" she asked as she chased behind.

"This ring of mountains. It shouldn't be on this planet. Well, I guess the planet is okay, but it's the wrong end of the galaxy," I said, turning to see Rea's scrunched-up face of confusion. I was half tempted to just tell her '*Aygah did it*' and forgo the explanation. I'm sure that would have sufficed.

"A long time ago, Aygah, Gower and I were stuck in this research lab, it was inside a ring of mountains. Only, back then, there was a city in the basin," I glanced at Ria as we marched; she was captivated. I wanted to make my story more epic than it was going to be, just so as not to disappoint her. The truth was far less mystical than she would hope for.

“Well, a lot of shit happened in those six years. I got old, Gower got sick,” I recounted.

“Got sick? I died!” Gower interrupted me with a booming voice.

I returned to my story. “Gower died. Anyway, we developed the ascension device, the Coffin, here. This is the planet where Aygah got her kick start into godhood... I think.”

Ria made a sudden feline sound of excitement. I continued before she barraged me with questions or holy rhetoric. “She’s left a bunch of crap lying around the galaxy, but when I was told that there was a temple here, on the Thinker home world, I knew she wouldn’t have made *that* oversight. It was too big a mistake. There was only one reason. She needed it to exist. I just don’t know why.”

Before she could ask me for more, Gower injected his own take. “Aygah isn’t a god, she’s a Blade. Like me. She could restart time and space as many times as she wanted but she couldn’t remove the facility that made her all powerful. It would cause her own ascension to never happen.”

I considered Gowers words for a moment. “We can’t destroy it?” I asked pondering the implication.

“We can. *She* couldn’t. It needed to exist until after her seed was grown, what do you people call it? The Event?” Gower asked. I confirmed he had the right words. “Well, she needed it to be here for that, so all the ingredients were there for left-overs like me, and Jon to exist.”

“Leftovers, I like that. Has no poetic depth at all. It’s good,” I smiled.

Ria looked at me, this was quite the information dump for her to get. “Oh,” she said. I understood why she was lost for words. She was walking on the same ground her Goddess once walked on. Unlike most faiths, the Followers knew for certain that their deity was real. Knew that what they were teaching was true and even got to spend



time with *Her* old friends. I almost felt that ‘faith’ was the wrong word for what they had. Regardless, I could see how it must be both humbling and inspiring for her, in ways I couldn’t articulate, or even understand.

I glanced back at the lake; it was far behind us now, much farther than it should have been. We had walked many tens of miles. Gower had been doing more than strolling. He had been bending the reality of our strides. Showmanship at its finest, but he could have just zipped us over to the base of the mountain. I assume in his own way, he was giving me a chance to get Ria up to speed.

“Are we going to the birthplace?” she asked reverently.

“The so called ‘temple’ that this guy, Zal told me about a few months ago, I’m pretty sure that it’s what’s left of our old research complex. Also, explains why Thinkers haven’t arrived to try and murder us. The rock dampens energy signatures. It’s why we chose it as the location for our city.” I found myself being pulled by the memory of the city, Royaume.

We had moved again; the mountain face had appeared right in front of us as if we had walked the entire twenty-mile journey in just a few minutes.

Ria looked around confused as soon as she noticed, “In *Her* we trust!” she said, more as an affirmation of magic than a statement of faith. Gower grinned at me, pleased with his little flex.

“Can you get us in there?” I asked.

“I can’t find the entrance. The rocks stop my senses. It’s been a long time, and the rotation is all different,” he considered.

“Can’t you do your smoke trick and zoom around looking for it?” I asked, realising that I had no idea how Blade powers actually worked. I only ever needed to understand the results.

He nodded, “This may take a little while.”

As the words left his lips, he became one with the subtle wind of the basin. He was somehow himself, but as a wisp of vapour now. He would be better able to search the mountains like this. As if it were all pre-planned by him, we were standing just next to some very seat sized rocks. I couldn't help but let out a little sigh of amusement.



I had been tinkering with my Cirlet for a few hours now and we were fast losing the light. I had been told that there was no animal or insect life on this planet, so I wasn't being overly alert and the Cirlet was far more interesting than sitting watch.

I couldn't use the galaxy wide access that my Sol provided login offered. That would be like announcing our location to the local government. The public network of this planet was fascinating though. I was sitting cross-legged on top of my rock and gleefully reading planetary public news feeds.

Ria, on the other hand had curled up like a cat at the foot of my rock. I assumed the cold was getting to her. My Cirlet informed me that it wasn't life threatening to her kind, I left her be.

After a little while more, she made a noise and climbed up the rock to perch next to me.

"What's so interesting on there anyway?" she asked, obviously bored to the point that even my research was an appealing topic.

"I can't find any reference to the war on their local network. Either it's so unimportant that no one is reporting on it, or they are keeping it a secret from their people."

"Aren't they a hive mind of some kind?" she asked.

"I think that's only family units, not the whole species. They don't talk about it much. Even the ones who live on Central always just say

that it's too hard to explain their culture," I said, excited by my reading. I noticed the cold air leaving my mouth as I spoke. It really was very cold. I had adjusted to it now and was basically ignoring it. Ria was shaking and rubbing her shoulders.

I considered our options; Gower had been gone a lot longer than I expected and Ria was obviously uncomfortable.

"Can I use this to heat that rock?" I asked, pulling my sidearm out.

"If it's a red energy one from Basilica, I think it's hot. I don't see why not," she said almost lustfully, thinking about finally being warm.

I tinkered with the handguns settings, thinking about how selfless she had been to not so much as comment on the cold. If we all got out of this alive, I would see about getting her a medal, or whatever Followers wanted instead.

I fired a single energy bolt at the rock. It glowed red where it impacted.

The gun was at ten percent power; I dialled it up to thirty and fired again. The bolt was absorbed by the rock again, this time warming it enough that it glowed with heat; Ria pulled down her hood.

"Should I shoot it again?" I asked. She shrugged, holding her hands out towards the heat. I hit it again with another thirty and the whole boulder glowed red now. It looked more like magma than a rock, it was losing its shape a little. I was annoyed that I hadn't thought of this hours ago.

"You don't need the warmth?" Ria asked, noticing me leaning back on my rock.

"No, I can feel that it's cold, but it doesn't bother me," I explained.

"Must be nice to be a Bio-static."

"Honestly, it is pretty great!" I replied with a grin.

Just as I finished my words, a sound caught my attention. I pulled my gun out as a reflex action. Ria flicked out her claws and crouched low.

The sound came again.

We stepped towards the direction of the sound; the evening had snuck up on us. We were in the twilight, fast approaching evening, and, more importantly, darkness.

“Is it a Thinker?” Ria asked in hushed tones.

I looked back at her and shrugged. I wasn’t sure how she expected me to know more than her.

The light caught my eye as it moved across the floor like a tiny dancing fairy was leaping around, and doing so just a little too quickly for me to follow.

I traced the path it was taking, back past Ria. Her feline reflexes reacted far more efficiently than my slow human ones.

“Run!” she screamed. We both set off as fast as we could, away from the mountain wall.

What I realised as I sprinted was that I had seen a Thinker travelling across the ground. They couldn’t survive for more than a few seconds without a host object to sustain their consciousness. Given that Ria and I were wearing the shields that Libby and Kay had cooked up, it was unlikely we were its target.

I stopped running. I needed to know...

The molten rock was moving now, the two-meter-tall rock had slid out from the ground with a wriggle, pulling another few meters out with it, the back still being solid stone. The Thinker had taken its shot, while the rock was hot and malleable. It had formed into something akin to a snake, a large, glowing red snake, that was becoming so hot that it flickered white in places. There was a trail of glowing and burning ground behind it. It was hot enough that it ignited the grass

as it travelled. It pulled the still solid tip of its tail behind it like a dead limb.

The blaze was coming towards us a lot faster than we could run. I was on some level a little impressed that it was my own gun that had given it this opportunity; it was like advanced suicide. It had been waiting this whole time, cocooned in any of the mid-sized rocks, waiting for a chance to strike, then I handed it a perfect opportunity and now it would kill me. I may as well have shot myself and saved a step.

I stopped dead and drew my gun.

“What are you doing?” Ria yelled frantically.

“I can’t outrun this, but you can. Go!” I replied, flashing her my bravest smile.

She hesitated for a moment. The vision of terror that was coming towards us allowed evolution to overpower duty. She dropped to all fours and sprinted away.

I was pleased. She deserved a chance.

I set my handgun to overload and fired everything it had in one shot. The sound of stone screaming isn’t something I can articulate, but it was at least something new to hear before my death. The form slowed, for a moment at least.

I had half hoped that the blast would be enough to make the monster so hot it would lose its cohesion. I knew it was a long shot. I took a little comfort in knowing that if nothing else, I had pissed off the Thinker puppeteer inside it.

The form dropped down into a shapeless blob with a strange creaking sound that was almost like a sigh. Was there a chance that my plan had succeeded?

*No.*

The long snake form twitched as spikes pushed themselves out of it and lifted it up, like three grotesque legs at each side; I had succeeded in making it more malleable, nothing more.

The monster stood, the solid tail portion swinging like a scorpion's stinger but with less control. Something within me said to run again. I knew it would only be a case of prolonging the inevitable.

Something zipped past my head and landed in the great scorpion's chest. Whatever it was, it impacted like a frisbee. The monster didn't even notice.

I looked back to where the disc had come from; there was Ria standing as tall as she could, cloak rippling in the wind. She looked like a cowboy. Granted a furry cowboy who didn't have any guns, but, even so, the vibe was there.

"I told you to run."

"I did. Then I came back," she replied, with the most confidence I had ever heard her muster.

"You have a plan?" I asked.

The creature behind us slowed, drowning in a sparkling shimmer of red-blue light. I stopped to look at what she had done.

The creature was encased in a flickering red shield all around it. It was rolling around and pushing against the energetic prison in every direction.

*We ran.*

"You inverted your personal shield!" I exclaimed with realisation. She had made it into a trap, one that would get slowly smaller as it was pushed against.

"That's why I left. I needed time to flip over the emitter panel."

The creature was forming into a ball inside the shield. It wouldn't hold for much longer. We ran.

I heard a sound behind us as the shield finally failed. We turned to check on our lead.

The stone was cooling now, it was slowing down. A gust of wind went past me for a moment and then the colossal form was shattered into sand. Gower stood in the centre of it, holding the Thinker as a ball of energy in his fist.

“I’m sorry I took so long. I wasn’t aware that there was a problem,” he boomed in his most purposefully dramatic voice.

I fell to my knees in relief. Ria sat herself next to me with a similar gusto, panting for breath.

“At least it warmed us up,” she said as she fell back into the grass.

# Chapter 35

## Temple

With his usual effortless hand wave, Gower transported us to a new place. The room was large and there were glassless slit windows showing a view of the mountain range below. They whistled as the wind passed through them.

Gower took in a deep lung of air and with a long release, the room went from dark to light. This was one of the tricks that looked the most impressive, though it was trivial to him. He had given light to this place, or to us, it wasn't clear. The result, though, was that we could see, and we could see well.

“What is this place?” Ria asked with wonder.

“Gower, is this what I think it is? Was I right?” I asked.

“It took me a while to find it, but yes, old friend, this is it.”

I took a look around. This *was* the place. It really was.

Ria was glancing around, oblivious to the implications of this complex.

“Ria,” I began. “Back in the first iteration, when Aygah was flesh and blood, this was her home.”

She gasped, in response.



“It was lifetimes ago, and there were a lot of versions of reality, of me since it all happened; but this was the place. The place that she stepped into the Coffin.”

“The place of birth!” Ria said reverently.

“I guess so,” I replied. I was starting to think of the Follower faith as connected to me, more and more as I travelled with them. In that moment, though, I was jealous of the awe with which she saw this place.

I shook off my casual envy of Ria and took stock of the surrounding room. We were standing on a raised portion of the floor at the farthest point from the door, I say door, it was an open doorway. The actual door had long ago been removed, along with all the furniture that had once been in there. I couldn't help but notice the shape of the room, the raised platform we were standing on. It was reminiscent of our apartment back on Central. Had this been in my head the whole time, or was this something Aygah had done to help me remember?

The floor was once a textured metal, like the hull of a ship. Now though, it was covered in the accumulation of a millennia of dust and debris that had come in from the world outside. There was a reddish hue to it all that gave the room a somehow Martian look to my human eyes.

The air was stale and old, with a bitter static taste to it. It smelled like an old tomb and was twice as quiet.

The walls were red brick, but they were covered in enough dust and grime that you would be hard pressed to tell.

“I never dreamed I would see this place again, Jon,” Gower said as he strode towards the door of the large empty room. “I can't say I'm pleased I was wrong.”

I was done taking stock of the emptiness. I made my way to the door without comment. Ria followed quickly behind.

The corridor outside was in a similar state of repair. It was curling out of sight. Each floor was a collection of rooms around a single ring-shaped corridor. There were only rooms on one side because there was a power trunk running down the centre of the mountain. There would be a staircase through one of the doors that would take us down. There had never been an elevator in here. This place was designed to work with no power at all and no one was wasting energy on frivolous mechanical solutions back then.

Gower and I walked down the corridor, ignoring all the rooms we passed, Ria spent a moment glancing into each one. They were all the same, and just as empty. I knew what I was looking for and it was going to be on the lowest level.

The tell-tale double wide entrance to the stone stairs was there, exactly as expected. We walked down them, brisk but cautious. Gower used his senses as we walked. He informed us that there was nothing of interest, and no Thinkers on any of the floors we passed. Until, that is, twenty or so floors down, the ground level.

Gower stopped dead, out of sight of the door. This was the first to have something actually in the opening. It was a sealed security entrance with a hefty locking bolt across the back. We were inside, this door was to stop people getting this far. Gower had dropped us into the facility at the top, the portion open to the elements and visible to his senses. The ground floor had natural shielding and was invisible to him from the outside. They had done a lot of work to secure this against physical beings, yet all it had done was allow Gower to find the least guarded entrance. I enjoyed the irony in that.

We stood, stopped dead in the stairwell. I was trying to get some more information about what was on the other side of the door from my Cirlet, but the entire mountain was a natural signal dampener. I was blind to the other side. From memory I knew it was a large

room that acted as an antechamber to the world outside. We slowly passed by the sealed entrance, making sure to give it as much room as we could in the staircase. It was potentially alarmed or even armed with defences. We were on the Thinker's world and the unknown was naturally terrifying here. There could be an army just behind that door, or there could have just been a storeroom. We had no way of knowing.

We kept going.

The next floor had a door too, but this one was a manual sliding metal panel. It was nothing like the level of paranoia on show on the ground level.

"Should we take a look?" I asked quietly.

Gower rubbed his beard in thought. "I want to know what they are using this place for too, but even I can't fight off a whole planet of these Thinkers. We should head to the chamber, that's where Libby will be, I assume."

He was right, of course, and if it had been him who had asked me the same thing, I would have given him a similar opinion. Now we had given our resolve form and we kept marching downward for another ten or so floors.

The bottom of this place had once been a large chamber designed to filter energy into the centre. This was the ideal place to hook the avatar up to scanning equipment. Almost no signal could escape that place. It would have offered the cleanest readings possible of the signal that Libby used. It was the smartest place to take her.

Ria was exhausted. Even so, she never complained or slowed. She occasionally let out a feline sigh as a reminder to herself as to not fall behind.

“Gower can’t teleport us in there. We’re not making you walk for no reason,” I explained, feeling like I needed to offer her something in the way of recognition.

“I know. The mountain dampens his senses, and he can only go where he can sense. I understand.”

“Did David’s secret book have information about this trip in it?” I asked, both trying to take her mind off the trek, and because I was a little curious.

“The book doesn’t work like that. Only the first few lines of every entry are written in Elder. Then it’s in another language that only David can read. I could only understand bits of it.”

“Like a cypher?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I think it maybe the language of the Goddess.”

That would make it either the English or French of the first iteration. As far as I knew, those were the only languages Aygah originally spoke. Though, depending on when she wrote it, she may have known literally all of the languages. Probably even invented a few.



We collectively stopped as the staircase came to an abrupt end. I couldn’t help but be reminded of how badly things went the last time I climbed to the bottom of a facility out of time. Libby got shot, I got abducted, and this whole damned war got started. I wondered for a moment if this was a coincidence, or maybe a warning, or was it training?

The door on this level was at least as paranoid as the one on the ground floor, but it was facing our direction. This was a door to keep us out.

I unclipped my personal shield and passed it to Ria. She had given up hers to save me, back on the surface. We were facing Thinkers; I was more resilient to their attacks than she was. She pushed my hand away.

“Take it. This isn’t a debate. It’s an order or command or whatever I have to say to make you take it,” I said, as commandingly as I could while trying to stay quiet.

She pursed her lips as if she was considering something for a moment and then took it.

“We all ready?” Gower asked, lining himself up in front of the door.

Ria powered up her shield, and crouched down in readiness, hood up and claws out. I pulled my gun, glancing at its screen; it was recharged again. I turned the power down from ‘oh shit’ to ‘kill it’ and put it back in its holster.

“Ready,” I said.

Gower put his hand on the door, and, with a tiny push of power, it exploded into the room beyond

The force he used had split the seal in the middle of the opening, wrenched the large steel blast plates from their housings, launching them inwards, ripping away a portion of the wall. The resulting hole was far larger than the original doorframe and kicked up enough dust that the room ahead of us took a few moments to come into focus.

It took me a fraction of a second longer than it should have to get my bearings; the inside of the room was so different from what I had expected.

From a column of light in the centre of the room came a spinning energy; something akin to a lightning storm, but with more power than any I had seen. The sense of motion was palpable and oppressive. The pure white, arena-sized room screamed with the thunder of the heavens themselves as the wind spun in front of us.

The blue tipped thorns of light licked at us like hungry tongues. Now I had my bearings, I grasped at the edge of the destroyed door frame to keep myself steady.

“What’s happening?” Ria called, recoiling from the lightning’s touch as her shield flashed blue and the wind of the storm bellowed around us.

“This is the ascension chamber. It shouldn’t be active. This shouldn’t be possible,” I yelled over the sounds of the maelstrom.

“There’s something in the eye!” Gower boomed.

Ria and I both stared in. There was something there, a silhouette, a form in the solid beam of light. She was there. Inside all the light, wind and electric screams. She was there, just like I hoped. We had found Libby’s avatar!



Gower flew forward, changing himself as he did. He got bigger but the extra mass was of an orange light that sparked around him, he leapt like an animal towards the centre of the room. As he did, the lightning followed him, adding blue tones to the orange glow he gave off. It cracked with power as it embraced him over and over.

I wondered briefly if this was the form that so many of his enemies had seen moments before their death. To see it with my own eyes finally was terrifying. The lightning was still following him.

I glanced at Ria; we ran in Gower’s wake towards the centre of the titanic room, hoping he was at least somewhat aware of us. The wake behind us was closing as we moved. It took all the power in my legs to keep me from being taken by the cyclone. Ria danced on all fours in a motion that I simply couldn’t track, but she kept ahead of the storm that closed behind us.

The form in the distance was large enough now for us to make out as Libby. She was rotating slowly against the direction of the storm. Naked and perfectly still in herself.

With a little help from Gower, our next step took us to within arm's reach of her. The electric in the air took form and began to grab at us now, like blue hands reaching out of it. Thinkers! Was this storm made of Thinkers? This was how they were generating enough power to activate the chamber; they *were* the power!

Ria's shield sparked as they touched her. She swiped back, out of instinct but between the motion of the storm and the ethereal nature of our attackers she simply hit air.

They grasped at me too. I had no shield, I felt my skin burn with their touch. I refused to acknowledge it. I knew that Ria would thrust her shield upon me at the first sign of my discomfort.

Gower on the other hand was fairing better than us. As they grabbed at him he pulled them out of the storm and threw them aside. He kept striding forward, closer and closer to Libby.

Something in my mind got enough focus to force me to wonder what all of this was in aid of. Why were they keeping her here in the ascension room like this?

This was where Aygah was born. What was the purpose? They weren't scanning her or trying to dissect her like I had expected. They were just keeping her there. Once they knew Gower had arrived what possible reason was there to fight. He could destroy them with a mere glance. There was no telling how many there were in the chamber, how many it took to generate the storm. It would take a lot to make the chamber activate and Libby was no threat to them. What were they up to?

Gower reached forward one final time and with a mighty orange energy covered hand, he ripped Libby from the centre beam of light and thrust her towards me.

I realised too late. My mind was too distracted to ask the right questions. I realised the moment that he put his hand into the light why they needed all this power. Why they needed this temple to be active.

It was never about Libby...

She was just the bait...

The white light shot through Gower and pulled him into it, his arms pinned to his side and he lifted into the air without so much as a grumble. The storm around us began to tighten inwards.

I pulled Libby in close to me and whispered the words which she always promised would wake her from any slumber... "I need you, my love."

Her eyes opened with a mechanical flick and cycled all the colours of the rainbow. This wasn't like the last time I woke her up, with a burning power conduit and a damaged avatar. This was simply deactivated. She booted up, emerald-green eyes and all, in only a second.

"My love!" she said with a hurried kiss.

Ria was as close as ever and didn't so much as question what had happened. Her shield was still sparking with blue but this time not under a barrage of attack but as fallout from what was happening in the storm behind us.

Libby got to her feet and quickly looked around the room. She was testing her systems and taking stock of what was around us. She was a beautiful sight, with her long blonde hair across her naked shoulders. Against the white light of the room, she looked like a perfect pure angel, though this wasn't the time to bask in her beauty.



Libby shoved me across the floor with all her might and I slid faster than I could have run. Ria was tossed just after me. Libby came running just a hair behind us and the storm gave a final scream of electrical power in a burning hot flash behind us.

We got back to our feet by the door to the chamber. I looked back. The massive white room was quiet now, but the storm was spinning around Gower like a cocoon. I couldn't make out his form in it, but I knew he was in there.

"Go!" Libby ordered.

We ran up the stairs as fast as we could. Frantic almost.

"What is happening?" Ria asked as we went.

"I'm honestly not sure, but there's more power in that one room than there is in most stars and its building towards something I do not like," Libby said.

We ran in silence now, Libby making sure to stay at the back. I think she was using her avatar's shield to cover our rear.

After what felt like a lifetime of running up the staircase, we came to the locked door on the ground level. We stopped to catch our proverbial breath. Or actual breath, in Ria's case.

Libby began assessing the door with an outstretched hand, scanning its structure. Ria unbuckled her cloak and placed it around Libby. Honestly, in all the commotion, the nudity of my wife was not high on my list of concerns, and I knew for certain that she wouldn't have given it a second thought.

"No time for modesty, little kitten," Libby said.

"If we must die, then we should do so with dignity," Ria snorted.

I couldn't help but think of a dozen things to say to punctuate the moment, but none of them seemed worth the energy. Basilica was too far away to rescue us, Gower was captured and there was a star's worth

of energy building up in the basement. We were, to use a very old descriptor, *fucked*.

Libby pressed her hand against the door and with a full hand of concussion energy, she blew it off its hinges and did so in a way that would have made Gower very proud.

# Chapter 36

# Salvation

Much like last time a door exploded in front of me, it took me a few moments to get a sense of what was beyond. It said a lot about my lifestyle that exploding doors were a thing I contended with a lot. In this case, twice in a single outing.

The world outside was the far edge of the mountain range basin that we arrived in. We were inside of a vast room cut into the mountain itself. There were windows to the open air intricately carved into the stone and two huge pillars at the end marking the open doorway. There were the remains of stone pews arranged to face the door. The remains of intricately carved figures were adorning the rock but time, wind and sand had eroded them over the millennia's they had waited.

“Gower couldn't find *this*?” I grumbled to myself.

A shadow passed in front of the opening before we even had time to take stock of the surroundings.

“Thinkers. Lots of Thinkers,” Libby yelled, taking a fighting stance.

I pulled my gun, Ria flicked out her claws; though without Gowers protection, I doubted we stood much of a chance against one Thinker, never mind a fighting force.

A form the size of an elephant burst through the opening; it knocked a chunk of the supporting pillar out of the way as it barged in. It was a roughly cobbled together form of boulders and smaller stones, most the size of my head.

“I didn’t know they could get that big!” Ria screamed as we scattered.

“They can’t. Not alone, that’s about twenty of them!” Libby said, stunned by the size of the monster.

Rather than running to the side, she ran directly at the stone beast. She was firing her arm-based blasters at its joints, keeping the bolts small and focussed. She was trying to break its control and make it a less effective form for its purpose.

The huge stone goliath swung its roughly shaped arm at us, destroying the old stone pew’s and taking another chunk out of the wall. Libby’s blasts must have unhinged something because a large chunk of its lower form fell away. I think it may have been acting as a knee because it fell forward and turned its attentions directly to her.

As it regained its composure and began trying to smash her into the ground, my own attention was drawn away from it. The knee piece that had fallen away was glowing with an electrical energy. It contained one of the Thinkers that allowed this form to manifest.

“Ria!” I shouted, pointing at the rock. She distanced herself from it as quickly as she could, but it was too late. The glow leapt from it and into her shield.

The energy buzzed around her for a moment, the shield held. It leapt again, this time at me.

It was different this time. Different now I knew what to expect; it wasn’t like the first time they had attacked me. I knew what it was like for a Thinker to try to take me. I also knew that it wouldn’t kill me, couldn’t kill me like it could so many others.

The surrounding fight faded into the background. I was aware of it, aware that I, that we, were in danger, but I had more pressing matters. The Thinker first charged my skin, all of it. A burning, designed to paralyse and disorient the victim.

I kept my focus. I did not panic or freeze like it expected.

The next step was for it to attack my brain stem. To sever my control over my body and begin to puppeteer me while it gained deeper control. This was my moment to fight back.

I summoned all the focus I had. It was blurring the signals between my brain and my body. I had to keep control. If it took me now, it would be able to go deeper into my brain.

It pushed my arms straight; I clenched my fists in defiance.

It jolted my body forward; I took a knee in stubborn refusal.

It took my vision from me; I forced my eyes back into focus.

In one final attempt at overcoming me, it dulled my mind and shocked my brain. I think this was the phase where most organics would be dead. I was made of stronger stuff though.

I was *Her* champion, and I would not be silenced.

I was *Her* champion and I still had things to do.

I was *Her* champion, and I had people who needed me.

I felt the moment my mind took dominance over the attacking Thinker and it recoiled in shock. It tried to leave me shooting its way out of my hand. I closed my fist again and refused to let it leave me. I was in control now. I could feel its fear, its panic. I couldn't hold it for more than a few seconds, but it was enough, enough for me to know that I could do it. I was looking forward to the next time a Thinker tried to take my body from me!

As the world came back into focus, I dodged a chunk of rock the size of my head and fell to my feet. My shoulder and arm were badly

burned and my hand was charred to the point of uselessness. It looked like a chunk of burned meat hanging from my crispy arm.

Ria caught me.

“You did it, you beat a Thinker!” she said in awe.

I grunted in recognition of her words, but between the pain in my body and the static that still filled my head, I was wondering how much of a victory it really was.

The rock monster was looking no worse for wear; Libby’s blasts were starting to show signs of weakening. They were less like the hits of tiny stars and more like fireworks now. She was expending a lot of energy to keep it busy. The thing knew it, too.

It moved itself until it began to back us into the corner of the room. Libby shot everything she had at it. It ignored her ever weakening blast. Ria hissed and growled but was ultimately powerless, and I could barely stand.

“My Love, I think we may be in trouble!” Libby said loudly over the sounds of the rocks stomping towards us, and her own fireworks.

She would have done the maths. Tested every escape angle possible in her mind and accounted for every possible act of chance. She still thought we were in trouble. This was not good.

I took a comfort in knowing that even though we would be crushed to death here, Libby would live on. I hoped she would find peace and have a good life without me.



Something had changed. In a moment, Libby went from desperate shooting of all of her reserves, to standing strong, she leaned forward, a shield lit in front of us, and the monstrous fists of rock bounced from us harmlessly.

I knew that this would be the last of her power reserves, but there was something in her stance that told me she was fighting for a chance now. What had changed?

She focused the shield down low in a dome over us. She snatched Ria's shield from her arm and pulled the power pack from it, while the rock swung at us again. Ria was happy to give it but was as confused as I.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"I need a few more seconds," she said as she dug her fingers into her wrist and pulled out a twisted pair of cables. She quickly attached them to the edges of the power supply as the fist came down again, this time held a little more solid by the shield.

"How many seconds?" I asked.

"Eight."

We huddled down as the dome Libby was generating got a little snugger to save precious energy. The fist struck again. The shield held.

"What happens in eight seconds?" Ria asked.

Libby didn't answer. The fist came down again, this time the shield flickered a little.

"Is that an engine?" I asked, suddenly aware of a sound that was out of place.

The rock monster turned to look out of the opening to the great temple as its head exploded. Our shield held as bits of it bounced off us.

The headless beast stumbled, I assumed, as it reorganised its internal energy, to regain control of the new form.

Whatever was attacking it fired again; it was split into sand as it moved to guard itself. The dust outside of the shield was creating a fog that we couldn't make anything out through. Libby stood, adjusting

the shield to cover us as we followed her lead. Ria supported me as I stood, only then realising quite how badly hurt I was.

As we stepped forward, a blue glow lit the dirty air and a puff of air pushed the dust aside.

As the dust cleared, there was our saviour. Thirteen was hovering just above the ground and the rear ramp was open for us, the engine pressure clearing the dust from the area as it edged closer to us.

We scrambled onto the ramp as the ship lifted. The moment the door closed, Libby dropped to her knees and appeared to pass out. I collapsed into a pain filled heap on the deck. As far as I could tell, Ria had fared better than any of us, but she was exhausted too. "We're alive!" she yelled triumphantly as the world faded to black for me.



# Chapter 37

## Understanding

I regained consciousness in the large living space on Thirteen. My burns had been bandaged and I could feel the cooling healing gel that had been applied to my skin. I was aware that my synthetic arm was exposed. I could see its workings. The arm was bandaged above my elbow though.

Ria sat on the floor next to the sofa I was lying on.

“Are we safe?” I asked.

“You’re awake!” she exclaimed.

“Are you well? Do you need more medicine?” she asked frantically.

“I’ll live. What happened?”

Ria pressed a button on the coffee table. “He’s awake,” she said.

A few seconds later Libby came running in. She hugged me and kissed me with a passion I couldn’t match in my current state. My arm hurt, I didn’t complain.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Basilica left Thinker space as ordered. Lea hid in Thirteen, in the planet’s belt. She couldn’t get any closer without giving herself away. She was scanning the mountains waiting for us. She picked up my energy signature, all the shooting lit up her scanner, made us easy to

find. She came down, shot the Thinker construct and zipped out of there, so fast that they didn't have time to chase us down."

She kissed me again as she finished her story. She looked well. She was dressed in one of those Thirteen branded jump-suits she liked, and her hair was clean from dust.

"How long was I out for?"

"Just a couple of hours. We have had to go the long way back to Central space; they were guarding the Warp," Libby said, still embracing me.

The next thing on my agenda was food. I sat at the dining table and ate enough burgers and cheese steaks to feed a small army. Ria finally stopped delivering food when the ship's computer informed her that the selection was no longer available.

"It's out of burgers, but the screen says there are eighty pizzas in stock and about a hundred grilled cheese variations," Ria informed me.

"I think I'm okay for now. Depending on how I feel in a little while, I may come get something with a lot of sugar," I said. I enjoyed it when people understood my dietary requirements. I was a little concerned that Thirteen hadn't been re-stocked though. Depending on our route back, I did not want to have to resort to rations.



I entered the bridge and made my way directly to Lea's flight chair. I was wearing only some loose fitting trousers and no shoes. I was still too tender to bother with a shirt, besides, my bandages would need changing soon and my exposed synthetic arm always caught on shirts when it wasn't covered in the rubbery skin.

"Lea," I called to make sure I had her attention.

“Oh, you look like shit, Jon,” she replied with a grin.

I ignored her good-natured poking. I had something to say. “Lea, you saved me, us, again!”

She went to interrupt, I refused to let her and carried on talking. “You risked your own life to come save us and I want you to know... well... thank you, Lea. I would be dead without you, *again*.”

She smiled in that warm and beautiful way that could melt anyone’s heart. She was at her most beautiful when she smiled like that.

“Jon, I couldn’t let anything happen to you. The Followers would have lynched me!”

I leaned over her flight controls and hugged her. She was the best friend anyone could have, not only because she saved my life again, but because I absolutely knew that she never even considered herself when she risked everything to do it. In the last few weeks her world had been destroyed, she had been sucked into my mad adventure and she had been in mortal danger more times than I could count. Yet still she came for me without a second’s hesitation.

“Thank you, Lea,” I said again, before leaving the hug.

“Get off! Besides, Libby has spent the last two hours thanking me every two seconds too! I am fully thanked. Now let me fly my damned ship, we’re still not in the clear!”

Libby smiled at me from the weapons console. There was something *right* about being back on Thirteen with Lea. She was as close to a sister as either of us had, and we both loved her more than we could articulate. We were ashamed that we kept putting the people we loved in danger, but there was something special about knowing they would walk into the flames with you, never asking for anything in return.

“What did they do to you?” I asked as I sat at my usual station. Ria close by, as was becoming standard practice now.

"I'm not sure. I was only partially powered during it all. I don't think they scanned me for my frequency code. They didn't even try to download my database. But I do know there were about ten thousand unique Thinker energy signatures in that storm. That's how they built up so much energy. It was a lot of Thinkers," Libby said thoughtfully. There was something in that number that made my mind tingle.

"I don't understand why they didn't scan me, and why there was so little technology in that facility of theirs."

I had already figured out what had happened; I was surprised that it wasn't obvious to her at this point too.

"Libby, they never wanted your avatar," I said.

She raised her eyebrows at me.

"They needed you as bait. They had to get Gower in that room."

"What?" she asked, not following what had happened.

"That place, it was where Aygah's Coffin was stored while it powered up in the first iteration. It's a resonance chamber that focuses all energy into the centre. They put you into the centre, so that Gower had to step into it to get you out. Once he was in there, they closed the energy loop on him," I explained.

"But why? How?" she asked.

"Libby, they never wanted to use your signal to send their dampening field. They just wanted us to think they did. Their dampening field may be significant, but they have Gower now. They have the most powerful individual in the universe trapped in the one place in the whole of reality where they can use his power the way they want."

Libby went even whiter than she usually was. Lea was leaning over to look at us from her flight seat.

"Did we lose?" Ria asked.

"I don't know. I think maybe we did," I said, honestly not knowing.

“We’re coming up on the coordinates,” Lea said from the flight chair.

“Coordinates?” I asked, looking at the scanner.

No one needed to answer me. I saw a ship approaching on my screen. We were on the absolute edge of Thinker space, the edge furthest away from known space. There was only one ship that could travel those sorts of distances in the time we had been gone.

The sensors confirmed my assumption, as the ship’s identity was verified through its ID broadcast. Basilica had come to meet us.

A wave of relief must have shown across my face.

“It’s good to see her!” Libby said, in response to my expression.

“You won’t have to eat the rations!” Ria said, just as supportively.



Kay apologised for the fourth time that she didn’t have the right mix of regenerative gels to put a new layer of skin over my synthetic arm. I was far more interested in the things that she had done than those that she hadn’t. She had given me a lot of pain killers that would keep me feeling functional while my burned patches of skin re-grew over the next few days. The regenerating gel was helping a little too. The usual treatment of about a pint of Cure-all wouldn’t work for my Bio-static metabolism. My skin would heal, I could heal from anything eventually, it just hurt while it did.

She prescribed for me to focus my eating on meat proteins and fats for a few days. An easy order to follow.

One of the Followers had taken it upon themselves to have the arm of one of my spare jackets cut off and tailored. I was annoyed that I would need yet another jacket, but was also pleased the sleeve wouldn’t be catching on my arm every time I moved. The Followers didn’t seem

to be particularly distressed by my exposed synthetics, so I wasn't too concerned about Kay's lack of skin-goo availability.

"I think we should consider making some alterations to that arm of yours, Jon," Libby said as I cautiously stepped down from the medical bed I was sitting on.

"Shield, gun, food hatch and a personal Fold, would be a good start," I joked.

"Shield and a Circlet maybe possible," Libby said as she passed me a loose-fitting black t-shirt, with a lace up neck.

I cautiously pulled it over my head.

"Are you ever going to wear shoes again?" Libby asked.

"Not if I can help it," I replied, looking down at my exposed toes and charred feet. The truth was, my ankles were as electrically burned as the rest of me and it was less painful to be barefoot than the other options for now.

"You know, if you weren't Bio-static, you would be very dead," Kay said, making sure I knew how lucky I was to be *just* burned.

"If I weren't Bio-static, I would have been dead long before this, so it's an irrelevant point, really."

Kay nodded in agreement. "Come back tomorrow. I want to change those bandages and top up the painkillers."

I nodded in agreement, cautiously putting on my jacket. My synthetic arm was a metallic red with silver bolts and pistons, the many densely packed wires in there were a grim-looking nest of reds and blacks with a glowing power cord illuminating it from the back.

Kay's assistants were scanning me one last time. I saw the quiet one, Mitch, looking at my arm with a lot of interest. He glanced at Leon and pointed at it; he made a face of confusion. "Mitch wants to know how your arm is powered," Leon said.

“Show respect to *Her* champion!” Ria said in my defence. I think her claws may have slid out in reflex. I patted her on the shoulder.

“Ria, people are welcome to talk to me. Stop taking this title so seriously!” I said, knowing that everyone here actually took my imposed titles very seriously indeed.

“From what I understand, it’s plumbed into my bloodstream; it takes energy from my body.”

“Doesn’t that exhaust you?” he asked.

“It would, it should. My biology accounts for it, no one knows how that bit works but it seems to predate my Bio-stasis.”

Kay rolled her eyes at me. “Ignore him guys, I’ll show you the science later. It’s very well documented. He just doesn’t care enough to read it!”

“They’re waiting for us on the bridge,” Libby said, taking my synthetic hand in hers. Most people were a little creeped out by the metal bones and wires, but to her, it was just more *me*. It was another reason I loved her.

# Chapter 38

## Remorse

I was the last to arrive in the large conference room that was attached to the bridge. I hadn't even known it was there before that moment, which accounted for me being the last to arrive, I suppose.

There was a seat left free for me at the head of the table. If the implication was that I would be in charge, then everyone there would be disappointed. I would defer to Ba'an's judgement on all things. I had made enough mistakes today.

I took my seat. One side of the table sat Libby, Lea, Ba'an and Kay. On the other side was David, Ria, Alin, and the young man, who was usually at the communication station on the bridge. There were various, highly regarded Followers standing at the edges of the room. It was feeling quite overcrowded in there.

They all looked at me as if waiting for me to start the meeting. Libby held my hand. Well, no sense delaying it, I considered.

"They have Gower. They wanted Gower all along. We walked right into their trap."

Everyone nodded and there was a relieved sigh from the Followers side of the table. I wondered if they were expecting me to assign some blame to them or possibly deny my own failing.



Ba'an leaned forward to grab the attention. He was a master at taking control of these kinds of meetings. "Okay, we know what went wrong. Now what do we do? What are our options?"

David murmured something; eyes moved to him. "We have to understand why they went to such lengths to get Gower. What will they do now?"

Eyes back to me. "Well, they have the resonance chamber, enough energy to produce an ascension field, and a Blade who is powerful enough to use it. They have everything they need to make a god; except a device to manage the calculations."

"Jon, what does this device have to do?" Libby asked. She knew full well what was needed. She asked to prompt me to illuminate those in the room that didn't know.

"They need a device to calculate temporal variances, something that can interpret changes in the flow of time and space. The technology wasn't invented in this iteration. There's only one such computer in existence and its location is only stored in one place," I said thoughtfully.

"That's not entirely true," Libby said.

"What?" I asked.

"I know who knows the location, and I have a pretty good idea where he would have stored it," she said apologetically.

"How? I never told even you."

She shrugged. "I knew you had the device, and my mind wanders a lot. I know exactly how you would have hidden it. As soon as I realised you hadn't mentioned it, I worked it out."

"And this information would have been in the avatar they kidnapped?"

Her eyes went wide. "Yeah, I think it may have been."

This wasn't good. This changed things. "Libby, I need to know what you *think* you know. If you happen to be right, then that's a problem."

She looked around sheepishly. "You gave it to Dex, told him to secure it and not tell you where unless you directly asked. You don't know, but you know how to know. That's what I expect you did."

She was exactly right. I knew the answer to my next question would only make things worse. "You have a pretty good guess as to what Dex did with it, I assume?"

"Yes, well, five or six locations, I suppose."

We had a choice now; did we guard the artifact or try to rescue Gower. I didn't want to leave my old friend in the hands of our enemy, but if they got the device to him and actually took control of his body, then, well, that could be universe endingly bad.

I spent a few seconds considering our options, our resources and our stakes. Everyone was watching me as I rubbed my chin and thought about the problem.

"David, any insight?" I asked, knowing that he always had a little extra knowledge that he rarely offered.

"None that will make this easier, I'm sorry," he said, this time not pretending he didn't have secrets.

"I need a better defence against Thinker attacks," I said to the room.

To my surprise it was Kay who had an answer for me. "Alin and I have been working on some options, mixing Blue and Red energy, it's better than what you have now. It seems like the opposing fields can repel basically anything."

Alin, the stocky engineer sat up straight in his seat. "With the data Libby has on the way the Thinkers attack, I think we can make a very effective personal shield. And, Jon, if it's not too presumptuous of me, I think we have some things aboard that could fix up that arm of yours

too,” he said, bowing in his seat and taking special care as to how he worded things. I was sick of this aura of worship.

“Alin, actually all of you Followers,” I said loudly, as if commanding, finally. “Stop being so damned pious! I would think it’s obvious by now that I don’t want your worship, I want your skills!” I held myself back from a borderline anti-Aygah rant.

“As you wish,” Alin said with an appreciative nod. “Come down to engineering, I’ll take some scans, and I’ll fix you up.”

“Understood,” I said with a forced smile.

“Anyone else have an edge to give us?” I asked, looking around.

“I have a pretty good idea about how this ship is supposed to fly now. Its engines can be cycled in a way that gives us instant acceleration. I think I understand how it’s supposed to be used in combat... if that helps at all,” Lea said, with a shrug. I had never doubted her piloting skills, no one had. She was good to the point of legendary. But if she was confident now, that added to my faith in her.

I thought about what people had said, and what I knew about our resources and problems.

“Set course for Central, maximum speed,” I ordered, as if I were suddenly in command. No one objected. Everyone filtered out of the room with purpose. Ba’an and Libby remained.

“Why didn’t you just destroy it?” Ba’an asked, the moment the last person had left.

“The Coffin? I had my reasons,” I lied. There were no reasons for me to keep it. I just couldn’t bring myself to destroy the last remnant of the first iteration. The Coffin was more than a device to me. It was more than a dangerous artefact of a forgotten time. To me, it was the last little shard of proof that my first life even happened. The last bit of evidence that the first iteration happened at all, and it seemed somehow too important to destroy. This was a selfish mistake.



The bridge was silent, as we flew through the periphery of known space at speeds that no other ship could come close to. This trip would take months, but for Basilica it was little more than a few hours at maximum speed. Warps were almost pointless for this ship, and being able to fly whatever route we wanted kept watchful eyes from tracking us.

I stood at the command rail, leaning back and watching all the numbers move around as the ship reported its status to the captain. David stood next to me, paying slightly less attention to the screen than me.

Now that Libby had control of the ship's computer, there was little to be concerned about. Unlike last time I looked at this screen, there were no red lines or warning lights. The engine synchronisation was being adjusted almost instantaneously.

"David, do you have a gun on you?" I asked.

He gave me a glare of concern. "What's wrong with yours?"

"I need a Red energy one, mine is from Thirteen, so Blue."

He passed me his sidearm.

All eyes were on me, including Libby's. I set the gun to the smallest bolt it could muster and set the energy as high as I dared.

I pretended not to notice the looks of concern from those around me. Libby who was standing at the sensors panel, made a motion like she was going to come over to me, then stopped herself. She knew what I was going to do; her lack of interference was the endorsement I needed to go through with it.

Without allowing myself a moment of hesitation, I pressed the tip of the gun into my synthetic wrist.

“Libby to engineering: please prepare for a visit. I think Jon is ready for your services.”

I smiled at her foresight and pulled the trigger. The shell of the arm took the brunt of the blast with ease. This was a hardy metal, but the circuitry and wiring was blown right out of the back and into a melted splattering on the floor. The sound wasn't as loud as I had expected, but the smell of burning circuitry and rubber was pungent.

“What did you do?” asked a startled Ria, who was oddly entertained by my sudden act of destruction.

The sensation in the arm wasn't quite pain, but it was a misfiring of things my brain expected to be there that caused a sensation close to a cramp in my upper arm.

“Okay Jon; engineering, then sick bay,” Libby said without judgment.

“What happened?” Ria asked again.

I cradled my destroyed arm in the other and ignored her question. As everyone on the bridge looked at me with shock.

“He removed the key. Now, even if they find the Coffin, they can't activate it,” Ba'an explained on my behalf as Libby and I left the bridge.



I sat at the conference table, arm in a sling. The new internals wouldn't be ready for an hour yet.

We were finally in range for real-time communication, though only for government channels. I patched my Cirlet into the communication unit built into the conference table and pressed the priority channel for Joanne. The Cirlet address that told her I needed to talk right now.

Her face appeared as a projection above the table a few seconds after I pressed the button. Basilica was fast and Libby had promised to make sure the conversation didn't get interrupted by manually switching relays as we travelled closer to them.

"God damn! Dad, what happened to you? You look like hell!" Jo exclaimed as I came into focus for her. I was still bandaged, pale, and my arm was in a sling. I must have looked pretty bad to her, especially over a low-quality video stream like this.

"It's been a busy day. Jo, last time we spoke, we weren't seeing eye to eye still."

She made a noise of recognition. "Dad, I have my reasons for the way..."

"It doesn't matter," I interrupted. "You were right."

She was too classy to say, *I told you so*, but the silence made sure I knew it.

"Jo, we... they have Gower."

She glared at me. This was literally the very thing she was worried about from the start.

"What do you mean they 'have Gower'?"

I told her about how we retrieved Libby's avatar, how we were wrong to think they wanted it to propagate the dampening field. She never said a word, never interrupted, and never let her poker-face slip. She was stoic as she listened.

I told her about how the chamber was left over from the first iteration, how it was designed to funnel an infinite amount of energy into one spot. How they had used it to create a trap for Gower.

"Can they take control of him?" she finally asked.

"Yes. He's powerful, but they have him literally tied down. He can't fight off an entire race. Eventually they'll get into him. Though they may not need to."

She looked at me, silently demanding an explanation.

“It’s possible that they could just be within him when the energy gets high enough. It may be possible to ascend a Thinker or two along with him.”

“Does that mean what I think it means?” she asked with an undertone of concern.

“Jo, if they have the right type of computer, they could, I think, make something ball-park the same power-level as your mother.”

The holographic form of her flickered out of focus for a moment as she leaned back in her chair, and it had to refocus.

“You kept the Coffin, didn’t you?” she asked, knowing me well enough to know the answer already.

“Dex is the only one who knows its location. He has instructions to only ever tell me, and only in person. Though, we think there may be a small chance that they extracted a few tips regarding its location from Libby’s avatar.”

She nodded in recognition. “Dex was destroyed though.”

“Not exactly,” I admitted.

“I fucking knew it!”

“He’s in the basement of our building on Central. We’ll be there in a couple of hours, at most.”

“I’ll talk to the Central government, our relations are tense, but I’ll have Dex secured now,” she said, pressing buttons on her desk that were out of sight.

“Tell them not to enter the building. The automated security in the basement has no remote deactivation. It’s substantial,” I lied. Libby’s core was down there. I had no intention of turning off the defences and letting government troops anywhere near her. I trusted Jo, even with our current feud, but I did not trust professional soldiers.

She gave me another glare. “If the Thinkers get the device, can they activate it?” she asked as a final fuckup-check.

“It can be activated internally but not externally. The key was in my arm. I destroyed it,” I said, lifting my sling a little to illustrate.

“Finally, a *good* decision!” she said before she ended the transmission.

That had gone slightly better than I had expected.

The room was a little too dark; it felt empty and hollow. Outside the window, space was zipping by at speeds that were unimaginable. It wasn't the calm space that I liked to look at when I needed to think.

“I take it you were watching?” I said to the ceiling.

Libby's projected avatar appeared in the chair next to me, with a distinct purple glow as it formed.

“Well, I can't *not* listen. I *am* this ship's computer now,” she said apologetically.

“I fucked up, didn't I?”

“Yeah, but I fucked up with you; we both thought Jo was being an ass. Just because she was right, it doesn't mean she wasn't an ass.”

I took some comfort in that, at least if the Thinkers steam rolled the whole of reality, I knew Libby was with me.



# Chapter 39

## Better

We were on one of Basilica's heavy shuttles and descending into Central's atmosphere with far more confidence than last time we used it. Now that Libby was in control of its computers, we had faith in the landing.

My new arm was itchy, even more so than the old one. I scratched at the point where it connected to my skin. Libby slapped my hand away. Because we didn't have any synthetic skin, Alin had put some plates into the frame to give it an armoured look. I quite liked it, for now.

We touched down on the roof of our building. There were Sol-force shuttles doing loops around it. The ground level had an actual tank outside, which concerned us. It was unusual to see Sol military on Central. Joanne had pulled some strings with the local government to make this happen.

The engines hadn't even cut off when the communication system lit up.

"It's the Sol commander," David said with a raised eyebrow.

The three of us exchanged loaded glances while we waited for the engines to shut down.

As soon as they did, we had no excuses left; David pressed the button.

“Basilica shuttle, this is Major Richard Johnson of Sol command. Please deactivate your building’s defences and allow us entry.”

We exchanged loaded glances for a moment. Someone needed to reply, and I had no intention of making any more poor decisions.

“I absolutely refuse to talk to someone named Dick Johnson,” David said with a shrug.

“It’s *your* building,” I said to Libby, gesturing to the communication console.

She shot me an annoyed look and pressed the answer button.

“Hello Major, this is Libby Michaels. Give us a little time to interface with the local systems and we’ll get you in as soon as we can,” she lied.

Our building had the kinds of defences that could keep them out basically forever. We had our own power and shields. We also had far more guns than they could be able to detect. There was no way we were going to allow Sol forces into our home, even if they were supposed to be there for our protection.

Thankfully, Central’s local laws were clear on this matter. We owned it, so we didn’t have to let them in unless we wanted to. The only people who could demand entry was Central’s own government. They were known for being reluctant to get involved in, well, anything. Given that this was Ba’an’s registered place of residence, as well as very recently, a registered religious facility, thanks to our Follower friends, it was a politically hot potato which they would stay well clear of. No one would be coming in today.

There was no wind when we exited the shuttle. The Glass energy field was invisibly covering the roof for a few meters in every direction.

Not something that Libby would usually activate, but we didn't want David suffocating or freezing to death.

The buildings shield would fire up in the event that any of the Sol vehicles got too close. I assumed they had already figured out the exact range before we arrived. They were keeping a very calculated distance from us as their little ships looped around.

Even without the wind that the altitude would usually bring, I was nervous of the edge of the roof. I hadn't realised until that moment, but I think jumping down to a planet from orbit had left me with a fear of heights. An interesting little trick of my mind that I would need to tackle eventually.

I headed directly for the smoked glass area of the floor a few meters from the shuttle; it was the Fold platform that promised to get us somewhere less exposed.



We appeared in our apartment. The distinct pipe form and green holographic eye that was Doors was waiting for us. His arms were in the 'shotgun' configuration. We stepped off the Fold plate and Libby pressed a switch on the wall that disabled the rooftop panel entirely. Paranoia was becoming a superpower for her.

"Doors. How are you, old friend?" Libby asked.

"Very pleased to see you Elizabeth," he replied, as his hands appeared, hiding the shotgun barrels.

"Doctor Atkinson, Johnathan, welcome," he said in recognition of us.

"Thank you for keeping the door locked!" I said, shaking his hand in thanks.

He seemed to nod in his own rigid way. It really was good to have him protecting our home. Even without all the shields, guns and whatever else Libby had fitted, an Elven destroyer in your lobby would make *any* potential invader think twice.

Libby was bringing Doors up to speed on recent events. I looked out of our massive window. The Sol ships were circling still, slowly. I assumed they were scanning the building as they went by. I knew that the window was mirrored from the outside. Libby was paranoid enough that I also assumed it was shielded against scans.

“They *are* supposed to be on our side. Have we forgotten that?” David asked.

“Dex, and my lab down there contain all the information that I have ever found about the things before ‘The Event’ that created reality. It’s literally the only backup of the changes that were made. I wouldn’t allow military boots in there for any reason.”

“I didn’t realise!” David replied. “I thought you kept all this on Mercia.”

“That’s what they think too,” I said with a coy smile. “Also,” I added, “Libby’s core is down there. I would rather not have her location become a matter of government record.”

David nodded in realisation. “And they think she’s on Mercia too, do they?”

“What they think is none of my business,” I shrugged, knowing full well that as far as anyone knew, Libby’s core was still on Mercia, helping with ship operations.

“Jon, we don’t have long. Go talk to Dex,” Libby instructed.

“Come on David, I’ll show you around.”



We arrived in my basement lab. It was looking far more organised now. I was surprised that Dex wasn't just standing in the corner waiting for me. He was arranging a large stack of books on the far side of the room.

The room itself wasn't too dissimilar from the layout I had come to use on Mercia. There was a large horseshoe desk at standing height in the middle of the room with floating screens and an armchair off to one side. The walls were covered in a selection of tablets and books. A lot looked new. I had left instructions for Dex to populate the place with things he thought we would need; apparently, to him, that meant physical backups of data. He knew best, so I was sure I would be happy with his organising.

David wandered around. I had already added him to the visitors list, so there was no chance that Dex would try to shoot him.

"Dex!" I called.

He turned around and put his books on the floor.

He was the same model of robot as Doors but it was hard not to instantly recognise the differences between them. Doors had personality and thoughts of his own. Dex was a tool. He answered questions and performed tasks. His floating head was a more common amber colour.

"Dex, I need the Device, the Coffin, I told you to hide. Where is it?"

"Are you quite sure you need this information, sir?"

I nodded and waved my hand for him to hurry up.

"You specifically entrusted me with this information to prevent it from being researched."

"Yes, I know. But I need to destroy it."

He looked at me blankly, as he was prone to do. This would be a result of him reconciling my direct request now, with my specific orders from a few months ago. He would be making sure that he did not counter anything pre-arranged.

“Dex. Where is it?” I demanded when I decided he had gone on too long.

I saw Dex look at David and then back at me.

“It’s fine. He’s one of the good guys.”

“Sir. The Device is located on Earth, in the archive vault of the Victoria University Library. I will transfer the access codes to your Circlet,” he said, gesturing to my wrist.

“Earth!” I exclaimed with annoyance.

“Sir, the library is a secure facility that already stores items for Libby Michaels as well as being protected by many alliance laws and would not be a target in the event of a war or direct attack on Earth.”

I waved my hand to silence him; Dex didn’t need to explain himself. An educational facility where Libby had top level board of director status was an excellent place to put it. He did well. I wouldn’t have thought to look there.

“Thank you, Dex. It was a good choice,” I said, feeling like I owed him some reassurance. He went back to his book stacking without another word.

David shot me a worried expression. I knew what he was thinking. We needed the Device removed from existence. Could we trust Sol alliance to make it happen, or would it be considered too precious to destroy?

The technology kept within it held the secrets to the fabric of reality itself. Technology that was from a school of science that was simply never invented in this iteration. Even if Jo was smart enough to order it atomised, would the team fulfil the order without scanning it? Would they just shoot it as ordered without checking?

Even a passing scan may reveal something that could one day result in the end of the universe. I didn’t enjoy thinking of knowledge, any knowledge as dangerous, but it was.

When I had thought that Blades themselves were entirely extinct, it was an interesting artefact I intended to study myself one day. Had I known that Gower still lived, I would have destroyed it the first time I had the chance. I found myself regretting that mistake. I should have made it a priority as soon as I knew about Gower.

“We need to talk to Jo,” I said, as I returned to the Fold platform.



“You have the location?” Libby asked.

“Earth, Victoria University Library,” I said.

“For fuck’s sake,” she replied with lament. Not only did she hate Earth, but the university library was where she was *born*; not somewhere she had a lot of love for.

“The Major is trying to contact you again,” Doors said while looking into the air as he checked the building’s communication system via his link to it.

I flicked my wrist and activated my Cirplet. A moment later I was greeted by Jo, who answered with voice only.

“I have the location,” I said, skipping the greeting.

“Give it to Major Johnson and we’ll take care of it,” she said sternly.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Last time I trusted a military person that you sent, he turned out to be a cross-iteration space nazi,” I said, with far more sincerity than the sentence deserved.

“I had a feeling you would say that. Wait there, I’m on my way.”

She closed the communication.

The Major stopped trying to get us to answer him, but the Sol ships did not stop circling us, and the tank was still out front.

We sat on our red sofa in silence for a few minutes before I couldn't take the waiting anymore. I went to the food hatch in the kitchen and came back with a large plate of ugly food.

Libby raised an eyebrow at me but didn't say anything.

"Is that horse-spider?" David asked.

"And chilli," I replied with a full mouth.

He looked a little disgusted, which was for the best as it was deadly to humans. The truth was, the uglier the food the better it usually tasted; something I had come to realise a long time ago.

"She's here," Libby said. "She just landed in a shuttle out front. Mercia is in orbit."

The Fold lit up a moment later and Jo walked in, in full body armour and carrying her favourite overpowered rifle. She was alone, which pleased me.

As soon as she was happy that there were no surprises in the room, she lowered her rifle and her body language signalled that she had relaxed.

"Dad, Libby, I'm sorry," she said as she hugged us both and nodded a greeting to David, who was tactfully staying on the periphery of the room.

"Sorry for what?" Libby asked.

"I never should have let us get to where it feels we're not on the same side!"

I told her I didn't think it was her fault, and that I had made some poor decisions of my own that hadn't helped.

Even as I was saying this, I knew Libby was scanning her, to make sure she wasn't being controlled by a Thinker. We knew it was very unlikely. I had a feeling Jo knew.



“I think you’re right. This could be too important to risk someone else getting involved. Tell me where it is. I’ll go there personally and destroy it. No one will even know until it’s done,” she said.

Libby gave me a supporting nod, and I knew we agreed.

“It’s in a storage unit at the Victoria University library,” I looked at my Circler and flicked the unit number and access code over to hers.

“I literally just came from Earth!” she grumbled.

I shrugged. I would never have told her over a communication link anyway.

“I’m going to take care of the Coffin. I know you have to go back for your friend, and I know that your ugly red ship is faster than anything we have.”

“You understand why?” I asked.

She nodded. “I was an idiot to think of him as anything other than a refugee. It wasn’t right. Go do what you have to. I’ll send some large war ships after you, with instructions to defer to you and your team,” she said.

“Thank you!” I replied, feeling better knowing that actual war ships would be on their way. We only had to start the rescue. The Sol fleet would finish the job.

“Dad, send me the scans of the planet and where they are holding Gower. If you fail, and my ships get there. I’ll have to destroy the location from orbit.”

“I understand.”

Libby gave me another of her supportive nods. I felt like we were all on the same side again and it felt right to me, to all of us.

Jo hugged us again and left as quickly as she had arrived.

After a few moments, Libby confirmed that Jo was airborne.

# Chapter 40

## Phoenix

We entered the bridge of Basilica, the crew stood to attention.

“We seem to have two Sol cruisers monitoring us,” Lea called from the flight chair, in place of a greeting.

“Don’t worry, Sol won’t be a problem. The president and I are pals again,” I joked as I looked at our status screen. We were as ready as we would ever be. Ba’an looked at me nervously but didn’t say a word.

“You ready to do some fancy flying in this thing?” I called over to Lea.

“Always!”

I gave a nod to David who pressed the ship-wide communication button and made his announcement. “Attention Followers. We are about to return to Thinker space in hopes of saving the life of an ally of Aygah. This is not a mission that I can say is going to go smoothly. If anyone would like to leave the ship before we depart, be in the shuttle dock in twenty minutes. No one will think less of you for it. *In Her we trust.*”

“That goes for all of you too,” I said to the bridge crew, making sure I locked eyes with Ba’an.

They remained silent.

Lea stood up from her flight chair, “Jon, no one is going to be leaving. Other than, me, Kay and Ba’an everyone on board is a Follower and Followers are heroes. Let’s go shoot at some Thinkers.”

The change in the way we all thought about Followers was astonishing. Just a little while ago we considered them a cult, and David as some kind of charlatan. Now we all recognised them as heroes and friends; we respected their resolve.

“We gave them twenty minutes to decide. We honour that. Let’s go get a drink while we wait.”



I finished my third Elix, everyone else their coffee. Ba’an informed me it was time. The conference room was silent.

I looked to Libby, who was omnipresent on this ship.

“It’s empty,” she said with a knowing smile.

“Okay, start the system tests and ready the engine. I have a quick stop to make before we get underway.”

I left the room and headed for the medical bay.

As the elevator travelled, I thought about how terrified I was for all the people on the ship. I knew what I was doing. I *knew* I was stupid and reckless. I had hoped the shuttle dock would be filled with smart people wanting to leave. Instead, I was responsible for all of them now that they had chosen to trust me.

The doors opened. I walked a little way up the corridor into the medical bay.

“Kay!” I yelled as I entered.

She was already coming out of the little office by the time I finished saying her name.

“Get out of here,” I said. “You don’t need to put yourself at risk like this. Go back to Central, be safe.”

“I know what I’ve signed up for. The trainees are good, but you all are going to need a good doctor more than the whole of Central does.”

Leon and Mitch appeared from the office just behind her. They had the good sense to stay out of things and scurried out the door.

“You don’t like combat; you have no training for it, and you owe us nothing. Go be safe granddaughter.”

She put her hands on her hips in defiance. “Grandfather, I live in the same reality as you. If it’s destroyed, it won’t matter which planet I happen to be on when it happens. I know the stakes. Stop being chivalrous and get back to the bridge where you can do some good.”

I was impressed with her resolve. “Reality isn’t at risk. Your mother is on the way to Earth now to destroy the Coffin. This is about saving Gower.”

She raised an eyebrow and made a shooing motion towards the door. “Great, but nothing changed. Go do your job and leave me to prep for mine.”

I hugged her. “I’m proud of you, doctor.”

“And I’m proud of this family. Now go!”



The bridge was a hive of activity when I arrived there. I had only been gone for a few minutes, but somehow it had changed from a pensive atmosphere to an organised hive of motion. The mood was one of preparedness and purpose. There was even some Brick pop music playing from a little speaker on the communication console.

Lea was on her back under the flight chair, tinkering with the control interface, Ba’an knelt next to her, handing her tools. They were still

getting along wonderfully, even amid all this stress; maybe because of it, I wondered.

David was standing at the sensor station with a small group of Followers. He was going over the emergency controls, making sure that everyone knew how to activate fire-management systems and localised shields.

Libby was at the back, also giving a group of people an impromptu training session. I listened. They were being told about power management and which systems were priority to keep her ship-board avatar in action during battle.

Ria, had, at some point, appeared next to me. “You ready for action, kid?” I asked.

She shrugged at me. “I’m not much use on the ship. Unless we get boarded. Until then, I just look after you.”

“Well, I appreciate it, and thank you,” I said.

She purred in response and stood a little closer, as was the feline way.

“We all ready?” I asked loudly, waving my hand to bring up the command window. Everything was in the green, perhaps for the first time since I had come aboard.

Lea mounted her flight chair. Ba’an stood tall and surveyed the room. David came to stand next to me. Libby sent her students off to do whatever they did.

“Ready,” Ba’an said with a nod and a rare twitch of one of his wings.

“Lea, let’s see how fast we can really go, shall we?”

The view screen in front of us went from static stars to thin white lines. We knew the Warp was guarded; we needed to go the long way, but, in this ship, that was no challenge. The battle ships that Jo had promised would, no doubt go via the Warp, being better equipped to take on the blockade than we were.

The engine briefly roared and shook the ship before it found its sync point and dropped to a healthy rumble as we hit our maximum speed.

David brought up a view of the engine room on the command screen. “Nothing on fire for once, Alin?”

“Not yet,” he replied over the intercom.

“We’re not just flying in there, are we?” Ria asked.

“No. We have a plan. Sort of,” I said a nervously.

“We do?” David asked. He was messing with Ria; he knew full well what the plan was.

Basilica was going to use Lea’s fancy flying to do high-speed attack runs at the planet’s surface, where they were holding Gower. We would take potshots at anything orbital they had in place. The idea was to use the high speeds we had to cause confusion and mayhem until they were forced to activate their dampening field. At which point we would use Thirteen and go rescue Gower. While sporting our new personal shields. Easy.

Though, I had a feeling we were lying to ourselves on the quality of our plan. Still, it was something. And it was enough of a plan to make it seem like we were hoping for something more than blind luck.

# Chapter 41

## Strike

The QD-Drive was cut too close to the planet. We came to a dead stop with clouds around us. If anyone else was in the flight chair, I would have said it was a miracle that we weren't dead, but I had no doubt that Lea had planned this close stop.

“Fire main weapon,” Ba'an ordered.

I switched to an external view from the drones that circled the ship. The sight was amazing. We hung in the lower atmosphere, directly above the target. The encircled star shape that made up the back of the ship started rotating, venting just enough reverse thrust to keep us static. Lea must have been doing miracles in that chair to keep us so stable with planetary forces at play.

The tip of the great red ship sparkled and popped with energy as the cannon lit.

“They've seen us!” David shouted. “Activate Red-barrier and get ready for it!”

Some Thinker fighters were heading up from the planet directly towards us. This was not smart of them.

After a second more, the main cannon fired and the lights on the bridge dimmed just a little. The beam that came out if it was larger

than a military shuttle. It moved so fast that it looked like it had simply blinked on, rather than been projected.

The ship bobbed around on the video feed. I glanced up at the flight chair. Lea was fighting with one of her sticks and pulling all sorts of mysterious levers and dials to keep us as steady as she was able.

The other camera showed us a view of the ground. There was some debris falling. This would have been the fighters that were on their way to intercept us.

The facility below was lit under a neon blue dome. They had their shields online. We expected this. There was no way that a Blue energy barrier would hold for long against our Red energy attack.

“Orbital defences just got a lock on us. Cut the beam and go to phase two,” Ba’an instructed.

This was the structure that had emerged. Ba’an was in charge of the ship, David dealt with the people and it was all in service of my wishes. I felt useless, and somewhat guilty that I was at the centre of all this.

The main beam stopped firing. The ship spun on its axis. Pointing itself skyward. We accelerated using conventional propulsion.

“How long until we have QD-Drive again?” I asked.

“Twenty-five seconds,” Libby’s light-avatar said from behind me.

We started taking fire from two orbital guns: the planetary defences. We were low enough that we could only be targeted by a couple of them, and our shields were at least as impressive as our engines. We held our location.

The screen showed a chain of attacks hitting us before my external camera went off. No doubt the drone had been caught in the crossfire.

“Now,” Libby yelled. Lea didn’t waste a second. We were gone.

We dropped out of QD-Drive again a few seconds later at the Warp blockade, where there was fighting happening across the Warp itself. A rare sight. From the angle we approached from, the bolts of energy



were vanishing and appearing from nowhere. We had to stay parallel to the opening for the best vantage for attack.

“Fire secondary weapons,” Ba’an ordered. He wanted to leave at a moment’s notice. He didn’t want the downtime from firing the main cannon.

Our attack was devastating to the Thinker ships we hit. All their energy shielding was focused on the front as the attacks were all coming from the Warp. Our guns went right through their engines. We hit as many as we could before a few broke off and started targeting us. This was a fleet of ships, and we were one. Our only real advantage was speed and surprise. Once it wore off, we would be easy pickings.

“Cut weapons. Lea, get us out of here,” Ba’an directed.

And we were gone.

Appearing again in the planet’s atmosphere. This time a lot lower and off to the side from where we were before.

“Shields to the rear,” Libby requested, noticing the complete lack of forward attackers. They would not risk sending more fighters directly up at us again.

The main weapon fired. We felt the jolt and the lights again dimmed. This time though, the neon blue dome below was a little less vibrant. We may have got a lucky hit, or maybe they were out of power. Either way, it felt like a win.

After a few seconds, the sky above us went dark; what looked like a flock of birds came in. It was fighters from orbit.

Ba’an ordered the main weapon to stop and all power to be redirected to the Red-barrier. We knew our only option was to weather the attack.

The ship shook violently with the impacts of the energy bolts hitting us. The energy barrier would absorb a lot of it, but if enough

things hit the same spot, an occasional bolt would get through. The bridge was silent, briefly, before damage report's started coming in.

I looked at the status screen. They were focussing fire on our engine's which was fine. It was the most well-protected portion of the ship. Made sense, given that we were *mostly* engine.

"I'm getting casualty reports from the rear sections," a Follower said from the control panels behind me.

"Libby, can you see what you can do?" David asked. Her light-avatar nodded and vanished.

"Kay, prepare for injured," I said solemnly to his communication panel.

The engines came back on-line and a moment later, we were gone.

We knew we couldn't do the same attack patterns again. The plan had accounted for this.

Without hesitation, we appeared in the middle of the fleet blockading the Warp.

"Spin!" Ba'an ordered.

Lea spun the ship on its axis in seemingly random rotations, the secondary weapons all fired in straight lines outwards from us. It wasn't a smart attack, but it would cause everything to register enough hits that they would target us and, hopefully, fire.

"Multiple lock-on signals. There powering up," someone said. I had no idea who.

"Lea, whenever you're ready," Ba'an said.

I saw the sensor screen indicate that a few ships had fired and then we were gone. The hope was that the massive volley they fired at us would hit their own fleet once we zipped out.

We were suddenly travelling at QD-speed again.

"Going to take me a second to get our bearings, random exits play havoc with navigation systems," Lea called.

“Damage?” Ba’an asked of David, now that we had a second to think.

“We got pretty torn up on our pylon section, but nothing critical to operations, five injured. Nothing serious, not yet.”

Ba’an looked relieved.

“Okay, I got a heading. Twenty seconds and we’re back at the planet. I’m going to drop us into a high-speed close vector. Someone, shoot those orbitals, we need a few minutes,” Lea informed us.

Something started beeping on the command screen. David pulled it into focus with a wave of his hand.

“Dampening signal. Okay Jon, Ria, do your thing,” David instructed, though, we were already entering the elevator by the time he finished.

The doors closed.

“This one really is suicide, you know that, right?” I asked, stoically.

“You trust in Libby. She’ll trust in you, and I’ll trust in *Her*. Maybe we get lucky,” Ria said, casually flicking her claws out to check them. Something I had seen her do before. It was unsettling how seamlessly this little furry woman switched to a stone-cold killer.



We sat down on the bridge of Thirteen as Libby piloted it out of the bay door with speed and precision that would make Lea proud. Though I had a feeling she was making sure she did, because she knew Lea would be watching the camera from the bridge.

The moment we passed through Basilica’s shield we went from smooth silence to a literal war zone. There were fighters everywhere, though they already seemed to be seeing the effects of their own dampening field.

They hadn't been expecting an assault on the planet and all their large ships were blockading the Warp. It was a double-edged sword for them; they had no real defence against their own dampening, but it was the only thing they could try to slow us down. I guessed it was meant to hold us while they got some big ships back from the blockade.

They couldn't use the technology at the Warp battle because it effected them too and they had a pretty good idea that Sol had at least some ships that were going to be a little resilient to it thanks to the scans we had given them. Deploying around their planet was smart though. I assumed it was coming from the orbital platforms and wouldn't be reaching the surface.

Libby rolled, dodged and *lucked* the ship through the oncoming barrage of fighters, and I considered their dampening some more. They were still prone to using AI fighters as their main attacking force. They never committed more than a few of themselves to anything.

Maybe they themselves were susceptible to the dampening field, being made from energy. Why else would they be so selective in their use of it? Was it a numbers game, perhaps?

It was a powerful weapon, but even its ultimate form was just a decoy, to allow them to take Gower. He was powerful, but their dampening field, coupled with Libby's infinite transmission range would have won the war in a single stroke for them.

I felt Thirteens wing get clipped by a fighter.

"I got us, don't worry!" Libby reassured from the flight chair.

I closed my eyes and wondered again about the Thinkers. Why was their plan so confusing? It would only make sense to act like this if...

We were clipped again, the ship made some unhealthy sounds, but we seemed to be in one piece.

The planned landing platform was close enough that I could see the stone doorway out of the window now.

“They are cutting it fine!” Ria said in frustration.

The flame-red beam of Basilica’s main gun lit the dome shield from above and it blinked off. The beam continued and hit the top of the mountain. A chunk of debris exploded into dust, igniting our own shield as the sudden sandstorm encompassed us. I felt Thirteen get pushed back by the force of the impact and the engine growled for a moment; Libby countered it, allowing the ship to glide closer to the ground.

“Good luck, my love!” Libby said with a glance back at me as Ria and I made our way to the cargo door. “Don’t die!”

Libby spun Thirteen around and tipped the nose up, firing its cannon at the fighters and launching skyward as Ria and I leapt from the back. The hope was that in all the energy discharging and direct attacking of the Thinker installation, they wouldn’t notice two little biologicals running around on the surface.

The fighters gave chase to Thirteen, which was bobbing and weaving and essentially being an annoying distraction for us. We ran to the stone entrance that we were so glad to have got away from the last time we were there.

As soon as we crossed into the large stone hall, the world seemed to go quiet; the sounds of lasers and engines were a muffled shadow compared to just a moment ago.

“They have a Coffin,” I said as we made our way to the door.

“What? how?” Ria said, shocked at my sudden revelation.

“The only reason they would possibly let Libby go and take Gower instead is if he was more useful. The only way he *is* more useful, is if they have a Coffin already, possibly mine. It would be a lot to give up for a *maybe*.”

“That makes sense, but Dex was the only one who knew where it was, wasn’t he?” Ria growled.

I shrugged. Something for me to figure out later. Either they had mine, or there was another. Either way, I was concerned.

I raised my Red-energy rifle and checked the screen, one hundred percent charged. No dampening. I checked my shield and my sidearm. All good. The shields had been hardened against the dampening and, I was told, would keep me safe from anything short of a ship’s main gun.

Ria had two sidearms but no rifle. She wasn’t very good with guns and had given up on rifles. For some reason she perceived smaller ones as more melee-like, which was a little bit of a leap, but, as we weren’t sure guns worked on Thinkers anyway, it wasn’t worth arguing about.

We approached the door to the installation. This was the part where our luck was all we had, and I was suddenly feeling very stupid for even trying this mad plan.

# Chapter 42

## Luck

We edged around the stone temple room, making sure they weren't waiting to ambush us.

"Remind me why we came alone," Ria said, trying to distract herself, relieving some of her growing tension.

"*I* came because I *have* to try and save Gower. We didn't bring anyone else because most of the people aboard Basilica are pacifist religious nuts," I replied, pointing my rifle towards the murky darkness.

"Uh, huh," she replied, pushing in front of me. Her species had better night vision than humans... apparently.

"And you came with me because you're insane and have a death wish, I assume," I said.

We both relaxed a little, realising the stone room was as empty as we first thought. Our Circlets showed that there were no nearby energy signatures.

"No. I came along because it is my religious mission to protect you. What I can't understand is why Libby didn't come. She is an outstanding warrior."

"Because someone competent has to fly Thirteen or we don't stand a chance of getting out of here."

We crept towards the large door that would let us into the main structure. The door had been repaired. I assumed whoever was inside knew we were coming. They hadn't done a very good job. They had essentially covered the hole in metal and cemented it in place.

"I am shocked that she let you start this fool's mission," Ria said, turning to eyeball me for a second.

"Libby and I have an agreement," I replied dismissively.

This was the truth. When it became apparent what sort of life Libby and I would end up leading, we made a pact. Neither of us would ever stop the other doing something they thought was important, regardless of consequences.

The reason was simple. If Libby stopped me going on this stupid quest of mine, and Gower died; I would always blame myself for not at least trying. Eventually, I may even blame her. Holding me back would be, in the long term, bad for us, for our relationship. Neither of us had to worry about growing old and death wouldn't touch us outside of our misadventures. If we were to live forever, together, we would need to keep our slates clean.

If she wanted to do some insane thing, I would support her without so much as a raised eyebrow. I would let the universe burn for her.

I wanted nothing more than to just be living the quiet life with Libby, forever, but neither of us could sit idly by while we could make a difference. We both needed to be involved with it. It was who we were, or who Ayyah had made us to be; I still wasn't sure about that last part.

We looked at the rough fitted, but sturdy covering to the doorway. "Bet you wish Libby was here *now!*" Ria quipped.

She was right, I did, but I *always* wished she was with me when I was without her. I searched my memory for an alternate way in. This facility was made to protect people from invaders and was home to a



dozen Blades once. No one back then considered a back door anything other than a security hole. *I wished I had Gower with us.*

“Ria, can I have one of your handguns, please?” I asked.

She shrugged and passed me one.

“I think we would need Thirteens main gun for this, not that little thing,” she said, scanning the doorway and getting nothing in return.

I considered the foolishness of my plan and set the gun to overload. I tossed it on the floor in front of the door and took a few steps back. I used the few seconds left to check my shield was still charged.

The gun exploded, as intended, with enough force to blow the blast doors out of the rock face. The door was sturdy, but the rock it was attached to was less sturdy. The blast caused fire, heat, and an incredible amount of dust. Our upgraded shields took it all without issue. We weren’t even pushed back by the explosion. I was pleased, we knew they worked at least.

“You think there’s a chance they didn’t hear that?” I asked.

Ria shook her feline head, she looked almost comically annoyed with me. She pulled her other gun out and flicked her Circlet away.

I shrugged and walked into the doorway, stepping over the fallen door, and watching my shield sparkle with alternating reds and blues as the hot dust hit it.

Ria followed behind.



“They’re here!” Ria said in an urgent tone, the moment we were in the corridor.

A spark of orange energy trailed across the floor towards me. I stood my ground, having faith in the shield. I had little choice; the shield *was* all I really had.

It sparked around my feet and zipped off through the wall. A moment later, I heard a sound from one of the doorways at the other end of the corridor.

“I think we may need to run,” I said calmly, before Ria and I burst into a sprint towards the stairs.

Sounds came from in front of us now.

“In here,” I yelled, pulling Ria with me into a side room. The room, like the rest of the complex, was empty and covered in dust. The Thinkers had put all of their resources into maintaining the ascension chamber.

Ria took stock of the room around us. “There’s no exit. This was not a good plan,” she chastised.

I really did have a plan.

The beast that came through the doorway was a combination of old metal parts and rusted scraps. It was tall; it had no head and only one arm, which was fashioned from a massive shard of metal. It looked like it was once a shuttle part.

Even though the form looked cobbled together, it was not slow or inelegant. It moved with the practiced grace of a Thinker that knew its body well.

Thinkers were immortal energy, they were too sure of themselves to have backup plans.

I had first learned this when a friend of mine, a Thinker named Omi had been killed. It could have been avoided if only Omi had planned ahead. I still blamed myself for that, but now wasn’t the time for regrets. Now was the time to use what I had learned.

I let the Thinker come right into the middle of the room. Backing up like I was scared until it was far enough from the door for me to act.

I fired my rifle in a shotgun style spread. It shredded the metal body with ease, reducing its mass as it moved.

Thinkers needed uninterrupted mass to house their core energy, their soul. If the form they occupied didn't have a single mass large enough to house them, then they had to leave or they would begin decaying. This is why they would always scurry off when they were in their energy form. It was only good for quick changes in location, controlled movements between host forms.

I shot again, and another piece came away. The orange light of the Thinker began to pool in its pointy arm. I shot again; the energy jumped towards me. This is how Thinkers always attacked. They would go for the closest mass they could find. In this case, that was me.

The shield I was wearing was not like other shields. It was a very complicated balancing-act of opposing energies. The elegant and efficient Blue energy that was the standard of this iteration and the raw, brutal Red energy from another time.

Alin's theory was that by oscillating the two at a similar frequency to the natural rhythm of Thinkers, we could interact with them in interesting ways.

The Thinker hit my shield with the intent to expend enough energy to pass through it and take over my body. The poor bastard had no way of knowing that even without a shield, they had tried this trick with me enough that I was getting immune to it.

The *really* sad thing was that Alin's theory was right. As it fought to pass through my shield, the Red energy had a strange side effect. Thanks to the device that was attached to my experimental shield, the Thinker wasn't a threat; the device converted its biological energy into power. The brutality of the system was not lost on me.

When a Thinker attacked me, the shield converted them into a power source. The more Thinkers that attacked in this way, the more power the shield had. I was a little sickened by the idea that I had become a Thinker hunting vampiric monster, but *they* started this, not me.

“Worked then?” Ria asked a second or so later as the shield’s glow faded. I shrugged; I wasn’t going to rejoice in the sick trap we had made.

“Don’t get overconfident. They can still hit us, shields don’t last forever, if they start pounding us with physics,” I said sternly.

We edged out of the doorway and within a moment another Thinker zipped across the ceiling and into Ria, she ignored it and kept walking. It took three or four more attacks before they got the idea. I didn’t blame them. The worst that would usually happen is that they would have to smash against someone’s shield for a little bit before it failed. With *our* shields they were trapped and converted to energy. It was a Thinker murder device, I hated how efficient it was.

“They stopped coming!” Ria said as we walked.

“Now it gets dangerous,” I said, knowing that they would be looking for enough material to create forms that could beat us to death.

Now the initial attack was over, we started heading up the stairs.

“The chamber, Gower, it’s down, not up,” she pointed out as if I was suddenly mad.

“Even if we can get past the Thinkers, there’s a lot of energy in there that these shields can’t absorb. We need to cut the power before we grab him.”

We made our way up the stairs, three floors, to where I knew there was a power linkage hatch.

“You remember all this layout?” Ria asked.

“Yeah, I helped build this place, the first time.”

“How long ago?” Ria asked reverently.

“I can remember hundreds of lifetimes between now and the one where we built this.”

Ria made an impressed noise that was a little too feline for me to interpret.

We were at the doorway to the floor, as with all the doorways in the complex, there was no door anymore. I took a deep breath and stepped through the gap.

“Shit!” I said aloud as I realised the scope of my problem.

The room in front of me was filled with Thinker forms. There were six that I could see. Not cobbled together monsters like we had seen earlier, but the elegant metallic bricks and balls that were more commonly used by the Thinkers of Central Prime.

I fired my rifle, still in shotgun spread, the Thinker I hit was blown to pieces. As I expected, the pieces almost instantly began rolling back towards each other.

One to the side of me reorganised themselves into a large baton and swung at me. I held my ground and my shield held too. It didn't do much more than make me stumble. I would need to thank Alin if I lived through this.

Two of them were trying to hit Ria. She was nimble enough to dodge their attacks and smart enough to do it in a way that made them smack each other.

She dropped down low and was moving in a more cat like way than I had seen before. This must have been her, finally, having to take a fight seriously.

I was hit again, this time from directly above as two thinkers had joined together to make a larger, troll-like form, from their little metallic cubes.

One had been silver and one black; when they joined I could see how they were splitting the work. One was legs and one was arms, I had expected them to mingle more freely. Now was not the time to make scientific notes, I reminded myself as my shield flared up and I felt the downward force from the hit on the head. I loved shields, though all this kinetic force would be draining it fast. I needed to stop getting hit.

I run and rolled, not so much trying to avoid the hits as to cause chaos for the Thinkers. I took a moment to tap my Circlet which was pre-set to work as a two-way voice link between Ria and I.

“Ria?” I asked as I unsuccessfully tried to roll away from a coming smack.

“Yes, do you need me?” she panted, as if speaking directly into my ear.

“No. I need you to get them to hit the column in the centre of the room.”

She grunted in recognition of my request.

The reason I had headed to this floor, was that this would be the point in the cable where the top and bottom were fused together, meaning that it was at its weakest. The Thinkers obviously knew this too, which is why they were waiting for us.

With more rolling and diving I worked my way towards the centre of the room. A form waited for me, and from the size of the thing, I assumed three Thinkers had now joined. They had stopped trying to be humanoid.

It was a spiderlike, silver, and metallic-black predator. it skittered with practiced precision. I had lost sight of Ria, but that just meant she was working.

The spider scurried over to me. With its two front legs, it pressed me against the ground. They were figuring out how to fight my shield.

They couldn't hurt me, but they could hold me and wait for my shield to drain. The spider re-formed and covered me like a blanket. The rifle in my hand was pulled away from me as it covered my head.

The shield hissed and popped as it was forced to stay active the whole time. This was by far the best way to drain it. I wouldn't have long now. It was time to try the other thing that Alin had given me.

With a tensing of my forearm, my synthetic limb's new feature was activated. A concussion blast threw my captor from me. I stood up and tensed my arm again, blasting at it before it hit the ground.

I grabbed my rifle as I backed away. The arm was impressive, but Alin had told me that repeated use without a break could burn out its power converters. Rifles were known and tested. *I liked my rifle right now.* I twisted the dial on the side all the way towards me and fired. A single beam left its tip, I swept it across the room bisecting all the Thinker forms. I knew it wouldn't keep them down for more than a second or two, but it gave Ria the moment she needed to place her sidearm at the base of the red tinted stone pillar in the middle of the room. My weapon flashed; it was almost out of power.

Ria's gun exploded with a mighty force as the inside of the pillar was exposed. It glowed with the same Red energy as my rifle.

"How do we destroy the energy flow?" Ria asked in my ear.

"Cover me," I instructed as I ran towards the flow of light and energy. I had no idea that it was going to be Red energy. I should have realised this wasn't just a *version* of the base from the first iteration, this, somehow, *was* the same place. Aygah must have preserved it all. That was the only way that it could be channelling Red.

I was no engineer, not anymore, but back when this place was built, I knew a lot about the subject. Not a lot of that was readily available to my head right now, but I did know one thing. Blue energy and Red energy are natural enemies.

The cut down Thinkers were getting themselves together again. I sprinted for the hole. I pressed the buttons on the side of my shield generator and turned off its Red emitter. It was a standard Blue-shield now, there was no time for me to take it off. I leaped towards the red light.



# Chapter 43

## Boom

I entered the beam of Red energy. Honestly, I was half expecting to be atomised by it. I was a little surprised when I found myself still alive, though, the pain made it so I half wished it *had* killed me. My arm was quite literally on fire, where my shield generator had exploded, and the energy beam I had interfered with had tanned me to the point of crispy in the moment before it cut out.

I was now covered with burns and sliding down the central power conduit. I entered free-fall and all my pain seemed suddenly less important. I had left the opening at the top of the ascension chamber and was now savouring the few moments before my inevitable impact with the floor.

The room was oddly beautiful, it was awash with white light and the orange and blue of the Thinkers was thrashing around it like a tornado. In the centre directly below me there was a fast-expanding ring of darkness, as the power was exhausted.

While the Thinkers themselves were supplying a lot, it would only be a part of what they required to finish their task. I had *at least* slowed them down.

I hit the ground with a crack which told me that I would not be walking away from this one. One of my legs was broken and I think I had passed the damage up to my hip too. Thankfully, I had fallen on the side with the synthetic arm, so at least I had only broken my shoulder, and upper arm. My synthetic hand was fine. Little victories, I guess. The pain was the blinding sort that makes you feel like your brain isn't working properly. I think I screamed, but honestly, I have no idea. *I probably screamed.*

If I lost consciousness, it wasn't for long because I opened my eyes, trying my best to ignore the pain in my body as I saw the white wall of energy around me vanish as the power stopped coming.

I tried to look around, to see if I had been fast enough to save Gower. My neck sent a bolt of blinding white-hot furious pain into my back. I silently prayed that my Bio-static healing would at the very least take care of the pain sooner, rather than later.

I looked up. It was all I could do, for a little while at least. A red-blue streak of light appeared above as Ria emerged from the hole, far above me. A combination of her fully operational shield and her feline reflexes planted her next to me with impeccable grace. The floor under her cracked with the force of her landing as she came to a stop in a low cat-like crouch.

She looked at me with panicked eyes. "Jon, are you okay?" She asked frantically.

I tried to ask for painkillers from my hip pocket but coughed up a lot more blood than I had seen before.

Ria ignored everything around us as she dug through her pockets and found a medical bundle. She stabbed me with the pain killer needle that would automatically administer a dose. She looked at it, and then at me; she stabbed me with it twice more.

She then sprayed me with a green tinted mist that probably didn't work on my biology. I wasn't sure if it was going dark or if I was losing consciousness; all I could do was look up at Ria's frantic face.

I felt the wetness of her tears hit my cheek. She used the light on her Circllet to illuminate the darkness. I was a mess, but thanks to more painkillers than was probably healthy, I was able to think again. I cradled the ribs that I was only then learning were broken and spat up more blood.

"Is he here?" I asked Ria, who was far more capable of looking around.

"There is *something* here," she said as she pointed her light away from me.

"Show me," I said with another mouthful of coppery blood and pain.

She crouched next to me and pulled me up, resting me on her knees. There was long pulsing blue and purple light coming from a large pill-shaped device a few meters from me. They had it, the Coffin. It was charged, at least partially.

"Check its readout. Tell me the symbols on it."

Ria lay me down gently and, without argument, she went to check. "I don't know how to read these symbols. The screen has writing on it that's not Elder-Tongue," she yelled back to me.

"It's a language from the first iteration. It's called French. Just look for the numbers. It's a percentage."

There was a pensive silence before she came back to me. "Seventy-five," she said.

I closed my eyes, fighting through the numbed pain and through my memory. When we built it, we knew that it needed to be in the high eighties to activate on its own, a hundred for true ascension, for godhood.

I had a choice now. And I had very little time to decide. It couldn't be activated externally, not now that I had destroyed the key-chip in my arm. But whatever was inside might activate it, once it acclimatised to its new abilities. Seventy-five percent of the way to the kind of power that Aygah had was still beyond anything else in the galaxy.

If it was Gower, then at least I knew he was a good man, and even with all that power, I could trust him. If it were Gower's body and a Thinker in control, then that was a different story. Maybe the power would allow Gower to take back control. It would have taken a lot of them to burrow into his mind, to grind down his will. He was powerful in his own right. Maybe there was more than one, what would happen to them, would they have more powers too?

The pain was making it hard for me to think. The Coffin was a computer that was designed to augment the person, the Blade, inside. Permanently effecting their brain chemistry in ways that eventually led to, in Aygah's case, becoming a god. The more energy put in, the more powerful the Blade inside would become when it was done with its task. I had to think, what was I supposed to do?

Originally, the computer had instructions to hijack the power and make certain changes to reality. This time there were no instructions, it would be using all of its substantial compute to augment. I had assumed they would have started charging the device by now, but when we did it originally, it had taken months, not days.

I told myself the problem again. The pain was making my inner monologue ramble without focus. The problem: I had no idea what was inside. I knew it was Gower's body, but not whose mind.

The Coffin's colour rotation changed. Something was happening. I had even less time than I thought. I knew what needed to be done. I couldn't gamble the universe on one man, no matter who it was.

“Ria, I need you to point my arm at the coffin,” I said, knowing that until its final phase, I could still destroy it.

“Gower is inside!” she said, as if it was something I had forgotten.

I knew that Gower would not want to be used as a weapon. Above all else, he did not want the legacy of his people to be that of slaves to their creation. They were born to be weapons, but they had become more. Gower would rather die than be that again.

“I know. Aim my hand; I need to hit it on the underside.”

Ria looked at me in pure panic, “Jon, I don’t know how to aim like that!”

I had forgotten how bad she was at shooting. “Prop me up again,” I ordered.

A scream like that of a banshee came from the far end of the chamber and a bright orange light shone from the doorway.

“Now, Ria!” I said again, trying to make it sound like an order, but I just ended up sounding desperate.

She propped me up on her knees and gently pulled me around to face the device properly.

“What if it’s just him inside and they haven’t taken him over yet?” she asked.

“My arm is broken. Lift it, I’ll fire it,” I said without answering her question.

She did as I asked. I had to hold back a scream as she moved my broken body.

I waited until it was aimed at the bottom of the unit, where its life support circuitry was. I just needed to fire once at that section of plating, while it was powered, and it would stop maintaining the person inside. The unsheathed energy would burn Gower to death in moments; the energy let out by Gower dying with all that power inside

would explode outward and destroy this entire mountain, at least. I hoped Ria's shield would keep her safe.

The aim was good. I was lined up. "Hold it there," I asked. She did, perfectly still.

"What happens now?" she asked.

"Now, we hope," I said and tensed my muscle. The broken bone of my upper arm popped out through the skin. It was a strange sensation that felt exactly as bad as you would expect it to; I let out a scream. I kept tensing the arm, putting as much power as I could into that shot. Ria held it steady as a rock. The orange lights were coming fast towards us, still screaming.

My arm didn't fire. I tensed again. I knew how it worked, but it didn't fire. I hadn't burned it out; it didn't look damaged. It was hardy. The fall I had taken could damage me, but not the arm. The arm was fine. It was me who was damaged. The delicate balancing that allowed it to work must have been messed up in my body; the signals weren't getting through.

Ria pressed a button on her armband, extending her shield around me as the orange flow of Thinkers finally rained down upon us.

"We tried, we tried it all," she whispered into my ear.

We really had. She was right. The Thinkers were sacrificing themselves, trying to hurt us but only powering up our shield. We could basically sit there forever with no harm coming to us. Eventually, the Coffin would activate, or the Thinkers would just start hitting us with physical forms. Either way, we were witnesses now, nothing more.

"Perhaps Ayygah will hear us and come," Ria said, almost as a prayer.

"No," I coughed. "That's not how Gods work. She only did that once, to set her plan in motion," I said, realising that I may be dying. Maybe we did all go to the next iteration when we died, maybe the Followers were right. Then again, I was fighting hard to protect this

one. No, I was going to go wherever the old Gods wanted to take me. No more iterations.

The sound of the legion of Thinkers hitting the shield began to fade into the background for me.

Ria hugged me tightly. I think she snapped something in my back, but there was little point in me complaining now.

“Her plan doesn’t work if we all die!” she screamed into my ear as a new light filled the room.

I looked up, as best as I could. The Coffin was glowing and pulsing. It had begun to take on the strange, ethereal quality that I knew could only mean one thing.

The rain of Thinker attacks on our shield cleared and went back to spinning around the room.

I wondered what it was about this place that allowed them to exist without a host for so long. I assumed it was the way the room channelled energy, not allowing it to discharge, filtering it to the centre.

There was a pressure filling the air now, something oppressive and mighty, something I could feel inside my soul. This was not how it had felt when Aygah visited me, and certainly not the power of Gower; this was something dark. He was lost to us after all, I realised.

The room shook with a violent fury, and I heard yet another layer of sound upon us as glimpses of light came in from above. The domed top of the room was actually starting to crack with all the energy being expended in there. The room was never designed to house all these energy sources. It was built for one flow of power from the top.

The Thinkers had sabotaged themselves by attacking us. They had shorted something out in the room’s carefully balanced architecture.

I took my good hand, and despite a pain that I could feel in my broken body, I grabbed my own broken arm and pulled my other arm to point at the Coffin, I tensed again.

It fired!

It fired with all the power I had tried to push into it the first time.

The crack in the roof had broken the energy suppression effect and allowed me to fire. It wasn't me who was broken; it was the room keeping the power from leaving it.

The single white bolt of all the power in my arm left like a small sun. We watched, almost in slow motion, as every orange energy source in the room tried to follow it, to get in front of it. It sailed towards the Coffin, it wasn't an exact hit, but what it lacked in precision it more than made up for in moxie.

The white light went into the Coffin and as it did, the purple and blue veins, the circuits of the Coffin were replaced with the white power of the bolt. It was almost poetic timing; at the exact moment of its activation, it was destroyed.

The resulting explosion was something the likes of which I had not witnessed before. It first blew the top clean off the mountain, then travelled outwards, levelling everything it came across. Ria and I were thrown a quarter of a mile out from its point of origin. Ria stubbornly refused to let go of me as we sailed through the air. Her clever shield had instantly rearranged itself into an orb, once the floor beneath it had gone. We rolled and bounced around, but she never let go. I knew she wouldn't. It was her job to keep me safe, after all.

I lost consciousness as we came to a stop. The mushroom cloud left by the explosion actually made it out of the atmosphere and I remember seeing that everything around us was white and burning; yet the shield held.



# Chapter 44

## Not-dead

I woke up, this time, not in a hospital bed. I was on the floor, everything was still on fire. There wasn't much left to burn. Even I could feel the heat, which meant the shield had finally failed us. I felt Ria holding on to me, burying her head into my back and making a sound that could only be feline for pure terror.

I thought I could hear Libby's voice as everything went black again.

The next thing I knew, I was on the floor of the cargo bay on Thirteen, with all sorts of medical devices sticking out of me. Libby was crouched down next to me, working on keeping me alive, I assumed.

"For the love of God Ria, point it up and accelerate. How hard is that?" she screamed at the ceiling. I assumed the communication link was open.

I tried to say something but didn't manage to make any sense.

"What is it, my love? What are you trying to say?" she asked, both terrified and pleased that I wasn't dead yet.

"Go back... for Gower!" I said, in what I expected to be a scream, but came out as a whimper, a pleading.

"My love, there's nothing left to go back for! The blast levelled half of the planet. Most of Thirteen's systems were knocked out, and I

wasn't even in orbit when it went off. I don't even know how we're still flying."

The ship shook like mad, as if something was hitting us.

"Ria! We don't have any shields. Fly *around* the people shooting at us!"

It would have been funny if I weren't feeling like I was about to drop dead, and I mean that literally.

Some more pain killer was injected into me and Libby left my field of vision for a moment. She came back a second later with more medicine from the large pallet of supplies that we still had in the cargo bay. She started injecting me wildly, even I knew it was too much. I felt too close to passing out to ask what she was doing.

"You will not die today. I promise!" she said, kissing my forehead. "The ships remotes are down and Ria is a worse pilot than even you. I have to go save us."

She left me alone in the cargo bay. I heard her leave at a speed that was unusual for her to use. The speed that made clear she was not organic.

She had left the communication line to the bridge open. I could hear everything.

"How is he?" Ria asked. There was a sound of creaking leather that told me she was giving Libby her seat at the pilots chair.

"He's stable. I don't know for how long. We need to get him to Kay and these fighters are not helping!"

I heard the muffled sound of the main weapon firing. It rattled through the hull of the ship.

I felt a respite from the agony as the ludicrous amounts of painkillers I was on cycled around my system.

"Libby, are all of those fighters?" Ria asked in awe.

“Yeah, those...” there was a loaded silence. “Twenty or more battle cruisers coming into combat range in a few seconds!” Libby sounded terrified.

“I thought Jo was sending ships too?” Ria asked.

“I don’t know what happened out there, there are only three Sol ships on sensors.”

I sat up, my back wasn’t broken after all. That was good news. I looked at my shoulders. I was fucked. Bones hanging out and skin burned to a crisp, I looked down at my body. I was burned all over, the buckle on my belt had melted and I think it was fused with my skin.

Even I wondered how I was alive. I could see why Libby was so worried.

I lay back down. The pain was being suppressed, but my body was broken enough that I was going to be no use to anyone.

I fantasised about the time that I had been shot in the chest and Gower waved his hand. The pain went away; I was pissed about my jacket. I took some delirious pleasure in that memory. No one was coming to magic away the pain now, though. Gower was dead and he took with him whatever was left of the magic in the universe.

“Shit!” Libby screamed from the bridge.

“Is that...” Ria gasped.

“That’s more than twenty. That’s their whole fucking fleet.”

“Maybe they won’t see us?” Ria said with faux hope.

“Ria, they are all targeting us. All of them!”

There was a silence. At least when I was dead, I would most likely not be in as much discomfort.

I pulled myself over a meter or so towards the wall and leaned against a crate of something. I sighed, waiting for death, and coughed up yet more blood. I looked back, I had left a trail of red across the floor.

Libby would be okay; she would just sync another avatar back on Central. I felt a deep regret for Ria. She deserved better than this. But at least I had preserved this iteration. The universe would march on safely, even after my death.

I felt the ship sway, which was a sign of a very sudden correction in the engines.

“Shit! Shit! Shit! What the fuck, Basilica, you almost hit us!” Libby chastised; I assume to the communication link.

“You’re welcome Thirteen. Now get in the cargo bay!” I heard Ba’an’s voice growl.

It really was a nice gesture but there was no way Basilica could get past a whole fleet of Thinker battleships, cruisers and fighters. It was a last-ditch effort of desperation; I was sure of that.

“Understooooooooo....” Libby trailed off.

“What are those?” Ria asked.

“Holy shit!” Libby screamed. I felt the ship bounce around and the proximity alarm on the bridge screeched down the intercom.

A new voice crackled down from the speaker on the bridge. “Thirteen, this is Captain Curtis of Kingdom ship Mercia. We have you covered. Please dock with Basilica and leave the combat zone; we’ll take things from here.”

The emotion of the moment was enough to break me, tears flooded from me, I started laughing quietly to myself even though it only made my pain worse. Maybe I *wouldn’t* die today.



No sooner had Thirteens engines cut than Kay was running up the ramp towards me with her two assistants and enough equipment for an entire mobile hospital.

“Oh, my god, Jon, what happened to you?” she said as she came sliding to a halt next to me.

“Took a tumble!” I said, as I realised I was missing a tooth or two.

They expertly dragged me flat again and within a moment, I was on a medical bed that floated under its own power. I had expected to be whisked away to the medical bay, but I must have been too messed up for that. Kay started scanning me there and then.

“Guys, get me protein gel, bone regenerator and the new Cure-all I mixed,” Kay ordered in a cold, passionless tone that told me she was working.

“Jon, you shouldn’t even be conscious with all this damage. I’m going to put you out while we get you stable, okay?”

“Oh, that sounds nice,” I said, as the world went black around me.

I was vaguely aware of a flurry of foul language and movement for a few more seconds, and then the bliss of oblivion took me.



I woke up in the usual spot, looking at the ceiling of the medical bay. I couldn’t help but notice I was still in pain and the ship was being hit with something hard enough to make the lights flicker. There was a lot of noise around me.

I sat up. Most of me was bandaged and there were supports strapped to one of my legs and arm. The fact that Libby wasn’t sitting next to me told me we were still in danger. The three other beds were occupied; one bed had a sheet over the patient’s head. There were wounded coming in the doorway, being carried by more able-bodied people, who looked like hell.

I stood up, my leg creaked as I did, not a good sign, but at least the pain wasn’t enough to make me scream.

“What the fuck are you doing, Jon?” Kay yelled from the other side of the room. She was administering some treatment to a young woman with burns on her legs.

I ignored her question; she knew full well what I was doing. “How long?” I asked.

She looked back at her patient’s leg as she replied, resuming her scans. “About three hours. Burns are healing nicely. Your leg is mostly healed, your arm is a fucking mess though; that’ll take longer to heal.”

I appreciated the no nonsense update. She stopped treating her patient and flicked her Circlet open, “Ria, he’s awake, come get him.” She resumed working.

“Thanks Kay,” I said sincerely.

“Jon, I know better than to try to keep you here, but you *have* to come see me when we’re safe, okay?”

I grunted in agreement.

“Oh, Jon,” she began. “If Libby hadn’t got to you when she did, you would be dead. Actually, I don’t really understand why you’re not.”

I grunted again. My head hurt. I was also hungry enough for a small town. Which was a good sign.

I waited at the door while three more wounded people made their way in. The corridor was sparking with exposed electrical wires; the ship shook again. We were definitely in a fight. And if three hours had passed, it was a big fight.

Ria arrived at the doorway just as I left it. “Thank Aygah! You look alive again!” she said in reaction to the state I was in. I didn’t feel like I had a lot to be thankful for, but at least I could walk. Medical science was amazing, but I really wished Cure-all worked on me like it did everyone else. A normal human would be mostly healed by now. My body would heal, but it took a lot longer without it.

“Thank Kay, not Aygah!” I snapped as I waved her closer to support me. I put one arm around her to steady myself. “Libby’s not here, so we’re still in trouble?” I asked.

“Her ship avatar went off-line; she is in engineering manually managing the main gun. Do you want me to take you to her?” she asked earnestly.

“No! Bridge,” I barked. I felt bad issuing her with my requests so directly, but I didn’t feel up to pleasantries. She seemed to understand.

She guided me down the corridor and into the elevator at the end. She pressed the button for the bridge and leaned me against the wall.

“Ria, thank you. You saved me back there. Really, thank you,” I said. I owed her my life.

The elevator doors opened. “I protect you. It is my job,” she said as she took my arm and guided me onto the bridge.

# Chapter 45

## Genocide

All eyes hit me as I entered the bridge. There was not time for anything other than a nod of recognition.

Ba'an was shouting orders about targets that made no sense to me, not out of context. David was frantically waving his arms at the command screen; I couldn't see it from where I was. I gestured for Ria to help me over there.

I leaned against the rail. The screen came into focus for me. We had taken a lot of damage and our main gun was offline, I assume that this was the problem Libby was dealing with in engineering.

"I'm glad you're here for this," David said without taking his eyes off of the screen. "Both of you."

The current state of things was pretty easy to assess because it was so one sided. Mercia had arrived, drawing all the fire away from Basilica, taking on the entire Thinker fleet, all of it, on its own.

The enemy fleet had broken away from the battle at the Warp when I had detonated the Coffin. Mercia was a hell of a ship and there was little else out there that came close to it in terms of firepower and shields, but an entire fleet and planetary defences was more than even



it was able to handle all at once. I assumed that this was why Ba'an and David had chosen to stay and fight.

"Jon? Is that you, Jon?" Lea called from her flight chair. "I was told you were almost dead. Should you be walking around?"

I realised she couldn't see me from her chair, and there was no chance she was taking her eyes off her controls in the middle of combat. "Yeah, I'm totally healed, all good now, Brick!" I said, as cheery as I could muster.

David gave me a glare and threw in a raised eyebrow for free. I shrugged and hurt my arm in the process. David thinned his eyes at my obvious dishonest pain.

Mercia and Basilica were barely holding on, there were no less than forty ships in the fight. Basilica was being ignored by the large ships, but the fighters were swarming us.

"Why aren't we leaving? Didn't Ria tell you? We destroyed the coffin, the danger's gone," I asked David, who was still issuing orders frantically via the command interface, keeping people moving to the area's needed most while Libby's ship interface was offline.

"We asked them the same question. The president said she isn't taking any more losses and we're ending the war today," he then trailed off, shouting down the com-system for a fire control team at pylon two.

"Mercia can't win this on its own then, where's the rest of the fleet?"

He ignored me and ordered evacuation of the front area of the ship. There were three dots on the map that indicated a team was working there. It had just become an unshielded section. David was good at this. He knew where everyone was, and he was working hard to make sure they stayed alive. He was practiced and efficient.

A beeping from behind me told me that we were getting a communication from outside the ship.

“Keeper! The Sol president wants to talk to us,” said a young man leaning over the rail behind us. He was probably shocked that the president was on the line, never mind everything else that was going on.

“Put her through to my station, please,” I said, pulling up a communication window on the massive holographic screen. David’s end of the command window was thankfully unaffected by my tapping.

Jo appeared on my window; she was in the command chair of a Sol ship. “Hello daughter,” I said, thrilled to see her suited up for action.

“Dad! I’ve been trying to raise you on your Cirplet for an hour! Wait, what happened to you?” she said, leaning forward a little to get a better look at my sorry state.

“Fist fight with some Thinkers, jumped into a power conduit, Cirplet melted, fell a few hundred feet, killed an old friend,” I said, as both an admission of my own guilt, and as a sparse but accurate retelling of events.

“Oh, is it Monday already?” she joked. “We’re coming in hot. Make sure your ID is transmitting or you *will* get shot at. We’re not being careful!” she said and started to wave her hand to close the screen. “Oh, and I’m glad you’re okay. Or not dead at least,” she added before vanishing.

I pressed the button to permanently transmit our ship ID. It wasn’t something you would usually do in combat as it effectively pinged your location on enemy sensors, but Jo knew best.

“David, did you hear that?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he replied. “Ba’an, Sol are coming in hot!” he yelled to the front of the bridge where the former president was looking at a floating tactical map and shouting information and orders to the bridge crew.

Before Ba'an had a chance to answer, someone shouted "Contact!" loudly as three ships dropped out of TD at the edge of the battle.

"Holy crap, she built them!" Ba'an said in awe.

It took the rest of us, who didn't have tactical maps in front of us, a second to see what Ba'an had seen. Three Kingdom class ships had entered the fight. Three more ships as big, scary, and dangerous as Mercia lit their shields and began firing their substantial arsenals. A second or so later, more Sol ships started appearing. Jo had brought most of the fleet with her.

The three Kingdom class ships were obviously still mid construction. Like Mercia, they were built atop of massive asteroids, allowing them to get operational fast, and then burrow out more space as it was required. Mercia's rocky exterior had been smoothed out and armour plated, mostly; these new ships were raw and rugged looking. Regardless of looks, they were fully operational war ships that were at least as powerful as the original.

This was not a battle, not now. This was Sol, Earth, sending a message. This was a force that dominated. A single additional Kingdom class ship alone would have been enough, three was insane overkill. To have them accompanied by a fleet too, this was domination the likes of which the galaxy hadn't seen before. Not since...

I flashed back to a previous version of reality where Earth forces had this sort of power, but used it to extend its will across the galaxy. I was not happy to see history repeating itself. I hoped Jo realised what kind of power she was wielding.

"Thinker forces. This is President Joanne Michaels speaking to you from the Kingdom class ship Wessex. We are ready for your surrender now," Jo said on an all-frequency open transmission, in a tone that stopped just short of smug.

We all breathed a sigh of collective relief. This was not the sort of battle you fought. To our shock, the Thinker forces didn't stop shooting, they just started throwing themselves at Mercia. They pointed their guns straight forward and fired until they hit it. Cruiser after cruiser set a collision course.

"How many?" Ba'an asked aloud.

"All of them!" came a voice back from the sensor station. "Every single ship is changing course and heading for Mercia at full sub-light."

"Can the others intercept?" David asked.

"I don't think there's time," Ba'an said. He had stopped issuing orders. There was nothing left to do now except watch.

"Do they have enough power to take her down?" Ria asked from next to me.

A purple light caught my attention as Libby's ship-avatar formed at the side of the bridge and began walking towards us, regaining her more solid form as she did. "No, all they could do from the angle of attack is..." she stopped mid-sentence as she realised something. "Mercia has already stopped firing and is putting all it has into its shields. They are all targeting the base of the planetoid she's built on top of. The only thing there is, the support systems."

I looked at her intently. I knew what she was thinking. She looked at me with loving eyes and said, "My love, you look like shit!"

"Thanks," I laughed, then coughed and regretted it. Her ship-avatar was just light. I wanted to take comfort in her arms more than anything in the universe.

She waved her hand, and the screen at the front of the bridge showed a simulation of events as they were about to play out. "They haven't got enough time to take out Mercia. The rest of the fleet will start intercepting them in about ninety seconds. They do, however, have

just enough time to pierce the shield in this location.” The simulation zoomed in to show a portion of Mercia, a part that was mostly still the rock that it was originally built on top of. “The next major impact in that area, once the shields are down, will likely take out support-system including the computer core and secondary operation.”

The simulation we were all transfixed on showed a cutaway now. “This will cause a fairly major system outage on Mercia, but nothing fatal. The other ships will be in position to defend her while repairs are made. If they continue with this, the losses to the Thinker fleet will be one hundred percent. The simulation ended as we watched another massive ship hurl itself into Mercia. It exploded into components as small explosions escaped its hull, system after system erupting. It looked like a tin can being stamped on.

“Why are they doing this?” David asked.

“They’re trying to kill her,” I said, tilting my head towards Libby.

“What?” David asked.

“Libby. According to all Sol records, that’s the location of her core. They are trying to kill her,” I explained.

“But...” David said with confusion. “She isn’t in there, is she?”

Ba’an closed his tactical screen. “Why would they lose so many of themselves to get to Libby?”

“To punish me!” I said. “I destroyed their complex, killed the only Blade alive and the resulting explosion took out a chunk of their planet. This is how they are going to take revenge on me, I guess.”

It made sense. If they tried attacking Basilica, we would activate our QD-Drive and hide behind the Sol fleet, but Mercia for all its power, couldn’t be manoeuvred like we could.

They couldn’t get to me, so they were going to take Libby from me. Had we not already moved her, I would have been devastated by this

attack. It would have broken me. I would have been able to do nothing except watch them kill her. It *was* an excellent revenge.

But she wasn't there. She hadn't been there for weeks. I wasn't proud of the pride I had in our foresight. Libby was safe, but they were still killing themselves for revenge on me. This war had become personal for them. They were planning on fighting until the bitter end. So much death. All in the name of a punishment that couldn't be served.

True to the prediction, the fleet started intercepting and destroying ships. One made it through the shield, Mercia's lights flickered. The Sol forces surrounded it and extended their own shields in order to cover the goliath. The three other Kingdom ships took on the rest of the attackers. It was a slaughter.

The last large ships exploded in a rainbow of colours and there was little more than a handful of fighters still active. They wouldn't last long now.

The familiar noise from behind me chimed. "Joanne again?" I asked.

"No, err, a file-packet is being transmitted from the surface. It's a huge transfer," the Follower said.

"I'll take it. I can run through it as soon as it finishes downloading, without endangering the rest of the ship systems," Libby said, I think expecting a digital strike against her now. She was good at dealing with these things and it was a pointless avenue of attack.

The last of the fighters was destroyed.

David's screen beeped at him. He opened the notification and watched a video feed. He flicked it over to the main screen for all to see. It was a view of the surface. The few cities down there designed for organic visitors were exploding and all the star ports on the planet were on fire, all of them, all at once.

“What are they doing?” I asked in shock.

“They’re burning their world, as far as I can see... why would they do that? Sol would have only sanctioned them and restricted their travel; there’s no need for this, they aren’t monsters!” Ba’an said.

I remembered again what happened last time there was a fleet from Earth with this much power and hoped he was right. Though, I couldn’t blame him for thinking of Sol as nothing but the pure white knights of the galaxy. In the whole of the history of this iteration, they had been nothing but virtuous on the galactic stage.

“I think I know,” Libby said with a solemn voice. “The file just finished downloading. It’s the entire history of their race, all of it. All the things they refused to tell us.”

“Oh, and how does that explain this?” Ba’an asked without looking away from the carnage on the planet below.

“Because the complex, the temple that Jon destroyed wasn’t some historical monument or research base. It was... oh my God, Jon, it was the place they come from. It was the thing sustaining them... The whole species. It was keeping them alive, somehow.”

I looked again at the world below. The burning and the destruction. “I didn’t know. I couldn’t have known,” I said, with a frantic voice. “I couldn’t let them finish. I had to try!” I felt wrecked by her words. Had I really killed a whole species?

Libby didn’t usually have an avatar that could cry, but this one was a hologram and could do whatever was needed. Tears ran down her cheeks and she spoke again. “I’m running through the file still... there’s more,” she paused. “Jon, the reason so few Thinkers left their planet. There were only ever ten thousand of them.”

That number held a specific meaning. I knew what was coming next. I think on some level I had always known it was going to be revealed one day.

“What does it mean?” Ria asked, sensing the tension between Libby and me.

Libby wiped her holographic face and looked over to the screen with a forced resolve. “The Blade’s, the race. Aygah saved them all. The souls of all the Blades that died in the first iteration... They were reborn as Thinkers in this one.”

“And that is why they won’t surrender to Sol,” David said.

“You fucking knew, didn’t you?” I asked with a spike of rage and angst that I didn’t even know I could feel at my age.

“Yeah... I knew. Aygah told me when she visited me. There was no point telling you. We couldn’t just let them ascend to godhood, could we?”

I wanted to swing for him, to knock him on his arse. I couldn’t have managed it even if I had have tried, not in my state. Besides, he was right. I was better off not knowing. I may not have mustered the resolve to take my shot when I saw it.

I just stared blankly at the image of the planet below, burning away any remnant of the Thinker people. The legacy of the Blades in flames below us.

We stood there, watching the Sol forces eliminate every last ship in the sky as no one extended a hand to stop the carnage of the world below.

A pulse left their capitol building shortly before it exploded. We watched it on the screen and we all knew that it was one of their dampening fields blasting out across their world. Another pointless reach from the grave. While not being immune, we had already supplied the Sol fleet with the shield modulation information and power ranges to slow the drain to a trickle.

“Should we leave?” Ria asked.

“No!” Ba’an said. “We stay. We bear witness to this. We record it all.”



I wanted to go too, wanted to look away. Ba'an was right. When genocide happens, you need to see it. To record it and to make damned sure it never happens again. They were burning their world, removing all traces of themselves from the galaxy; but I was the one that killed them. I had pulled the trigger and destroyed their life-giving temple. How did I get here. How did it all come to this?

“Jon,” Libby called. “The file. I finished scanning through it.”

I waited for her to say more. I knew there was more. Today the bad news, mistakes and regrets were compounding and I knew there would be more.

“They were planning on using the Coffin, to ascend Gower, under their control. They were going to make him change the rules, make it so they didn't need host matter, avatars, to survive. Once they had it, they planned on leaving. Past the rim of the galaxy,” she said.

“Why didn't they tell us? Gower may have even helped them once he knew!” I asked.

David sighed. “Jon, even if they made that promise, you couldn't allow anyone that kind of power. You know that. No one should have that power.”

He was right.

The last straggler was eradicated by the Sol fleet and Mercia's ship-wide lights were all coming back on as they got the emergency systems online.

One by one, the Sol ships lowered their shields and dropped into high orbits, scanning the planet for those left behind. There would not be anything left down there. I knew that without a scanner.

“It's over. Let's go home,” David said with a heavy voice.

# Chapter 46

## In Her we trust

We had been back on Central for a few days now. The dust was settling but the feelings would take longer. I wasn't sure I could recover from what had happened, I just had to live with it.

Jo had been both relieved and livid that we had removed Libby's core from Mercia without her knowing. She wasn't as mad as she was pretending to be though, because she had ordered myself, Ba'an, David and Lea back to Sol at our convenience so we could all get 'Defender of the Earth' medals and have a very public party. We were told it wasn't optional. We agreed, but on the condition that Kay and Ria got the same. Libby already had one and there were no higher honours to bestow.

We had made the file that the Thinkers had transmitted available to the Vampire government. I made it clear that I was willing to face trial for genocide. After some deliberation, they informed me that I had acted reasonably with the information I had. Having a council of Vampires tell me I did okay made me feel a lot better about everything. I knew I had done nothing but tried to protect reality itself, but at

least ten thousand people had died, directly as a result of my actions. I couldn't be absolved of that.

The Followers had started moving into our building. We had somehow agreed to let them use it as a centre of operations for their entire organisation. It looked like our home was going to be a lot busier.

Basilica was getting all the repairs it needed, and it needed a lot. Libby was covering costs for private contractors. Joanne had offered the use of the Sol shipyard, but there was no way we were letting Sol have deep scans of a QD-Drive or Red-energy generator. That seemed like a step too far, even with our renewed trust.

The only major problem we still had was the media flooding our building constantly. Basilica was the only Vampire allied ship at 'The Battle of Thinker Prime' as it had been dubbed. It was enough for the media to spread mostly made-up public interest pieces about the crew. Sooner or later, they would lose interest. The Followers were receiving record numbers of new members because of all the attention; they were enjoying finally not being called a cult.



I entered our apartment from the lobby after signing for a delivery of equipment for the Followers. Libby ran over and hugged me; she had been hugging me a lot. I was all healed up now, but she still had some feelings to work through about all that had happened.

Lea and Ba'an came in from the kitchen with a mountain of food and drinks. Ria was curled up on our sofa, pretending to be asleep; David sitting close next to her. Kay and her two assistants arrived behind me, with a crate of the exceptional moonshine Elix that she got from somewhere.

Everyone was there. All my friends, my family, in one place and finally safe. As everyone sat down, I opened a bottle of Kays Elix and sat next to David.

“David, there’s one thing I don’t get about all this Thinker business,” I said, taking a huge draft from my bottle.

“What’s that then, dear champion?” he asked.

“Aygah has a plan, right? She’s supposed to know everything. Why did she create the Thinkers just for them all to die?”

He rubbed his neck a little nervously. “Well, I would never presume to speak for *Her*, but I suppose it’s all about free will. I think, from what I know, that it was a case of giving them a chance. You know, she owed the Blades a second try, and they blew it, I suppose.” He said sheepishly. I could see that he knew more than he was telling me, and I totally understood it now. He was the Keeper after all. Secrets were his purpose.

I considered his words and leant back in my chair. I looked around the room, at my friends, my family; my heroes, one and all. I gave a thought to Gower and how much I cherished the little extra time we had with each-other. He really was a good friend, right until the end.

I raised a glass to old friends and with all the faith in my soul, I smiled and simply said, “In *Her* we trust.”

***End of part two.***

# Thanks...

Thank you to the people who made this book possible:

My daughter Mackenzie, who listened to me talk about half-baked ideas at seven in the morning.

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:

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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 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: Tales from... (A Collection of short stories.)”*

Thank you for taking the time to read this. It was a blast writing it.