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Gaia

Chapter 1

Detection and Preparation

Archytas International Space Observatory

June 5, 2072

Professor Alan Wilson was staring at a screen. He pushed himself away and floated toward another. He frowned while thinking, *Something is wrong with the data again.* He continued to move from one screen to another while contacting his fellow astronauts. Soon, the station came alive with the excited yet scared voices of the crew. They were joined by the voices of those on the ground. The data was repeatedly tested. An anomaly was detected in the ort cloud, an area of space filled with icy rocks and dwarf planets just outside of our solar system. Professor Wilson let himself slowly float away from his station. The voices around him were fading away, while a new thought flooded his mind. *Is this for real?* Hundreds of years ago, a group of asteroids was knocked out of their orbit, and they were heading toward the interior of the solar system. A gigantic rock with a diameter of about forty-five kilometers, along with a few smaller but still destructive ones, was falling toward the sun at ever-increasing velocities. Earth stood in their way. The impact was going to take place just forty-four years into the future.

August 12, 2072

"Hello, everyone," Professor Wilson said to the public. "I wish I could start this speech with a smile or a warm welcome, but as most of you already know, the news is anything but good. An asteroid with a diameter of about forty-five kilometers is closing in on Earth. The asteroid is currently traveling at lower speeds, but it freefalling toward the sun. Its speed is continuously increasing, and by the time it meets Earth, it will be traveling at 120,000 kilometers per hour. After having thought of all possible ways of avoiding the collision, we came to the realization that the impact is inevitable. We can't destroy it because it is too big, and we can't alter its course for the same reason. Bombarding it with missiles runs the risk of breaking it into smaller chunks, which will most likely impact the Earth at various locations, rendering the disaster even greater. It's traveling too fast and it's too massive to be threatened by anything we throw at it. Its trajectory has a 93 percent chance of colliding with Earth, with an projected date of forty-four years. The impact location will be eastern Australia. Professor Haze will take the stand to give us a prediction of the aftermath."

"As Professor Wilson explained" said Professor Haze with clear discomfort, "this is an asteroid with a size unlike anything that has impacted the planet since the

time of Earth's formation. It dwarfs the asteroid that took out the dinosaurs. The damage to the planet will be incomprehensible. Virtually all advanced life on planet Earth will become extinct in a very short period of time. The immediate effects will be felt throughout the world, with tremendous earthquakes, possible volcanic eruptions; the largest tsunamis ever seen will be overshadowed. And this is only the beginning. Burning winds will wrap around the planet, igniting everything in their path. They will be followed by a rain of burning rock, which can last for weeks. The aftereffect will be a cloud of dust and carbon, which will envelop the Earth, leaving us hidden from the sun for perhaps hundreds or thousands of years, leading to a global ice age. Ladies and gentlemen, we are facing the complete annihilation of our species and with it, the annihilation of every species other than bacteria life on Earth." He swallowed, looked around him, and continued, "No matter how slim the chance, we need to innovate and put our combined effort in a plan to avoid the collision. The small chance that it will miss should not be our comfort. We need to fight this thing. Our current technologies cannot match it, but if we work together, we might make something to shield us from it."

The idea that it was forty-four years into the future did not seem to calm most of the people of the world. Many began denying the facts and claimed that the science was wrong. Others thought that their religious deities would step up and alter the course of the asteroid. There were those who laughed and those who cried. The vast majority of the world, however, saw the threat and thought that science would help us. Science would create something to change the course of it or somehow save us. Birth rates all over the world saw a steady decline. Few wanted to bring to life a child, only to teach it that their little island in space was targeted by the manifestation of death.

Great leaders had their heads in their hands. They sat quietly, alone in their offices. The Kremlin, the Oval Office, and more were waiting for something to happen. A phone rang. Then another. Then, as if orchestrated by a maestro, the phones and computers of all head offices of the world began connecting one another. "We need to act now!" said a voice amid the chaos and confusion that seemed to be the first reaction. Soon the voices calmed. In an orderly manner, they agreed upon a meeting. A few days later, inside an amphitheater, the voices of reason began plotting their plan for survival. "We need to calm people down. We need hope," said the head of the committee.

"Our scientists are positive than an early strike has the best chance of success," said another.

"We need to prepare for the aftermath. There are ways we can survive the impact," said a third.

The options were coming from every direction. "We will have to try them all!" one president yelled. "We have to invest all we have and try them all," he repeated. The room became silent. "This is not a matter of economics, nationalism, or grudges. This is the line where we unite or perish. We need to try all the solutions."

Slowly, the plan began to take shape. Massive projects of self-contained environments seemed to be the answer to the continuation of our species. From large-scale cities to small bunkers and everything in between. Others started looking at ways to avert the impact altogether. Even the most optimistic could not see a complete avoidance of the destruction, because even if the main asteroid was

directed elsewhere, the smaller ones would still strike and cause great damage. Human colonies on Mars would not be able to accommodate a lot of people, since Mars had not yet reached full independence of materials and new settlers from Earth. The hope of Martians was that the small communities they had would be able to advance to the point where they could stand on their own. Hope was limited, though.

Twenty-four cities, mainly located in Europe, western Asia, and Africa, were chosen to be rebuilt under domes, with automation to provide for water and food to a population of about five million each. The tremendous projects began in the year 2080, with a projected thirty-five years to completion. Entire city-sized areas were turned into flat concrete fields with ten-meter-thick reinforced walls around them. Their roofs were not made of futuristic glass or any other transparent material. They were made to withstand the molten rock that would fall from the sky and use it as an extra layer of protection for the coming snow that was expected to cover the entire world. They looked more like turtle shells with multiple supports. The domed cities would be using power to make an artificial blue sky in the otherwise windowless, pitch-black interior.

In the year 2100, a new generation of scientists joined the work, and the projects sped up. New technologies for creating tremendous subterranean water reservoirs and linking them with the cities were created and the dome cities began to show progressively more optimism. Besides the few unexpected events like fanatic's sabotage's and larger than normal earthquakes, the progress on most cities was proceeding better than expected.

In the year 2101, the most massive launch of weapons, expected to intercept "Osiris," as the asteroid had come to be called, began their eleven-year journey in hopes of sideswiping the asteroid and changing its course. Although the project had a very small chance of success, more than fifty similar projects were simultaneously worked on and launched at different times.

In 2111, the dome cities were finally ready to open their doors to the three million people they were going to host. Although five million people could be supported, the choice to put fewer in each city was made to make them more manageable. Picking the residents was a project of its own. Specially designed schools around the world would train kids to operate the cities and to face the psychological impact that was imminent. They were let in about five years before the impact, so they could have a trial time to see if everything could run smoothly. Their connection to the outside world was cut, and only a single superintendent would be able to reach out, in case of failures that needed additional help. The domes' entrances, large enough for a big truck to fit through, were hermetically shielded, thus isolating the inside environment from the outside. The domes would use a two-way system to produce energy—nuclear, which would produce waste that would then be recycled and reused, and geothermal. It was projected that the power would be able to sustain a population of up to five million for over two thousand years.

With the asteroid now visible to the naked eye, people started to turn against the method of choice for the survivors. Fear started to spread; the mountains of the world were slowly filling with societies who sought refuge from the destruction. The full military force of the world was stationed guard at the twenty-four cities, which

held the hope for humanity's prosperity. Madness seemed to be overtaking the general population. Hope lay within the steel tubes carrying bombs in space.

In 2112, the missiles that were launched to intercept the asteroid had finally arrived at their destination. A continuous bombardment took place, but the asteroid, instead of changing course, began to shed some smaller asteroids, which posed a new threat. If the bombardment continued, large enough chunks might be split that could strike in Europe and destroy the dome cities. This called for a halt in the bombardment, since the math showed that it was very unlikely to change its course either way. A positive result of the bombardment was that some chunks of the main asteroid did actually fly to a trajectory that took them off the path of Earth.

Although it made the impact less powerful, the news was not good for the people of Earth. The outside of some domes became a battlefield. The world began its final world war. Every country wanted its people inside. Every country wanted some level of control. Although outside, the wars waged, the united military force of the planet was driving the war away from the domes to protect them. As time went by, the war escalated to the point where the only solution seemed to be the detonation of nuclear weapons. The protection of the domes was all that mattered.

Near the end of 2115, just a few months before the impact, the world burned. Nuclear weapons were launched to defend the domes. Under the red sky, humans fought each other to provide a seat of survival for their leaders. In the perpetual darkness of the dome cities, people worked with science, they illuminated the ceilings with beautiful colors and, unaware of the outside war, they continued to build and perfect their new homes. The superintendents, all in communication with one another, had agreed that the nuclear war, although some cities felt it, should be kept a secret. There was no need to psychologically damage those inside. The records were made, and the history was written, but it got stored away from the eyes of the population ... for now. The tremors of nuclear detonations were explained to the geologists in the domes as controlled tests for the walls of their cities.

In February 2116, the asteroid was a bright object of amazing beauty and terror on the sky. The impact was just a month away. The world war was still ablaze. Stronger than ever, the last battles were being fought under the watchful eye of Osiris. Some saw it as an omen, others as nothing more than what it was. A final attack made the wall of the dome city of Paris crack. Working on it from both sides, the engineers had one month to patch it properly. Just a few days before the end, the war ended. People gave up. Soldiers did not have the will to go on, and rulers had already been changed enough times that they had forgotten who was who and whom they were fighting for. A week before the end ... calm ... whoever was not on the mountains seeking refuge among the societies there was in the cities. Finally, a party. A celebration. They gathered at city centers around the world and looked up into the sky. With their lungs filled with poison and radiation, slowly dying, they looked up. With their hearts torn for the crimes they had committed, they looked up.

Someone yelled that which was then written on walls.

"We will not go the way we came. We will not cry; we will not kneel. We will dance and celebrate life for the time we had."

It took death to reach the door for humans to unite and finally dance. The superintendents shared the images of the last two days with the domes. Showed the courage and resolve humans can find in their last hours. While Osiris was breathing

its heat onto the Earth, the people of the dome cities, with tears in their eyes, saw humanity dancing in the face of death.

This is how you will be remembered. All of you.

Chapter 2

Impact

March 13, 2116

That's when the world ended. As predicted, the impact took place on the coast of eastern Australia, near Brisbane. The few humans who had remained in space stations in orbit stayed, knowing that this would be their end, but they also documented and gathered intel that was then sent to the dome cities for future reference.

With their eyes in the sky and smiles on their lips, some chose to go near the impact site and welcome their doom. Kneeling with their hands held together, they fearlessly looked upon the small dot that was coming to end everything. Eyes opened wide as the small blip of light began to grow exponentially; no thoughts, no time for thinking. The dot suddenly grew to cover the entire sky. Less than a second remained; the blinding light came without sound, and the last images to be transmitted filled those who came later see them with terror. The world became a flaming ball of dust and thunder. Winds of unprecedented speed started spreading the flaming gases and dust around the globe. A wave of thunderous black clouds ignited everything in its path, releasing more clouds of dust and smoke, which covered the sky of the entire planet, storming as if on a race around the Earth. Earthquakes maxing out the Richter scale were felt throughout the world. The tsunamis that hit the west of the American continent and the east of Asia proceeded so deep into the continents that they transformed the landscape in their path forever. Australia's east coast sank into the sea. The west burned so hot that the soil looked like a sea of lava. For days, a rain of burning rocks, returning debris from the impact, bombarded the Earth. Weeks after, volcanic eruptions had not stopped, spewing molten rock and adding more carbon and other chemicals into the atmosphere, further deepening the thick clouds that were slowly freezing the planet under.

Most of the dome cities suffered manageable and expected damage; some collapsed. Most of the secondary survival plans, like underground vaults, did not survive the first weeks. Humanity was now down to about sixty million people in population. Sixty million people who, for a while, had visual feed from the most catastrophic event ever to hit the Earth. When the earthquakes started shaking the Earth, when the winds started whipping the walls of the cities, when the rock impacts began to sound like machine guns, relentlessly bombarding the roof of the domes, some screamed, some cried, some remained silent. The one common feeling they all felt was that our minuscule size and power finally became apparent. Then they all understood, "*We should have moved faster ... we should have gone to space earlier ... we should have listened ...*"

Chapter 3
Survival

2118

Life in the cities slowly began to adapt to the new situation. Communications between the cities provided insight to the problems some were facing, so that all could adapt and provide for the future. Some of them were in distress. The city of Paris faced starvation. The hole in the dome was never properly patched, and the environment was in contact with the outside. Most of the systems were now unable to keep up with the life-support demands and were failing. The outside world had begun to freeze, and the scavenging humans who survived the first years of the Osiris impact were visiting the domes in an effort to find refuge. Most of them survived in underground bunkers near the cities but had run out of resources and were now looking for a means to survive.

The gates of the domed cities, however, were under a rock. Rock that fell as liquid from the sky slowly built a layer around the cities. As the years went by, their attempts became more and more rare until they stopped. This became apparent from the evidence found after the gates of the dome cities got unblocked. The speculation was that no survivors existed outside of the domes since the moment of the impact. Communications with Mars had yet to be established, leaving most to believe that the colonies had all been destroyed. The plan was to open the gates and dig through the rock before the planet completely froze over, so that they could have access to the outside. Pre-dug human-sized tubes connected the cities, but most of them needed repairing, since they had collapsed in various locations. After their completion, some goods and help would be able to be transferred from one city to another.

2140

As the years went by, the surviving cities began to work almost fully autonomously allowing all residents to work on scientific advancement. The majority of the population was preoccupied with finding a way to reverse the damage and make the planet habitable, faster than nature. A titanic task with no apparent way of achieving it. Things began to slow down. Change seemed to be a distant memory. Under the blanket of snow, humanity almost froze its progress, and social structures adapted into an ever-slowing pace.

2150

The first launch of a rocket took place. From a single-use pad, a small rocket with a few kilos worth of equipment was shot in space. A new space observatory of Earth or SOE was placed into orbit. Its sole mission was to monitor Earth and send readings regarding weather, dust, and element composition of the Earth's atmosphere. Ninety-nine percent of all satellites had been destroyed by smaller meteorites and pieces of Earth debris launched into orbit with the strike. The remaining satellites were geosynchronous GPS satellites that were very far from Earth and had mostly

remained unharmed. Communications with those satellites have been useful for various reasons. It was becoming increasingly harder to send missiles into space since the Earth was continuously sinking into the white sea of snow and ice.

2156

The Mars Communications Reestablishment Drone, or MCRD, was launched. Its mission was to establish communications with the Martian colonies. Five months later, the drone landed where the colonies used to stand and reported ruins with no signs of life. The colonies did not survive. Mars too had been bombarded by smaller meteorites. Besides the few that were part of the original Osiris, some chunks that flew into space from Earth found their way onto Mars. Additionally, the lack of a thick atmosphere on Mars meant that even small meteorites made their way to the surface, acting as bullets.

2158

The first space station was placed in orbit. The thick cloud that covered the planet had created a winter that killed nearly all life outside of the dome cities. A small selection of animals had been kept, with the hope of reestablishing an ecosystem after the snow melted. There was hope that in the ocean depths, life still thrived despite the increased acidity. Bacteria and fungi should have made their home under the ice, where water was heated from the inside of the Earth. The ice on the surface was winning. Even where the clouds allowed the sun to see the surface, the ice reflected nearly all the heat back out. The Earth began to resemble a snowball.

2160

A technological breakthrough in robotics allowed for the building of a safe transport system under the snow. Most of the connection pipes were restored, and the cities were beginning to be linked with each other, allowing for faster development of technologies.

2180

The energy efficiency of the cities had reached near perfection, but the need for fresh materials was already appearing. New technological developments required materials, not thought of during the construction of the cities. Humans began digging again, and they became very proficient at it.

2216

The cities were celebrating one hundred years of operation. The ingenuity of the builders had made life possible in the otherwise-uninhabitable conditions of Earth. No human alive had seen the outside. All they had were memories written on numbers. The final dance of the humans before the Osiris strike was still celebrated. However, it was slowly slipping into the pages of forgotten lore by the newer generations.

2270

Some of the collapsed cities like Paris became operational again. The years of tunneling, repairing, and digging brought forward enough materials to repair the collapsed cities. Survivors were found in some of them. The world consisted of one

hundred million people, who were slowly losing faith in rebuilding the ecosystem. While most people and mainstream science was looking at a way to heat up the Earth, a small group of scientists began considering that perhaps colonization of another planet might be the solution. A return to Mars looked promising, and with the available technology, survival on Mars might turn out to be easier than previously thought.

2273

Perhaps the most revolutionary change in culture and life took over humanity. The long trip to immortality had finally reached its end. A system was made that could program a swarm of nanobots, continuously adding scrambled code into the edges of the DNA of every cell in the body. This way, the division of cells became unaffected by the natural decay of the code, making every cell of the body as good as the original one. With a few extra modifications in the following years, the humans could now slowly return to the age of their choosing and stay at that age forever. Additionally, nearly every disease that physically affects cells got eradicated in one go. Natural death was conquered. The childbirth rate started dropping almost immediately after the distribution of the so-called "COD" or Cure of Death injection. Newborns could not be injected with COD, since it had disastrous results in the development of the body. Only after the age of 20 could COD be administered, and in certain cases after twenty-five years of age.

With very few humans being born, even though almost nobody died, the population was struggling to rise. Most of the people were humoring themselves by saying, "We will have children when the Earth becomes habitable again."

In the following years, many technologies previously thought to be science fiction started becoming a reality. Nanobots in everyday materials and a lot more became a common sight.

*"And we finally got to understand why we need to matter.
Apostasis will guide us back to reality."*

—Written on a wall

Apostasis: *A term used to describe an unforeseen consequence of human immortality and lack of purpose. A psychological condition which renders the person unable of finding meaning behind life. Leads to social distancing, depression, and in advanced cases, suicide.*

First identified in 2312, but speculated to be around for longer than that and misdiagnosed as severe depression, the condition started to spread like a virus. Machine automations render individual humans unimportant to society. Many believe that combating the condition would require humans to start working and making decisions that would ultimately affect their well-being.

Medical treatment consists of temporary chemical interference with the brain's neurotransmitters.

*Drug effectiveness declines with time and dosage levels.
No cure is in development.*

Chapter 4
Alex, Jain, and Project Gaia

2330

Alexander was born in the city of Athens. His world appeared normal to him and to the people around him, but to humans before Osiris, it would feel like a prison. It had been nearly sixty years since the administration of COD, and society's population had managed to decline. With nearly zero newborns and quite a few suicides, Alex grew up in a world where everything moved slowly, where what was once considered depression seemed normal. At the age of five, he began to show the first signs of his natural leadership abilities. Since having a child was a very rare event, he and the very few children were mentored by the best possible teachers in the most ideal environments. His development began to show a lot of promise, and his interest in the cosmos seemed to be growing, the more answers he was getting. Although he was very easily distracted and more often than not caught daydreaming while studying, he managed at the age of sixteen to join the scientific community of astrophysicists and cosmologists.

"There are still satellites with telescopes and other instruments floating in space. I insist, repairing those satellites should be one of our top priorities," said Alex to Martina, one of his supervisors.

"How will spending all those resources to repair a few satellites, none of which are meant to monitor Earth's climate, going to help us now? Even if we detect another Osiris coming, there is nothing we can do now either way," answered Martina.

Alex composed himself. He took a deep breath and thought, *You have practiced that. Speak slowly and pass the message.* He let a couple of seconds go by, and then he explained. "There are no miracles that can happen now to fix the environment fast. But there are still areas we can learn from. Science is hitting dead ends in all directions. We need astrophysics to be tested so our hypothesis can take the right track. This has always been the case. All science works as one."

Martina remained silent. She placed her hand on the side of her head and said, "What you say is not wrong. Make the calculations for a launch bay that can be reused, and then we will talk again. We can't use single-use launch pads. We know the missions will be plenty."

"Of course not," replied Alex. "I will need a couple of people to help me with the calculations."

Martina smiled at him. "You can request a small team, and if it is not overly ambitious, I will make sure you get approval."

Launching and landing rockets often meant that a new launch site had to be built. An area with extra-thin ice that could be removed, revealing the stable soil underneath was found. A few kilometers off the dome city of Abuja, a new launch base was beginning to be built. After the first couple of satellites were repaired, Alex began using them in idle times without the proper documentation. He thought, *It's a*

waste of time. It takes me more time to fill out forms and wait for approval than to actually use them.

2332

Jain was born in the dome city of Tehran. She had a hard time with other kids around her. Her competitive nature and incredible mind meant that she topped everything she set her mind to. From gymnastics to mathematics, she would excel at everything. Her tutors began paying special attention to her and giving her increasingly difficult tasks in every field, in an effort to test her limits. That caused the few kids around her to distance themselves from her. That did not seem to bother her for too long, since the society she was in seemed to follow a distancing pattern either way. She grew up independent, and that made it hard for her to work with others. The few friends she had around her would worry. She was too young to be suffering from apostasies, but it seemed like she did. She would only be fine when she worked on something hard. She began working for a while on the Earth Revitalization Program or ERP. In her work there, she met people from all over the fields of science, and she ended up in a leading role.

One day, while gathering data from the satellites, she noticed that their log had entries during times where the systems should be idle. *Someone is using the satellites during their idle time*, she thought. *It looks like the keys are from one of the admins.* She curiously searched deeper to see who and what were they used for. "Who is Alex? Could this be *the* Alex?" She called for a meeting with the user named Alex to question him about the authority under which he was using the equipment, along with the nature of data he was collecting. She was quite sure this was someone using the name of Director Alex to avoid questions.

2348

Jain looked at Alex on her monitor and immediately felt threatened. It was Director Alex. She had a plan on what to say earlier, when she was sure it would be someone else. She opened her mouth, and the words came out as they were planned.

"Hello, Alex. I would like to get straight to the point of this meeting. Before I file any reports, I would like to know why are you using the satellites without permission and what will you use the data that you are collecting for?" She said this in one breath, then sat back, and with a frown and eyes wide open, she waited for an answer.

Alex's confidence seemed to be gone for a second. He stood silently looking at the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. "I am sorry, I was expecting ... someone different," said Alex with an unintentional smirk.

"I don't see what you mean by that," replied Jain.

"I am sorry. Let me try this again," said Alex while composing himself. "Hello, Jain. I am Director Alex." Alex smiled and continued. "I am simply using the satellites to collect data for research I am conducting. I am not filing the standard forms because they take too much time, and I consider progress to be more important," he said with his confidence fully restored.

"Filing forms allows us to organize and keep the equipment in proper functioning order. It is very important, and if I may say, I think the only reason why you are not doing it is because you don't have a schedule," replied Jain.

"Okay, yeah. That's definitely the truth. How about this: you come and work with me on a few projects and help me keep everything neat. Proper forms and all."

Slightly irritated, Jain replied, "You are joking, right? You just met me, and you expect to know what I can be useful for? Let me guess—you were not planning on asking for my help when this meeting was being set up."

"I read your file before our meeting. I knew you have the right mind to help with the projects I am working on, but until I met you, I was sure there were more candidates for this work. Now I am positive that you would fit right in."

Fit right in, thought Jain. She was used to feeling slightly left out, so these words meant a lot to her. "If you are serious, file a form for once, and I will see if I will agree."

Jain eventually went to work with Alex. Upon arrival, Alex himself was there to guide her to her new home.

"As you know, our primary goal is to gather data and test hypotheses about the nature of physics," Alex began on the way. "There is, however, another project I am working on which is top secret."

Jain noticed that Alex was looking at her with excitement, a kind she had seen before but more intense. "How top secret can it be if you are about to tell me on our first real meeting?" she replied with a smile.

"Well, it really is top secret. I am basically the only one who knows about it. Perhaps a couple of friends included."

"Sounds ... interesting. Tell me more."

Their conversation began sounding more like jokes with every phrase.

"With all seriousness, I am considering the possibility of interstellar migration," said Alex with a very serious face.

"I can't be sure if you are joking now," Jain answered with a frown, "Interstellar migration would require technologies we do not currently possess, and that is only *if* we find a suitable planet"

"We will talk about it more soon. This is your new place," said Alex, pointing at her new home.

As time went by, they spent more and more time together. After work, they would discuss Alex's migration idea. Slowly, more friends started joining up in these conversations, adding their input on problems. It was not yet taken seriously though by anyone.

"We need to talk," Alex said to Jain.

"Let me guess," said Jain with a smile, "you have a new way of convincing me that it's in my best interest to leave the planet."

"No, no ... well, yes," said Alex. "Look, it's time we took this slightly more seriously. Mars will take thousands of years to be terraformed. It will take more time to be terraformed than it will take Earth to recover. Can we really wait that long?"

"Alex, we don't need to terraform Mars to live there. Our dome cities have paved the way to make habitable zones on Mars with ease. With a bit of effort, it will be easier to build Mars into the capital of our species than waiting for Earth to become warm again," said Jain with a calm voice.

"I am happy we agree that Earth will not support us for long. Once the ice starts to melt, we will face flooding in all places"

"Not Tehran," said Jain with a smile.

"Yeah, perhaps not Tehran, but the rest of the cities will probably flood. We have to make colonies before that happens."

"Yeah, we have established that."

"Would it not be better to make a colony somewhere where it is hospitable?"

Jain looked at him with a frown. "Alex, obviously going somewhere nice and old-Earth-like would be great, but we need to be realistic here."

"Okay, let's be realistic. We know of planets in our close stellar neighborhood which are pretty ideal to live in. In fact, some have better air than old Earth. All we need is a vessel to take us there."

"Exactly," said Jain with excitement, "the technology to take us there does not exist!"

"Yet!" corrected Alex with his finger pointing up. "I have done many calculations, and I have many ideas on how to make that work. I am positive that it can happen. Janis Wafer did the same leap when he designed the nanobots that now make you immortal. Will you please entertain the idea a bit more seriously and help me with the calculations?"

"How can I say no to these eyes?" said Jain with a smile.

2350

Days were passing, and the two scientists were spending all the hours of the day together. If it was not recreation, they would discuss about the future of humans and whether the solution really was to colonize. With the help of their friends, they started to do the math for possible interstellar travel. As time went by, the thrill of the idea and the problems they managed to bypass made the idea seem more and more plausible. Even Jain joined dynamically in the idea of deep space. Perhaps a gamble with the stars would pay off. For many years, the world had known of habitable planets in close proximity to Earth. Was it the time to colonize another solar system? The technologies that would be required for this trip could also be used to transfer people to Mars safely and even help the Earth recover. It could be a win-win bet. They began referencing their research as "Project Gaia."

2352

The cities were governed by a table of superintendents, one from each city, who held most of their conferences through the web. Since the cities were working as intended and there was very little that depended on humans, the role of the superintendent had become undesirable and unimportant. Most of the budget requests were focused on roads in the snow toward the surface, mainly for research and rarely for recreation. The costs were low and usually granted. In some cases, bubbles of voids were found in the snow, and the request for their use would be filled. These and others like them were projects that were approved by the superintendent of the dome city that would control it. It was very rare that they had to give a joint approval for something. The missiles to space were a good example. Alex gathered all the dome cities' superintendents to ask for a joint budget for Project Gaia to begin its realization.

Seeing the huge group of people watching him on their monitors, Alex took a deep breath and began. "Hello, everyone. I will proceed directly to the subject at hand. Since our ancient history, when humans were faced with infertile land,

drought, or any other life-threatening situation, they would migrate. They would travel vast distances for their time and colonize uninhabited areas or fight to take the areas from others. This practice has ensured our continuous survival for millennia." He left a couple of seconds of silence, then continued. "Now we are facing the same issue. Our world is dead, and it will stay dead for perhaps thousands of years. Our air will remain unbreathable and the soil uncultivable. Our seas have frozen, and under the ice, there is almost nothing that survived the increase of acidity. We speculate that the way things are going, we will not survive long enough to see the Earth as it once was. Our dome cities are in near 100 percent efficiency. But it is not 100 percent, and even if it was, error and accidents are draining supplies and energy, making it continuously harder to extend our survival indefinitely. Together with the risk of Apostasis, rendering more of us unable to take part in social actions, it becomes clear that our solution is space. Project Gaia wants to ensure the continuation of our species in space. Not just Mars. Mars will have its own problems of sustaining a large population. Our goal should be set on deep space. There is a known system, about forty light-years from Earth, called Solis. Its existence is a near miracle. It is a system that seems to be engineered to sustain life. It is centered around a small star, a fraction of our own, but a very stable star with a projected lifespan that will outlive almost everything else in the universe. It has many planets in close proximity to it, and four of them are in the habitable zone. A system like that could be fully colonized, and it gives us four chances of survival."

One of the superintendents rudely interrupted the speech. "Are we seriously discussing about an actual ark away from here?"

"I am, yes!" said Alex with charm and confidence. "We have detected oxygen on Solis's four planets, which tells us a lot of things. Since oxygen bonds easily with other elements, it's a good indication of life. Finding it on four different planets of the same system, however, increases the chances that photosynthesis is taking place on them. It's very unlikely that an intelligent civilization is calling those planets home because there is no evidence of any electromagnetic signals emitted from the system. It might sound impossible, but a migration such as this would have one and only one difficulty to overcome: the distance. We have made the first estimations, and it is clear that the challenge of covering that distance is smaller than the challenges we face here on Earth or the challenges we will be facing on Mars. Our team is hereby requesting the necessary resources for achieving the goal of reaching the stars and continuing our species's survival into the universe. This funding will not only allow us to travel into space, but the technologies that we will develop for the travel will revolutionize life here on Earth and allow a safer migration to Mars in the future. Additionally, our communications will allow us to exchange information so the developments from Solis will be shared with Earth."

"What would the costs be?" asked one superintendent.

"The research for the spaceship would require a team of over two thousand people. The manufacturing of the ship itself would need materials we currently do not have. We will need to mine them, which means that another five hundred people are estimated to be required to work on that."

"For how long?" he continued.

"We estimate about thirty years until completion," said Alex.

"So, you want twenty-five hundred people to work for you, for thirty years, on a project that will be shot into space," said another superintendent

Alex was prepared for this, so he almost arrogantly answered, "Our people are wasting their lives behind screens, playing games. We have become lazy and purposeless. I am proposing a plan that will put many out of us into action. Many who are currently waiting for something to happen will rally to a cause such as this. The technologies we will create will not be 'shot into space.' Just the prototype will. The rest will stay here to be further upgraded and provide solutions to problems of the future."

"I am beginning to like this idea," said Semreh, the superintendent from Abuja who knew Alex from before. "I am proposing volunteer recruiting only. Would that work, Alex?"

"That would work great," said Alex.

The project got the green light, and the volunteers, just as Alex had predicted, came in abundance. After the details of the project became public, tens of thousands of applications for every job, ideas and solutions to all the problems started raining down. Now Alex had all the power and funding he needed to make the project a reality.

2353

Abuja

Alex entered a room with Jain and eight other people inside. "Hello, everyone," he said while walking to his seat. "It is nice to see all of you in person here."

"Nice to be here ... kinda," said Gakuto.

"Why kinda?" asked Alex with a smile. It was obvious that Gakuto was joking to break the ice.

"Well, I had to leave my plants unintended."

"I am sorry to hear that. I hope someone will take care of them. Now, the reasons we are all here in person," said Alex with energy in his voice. "We have split the project in certain aspects that are of high importance. The team gathered here is composed of people of many different departments, all of whom will be joining the expedition. We need to know each other well, since we will act as leaders upon arrival at the Solis system. The entirety of the project will be supervised by myself and the construction of the *Hera*, by Jain."

"So, we go with *Hera*?" said Juuda, who was a close friend of Jain and Alex.

"Yes. *Hera*! From the goddess whose breastmilk got spilled in the sky, creating the galaxy."

"I like it," said Gakuto.

"You will like this more," said Alex. "We are estimating a three-thousand-year trip, and the plan is to get there sleeping. However, even in drug-induced hibernation, our bodies will require nutrition. This is where you come in, Gakuto."

"Say no more! I got it covered. Not yet, but I will figure it out," said Gakuto with his permanently excited attitude.

"I am sure you will. There will be more problems to tackle, and the team in this room will be in charge of solving them. You can apply for as many people as you

need, and I will make sure that we have the necessary help to complete the project. Is everything understood so far?"

Heads nodded throughout the room. Only Gakuto's voice was in the air.
"Yes, sir!" His energy was enough for everyone.

"So, Steve, you will be head of engineering. Your main tasks will be solving the issues with large-body detection and avoidance as well as dust and small-particle collisions."

Steve looked seriously toward Alex. "There are many ways we can work on that. More important will be the AI which will drive those systems, since we will all be sleeping, and the shielding from cosmic radiation."

Alex smiled like he was not expecting such a good answer. "That's exactly right. Margaret here is the leading authority on computing and artificial intelligence. She will work with you on this project. Together with Hypatia, you will work on shielding the *Hera* from anything space has to throw at us. You have a nearly unlimited resource for this to work but not unlimited time."

"I have seen the timetables, and I think we should be able to solve those problems in time," said Steve with confidence.

"Moving on to the next problem, we need to shield all possible life on those planets from our microbes."

"I think this is my field too," interrupted Gakuto.

"I too think this is going to fall on your department, Gakuto," said Jain

"Do I have to do everything?" Gakuto said while smiling toward Konoya, the psychiatrist of the group.

"Hypatia, you will also be tasked to lead the team that will figure out the maneuvers that the ship will need to do to decelerate upon arrival."

"I have actually begun working on it since I got the briefing of the project. It is less complex than you might think," said Hypatia.

"Happy to hear that. Now let's go to the three probably hardest problems we will face. We need a way of adapting to the different gravity forces. We don't know which of the system's planets we will be landing on yet, so we need to be prepared for anything. Galen, you are the doctor of the group. You program nanobots to deal with all sorts of conditions of the human body. I am guessing that you are the best-suited person for this job."

Galen was skeptical. "We have used nano-enhancements before to increase strength or stamina on humans, but the experiments were at their infancy. Controlling that with our minds might be a very hard task. I will work on it for a while and update you about the direction we will be taking."

"Sounds promising enough," said Alex. "I will add to this that we need a way of combating the lack of gravity on the ship and the probable births that will take place. Babies and kids will need a full G worth to grow their bones strong and healthy."

Most nodded their heads in understanding.

"This will be a hard one to work on," said Steve.

"We could forbid childbirth during the trip," said Jain, "but the benefits of this research will be crucial for many other aspects of our technological innovation and needs for this expedition."

"As Jain explained, there are many scenarios, and technology like that would be key to solving other problems which might occur," added Alex. "We will finally need an energy source to power all those functions of the ship."

The team got their assignments and began immediately working on the project.

Chapter 5
Preparations and Departure

2388

Low Earth orbit. Inside the *Hera*.

"Jain, I am having hard time believing it. We are done," said Alex with excitement.

Jain's eyes were wide open. Shaking her head, she replied, "I don't know if I should believe it either. We are done. Thirty-four years in the making, and the last system is online."

Juuda entered the room and smiled at them. "Guys, the crew is waiting for you at the hall."

They stood and walked toward the hall.

Alex entered the hall with Jain, and they were greeted with smiles and the occasional cheer from Gakuto.

Alex took a deep breath and said, "Hello everyone! Most of you know each other since you worked on this project, one way or another. Some are new among us. I will give you a rough briefing of the mission objectives and the technologies that some of you might not be aware of yet. Details about them can be found on your individual e-boxes." There was excitement in the room. "I will start by briefly mentioning some magnificent technologies that will help us on this voyage. Our worst enemy in space, radiation, has been transformed into our best friend. The skin of the ship, along with our one-square-kilometer solar sail, are capable of absorbing cosmic rays and turning them into useful energy. This system also shields us from radiation. Our acceleration will be done with said solar sail, but with an added boost. A group of solar-powered satellites in orbit around the sun will be shining beams of light toward our sail, helping to boost the acceleration. This cuts down on travel time to just under three thousand years. We are also equipped with thrusters and nuclear explosives, which will give us an initial boost, but they are only being used to test the systems. Those will be our means of decelerating and maneuvering the *Hera* after we arrive at Solis. Now for the fun parts." He looked around with a faint smile. "Our food will be composed of standard bug and nutrient shakes, like back at home. The added flavors are courtesy of our friend Gakuto, who made it possible, probably by accident."

"It was completely deliberate" answered Gakuto with a comedic frown

"Now to the new and exciting technologies. The *Hera* is the first ship of its kind. It is ... alive!" After pausing for a second, Alex added, "In a sense. The ship has its own immune system. It is currently swarming with nanobots made of various materials, ready to defend against any change to its morphology. Any scratch, dent, or hole will be patched automatically. Those nanobots join to form alloys and can weld each other to repair virtually any damage. They can replenish their numbers automatically, and in theory, if an energy supply is always there, then it can run indefinitely." After another short pause, he continued. "Finally, to the biggest

development we have achieved. Probably the biggest development in our history since the COD. We created another limb for us. We are finally entering the dream world of cybernetics. The nanobots that so far worked to protect us from aging and disease have been updated to function as something more. Something way more." Any noise in the room was silenced at that point. Everyone was eager to hear exactly what he was talking about. "We can now use our nanos to enhance our strength or reduce it. We reduce it by making movement harder than it would normally be. If you are wondering why this would be useful, I will explain. The different gravity forces we will experience will have a huge impact on us. From the spaceship where everything moves easily to the planets we will potentially see, our bodies are not suited for environments such as these. Now, however, we can visit anyplace, and we will feel as if everything has the same forces as it would be back on Earth. The most remarkable part, though, is that this happens with your mind. You control them as easily as another limb, after a bit of practice. Additionally, if you need to lift something heavy and you put all your force, you will have a larger range of forces to use that are reaching multiples of your original physical strength. The same applies for running, although it's harder to get used to. It requires more practice."

Most were looking with a curious frown while others were in disbelief.

"This is remarkable," said one crewmember.

"Is it safe?" said another.

Alex calmed them down by saying, "These have been tested for a while, and everyone on the command has already fully integrated them. You will all be replacing your existing nanobots and begin training with the abilities of the new ones. These will also be able to harden your skin, effectively protecting you from impact forces and turning you into somewhat of a hero. In a few months, we will be leaving, so make sure to get used to them and report any uneasy feelings to Galen."

September 2389

Inside the *Hera*

From a window, the Earth looked like a white marble suspended in space. Slowly, the crew began entering their hibernation capsules. Jain looked at Alex and with obvious anxiety said, "I don't think I want to be awake for the first part."

"This will be the most fun. We will accelerate in a way that we will never experience again," replied Alex.

"Yeah. That ... I will get into my hibernation pod and follow the program."

"By the way," said Alex, "I have barely checked the hibernation timetables. When am I seeing you again?"

"Well ... it's made in a way that the crew will get to know one another in the span of the trip and minimize energy consumption. If all goes well, then not too often." Alex looked at Jain with a frown, at which Jain continued, "But unexpected events and pregnancies will change this timetable, so we might get to see each other more."

"Yay," Alex said sarcastically and kissed Jain before helping her strap into her pod.

A few seconds after the initial chemical rockets turned on, nuclear blasts were being detonated behind the ship, turning explosive energy into forward motion. A

few minutes after, and the ship was already traveling at about fifty thousand kilometers per hour. At this point, the solar sail took charge, and the ship began its calm trip with barely noticeable acceleration.

The *Hera* had in its storage another thirty satellites that could be used in case the planets were not habitable. The ship would find a new destination or reverse course, and another three thousand years later, they could be back on Earth.

A hopeful detail of the *Hera* was that it was equipped with special facilities for babies and mothers. It was expected that in the passage of such time, new children would be born, and since they couldn't be placed in hibernation immediately, they and their mothers would need special care to simulate Earth on board.

With only a thousand members to start, all genetically diverse as to not limit any potential first-generation couples, the *Hera* began its trip.

And thus humanity kicked into deep space its last hope for survival.

2420

Hera

With just a few crewmembers awake, Alex woke up and began walking toward the main deck. An awkward feeling began to envelop his mind. *Is this for real? It feels so surreal that just a bit ago I was in orbit around the Earth. This is probably the first step toward conquering the galaxy. Why haven't we seen any alien species? I need to focus on the mission at hand. I should not daydream so much.* While approaching the living areas, he heard voices.

He recognized General Bara's voice. "It's hard not to think how crazy what we are doing is. We have been going for about thirty years, and it makes me feel ... weird. We are in the middle of nowhere now. On Earth, so many things have happened that it's hard to keep track."

Alex interrupted him. "We are in the middle of everything, actually. How is everyone doing? Also, that's a strange noise behind the music. Like an engine of some sort."

Konoya replied, "The background noise is constantly playing. Even when the music is on. Otherwise, the silence can be deafening."

"Let me see." Alex turned off the music and noise and waited with his finger upward, indicating for everyone to be silent. "It's true! The silence is incredible. I mean I knew about it, but it's different to experience it firsthand. If we don't speak, it feels like something is wrong. I was expecting the ship to be making some kind of noise with all those systems in operation, but there is nothing. It's actually quite incredible how quiet it can get."

With a clear issue to discuss, Konoya changed the subject. "What I find strange is that no one is scared. Everyone is so used to technology working that they don't even consider the chance of something failing."

"That, or Apostasis has affected everyone a little bit," replied Alex with a smirk.

"Or that," said Konoya with her eyebrows high.

Bara interrupted their conversation with his own worry. "Things back at home don't look too good. There are a lot of problems, and Apostasis seems to be getting the better of society. There is also a lot of talk about Project Gaia. The resources spent for the making of *Hera* have taken their toll onto the rest of the population."

Konoya, wanting to ease the conversation, tried to once again change the subject. "Well, yes, there have always been problems. This time is no different, just the reasons differ from time to time, but also, Alex, you are probably one of the oldest humans in existence."

"How so?" asked Alex.

"Apostasis seems to have claimed the lives of almost everyone who was born before the COD. And you were born shortly after, which means you are one of the oldest humans. Congratulations."

"I am not sure If this is something I should feel happy about," said Alex.

"Well, you should not. It might be an indication that the COD only extended our lives but also cut short our birth rate. It might end up being the doom of the people back on Earth," replied Konoya.

Alex stood up and looked around. "I don't think now is the proper time for philosophical discussions, Konoya. We have other things to care for. I will be checking my logs, and then I will head back to my hibernation chamber. Try to think happy thoughts."

2515

Earth

Old practices began to resurface. Worship of deities started to be common. The superintendents were losing power.

2798

Earth

Resources were becoming an issue. Most cities halted research in favor of conservation.

2837

Earth

The first war since the Osiris impact broke out. The city of Budapest was destroyed. News between cities was becoming increasingly filtered.

2897

Hera

As Juuda went for his scheduled system checks, he noticed errors. *This has to be a mistake*, he thought. Immediately, he ran to wake Alex.

About an hour later, Alex was ready to hear the news. "What has happened, Juuda?"

"There seems to be an issue with our acceleration systems. I have been checking for the past hour, and nothing seems to be malfunctioning from our side."

Alex was clearly skeptical. "Calm down and explain the problem to me first."

"Okay." Juuda calmed himself and continued, "We are receiving reduced boost from the satellites. Some have failed, and the others seem to be failing one by one. We will soon be cruising without any added acceleration."

"Why am I hearing this just now?" said Alex with an aggressive frown.

"When the first satellite went offline, we thought that it was a malfunction that they would fix back on Earth. We have not received any reply yet as to why this happened," replied Juuda.

"When did it start?"

"About a month ago."

"Wake Steve and Gakuto up," ordered Alex with clear discomfort.

Awhile later, they were all gathered in the control room with all necessary data on their hands.

Alex began the conversation. "Now that you have all read the problem, we need to check what that means."

"Well," said Steve, "we are currently going at about three million meters per second, so that means that our trip will be extended by another thousand years if they don't repair them fast."

Alex coldly replied, "We can consider them all offline in one month. There will be no repairs."

"Is there something we don't know?" asked Juuda.

"Now you know. There will be no repairs, so we are looking at an extra thousand years of travel," said Alex.

Trying to calm everyone down, Gakuto said with a more neutral temper, "There is no appointment we need to get to. If the energy is enough, then I can probably cook up a way to extend our food supply by a hundred years. Steve, will we be on with energy reserves?"

"We will fold our sail back, which means no more repairs on it. Also if we limit our awake time a bit more, then we should be fine in terms of energy for the trip."

Alex stood up. "Then let's not make things sound more tragic than they are. Our trip will take longer. Juuda, please update everyone's notifications with the new data. Everyone should reschedule their awake time accordingly."

3016

Hera

Jain was walking toward the nursery to see the children. Her shift was ending, and she was eager to see her own child before going back to her capsule to sleep. She began playing with the children when Dimitri interrupted her bliss.

"Jain, you need to see this."

"What happened?" said Jain, surprised.

"We have lost all communications with Earth."

"How can that be? We have backup systems," said Jain with a questioning frown.

"I have been working on it for a while. I think it was purposely done."

"Wake Alex and Margaret up, please."

After Alex and Margaret were brought up to speed, Margaret left to run diagnostics. She returned and said, "They really did shut us out. The systems stopped working purposely."

Alex's second awakening to bad news began to frustrate him. "First the boosters, now the communications. We know that Earth had its problems, but this got out of hand. What are our options?"

Margaret calmly replied, "There is not much we can do. There are no ground receivers on Earth now, and the satellites seem to have been destroyed. I will run occasional checks, and I will be broadcasting toward Earth frequently, so once they wish to hear from us, our voices will be there. If they begin broadcasting again toward us, we will also be hearing from them. There is not much else we can do for now."

Alex's frustration did not subside. "What will it mean if we do not reestablish communications?"

Dimitri made a sad face and with a bit of thought said, "Well, we mainly lose contact with our people there. They actually lose more than us. They will not hear of our findings. Solis is forty light years away; our news would be with a delay of forty years, but it would still be better than no news."

Margaret frowned and said, "No, Dimitri, losing contact with friends is the least of our losses. New technologies from Earth would be shared with us even with delay; new developments here would be shared with Earth. We did not lose contacts, we lost technologies." Margaret seemed very upset. "We can't compare the advancements we will make with a few thousand people on Solis against the developments of millions."

"So, we are finally completely cut off from Earth," said Alex skeptically. "Margaret, you are right; we lost very much, but there is also nothing we can do. Inform everyone that if they have any private messages in their boxes, which shed light as to why this happened, they have to share it with me."

As Alex walked toward a terminal, he saw an urgent message from Semreh, his close friend and superintendent of Abuja.

Hello Alex.

I hope you will see this message soon and you will not be sleeping for the next 300 years. It has been a while since I began regretting not joining you into the stars. Now I don't even have time for regrets. The situation here is starting to get out of hand. The cities are falling apart. Despite our best efforts, we will need more hands if we are to repair everything in time for Earth's recovery. Apostasis is still affecting a large amount of population. Mainly the ancient ones. The people like you and me. Every city has made a separate council of elders who have their own way of dealing with the situation, and growth has halted. Many projects for speeding the recovery of the planet have ended, and an increasing amount of people are filled with a constant rage. Basically, if you are not affected by apostasies, you are affected by rage. We are now trying to convince everyone that the best cause of action is you. Although you are very far, you are 1,000 ancients who are unaffected by apostasis and can clearly see things from far away. The proposal is that you will be the counseling party of the planet and try from afar to lead us until Earth becomes habitable again. Although you are three years

away, decisions take this long to be made, so it will be like you are here. Many of the ancients are in opposition and even claim that you abandoned Earth. I hope you see this soon and contact me so we can discuss things further. I am attaching some information for you which will not bring you joy, but I hope it will help you take the necessary decisions.

Godspeed my friend.

The message was received just two years before the end of communications.

3487

Hera

With multiple kids on board the ship, many crewmembers had taken the role of teachers. The holoclasses were fun and interactive, but the energy needs were too great for them to be used extensively. The team going to Solis was already composed of people who had never been to Earth.

6403

Hera

The *Hera* entered the Solis system and began its dancing maneuvers to reduce its speed. While the ship was calculating trajectories, it was simultaneously gathering information about the planets and the interior of the solar system.

Are we invading? ... Are we ... good? ... Is there really a choice?

Chapter 6

Gaia

The third planet of the Solis system, Solis-C, which was nicknamed "Gaia," seemed to be a utopia for humans to settle on. The crew began waking up while the ship was orbiting the beautifully blue and green planet at relatively slow speeds.

The head geologist, Hellen, with uncontrolled excitement, was organizing her team. "We have the suggestions fed by our systems people. We need to see the potential landing sites and choose fast. Margaret, please isolate our searches to places near river deltas with close proximity to both mountains and forests. We will need materials for our settlement."

Trying to help as fast as she could, Margaret said, "We don't have subterranean data yet. I can isolate potential places, but I can't say for sure that there will be metal veins close by."

"Then let's choose our top picks, and within a couple of passages, we should be able to get some underground information if we selectively scan those," said Hellen, full of confidence.

"I am on it," replied Margaret while working with her team.

Once all teams were working on their projects, Alex gathered the leaders to talk to. "Finally, we are gathered all together. I will have to ask this before anything else: Have you realized that we did it? We did it! We made it safe and sound. The *Hera* worked!"

"I knew she would," said Gakuto, smiling and shaking his head.

"Then why were you shaking in fear when we met, like a thousand years ago?" teased Konoya.

"That never happened," replied Gakuto.

Alex interrupted. "Right. So now we are here. At our new home. Hypatia, what can you tell us about the solar system?"

"Well, when we left Earth, we were joking about this system been engineered. We might have to begin thinking about that again, only this time seriously. There are five planets that are habitable, with Solis-C or Gaia being the closest to what we would engineer for ourselves. All five have oxygen, all five have life. Not advanced enough to broadcast signals though. All five are moonless, and there are nearly no asteroids roaming between them. The chances of a naturally occurring solar system like this are astronomically low. Finding one so close to Earth is ... nothing short of a miracle."

Everyone got skeptical for a second until Alex broke the silence. "We will soon be ready to descend. Before we go, I would like to share with you some information." His seriousness made everyone focus. "Before our communications with Earth were severed, I received information that Earth was facing an increasingly larger number of problems. They even sought our help to combat them, which either way I think it was a desperate attempt. Now we have a decision to make, but first, Margaret will give us the whole picture. Margaret?"

"Here is the problem. Earth has been broadcasting again. We believe that they never stopped. We have a forty-year delay now, but we are still seeing an increasingly complex signal arriving."

Gakuto smiled. "So, they made it. The Earth should be habitable now. And what marvelous technologies are they going to share with us?"

Margaret looked at him with her lips pressed together. "They are not." Everyone looked at Margaret, who continued. "Everything is encrypted in a way that we cannot decrypt it."

"Well then, send them an unencrypted message and ask for the key or for a new channel where we can communicate," argued Gakuto.

"Well, that's the thing. We have, and they never replied. We think they have purposely kept us cut off," replied Margaret.

"Now," said Alex, "we need to decide if we will be sharing our findings with them. We can just as easily encrypt all our transmissions and hide our discoveries."

"I don't see any reason to do that," said Gakuto.

Konoya broke her silence. "Actually, do they know we have arrived safe and sound?"

"Yes, they do," replied Jain.

"Then we should cut them off. The chances of them contacting us will increase if their curiosity increases. As long as they are receiving all our news, they might never open channels with us."

Jain started moving her head in agreement. "I think Konoya is right. We should keep our communications encrypted until they open an unencrypted channel first. We have been broadcasting all the way till here."

"Then we agree that this is the plan?" said Alex, who saw the room agreeing. "Konoya, please update all communicators with new encryptions. Let's head back to the crew to prepare for our landing."

Twenty-four hours pass with everyone preparing for the landing. The suitable areas have been thoroughly scanned, and the crew is finally ready for their descent. They are all waiting for Alex's order to enter the "Arrow," which will take them to the surface.

"This is it," said Alex, "we are finally ready. I believe that everyone has read the reports of the ground team and of the analysis of the planet. In brief, the planet Gaia has a radius of 2.1 times that of Earth. Its gravity is 1.24 times higher, which means that although you might not feel it since your nanobots will take the extra load, items around you will fall faster, tools and structures will age faster, and other daily changes. The days here last about thirty-three hours and twenty-one minutes, so we will all have to get used to this cycle. Everyone will take his own pass in making that happen. A year here lasts 44.26 days or about 61.5 days back on Earth. There are no seasons for us to mark the beginning of the first year, and therefore we will mark the first day as the day of our landing. Today. Lastly, we have no data to see the effects of ... anything, really. Everything is new, so anything you feel is wrong, anything you think is important, you need to report it." He took a deep breath. "Good luck to us all."

The atmosphere was quite calm. It was as if none really understood that they would be entering a new world. The cheers had ended, and the seriousness of the work ahead was all the thinking was about. Everyone had specific tasks to perform,

which would go on until the safe establishment of the city. The idea that they were an invading species colonizing another world had not passed through anyone's mind ... yet.

The ground team had sent a message that everything was clear for the descent of the crew. Once the Arrow was fully loaded, the 250 people it could fit sat on their seats and began their fifteen-minute journey to the planet's surface. The rest of the crew, along with their machinery, would land in single-use capsules of twenty-five each that would be salvaged for materials after their use. After the Arrow landed, Alex and Jain were the first ones out.

"I can't believe my eyes," said Alex while holding Jain's hand.

"This is paradise," said Jain. "You brought us to paradise." She turned and kissed him.

Trees taller than the roof of the dome cities, pristine water in a river, the smell of the forest entered their noses and woke up feelings they had forgotten they had. The laughs and dances of the few small children that exited the Arrow were enough to bring many to tears. Jain, holding Alex tight, was mumbling, "This is what we had? This is what we lost to Osiris?"

The capsules containing the crew and equipment began to land like feathers touching the ground, without even making enough noise to scare the strange animals that had the courage to stand by and see the invasion of their planet. One by one, the humans saw the wonder of Gaia and stood in awe. The dawn of humanity's new era was filled with wonder and excitement. Slowly the first settlers began waking from the spell that nature had cast on them and started working on their assignments. Setting up the temporary tents was their first job. Others started checking the water and soil composition. Soon, like ants, all of the settlers were moving to one goal: the setting up of their first city.

Dimitri approached Alex. "I will keep the general records with the Y:D: format. Today is Y1:D:1."

"Yeah, sure," replied Alex with little interest in the subject.

Within a few days, the machines had found material veins, and they began extracting raw metals. A 3-D printer began to be fed with them and started the outline of a city. The walls were the first thing to go up. Protection against the unknown. The Arrow transformed into a laboratory, as it was planned to do after its landing. After the walls were ready, a name was printed. Argos, in honor of one of the oldest cities of the old world, and then, the first human settlement in deep space.

"Mr. Bara! I saw something," said one of the children.

"What did you see, Kate?" answered Bara.

"Over there by the hill. I was playing hide and seek, and I saw a creature looking at me."

"What sort of creature?" asked Bara. "Did you take a video of it?"

"I wanted to, but I got scared and run back here to tell you."

"Okay, what did it look like?"

"It looked like a boy, but very very ugly. Big nose and big ears, also long nails, and he was holding a stick."

"Are you sure he was holding a stick, or was it a branch?"

"I am sure. When he saw me, he walked slowly backwards to leave, but I ran before I could see more."

"You did great by telling me. Make sure not to venture too far now."

Bara called for the leaders to gather. "Kate saw a primitive intelligent humanoid," said Bara, to everyone's shock.

"How sure are we about what she saw?" asked Jain.

"She described it well. Also Clive said that while flying, he saw something that resembled primitive huts. He could not be sure if it was natural from that distance, but after he is done transporting the items from the landing pods, he will go take a better look."

Alex stood up. "Okay, finding primitives does not really complicate our lives here so much. It just means that Gaia has its own history to share in time. For now, Bara, please set a perimeter and make sure that any kid playing will not cross it. We can't be sure of the abilities of those humanoids, but let's not take any chances."

Y:2 D:27

Argos

The colony had adapted pretty well into the new home, and Gaia seemed to be plentiful. There were tons of different insects that lived there, which acted as the main source of nutrients and could be farmed easily. It was quite strange that evolution had favored such similar insects to be shaped there as they were back on Earth. The first edible grains and plants had been identified and were cultivated around Argos. Due to the fear of ecological collapse, no seeds or animals were brought from Earth. The *Hera* had quite a few of them, though, in frozen state, in case a planet was barely habitable without much life. Here, all this seemed redundant for now. Everything was plentiful. The red star in the sky gave a color of romance in the atmosphere. It was almost as if nothing had ever happened. Everything had gone too smoothly.

Every day, the citizens of Argos would gather at the heart of the city and discuss any major breakthrough they had, difficulties faced, or resource needs to complete their individual or collective projects. In the center, a sign was raised. Upon it, the word "Agora" was written. This was a place more for recreation and social empowerment than problem solving. More a gathering of friends than a gathering for work.

Argos grew slowly. There was no real reason to rush anything either way.

The primitives seemed to be approaching and staying at a distance.

"Why are we not visiting them yet?" asked Jain.

"It's early," answered Alex. "If, by any means, they pose a threat, we should be first ready to defend easily."

"Are you really worried that a preindustrial civilization might pose a threat to us, Alex?"

"Honestly, no. But this is an alien world. I have spent too much time daydreaming about meeting aliens with whom I might be able to communicate, but I also spent time thinking what to do in case they are hostile. It's too early. Let them observe us for a while, and when the time is right, we will go see them."

"To be fair, I am not in a rush to meet them. I am just curious to see one up close. They resemble little children."

"They resemble Goblins," said Alex, waiting to see Jain's reaction.

"Goblins?" asked Jain. "Like from our ancient myths?"

"Yes! Don't you see the resemblance?"

"I don't know! I did not spend that much time searching for depictions of Goblins in the past."

As days went by, the "Goblins," as they started calling them, were keeping their distance. It seemed that they were nonhostile or at least smart enough not to make a move against someone visibly superior.

Chapter 7

First Contact

Y:5 D:18

Argos

Albert, one of the guards stationed at the wall, heard approaching steps during the night hours. Accustomed as he was to these sounds coming from animals, he gave no attention to it. As the steps started approaching the wall, he heard whispers. Something outside of the wall was clearly talking to its partner in some sort of language. His immediate reaction was to take cover, continue to listen, and record without making any noise. He knew those were the Goblins, but this was the first time they approached the wall. This was his chance to see one up close, as the order was not to approach them by any means. After they reached the wall, they began touching it. Then they moved away. Albert unsuccessfully tried to get a clear view through his weapon's scope. He then immediately set a drone to follow the creatures and notified Bara about the event. In his turn, Bara woke Alex up to discuss the situation. By the time Alex was checking the monitor, the drone had lost them in the vegetation.

Next morning at the agora.

"I understand that most of you want to start venturing further out and that you are eager to meet our Goblin neighbors," said Alex. "This will happen soon."

"I for one would like to start exploring this world. We don't have anything to fear from those creatures," said Jonah.

"Yeah, I don't understand why we can't go further than the perimeter," said Maria, adding to the argument.

"We have a protocol," said Alex. "Before we left Earth, we made scenarios to prepare us for many different threats. One of those was for the existence of a preindustrial species."

"And these protocols dictate for us to be closed into this small area?" said Maria, frustrated.

"The protocols increase our chances of making it here," said Jain. "Your failure to understand why we have not made contact or entered their territories yet is no argument, Maria."

"As Jain already mentioned," continued Alex calmly, "we should not make moves that might be considered hostile to them. That is why Clive is not flying his Eagle over them. This kind of technology might trigger responses we do not expect."

"And what could the worst-case scenario be?" asked Jonah. "I am honestly trying to understand this. Most of you had training before you left Earth, but Maria, myself, and many more here were born in the Hera. We do not see things the same way as you, so you should make things clearer."

Alex looked at Jonah with understanding. "The worst case is hard to imagine. But an army surrounding us might force us to use a Cerberus, one of those war machines the *Hera* has in it. A massacre against a primitive species would not be the best way to begin finding our place in this world."

"I get it yes," answered Jonah. "How will we approach them once the time is right?"

"We do not know yet, but last night, they made the first contact themselves. This might be a sign for either direction, so we must be cautious. Soon we will have a plan ready and proceed to meet them and make sure we can coexist here."

The following nights, more and more of the Goblins were approaching the wall. The expedition required a detailed map of the planet, and the *Hera* was not optimized to make detailed maps. Just subterranean imaging and basic surface mapping. The details were supposed to be made with the instruments on board the Eagle that Clive was piloting, but it was grounded until the natives were approached calmly.

"Alex!" said Jain. "The meeting is in five minutes."

"I am coming." Alex looked at himself in the mirror and got prepared for the meeting.

"I think we should start with Kono's observations," said Jain. Alex nodded in agreement.

"As you all know, we have become very slow," began Kono. "Since the invention of our immortality vaccine, we have become slower and slower at an alarming rate. We sleep a lot; we don't rush almost anything. We like to walk, and we enjoy taking everything as it comes. This is changing here. We have been here for over a year on Earth time, and we want to explore more. We have seen the Goblins, as we came to call them, and we have seen that they are not alone. There is another species that has briefly come close to us. The people are eager to explore and see new things."

"I have to agree," added Gakuto. "There is so much diversity here that I feel imprisoned. I want to explore and learn. It feels like we don't have a clear plan yet."

"I want to add to this," said Steve. "We really are starting to wake up from our slumber. The city's progress is much faster than anticipated. Most people are working hard because they feel that when the city is done, they will be able to go out and explore."

Alex calmly raised his head. "The time to start exploring is indeed now. Some of you are aware of the protocol. For those who are not, the protocol is simple. We wait for them to make first contact. It has been so long since those protocols were made that I have forgotten the logic behind them. Those creatures must fear us. I never expected that after so long, they would have not made an effort of making contact. Albert even volunteered to stay out in a visible location one night, but they steered away from him."

"However, we have managed to gather a lot of intel about them," added Bara.

"We have indeed, but not of their bigger cousins," said Gakuto with a smile.

"Yes, they seem more cautious," continued Bara.

Margaret raised her hand to say something, and everyone looked at her. "Before we decide on going to meet with them, I need to inform you. As of today, a

few hours ago, we have the terrain maps from the *Hera*. They are not detailed, but they pave an image, which is," she paused for a second, "expected perhaps. Helen has more info about it."

With all eyes on her, Helen said, "We need the Eagle to fly and give us details, but from the first analysis, it seems that deltas and big rivers host a plethora of cities. As you can see from your maps, there is deforestation and zoning, which indicate a preindustrial civilization."

"This is strange," added Konoya.

"Why is that?" Alex asked.

"Well, they are nocturnal and live underground. They also don't seem to like water so much. They are mountain dwellers. At least the profile we have made of them is that they should have no intention of settling next to rivers."

"It is clear that we have a lot to learn. Let's organize the first expedition to meet our neighbors. There is what seems to be a city not too far from here," said Alex.

"It should be just about twenty minutes with the Eagle," said Bara, ready to call Clive.

"No," interrupted Alex, "we will go on foot. Let's try the first time to be calmer. Have Clive ready to go pick them up in case of emergency, and make sure everyone is prepared for the worst."

"But on foot it is more than a day's walk."

"We have been here five years. One day will not be a problem. Also, we need to start referencing time to Gaia cycles and not Earth's, Konoya."

Konoya nodded.

Gakuto could not contain his excitement. "I am going too. Oooh, there is no way I am not going."

"Bara, who will we be sending?"

"I think I will go myself with Anais. She has been trying to find excuses to do some scouting for a while now. Along with Gakuto, that makes three."

"I will be joining too," added Juuda.

"You have been silent for a while. What happened?" joked Gakuto.

"I am concerned."

"What about?"

"I worry that if they force our hands, we will use those death machines we have on board the *Hera*."

"You mean the Cerberus?" asked Bara.

"Yeah, those. I was against taking them with us, and now I worry that our confidence might be a challenge for them. This might make them force our hand."

"You are overthinking it, my friend," said Alex. "This is why we are going on foot. We want to make our first contact as smooth as possible."

Jain looked at Konoya. "I will be overseeing this exhibition with you, Konoya. We might need some insight on how to react when we meet them."

Konoya replied, "That is why I think it's better if I join too. Someone has to keep an eye on Gakuto and his excitement."

"So, that makes five. We should not add any more. A quick pickup in case of emergency cannot happen with more," said Bara.

"Will you overlook with me?" said Jain, while looking at Helen.

"For sure."

The next day, the first important expedition started. A group of five people left Argos to travel west, in hopes of meeting and befriending the so-far neutral aliens.

Anais, who had been training as a scout for many years in simulated environments, was carrying a reconnaissance quadruple drone system that had four quads circulating the area above and front of the party at a distance of one kilometer. The main function of the drones would be to notify the group of any unusual structure or creature not yet registered in their banks.

The first few hours went by with only a couple of new animals being observed. Soon the drones started registering more and more uncategorized species, which Jain or Helen from the base would watch and categorize as wildlife or as something that needed to be investigated further. The search was going very fast, with a large area being scanned in a very detailed manner.

After a few more hours, Anais broke the silence. "This can't be right."

"Is this a city?" said Jain from the coms.

Anais was standing in shock while the rest of the team were logging their hand monitors to see what she was seeing.

"By the gods!" said Gakuto. "It's a city. An actual skyscraper city."

"How can this be?"

Jain called for Alex and everyone else to join at headquarters.

"It's a city," said Steve.

Alex immediately widened his eyes with excitement and fear, "Be careful, they are not primitive at all. Bara! Order Clive to come and stay close to you."

Bara replied, "I don't think we have anything to fear. The city is about two kilometers away but looks abandoned. I will call Clive to stay one minute behind us just in case, though."

As they were slowly approaching the city, Steve noted, "Be very careful. Whoever made this city is not primitive at all. From the shapes of the buildings, I can tell you that their engineering level is beyond that of ours. Probably by a lot."

When they finally reached the first buildings, Helen stopped them. "There are no doors, no entrances at all. This city looks like it has sunk into the soil."

"And quite deserted," added Bara

Steve was in shock. "I see metal pieces here that have almost turned to dust. This city is ancient, but then, how can buildings of such design be standing if they are ancient?"

"This is very strange," said Bara. "I can't chip off material from the walls. It's solid."

Anais, who was already looking through a window into the interior of a building, said, "There should be broken fragments in there. I see an entire floor almost broken. Some kind of explosion must have taken place here." She proceeded to rappel down and dig into the soil that had accumulated on the floor from the broken windows. "Yeah, there are pieces of the material here."

"Is there any glass there?" asked Bara.

"I think there are tiny fragments. No big chunks, and nothing else. Everything has been removed."

"You're right, Bara," said Juuda. "There are no fragments of broken glass on any windows. Anywhere in the city, as it seems. Just as there does not seem to be almost anything at all inside the buildings."

"I think we have enough for one day. Leave a drone to scout the area, and get Clive to come pick you up," said Alex.

"No, let us walk back home," said Gakuto "There are still things we should see. We can take a different route back to explore more."

"I agree," said Juuda. "We also have a higher chance of meeting our friends this way."

Gakuto continued, "We should take the route that goes close to the river. The thick forest close to this ancient city must hide secrets."

Konoya looked at Bara and Alex through her communicator. "I also think that the Eagle will be a bad idea. It will draw too much attention to us. I think we should keep it back at Argos."

Bara nodded. "I agree. Last thing we want is for curiosity to lead the Goblins from all around to us."

"I wish we could dig there," said Steve.

"We can't now, but what do you expect to find?" asked Jain.

"Well, I want to see what a species of this advanced technology used to travel with."

"Now I am curious too," said Jain. "We need to arrange for an expedition to go dig and find out with the first opportunity we have."

"We have to transmit the discovery back to Earth," said Alex. "Perhaps this will help them decide to open channels with us again."

"It will take forty years to go and another forty for the answer to come back, but yeah, we should," agreed Jain. "Gather anything that looks manmade ... or Goblin-made, and bring it back for analysis."

While walking back toward Argos, they were all alerted to find something of interest. Excited, they scouted the forest and looked at every strange bug and plant they encountered.

"We should camp there for tonight," said Anais, pointing at a spot on the map. "It should be about an hour away."

"Steve said quietly, "Guys, do you get the feeling that we are being watched?"

"We are," said Bara. "They have been following us since we left the city. Why do you think I led you through areas without thick vegetation?."

"Shouldn't we be worried?" asked Gakuto.

"They are good at hiding in the vegetation. The drones could not pick them up. I, however, set a small camera on the way, and I could see that they are armed with spears and bows. I doubt that they can even penetrate our skin."

With a bit of worry, the group continued their hike. Every few hundred meters, they would see non-natural structures or slabs poking through the soil. They would record them and move on.

"Wow!" Bara's eyes and mouth were as open as wide they could.

The whole team stood watching in awe. Jain and anyone who was observing the feed also stood speechless.

"A statue. A statue of ... is this a human head?" said Helen with her voice barely reaching her own ears.

"Is this some kind of joke? Alex! Are you seeing this?" said Jain.

"What is this? I mean ... what is the chance that they made art and it ended up resembling us by accident?" asked Alex in shock.

"Zero. This is a statue of a human protruding from the soil, Alex. What is going on here?" continued Jain.

"Okay, now things are getting very weird here," said Helen.

"Everybody, take a breather. We need to think."

"I am not sure what to think. There is a human statue here. We need to dig it up and bring it here," said Jain.

"We will. Once we can, we will send the Eagle with tools to dig it out. For now, let's just take a breath."

After they marked the location and took records of the statue, the team began to move to the designated spot where they would be staying for the night. Within a half hour, the team had reached the spot and began setting up camp. Although excited, everyone was sunk into their own thoughts, as was everyone at Argos too. The scenarios that the statue gave birth to were countless. While camp was being set, Helen was registering the small buildings that were protruding from the ground near the shore of the river.

Steve broke the silence. "I wish we could replicate the material that they used. It seems like it never breaks. They used it for everything."

"I am more interested as to why the head of the statue was kept clean of vegetation," said Konoya. "Our resemblance to it must also be the reason they are not hostile to us."

While the tents were being inflated, the liquid food was warming up in its bag.

Konoya continued, "What are you guys thinking? You are awfully silent. Especially you, Gakuto."

"I am thinking, what if we are still in the *Hera*, and all this is a vivid dream of mine?" answered Gakuto.

"It makes more sense to think that we are being taken by whomever occupied this world and placed us inside a simulation," said Anais.

"Hey! That's a good thought. Perhaps they are actually placing us in a game-like place. A world designed for us to be toyed with."

"Or perhaps we are in an alien world with endless mysteries. Some closer to our understanding and some further. Letting our imagination run wild is not necessarily a bad thing, but don't let it stress you out," said Konoya.

"Okay, let's try to make the least imaginary scenario of how this could happen," said Gakuto.

"That's easy," said Helen. "The civilization who once lived here traveled to the stars and met humanity in an earlier stage. We have numerous of cultures whose ancient beliefs depict visitors coming from the stars."

"Okay. You're right, this makes more sense, but it completely drives me away from my holographic-reality concept," said Gakuto with a smile.

Looking at the sky, Anais said, "Imagine that. They could have visited us thousands of years ago, and now we visit them."

Jain's voice sounded from all their communicators. "I think you guys should take some time to sleep."

Anais left her drones as guards, and they all went to sleep in their two tents. The drones were monitoring the perimeter from the trees while Helen and Jain were taking turns acting as remote guards, watching over them. Their dreams were shared with all of the humans currently on Gaia. Everyone was dreaming of stories about the ancient past. The feeling of being so incredibly interested in a fantasy brought an unexplained pleasure to all. It had been a while since this was common for humans.

"Rise and shine," said Bara with a loud voice the next morning. "Wake up and let's get ready for our return."

Helen curiously looked at Anais who was petting a lizardlike animal. "What is this?" she said.

"This is Draco. He is my new pet."

"How did you come to befriend a lizard?"

"I can hardly sleep more than eight hours per night. When I came out, this guy was in the bag of food."

"And he just let you hold him?" asked Gakuto with the excitement of a child.
"Can I touch him?"

"Ask him, not me," said Anais.

When Gakuto's hand had almost reached Draco, the animal hissed and took an aggressive stance.

"He does not seem to like you," said Konoya, laughing.

"Actually, I think he is scared of all of you, being so close to him," said Anais, waving her hand to make space. "It took a little bit of food for him to let me touch him. Now he does not let me put him down."

"That's strange for an animal," said Gakuto while packing his backpack.

With Draco happily on her shoulder, Anais moved to the front of the party and began working to find a path toward Argos. The team crossed many more interesting areas, where they registered structures, most of which were deeply buried under the soil. On arriving back at the camp, the materials gathered were given to Jabir, who was the chemist of the group, to begin analyzing them. In the meantime, the exploration team tried to befriend Draco, who became an instant sensation.

The following days, small excursions took place but at limited range. Another excursion to the city was made by Jabir and Steve, who needed data about the materials used to build it. The analysis of samples and the observations made by the *Hera* provided enough data to begin forming a hypothesis about the history of that world.

"On top of today's progress reports, we will be discussing the results of the research on the history of this place," said Jain as he kicked off the meeting.

"We are beginning to form a hypothesis," continued Helen, "about the age and partial history of this world. It does not, however, feel complete by any standard. The *Hera* provided tectonic information, and contrary to our initial suspicions, this planet has very little tectonic movement, which is mainly located away from the area of the city. We will be referring to the city we partially explored

as Alpha City or just Alpha, to distinguish it from the other places we will surely visit."

"So, how did it get buried?" asked Juuda.

"Actually, that is the correct term, Juuda. The city did not sink; it was buried. The soil we see there has been deposited over large periods of time by the wind."

"How much time are we talking about?" continued Juuda.

"It's better if we let Jabir answer that."

"I am shocked by this material's properties," started Jabir. "It is pretty easy to date it from the moment it was split off from the rest of the building, and as long as it remains away from direct light. We know that the part I have was split by some kind of explosion about twenty-five to thirty thousand years or six to seven thousand Earth years ago. It is, however, impossible to date how long ago it was actually made, since it does not age."

"How can it not age?" asked Steve.

"It is stronger than any concrete and harder than carbide. On top of that, it heals itself and can even close visible cracks."

"Does it not need energy to do that?" asked Steve.

"This is the crazy part," said Jabir excitedly. "It is solar powered. It can absorb various frequencies of light and turn them into current. Then it transfers that current throughout its structure, providing replenishment to the basements and areas away from the light. Additionally, it stores current in itself. This is a material we worked very hard to make on Earth but never completed. The original piece you brought here could not show me its age because it was exposed to sun. This was one of the reasons I went back there to get new samples."

"Can we replicate it?" asked Alex.

"It will be hard. Figuring out its abilities is the easy part. Analyzing something so resistant to anything is another challenge."

"Make it your first priority."

After a short pause, Jain continued. "We also have a hypothesis about the events that caused the civilization to collapse."

"So, we are sure they have collapsed?" said Gakuto.

"It surely seems that way," continued Dimitri. "They are holding spears, and their city is deserted for twenty-five thousand years. I don't think there is a doubt about that."

"So, what took them out?" asked Gakuto.

"War. It seems war was the reason here. The buildings that have damage on them have the characteristics of ballistic weapons."

"Ballistic weapons and bullets of unimaginable power," added Steve. "There are holes that go through seven walls. I haven't tested it yet, but I think our plasma rifles would not go through a single wall. There are also buildings that look like they have been cut in half. Their war must have been terrifying."

"What is the chance that weapons like that are still in circulation out there?" asked Alex.

"It's not easy to know," said Steve. "If they could last that long, then they could still be around, but it surely does not seem to be so."

"Does no one see the weird connection here?" said Juuda. "Their civilization ended when ours was beginning. We also see creatures here that existed in our legends. Even Anais's lizard looks more like a miniature dragon than anything else."

"We are aware of the similarities," said Dimitri. "Taking the statue we found and everything else into consideration, we are starting to form the hypothesis that they indeed visited our world before their end. It is, however, a bit far-fetched. At least with the data we currently have.."

"On our second visit to Alpha, we came across a large predatory animal," said Bara. "We monitored it for a while, and we came to the conclusion that an attack from that thing would probably result in death. Our nanos will not be enough to protect us against it."

"I need to add to this," said Konoya. "Our entire population has never experienced disease or physical threat at all. This has made us fearless. But it has also made us high risk takers. I gather information on the daily lives of everyone, and I notice a high inclination to risk taking. Stories of big animals and Anais's dragon only drive people to want to venture out more."

Alex seemed worried. "Based on everything we heard, we will be making some changes. For starters, Steve, I want you to fabricate weapons for everyone."

"What kind of weapons?" asked Steve.

"Bara, do you have a say in it?"

"Well, I don't like the idea of everyone walking around with a plasma weapon. It is very dangerous. There is a technology that was developed before the Osiris impact which would be great for here."

"Which is?" asked Steve.

"Electric weapons. It uses electrical charge to shoot a tiny projectile out with supersonic speeds."

"How is that less dangerous?"

"It is, greatly. The projectile has the size of a pinhead. Despite its extraordinary speed, it has an effective range of about six meters. It is particularly devastating at anything under a meter. Shoots one projectile per second, and most importantly, it makes a very loud crackling sound. Perfect for scaring away anything."

"Sounds ideal. I suppose the schematics are in the database?" asked Alex.

"Of course," replied Bara.

"Then give access to the file to Steve. Begin producing one for each citizen. Since we can't stay within Argos any longer, we will allow excursions, but they will be accompanied by at least one soldier. Bara, you'll be in charge of the schedules."

"Should I place the weapon production before the sewage treatment?" asked Steve.

"Yes. Make sure everyone has a weapon. It will be included in the necessary equipment for all excursions."

"I also have an announcement," said Steve, while sending an image to the display. "This is a new drone. It can't hover, so it's actually a plane, but it can fly at very high altitudes, and it looks like some of the birds here. We can mount a small amount of weight, so for starters I am placing a visual camera on it, and I will be sending it to slowly map out the continent. I will make more of them after finishing the production of the weapons."

"There is one more thing," said Jain. "Every city must have a library of some kind. A place to hold important information and manage it. I want to organize the next excursion there in search of such a building. The information found inside would be invaluable. We have explored a tiny fraction of this continent, which is but a small fraction of this planet, and we are surrounded by mysteries. We need to speed up our information gathering, and I think the fastest way is through the discovery of a library."

"I have to agree with that," said Konoya. "Everyone wants to venture out and see this world, but mainly for their own recreation. We are working toward answers and progress extremely slowly. A library with ready answers sounds ideal."

In the days that followed, new data kept coming in. More preindustrial species were observed, which raised new questions. They also noted a pattern of scouting parties from various species coming to see Argos from a distance. Steve added a dozen more scouting planes, and soon a rough map of the terrain of the continent was made. It revealed a landscape rich in cities, with countless settlements of the indigenous species, which were marked and avoided when venturing for excursions until an approach plan was devised.

"Tomorrow the team will be leaving to go search for the library," said Jain to Alex while getting ready to sleep.

"Jain, does it not seem surreal to you?"

"You mean the whole situation here or something in particular?"

"Well, everything really. We have clear images of a few species living here, and they all resemble mythological creatures from back home. Dimitri, who had quite the fascination with old legends, is shocked. When I speak with him, he makes a compelling argument that we were visited by them a long time ago."

"It could be so. We will soon have more data to test this hypothesis. It should not trouble you so much."

"I can't help thinking that some of those ancient technologies will resurface somewhere and pose a threat to us. I delayed contacting the Goblins and every other species because I worry that this will start a series of events that might lead us to conflict."

"I understand. We do not have a good history of meeting new people in our own world."

"Yes, and here we see species which differ greatly, all living together. How did they manage it?"

"The answers will come slowly. Stressing about them will not help you make the right choices."

"You're right, as always. I am happy I can go through all this with you by my side."

Y:6 D:2
Argos

A well-organized search party of five left Argos to go straight to Alpha City. The camera they had left had not seen anything other than passing animals, and therefore the city was considered empty.

Upon arrival, the team proceeded to move close to the center, where it expected to find more buildings of importance. Parts of the city had been overtaken by vegetation, giving a magical feel to the already alien environment. The team sat to rest on a wide opening, probably the location of an old park. They still needed a few hours of walking to reach the center.

"It is pretty magical to sit here," said Juuda, opening his backpack to get his food out.

"I think Helen's hypothesis is right," said Anais. "This city must have been the capital of this world."

"I think so too," added Steve over the communicator. "The city gives the feeling that it was made with multiple architectures. We find similarities to the ones we have seen from the spy planes, but this is the only one that combines them all."

"They moved by air a lot as well," said Juuda sadly. "What could have caused them to destroy themselves?"

"Why do you find that strange?" asked Bara.

"So many species managed to coexist for long enough to build buildings with docks on almost every floor. We have not found a landfill yet, which might suggest that they managed their trash to keep the environment safe. Now we invaded them, and yet they have shown no signs of aggression. I can't imagine what could have destroyed such wonderful creatures."

Emile, who was a sociologist and history enthusiast, although he rarely spoke, decided to add his own input in the conversation. "This has me really confused. We see that they have almost no connection now. In fact, if you observe them, you will notice that they are on alert when they are near the borders of other species. They are not living in peace, and obviously they had war at some point. The question then arises, how did they manage to coexist so well for long enough to reach these technological achievements, and why did they fall?"

"We will find answers for all those questions soon enough," said Juuda. "For now, let's finish our meals and continue."

A couple of hours later, the team had reached the area with the tallest buildings.

"This looks like a good choice," said Juuda, pointing at the largest building he could see. "Let's head in."

Bara stood at the front, and Anais sent in two small drones to scout the area. "It's empty," she said and began walking in through a window.

"The room is quite small. One window, one door," reported Anais while walking through. "The door leads to a very large open room with many doors connecting to many small rooms around it. The ceiling is much higher than you might initially expect. The walls and floors must be quite thin. This entire floor is like a large square with many small squares around it. There is a wider room on each side. Yes! This is the access to the other floors."

"It looks like they had a few ways to get from one floor to another. There are stairs very similar to what we would use, but there are also thinner shafts with metal extrusions. Helen's hypothesis is increasingly valid," said Juuda while reporting back to Argos. "There are many ways to go to the floors. Probably for the different species to use."

"I am proceeding to the floor below, lights on," said Anais. After a few seconds, she reported, "Clear. Same as above. All seems empty."

"How many floors down does it go?" asked Juuda.

Anais sent her drones down the shaft. "I am counting ... wow, eleven floors. There are more, but they are flooded. I need a different drone."

"Check for any that do not look the same as the rest," said Juuda.

"The second floor down looks like it was the ground floor," said Anais and continued to make rough scans floor by floor, while keeping everyone updated. "The seventh floor under seems to be very different."

"Check that the others further below are clear as well, and let's proceed to that one."

"They are all clear. No movement. Same as the ones we have seen."

"Then let's go down to the different one straight away."

"Everything seems to be empty," said Bara while going down.

Steve added, "This makes sense. If their collapse was so many thousands of years ago, they would slowly take everything."

"It does not explain why it's deserted. They should still use it as a base, just like all other cities we have seen with the spy planes," added Juuda.

"I am at the seventh floor down," said Anais. "It's clear. Come."

"It's like a sewer network of the old Earth cities," said Steve. "The larger openings seem large enough to have a vehicle pass through. It looks like the whole city was interconnected from underground."

"Shh!" said Anais suddenly. "Something is coming."

They all froze in place and focused their attention to one of the tunnels, where light started appearing. It was two Goblins. The Goblins froze when they saw light coming from the room and proceeded to walk slowly and carefully without talking anymore.

"This is it!" said Alex through the communicators. "This will be our first contact. Make sure you stay calm and friendly."

Juuda moved to the front and stood with his head high. When the Goblins moved close, they had their shields high and their spears pointing at Juuda.

"Their shields and spears are made of glass," said Anais.

"Hello," said Juuda, raising his hand and showing his palm to them.

All the lights were shining on them. Gakuto, who had thought that they must be nocturnal, tried to warn them, "Don't shine your lights on them!" but it was too late.

The Goblins could barely see Juuda and his friendly greeting. The light for them must have indicated aggression, so while one of them stood in defense, the other yelled a war cry and charged toward Juuda. Bara immediately took out his pistol and shot the Goblin almost without thought. The Goblin was about three meters away from Bara, but the lack of a wound made Bara think he missed. The loud noise, which in a closed space, sounded like it could take down a wall, was enough to make both Goblins cower in fear. The lights were shone on the wall on the side so the Goblins were no longer in the direct beam.

"Move slowly back and leave," said Bara.

"But we might have the chance to communicate now," answered Juuda.

"They are scared," added Konoya. "It's not the right time to communicate."

"Leave slowly," said Alex.

The group started moving backward without words, and when they reached the stairs, they started climbing them silently and slowly until they had reached outside.

They began walking toward Argos and discussing the appearance and attitude of the Goblins. Anais, with Draco always on her shoulder, stopped before reaching the edge of the city. "I think I will be staying," she said seriously.

"What do you mean you will be staying?" asked Bara.

"I want permission to stay here and scout the city. I am sure it has a lot more to offer than what we have seen."

Bara looked skeptical. "I am not so sure that staying here is a smart idea. Aren't you worried or scared to be alone here?"

"I am exhilarated. We are on an alien world surrounded by mystery, and I worry that until we decide on the next missions, I will drive myself crazy. I can't stay idle while there is so much to see and learn. If I stay here, I will be able to scout this city for a library and hone my skills. I have everything I need with me."

Bara smiled. "Alex! What do you think?" he asked into the communicator.

"If you are not worried, then I see more benefits than risks. Anais, you have to be careful of any contact you might have with them. If you detect that they are near, you will need to contact immediately for the right way to approach them."

"Understood. I will make sure to steer away from them."

Anais left the group to find an appropriate place to set up camp while the rest of the group continued their trip toward Argos. The next day, the group had returned, and a few hours later, Bara and the leaders gathered to speak.

"You should have not shot at them!" said Alex, looking at Bara.

"It was instinct, but I missed either way," said Bara apologetically. "Although I shouldn't have. I don't easily miss. Something must have been wrong with the gun."

"Well, apparently you did not miss. Jain, can you show us?"

Jain replayed the feed from the incident. "The Goblin attacked, and its shield went on its side, exposing its chest. You shot right at it. As you can see from this small spark, the bullet deflected off its chest."

"But how is that possible?" asked Bara.

"We are still trying to figure out the details, but for now we know that they are tough. Their skin might be harder than ours, even with our nanobots in," said Gakuto. "It's hard to explain how they evolved like that, but now we know that an attack from them could be lethal."

"Lethal? You mean their spears could penetrate us? How did you deduce this?" asked Juuda.

Jain explained, "We made some rather worrisome assumptions while you were coming. The inhabitants of this planet do not seem to mix. It is very rare to see some visiting other species. We also see the results of a devastating war everywhere. Steve's spy planes have detected areas where very destructive weapons must have been detonated in the distant past. We believe that they all have traits similar to the exceptional skin of the Goblins. We also have to consider the probability that their weapons combined with their strength are capable of killing each other. That would mean that a blow from them could mean death to us."

Juuda's eyes opened wide. "I was not worrying at all when he attacked me. It looked so small."

"Looks can be very deceiving," said Gakuto with a smirk.

"In other news," interrupted Helen, "we have an idea as to why the biggest city is not occupied while all the rest seem to be the centers of the species that control them. As Anais's scouting showed us, the basement of the big building was flooded. We suspect that there is a lot of water under the main city which once was vital for its growth. The Goblins, which seem to have it under their control, live underground, and therefore the city is almost useless to them."

"I see," said Juuda.

"It also seems possible that the main Goblin city, which is four kilometers away from Alpha, is linked to it. The ones you met seemed like scouts."

"We need to speed up contact with them," Alex said. "We need to learn of their intentions and begin properly exploring the past of this world. We will put research of the history of this place as our top priority. As far as we know, the survivors on Earth might be few and dying out. We might be the last humans, and we can't risk whatever destroyed this world to be the end of us. Argos needs to finish faster."

Chapter 8

Argos

Argos was a city designed to adapt and grow. It was a circular in design with a large area at its center where everyone gathered to meet and talk. Around it, like spokes on a wheel, four roads extended outward. Around the center was the market where all the goods were distributed. Raw materials for 3-D printers were the most common items and were exchanged with EAs, electronic approval tokens, which were given to those whose projects were approved by Architecture and Engineering. Once a citizen wanted to create something, the material estimates and energy demands would be calculated and handed to A&E, which was Steve's department, and from there they would wait for approval. With the approval, they would receive an EA with which they could get the materials from the market. Around the market was a ring with more spokes of roads that contained the research areas, public facilities, water-storage tanks, and other industrial buildings. After that came another ring with the housing area. Finally, it was surrounded by the large wall and then the final ring of agricultural production. Between all the rings, there was a road circulating around. Every ring had small parks and recreation areas that seem like they were made for young children but were mainly used by the adults.

The current city design was meant to hold up to five thousand people. The plan was that the materials for all the structures could be recycled and reused when the circles needed growing, so that the city could expand. The maximum number of people it could reach before another circle began to be made was fifty thousand. Once the population grew to about a million, the main city design would begin to be built. The designs for the cities were made back on Earth, and many of them were loaded into the database so that depending on the environment and material availability, the right one would be chosen. All the designs had lots of recreation areas, since it was deemed necessary for the mental stability and creativity of the inhabitants. Each individual could request space to make a project, and if it was deemed useful, then the materials and labor for it would be supplied. A few small nuclear reactors were used as the main energy source, which had been dipped into the nearby river. As long as they remained underwater, they could provide enough energy for a few years. When the population grew, they would need a new source of energy. Solar and wind were the main alternatives unless nuclear material could be found. Nearly every structure of Argos was made from the materials that were found around the area, harvested from the soil, and mixed with machines brought from Earth. Their small size meant that it took long periods of time for the 3-D printer to be fed the composites, so for the time being, most structures were made with simpler materials, not meant to withstand time or very harsh conditions.

Argos was under continuous construction. One side of the city was under the constant work of the 3-D printer, while the other was used by the civilians. The number of people was also steadily growing, so the city was continuously adapting. The plan was to keep it simple and small until they could fully recreate Alpha

concrete, as the new material came to be called, so that it would be used afterward everywhere. The idea was that if this material absorbed infrared light to heal and could transport the energy through its body, then it could probably also be converted to produce energy from the star and perhaps meet the energy demands of the building itself. It would truly bring a revolution in building design that the Earth and Mars would have found profoundly useful.

The political hierarchy of Argos revolved around the creator of the entire project, Alex, who, with a team of experts, crafted a system which could help the community advance. As the population rose, the system would slowly change. Once the population required a second city to be built, the system would again change. Finally, once they reached one million people and began constructing Argos as a megalopolis, the political system was to take a final change that would be able to govern an entire planet of people despite their numbers. These systems were made back on Earth and had failsafe mechanisms only shared to Jain and Juuda in case of something happening to Alex. Their system required no currency or goods exchange. The small amount of people paired with advanced technology that they had at their disposal made it so that everything other than energy was plentiful. Energy would be the only resource that would soon be worthy of attention.

For the time being, Argos was a utopia for the citizens, but its rate of expansion was very, very slow. As humans had no worries and no time pressure, everything seemed to be working at the absolute minimum. There were very few who worked hard for their goals, and these were mostly made as a subject of ridicule. Alex was beginning to feel that this slow progress needed to be changed.

Y:6 D:8

With Anais still in Alpha City, the information kept on coming. She had also found and sent back to Argos certain crystals she had come across that seemed to be information-storage devices. She had set up camp atop the tallest building of the city, which provided her with a vantage point. With a small garden and a few floors secured and protected, she would soon be able to stay completely independent of Argos. This made her proudly proclaim herself the lord of Alpha City, something that was used by most citizens of Argos as her call sign and a tease. After many days of scouting, Anais had begun finding buildings with vaults that she found impenetrable. She had also begun finding abandoned machinery of unknown functionality and very heavily damaged. These machines were slowly transported for examination back to Argos as she continued to receive supplies, but with most their parts stripped and other parts corroded to unrecognizable states over time, the chances of decrypting the crystals anytime soon seemed slim at best.

Argos was a growing city. Most women were perpetually pregnant, while few people were preoccupied with the needs of the community. Food, water, and shelter were becoming so well automated that with minimal effort, there was plenty for everyone. Automated agriculture and bug farms coupled with robotic solutions for the labor-intensive jobs were helping to create a paradise. Most of the city was now working on decoding the story of the planet. From every angle that anyone could grasp it, they were all trying to figure out what happened. As the days were passing, the memory of Earth, which more than half the population had never seen, was becoming ever so vague. After all, it was not hard to forget a white ball of snow

under which you were born. The memories that some did carry were mostly of a sad and apostasis-infested community.

The crystals that Anais had been finding were taken by Margaret to be decoded, but it seemed like an impossible task. Without much of an idea on what these crystals contained and in what format they were written, decoding something that was coded by a species more advanced than yourself was very challenging. The hope was that some of the machines they were finding were the readers of those crystals and with some help they would be able to take the first steps of understanding them. There was nearly nothing written anywhere besides some building scriptures, which alone were very hard to decode. The surrounding areas had all been mapped and monitored well. The flight restrictions were lifted for a large radius from the city, which meant that Clive and his team could not transport materials and findings fast. The borders between the species were also being drawn out based on their location and observations on how far the patrols go. The spy planes were beginning to map the islands and other continents of the planet. A process that would take years to complete but that already began.

Flying the Eagle meant that small machines could be easily transported, and this way the statue had finally been uncovered.

"It resembles a human more so now," said Jain.

"It really does," said Konoya.

Dimitri seemed to be the most excited about it. "I know what that is. I am sure I have seen something similar," he said with a loud voice. "Look, he is pointing at his feet. He is holding a plaque, and he is covered with a sheet. He looks like an ancient philosopher from Earth."

"We need to search for any distinctive traits that separate him from humans," said Gakuto.

"On first look, he looks very human," said Galen. "Perhaps too human."

"We have not seen any species that resemble humans so closely on the planet, however," noted Jain.

"We have not seen what this planet has to offer yet. Nor the other planets for that reason," added Gakuto.

"The other planets?" said Konoya.

"Yeah! These species here had technology which by far surpasses ours. With so many planets filled with water and nice conditions, I can't imagine they left them unpopulated."

"We will have to send a satellite to begin imaging the other planets," said Jain.

"The plate on his feet as well as his plaque has writing. Just like the other writings we have found," said Dimitri.

Alex called for them to gather for a discussion. "Yesterday," he began, "we got close to an Orc".

"We're calling the large ones Orcs now?" asked Gakuto.

"It's easy to remember, and their looks make it hard to not call them that."

"No objections here."

"So, yesterday Nick went beyond the city radius after the detectors heard sounds. He approached stealthily and saw two of them. They did not want to back

off after seeing Nick. A few meters behind them were about fifty more, all fully armed. They were coming ready to fight."

"What does that tell us then?" asked Dimitri. "That they might attack us?"

"We see more species approaching us from every direction, but they don't dare enter other species' lands. This is Goblin land. We know that. Now that the Orcs have entered, we fear that it might be the start of change."

"Do we have a plan?" asked Dimitri.

"Yes. We are going to meet them. Straight to their main city."

"Finally, some excitement," said Gakuto.

"This will be the beginning of something new, so we need to make it as friendly as we can. If we create enemies here, our future might be difficult and war-torn. I want you all to consider that although we have no fear of them and that we have no memory of war, those who have studied a little of it can tell you of its horrors. I want ideas and plans on how to approach them. Jain and Konoya will be setting the plan, so any observations or ideas you have, please report them to them."

Chapter 9

Information

Y:7 D:18

Argos

The city's stage 1 was nearly complete. This meant that now more time could be invested in research and exploration. Multiple species had been identified, with some of them living in isolated islands and other continents. A meeting was organized to discuss the strategy with which they would approach the Goblins and finally begin seeking answers.

"Are we really going to keep calling them with names from creatures of our mythology?" asked Juuda.

Dimitri stepped up. "Well, according to the most popular theory among our citizens, it is the correct way."

"You mean that we got visited by the civilization of this world tens of thousands of years ago, and we sprung up legends after meeting them on Earth?"

"Precisely. It ticks many boxes and answers many hard questions. How else are you going to explain the similarities we see here with our legends?"

"There is a bigger problem to answer, and this is how they made it this far. What destroyed them and whether there are still weapons available to any of them," said Jain.

"Exactly," added Alex. "We need to focus on one step at a time. Today we are planning the first. Jain, are you ready to present your plan?"

"Yes. We have figured out that their most valuable animal is this gazelle-looking animal."

"I call them gazortis," interrupted Gakuto.

"Right," said Jain with a smile. "These gazortis are important to them. They are very fast, and they hunt them with large groups. They even have a ritual when killing one. Our plan is to get Clive flying around and pick the largest he can find and trap it. We will approach them from the air with the Eagle right at sundown, when they begin their night, and present them with the animal alive. Then Konoya will proceed to try and communicate with hand gestures and pictures of items."

"Sounds like a plan. Does anyone have any comments or objections?"

"Since we are going with the Eagle," added Bara, "let's plan to leave some heavy supplies that Anais has requested."

"Who will take part in this mission?" asked Juuda.

Konoya replied, "Bara, Clive, and myself should be enough. We do not need to go with a big team. We need to appear harmless to them."

"Then it's settled. Bara, inform Clive to pick the ... gazortis, and in the meantime, get ready," said Alex, looking at Konoya.

Later that night, with a large gazortis on board, the team left for Anais, and after leaving her supplies, they proceeded to visit the large cave, which acted as the

main opening of the underground city of the Goblins. Clive remained hovering on standby while Konoya and Bara began walking the last three hundred meters to the opening. The large gazortis was making sounds as it was being pulled from Bara. The scouts around the area had begun pounding the ground with metal pistons as a way to inform the city of the approach, since the Eagle was a kilometer away in the air.

"Continue walking as if you haven't noticed them," said Konoya to Bara.

"I am not very comfortable. We are amid vegetation, and Clive cannot pick us up fast enough. We need to get to the opening faster," said Bara while walking.

"Don't rush. They will not attack," said Konoya with confidence.

The area around the cave had a fifty-meter radius of no vegetation. They arrived ten meters away from the opening and stopped.

Within seconds, they were surrounded by a large number of Goblins. Clive, seeing this unfold, began moving toward them. He hovered with the Eagle less than fifteen seconds away. Some were yelling; others were looking scared. Some were armed with glass swords, spears, shields, and other weapons, while others were completely unarmed. There were small ones there as well, children who had come to see what the commotion was all about. Konoya looked around and smiled. She pointed at the gazortis and tried to invite them to take its ropes. Then a loud yell made all of the commotion stop. Amid the silence, their leader began walking through the crowd. While a male Goblin was approaching from the cave, a younger one stood up and began marching toward Konoya. It was visibly scared, but something led it to act brave and approach. From behind, a female Goblin stormed with her weapon high toward Konoya. Bara raised his weapon to the air and shot a bullet. They all cowered down from the sound—all but the mother. She flinched but did not lose focus from her child. Seeing the young one as it cowered in fear made her attack more ferociously.

As Bara watched the young creature approaching Konoya, he felt he had no other choice but to turn the weapon toward the Goblin mother. He stepped forward in front of Konoya and shot from a distance of less than two meters, right when the mother was over her child. The Goblin placed her hand on her chest. A tiny wound that was barely bleeding but causing a lot of pain was all that the weapon could do. The Goblin, which momentarily looked like it was there to only remove her child from harm's way, now had a reason to attack. She once again raised her weapon and jumped toward Bara. In his panic, Bara picked his plasma weapon from his side and shot at her. The bullet went through a couple of Goblins before becoming a bright spot on a rock, slowly dimming. Before leaving her last breath, the Goblin mother fell on to her child and tried to push it back. The younger Goblin held the body of his dead mother and with a loud scream, took his mother's axe and charged toward Bara. In the second that followed, Bara took a flash grenade and yelled, "Flash!" while Clive had reached almost above them. The flash went off while the Goblins were ready to attack.

Everything happened so fast. The whole team was in shock. Argos was breathless while watching the unfolding of these events. With a faint voice, Alex almost whispered, "What are we doing?"

Bara opened his eyes after the flash to see the young Goblin at his feet, while all the others were trying to clear their eyes. He grabbed the young one and held it to

the hook that Clive had dropped down from the Eagle. A hostage! They had a hostage with them. Bara was holding the little Goblin so tight that in his shock he was hurting him. Something made him feel that they needed one to communicate, so he took the young one.

While just a few meters off the ground, the team saw the leader looking at the dead bodies and at the team who had kidnapped one of their own. His scream of rage brought a feeling to everyone that they have never felt before. Fear. His rage made all the other Goblins raise their spears and axes and scream with all their might. The small creatures somehow looked very large now. What was coming was now obvious.

The team returned to Argos with a terrified young Goblin. They quickly provided him with a room and prepared a meal. He began bashing on walls and doors, trying to break free, but with no success. Despite his immense brute strength, the door would not be broken by his strikes. Soon he exhausted himself and lay on the bed that was there. To his surprise, the bed was softer and more comfortable than any he had seen so far; Konoya could tell from his reactions.

"We have about two days before they come here," said Alex. "Keep a drone close to them, and inform Anais to hide."

"She has been warned," said Bara, with his voice hanging low. "I don't know what I should have done," he continued apologetically.

"What is done is done. We will discuss this at a later time," said Alex, pumped with adrenaline. "The only thing that matters now is that the coming army will not be the end of us."

"They can't. Can they?" asked Gakuto.

"If they surround us and build a camp around the city or attack us every time we try to move out, then they will end us slowly," replied Bara. "Primitive or not, they outnumber us at least a thousand to one."

Everybody's eyes opened wide.

"Inform Argos that we are now on alert," said Alex, looking at Jain. "Call for all the leaders to gather, and make sure no civilian is outside of the walls."

"Konoya is not here," said Jain. "She is working with Jade to feed their language to the system and run medical tests."

"Do we know when we will have a working translator?"

"I am not sure, but if the kid starts talking soon, then it will take very little time."

Alex took a deep breath. "We need to avoid war with them. When they arrive, we will give them their child back unharmed physically and mentally. Make sure you do not stress him too much."

"We are not going to. Konoya is showing images to him and promoting him to say the word for that image."

"We need to examine him and see how his skin can withstand bullets," said Gakuto. "We will only need a small sample from his skin."

"Can you take it without him feeling it?" asked Juuda.

"No. We can't use local or general anesthesia because we can't be sure of the effects it will have on him. We need his permission," said Galen.

Alex seemed to be the most stressed. "Bara, we need to make a plan. We know that last resort will be to bring down a Cerberus."

Juuda's eyes opened wide. "You can't be serious. These machines are devastating. We can defend without them. We have weapons and walls. What will they come with? Tanks?"

"We don't know," answered Alex, "but if a battle is unavoidable, we need to clear it fast and decisively. Otherwise, they might drag it out indefinitely."

"I agree," added Bara. "If it comes to it, it will be better to make a display of power early on. This way they might surrender faster and save themselves."

"What if we made a display of power earlier than the battle?" asked Jain. "Before they arrive here, we can meet them halfway and show them that they can't mess with us. We can deliver the kid back to them at the same time, and if the language is ready, then we can explain about the incident with their dead."

Alex smiled at the idea. "I like it. Let's get the plan on its way. Steve and Bara, stay with me for the details. Jain, go and check that Konoya is proceeding with the language, and try to get the kid to give us a sample of its skin. He does not need to know what for. Just a pinch on his arm. The rest, please make sure that the civilians understand the situation and are prepared for the worst. Distribute plasma rifles and prepare them the best way you can."

In the following twenty hours, Argos became hectic. Konoya was making very slow progress, so she decided to enter the room with the young Goblin.

"I am not sure this is a good idea," said Jade, while Konoya was opening the door.

"I need to try and gain his trust. Time is ticking," said Konoya while entering.

She sat on the floor just a step inside the room and saw the little Goblin shivering from fear. She pointed at herself and said, "Konoya." Then she pointed at him. There was no answer, so she repeated this process with a smile and patience. After a couple of minutes of this, the little Goblin said, "Bikz." Konoya's face lit up. Her smile was friendly, and she greeted Bikz with a wave of her hand. "Bikz," she repeated. Then she proceeded to show him a picture of a tree, then a river, then the sea, and then a mountain. Bikz was naming things, and the computer was filling a database of a language. After many basic words were placed in, Konoya stood up, pointed at her feet, and said, "Feet," in Goblin language. Then she proceeded to walk. Bikz, who had understood the game, continued to play, up to the point where his fear was almost gone. After a few hours, Bikz got tired, and they let him sleep for the day. When the sun was setting, he woke to find Konoya in her place and a warm meal next to him. Stressed, he tried it and proceeded to eat some of it. Konoya spoke to him in Goblin, which made him comfortable. "Voice me," she said.

Bikz smiled. "Speak with me, you mean. Speak with me."

Emile was hearing the conversations, helping the computer log the right translation. Every word that was not identified would be placed in standby until it was identified, when its meaning became apparent from other sentences. This process helped the system build the language very quickly, and soon Konoya was ready to test it. In the meantime, a large group of Goblins began to gather at the main Goblin city, and smaller groups were arranged all around. Alex worked on the strategy, and Jain informed Konoya that Bikz would be returned to his people.

"Speak with me," repeated Konoya.

"What do you want me to say?" asked Bikz.

"You will go to your father soon. No fear."

"You killed my mom," said Bikz and almost came to tears.

"Terrible accident. Terrible mistake."

"I only wanted to show my father that I was brave. She only tried to protect me, and you killed her."

"We were scared. Very scared. We thought she wanted to kill us."

"We are always scared," said Bikz sadly.

"Why are you scared?"

"War is always there. We fight always, but we can't win."

"Why are you fighting? Whom are you fighting?"

"We fight everyone who is not us. Sometimes we make friends, but they don't last long."

"We want to be your friends."

"You killed my mother. Now you want to be friends?"

"Yes. We want to be friends. You have already helped us a lot. Now we can speak with you because you taught us. Soon we will take you to your father, but first I will touch this stick to your hand, which will feel a small pain."

"What is this?" asked Bikz fearfully.

"It will not do bad to you. Only good. It will only pain for a blip."

She approached Bikz slowly, and he extended his arm out in fear. The apparatus sucked and took a small sample of skin and blood from Bikz.

"Did it hurt?" asked Konoya.

"No," said Bikz while rubbing the small wound.

"Then wait for a bit. Eat and soon we will take you to your people," said Konoya, standing up and walking out of the room.

She gave the sample to Jade, who immediately began running tests. Four hours later, she called for a meeting to give the leaders a better understanding on who they were dealing with.

"It might sound impossible, but there is technology working here," began Jade

"What do you mean?" said Jain.

"Bikz is swarming with nanobots. Just like us," she said, causing everyone's eyebrows to raise. "Only their nanos seem to have the sole purpose of enhancing their combat abilities. In fact, Konoya going in there was a risk. He could probably kill you with his bare arms."

"How did you deduce that?" asked Jain.

"We gave him colorful items, which he explored, that had different weights. He can grip and lift with much more force than that of a human. Despite his small size and young age, he is already dangerous to someone like Bara."

"That means that we cannot engage in close combat with them under any circumstances," said Bara.

"No," added Alex, "and this world keeps on surprising us. It is too early to engage in any kind of aggression with them. We can't be sure of what else we will be surprised with. We have to make our display work."

"But wait," said Jain. "Are they producing nanobots now? It certainly does not look like they do."

"They probably don't," said Jade. "The bots do not offer any protection against infections. That means that the bots are not dangerous for babies, and they

can pass from mother to child. Ours need to be programmed for each individual, and then they directly affect our cells' reproduction and well-being. I think this is the reason they made them back in the days to be only for military advancements. I think they had a war between them, and they made them with exactly that purpose."

"This is an incredible find, but now is the time to finalize the plan on getting him back to his people," said Alex with determination. "How is the language translation, Konoya?"

"It is finished. We can speak with them with almost no misunderstandings. A few conversations with their adults, and we will have most of their vocabulary filed. We have no idea about their written language, though, and he did not seem able to read the scripts we found around."

Bara interrupted the conversation. "Anais has something to say. Speak, please."

"I am seeing a large army of Goblins moving toward Argos. They are moving fast, so I estimate that tomorrow after sundown, they will be there."

"How many are there?" asked Bara.

"It looks like there are over ten thousand," she said calmly.

"This is a manageable number," said Bara.

"No! The problem is not their current numbers," added Alex. "We can surely take on them easily, and if their numbers move up to one hundred thousand, we will land a Cerberus. The problem is that our weapons and machines are numbered. If they go for a guerrilla warfare and we remain under constant attack for the years to come, we will eventually perish. We need to avoid combat in any way possible. Let's gather everyone at the agora to inform them of the situation."

Within less than an hour, all the citizens had gathered at the agora.

"As many of you have already heard, there is an army marching toward us. An army that currently does not pose much of a threat, but it could mean the beginning of the end for us."

"How?" asked Guliane, one of the citizens. "How will tiny creatures with sticks pose an actual threat to us?"

"Yeah," said another, "we should not be scared of them. They should be scared of us."

The crowd muttered their agreement, and Alex frowned. Bara made a sign to Alex that he wanted to speak, and Alex nodded. "You have no idea what a war looks like," said Bara loudly. "We all have no idea what it looks like. But not them. They have a clear view of what it means. Our weapons will prove our superiority in open war, but if they start hiding in the trees and bushes, if they start hunting you the moment you get out of the walls, if they burn every tree around Argos and sabotage our crops for the foreseeable future, then you will understand that our weapons only give us superiority when the war is fair. But war is never fair. This is their world, and we are few and new here. We don't know their strengths or their weaknesses, but they know ours. They know we are few. So, stop acting brave with someone else's guts!"

"Thank you, Bara, for clearing this up," said Alex. "Now, there will be no venturing out until the situation is resolved. The ones born on *Hera* have no weapons training at all, and there is no time to be trained. After this is all in the past, you will

begin your basic weapons training. The rest, you should prepare for the possibility that they reach the city."

"Why don't we use the Eagle to take them out or build an ambush before they reach here?" asked Maria. "If it is going to end up with bloodshed, why take the risk of doing it here?"

"We are planning to give them every reason not to come and every chance to back away. If they don't, we will need to show that we are defending our city. Killing them out there will only provoke a larger response."

Something resembling fear started to spread in Argos. Something new. Something strange. Something difficult to put into words started to affect everyone. Something between fear and rage. It looked like everyone was prepared to go to fight. The horrors of war were nowhere to be found in the memories of humans. They did not understand what war stood for. Like little children, they challenged the attackers in their minds, and with their superior weapons they thought they were undefeatable. But not all. Not Bara. Not Alex. Not Jain. Not the soldiers. Not the ones who had been trained for the small chance they will face war. They had seen images, stories, and videos of what war looked like. They had studied and knew that once the weapons started blazing, the screams and horror would drive them mad. They knew that war would change them completely.

The following thirty hours were hectic for Argos. Alex had ordered the production of weapons from Steve, who could not produce fast enough and additionally arm the Eagle with weapons. Anais was sending continuous info on the movements of the Goblins and also discovered many of their hideouts. What the naked eyes could not see, her cameras could. The numbers of the Goblins seemed to change occasionally. After more focus, she could see that in some areas Goblins seemed to disappear for a while and reappear later. That's where their underground hideouts were. So well made that it would be near impossible to be seen without someone going in or out. By keeping a relative distance while scouting them, Alex had a clear eye on the progress of their march. When the time was right and at a distance of about seven kilometers off Argos, Alex and his team flew to meet the marching army at an opening in the forest. By that time, Konoya had managed to become somewhat of a friend with Bikz. They were comfortable enough to sit next to each other in the Eagle. Bikz had informed Konoya that the Goblins were facing a main adversary over the past years. The land where the humans had built Argos was near the borders with another species. The Orcs, as humans called them.

Y:7 D:28

A field, seven kilometers from Argos

With precise timing, the Eagle dropped from the sky in front of the marching army. At a distance of only one hundred meters, a loud artificial metallic roar made the descent of the Eagle seem like a dragon landing. The army froze, waiting for their leader to speak, but he too was stunned.

The Eagle landed, and Konoya came out holding hands with Bikz. The moment Bikz saw his father, he started running toward him. Ags, his father, looked at his son running away from his captors with extreme fear in his eyes. He thought that he would see his son die. Before Bikz had the chance to reach them, Ags raised

his weapon and screamed in anger and frustration his war cry, "For our people!" Then he stormed toward his son.

Watching the sprinting army approaching them, Alex immediately initiated plan B" He stepped out of the Eagle, and in clear view, shot an explosive into the air. Between them and above Bikz, about twenty meters in the sky, a tremendous explosion took place, followed by a screeching from the Eagle. The shockwave knocked Bikz and the first few lines of the attackers onto the ground. When he stood up, his father was there holding him. The army had stopped. Fear and panic started to spread among the Goblins.

"I am Alex. We are here to make peace, not war. What happened before was a regrettable accident." His voice was coming out of speakers loud for everyone to hear.

Shocked to hear his own language, Ags looked at Alex. "Here to make peace? You took the life of the mother of my child!"

"There is nothing I can say that will bring her back. Your son is unharmed. We needed him because he is the bravest of all of you. He is the one to first approach us when we tried to make contact. He is the one who taught us your language."

"You will pay for what you did," replied Ags while his army looked confused and stressed.

"You can't defeat us. We come from the stars! We have what it takes to destroy this world. But we come in peace. Let us talk, and then make your decisions."

"We know you came from the stars. We thought you would come in peace. But we see now you are not here for good. Are you not fighting together with the Orcs?"

"We are not fighting for or with anyone."

Ags was approaching Alex slowly while his army moved slowly behind him.

"We have many legends of our people coming and going to the stars. None have them killing us," said Ags while moving closer to Alex.

Alex realized that he might be approaching for an attack. His son was now behind his army, and it felt like Ags was not as scared as his soldiers. "We would love to hear of your legends. We would be happy to tell you some of ours too. Now, however, is the time for you to stop and turn back. Come again to talk whenever you see fit."

Ags saw that Alex changed the way he was looking at him, so he stopped moving toward him. He also noted that there was another inside the flying contraption who was more aggressive looking than the others.

"I will visit you soon," were his last words before he made a signal to his army to begin marching back.

"That was well done," said Konoya while they were flying back.

"That was close," said Bara.

"You saw what he was going for, didn't you?" asked Alex.

"I saw. I was hoping he would stop. A few more steps, and I would step out with weapons in hand."

"Now we have to prepare for them. And for the worst-case scenario that they simply went back to gather information from Bikz."

"Yes, but we got information from them too now," said Konoya, trying to boost morale.

Chapter 10

Gray Days of Now and Then

Back at Argos, a sense of relief was felt, but not by everyone. Sadly, the number of humans looking forward for the battle was not negligible. Perhaps the need for something new, the need for adventure, the need for adrenaline was what caused that. Konoya believed that there was something deeper. The excitement of being in a new world should be enough to fill the need for adventure and excitement. Why is it that in the face of war, a new feeling developed which was, if not welcomed, then mostly neutral instead of negative? For now, the battle was averted, and the chance of forming an alliance was gained. It was the time for changes. A large amount of work was placed into creating A-Concrete, as they called it, with similar characteristics as the one used on Gaia a long time ago. The mining of materials and the reconstruction of the city became the primary job of everyone. The city began to be built like a fortress. New houses started to look like bunkers with an underground tunneling system connecting them all.

Storage rooms for food and tanks for water made the city able to withstand a lockdown for years. The once-beautiful city of Argos was slowly looking like a military fortress. The parks were becoming smaller, and the nonlethal weapons that everyone was carrying started to be accompanied by plasma pistols. The recreational expeditions and hunt for exploration were halted for a while. In the process of all this, the Goblins made multiple visits. Although they were not showing any signs of aggression, Alex chose to not let them see the construction of the city. He did not want them knowing of the preparations for war or the underground passages and storage areas.

The Goblins, from their side, did not allow almost any information to be shared either. They would visit often, but it looked more like spying than alliance building. On their last visit, Ags was there, wanting to talk with Alex. They met at a tent a hundred meters away from the edge of the fields around Argos, early at night.

"We do not seem to be learning a lot from one another," said Ags with a smirk.

"Well, Ags, learning from one another requires trust and a mutual goal. Or at least mutual benefits."

"We will be your friends and share with you, but we want something in return," said Ags, looking toward Argos.

"What is it you want?" asked Alex.

"We want one of those contraptions that plow the land and plant seeds and then even harvest them."

"That will not be simple," said Alex, nodding with his lips pursed.

"Why will it not be simple?"

"You have been close to those machines in the past, haven't you?" asked Alex.

"I have. I also tried to understand how it works, but it is like magic."

"It is not magic. But have you noticed that they have thick ropes that connect them to the city?"

"Yes. They are not there to prevent them from leaving, are they?"

"No, they are there to provide them with water and energy. It's hard to make one for you because you will also need the contraptions that provide it with energy and water."

"Can't you give me those as well?"

"I have an idea," said Alex with a smile. "I can provide you with a simpler machine that you can leave in the sun all day, and at night it can provide you with light wherever you need it. It will have a few small branches that you remove from it, and they will have light for much of the night. Small and easy to carry and without fire. Let me show you." He turned his torch on.

"This we can work with for now," said Ags.

"I will make sure you have one delivered in a few days. Now tell me, Ags. What do you know of the ancient cities that are everywhere on the planet?"

"These are the creations of our people. Back when the gods were with us ..."

"Which gods were with you? Tell me about them."

"You want to hear of our gods?"

"Yes, I would like that very much."

"A long time ago, we were all living together in this world. We and all the others. We were living together with the gods too. They were coming and going to the stars at will."

"When you say *the others*, you mean the Orcs?"

"Yes, the ones you call Orcs, the Lot, the Ipc, the Zakil and many more."

"Are you friendly with any of those species?"

"Not really. We have trade with some, but we don't have peace. We don't know for sure how many have survived, but we have a history of many living together. We are surrounded either by sea or by another race. The sea is dangerous, and for us Goblins is a place we do not want to go near. We also have many species that we are not sure if they ever existed outside of stories. Like the Semav."

"And the gods were people like you? Who were they?"

"The gods left us when we began the great fight. The gods guided us to create a world where we all had everything and lived in abundance. We do not know anymore what caused the end of the world because that is ancient history. What we do know is that after all was over, everybody wanted to be the ruler. Some still live in the ancient cities, but only we have Dircesh or A-City, as you call it. We worked and fought hard to reclaim it."

"And now you can't live there because there is too much water underground?"

"How would you know of this?" asked Ags with a suspicious frown.

"Do not underestimate our abilities, Ags. We have eyes in the sky that look under the ground."

Ags's eyes opened wide. "You can see under the ground?" His face was betraying fear.

"Yes, but we don't look at you. There is nothing to worry about," said Alex, who felt that something was wrong. "So, why do you still fight? There surely are enough resources and space for everyone."

"Because they are not Goblin. They always think they are better than us. Orcs think we are weak. The Ipc think we are stupid. Everyone thinks others are inferior, but it's them who are inferior. The question now is who are you? You are very few but hold great power. Are there more of you coming?"

"We are not here to wage war with anyone. We are here to find ourselves a new home."

"But this is not your home. Where did you come from? Why did you have to leave?"

"Alex, this might not be a good question to answer," said Konoya over the communicator. "They might only understand that leaving your homeland to go to another place is either scouting for an invasion or the invasion itself."

"What was that?" asked Ags, looking confused.

"That was a call from someone in the city. We can talk from distances with each other. That's also something I can give you in the future. If we become allies, I will provide you with a way to contact us instantly."

"That sounds tempting. You haven't answered me, however. Why did you leave your world? Why are you here?"

"We left because we wanted to explore. Your world was close and looked welcoming. We do not know how long we will stay here, but we will try to make our stay without any incident."

"Incidents have already happened. You killed my people, and this has remained unanswered."

"Without any more incidents then." Alex looked troubled. He thought that the mistake of killing some Goblins would haunt them for a very long time. Now he had also lied about their staying. "We are not here to make war with anyone. We would like to find a place to call our home in the future and live peacefully."

"So, you are not planning on leaving?"

"We do not know yet. We wish to make peace with everyone around us, and then we will see how things go."

"You truly are from out of this world, Alex. Peace with everyone? There has not been any peace for thousands of years. We lose our people every day."

"Have you ever tried?"

"There are always those who seek peace. Peace allows for some to multiply faster than others or make more weapons. Allowing one to become too powerful cannot happen, so we are always at war."

"I am starting to see the picture," said Alex with his lips shut and his head shaking.

"It is time for me to go. I will wait for the light present."

Alex felt that there was too much hidden in Ags's words. There was no trust. There was too little information of the past. Just what you would expect from any primitive civilization, the conversations provided little real insight to the past. *Although they are on their land, Ags did not ask us to leave or threaten us.* Alex was thinking. *Did he understand that we are superior, and he gave up? Something else must be going on too.*

The satellite that was sent to scan the second planet of the solar system had returned its data and was currently arriving at the first planet. Solis-B had a tragic past, just as much as Gaia. The planet was littered with ancient cities but with no sign of technological civilization. It was expected that primitive remnants of the same species would be found there as well. In the meantime, the Orcs had made their first contact. They were witnesses to the battle that was nearly fought between the Goblins and the humans. Habo, the leader of a large settlement, visited Argos to contact Alex. Although they did not meet that day, Habo and his party of four were asked to help humans learn their language. They spoke some Goblin, which helped speed the process, and soon their language was ready to be used. Habo was asked to join Alex for a meeting on the outskirts of Argos, in the same tent where he met Ags.

Entering the tent, Habo was visibly worried.

"Why do you look worried?" asked Alex in Orcish. "There is no danger for you here."

"This is Goblin land," answered Habo "I would be a fool to not worry."

"Sit, Habo. Let's learn about each other. You approached me first, so there must be something on your mind."

"I want to know who you are. Whom do you stand with?"

"We are visitors from the stars. You knew that. We are not standing with anyone. I told the same to Ags. We will not fight anyone, unless it is to protect ourselves."

"Then why has Ags let you stay on his land?"

"That I do not know yet. I also wondered."

"It seems that your wisdom does not match your technology."

"That remains to be seen, Habo. Tell me. What do you know of your history?" Back when those cities were built."

"Our history is as old as the stars. Most of it forgotten over the eons. This is not the time to speak of history, however."

"What is it you want to speak about, Habo?"

"War. What else? You stand on Goblin land alive, and you wonder? Goblins are not easy to defeat or to reason with. You must have agreed something with them."

"I have agreed nothing. They seemed to be reasonable to us. Why do you fight them?"

"Why fight them? Are you a child? Because they are Goblins. Because we are Orc. If you have not agreed with them over anything, then you will soon meet their axes."

"Why are you so sure they will attack us?"

"If they don't, then you are even more dangerous to us."

"I don't understand," said Alex, confused. "Why is it there is no way for us to speak outside of the premise of war?"

"Because Goblins want to conquer. More than anyone else. And now they found the way through you. They will use you one way or another."

"You are underestimating us, Habo. We came from the stars. We have technology. You can't force our hand to do anything we don't want to do."

"It is time for me to leave. I don't find the way to trust in your words. Perhaps in the future, Alex of the humans."

Y:10 D:59

Argos

The situation in the city was growing strange. It felt like there was constant preparation for war. Many weapons were made, and defensive structures were taking up increasingly more space. The once-beautiful plan for a green city now looked like something of the distant past. Every excursion out of the city was accompanied by drones that scanned the area around and warned of possible hostility. Alex and his team understood that there could be things at play yet to be revealed. Drones flying high were taking turns monitoring the neighboring cities of the Orcs and the Goblins alike. The Orcs were gathering a large number of people over the days. Anais was reporting movement over at the Goblin side too. The Goblins and the Orcs were preparing for war, just as Argos was. Most of the humans had not come face to face with the Orcs, and even more so, had never felt the fear of another creature hurting them. The nanobots in the body could make everyone superhuman, so there was a very strong sense of security. Alex and Bara, however, know that this was not trust well placed. Orcs were a lot bigger than Goblins, bigger than humans. If their bodies were filled with the same war technology as the Goblins, it would mean that they were impossible to fight against in close combat. Open war would be an easy win for humans, but it was never open war that Alex and Bara were afraid of.

Alex and his team were making plans and scare tactics in order to avoid any upcoming battle again. All plans finished at the same line—the showdown with the Cerberus landing and a last stand at the walls of the city. Alex insisted that defense would send the right message in any situation. Resources had been gathered for long periods of time, and within a couple of days, the Eagle had been armed to act as aerial support if needed. It did not become an efficient combat machine but enough to fight off a wave of Orcs or Goblins.

"We came to start something new here, and now our city looks like a fortress," said Alex to Jain while preparing for sleep.

"We are adapting to the challenges we meet," answered Jain.

"Sometimes I want to go tell them not to prepare for battle, but I am doing the same. It will only sound stupid," said Alex sadly.

"They might be gathering armies only as a means of defense, just like we do."

"I asked Dimitri for his insight. He explained to me that the situation for them is far more complex."

"In what sense?" asked Jain.

"They don't have a government. They have leaders of cities like humans did in our ancient past."

"Yes, I was aware of that. What does that mean, though?"

"It means that the ones who are gathering are soldiers are expecting something in return. They need food and goods, and Habo will not be able to keep them for too long. That means he is gathering them for an attack."

"You think they might work with the Goblins to attack us together?"

"No. We've observed the Goblins for a while now. They are surely much better organized than the Orcs and far smarter than we thought them to be."

"If they come alone, then they stand no chance, do they?" asked Jain worriedly.

"No, they stand no chance, even if they come together. It's not the coming battle that scares me. It's the possibility of an ongoing war for generations, which they are used to. We don't have rich veins of every material here, and eventually we will run out of supplies. We can't be in constant war with this planet's inhabitants."

"I see your worries. It's time to put them to rest, and tomorrow we will think of solutions for everything."

"Good night, Jain."

"Good night, my love."

Early the next morning, Bara alerted Alex to wake up. "They began to move," he said.

"Who?" asked Alex. "Goblins or Orcs?"

"Orcs. Habo is coming with his army."

"I am coming. Prepare the meeting, please."

Twenty minutes later, the leaders were all gathered to discuss, and the gates of Argos were closed. None was left outside.

"We have visual from the army," stated Bara, "and it seems they have tamed some animals that they are carrying with them."

"Oh my," said Dimitri. "Those look like Manticores. We have not seen those around here. They must have brought them from another location on Gaia."

"That's a lion-looking thing. What did you call them?" asked Jain.

"Manticores. Yet another mythological creature manifested in front of us. I guess this will be a discussion for another time."

"How much time do we have?" asked Alex.

"They will be at the spot we have set the show in less than two days," replied Bara.

"I need to address everyone. Let's gather everyone at the agora. In the meantime, Bara, finalize the last details of our plan, and let's make sure we will not let this battle happen."

Alex notified through the communicators for everyone to gather at the agora.

"Hello, everyone," he started. "We are currently being approached by a large army of about fifteen thousand Orcs. Once again, we are called to stop the bloodshed with tricks and scare tactics. We cannot be sure they will work, however, so we need to prepare for the worst. If they reach our city, you will need to mount the walls and act as you have been trained. There will be no heroics, and if anything goes wrong with your weapon or if the enemy climbs the wall near you, use the hatch and get to safety. I repeat, no heroics!" He took a deep breath and allowed a couple of seconds for this to sink in, then he continued. "Fifteen thousand Orcs is a strong army, but it stands no chance against our weapons. That does not mean that we will not have a Cerberus ready to land in case we need it. That also does not mean that the plan is perfect. It will all depend on you. If you can't fire straight and if you can't keep our enemy away, they will overtake us. This is nothing to be taken lightly."

Alex saw in the eyes of his people something scary. He saw no emotion. Near apathy. Something he had not seen since he was on apostasis-infested Earth. After his speech was over, he called for Jain, Bara, and Juuda.

"I don't think they understand," he said.

"I too think that we are at higher risk than they think," said Bara. "If the scare tactics fail, then these people are not going to hold well. Thirty soldiers cannot fire fast enough against a perimeter-wide attack. We will be in peril."

"Then let's make sure the scare tactics don't fail," said Juuda.

"He is right," added Alex. "We are not ready for war. We need to make sure they will stop and not reach our city."

Chapter 11

The First Battle of Argos

Y:11 D:04

Orcs as far as the eye could see, holding Manticores, lion-like animals on chains, were marching with battle drums toward Argos. The drones were following their movements from a distance. The one that was used as a test and flew close above the marching army was taken down by a spear in no time, about six hours before reaching Argos. Clive, Bara, and Alex were waiting by the Eagle, ready to put up a show of strength. They were standing on a hill in front of an area where the land narrowed to about fifty meters wide. Once Habo and his men were about a hundred meters away, Alex shot a large firework into the air. The explosion made the army stop. Using the Eagle's loudspeakers, he spoke in Orcish. "Habo. Take your men back."

Habo stared at Alex and his flying contraption for a second before taking a couple of steps forward.

"Don't move any further!" Alex yelled. "Do not force me to use my weapons against you."

The phrase must have infuriated Habo, who yelled something to his people and stormed forward with all their might. Shocked with their speed, Alex quickly blasted the underground explosives, which were supposed to act as a scare tactic and a wall of debris a few meters away from them. The Orcs were fast enough to pass the line, and the explosion happened behind Habo, about ten men deep. It shot hundreds of Orcs onto the air, killing them instantly, and hundreds more were left injured from the blast. A nearly seventy-five-meter-long curved line of explosives went off right under the feet of the marching army. Bara began pulling Alex into the Eagle, while Alex was speechless and in shock. In the heat of the moment, Habo's curses were heard even through all the screaming. Spears started flying toward the Eagle, and Clive took off toward Argos. "We only meant to scare them," he tried to say, but his voice could barely reach his own ears.

The gore and intensity of the moment made Alex throw up inside the Eagle while flying away. Bara was trying to keep it together, but the situation was something he had not imagined before. Habo was furious! Orc cries, screams and roars were mixing into the air, creating a symphony of death and anger. Habo's grip was suffocating his axe, while his fury had all but materialized. He began marching decisively toward Argos without thinking, leaving behind him his people. The army, seeing their leader in that state, quickly followed fast behind him. The marching army had now turned into a flood of hatred-fueled Orcs. Alex gathered himself and began to assess the situation.

"Clive," he said, "turn back and fly above them." Then he spoke to the Orcs again. "Turn back. I do not wish to kill more of you."

His words could not be heard at all. No threat, no scare tactic, no display of power could stop this. Humans were going to be reminded of what war stood for, the hard way. Although most did not really believe it would come to this, it was now obvious that in less than six hours, they would face the first battle of their lives.

"Should we open fire?" asked Bara

"No! We will try one more time to scare them with Cerberus. Its landing should be enough to stop them."

Alex and Bara reached Argos and, in the meantime, drones flying around the army were continuously transferring Alex's voice, asking them to back down. Alex reached the point of nearly begging them to stop. The scene he saw with the explosives was so horrific to him that he was trying to avoid conflict in any way he could. His voice made Habo turn and look up at the drones a few times, but his march was decisive to his anger and his leadership. He could not stop. In Argos, there were already those who began questioning whether the right course of action was taken. It was too late to stand against Alex's orders now. The enemy was three hundred meters away.

"How long till the Cerberus lands?" asked Alex.

"It still needs twelve minutes. They arrived earlier than we expected," said Steve.

"We need to stall the battle," said Bara.

Alex called for Clive. "Get the Eagle up and shoot a few rounds between us."

The Eagle, which was not tested for combat yet, flew and shot the rounds. Habo looked at Alex aggressively.

"It's jammed," said Clive. "The vibrations caused the weapons to jam."

"Land and get Steve on board to fix it now!" said Alex, his voice trembling. He knew they could not depend on the civilians. The thirty trained soldiers were all that stood between a sea of Orcs and Argos. The Cerberus still needed eight minutes to land. To his surprise, Habo waited. A couple of minutes passed, and he too looked stressed and searching in the forest with his eyes. Alex stood there looking, trying to win as much precious time as possible. *Is he having second thoughts?* he thought.

"Perhaps we can avoid the battle in the end." Then Habo took the first step forward alone.

With an extremely loud "*Stop!*" all looked up to the light that was coming down. A large chunk of metal, bigger than a two-story house, landed in front of Argos. Once the parachutes got sucked back into their ejection box, the nine sides of the capsule opened up. With a deafening screeching sound, a Cerberus turned on and sat in battle position against the Orcs. A machine made before the Osiris impact. A machine that was the latest model of a series of machines designed to have maximum mobility and inflict as much damage as possible to the enemy. The most terrifying face of human technology was now facing the Orcs, who looked at it with fear and anger in their eyes. The walls of Argos were covered with humans celebrating the landing of their war machine. Arrogant in the eyes of Habo, foolish in the eyes of Bara, and wrong in the eyes of Alex.

"This is your final warning, Habo! Don't make me do this," said Alex in desperation.

While the Orcs waited for Habo's order, they began organizing in rows and shapes that made them seem far more formidable than before. Their chaotic march

was replaced by a well-organized army formation. Then they stopped moving. They began to hum. Mixed with the suffering and hatred they were carrying while storming toward Argos, this was a moment of taking a breath before the inevitable. The hums became louder and louder. Then they began to sing. From the top of their lungs, they began chanting their war cries in unison. The voices brought terror to some of the humans, who just barely started realizing the position they were in. The Orcs were no longer looking at the Cerberus. Their eyes were focused on the humans standing on the walls and roofs of their buildings.

Habo raised his axe into the air and yelled, silencing everyone.

"You honored your deal! The Hir were always keepers of honor," said Habo with a smile.

For a few seconds, Alex thought, *That's it! He is stopping.* His words, however, froze in his mind. From the forest perpendicular to the direction of the Orcs, something else was moving. Something even larger and more ominous than Orcs.

"How did they get so close without us seeing them? Who are they?" asked Bara.

"They look like ... Naga!" said Dimitri in shock.

Alex got frightened. A new species was at his doorstep, ready for war. He knew nothing of them or their abilities but realized that war was inevitable. *This is what he was waiting for. This is what he was searching for,* he thought. Then he began giving orders. "Clive, get airborne now! The battle is starting," he said with a loud voice and turned toward his people at Argos "Everyone! This is it! We will not avoid war. Hold your weapons tight and prepare! Listen to your commanders and follow their instructions."

He then turned to Bara. "Get the Cerberus firing. Do not target the leaders."

Bara saw Alex's sudden change in attitude as a sign of alert. *But we were supposed to wait for them to charge,* he thought. Before he had the chance to order the Cerberus firing, Habo let out one last roar and led his people into battle. The Orcs started charging, and the Cerberus began shooting. Humans on top of the walls would experience a few seconds of awe before terror began getting its claws in their minds. The Orcs were the enemy, the Naga were too; their suffering, however, left none unaffected. The 30-mm bullets, which sounded like an explosion when fired, began to fall like rain. They were accompanied by small missiles, targeting the highest concentration of Orcs and their war machines. Slow but terrifying, the Cerberus would also fire less-frequent plasma shots that, until dimming a few meters deep in soil, would penetrate anything. The Cerberus was programmed for maximum efficiency, which meant it fired the plasma shots horizontally to maximize its damage output. While firing, it was making tremendous mechanical sounds to intimidate the opponents.

Just a few seconds after the battle started, the Orcs were devastated. From the other side of the battle however, the Naga reached the walls. Spears thrown toward the wall stations found a few humans. All the strength of the nanobots meant nothing. The spears weighed a lot, and their speed was such that it went through the bodies of men and women like they were made of leaves. After the first few fell, the rest went into a frenzy. Terror was replaced by madness. Adrenaline began to fuel a reaction that looked more like insanity than anything else. They began firing their weapons like mad. Not for everyone, however. Some began running to the bunkers,

while others jumped the wall and ran to the forest from the other side of the city. The screaming and the yelling, together with the cries of agony and pain of enemies and allies alike, brought forward tremendous change in the characters of the people. The weapons were not easy to handle, and when the untrained humans fired, they would miss most of their shots. The humans' only defense was the machinery they brought and the few soldiers who followed Bara's commands properly. The rest proved to be more of a liability.

From the other side, Habo was encouraging his people to spread apart from one another and storm the walls. The Cerberus would not fire toward humans, and he figured that out by seeing that it would show priority to the ones closer to the walls but stop firing at them if the wall was at risk of damage.

Clive's Eagle was nowhere to be found yet. It took him a few minutes to land and get Steve on board to fix the problem. He finally took off while the Naga and the Orcs had climbed walls from all sides, and many of them were in hand-to-hand combat. Upon his attack, the enemies faced complete annihilation on all sides. The Eagle had an overwhelming advantage. The Naga were being decimated. The small missile blasts that the stationary defenses were firing added to the unreal sight of the battlefield. The Naga began to slow their advance, while the orcs were fighting an impossible enemy. Their spears and axes could not even dent the Cerberus armor.

Alex saw that they were winning, so he decided on minimizing the losses. He ordered all civilians into the bunker. One by one they started entering their hatches and locking them up behind them. Some entered without waiting for the others and left them out. Others died before reaching the hatches, leaving them open to the enemy. Luckily, the Orcs and the Naga were too big to fit and fight in the narrow passages. While the battle raged on outside, Alex and the rest of the leaders could see everything from the drones flying around the battlefield. The Orcs and the Naga were clearly being defeated.

Habo yelled for retreat, but his words froze on his lips. From all around the battlefield, an army of Goblins was now blocking the path of the retreat of both species.

"Stop firing!" said Alex. "Anais! How did you not see that huge army passing by you?"

"What huge army? Nothing moved here. Just few scouts are going around," answered Anais.

Alex's eyes opened wide. "They know you are there, and they snuck around! Anais, they know where you are. Be very careful. Go hide."

Clive's Eagle and the Cerberus stopped firing. The Orcs and the Naga began trying to hide with their backs on the human wall. Some tried climbing them in an effort to avoid the spears that were flying toward them from the Goblins, who lost no time before attacking. The Goblins, who were laughing in their advance. Goblins who were finally capable of defeating three of their enemies at once with minimal losses. Seeing the events unfolding, Alex decided to make an appearance. With a huge sound blast from both the Cerberus and the Eagle, Alex's voice began to speak as he ascended from the top of the bunker. Half the sound was in Goblin, and half was in Orc language, so both could understand him.

"Enough," he said. "It's time to stop this nonsense. Habo, take the leader of your allies and come meet me at our gates. Ags, you too."

The languages of all those species were very similar, as if they had all branched out of one language. They had different accents and intonations, but they all spoke each other's language.

Ags spoke first from outside in Orcish. "You are not in control here, Alex of the humans!" he yelled through a primitive loudspeaker. "This is our world! This is our land. With your help, the Goblins will now be rid of our biggest enemies. And to think, you did not want to help us kill them." He laughed, causing his people to cheer and feel empowered.

"You do not want us as your enemies, Ags. Put down your weapons and come here so we can talk."

Habo was looking shocked with the turn of events.

"We have nothing to talk about, Alex! If you think you are forgiven of the death of my wife, you're mistaken! You all think you are so smart, but it took very little to make you fight each other while we organized."

Both the Cerberus and the Eagle now turned, facing the Goblins

"Ags, you are about to make a huge mistake. You cannot defeat us!" repeated Alex. "We are not exhausted. We have barely begun using our technology."

"Lies!" he yelled and then prompted his people to resume attacking. "For our people!"

With this, the charge of the Goblins began. Waves of thousands of Goblins began storming Argos. The Naga and the Orcs still out of the walls formed the first unintentional line of defense. The Cerberus and Clive began emptying their weapons on the new enemy. A few large ballista-like weapons fired simultaneously toward the Eagle in an effort of pinning it down. Long chains wrapped around it, and Clive's Eagle crash landed. The Goblins quickly started filling every hole of the Eagle with soil, sticks, and more, thus rendering it unable to take off again. They surely came more prepared than expected.

"Are you okay?" Alex asked Clive and Steve through their communicators.

"We are fine. The Eagle is out, though. It will not take off."

"Stay inside." Then he switched to Bara, who was orchestrating the defenses
"What are the ammo levels of the Cerberus?"

"More than enough for the battle to end," replied Bara. "Those Goblins, however, are not Orcs; they are tiny and move fast. The effect is not the same."

A few seconds later, Bara's voice became troubled. "They are climbing on the Cerberus, blocking everything with soil, branches, and ropes. The Cerberus will be offline in a few seconds."

Alex realized that this battle might be lost. The rest of the Cerberus would require hours to be in the right place to land from orbit. For the first time, he felt desperation. He was absolutely sure that they were undefeatable at open war, but their lack of experience proved them weak. The enemy had been born in war; they feared nothing, and they adapted fast. The battle outside his walls was raging, and the Naga and Goblins were fighting with their backs at the wall of Argos. *How long before they pass them and climb our walls? he thought. The Goblins can get through the hatches and will swarm in the city. Even if the Cerberus land in a few hours, there will be no way to fire at them in the city.* He then stood up and ran outside, jumped the wall, and found Habo. "Are you ready for an attack?" he asked while hiding his fear with a smirk.

"You mean fight together? Why? Go hide in your walls and use your machines when they have finished with us," said Habo with pride.

"Habo! You led your people to battle. Now lead them to life. Stop being stubborn and give me your word. We fight together?"

"How will I live with this shame?" he asked and let out a desperate loud roar.
"So be it, Alex! Help my people survive, and you will have an ally forever."

"Can I count on your friends there to do the same?"

"They are noble on their word. I will speak to Prana."

Thenalex turned to his communicator. "Bara! If the Orcs and these Naga fall, we are doomed. We need to mount a counteroffensive while we can! Everyone, back out! Arm yourselves with courage and weapons, and try to avoid close combat! Orcs and Naga are our friends! Target only Goblins."

In the following hour, Habo acted as a wall for Alex, who was firing his weapons on the first line. As the battle was progressing more and more, Alex's commands at the front made a difference. He maneuvered the strong Orcs to strengthen the sides of the front and used the Naga as a first line at the center. Their only job was to hold their shields and make a wall. Behind and in between them, humans would fire their weapons, protected from the shields, and slowly the lines progressed to victory. It looked as if they were carefully choreographed. The screams of Ags as he was losing the battle brought new courage toward the end of it. After the ceasefire, Ags was furious. Instead of calling for retreat and heading back to his city, he called forward Alex, Habo, and Prana, the leader of the Naga. "Get him here!" he yelled to one of his warriors. A small Orc prisoner was dragged to the front line.

"Tiel!" yelled Habo. "This is my son, you filthy little Goblin."

"Take another step toward me and he dies, along with all the other prisoners you politely left for me back at your home," said Ags. "The city was defenseless. You must have hated the humans a lot to take every soldier with you. Pity your hatred is stronger than your intelligence."

Habo looked devastated. His pride, his strength and now his family was on the line "Alex, do something! Use your magic and save my son! They will not let him live!" he said with tears.

"Giuli," said Alex into his communicator, "can you take the shot?"

"Of course, I can take the shot," answered Giuli, who was observing from the top of a building.

"Don't kill him. Only wound him. Then keep away from the kid anyone who approaches him. Fire!"

The shot was surgical. The bullet found Ags on top of his shoulder while holding the large young Orc. Tiel began to run. Two Goblins who tried to get him got shot down by Giuli, the merciless sniper.

"Don't move!" Alex yelled. "Anyone moves and the next shot will be on you. Let the boy come! Ags, the next will be on your head! Do as I say and come here so we can all talk!"

Habo smiled watching Ags walking with his head down. "Yes, come here, coward! Now I will finally end you!"

"No, you will not!" he said. "Do you understand this language as well?" he asked Prana in Orcish.

"Yes, I do! My name is Prana. I am the leader of these soldiers. You are Alex."

"Great! Now we can all speak together." He pointed at the Cerberus. "The metal giant you see there is called Cerberus. This one was not ready for war. We have a few more of those, and they will be able to land anywhere, even better prepared next time. I really suggest that you mark those words. Going to war with us is a mistake that should not be repeated."

"You saved my son, and for that I will remain your ally forever."

"The Goblins will never become your friends," said Ags in anger while holding his wound. "I will never forget what you did to me and how your poison tongue tries to make everything sound innocent."

"Ags, send a message to your people to release Habo's prisoners unharmed," Alex said. "Also trying to attack us in such a sneaky manner will not go unpunished a second time."

"What of us?" asked Prana. "What will you do, Alex of the humans?"

"I would like to talk with you. We are coming in peace, and it is hard for most to see this."

"But you are an invader. An invader who has killed more than our greatest enemies in such a small time. You have the ability to bring great misery. Your confidence does not have its source in kindness but in strength. Are we now taking our orders from you?" asked Prana calmly.

"No. You do not take orders from us," answered Alex. "We do not see ourselves as invaders. We will have this piece of land to call home, and we will be in peace with everyone else. Now, however, is not the time for this discussion. We will gather and speak in the following days. Now is the time to stop the madness."

Juuda and Bara looked at each other, feeling like they were in a tight spot. Humans were invading this planet, and it was hard to see it differently. After the meeting was over, everyone took their remaining men and carried their dead back home. Argos, the once-beautiful plan for human colonization and prosperity, was now painted red, green, and blue from blood. Like a twisted artist's work, it had a sense of beauty, but nobody could see it. Although in victory, nobody was smiling. Nobody was celebrating. Everyone was coming out of the bunkers and moving aimlessly in the destruction. Those who had previously thought they were ready to face any enemy were the most silent of all. The fear of another battle became the most terrifying thought in everyone's minds. As humans gathered their dead, they were in disbelief of what had just happened. The bodies of more than fifty of their people lay in front of them, and they were preparing a mass grave for them.

"Are we to live with constant fear the rest of our lives?" asked Maria.

"We have nothing to be afraid of. This will not repeat itself," answered Jain.

"How do you know that? How do you know that tomorrow they will not be back here with double the armies?" asked Maria again in panic.

"We don't know," said Bara, "but we do know that they took a beating from a handful of people that they will never forget. If I was them, I would not dare come near again."

"You are not them! How can you guarantee that we are going to be safe?"

Alex turned to face the crowd. "Guarantee? We are on an alien planet! We are invading those people, and our only way to survive is to be tough! You want guarantees? What more guarantee can you have than what you see around you? We thought we

made friends here. We thought we would be able to live in peace. This expedition was supposed to be the continuation of humanity. As far as we know, we might only be able to survive through war. There are no guarantees! We will now start preparing for the worst. Our city will never be breached again. All Cerberus will be spread so that on short notice, they can land. We need a weapons-production facility and a silo to store them. We can't trust anyone but ourselves. From now on, everyone will practice with weapons. Until we can be sure we are safe, we will prepare."

Juuda planned to 3-D print a memorial to the fallen of the city. *Today's events should never be repeated*, he thought. *We have to keep this day to our memory. Every human should remember that there is no war without losses and suffering.* Then he turned to Alex. "Are you planning on taking them on?" he said.

"I am planning to lose no more people in this hell."

"This is not hell. This is a paradise, just like Earth once was. Let's just try to make it this way."

Alex smiled, the first smile he had in a while. "Although your optimism is, as always, great, it's hard to think this way now. Thank you, though."

The following days, Argos began to be replanned. It would be ready for any kind of aggression. The city grew to have a large, ever-growing perimeter with automated watchtowers and a large wall surrounding the city. After that, the next ring wall began to be constructed, and the city was growing to host more people than it had by far. The plan was to return to the paradise they had planned by keeping an extra inner ring as a fortress in case of emergencies. Soon the city was designed like an old medieval castle town, with a fortress in the center and the habitats around it, surrounded by a wall. For a while, things started to look bright. There was minimal connection with any other species, and the borders were kept.

The communications with their three neighboring species were nearly halted. Alex wanted to be more prepared before he began exploring and growing his relationships with his neighbors. While the city was being built, questions about the past of Gaia and the connection to Earth mythology became a daily chat. Someone even wrote it on a piece of wood at the agora.

"Why are we meeting our mythological and fictional creatures in the flesh here?"

The toll on the three species was very heavy. They lost many, and that meant that their defenses were weakened and their goods production slowed. Many were still at war with other species or even between themselves for power. Alex could see that this was not the end of their worries. They needed a decisive plan to secure their peace.

Chapter 12

Answers

Y:14 D:5

With the population on the rise, more and more machines were being printed out, for material harvesting and production of goods. Among other critical structures, the hangar was also completed, fully ready and with machinery to begin production of more flying units. From observatory to military and even leisure, a whole army of units was ready to be requested. This would give humans the means of traveling around the world fast. Some recon missions were completed by Clive and his Eagle, only to reveal even more species that resembled the mythology of Earth and cities of completely different styles inhabited by those species. A-Concrete was also being synthesized. Its creation also brought forward other breakthroughs in architecture and structural mechanics. The first planet of the solar system had also finished being scanned, and the satellites began moving to the fourth. While traveling toward Solis-D, by complete chance, the satellite intercepted a laser signal. Decoding the signal was not possible, but something technological was working in the solar system. With a bit of detective work, Steve managed to decode the direction of a direct signal to a satellite, which betrayed the location of an ancient network of satellites previously unseen within the Solis system.

"Hypatia, what are the chances that a satellite could remain in operation for thousands of years?" asked Alex.

"I have been analyzing this exact thing since we detected them. Solis is a very stable solar system with a very small amount of floating dust and stone to damage a satellite. Still, after thousands of years, I find it difficult for solar panels to be effective or for any battery to still function. Furthermore, surviving for that long without any maintenance is very hard. Over long periods of time, the systems would decay one way or another."

"So, what do you think is happening?"

"I think the solar system still has a spacefaring civilization living here. Even with self-healing alloys, some maintenance will have to take place at best every thousand years," replied Hypatia

"So, whoever is repairing them also uses machines that transmit the signal we detected. Which also means they might be here on this world too," said Jain while working on her terminal.

"We need answers fast," said Alex. "We do not need an advanced enemy at our door now that things have calmed down. Prana will soon come to speak with us. We will try to learn from them. They seem to be the most civilized of all the species on the planet. Things look good for the first time since we arrived; let's hope it will last."

"If those things only need repairs once every thousand years," added Juuda, "then there is a chance that they are on autopilot."

"What do you mean?" asked Jain.

"They could have been repaired by the Goblins we fight now, but it was in the last thousand years that they lost their technology."

"Could be," said Hypatia. "We know they had technology and that a few thousand years ago, they began their war. They could have run out of resources relatively recently but continued to use satellites till that point."

"Exactly," said Juuda, "and the signal we received could be sent a ping between them or an automatic communication."

"I too hope this is the case," added Alex. "A spacefaring civilization would not be an ideal entry into our problems now. Nonetheless, we need to scan the other planets to be sure there is no threat."

A few days later, what looked like a small combat plane passed silently above Argos. The citizens who noticed it thought it to be some new machine made by Steve. Bara, however, realized immediately that this was not one of their own. Before he had the time to alert anyone, Steve contacted him through his communicator and said, "Please tell me this is something you recognize."

"I am afraid not," answered Bara.

Within seconds, the leaders were notified and gathered to discuss.

"We just had the first contact with an advanced species," said Alex.

"We are assuming this has something to do with the signal we detected, right?" asked Juuda.

"Right now, what's scary is that they know where we are, but we have no idea what we are facing. Perhaps it's also about time we make an anti-air weapon," said Bara.

"No one seems to be bothered that we are taking defensive measures before we even know their intentions?" said Juuda. "We have made so many weapons that we can annihilate everything in this world."

"Juuda, as always, I love your peace-loving approach," said Alex, "but so far no one has greeted us on their first try, and I don't think we have the luxury of waiting to see what happens. We barely survived the attack of the primitives. Now this could mean the end of us if we are not prepared."

"But we might be inviting them to war with these moves, even if they are peaceful," added Juuda. "If they are watching us and realize that upon first sight we made weapons against them, they might change the approach they would have if we acted more civilized."

"If they are peaceful, then we all have nothing to worry about. For now, we need to be ready in case they are not," said Alex.

"I hate to admit it, but I think Alex is right," added Konoya. "If they are planning an attack and they have flying weapons, we might not be able to make it. We need some defense against air."

"If we have one thing to look into our history for, it is that new neighbors are rarely welcomed." added Dimitri.

"That applies to us humans. It does not mean it applies to them," said Juuda.

"I will stop you here and tell you that we need to get ready for war. This is not something that applies to us humans," said Gakuto. "From bacteria to mammals, birds, and reptiles, a new neighbor is usually greeted with hostility. War is not a

human invention. It happens with any weapons and organization a species is able to construct."

"I have to agree," added Hypatia. "Most models for meeting extraterrestrials back on Earth revolved around the idea that a species goes to war upon landing. There is little hope of meetings with immediate peace, even if the species are at a great technological distance from one another."

"So, we all agree. Let's proceed. When are we going to be visited by Prana?" asked Alex.

"She will be here tomorrow," said Konoya.

The next day, Prana, accompanied by two guards, came to Argos. She was greeted as a friend and asked in Orcish to help them feed her language to the system so that they could speak directly to her. She was immediately impressed by the technology and asked her guards to help as well. A few hours later, the language was fully registered, and Alex was ready to begin his conversation.

"Prana," Alex began, "I am happy to be communicating with you in your own language."

"I am still surprised how your technology talks our language so fast," answered Prana. "So, what will we talk about today?"

"Let's start with the reasons you attacked us. Why did you side with Habo and come to attack someone you know nothing about?"

"This is not a valid question. We were told that gods returned to the world. But these gods are not with us. They are probably Pars, which are enemies of everyone."

"Who are those Pars, and why are they an enemy of everyone?" continued Alex.

"They are a species that many think they are legend. We, however, know things about them. Things that most do not believe, but we keep records. Every time someone develops strength, one of them appears and destroys everything. They have not made an appearance in many centuries, so we thought they were extinct. Habo was convinced you are the Pars and that you are here to destroy what we built."

Alex turned to his communicator and spoke to Jain, who was listening. "I get a feeling that our guests in the sky yesterday might have a connection to that."

"I was just thinking the same thing," answered Jain.

"You are talking to your people from here?"

"Yes. We have the technology for that."

"So, you use ether!"

"What is ether?" asked Alex

"Ether is waves that don't need water or air."

"That is a very nice way to put it. Yes, we use ether. Getting back to the point, do you know why Habo would think we are those Pars? He spoke with us a few times; we got to know each other in a way."

Prana looked at Alex curiously, like she was expecting him to know the answer. "You look like them. From the descriptions we have from the old legends. You also use technology that, for most, exists only in legends. Just like the Pars."

"I think I understand now," said Alex. "We are not here to destroy anyone, though."

"I am not so sure this is something you should be saying after your display of power," said Prana with attitude. "Also, every piece of land you lay your feet on belongs to someone else. Like it or not, you are conquering, and you will soon be faced with new resistance."

"So, you know there will be more attempts to destroy us? Why are you here then?"

"I prefer to be on the winning side. You see, we are a semiaquatic species. We can survive underwater for hours. Our ancestors made underwater cities, which managed to stay in better shape than the land-based cities. The first few years of the war were the most devastating. We still have some history of these ancient times. We are even attempting to create ether and see if the Pars appear. Now, however, we have only to wait and see if they come to you. Since you are using it for a while."

"What does ether have to do with the Pars?" asked Alex.

"We have a history that explains how they can feel ether, and if anyone is producing, they come to destroy."

"So, since we have been using ether for a while now, you think the Pars might be paying us a visit soon?"

"If they really are out there, they will come. Spears and arrows, swords and shields mean nothing to them. Just like they mean nothing to you."

"We can be allies if you wish. But before we share any technology with you and before we can fully trust you, we need to spend more time getting to know each other," said Alex.

"You are quick at offering peace. It feels like you have not thought of it well yet. What happens when your population grows? Will you come to our lands? Do you expect me to take your side in the upcoming conflicts?"

"You keep repeating this about conflicts. Is there something you know that you are not telling me?" asked Alex, slightly irritated.

"There is nothing I know that you don't. There are many species on this world. None will accept being ruled by a different species. You might be strong, but you are few. I am sure there are many that, by now, know of your existence and are scared. They must have heard of the outcome of the battles that were fought here. Soon their fear will lead them to the warpath."

Alex looked surprised, but deep down, he knew her words were true.

"I offer peace quickly because my mind is set on peace and coexistence. I might be naïve to think this way, but it has brought us to where we are now," said Alex with mighty determination. "You can join our list of allies, which I hope will grow, and we will figure out the way to coexist, in time."

Prana smiled. "You might be naïve, but perhaps this is what was missing from this place. We are keepers of honor, so I will not answer you so early. First, I must consult my people, then I will give you my answer."

"I understand," said Alex. "How about we switch the subject a bit? Tell me about this world. What do you know of the history when those cities were built?"

"We cannot be sure of the accuracy of our history, but what we know is this," said Prana and took a breath. "Tens of thousands of years ago, it was the time of the great kings. The world was ruled by a group of kings, one from each species. Together they prospered and created a utopia, a world with no war and no hunger. They could travel to the stars, and they could build other worlds. Among them were

the Pars. They were always few in number, but they wanted to rule alone over the rest. They began corrupting the kings and turning one against the other. Soon a war broke out that lasted a thousand years. By the end of it, nothing was standing. Some even say that the war never ended; it is still going on, and it will end when only one species remains. It was at that moment they took control, and they have not let anyone advance technologies again ever since."

Alex smiled. "This is a different, short version of a story I have already heard, but it has many holes. Where are they if they won? Where are their cities? Their civilization? If they have the technology on their side still, then why aren't they building?"

"We don't have answers to everything. This is what our story tells us. We know there are gaps, but we have the best-preserved ancient library of information, and this is what we know. Perhaps when you meet them you can ask them."

"It might happen sooner than expected. Yesterday we saw a flying chariot. One that is not our own," he said and noticed Prana's eyes opening wide. "Also, what is this library of yours? Does it have things that look like this?" He held up a data cube.

Prana was in near shock. "You saw a flying contraption that was not yours? So, it's truth. They are here." She looked at the cube. "No! This is a decoration," she said. "We have thousands of them since the old days, but they are all just nicely shaped transparent cubes. They are not good for anything. Our library is of stone. Sunk under the waters you can find stone walls that we preserve over the centuries, which explain the past. Most of them talk of things that make little sense, like names of Naga, items and texts of heroes."

"That sounds interesting. We would love to see those one day. However, now we need to prepare for the Pars' visit."

"You should prepare. I can leave one of my people here with you, and if needed, he can come and call us."

"That will not be necessary. Here, take this," he said, giving her a small communicator. "If you hear it making sounds, press this, and we will be able to talk. It can work under water too. Keep it on you."

Prana took it with joy. "It's difficult to believe this is not magic."

"Perhaps one day we can show you how it works. For now, we need to prepare. Thank you for everything."

"Thank you too, Alex of the humans," said Prana. "See you."

Jain, who was listening to all the conversations, waited for Alex to return to the city. "After hearing all of this, I thought of something. Is it possible these things are more than storage devices? Margaret, what do you think?"

"I am not sure of what you mean."

Jain looked confused. "Well, I am not so sure of how to describe it, but if those things were everywhere, they must have other functions. I started thinking of those crystals as keys. Perhaps my imagination took me very far."

"Perhaps they were very artistic and used them because they are pretty," said Gakuto, half joking.

"Really? That's your best guess?" asked Konoya with her eyebrows raised in surprise.

"We can't completely discard this possibility, can we?" asked Juuda. "They could function as decorations and at the same time as something more."

The preparations for a possible advanced warfare began immediately. They did not leave things to chance.

Chapter 13

Pars and Their World

Y:14 D:23

Argos

Anais had returned from Alpha City after the sighting of the Pars drone and had begun surveying Argos. She had spent a considerable amount of time setting drones in strategic locations to observe the species that approach the city during night hours. The past few days, she was paying special attention to the north, where the drone had come from. At the Gathering of the Leaders, she was called to explain the findings she had previously spoken about with Bara.

Anais was a bit anxious about talking to all the leaders, but she composed herself and began. "I have some strange things to report. As some of you know, last night from the north of the city, the cameras we have set to monitor the area went offline before they could detect anything. We have a failsafe mechanism where if the cameras turn off, then two drones turn on and fly around the area immediately so that we still have feed. Those too turned off as soon as they turned on, also before any feed could come through. At that point, I went out at night and tried to make an ambush. What I saw was a yet another type of humanoid. One we have not seen before. Shaped more like a human. I could only see the outline and only briefly, since it was like it was expecting me. I think it came to see me just in the same way as I was trying to see it."

"So, our next enemy is here," said Alex. "The Pars, as the Naga call them, have access to at least some technology."

Juuda was almost angry. "Why do you say that our next enemy is here? Why don't we give them a chance to be friends?"

"I take that back, Juuda. You are right. They might be friendly."

"So, what is the strange thing about it? I feel you have more to report, Anais," said Jain.

"Yes, I do. This device is a camera. It is very old school, with terrible night vision and no signal output. You cannot see what this camera sees, change its spectrum, or control where it points."

"Sounds like a great tool," interrupted Gakuto.

"Well, It does have its advantages. Especially in the military," said Anais confidently. "Without trying to bore you, I will say that it was used at the end of the human wars because it was undetectable by an EM detector and could not be jammed by an EMP. Downside is that you have to retrieve it to get the information it has recorded and recharge it. I had placed it far outside the city along with three more, mainly out of curiosity and as a checkpoint of my excursions."

"What did it record?" asked Alex excitedly.

"It's better if I just show you." She played the recording on a monitor. "As you can see, it's a human. Or at least a species extremely close to humans. His speed,

however, is many times that of ours, even at our nano's maximum capacity. I think we found what the statue represented."

"With a quick view, I would be pretty sure it is using nanotechnology, like everything else in this world. These legs could not support that speed. It nearly broke the rocks under his feet by accelerating on them.

"We can also deduct from the recording," continued Anais, "that it's about 190 cm in height and resembles a male. We do not know what he will use to try and take us out, nor when he will attack. From now on, we are on alert."

"Again!" said Juuda. "Again, we are sure he is hostile and prepare to shoot and then talk. Am I the only one here who sees the madness in this?"

"Here I will side a bit with Juuda," said Jain. "We can't kill him."

"We can't or we shouldn't?" asked Bara.

"Well, think about it," said Jain, trying to explain her thoughts. "He is probably alone. Prana also told us that according to their legends, only one comes to take them out. Also, there were very few of them to begin with. This could be a species that multiplies very slowly. We can't be the ones to bring them to extinction. We need to capture him and talk with him."

"It's hard to argue with both of you," said Alex, looking around to see what the rest thought. "We will do our best not to harm him then. But this might not be possible. Time to set a plan. Any ideas?"

"We need to set a trap for him and physically restrain him. Perhaps we can go old school and put an underground trap which will activate once he is on top?" asked Bara.

"Let's try to think here," said Jain. "He has a long history of primitive civilization conflicts. Traps are probably what he expects. We need something more sophisticated."

"I think I might actually have a solution for it," said Juuda, to everyone's surprise. "But we will need to move fast. Call Jabir. We have had a discussion about something, and it might come in handy now."

Jabir joined the conversation and was explained the whole situation.

"Now that you see the problem," said Juuda, "don't you think we can use the projectiles we were discussing before?"

"To make everything clear to everyone," said Jabir, "we had spoken of some chemicals that, once mixed, become like plaster. We can create bullets with those two components, and once they strike, they will combine, and in a matter of milliseconds, they will expand into a foam that hardens almost instantly. This way we can immobilize anything without killing it. That is if it has the same tough skin as everything else. The bullet itself will be very hard and fast. If his skin is unaided by technology, he will be injured from the shot."

"I think this is perfect," said Alex. "Get busy and provide a large number of those bullets. Bara, arm a couple of fast drones with those and get them ready. Set them at a distance, and once the time is right, start shooting them before he can disable them. Anais, Giuli, get your snipers and some of these foam bullets and go to the hill near the west to make camp. Be in constant preparation and alert. Make sure you have a clear view of the west side of the city. Guys, keep lights facing all directions during the night and place extra cameras. We can only hope his weapons are not as advanced as ours."

"I really hope we will not be met with a missile. Is our anti-air system able of defending against missiles?" asked Jain.

"If it's only a couple missiles, then yes," said Bara, trying to calm everyone down. "We have a high-energy laser with an automated targeting system to shoot missiles. This will only be good for a couple of shots, though. It tends to get very hot and also recharges slowly."

"It's the first time that I realize that our military technology is not in par with everything else. We could be better equipped," said Alex.

"Well, military research stopped with the Osiris impact before we were all born," said Bara. "What we have are weapons that were made with past technologies. We never expected an advanced civilization, though."

"I am not so optimistic suddenly, but we can also hope that his weapons are just as outdated," said Jain.

"When it comes to combat," said Bara, "weapons are half the story. It's strategy, precision, timing, and more that determine the winner. I also want to let you know that even though our weapons are not as advanced as everything else we have here, they have been thoroughly tested. These are the same technologies that fought countless wars before the Osiris."

A couple of days passed with preparations and anxiety. The people of Argos had changed, from the slow and lazy group of people to a fast-paced society. Advancement was accelerated, and exploration was progressing, but people were not happy. There seemed to be no ease of mind. No peace inside the hearts of humans. Fear was often discussed, and Konoya spent most of her days trying to work her way through people's minds. Then, in the middle of the second night, the north cameras went offline, and in a matter of seconds, everyone was up and alert.

"This is what we waited for," said Bara. "Anais, Giuli! Do you see anything?"

"I can't see anything in infrared," answered Anais.

"Quickly turn all lights on. It might be cloaking its body heat," said Bara.

Giuli's voice proved how pumped with adrenaline she was. "I have visual. I think. Its wearing something that makes it hard to pinpoint. It distorts light."

"Dispatch the drones and shoot on sight," ordered Bara.

"He is incredibly fast, and it looks like he is trying to approach you with what looks like swords. The few bullets that make it to target seem to be washing over him. Is it due to his speed or his armor, I can't be sure," said Anais.

"Swords? Don't take chances. Shoot, everyone shoot!"

Jain, who was looking at everything through the monitors, turned to Alex. "He is very fast, but it seems like it's working. He is slowing down."

"Everyone, get out and shoot it until it can't move. Aim for the chest," ordered Bara.

His maneuverability made him a very hard target. It looked like he was dodging the bullets.

Albert, who was the one further out on the wall, saw him approach from underneath and sheath his swords.

Then he climbed the wall with one agile leap and stopped. He stood in front of Albert for a brief second, then a hail of bullets fell on him. Some words in a yet unknown language came out of his lips. He fell down immobilized, and Jabir came above him pouring some liquid on the edge of his hands, which dissolved the foam

and allowed for Bara to tie his hands and legs. They removed his weapons and took him to a room while wrapped with restraining bands like a mummy.

For four days, everyone worked hard to gather as much information as they could from his weapons and armor. Meanwhile, Konoya, who was the only one in contact with him, tried to learn basic things about him. She started decoding his language with the help of Orcish that he was fluent in. He was very comfortable with technology, and he understood the process of teaching the machine his language immediately.

His weapons were made of some strange metal alloy, which at first look did not have anything special other than being incredibly tough yet lightweight. Upon further investigation, it turned out that the blade was made with some technology that would vibrate the edge of the sword and keep it sharp. Although it weighed next to nothing, it could cleave through a tree. He was also equipped with a small weaponlike device that fired short bursts of electrons in a cone shape that could fry electronics within a few meters' distance. It could also focus the beam and burn more precise targets further away. His uniform was a mesh of one-atom-thick layers of different elements with composite sheets in between providing protection from virtually anything and could distort most electromagnetic signals that tried to bounce off of it. It was hard to categorize his arsenal as that of a warrior or an assassin.

In the couple of days it took to identify the properties of his equipment, Konoya had made a complete translation of his language. He spoke something that looked to be the root of all the other languages of this world. Also, his looks would categorize him into the elf kind of lore back on Earth, but since his diet consisted primarily of animal blood, they decided to call his race Vampires. The statue that had long troubled humans finally had found its origin. A species that was nearly impossible to separate from humans unless thoroughly examined.

"Hello, Eldon. My name is Alex. I am the leader of these people here. Let me start by asking you, why did you attack us?" said Alex in his native language.

"Who are you? Where did you come from?" asked Eldon.

"We are humans, and we came from the stars," Alex answered vaguely.

"What are you doing here?" asked Eldon fearlessly.

"I would rather switch this conversation into one where I ask the questions, Eldon. You attacked us by taking out our cameras. Now you should focus on answering questions."

"I did not attack you. If I wanted to attack you, you would be dead by now," said Eldon arrogantly. "I was merely curious about you. I thought you were someone else."

"Who did you think we were?" asked Alex.

"I can't answer any more questions now," said Eldon.

Alex left the room to talk with the others.

"Bara," said Alex, "from what you saw, is it the truth? Could he had taken all of us out if he wanted?"

"I hate to admit it, but it's possible," said Bara. "If he hadn't stopped, he would have entered the city without much effort."

"I don't know if that's useful now, but I know how to defeat him," said Steve.

"So, if we were to go against a few of them, we have weapons that are effective against them?" asked Bara.

"Not exactly," answered Steve. "A direct plasma shot would probably go through the armor he was wearing, and even if it did not, it would cause a lot of damage. But plasma is slow, and he seems to be able to somehow dodge bullets. The answer is quite simple. Lasers. A high-power laser would go through the armor like it was paper."

"Have you tested this on his armor?" asked Bara.

"No," answered Steve, "but we don't need to. The camouflage technology he uses works in a way that would not reflect a laser beam. It would try to absorb it. Also, it is impossible to dodge a light beam."

"Great job, Steve," said Alex. "Prepare a couple of weapons like that as soon as you can."

"And how will we aim them?" asked Bara. "If he starts moving the way he did, then we can't aim at him"

"Any solutions to that, Steve?" asked Alex.

"Not really. It's hard to program a robot arm to target something it can hardly see. His armor renders him almost completely invisible to most sensors."

Alex sighed. "Prepare the weapons, and let's hope we don't have to fight more of him. In the meantime, we need solutions for the targeting," said Alex and took a deep breath. "Now, what do we do with him?"

"We might need to let him go immediately," said Jain.

"That makes more sense," said Juuda. "Why do you say so, though?"

"If he is not back to his base, there might be more coming soon," answered Jain.

"Well, I think that he has not harmed us, so we let him go in a gesture of good will. Also, we have a prisoner now? What are we?" said Juuda in an angry voice.

Alex raised his eyebrows and opened his eyes wide. "You're right!" he said. "This is not the right way. What are we to do if he does not comply and talk? Kill him? No! We need to let him go!"

They all looked at each other and nodded in agreement.

"I will try to talk to him one more time and then let him go. It's a risk we have to take. In the meantime, a weapon against a possible fight with him should be our top priority," said Alex, as he moved toward the room in which Eldon was kept.

"I am quite disappointed, Eldon," said Alex, sitting in front of him. "You made an aggressive move against us, and then you refuse to talk to us."

Eldon leaned his head to the left and curiously watched Alex talk.

Alex continued, "Your aggression, however, has not put any of us in danger, and therefore, you are free to go. I only wish you could understand that we are not your enemy. If you need something or you decide to talk with us, come to the front door during the day. Like a friend. We would have much to discuss." With that, Alex stood up, and Nick entered the room, giving him his gear.

While walking toward the gates of Argos, Eldon could hardly hide his surprise. Partly because he was let free and partly because most humans would approach him as he walked to take a better look. Like they had no fear. They were amazed by what humans would consider his near-perfect characteristics.

The following days went by with Argos spending more time and resources developing technologies based on the items found on Eldon. Without them, however, research was not very fruitful. The glass that everyone on the planet seemed to be using for various applications had its own unique abilities, which were discovered and reproduced. With just a few artifacts, Argos began developing technologies and materials that would otherwise be far from conception.

Y:14 D:53

Argos main gate

Eldon was at the perimeter of the clearing, walking toward the gate with his weapons sheathed. Alex was notified and realized that he was coming in peace, so he immediately walked out to greet him.

"Hello, Eldon," said Alex. "Welcome back to Argos."

"Hello, Alex," replied Eldon. "I am back because I want to talk with you."

They began walking toward a small park near the center of the city. "Why the change of plans?" asked Alex.

"It's been too long alone here."

"I don't understand. If you are alone, then how did you know we are here? How did you maintain the observation plane that you used to find us? Also, there are many species who know of you."

"The Serpents," said Eldon.

"Yes. The Naga were very clear in their knowledge of you."

"They are very hard to deal with. Under water, I can't fight easily, and they tend to make their homes near the shores."

"I am not sure I understand," said Alex.

"It's been too long. I have forgotten how many years it has been since I spoke with someone. I give up now. I need some company."

"Calm down, Eldon," said Alex, turning toward him and holding his shoulder. "I can hardly understand what you are saying to me. Being alone is very hard, but this is over now."

"Thank you," said Eldon, moved by Alex's words. "I never liked attacking everyone in the first place."

"Tell me why you did it."

"It was my order; I was equipped with a device that replicates itself and can also make weapons and parts for my base and planes."

"Ordered by whom?"

In the meantime, Jain and the other leaders were listening in on the conversation. When Eldon mentioned that he had working machines, Steve and Margaret's eyes opened wide. "We need those machines," Steve said.

"Definitely we do," answered Margaret.

Eldon sat down on a bench and took a deep breath. "I will tell you my story, Alex."

"I am more than eager to hear it."

"I am one of the youngest members of my people. I am not even sure if there are still any of my people out there. A couple of years before I was born, a war broke out. A war that destroyed everything." Eldon looked up, like he was searching for

the words in the sky. "I was barely thirty circles old when all the mothers of our species died. Our enemy tried to kill us with a poison, a virus that would harm us. But it only worked on our females. I don't know why it did not affect us males or how they infected all of us with it, but they did. After that, we hid and waited for the war to end. Unable to reproduce, we had only one hope left. That the kings would return for us."

"What kings?" asked Alex.

"I have to take you a bit further back. I was not alive then and I never had the chance to hear details of this story."

"It does not matter," said Alex compassionately. "Just tell me what you know."

"My people come from the fourth planet in this system. We call it Spi. Back before the war, all of the planets were filled with people of many species. We all lived in peace, which is hard to imagine, but we did. Through the guidance of the great kings, the people prospered and advanced to the point where they began traveling to the stars. There they met the Thropi. They were an evil species that caused the great war."

"You fought against another alien species?"

"No, they caused us to fight. I know it sounds strange, and I am not sure exactly how, but the story goes like that. They caused war to break out here, and soon the kings were forced to flee. They made spaceships and got themselves away. Then our people were blamed for the war. We were blamed because we did not grow old and die. So, they attacked us with the virus that killed off our females."

"How did you get here then?" asked Alex.

"These are the parts I do know for fact. After hundreds of years, the war began to fade. Great battles were replaced with small fights. Alliances began forming and breaking on a daily basis. The borders were set, and every species was on its own, with little interaction between them. That's when our leaders made the plan."

"What is that plan?"

"We thought our kings would return to bring balance. We had to simply last until then. After we realized that we were the last species with access to technology, we set a plan in motion. Since we were very few, we would train in combat for years, and then, after we had perfected the art of death, we were equipped with these swords and other tools which make us the strongest of all. Then we established ourselves in various places of each world with a device that notifies us when someone is using electromagnetism. Then we scout the areas and go destroy them before they get to advance further."

"I think I understand. But who could develop electromagnetism using technologies while they are living in small tribes? I don't see how this would make sense."

"Today it seems to be the case. But until a few thousand years ago, old-world technologies resurfaced in isolated areas which would give a small group of people amazing powers. That's what I was hunting and destroying. This way we made sure we would not have anyone advanced enough to challenge us until our kings return. Now I realize that it was probably us that made this world return to the age of no technology by systematically destroying it."

"I understand. So, that means there are more of you in the world now?"

"Judging from the area I supervise, there should be about ten of us on every planet. Besides Spi, our base was there, so there should be all hundred thousand that had survived the war underground. Now that I think about it, I don't think many must have made it this far. I might even be the last of my kind. That is why I was so excited when I first saw you. It seemed to me that the kings had returned."

"I think I see a picture of your past, Eldon. You are welcome to stay here with us if you so choose. You don't need to be alone anymore."

"You know," said Eldon, "there was a time when I was building my legend and fighting all the time. I had even met others of my kind over the years. But the feeling began to fade. I realized I did not enjoy the killing. I dreamt of the days of the kings, when all these great cities were filled with life and movement."

"Perhaps one day you will see them like that again," said Alex with a smile. "Let me introduce you to the rest of the team."

After the team welcomed Eldon in their ranks, Anais escorted Eldon to his room.

Juuda was the first to address the situation. "I like the idea of an ally, but don't you think you should have at least informed us that you would invite him to stay?" he said, frowning.

"I have to agree," said Jain. "It is strange that we let him stay here so easily."

Alex looked around and saw that they all agreed that his actions were rushed. "I will not lie. I had not planned this. After talking with him, I realized that we can't kick him out," he said apologetically. "You all heard him. He could very well be the last of his species."

"He could very well be lying," said Bara.

"I don't think he is lying," said Juuda. "I actually agree with Alex's decision to invite him. I just did not expect that it would happen without first discussing it with us."

"Let's keep an eye on him at all times for a while and be prepared for the worst," said Jain. Everyone agreed and proceeded to discuss other matters.

A few days passed, and Eldon quickly became a part of everyday life in Argos. He learned the language and became a friend to many. He even began his first romantic relationship. He did hope that he could bear a child with one of the women, but Gakuto quickly explained to him that although they were so similar in appearance, it was impossible to have a child with a human. His appearance, however, brought up new questions. Gakuto believed that for his form to be so close to their own, the planet on which they evolved had to be extremely similar to Earth. That was not the case with the planets around Solis, however. This brought new scenarios as to the origin of so many species in this system.

Gakuto began forming a hypothesis that those species must have evolved on different planets and been brought there. His idea was very complex and brought forth new questions that were even harder the answer, so for now it remained a hypothesis without much research behind it. His request to sample DNA from thousands of species and prove that there is no evolutionary link between them was too costly and time consuming to be granted the green light, so for now he remained in speculation.

Eldon's memories of the past began painting a detailed picture of what happened in the years after the start of the war. While satellites were scanning Eldon's home planet, they decided to drop a few drones so they could remotely monitor some key places Eldon wanted to see. When the maps were ready, Eldon pointed out the approximate locations of the ancient command centers. Eldon also provided the system that notifies him of any electromagnetism being used. In all cities, some of the buildings have installed within their walls a simple yet durable system, which acts like a receiver and an antenna. It gets its energy directly from A concrete. Most of its systems have failed over the years, and the network can no longer even pinpoint the location of the source; it still functions as an alarm, to inform of the existence of the technology.

Margaret and Steve were eager to get his replication machines in their hands, in case they could help them decode the crystals. Eldon allowed them to visit his bunker and see the machines firsthand. Those turned out to be very sophisticated 3-D printers but with an existing library of items to make. It seemed that it was designed so that no one, even Eldon himself, could tamper with the machines and make something new. The machines did not provide insight on how to decode the crystals, but they did help with the creation of very sophisticated 3-D printers for Argos.

Y:18 D:60

The mapping satellite left Spi (Solis-D) to move to the outer, colder, and smaller planets. Meanwhile, the drones sent there were approaching an ancient city in ruins. Although the planet seemed to be well built, there were far fewer species and villages still active there. Eldon explained that it was most likely due to the existence of the largest concentration of his people there. They would not easily leave anyone alive over the period of those years. At least not in close proximity to themselves. There, just outside the tall structures, an area that looked like a lake from the airborne images now seemed like a well-polished metal sheet. Upon close inspection of the area, it looked like the top of an underground launch platform, under which should still be a working base. They deduced that because the area was kept clean and no vegetation was present around the pad. Without much searching, a smaller, hangarlike gate with a human-sized door next to it was found.

"It looks like they only use flying to travel. There are no roads," noticed Jain.

Eldon seemed excited and worried at the same time. "Can we knock on the door?" he asked.

"Weird as it sounds, we actually can," said Steve.

"Can I also speak to whoever answers?"

"Yeah, you can," said Jain, who was organizing the operation. "Steve, knock on the door please."

Steve looked like he was waiting for this the entire time. "Look at this maneuver," he said and made the drone bash its belly on the door twice, in what would seem like a dance maneuver, much the way a human would knock on a door. Hearing no answer, Steve continued to bash on it for a while, waiting for something to happen. About ten minutes later, the door opened. From within, another Vampire

appeared. He looked at the drone with a questioning face and a weapon pointing at it.

Eldon began talking to him in a yet-unknown language. Jain stopped Juuda, who was ready to begin asking Eldon to transfer questions. "Let him speak alone," she said. After a while, Eldon stopped and turned to the group. "Well, this is amazing," he said with excitement.

Alex, who had arrived once he heard the news, asked, "What were you talking about?"

Eldon turned toward Alex. "His name is Rhain," he said. "He is a much older Vampire than me, and he was very curious about you. But he is a friend, and he would like to talk again. He will speak with his superiors, and he would like to talk again tomorrow."

"What did he ask you, and what was this language you were talking?" asked Jain.

"Is this the language you mentioned a few times before?" asked Konoya. "The language of the stars that your elders spoke?"

"Yes. I had not spoken that language since I was a kid, thousands of years ago. Also, his reaction when I told him that you look like us was very strange."

"What do you mean?" asked Jain.

"When I told him that there are visitors from the stars, he asked me what you look like, and I told him you are just like us but require a far more complex diet than us to survive," answered Eldon. "At that point, I have to admit, the reaction on his face was that of shock."

"What did he say after that?" asked Jain again.

"He said that he will speak to me again tomorrow. He went to talk with someone else inside the base."

"We need to wait and be ready for more communications. Let's take a break for a bit and gather tomorrow, once we have him back. Steve, put the drone on standby, looking at the door. Once it detects movement, let us know."

After almost everyone left the room, Alex, Jain, Juuda, and Konoya gathered to talk alone.

"It felt like something is wrong," started Konoya. "He looked like he thought he knew us."

"Konoya, once the language they spoke is complete, make sure you do not inform them that we understand. Keep it a secret from anyone out of our current circle for now," said Jain.

"Are you suspicious of Eldon?" asked Alex, to which Juuda nodded in agreement with the question.

"Not really," answered Jain, "but if Rhain is his superior and he thinks he knows us, then he might pass sensitive information to him. It's good to know what they are talking about, to avoid any surprises."

"Don't you think that will be very hurtful to him once he realizes?" said Juuda. "I think it's better to tell him the truth immediately. Let them talk, and before we test him, we tell him the truth without making him feel like we don't trust him."

"As always, you are the voice of morals here, Juuda. We usually don't listen to you, but I think you might be right on this one. Since the language is not yet ready,

we will let them talk, and after we have decoded the language, we will let him know that we understand."

A day on Solis-D lasts just under a day on Gaia, so in the early hours of the morning, Steve was waiting to see movement. The door of the Vampire base opened, and Rhain came out. Steve informed everyone to gather and flew the drone in front of him. He was followed by one more of his kind, who just stood there observing the drone.

Aldon and Rhain began talking. Their conversation took a while, since there was a delay in the signal due to the distance between the planets. After a few hours, Steve interrupted. "Batteries are running low. It will need to fly up to the top of a building and recharge."

Alex stood up and said, "Eldon, inform Rhain that your conversation has to be cut short. The drone is running out of battery. Let's discuss, and we'll speak with them again tomorrow."

"Actually," said Steve, "we really drained it this time, and it's already late there. We will need most of tomorrow morning to charge. It's better if we have the next talk in two of their days."

Eldon informed Rhain that they would talk again the morning of the second day, and they left to return to their base.

Jain turned to Konoya and whispered in her ear, "Did we manage to get that?"

"All of it," Konoya whispered back.

Alex turned to Eldon. "So, what is the deal there? Are they in need of anything?"

They all had noticed that during their conversations, Rhain was becoming increasingly direct with his tone, while Eldon was looking confused.

"It is strange. And I don't know what to say about my conversation. Can you please give me some time to think?" asked Eldon.

"Of course," said Alex without giving it much thought. "But you need to understand that we also have the right to know what is going on."

"You do," said Eldon. "I will sort myself out and talk to you in a few hours, if that is acceptable"

His tone was different than other days. Something was clearly troubling him.

After Eldon left the room, the team gathered to speak.

"Are we sure that what we will hear is the right translation?" Jain asked Konoya.

"They spoke for so long that together with the words we had picked up during his stay here, we could even make out a quantum physics conversation," said Konoya "So yeah, it is clear. He had given us more of his ancient language than he thought in his stay here, and I had recorded all of it."

"What are you two talking about?" asked Alex.

"You have to forgive us, but this might be one of those moments when you are too trusting. We recorded his entire conversation, and after the translator got the language, we translated everything, including his conversation from yesterday."

"I thought we agreed that we will not eavesdrop on their conversation without him knowing," said Juuda with clear dissatisfaction.

"We did not. We just recorded it, and now we have the language. We still don't know what they spoke about," said Jain. "Alex, this is your decision."

"This is unfair," Alex replied. "Curiosity alone dictates me to hear."

"But do we really want to be the people who did not show trust? We are not doing this for him. We should not be hearing this, for us!" said Juuda.

"From that point of view," said Konoya, "Juuda is right. We should not think of this as something that has anything to do with him. We need to think whether we trust him or not."

Alex looked up and took a deep breath. "Deep down I don't want to listen to it, but since we came here, we were greeted with hostility from every direction. Do we really want bet the continuation of our species to a trust roll? If we risk, we might risk it all. If we don't, we might become more morally comfortable. The losses outweigh the gains for now. We will look at our moral code, Juuda, when the risk is not so great."

"I would rather not stay here then." Juuda stood up and left the room.

"I understand," said Alex. "One day, I hope I will be more like you."

"Konoya, let's hear it," said Jain.

The conversation began with greetings and general environmental information. Living conditions and psychological strengths. Rhain seemed to be asking questions to understand Eldon's mental situation and the impacts of the years in isolation. When Eldon had difficulty answering, Rhain reminded him continuously that he should be strong. He is a soldier, and he needs to keep it together. He repeated it even in moments when it was not necessary to do so. Konoya immediately identified the pattern. Rhain was his superior in hierarchy and was trying to make Eldon understand this in a very smart and slow way. At some point, quite casually, Rhain asked Eldon, "Can they hear you now?"

"Yes," said Eldon, "but they don't understand anything. I never taught them our language."

"Right, then. Listen closely. You are a soldier, and you will now receive new orders. Stay with them there and observe them. Learn of their defenses and their technology. Act as their friend and gain their trust. You will be informed of what comes next in the future."

"But why?" asked Eldon with discomfort. "They are my friends. They welcomed me here without knowing me, and for the first time in thousands of years, I am not bored or alone."

Rain replied seriously, "Eldon, this is not a matter to be taken lightly. There is a good chance they are the Thropi."

"What are you talking about? How can this be?"

Rhain looked like he was searching for the right words. "It can. I can't be sure, though. We have to see them and talk to them to confirm it."

"But we were told that the Thropi were monsters. That they want nothing but destruction and that they never made it here."

"There is more to the truth than what you know," answered Rhain. "Trust me for now. Soon you will have more information."

"I would like to know now."

Rhain began to look angry at Eldon's persistence. "Eldon, now is not the time. All was done to protect us. To protect you."

"Protect us from what?" Eldon was very confused.

"It is a long story, and now is not the time," Rhain said with a strict voice
"Whatever you do, do not trust them. We might be wrong, but it's the safest way.
Learn everything you can, and we will think of something in the meantime."

At that point, Steve was informing them that the batteries were running low, and the conversation ended.

"This complicates things. What do you think?" asked Alex.

"I think we should wait for him to tell us his story. Let's see if he will say the truth," answered Jain. "After, we will discuss the right direction."

Konoya nodded. "I agree. I think he will try to come clean. I spent far too much time with him, and he seems like someone who will not have an easy time doing spy work."

"It is important that we observe him for a while. We will need Bara in the loop. One of his drones will have to be observing Eldon at all times from a distance. If he enters the main bunker, we will need to know exactly what he will be seeing," said Alex.

"The good news is that we will soon know if he is a true friend and ally or not," said Jain.

With an uneasy feeling, the team left the room. Eldon was seen walking around the perimeter of the city. Near the trees, at his favorite spot, he stopped and lay down, looking at the sky. A couple of hours later, he returned to talk with Alex.

"Alex," he said with his head facing down, "I need to tell you something."

"Personally to me or to everyone?" asked Alex.

"I'd rather speak with you alone."

"Do you want to walk?" he asked.

"That would be nice."

Alex turned off his communicator, and they began walking. After they walked past the gate, Eldon got straight to the point. "Rhain asked me to do something I don't want to do."

"What did he ask you to do?"

"I am not sure if I should say right now. I am not sure of what to do," answered Eldon with discomfort.

Alex felt bad about how things have gone and decided to trust Eldon with the truth. "I can make this a little bit easier for you."

"How?" asked Eldon with disbelief.

"Before I explain how, I want you to understand that this world is alien for us. So far, we have only faced hostility from everyone we met."

Eldon looked at Alex curiously, as if he started to understand what was happening. Alex continued, "We trust you to be among us, and we trust you as a friend. We do not trust Rhain or his orders toward you. We know how hierarchy works, and we know that you will probably obey his orders. That meant we could take no chances."

"What exactly did you do?" Eldon looked scared. His mind was traveling between bad scenarios.

"We translated your conversation. We know he asked you to spy on us."

Eldon looked relieved. He was worried of far worse, so this news did not strike him as something too bad. "I completely understand. Yes, you made it easier. So, what do I do now?" he said.

"It has been a long time since you had contact with your people, but you should remember. There is a strict chain of command in most societies. Breaking this chain might have catastrophic results for you."

"I know that. But my society failed a long time ago. Perhaps it's time to give a chance to a new one. That's what I am thinking. They think you are the reason our world collapsed, but this can't be the truth."

"Yes," said Alex, "we heard. We could not have been the ones you call Thropi. We were still in preindustrial societies when your war was raging."

"Should we let them know that you know everything?"

"This, my friend," said Alex compassionately, "is your moral dilemma. I had to take mine when I heard your conversation without your approval. I am happy with the way it ended, but it does not change the fact that it's not correct. You will have to make your own decision and face the consequences."

"So officially, you are not my leader?" asked Eldon.

"I am not," said Alex, "but I am officially your friend. I would give the same talk to any of my friends. You have a leader and are talking to Rhain. If you want, however, to become an actual member of this society, you will have to first explain this to your superiors."

"You make it sound easy."

Eldon decided to keep it a secret for the time being. As if Rhain understood, he began limiting his talks with Eldon and began asking for Alex to visit the base on Spi and talk with the leader of the Vampires in person, a leader who did not accept talking over the drone. He insisted on a face-to-face meeting.

The Arrow, which had been turned into a research facility, required far too much work and modification to make a trip between the planets, so for the time being, it remained a plan for the future.

The Vampires agreed on a check-in once every fifteen days with Eldon, who was to remain with the humans. They thought that his spy work would go on while the information he was delivering was real but not sensitive. He had blurred the line between spying for his superiors and disobeying their orders.

Chapter 14

Tranquility, Treasure, and Exploration

Y:19 D:28

Argos

The days after Eldon's contact with his elders made him skeptical. He was in a hard dilemma. Juuda, who had become a close friend of Eldon's, got everything explained to him. His denial to hear Eldon's communications without his approval was a key part of why Eldon trusted him the way he did. Juuda's ideas also began to have an impact on Eldon's mind. His pacifist and just way of seeing things rubbed off on Eldon. As time went by, some contact was established with the other species. In most cases, they were greeted with fear. Humans slowly became more proficient in how they make first contact. They were slowly convincing one after another that the best cause of action was to cease hostilities with the neighboring species and join the humans in their quest of uniting the system. Most of the species joined out of fear. The technological advancement of humans was well spoken of, even to people who had yet to come in contact with them. Very few joined, because they really believed that the humans might end the wars of their ancestors. Especially after the news of the Orc-Naga defeat and the murdering of the goblin leader's wife, it became hard to convince them that the humans were truly seeking peace.

This problem concerned Alex greatly. His plans began enveloping a much grander scheme, wherein the entire system would need to be governed. With that in mind, he was searching for ways to convince the other species to join the cause. Those who feared humans would not willingly join, and those who did not thought that an alien, an outsider could not be trusted.

Anais and Albert, who had left for a long mission near a strange species of tiny tree-dwelling creatures, were returning with more data. Helen had made more accurate measurements and now dated the end of the civilization on Gaia at about sixty thousand years ago. That was the same as about 7,200 years on Earth.

Y:20 D:7

Argos

Emile, who was devoted in sociology and was spending much time at indigenous species' villages, learning from them, invited the leaders to reveal the results of his research. In the meeting, Eldon was present at Emile's request.

"Hello, everyone," he started. "As all of you have been briefed, I am looking into ways of making the communications and alliances with other species easier. I had stayed with some of them for long periods of time, and slowly I began painting a better image of their history. I am now convinced that there is a bigger picture we are not seeing. Something is so magnificently out of our understanding that we are blind to it."

"Can you make this clearer, please?" asked Jain.

"The species we have here are not from this world."

"That's a brave statement, but what are you going to back that up with?"
asked Jain.

"Firstly, there are no cousins of any species we see here. There are no animals that evolved unparallel with any species we see. We should see animals with similar features as every one of them, but we see nothing."

Gakuto interrupted. "We have spoken about this, Emile, and I explained that this is not proof. They could have driven all those animals to extinction. We need to start digging into the soil to uncover the past. This is not proof yet."

"And we will not have enough people to start investing into digging for fossils anytime soon," added Juuda.

"Yes, but this is not all," said Emile. "They all talk about kings from the stars. They all have a history, one way or another, of being abandoned by those kings. The cities we see and the expansion on the other planets we confirmed with Eldon's home world, Spi, betrays a coexistence before the war, which is very unlikely. Near impossible, really."

"Why do you say that?" asked Juuda. "Why do you think that just because we were always unable to make peace on Earth, they would have hard time to do that here as well?"

"Let me clear this up." Emile took a deep breath and put his thoughts into order. "They are not special. They are all people like us. They have the same chemistry, the same needs, and even very similar wants. They love and hate just like us, and they fear change and strangers just like we used to. The question then changes into this: Without an external input of something too big, how do you expect them to grow into a spacefaring civilization?"

"So, if we were to leave them alone to advance now, you say they would never reach peace?" asked Juuda.

"Exactly," said Emile. "If you somehow manage to make them have peace for a while, it will not be enough to create an elite tribe of kings from every tribe that will keep the peace over large enough periods of time to create spaceships. The chances are astronomically low."

"So, what are you suggesting here?" asked Jain.

"I am saying that there are things we are missing that are far too important to neglect. We need to seek the truth of the past. Something huge is hiding here."

Alex, who was listening all this time, looked at Emile with seriousness. "How do you suggest we approach this then?" he asked.

"I think we should go to the other planets. We need to see and talk with the Vampires who are ancient and check on the first planet of the solar system."

"Why the first planet?" asked Alex.

"Because it is often pointed as the home of the kings by some tribes."

"Eldon," said Alex, "do you think that Rhain and his superiors will know something more than you about the past?"

"Probably," said Eldon. "Our species does not age. Just like you. Rhain is much older than me. He lived when the kings were present. I am sure that his superiors are even older, and some of them must have had some sort of connection to the kings themselves."

"Is it time to turn Arrow into a spaceship?" asked Jain.

Steve shielded his lips and shook his head. "I hate to disappoint you, but that will not be easy or fast. The Arrow is not made to be used as a bus between planets."

Eldon's eyes shined while he smiled. "I might be able to help with that," he said, "I know a few places where underground technology areas are sealed. After a few years here, the energy ran out, and these places could no longer be accessed. There is even one that I never had access to but seemed to be important. Together we might find a way to bypass the gates and get to the equipment inside. There are mainly military items, but I am sure they will prove useful. Within them there should be some small spaceships."

Steve started looking happy. "Military equipment will actually prove even better as a source of information than anything else. How do you know of the spaceships, though?"

"When I first arrived on this planet, I landed and hid in one of those bunkers. There was more than just my spaceship there. I think I can safely assume that most of those will still be full of equipment inside."

"Let's start right away," said Alex. "Show us this place."

"I will take you there, but we will need the Eagle," said Eldon.

For the following few weeks, a team of ten people were working on entering the bunker that Eldon had led them to. The area around was cleared so that the power and air intakes could be exposed. It seemed like a futile effort. The bunker was built to withstand nuclear explosions. No drill could go through the walls, and air intake was filtered in a way that nothing would crawl through. Repowering the station was pointless as well, since it ran the risk of security systems turning on instead of doors opening. The bright idea of digging and going underneath led to yet another dead-end, since the whole bunker was meant to withstand attacks from Goblins, which are masters of digging. Finally, Jain came up with a bright idea. "How about we drop something heavy on it?" she said.

"Like what," said Steve with a smirk, "a mountain?"

"Actually," said Jain, "something like it. Can you calculate the force a Cerberus would impact with if no parachutes were to open?"

Steve's eyes opened wide. "That sounds like something that could work." He could not hide his excitement. "If we drop it right on the joint of the bunker door and the walls, it might crack it like an egg."

"Wouldn't that sacrifice the Cerberus?" asked Alex. "I mean, I love the idea of seeing something like that, but we would lose one of our most important defense units."

Jain thought for a second. "Do we care?" she asked. "I mean, we have a few more, and we don't seem to need them anymore."

"You're probably right," said Alex. "Also, the wonders we might find in there far outweigh the cost of a Cerberus. Let's do it."

"I want to add," said Steve, "that the parts will be salvageable. We might even repair it at some point."

"What are we waiting for then? Everyone! Begin clearing out your equipment. Steve, when can we have it drop?" Alex was just as excited as everyone else to see this tremendous crash take place.

"I can have the calculations ready in one hour, give or take." Steve checked his arm screen for a few seconds and added, "Hera will pass above us in about six hours. We should be ready by then."

About six hours later, the Cerberus appeared in the sky as a bright comet falling. There were no thrusters on it, so the drop had to be calculated precisely. It crash landed on the bunker with incredible accuracy. The impact could be felt as an earthquake to the goblin outpost five kilometers away. At a large city a few kilometers further, it was heard like loud thunder, accompanied by a mild tremor. Although they were informed of the impending event, they could hardly believe that they would feel anything from those distances. The event made the species that heard of it afterward worry about the powers that the humans had in their control.

The bunker had finally given way. The right side of the bunker gate, where the door was rooted in, broke and left an opening large enough for a human to pass through. More importantly, it was a point from which they could work to open the gate fully.

Alex entered first, like a young child exploring something for the first time. Jain heard him laughing, and her curiosity piqued. "Treasure!" he yelled with joyful laughter. One by one they entered and lit the place up. Weapons, machines of many kinds, gadgets and more, the bunker was filled with items, each of which could revolutionize human technology. Above all else was the crown jewel of their findings. A bus-sized craft that looked like it was meant for outer space travel hid in there. The greatest discovery they made would soon bring a new page in everyone's future. Steve was practically dancing, surrounded by a plethora of things waiting for him to understand. From Argos, Margaret turned to Helen and told her, "We will finally decode the crystals." It was a joyful moment for all.

As time went by, the relationships between the other species began to mend. Prana from the Naga became something of a friend with Jain, who spent hours talking about the cultural differences of their species and how their worlds were destroyed. Steve, along with a team of engineers, reverse-engineered the spacecraft and began creating their own first prototypes. The bunker seemed to be a research base, used exclusively for the research of antimatter. The battery for the aircraft was the only truly complicated part that required time to understand. It could create antimatter on demand out of ordinary matter and then use it to fuel itself and propel the ship, annihilating matter with antimatter in the process. The conversion from matter to antimatter and then pure energy with 100 percent efficiency was hiding under Gaia all this time. Argos would never seek energy anywhere else. The construction of it, however, proved hard enough that they would not be able to produce more than a couple of engines in the following years. The only one working was the one found in the alien ship. It looked like they had built a lot more of them in the past. It is thought at this point that they were mass produced and used for the escape spaceships of the kings. There were even five experimental high-power laser rifles, powered with a similar technology, but they were obviously not used and still in testing stage. In theory, one of those weapons could fire energy beams, similar to plasma, trillions of times before running out and becoming unusable. Those could not be reloaded.

Y:27 D:47

Argos

From the moment of the bunker's discovery, many new technologies became available to Argos. The 3-D printers that were developed with the help of Eldon's hideout prototypes proved invaluable to the replication of parts for their first spaceship. The need to visit the other planets and gain information about the past had become a driving force. Alex and the leaders gathered everyone at the Agora to make an announcement.

"As all of you know," he began, "with the help of Eldon, we located and cracked open an old-world bunker a few years back. A bunker which hosted a plethora of technologies. Today we have in our hands the fruits of those technologies. The first spacecraft capable of coming and going into space with the ease of the Eagle's travel. It can reach unbelievable speeds; in fact, it can accelerate faster than what our bodies can withstand with full nano protection. It can take us to the other planets of the solar system in a matter of days. In fact, it has the potential to give us near-light-speed travel if tuned appropriately."

After he took a second to breathe, he noticed that there were hands raised. "Please!" he said, inviting the person raising the hand to speak.

Maria stood and stated, "We have invested so much time and resources into the creation of this ship, but we have yet to know the reasons behind it."

Many more began agreeing with her. Someone else added, "Our exploration time is limited, and we are working on projects we do not understand. We want more free time."

Alex became more serious. "There are questions that need answering," he stated. "we still have enemies in the system, and we still don't have answers as to what caused the end of their civilization. We need to make sure than there are no more surprises coming our way. Visiting the other planets will help us answer some of those questions."

Although many showed understanding, some were not satisfied with his answer. "Are you saying that we are in danger?" someone asked.

"We have said that before," said Alex, slightly irritated. "We are on an alien world, and we have no idea of what is hidden from us. Are we in danger? Yes, we probably are. Now can we move forward?" he asked while looking at Maria.

"We have completed the first antimatter energy production facility at Fergi, as the natives call the area. The engine was almost completed when we found it, and using the spaceship engine as a guide, we finished it up. We are now in the process of bringing it here so we can be completely energy abundant. That will allow for more automation and therefore more free time for everyone to explore or recreate."

A few smiles and excitement were seen as a positive note. There were no hands raised, so Alex continued.

"Our relationships with our neighbors are becoming friendlier, and we are planning on a trip led by Juuda to the other two planets to gather information and expand our influence." Pointing at a projection, he continued, "On planet B we have detected lights but no electromagnetism, which tells us about a planet in a similar situation to Gaia. Planet D is the home planet of Eldon. There we will meet with

Rhain and his superiors and try to get the story of this planet straight. The team will be composed of Juuda as a leader and negotiator. Anais, Giuli, Nick, Eldon, and Hypatia will accompany him.

"Anais and Giuli will remain at Solis-B to begin gathering information about the situation there. They will also attempt to come in contact with the Vampire there and get more info from him, if there is still one alive. They will return to Gaia in about two years, when the Space Eagle passes to pick them up on its way back. The rest of the team, Juuda, Nick, Eldon, and Hypatia, will travel and establish contact with Rhain. The mission will start in a few days. On the morning of our first day of year twenty-eight we have been here."

The mission briefing left most people silent. They were far more excited about the prospect of free time due to the energy surplus that the generators would provide them, than of a mission to another planet. Alex was quite dissatisfied by the indifference, and that could be seen in his expression. Hypatia stood up to speak after Alex about some details. "I will now proceed to explain some details about the new technologies we have at our disposal. All of this information can be found at the central database, so I will only cover the basics, so that everyone can have an understanding of what we are dealing with here."

Like students of a class they don't want to be in, most people did not hesitate to express their boredom. "Do we need to stay here and listen to this?" someone said.

"No," Hypatia replied. "As I mentioned, everything can be found on the database. Anyone who is not interested can leave."

Jain whispered to Alex, "This is not a good idea." About one every four people stood up and walked away.

"A lot of people with no interest in our progress ... I see," continued Hypatia. "Let's return to the point at hand. We have reasons to believe that the base we opened was one of the main stations of military research for the united species back when they all lived in unity. It remained locked and in good condition because it required multiple access codes to open. We now believe it was locked away at the very start of the war. The spacecraft we discovered used technology meant for deep-space travel. Antimatter propulsion was always known to humans. What we were lacking was the means of producing and storing antimatter as well as using it safely. This technology here works like magic. It makes it so safe that even if the ship explodes, there is never enough antimatter to trigger a devastating effect. It produces antimatter as soon as it needs it. In simple terms, it turns certain subatomic particles into themselves, causing the atom to turn into antimatter, then immediately collides it with another and produces energy. At no time will there be more than a few atoms of antimatter produced. That being said, it eats matter to move. A spaceship like that could gather space dust and use it as fuel indefinitely. It truly is a gift from the universe to allow us to use such mechanics."

Hypatia got a pleasant feeling when she saw many of the younger people become very excited at this idea. Their eyes shined with the imagination of what technology like that could offer.

"Is it safe to have it near us?" asked Zoya. Born on Gaia, the young girl was very interested in technology. Although she was about six years old, she learned the Gaia system of dating, which meant she identified as twenty-seven years old. She

still did not understand anything about the physics and mechanics that the adults were referring to, but she was full of thirst for exploration and learning.

Hypatia smiled, and with her everyone else. "Yes, it is very safe," she said. "In fact, I am here to explain a bit of how it works so that everyone will feel safe around this new technology."

"Why would we not feel safe?" Zoya asked again.

"You ask the most important questions," said Hypatia with her eyes sparkling. "We learned since childhood that antimatter is this dangerous thing that we should stay away from. That it explodes the moment it touches anything. It turns out that it can be controlled. It's hard, and we were not the ones who cracked the way of making it happen, but someone did. So, their work will continue through us. But," she looked around at the adults, "we will not be seeing an armada of spacecrafts using this anytime soon. It is nearly impossible to produce another engine with our current material harvest and refining. We spent almost all our stockpile of rare metals to finish the one we are bringing over."

Once again, Zoya, who now was confidently asking questions, asked, "How fast is our new ship?"

"Another important question," said Hypatia. "The ship accelerates and decelerates and maneuvers faster than what our bodies can withstand, even with full nanobot shielding. In fact, the thrusters can produce so much force that the skeleton of the ship can be ripped to pieces." She took a break for a second for any questions and then proceeded to finish her speech. "Giuli will also be taking with her their first laser-burst weapon. A far superior weapon to any before it, which utilizes these new technologies. Not using antimatter exactly but with a similar process as its production, it forces an event we call *touching* of subatomic particles inside of atoms. It causes them to overheat and eventually explode. Any matter you have added to the weapon will also be turned into plasma and quickly accelerated to near light speed. The benefits of this technology as opposed to a plasma rifle is that it can fire repeatedly, almost ten times a second until the engine runs out of stored antimatter atoms or the materials composing the weapon fail. She will take it and run some tests with it there."

A hand raised from one of the civilians. "Isn't storing antimatter dangerous, though? You said before that the engines produce it on the spot, so you never have to have stored any to avoid accidents."

"This weapon actually fires energy," said Hypatia. "The amount of antimatter stored could, in a malfunction, explode, but the intensity would be the equivalent of a couple of grenades."

After her speech, anyone who was interested in more information or to see the new weapons and the aircraft was invited to go see it at the underground bunker that had become somewhat of a new military base. Bara thought to suggest that Argos should be transferred over the Bunker, since it could provide protection as well as research laboratories at no cost. Although the idea was good, it was not accepted, since Argos was close to complete. The sparing of a few guards to keep the bunker safe was a much lower cost.

Space Eagle

The team entered a bus-sized craft, which lifted off. For the following five days, the team would be experiencing about one G of constant acceleration, then another five days of deceleration before reaching the destination. The ship could accelerate a lot faster or for longer periods of time, but it would become very uncomfortable, and since the travel was not that long, they did not require it to do so. It was also its maiden voyage, which meant pushing it to the limits was not ideal. For everyone who would not stay on Solis-B, the trip was thirty-five days. Since the ship was small, the crew would be sleeping in similar pods to those the *Hera* had, purely for combating boredom.

Y:28 D:35

Solis-B

After arriving at Solis-B, they headed toward the landing site that they had marked after the satellite images. It was close to the biggest settlement they could see on the planet. The scenery was very different than that of Gaia. It was significantly hotter, and most of the land was covered in thick jungle. The animals living there seemed to have once had a common ancestor as those on Gaia but had adapted to the higher temperature and humidity of the planet. The capital city that they landed close to was built on a mountain slope. The mountain itself felt majestic. Like a giant holding a baby on his lap, the city stood solid. The smell was that of petrichor, and once the team stepped out, they were overwhelmed by a feeling that they could not yet fully understand. They made a connection to that place, embraced by the planet.

Anais and Giuli located an ancient building a few stories tall and decided to turn it into their base of operations. The Space Eagle left them there and continued toward Solis-D to meet with Rhain and his superiors.

After Anais and Giuli had established their base, they sent out a drone to map the area better. It also flew over the big city and got a better image of what they were dealing with. At the same time, a small high-altitude spy plane was sent to do a more detailed general map of the planet. The city was entirely populated by Goblins. Only a few of them were out in guard posts. Some of those guards noticed that there was a strange bird flying in the air, and once they realized that it was not natural, they fell on their knees and performed a ritual.

"I don't like that," said Dimitri, who was watching the feed from Argos.

"What is it you don't like?" asked Anais.

"I am watching your feed and noticed that when they saw something they did not understand, they immediately performed what seemed to be a religious ritual. They also have a strange symbol carved everywhere."

"I still don't see why that troubles you," said Anais.

"If they are very religious, they might be hard to communicate with. They also might be more aggressive than those here on Gaia."

"I don't feel that there is reason to worry. If they see our tools and ourselves as divine, then most likely they will be easier to deal with," answered Anais with confidence.

"I do not agree with you," answered Dimitri. "We are most likely going to be met as reincarnations of evil. They look different than us, and their deities will most likely resemble themselves."

Juuda, who was sitting close to Dimitri, added, "I think Dimitri is right, Anais. You have to be extra careful there. Those Goblins might be vastly different than those from Gaia in their ways."

Dimitri added, "Thinking of the Goblins we met here on Gaia and the fact that their train of thought is not so different than ours, I must speculate that the ones you might be facing will be very hard to reason with. Be very careful. Your way back is gone, and you can't escape that place anytime soon."

"Anais, Giuli!" said Alex over the coms. "After hearing everything, I need to tell you that you should be very careful there. Just gather info and try to come in contact with the Vampire, if there still is one. Finish your mission, and don't take any unnecessary risks."

"Okay, guys," said Giuli. "There seem to be public executions taking place here. The city has an execution arena close to the main square. Although there are very few Goblins out during the day, the ones that are there are beginning to notice the drone."

"You are taking a lot of initiative little one! We did not agree to fly so close to them. Get your drone out of there," said Anais without much humor.

Anais and Giuli began broadcasting with a small antenna with which they were hoping they would get the attention of the Vampire. Eldon had a similar system on Gaia, so anyone sent to Solis-B should also have the same system.

As the days went by, the spy plane was sending info, and it seemed that there were no other intelligent species on the planet, only Goblins, and all of them seemed to obey the same system. They all had the symbol of worship on the entrances of their caves or on the ruins of ancient cities. Giuli began noticing that small groups were going out of the city and returning empty-handed. Almost like scouting parties, they always went toward a different direction. Many times, they passed close to the couple, who hid to stay out of sight. They looked like they were searching for something. At one of their close passes, from the top of a tree, one of them shouted, "There!" The direction was that of the building where they were staying. Some of the equipment was on, and the light was visible from the height of the tree through the window. Immediately they began running toward it. Giuli was still atop the building, while Anais was on another, a few hundred meters away. As protocol dictated, when the situation was of notice, their communicators were set to open so that Argos could listen to everything. Normally, the communicators worked to link individuals to protect their privacy.

Anais's voice was heard first, quietly in the night of Solis-B and still early evening in Argos. "Giuli, they are coming toward you. Looks like they will come upstairs."

"What should I do?" asked Giuli, clearly stressed. "Should I escape?"

"We can't let them take our equipment. It's time we scare them with a flash grenade and a few shots in the air."

"You got it," said Giuli with confidence.

Clive, who was on duty to monitor any communications from the mission, informed Bara of the events, and with Alex, they arrived at the command room and silently followed the events.

After the Goblins reached one floor below the camp, Giuli let a flash grenade roll down the stairs. Together with the flash, she yelled into the translator, "Who dares come close?" in the Goblin language. The Goblins fell on their knees and begged for forgiveness. Giuli continued, "Leave this place and don't come again!" The Goblins did so without question.

"Don't you think you overdid it?" asked Anais while trying to be more serious than she felt.

"I think it went well," answered Giuli.

"I think it went badly," said Bara. "It is clear we are not well prepared for situations that need immediate decisions. Also, you need to change location now. They will now go back and tell everyone of their encounter with something divine. This will cause many to come your way."

Anais, trying to calm things down, said, "I have a new one in my mind. In fact, I have a few more. Far better locations with better vantage points. We will leave to get there as soon as tomorrow night before their next excursion."

"It does seem odd that they barely venture out during the day. I mean, Goblins are nocturnal here as well, but they go out during the day just fine."

"I have a hypothesis about that," said Anais. "From my observations here, I think they are not allowed to go out during the day. From the behavior we see at smaller underground outposts, there will even be fights when younger ones want to go out in the daytime. It's also a lot hotter here during the day than on Gaia, so that might also be a factor."

"Continue the good work and stay safe," said Alex and left. Bara would continue with instructions about their moving and discussions about their next encounter.

Anais and Giuli moved their camp to another area a bit further from the city and away from any roads. They also made sure it was higher on a hill. An old-world observatorylike building atop of a naked small mountain seemed to be the ideal place. There, they observed the behavior of the masses to uncover the way of life of the Goblins on Solis-B while waiting for the Vampire to appear. Their drone flights and spy plane added fragments on their maps every day.

Through listening to conversations kilometers away, using lasers, Anais and Giuli began piecing together the system on the planet. The planet was called Gant. The goblins had finally won the war about three thousand Gant years in the past. That meant just a bit over five hundred Earth years or about twenty-two hundred Gaia years. The Goblins were ruled by a few elites who all took their orders directly from the messenger of God. They called him the Voice. They had a major city on the surface, an ancient city, probably designed by another species of similar size in the past. The city was atop the largest underground cave system of the planet. Probably made by the goblins themselves over the years. The underground city had to be even more majestic than the one on top. The city on top was also the home of the Voice, who had an army of goblins taking their orders by a table of a few handpicked elites. Although Goblins naturally preferred the underground, they lived on the city above because the Voice and the elites were suffering the days on top-land, as a tribute to

their divine. The buildings, however, had been modified to resemble underground, and the comforts and luxury of their living would not be paralleled with anything on the rest of the planet. The ruling was strict. None had ever seen the Voice, and none was allowed. He gave his orders from the top of the biggest building in the city directly to his few. They had not seen him either. He was never seen, but light from his chambers and repair would take place while he would be mystically absent.

"Guys, I have to tell you. It is crazy here," said Giuli over the coms.

"We are all eagerly waiting for the next updates. It's quite fascinating really to see how they function," answered Alex.

The team of leaders were gathered for a briefing.

"Yeah, it might sound nice to hear the general story, but seeing them?" Giuli asked rhetorically. "Night after night, blaming each other and dragging prisoners from underground to let their star burn them for days on the surface or torture them in so many different ways is not something you can get used to. I have begun hating this Voice. We have not seen him move, and that's quite strange. He does not leave by any mechanical means. There are probably passages in the walls where he hides and moves around."

"Okay! Let's leave the gruesome details out and proceed," said Anais. "We have been observing and eavesdropping on them for quite a while now, and here is what we came to understand. They believe that they have been punished by the gods to be small and weak due to their previous sins. They have burned every last piece of information from the old world, and the few who dare speak in opposition are immediately disposed of in horrible ways. They all receive their orders from a messenger from God, which you all know as Voice. We just found out that some of his elite members consider him a white angel. He is immortal and has been described in a way that makes us feel that he is a Vampire."

"Wait," said Jain, "are we sure that this Voice is a real person?"

"Yes," answered Anais. "We have heard him speak in his chambers, so we know for a fact he is real. He has ruled for very long. In fact, he was the leader who brought the Goblins their decisive victory against other species, and then they began taking over everything. They have frequent wars with other tribes of Goblins, but they always win, due to some weapon given to them by the divine one. This further increases his influence and dominion over them. It is a strange situation, but I am confident we are dealing with a technology-using Vampire here."

"I have arrived at Solis-D," said Juuda. "We will see if I can provide you with some information about that. We are currently headed to the bunker. Rhain has been notified about our visit, so we should be welcomed there. I will make sure to ask about Solis-B."

"Great!" said Anais. "Keep me informed, because it does not seem like we will have a visitor anytime soon. We have been broadcasting for days."

Eldon was very excited to be back on his home planet after so many years. It was a bit colder than Gaia and a bit darker. The sky was redder and the trees darker green. Some of them looked almost black, making the scenery vibrate with an ominous feel. The sun looked a bit smaller in the sky, and the animals around were slower. The birds hovered in the sky, gathered in groups, with very large wings and flying bubbles that, at first sight, looked like hot-air balloons. Gakuto was watching

the feed from Spi, and he immediately regretted not being there. "It looks magical," he said with excitement.

Eldon had not informed his elders that he had not been spying on humans. By all accounts, he was a traitor to his people. This, however, did not bear a lot of weight on Eldon's mind, since this was a situation he was unfamiliar with. Despite Alex's efforts to make him understand that hierarchy might be extremely strict with his elders, Eldon preferred not to think about it.

It was finally time to meet Rhain. They reached the door and knocked with force. Juuda accompanied Eldon, while Hypatia and Nick were camped at the top of a building overseeing the bunker and the surrounding area. They had already began taking samples and collecting scientific data that would later be used back at Argos.

The door opened, and Rhain welcomed the two inside.

"Welcome home, Eldon," he said with little emotion.

"Hello, Rhain," said Eldon, unable to hide his excitement. "This is Juuda."

Juuda made a gesture he had learned from Eldon and said, "Hello, Rhain. It is great to finally meet you," in Rhain's native language.

Rhain seemed very cautious with Juuda. He could not hide his uncomfortable feelings.

"How can you speak our language?" he asked.

"We have a translator," said Juuda. "It's a device that helps us communicate between species."

"Let me take you to Kieran. He is our leader," said Rhain.

"Thank you," said Eldon and apologetically looked at Juuda. He did not expect that Rhain would be so borderline rude.

"These are the visitors from the stars," Rhain said to Kieran.

"You are the Thropi." Kieran smiled. "How wonderful to see you in person."

In hearing that name, the guards in the room felt fear. It immediately became hard for them to hold their weapons. Juuda looked around him in confusion. "I think you have confused us for someone else," he said.

"I thought so too," said Rhain to Kieran while ignoring Juuda's words.

Eldon looked sadly surprised. "But they are nothing like the description you gave us. How can you say that?" he asked.

Kieran turned aggressively toward Eldon. "You! Stop talking," he said. "And you! The leader. Juuda is your name? Why are you here?"

Juuda composed himself. "Kieran," he said, "we are not your enemies. We arrived in this system looking for a new home. We did not know you would be here to begin with."

"Why would you leave your own world behind?" asked Kieran.

"I was hoping this conversation would go differently, but let's start from there. A disaster took place, and we escaped our doom by looking for refuge in the stars. I think it is better, however, to have these discussions with our leader, Alex."

"I would prefer to speak to your leader then," said Kieran.

Alex, who was listening in to the whole conversation, was heard from the translator. "Hello, Kieran. I am Alex. I could hear your conversation."

Juuda unfolded a paper-thin screen and placed it on a stand with a camera so Alex and Kieran could have visual of one another.

"Hello, Alex," said Kieran, taking a serious look. "I have a few questions for you."

"I will be happy to answer," said Alex. "I also have questions for you."

"How well do you know the history of your people from about forty-three thousand third-planet years ago?"

Alex did a few calculations in his head and replied, "Our history from back then is very vague. We were still without much technology. We have a historian with us who has a better understanding of history and a library of information, but it will not provide much help if you don't tell me what you are looking for."

"As I understand, you have forgotten your history of yourselves," said Kieran.

"I heard you calling us Thropi. I don't know whom exactly you have mistaken us for, but I would like to hear more about it."

"I have not mistaken you for anyone. I know who you are and what drives you," said Kieran with confidence.

"You speak with a lot of confidence Kieran," said Alex. "Please tell us what it is you think you know."

"I was there," said Kieran, smiling. "You came from the star that you can see here. Didn't you?" he said while projecting a map and pointing at a star.

Hypatia, who was watching the events unfold close to Alex turned to him, and said in secret, "He is right, this is our star according to their night sky."

"How would you know that?" asked Alex with confusion. He was eager to listen to Kieran's words.

"You are starting to convince me that you really don't know," said Kieran again with a smirk.

Alex composed himself. "You will need to help me understand what it is we should know."

In the meantime, Hypatia hypothesized a possible way for Kieran to know and signaled Alex to mute the conversation with him. "He could have seen us when we first entered the solar system and extrapolated our course. It is hard but not impossible," she said.

Alex seemed to calm with her words. "Thank you for that. I was lost in fantasy for a while," he said. Now he could listen to Kieran with more critical thinking.

"The information on the third sphere should be enough to piece together the past. Judging from your transport with which you arrived here, you seem to have found our bunkers as well. Although I believe you do know at least part of the story, I will add some information to it." Kieran looked around. "There is no harm anymore anyway."

Rhain opened his eyes wide. "I have asked for the details of the past countless times," he said to Kieran angrily. "Why would you share this information now with them?"

Kieran looed calmly at Rhain. "You know most of it already. We as immortals should not have to worry at the speed in which information is gathered but the quality of it."

Rhain looked confused. "I don't understand what that is supposed to mean," he said.

"You will get it in time." A small smile appeared on his face as if he was teasing Rhain.

Konoya, who was observing his body language in an effort to help Alex gather the right information, turned to Alex. "He is difficult to understand," she said. "It does not look like he is lying, but he might exaggerate or bend the reality a bit."

"Let's start from the beginning," said Kieran. "I would prefer for you to be here and talk to you face to face instead of your ... proxy, but I will move on."

"I would like that too," said Alex.

"I will take you back about fifty thousand circles ago. This solar system had reached an impossible stability. So many species living together in harmony. Many would consider it miraculous that it happened and we still don't know of the events that led us there."

"So, this story begins close to the war?" asked Alex.

"Yes. The information of how we got to be here is perplexing, and there are numerous suggestions, but none of them can form a solid theory."

Alex looked a bit disappointed but chose to remain silent.

"I was born when we had just learned how to make engines to help us travel across the stars within short periods of time," Kieran said "We were the only ones that were immortal by nature, so we were entrusted with recording history and dealing with most of the political issues that arose."

"Entrusted by the kings?" asked Alex.

"Yes. I am glad you know of the kings on Alpaz."

"Alpaz?" asked Alex.

"Yes, the first planet of the system. That's where the kings stayed and sent out orders to all of us. But my species, we were also hated. Although we had the technology to make everyone live forever, it was unanimously banned by the kings. This made most think that we were leading behind the kings, and we wanted to be exclusive yielders of time."

"I can see how this could drive people against you," agreed Alex.

"The kings did many things I do not understand. Back then I was simply a data dealer. I witnessed as our combined technologies built the first extraordinary spacecraft. The *Olympus* was a marvel to behold. A gigantic spaceship that took thousands of years to be made."

"*Olympus*, you said?" asked Alex.

"Yes. The name reminds you of something?" asked Kieran.

"It does. It's a common name on our planet. It's used as a name of mountains and volcanoes all over our solar system."

"You might slowly see the connections. The ship had the ability to keep its population alive and breeding nearly indefinitely. It was powered by the most magnificent antimatter engine ever built. It would use any kind of material and would turn into antimatter and use it to travel. It was durable enough that it could land on the surface of a star. I was young back then, and for me, traveling with it was the greatest dream. We could tune in and communicate with a prototype instant-communications system, so despite the distances, we could see them live."

The team listening had their jaws dropped. They could all start seeing a formation of a story taking place.

Jain prompted Alex to ask about the communications system.

"Do you have access to these communications systems?" asked Alex.

"This prototype technology was years away from being accessed or understood by everyone. The war came, and this was lost. Perhaps under some planet, inside a research center, some data could be found regarding this technology." Kieran shook his head strangely and then continued. "I would read about its construction and see how every part was designed. It was manned by our best. From every species, a few hundred people would take their place, and with a combined crew of a few thousands, it began exploring the cosmos with a speed that almost touched the speed of light. It was the dawn of our galactic era. Then they began reaching nearby stars. I was hearing the news of its arrival into other worlds every few hundred years and following the crew updates. After a few nearby visits to other stars, they headed toward your world."

The room in Argos almost froze. Juuda's eyes opened wide in anticipation of what was coming.

"That's when the problems began." Kieran looked deep into Juuda's eyes. "The team reported a species like us. Very similar but mortal with a complex diet. The news was incredible. We had irrefutable proof that we are not alone in the cosmos now. Many theories of our origins were debunked by the lack of other species in our searches, and then you entered the picture. We had so much to look forward to. They began testing the mental capacity of your people, by taking babies, otherwise ready to die."

Juuda and Alex both made a barely noticeable move that could be interpreted as disbelief.

Kieran smiled. "Yes! They were trying to be as moral as possible. I understand that for some this is hard to imagine, but it's the truth. The babies would grow in the spaceship and learn science. Soon we realized that your mental capabilities were very advanced. You had the ability to learn at a similar rate to any other species here. That brought the first ripples in our society. Some began to think that it was a bad idea to teach you science. Others thought that this was an elaborate plan of us Vampires to take over. Misinformation and fear spread like a virus. Since we were very involved with politics, we had a lot of hatred directed toward us already. Our slow birth rate was the only thing that kept everyone from worrying too much. They thought that we will never be populous enough to take over. Now, however—" Kieran took a breath, and in the short break, Alex shut his lips and shook his head in understanding.

Kieran continued, "With you in the picture, it looked like we had figured out a way to multiply fast and finally make our move. You would think that in an advanced society like ours, everyone would know genetics would never allow for a cross breeding of species with almost no genetic compatibility. They thought that Olympus was manipulated and that this species was actually us. That this was our home planet. Ridiculous as it sounds, the movement began taking the minds of many. Everything was hanging from a thread before a war was ready to break.

"What did the kings do?" asked Alex.

"Our kings always looked at peace. They never promoted war. Their level of pacifism was such that it in itself brought forward more questions. While everything was boiling up here, the *Olympus* was sending your people back on your planet to become teachers and spread knowledge. The plan that the kings followed was to

unite as many species of the cosmos together and expand into an empire which does not look at your origin or your genetics."

"This truly sounds like a noble cause," said Juuda.

"Yes, but then the impossible happened," said Kieran. "We never found out why, but your people went to war. They planned their attack for a long time. After their numbers were enough and they had learned how to manage the *Olympus*, they slaughtered almost everyone. They kept some to teach them flight and other aspects of the ship."

Alex looked surprised. He thought for a second and asked, "How did you get this information?"

"One of us made it," said Kieran. "One of us who could not be found. Probably was on your planet when that happened. Before the humans had the chance to change protocols on the ship to obey themselves, he sent the distress call with all the information he could gather. You might have found him afterwards and killed him. We never found out what happened to him. What we do know is that your people took the *Olympus* by force, thinking that no other ship could make this travel, and therefore there would be no retaliation. After that, the only other ship capable of reaching your planet fast was a military scouting vessel. The second antimatter-engine ship we had made. The order to retrieve *Olympus* was given instantly, and the ship left. Here, the hate could not be contained. People thought that it was us who ordered our people to take the *Olympus* by force as a first step of system domination. Year after year, it boiled up, and the kings finally betrayed everyone. The greatest of betrayals."

"How did they betray you?" asked Alex.

"In relative secret, the development of many more *Olympus*-sized vessels was underway. But those were made specifically for each species. Not able to host any species like the original *Olympus*."

"How is that a betrayal?" asked Alex again, trying to piece together the story.

"Because those were meant for them and their families to be used as means of escape."

"Escape from what?" insisted Alex. "I am missing something."

Kieran made a gesture to Alex to be patient while explaining. "These events led to the war. *The war*. We do not know if the war broke out and the kings took their elite and left for deep space without a trace, or if they left and that's what made the war start. It was the greatest betrayal. We received the call for war from the kings without direction. It was like every person for himself."

"What do you mean? They were seeking unity, were they not?"

"They were," said Kieran, and his lips tightened. "Then they ordered us to slaughter each other. For countless years, we were fighting. Digging to survive. We began advertising the idea that it was all the fault of another species which looked monstrous. The idea of an animal, like a head with many legs. We hoped this would stop the relentless attacks toward us. Everyone hated everyone, but they were all willing to put their differences aside just to take us out."

Alex and Juuda and everyone else listening were shaking their heads in sad understanding.

"After, they released a virus and killed off all our females. They were planning to make it kill all of us but it became effective against our females only."

That's when we found refuge underground. We waited while promoting the idea to everyone that it was the fault of another species from the stars, but the truth is that we were always on borrowed time. The kings were all that kept us together. We still do not know how they were made into kings or how they managed to keep the peace, but it was not meant to work."

"So, why did we destroy and kill them all those years?" asked Eldon.

"We decided, back when we had a governing circle, that we would keep destroying all technology and keep everyone without the means to destroy us until our king returns for us. We could not believe they would abandon us here. Now, I don't think that will ever happen. If they survived deep space, then they probably made their home on a new world."

Dimitri could not contain his excitement. "This is the most fascinating story I have ever heard." He turned toward Alex. "Thank him and ask him to tell us what happened to the military ship that went after the humans on the *Olympus*."

Alex asked Kieran, who answered, "We lost contact awhile after it left. Our war was more important than a scout vessel, or the *Olympus*, for this matter. I don't know what happened to it."

"We really do appreciate you opening up to us," said Alex. "How many of you are here?"

"Why do you ask?" asked Kieran.

"If you want refuge on Gaia, the third planet, we can travel back and forth a few times and get you there."

Kieran smiled. "I think it might be safer for you to come here instead. The third sphere was the center of our system, due to its climate and size. It is also the most populated with different species. It is dangerous there."

Jain reminded Alex to ask information about the second planet.

"Can you please tell us what you know of the second planet?" he asked Kieran. "Is there one of you who can contact our people that have recently landed there?"

"We have lost contact with all but the third sphere," answered Kieran. "The outer planets probably harbor very small civilizations. Here we have almost completely eradicated everyone else. The third is the only populous place. The second is lost a long time ago. No contact. Mullo, who was the last one there, is probably dead. Although if you do make contact, I would like to know. He is an old friend of mine."

Juuda took the initiative. "We can try and recreate a government back on the third sphere and live in harmony all together. Something like it was when the kings were present."

Alex whispered in Juuda's communicator. "I am not so sure we can offer that, Juuda. Stay restrained for now."

"We would rather stay here and see how you fare," answered Kieran with a smile. "Don't get me wrong, but the species you are dealing with will not like it that you are stronger than them. If you don't dictate every law and enforce it with strict punishment, they will soon want to rule. It's safer to wait and see how you will manage. If you want my opinion, conquer and subjugate. We have tried with the small populations here so many times and so many systems. The only one that seems to last is not sharing power or technology."

"I can't guarantee what the future holds, Kieran, but you are welcome to come to us," said Alex.

"For now, let us be. Eldon, if you wish to stay with your people here, you are welcome. If you wish to go back to them, you are also free to choose." Kieran seemed to be softening up a bit.

"That's a very hard choice, but I think I want to go back. There are still so many things I want to do, and I have my friends there now. I don't care what species they are."

"So be it. Eldon, you are now excluded from our ranks. In case of conflict, you will be treated as a traitor. Alex, I guess this is yours?" said Kieran and handed over a data cube to Juuda.

Juuda took it and, with a confused look, examined it to see that it was similar to data crystals they had found, only slightly different in the way it was cut.

"How would it be mine?" asked Alex, confused.

Kieran smiled. "I am sure you will come to use it, so take it."

Juuda took out a communicator and handed it over to Kieran. "We are going to leave this device with you, so if you need us, you can communicate with us."

Kieran bid them farewell and closed the conversation.

The team stayed for a few days and did a bit of exploration on Solis-D. In the meantime, back on Solis-B, Giuli detected movement from a bigger figure than the goblins, going toward their old hideout. It was during the day, when nearly all goblins would be asleep or underground. It looked more like a human. Anais thought that this must be the Vampire of the area. Although they had already been informed that there was a small chance that he was alive, Anais was quite positive it was him.

She pointed a strong laser on the ground around him so he could see their location. He began to travel toward them.

A few meters before reaching them, Anais was waiting to greet him. Giuli was aiming at him with her new sniper rifle. He was more beautiful than any other person they had ever met before. Anais was standing in front of him and felt bewitched by his looks. Unsure of whether her senses were misleading her, she could also smell him. He smelled like nothing she had smelled before. It gave her the feeling that the early morning smell of a flowery hill in spring would give her.

"Hello. We are here to meet with you," said Anais in his language with a smile.

Without any words, Mullo drew his swords, and with a fast move, he advanced to take Anais's life. Without hesitation, Giuli shot her weapon, hitting Mullo on the shoulder. The tiny, plasma-like bullet of her new weapon traveled at near light speed and penetrated Mullo's armor like it wasn't there. He fell on the ground, screaming in pain. Anais immediately took his weapons and sprayed his wound with a foam that immediately closed it.

"Nice shot," said Anais to Giuli in Mullo's language. "If he makes a move, land the next one directly on his head. Now you! Why did you attack me?"

"Do I have another option?" asked Mullo. His voice matched his looks. It was angelic.

"I don't know why you would say that. Do explain," said Anais with as much aggression as she could muster. It was hard, even after his attempt to attack her, to be aggressive toward him.

"I am hurting. I need to go back to my chamber," said Mullo in agony.

"You do realize this is not an option now, right?" answered Anais with a frown.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"This depends on how much of the truth you will tell us," answered Anais in an effort to intimidate him.

"It's my job to kill anyone with technology," said Mullo, trying to explain why he attacked. It was clear that he had realized Anais was not from his species.

"Nice try," said Anais with a smile. "We spoke to your superiors on the fourth planet. Spi, you call it? They have lost contact with you for many years now."

"I had no choice."

"What do you mean? Come, walk in there." She pointed at the entrance to a small building.

"It's hard to explain everything. It has been so long." Mullo's words were coming out with difficulty.

"One thing we do have, my almost-friend, is time. Let's try to start from the beginning. When you were first sent here."

"So, I should consider that you know of the war and how our species destroyed the entire world?"

"Yeah ... you might have parts of the story wrong, but tell us your view. Don't leave out the part where you attacked me without warning." Anais was humoring him without knowing why. He was irresistibly comforting for some reason.

Mullo began telling his story from early in his life. He was in a similar situation as Eldon. They were also born around the same time.

"After I arrived in this hot hell," continued Mullo, "I went to my designated base. It was not too well concealed, and I was in constant fear that someone would see it and come for me. All I could hear for years, even before I came here, is how our species was at fault for the fall of paradise. How we destroyed everything and how everyone hates us. My objective to destroy technology did not make this any better."

"I can understand this," said Anais with compassion.

"Although now my weapons are far superior, back in those days, they still had lasers and other weapons that could match mine. My orders were to stay hidden for a while, which was a relief. Outside, the temperature was torture for me. Then over time, the war became less aggressive, and I started to move out in the nights, which was cooler. Mostly Goblins would venture out at nights. I started going out to destroy any technological apparatus I could find. I was equipped with a device that could point out where something was working."

"Yes. We are aware of this technology," said Anais. Everyone was listening in to this conversation but interrupted Anais's interrogation.

"The orders kept on coming from Spi, but even those began to fade in time," continued Mullo. "I had less and less contact with the home base. I knew there was at least one more Vampire here. Boredom and lack of communication forced me to venture away in search of him."

His words were sad and apologetic. "By the time I finally found his hideout, he was dead. Probably suicide. Soon after, I felt even more alone and abandoned. So, I left my post and my tools. I kept only my swords, armor, and their repair kits, which could keep me safe. The world had changed by then. The large wars were over. Only small battles were taking place.

As if strong memories were coming to his mind, Mullo looked Anais in the eyes. "I was out one night, and I met some Goblins. They did not run. They stood there watching me. I moved toward them and spoke. Soon after, they became my first friends. I realized that until that point, I had never had a friend in my life. I enjoyed staying with this family of Goblins because they could see past the species. They spend a lot of time underground, which is cooler and comfortable. There were eighteen of them, and with me, we lived together far away, near a mountain."

It was clear the story would take a bad turn. Mullo began to sob. "They were the only people who were ever good to me," he said through tears. "I was gone for a couple of days hunting, and when I returned, I found a group of Kalikantzari partying and laughing in our home. The adults who were still breathing were the most unfortunate. It's hard to describe what they had done to them. The kids were in chains."

His eyes were suddenly filled with rage as he brought memories of the distant past into his mind. "You need to understand. My friends were desecrated. I thought loneliness was painful, but right then, at that point I realized what pain truly is. I did not run for my swords. After my scream forced them all to look at me, I simply dived into them. With my bare hands, I began butchering them. I did not stop until I was covered in blood and none of them could move."

He took a deep breath, and sadness returned to his eyes. "Then I turned and looked at the young ones. They were scared. But there was no one else there. Just them and me. Why would they be scared now? I thought for a second. Then I realized that my rage had turned me into a monster. I released them from the chains and kneeled in crying. The fear disappeared, and they ran to hug me. We cried together. We cried as we buried our families, and we continued to cry as we left our home."

He stopped for a breath. Anais was sitting in front of him with her eyes wide open, waiting for his story to continue. He looked at her, and she gestured him to continue with compassion.

"We began to travel," he said. "On our way, we found others who chose to follow us. Once we were more than fifty, I led them to build a small village. We used my knowledge to build defenses, and soon our numbers had grown too much. I realized that we would need a new place to call home. We moved to the capital and took it by force. The battles were very one-sided. I quickly climbed the walls, and within a very short time, the city surrendered."

He sighed and continued. "For a while, things were going very well, with the kids wanting more and more to expand their influence and reach. They grew to a kingdom, which covered a quarter of the world. Then they began to die of old age. One by one, they left me, and their kids began to fight for control. Although I had lost my will to lead and fight, I was almost worshipped by the people. I realized that the more I stay in the shadows, the more they trust in the words I say through the speaker I chose. I then decided not to appear again. I made myself into a hidden

ruler. I caused a new uprising of the system and turned it into what it is today. The wars resumed with ferocity, but not with a rare use of my weapons. Nearly all other species got wiped out, and I was then worshipped like a god."

Anais's face became sour. Mullo saw that and added, "Like the god kings of the past. Over the years, however, I stopped caring much about anything. Everyone I knew was gone, so all I had left was my god play. Thousands of years passed. I continued to give strict orders and played with the lives of those against my rule. Then, out of nowhere, you appeared in the sky. I thought you are the ones from the home sphere who finally came to kill me for leaving my post. Then I thought that you might be another species who developed technology from other planets. My own thoughts were confusing me. I decided to come see you, and once I did, I thought you were my superiors. My immediate reaction was to save myself, and therefore I attacked you. Now that I see you are of another species, what are you going to do to me?"

Anais stood up. "That's a great story," she said, "but the ending is not so clear. I don't understand why you would attack your people. You thought you can take on all of them? Also, you truly did become a monster. Your rage and pain left you years ago. You are torturing people and forcing extreme laws for no real reason."

"You do not understand," he replied. "These Goblins are savages. They can only be controlled as long as you torture their enemies. They only listen to violence. Sometimes they lie to the authorities, just to see their neighbor suffer horrible deaths."

"You might have been the one who made them like that. I will not further analyze that thought. If you are lucky enough, you might have a talk with Konoya. She will be able to help you understand who you have become."

"Who is Konoya? And you look just like me. I want to understand how this can be!" He looked troubled as he pondered.

"Yeah, we also find that to be strange, but one mystery at a time," said Anais. "So, what happens now?" he asked.

Anais turned to her communicator. "Alex? What do we do now?"

Alex spoke to him. "As much as I hate to leave these people suffer under your horrible rule, Mullo, it is not our place to dictate what will happen. Not yet, at least. We will inform your superiors about the whole story and do nothing for now."

"You hear that?" said Anais. "It looks like you can go on playing God for some more time.

"No, no!" said Mullo. "Please take me with you."

"You want to come with us?" asked Anais, confused.

"Yes." He replied "You don't know what boredom can do. It's killing me. I have none to speak with, none to enjoy blood, none to play. My punishment for all I have done is already with me. Please take me with you. I will come and do anything you say. Just don't leave me in this hell anymore."

Anais felt compassion, but she could not resist speaking her mind. "You do realize you had the power to turn this hell into a paradise all these years, right?"

"Perhaps, but now it's too late. Please take me with you," he repeated.

"Alex?" asked Anais into her communicator.

"In six days, Juuda will be there to pick you up. I will have an answer by then. Let him go for now, but stay in touch and change your location again. I don't want any surprises," answered Alex.

Anais turned to Mullo. "You are free to go. In six days, come back here in the morning, and we will see if we can take you with us. Come prepared to leave, because if we decide to take you, then we will depart immediately."

"I understand. Thank you." He stood up, holding the wound on his shoulder.

In the days until Juuda arrived at Solis-B, Alex spoke with Kieran, who did not mind Mullo leaving to stay with the humans for a while. It seemed that the vampires had almost given up hope in the return of their females. Konoya informed Alex that there was a high probability that all of them will ask to join the human society eventually. Strangely enough, when Alex discussed Mullo's relocation to the human society, Kieran almost asked for it to happen. He seemed eager to have Mullo closer to him. Somewhere they could contact him. Since Kieran had mentioned that Mullo was an old friend, Alex felt it is appropriate in the end to take Mullo back to Gaia.

When Juuda finally arrived at Gant, he found Anais and Giuli on their fifth hideout, stripped of their equipment.

"What has happened to you?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" answered Anais casually.

"Where is all your equipment?" he asked with clear confusion.

"Oh, that!" She smiled. "We discarded it. Don't worry, we made sure no one will be able to find it."

"Why would you do that?"

"Well, we have refined the term *necessary equipment* with Bara. You see, when you need to be continuously on the move, and most of those things we were carrying proved to be luxuries. They made us slow."

"What do you mean?" asked Juuda. "Why did you need to move continuously?"

"Mullo has ... done it again."

"As you know, I was mid-travel and in sleep state. Can you update me quickly?" asked Juuda.

"Mullo used to give out orders once every two days to show his presence. After we met him, that same night, he returned to his tower and called the council. He gave one order only: love one another, and he left."

"That does not sound too bad," Juuda said.

Mullo was sitting there listening but other than his name and a couple of words he picked up, he could not understand what they were talking about. He could, however, guess.

"Well, actually, things took a bad turn next night. He was supposed to speak to them, but he was gone. Someone claimed he could listen to the voice still, and the room got divided immediately. It is incredible to listen to the recording. Some claimed they too are listening to the voice, while others claimed that they lie. Before the morning came, the central square had more bodies than ever before."

"What is happening there now?" asked Juuda.

"Someone, whose name I am missing now, has taken control of the city as the sole ear of the voice. He does not have enough space for executions, so he is preparing special places for it."

"What do we do?" asked Juuda, filled with anxiety. "Alex? Do we abandon them to slaughter each other?" he asked in his communicator.

"Do you have a better idea?" asked Alex.

Juuda bowed his head for a few seconds as if he was trying to convince himself of something. "Yes," he said with confidence, "I will stay here and turn this place into a peaceful world. Into the paradise it can become."

"I am very happy for the initiative and your intentions, but I really think that you will face many problems there. You might need to come back and make a plan here, then return at a later time with a bigger team."

Juuda was a bit depressed with the events on Spi. Kieran had paid almost no attention to him, and he also said a few wrong things. He was confident that he could deal with the Goblins. After all, he had great communication results back on Gaia with the Goblins there. "I will be fine," he said. "I don't even think I need a weapon."

Hypatia, who was probably the closest friend to Juuda, said, "Alex, if he stays, I will stay with him to keep an eye out," in an attempt to help out with Juuda's difficult request.

"I will stay too," said Giuli. "I think they will need my rifle eventually. I don't think they know what they are getting themselves into."

Anais smiled at Giuli. "It really is a wonderful planet, isn't it?"

"It is!" said Giuli with a smile.

Alex turned to Jain and asked her in silence, "What do you think of this?"

"If he manages it, it might become very helpful to us. I worry for his safety, though."

"Okay," said Alex. "Juuda, be careful and keep us updated of the situation. If you detect any kind of danger, get Giuli and Hypatia out of harm's way."

"I will not allow anything to happen to them, Alex. I am happy I will get to show you how peace can solve all problems," said Juuda with excitement.

"I can't wait to see," replied Alex with a sincere smile.

Chapter 15

Enter Spirto

Y:34 D:26

Argos was once again beginning to look like the city it was meant to be. The population was steadily on the rise, and due to the unending giving of the ancient hangar, new scientific discoveries were popping up frequently. Relationships with the neighbors were getting better, and the two Vampires had adapted well in the community.

The exploration of the solar system was continuing as intended with plans of adapting the *Hera*'s propulsion system with the new antimatter technology they had developed. A mission back to Earth was all the discussions seemed to be about. Who would go and what to expect? The mapping satellite was finishing the scanning of Solis-F, and its final trip to scan Solis-G was underway. It had also scanned Solis-E, which was a volcanic world. Cold and hot at the same time. With magma flowing like water, forming lakes, and freezing cold just a few meters away from them. It was enveloped by a thin atmosphere of carbon and methane. The rare toxic clouds would form near the surface, making this planet very hostile to carbon-based life.

Immediately after its arrival around Solis-G, the drone began scanning the planet with various systems to check surface and subsurface materials, temperatures, and activity. As the scanning was progressing, a strange hole appeared in the data. A small patch of land on the planet scrambled the signal it reflected. Hypatia from Solis-B got the drone to do a more thorough scan on the location. The data became weirder the more they scanned.

"It does not look like there is something wrong with the sensors," said Hypatia. "I wish I was back at Argos now to have access to all my equipment."

She asked for help from Margaret and anyone else who was available to see what could be wrong with the data. After figuring out that everything was working as intended, they assumed there had to be something down on the planet that scrambled the data. They tried to take visual pictures from orbit, but the results were baffling. It looked like a liquid. When scanned with infrared, it looked as if it moved. The results were once again completely inconclusive. The only thing for sure was that something weird was going on. They thought of scanning it at the smallest range on the spectrum they could, detecting only a tiny sliver of the electromagnetic spectrum but with high detail. That's when the data showed a geometric shape. Then they scanned at another frequency. The shape changed. Refining the frequencies and analyzing them revealed an object that was solid but had no specific shape. It looked like it had all shapes at once.

"There is some kind of phenomenon taking place on Solis-G which is just short of miraculous," she stated at the meeting she called for. "I can't exclude the possibility that there is some technology which is scrambling our data, but we most definitely need to check it out."

"Having seen the data," stated Jain, "it really does look strange. Eldon, do you have any idea what that might be?"

"No idea. I don't recall ever anything taking place outside of the first five planets of Solis."

"Steve," said Alex, "how fast can we send a drone to check it out from close?"

"There is no atmosphere on Solis-G, so we will need something on legs," said Hypatia. "Also, if there is a data-scrambling device in operation, we will need it to be shielded from its interference. Optical analysis might be our best approach. Equip it with strong light sources, so we can shed light on it and see it as clear as possible."

"Steve, when can we have it ready?" asked Alex.

Steve stood there for a second, shaking his head. "I can have it there in about one year's time, give or take some."

"If no one has anything to add, let's get this done. Begin working on it and keep us updated."

In the following year, along with this new type of legged drone and the small rocket carrying it, many more projects were being developed. In Argos, the first rest area opened up to serve foods to the travelers from other species who wanted to go and see the wonders that the humans had brought from the stars with them. A tavern offering food and drink, specific to the appetites of the different species, opened up. A sort of tourism began to take shape, and humans promoted the idea. Some, however, saw that as an opportunity and some even as a problem.

Y:36 D:6

Solis-G

The rocket landed, and the Crawler began its twenty-minute walk toward the anomaly. Once the drone started approaching the area, the lights turned toward it, and the object began to slowly take form. As if it stopped changing shape.

"Oh my," said Jain. "This really looks like a house. It's like a house made of liquid materials."

"It's scanning it," said Margaret. "Or at least something like it. All the instruments are on overdrive. I can't pinpoint why or exactly how."

As the drone was being scanned, the anomaly began changing form again. It started shrinking in size and becoming more and more like the drone approaching it, until it was the same as the drone itself. With their jaws dropped, the team was observing the events. There was silence. The anomaly, now in the shape and size of the Crawler, extended one of its legs and touched the drone. The drone momentarily lost communications as all its systems got hijacked. In the couple of seconds that the feed was lost, Margaret and the rest were unable to speak. Then the feed returned. The anomaly was growing in size, and it started looking more and more like a human. Within a few seconds, it was complete. It waved its hand in a manner similar to how humans would greet each other. Naked ... calm ... perfect.

The hair on the back of the team watching stood upright. It was not shock or fear.

"Is this real?" whispered Jain.

"I ... I don't know," answered Alex. He quickly turned to Margaret. "Speak to me," he said, unsure of what he expected as an answer.

"But ... it's impossible," she replied.

Jain composed herself. "Okay. Let's take a breath. Someone has taken our drone and is messing with us."

Alex breathed out. "Yes, that actually makes more sense." He looked back to the screen to see the anomaly looking at the Crawler and almost petting it. It had human expressions, but it was difficult to pinpoint what he was thinking.

Without warning, an explosionlike sound came from the entrance of the room. Air got pushed violently inside the room, and after the brief second it took everyone to focus, the anomaly was standing there. "Hi! I am Spirto," he said. His voice was that of a young kid. In a sort of panic and fear, everyone froze. They could only stare at it. Then Spirto started speaking. His voice changed with every word. "Don't be scared. I will not hurt you."

"Who ... what are you?" asked Alex.

"Hi, I am Spirto," he repeated.

"What do you want?" asked Alex without thinking too much. His thoughts were a mess.

"I will leave you with your thoughts for a bit, and I will be back. Don't be scared," he said in a calm and soothing tone.

"Don't go," said Jain, but within the blink of an eye, Spirto vanished. Without sound, he disappeared, and a gust of air moved around the room again.

In the few seconds that followed, they were all looking at each other. In the feed from the Crawler, Spirto was still there. After he disappeared from the feed, Steve broke the silence and said, "He teleported."

They all looked at him as if they needed to hear more words. "The feed has a delay, so I could see him there for a while before he vanished. From the time he appeared here until he disappeared from our feed is the same as the time the signal takes to come from Solis-G. He traveled faster than light."

"That's not possible," said Hypatia.

"It looks that way, though," said Steve. "The sound and push of air indicate an almost instantaneous arrival at this location." He calculated something in his mind and added, "I think that if he wanted, he could have made the entire city explode simply by arriving."

"What do you mean?" asked Alex.

"If he made his appearance truly instant, then the air pressure being pushed around him would cause atoms to fuse."

"Perhaps he can't appear in an actual instant," added Hypatia.

Alex turned to Eldon. "Do your legends say anything about this, Eldon?" he asked.

Eldon blinked as if he just woke up. "No," he said. "Nothing I ever heard of before."

"Hypatia, shake it off," said Jain while holding Hypatia's shoulder. "You look devastated. We need to be ready for his next visit."

"But don't you see?" said Hypatia. "This is not a god. This is a creature. An alien creature from a late class-two to class-three civilization here, if not higher."

Eldon looked at Hypatia as if searching for answers. "What's a class-two and -three civilization?"

Hypatia took a deep breath and tried to shake herself into normality. "Briefly explained, a class-one civilization is defined as one which produces equal energy as their home planet. They get to colonize their home solar system. A class-two is a civilization producing same energy as their star. They usually have entire solar systems under their command. A class-three civilization is capable of producing the energy that matches their galaxy. These are hypothesized to control their entire galaxy and possibly more galaxies than just their own. There are more classes, but they are mainly answers to philosophical questions rather than realistic possibilities."

"How can we know what class Spirto would fall into?" asked Eldon.

"This is hard to answer," she said. "If we assume that he really did teleport, then we still can't pinpoint his level. The fact that his body was changing, however, tells us that he is not made of flesh. He is composed of something else."

"Does that help us understand more of his species's technological level?"

"Not really," answered Hypatia.

"He learned our language and our greetings in seconds," said Margaret.

"He also changed his voice as if he was scanning to see which works better for us," said Gakuto.

"We need more data," said Margaret. "We need to compose ourselves and prepare for his next visit."

"Did you notice?" asked Alex. "He dumbed down for us already. He was talking to us like we were children."

Hypatia nodded in agreement. "A member of a class-two civilization has nothing to say to us that we would understand. It is hypothesized that our languages and communication instruments cannot convey the amount of information a class-two civilization requires to function. Like us talking to a mouse, he needs to figure out what is the level of complexity we are able of understanding."

"This is all surreal," said Gakuto. "What if he is from a class-three civilization, then?"

"That's not in the sphere of our imagination at all, Gakuto," answered Hypatia.

Jain turned to Konoya. "You haven't said anything."

Konoya made a gesture with her head and said, "I will rule out that we hallucinated all together, so I will say that we need to wait. Speculating his level and powers might be counterintuitive for now."

The days passed with Spirto never appearing. A year passed, and Argos set a trading route with the nearby Naga village. An automated wagon would depart and go from one place to the other at standard intervals. It was the first train line of the planet. Vanadium, platinum, and cobalt were the main trade goods, which humans exchanged for bug-biomass grains and a water-absorbing compound used by the Naga to keep their skin hydrated and stay longer periods away from water. Now there were discussions for a currency to keep balance of goods exchanged based on gold. This brought up some issues with the population of Argos, since the idea of wealth was controversial. The indigenous species, however, were already using currencies based on gold.

Y:39 D:24

Argos

While Jain and Gakuto were in a meeting to discuss biomass production and possible minerals trade with the Tsepi, Spirto made his appearance. All humans were informed of the event and were prepared for the second time he appeared. Some gossip had leaked out to the other species, who barely understood the difference between Spirto and the humans.

Directly in front of Alex, who was walking alone around the perimeter of the city, Spirto appeared. This time he appeared with less of a sound and air push. Smoother and friendlier.

"Hello again, Alex," said Spirto with a calm voice. This time he was dressed and looked just like any other human.

Despite everyone's mental training for the next Spirto encounter, the ones who witnessed his arrival were shocked. They informed the leaders, who tuned in to Alex's communicator and listened to the conversation.

"I am not here to hurt you," Spirto added.

Alex composed himself. Hard as it was, he kept his mind focused and began conversing. "Hello, Spirto," he said. "I am sure you understand that I have many questions."

"What are your questions?" asked Spirto.

At that point, Alex's mind filled with questions. It was impossible to put them in order. He was unsure of which was the most important to ask. "Why are you here with us?"

"I am interested in you. There is always something new to learn," answered Spirto with a smile.

"You hacked into our database. With your intellect, you should be able to now piece together and figure out more about us than we know about ourselves."

"Your database has mistakes. You did not pass history forward realistically. All I know for now is what you yourselves have written there."

"What do you mean mistakes?" asked Alex.

"Many parts of your history seem to have been left out. You also tend to record everything from a specific point of view. These lead to mistakes."

Dimitry was nodding in agreement while hearing these words.

"How did you shapeshift, and how did you teleport?" asked Alex. There was a set of questions that by getting the answers, humans could advance technologies that were still completely out of reach.

However, Spirto's answer was far simpler than Alex or anyone expected. "The same way you switch from standing to sitting. You morph into your sitting shape effortlessly."

Alex took a deep breath. "Will you teach us?"

"Teach you what?" asked Spirto in return.

"I ... don't know. Teach us how your technology works?" said Alex with some hesitation.

"You want to be like me?" asked Spirto with a big smile.

"Yes. Can we have technology like yours?"

"What would you do with such technology?"

Alex realized he sounded like a kid asking a guardian for the keys to a vehicle he could not yet drive. "I don't know yet. Expand into the cosmos?" he said without much confidence.

Spirto smiled. "You can't understand my technology," he said. "It will take countless generations until you evolve the necessary tools to understand."

Alex was almost expecting an answer like that, so he moved to taking the direction of Konoya's line of questions. "Is there something that you want?" he asked.

"Just like everyone, I always want something," Spirto replied while looking at Alex curiously "It will be very hard for you to provide me with what I want."

"Is this a relationship that has a future then?" asked Alex boldly. "Why would you come to us if there is nothing to give and nothing to take?"

Spirto smiled again. "I like you," he said.

Alex smiled back. "I am glad. I mean I am actually glad," he said while shaking his hands.

"Perhaps I can teach you some things," said Spirto.

"Teach us what exactly?" asked Alex. Everyone listening was now excited at the possible outcome of this conversation.

"Not us," said Spirto "Me! I can teach *you*!" he said, pointing at Alex.

"You mean teach me as an individual?"

"Precisely" said Spirto. "Technology can progress only as a collective effort. You can't advance on your own. You are immortals and therefore will need a leader whose mind can stay focused and clear as you advance. I can teach you how to be that leader."

"Why me?" asked Alex curiously as if he was expecting a complex answer.

"Because you are here." Spirto's answer was not very flattering.

"I feel like there is something you want me to do," said Alex. This was a gut feeling.

"Curious," said Spirto. "Yes. I want you to lead the next attempt."

"I don't understand. What attempt?"

"It will take time to understand, but for now, I can share with you a small story of the past."

Alex walked toward a natural rock formation that overlooked a small lake the nearby river was forming. The machines that the humans had sunk in the water worked silently, and Spirto approached and sat close to Alex. "Do the ones listening to you right now have your full trust?" asked Spirto.

"Yes," said Alex. "These are the people with whom I made this travel possible and those who still support me on advancing forward."

"As you probably already have figured out, this world is engineered."

"Immediately, Alex's eyes opened wide.

Spirto understood that Alex did not yet know of that, so he said, "Let's start from a bit further back. When the universe was only a third of today's age, this galaxy was different."

"I am sorry," said Alex, "you have history from when the universe was a third of today's age?"

"Yes," said Spirto. "Many of the stars that exist today were not born yet, and most of the stars that existed back then are now gone. That's when my species

evolved to the point of recording history. We built and evolved slowly. We would live very long lives and reproduce very rarely compared to you."

"Your body is the way it is by natural evolution?" asked Alex.

"No. This happened through technology. We figured out a way to cheat evolution and become the architects of our own selves."

"That is amazing," said Alex, his eyes filled with excitement.

"It was," answered Spirto, "but it also brought a lot of conflict back then. Conflict that would not matter; the march of progress was unstoppable. We became immortals artificially, just like you. We faced many problems with that. Problems that we surpassed as well. Time went by, and the new generations were slowly mutating into a different, more advanced species. We proceeded to expand into the stars and conquer parts of the galaxy while fighting between us. We called them the generational wars. They were really pointless. The more-advanced generations always had the upper hand. Although we were traveling the stars, we had not yet made the great leap into the quantum era. I don't mean the era in which we discovered that things are made of atoms. I mean the time where our brain evolved to have an intuitive understanding of the way the universe works."

Alex was skeptical. There was too much information to process.

Spirto noticed and proceeded to simplify things. "Like you evolved the way to make tools and experience emotions that helped you build societies; we too evolved the way to naturally manipulate the quanta."

Alex and everyone else was now glimpsing into the vastness that separated themselves from Spirto. "What could it be that he wants?" was all Jain could think about.

"After that," continued Spirto, "we started traveling and conquering more and more of the galaxy at a faster pace. Our conquests were rarely met with any resistance, and we rarely imposed laws on our worlds. Our main objective was always to grow, prosper and seek unity. We knew that the universe is still too big, and we have so much more to see. We would need any help we could get."

Spirto left a small break in his story to let Alex think. As if he wanted this part to sink in. Then he continued, "New problems brought forth new solutions. We did not have any threat, and it felt like we were the only species who made it to that evolutionary point. We scanned other galaxies, and we saw nothing similar there either. After our bodies ... changed, we did not evolve naturally, and we stopped giving birth to new peoples. We found a way to evolve on an individual level. We conquered the whole galaxy and began searching for ways to expand to other galaxies. It was then that we met with the Vartars."

At this point, Spirto stopped talking for a couple of seconds. For the first time, his expressions were strange. Like they were unplanned for the first time. Alex noticed this. He immediately realized that these Vartars was important to Spirto's past. "Who were the Vartars?" he asked.

"Our strongest and only opponent," he said. "Vartars was truly unbeatable. His rate of expansion was incredible. He would appear everywhere. His technology advanced during the war as well. We, on the other hand, began losing ground."

"Why do you refer to them as a he?"

"Vartars was one person," said Spirto. He was showing emotions for the first time, and it felt like sadness was filling him. "For eons we fought, developing more

and more powerful weapons. After my species had only about 25 percent of the galaxy under our command, we changed strategy. Our fair and just way of life gave way to a new system, a system which was born out of the mind of the new leader. Spirto entered the fight."

Alex looked scared. "You?" he asked, in lack of a better question.

"That *was* me," Spirto said. "I have evolved countless times since. When a war wages on a stellar level, most of us are not in fear. We knew it would take long for it to affect us. We continued living our lives in most worlds. Building and developing and nursing. But the enemy poured every resource into dominating the galaxy. If we did not do the same, we would be gone. That's when I forced everyone to work on the war machine."

He looked at Alex and smiled a bitter smile. "Like the drums of war in your ancient cultures," he said, "I began building an empire of brutality and fanaticism. Vartars would be eliminated. Anyone who would oppose me would instantly and without question be gone in an exemplary fashion. Our aggression turned every people under my empire into the deadliest force the galaxy had ever seen. We began taking back, pushing back, and we did not stop there; we began developing technologies that, to most, even then, seemed like magic."

Spirto composed himself and continued his story without much emotion anymore. "The quantum world has so much to offer. The fabric of reality began unfolding in front of our eyes ... and we used it. We used it to drive Vartars to extinction. I destroyed him once and for all. I think I found out where he came from, but nothing of that solar system remains anymore."

"You found him and destroyed his home solar system?" asked Alex with his eyebrows up.

"Not exactly," said Spirto. "I never exchanged more than a few sentences with it. By that time, I too was everywhere. I had no body left. I had no will other than eradication of the enemy. Then it finished. Just like that, it was over. I got him. That's all you need to know of Vartars."

"How long ago did this happen?" asked Alex. "This happened a third of the way to today?"

"Roughly," said Spirto without minding the answer. "This is not important. What is important is that we were left without a purpose. We had none to hate, none to love, none to work for, nothing at all to do. I tried to return to the original plan of expanding further into the cosmos, but it required numbers, and my species had distanced itself in an endless pursue of self-improvement. Each of us alone began looking for a way out of this pointless existence."

"Death?" asked Alex.

"No, not death. An exit," said Spirto. "Over vast periods of time, the planets were forming around us, but we could not evolve further. We could not go to another galaxy; we could not enter new dimensions. All because we were no longer united. Slowly we began to fade. Some entered black holes, others slept until their energy ran out and perished. Some made ships to travel to other galaxies alone, and there were even those who simply vanished out of their own will. I was the emperor of a galaxy of primitives again. Over the eons, my own people were all gone, but I was driven by the glory of the past. I did not want to vanish, so I slept. I woke up from time to time to see what had become of the galaxy, hoping to find some enemy

and some friend to restart our conflict. I made countless friends and enemies over the eons, but they never could grow to the empire's former glory."

Once again, Spirto began showing emotion. It was clear that he had the capacity to feel all of the emotions humans have, if not more. Konoya realized, "He is not a machine."

Spirto continued, "The species that evolved around the galaxy seemed to be less fortunate than mine. They rarely made it into deep space, and when they did, they were fragile and slow. Most species do not outlive their planet's end date by far. I found myself realizing that a species capable of conquering the galaxy might not evolve again, so as a final act to find meaning, I gathered many primitive species and brought them all here. I helped shape this solar system as ideal as possible for life. I took the role of a god and made a table of kings on the first planet. Only they would be aware of my existence."

The realization of what had happened to Gaia struck the minds of the leaders. *This is how it is! Gakuto thought. I knew they did not evolve here.*

"Through my guidance," Spirto continued, "they resolved every dispute and prospered. They built the planets to their liking and began traveling to the stars. As their technology was developing, however, they stopped seeing me as a god and started realizing I have flaws. I am not almighty. I have a will of my own and desires of my own. They had found out that they had not evolved here, so the kings were selling a story of mass migration from a nearby star. But the kings themselves did not want to be here with one another anymore. They thought that by leaving the system, they could escape me, or that I did not know about their plans. Truth is, I did not mind, since time was the only thing I had. I could start over.

"So, you let them leave and began a war here that reduced them to this primitive state?" asked Alex.

"Not exactly," said Spirto. "They met your species on Earth first. That was a spark to ignite their hatred. The war began, and I decided to stay out of it. It was too small scale. I thought that I would take the victor of the war and progress with him into the future. But there was no victor. Everyone left, and the battles here slowly turned the once-glorious civilization primitive again. I slept again. I thought to wait for longer, but then you woke me up."

"Are there currently any advanced species out there? More than us?"

"More than you?" said Spirto with a smile. "There always were, but most of them don't seek expansion. They tend to look inwards. There are few with the spark. Like me. And you. And on a certain level, the ones I chose to bring here."

"Is that spark a good thing?" asked Alex without thinking much.

"Good and bad is merely a side view," answered Spirto. "You do what you have to do, and as long as you do that, you are good. If you do something that you yourself know you should not, then you are bad."

Alex found Spirto's words simple and clear. "What is next?" he asked.

"War," said Spirto, "like always. War is following you. Here and everywhere. It has not stopped since the dawn of time. It will continue till one species figures a way out of this mess, and it might still remain the same for the rest of us here. Until then, we have to fight on."

"So, you will train me on how to fight?" asked Alex.

"I will help you as I can. I have hope in this attempt, so let's make it worthwhile."

Alex frowned. "Now you speak in riddles," he said.

"I do not," answered Spirto. "I am going now, but I will be nearby. For now, keep focused and remember that there is a bigger image here."

Spirto disappeared, leaving Alex with a simple "See you soon." For Spirto, soon could be years away. The information, however, that war has been taking place for billions of years and that they may have just had contact with the former emperor of the galaxy was a bit harder to digest.

"What are we supposed to do now?" asked Gakuto.

Bara was the first to find comfort in the words of Spirto. "We prepare," he said. "We prepare for anything that comes against us."

"The story he told us," said Alex, "sounded oversimplified. It felt like he was trying to explain history to a child. It feels like we got told a fraction of reality."

"It's hard to summarize billions of years into a few minutes" said Konoya. "I don't think that there is much to think. For now, we should focus on our tasks."

Alex nodded in agreement. "I don't understand him much yet. If his goal is to conquer everything, why does he need me? Many questions are in my mind now, but we need to move one step at a time"

Jain agreed. "I think we should not change anything. We have a path to take."

"Let's not share all of this with everyone yet. Keep it contained, and once we have a clearer view, we will let everyone know of his story."

After the day passed, Alex found himself thinking about Spirto's story. He turned to Jain and said, "What will we do when we overpopulate here?"

"That is a very long time in the future," said Jain. "I understand where your mind is going, but you don't need to worry about it now. There are far more important steps to do before."

"I agree," replied Alex. "But just for the sake of conversation, what will we do?"

"We will need to expand into other solar systems. That is after we have all these planets here capped."

"Yeah, expand. That is what I thought too. If we are met with resistance?"

"You will need to fight," said Jain.

"That's a bit out of character for you" replied Alex with a confused smile.

"Well, I also think of what Spirto said, and I am positive that he was right. War is inevitable. With that in mind, we can only reduce it to the minimum we can."

In the following couple of days, the leaders could do nothing other than gather in small groups and discuss the philosophical and pragmatic consequences of Spirto's support of Alex.

Alex spent his time stressing. He was naturally resistant to stress, but now something had changed. Spirto had weighed in his mind heavily. No specific thought was troubling him, but there was a mess in his mind. As if he could hear his problems, Spirto was sitting at the tavern enjoying a morning beverage. He looked just like an ordinary human to the eyes of those who did not know him. His shapeshifting, however, did not fool Alex, who recognized him from his eyes and expression. "Spirto?" he asked with a quiet voice.

"That was quick," said Spirto.

Without hesitation, like speaking to a close friend, Alex vented. "I am in trouble. I think I am stressed, and I don't know how to deal with that."

"You might not be the brightest individual I ever came across, Alex, but you have charisma."

"What is that?" asked Alex, eager to hear something that might help him out of his spiraling thoughts.

"You know whom to keep close and whom to push away. This is one of the fundamental attributes required to lead. Turn off your communicator and walk with me."

Alex did so, and they began walking.

"There is a goal which stands much higher than what you can currently imagine. I have tried to reach that goal, but I could not."

"And you think I can?" asked Alex abruptly.

"I don't know. I do know, however, that my intellect did not lead me there after a number of trials. This is my second try to let someone else lead there."

"You still haven't told me where 'there' is," said Alex.

Spirto smiled. "You will figure this out in time. For now, have faith in the people around you. It's with them you will manage to build all that is necessary."

Alex immediately felt a bit better. He realized that he had the people around him who thought and worked together with him to make everything happen. Their opinions, ideas, and support were the only tools he needed. At that moment, he decided, "I will listen to my tribe of leaders more." Then he turned to Spirto. "Thank you! Now, where do we start?"

"That, my friend, is the easy part. And someone made it easier for you. Prepare. War is brewing under your nose," said Spirto, to Alex's surprise.

Alex instantly became more serious, like waking from a daydream. "But our close neighbors were already defeated once, and it was bad enough that I don't think they will try again. Now we are stronger than we ever were. Who would try something like that?"

"You have much to learn. I will take my leave for now, but I will be in contact. Remember to look at the bigger picture." With that, Spirto left, this time on foot; he just walked toward the forest.

For a while, Spirto's visits were somewhat frequent. Alex soon got the feeling that Spirto was also just another person trying to find ways to spend time. They began talking of various things, including their favorite games and the best places they visited. When you are alive for billions of years, companionship seems to be your most desired thing. Spirto was paying almost no attention to anyone other than Alex. In some of their conversations, Alex was taking the role of a hungry kid eager to consume the next part of the story. He had so many questions that he had to restrain himself from flooding the air with his voice. Spirto was happy to answer most of them, but his answers were rarely full. He also had no problem with Alex interrupting him, and slowly Alex made a habit of it.

"What is your actual form?" asked Alex once.

"This is my actual form."

"But you look like a different person or even species most of the time. I have formed a habit of figuring out where you might be next. Your eyes seem to stay the same strange ... material? I should call it?"

"No," said Spirto, "I always looked like whatever it was necessary for me to look like."

"So, your species evolved without having a specific shape? You were always shapeshifters?"

"Oh, you mean that far back? I am not precisely sure now how we looked before our quantum era."

"You mean there are things you can forget?" asked Alex.

"How could it be any different? Memory needs space to be stored. Once you reach the limit of your memory, you can either expand it or delete it. For a very long time, we stored our memories and hid them away, but after a while, this process becomes useful only for sentimental reasons. Sentimentality fades and with it the reasons for keeping very old memories. We started simply deleting the memories that mean nothing. I even lost the location of some of my stored memories over the eons."

"So, you don't ... care about knowing who you were?"

"You start all your phrases with *so* today."

"So sorry," said Alex.

"You did it again."

Alex frowned and smiled.

"Memories are who you are," said Spirto and took the teaching look he was taking when he wanted Alex to pay attention. "By selecting what to remember and what to forget, we managed as a species to shape ourselves and become who we want to be. Selective memory does not mean we delete the old ones. We delete the ones that could affect our being from the one we really want to be."

"Is that not lying to yourselves?"

"Not at all. This is a way to make yourself the way you want to."

"Also, you mentioned that there is a box somewhere which contains your memories?"

"In a sense, yes."

"Spirto?" asked Alex, frowning at the question he was about to ask. "Do you know how to make a faster-than-light travel engine?"

"Of course, I do," answered Spirto quickly.

"Then why didn't you use it to travel to other galaxies when you had your empire and expand indefinitely?"

"You can't travel to another galaxy. Hypatia can probably explain more as to why a simple faster-than-light ship will not be enough."

"I will ask. I am interested to know."

"Ask the technical details, but also consider this." Spirto took his serious face again. "Once you reach a galactic-level civilization, you will be faced with the three barriers."

"Barriers that stop me from expanding into a greater-than-galactic civilization?"

"Exactly," said Spirto. "The first one is spacetime. It is simple to grasp and expected. It's really hard to travel far. It takes vast amounts of energy to get a space-

rippling engine running. Getting it running will begin moving you slowly; the more you add energy, the higher your speed. It can cross the speed of light and in theory by very far, but the energy requirements are rendering it near impossible. Even if, in theory, you invest in it, then you will face the second barrier."

"But you can teleport. Does that not take even more energy?" asked Alex.

"A lot more, yes. But I can only teleport my body at very short distances. Within the solar system. It also exhausts my energy reserves, and I need time to recharge them."

"So, you can't travel to another solar system?"

"Currently, no. I can build a machine to take me wherever I want, but not instantly."

"How do you recharge?" asked Alex.

"That's a bit more complex. Leave these technicalities for when you have a better understanding."

"What's the second barrier?"

"As I said," continued Spirto, "if you made a ship to travel there, you would face the second barrier, war."

"War? How ... what does that mean?"

"Every galaxy has at least a few civilizations conquering it. At war with each other usually. They will drop whatever problems they have to make sure that a higher species that made the intergalactic travel would not be a threat. You can't travel with a big armada due to the first barrier, and you can't win with small ships. Therefore, you are left to travel only as an individual at best."

"Can't you just send someone like an ambassador?" asked Alex. He could not easily see what Spirto was trying to explain.

"Someone who will communicate with them matters of galactic governing? No, that never worked. Sooner or later, that ambassador vanished. Either dead or abandoned his duties. That's not expanding your influence; that's gifting the ones who find your ship with your technology. Not the best of ideas."

"You really make it sound like war is a universal truth. Why can't there be galaxies ruled by peace and harmony?"

Spirto smiled. "You sound a little bit like your friend Juuda. To evolve means to survive. In most cases, it's the top predators that make it for long enough to evolve reasoning skills. Once you venture into the stars, it is inevitable that you will meet species that are their planet's top predators. Species which are pulled toward their sense of superiority and even their pursuit of war as a path forward."

"Yes, I understand that. Even if I am evolving in peace somehow, not everyone else is," agreed Alex.

"Populating an entire galaxy with one species is also almost impossible, because by the time you are done, there will be evolutionary branches everywhere. They will adapt to the different planets and will become different by then."

Alex realized at that point that once again Spirto looked at a very much larger picture than he did. "Yeah. I can see how war is inevitable," he said.

"It is. And uniting a galaxy against another is proving to be hard."

Alex looked curiously at Spirto. "You already made it impossible to expand beyond a galaxy. "What could the third barrier be?" he asked.

"The third barrier," said Spirto, "is something you hit independently of the other two. It is also the most common barrier faced by species going interstellar."

"And it is?"

"The will."

"The will? As in the desire to do things?"

"Yes exactly."

Alex once again could not see exactly what Spirto was trying to say. "But how is that a barrier? If, hypothetically, we evolve into a species which travels the stars, going to other galaxies will inevitably be a desire."

"That's how you see it now. Once you reach that level, things change. The galaxy is very big. The time too long. You would need 100 billion years to see a fraction of what the galaxy has to offer. If you try to rule the galaxy with many, they collectively begin losing the will for more. There is far more than what they would ever desire here. If you rule with few, then the disagreements lead to betrayals. The will is lost faster. Ruling as an individual makes you lose the will for more the fastest."

Alex looked troubled, so Spirto smiled and told him, "It's too early to ponder those things now. Trust in your people, for without them, you can only dream of the future. With them, you can build it."

Chapter 16

Building the Future

Y:45 D:9

Argos

Argos had become the center for trade around the continent. Smaller satellite villages had been established by the various species, with hotels to accommodate those who were coming to trade or simply see the aliens. Anais and Draco had become well known. Draco had grown to the size of a dog. A dragon that looked majestic and beautiful. Nowhere to be found on Gaia.

Humans started to need policing, since technologies and small arms were traded for all sorts of commodities or services. The young ones were commonly abandoning their jobs and going away with friends they made with other species. Sometimes they were gone for days.

The Goblins who owned the land were difficult to deal with. Ags was accepting the others in his lands after they paid him a toll, but no permanent solution was presented. Selling the lands around Argos was out of the question.

"We need a plan," said Alex to his leaders. "The city is growing. The other species are asking for technologies. We also have requests for taking in children whose villages are constantly raided. We need solutions."

After a moment of silence, Jain spoke first. "It's hard to change our systems. We had prepared for growth of our population, but we never planned on incorporating other species into our society. Especially species with such vastly different cultures and tolerances."

Another few seconds of silence was broken by Juuda, who was still on Gant. "I can agree that our systems don't work as we thought they would. Things are much harder than I anticipated."

"We need a system to be capable of governing an unlimited number of planets with an unlimited number of species," repeated Alex.

"This will not be answered today," said Konoya. "Nor tomorrow. We will need to spend time on this until we figure it out. Can Spirto help?"

"You can ask him. If you look for him, you tend to find him," replied Gakuto. "He is just hard to speak to. He only seems to want to speak with Alex."

Alex shook his head. "He will not help. He expects us to figure out solutions to our problems ourselves. 'That's the only way to evolve,' he says every time I ask for something."

"So, let's do that!" said Jain. "Let's begin forming a system that will work for everyone."

"I will lead this project myself," said Alex. "Any ideas or comments will be appreciated. In our meetings, I will continuously update on the thoughts and ideas, expecting your input."

The team left the conference ready to imagine the world as they would want to see it. Their ideas were shared over the logs and in person. Alex began traveling to the biggest cities of the other species to talk with their leaders. He would also invite them to Argos in an attempt to understand how they would ideally govern their people. Slowly a new government system was formed. The idea of change, however, would not be welcomed by everyone.

Y:47 D:7

Argos

The citizens of Argos had knowledge that a new governing system was being made to include everyone, human or not. Although this was welcomed by the vast majority, the way it was constructed was not accepted by many. Alex closed the city for the day and gathered all humans to make an announcement about their new system.

"Hello, everyone. It's nice to see you all gathered here," he said. "Today, as you all are aware up to a certain point, we will launch our renewed system of governing."

"And you came up with this system without consulting any of us?" said Maria. She was often leading small-scale demonstrations and fought for change in the way things were running. "How can you think that your answers can work for anyone without even asking anything?"

"We came up with this system with the help of all leaders, not just humans. This is a system which will try to incorporate justice and freedom for all while allowing our civilization to expand."

Jonah stood up, and with some frustration, he said, "You really think that you can make decisions like that? We bet our lives to come here, and then you led us to war and to uncertainty. Now you have a solution to expand the city, and we have to play along?"

"I think it's time we discuss whether we really want Alex to be our leader here," said Maria loudly. Her voice made quite a number of people to agree and create some noise.

"This is not something debatable. You all agreed at mission protocol. Alex will be leading this mission, and there is a chain of command. We cannot start questioning structure now because ..." Jain was saying before she got interrupted.

"You are just his puppet! Your words have no weight here," said Maria.

"Enough!" said Alex loudly. "You don't seem to understand anything! We will postpone the implementation of the new system until a later time. Whoever wants to leave Argos is free to do so. I will be expecting a representative."

While walking away toward his office, he heard people saying, "Argos is not his." Others were shouting, "You and your elites should go! Not us!"

The following days became a nightmare for Alex and his team. Although this was an expected outcome of the events that had unfolded in the past, it was never addressed properly. Most of the people passionately fighting for new leadership were the ones who were born mid-travel or on Gaia. Konoya believed this had to have some connection. For now, they were trying to figure out a way for this to subside.

"We have a solid system ready, and we need to implement it," said Alex at the beginning of the leaders meeting. "We need to finish with the debates of leadership and focus on going forward."

"Most of the people who are now living here," added Konoya, "were never on Earth. They do not know who you are and how this mission was first set in motion. They were born in a world with many more species and a leader who, in their eyes, is not doing enough."

"Then how do we change that?" asked Alex.

"We first need to explain to them how our system will work," said Konoya. "Then we can expect those who still disagree to be dealt with. Perhaps a split of our city might take place."

"Splitting in two might not be a smart idea," added Dimitri. "It's not going to end there. If you agree on people leaving the city once, then you have to get used to doing it all the time. You can never make everyone happy."

"There is also that!" said Bara. "Dimitri is right. What happens tomorrow when they want to be self-governed in small tribes? Also, what if they need help? Do we rush to lend a hand? How will that work?"

"These are difficult questions, but a solution will have to be given. Right or wrong, we need to take a path forward. Spirto has made it perfectly clear that war will follow. We need to be prepared."

"The people in this room trust you, Alex," said Jain. "We trust you to do the right thing for all of us. Before, there might have been different views of how we should proceed, but ever since Spirto came and showed trust in you, so have we. We have all spoken repeatedly and think that we should provide you with our opinions but let the ultimate answers fall upon you."

"Spirto indeed changed a lot of things," said Konoya.

"Yes," said Gakuto, while nodding in agreement "You changed a lot, Konoya," he said with a smile.

"Honey," she replied with one eyebrow up, "you're sleeping in the bathroom again if you continue."

A much-needed laugh was heard in the room. They started laughing without much reason and kept laughing for a while. It was like their systems needed a break and were finally getting it.

"Thank you for that, you two," said Jain with a smile still on her face. "Alex, we have come to a conclusion. We trust your judgment. We trusted you since we were on Earth studying for exams. We think that the only person able to lead us to the stars is you. You did it once either way. So, we will trust you with your decisions on how to deal with the situation now and the situations that will inevitably appear in the future."

"We give you our word that if we think you are going the wrong way, we will speak our minds and trust that you will consider our opinions," said Juuda over the coms.

"To Emperor Alex!" said Gakuto with a smile and a glass of water raised high. "Was I too early?" he added with a smile.

"I am happy to hear that you trust me. This means our system is a go, regardless of how many of the citizens will agree!"

"However," said Bara, "I suggest we remove the weapons from every civilian's hands. Not the sound, close-combat ones. Just the plasma."

Alex looked at Bara with questioning eyes. "Do you really think it might come to this?" he asked.

"Violence from one human to another was very limited to begin with, back on Earth. This does not mean that anger and the potential to do harm is not there," said Konoya. "Having the means to do harm only increases the chances of something happening. I agree that removing weapons might not be a bad idea."

"Even though this will mean we are more vulnerable outside of our walls, it seems like a necessary step," said Alex. "This will obviously cause some reaction, and we should be careful. Konoya, we need to make an announcement as to the reasons we are removing them. After the announcement, all weapons have to be returned. Jain and Konoya, can you see that it will be done?"

"Yes," they said.

And reaction it caused. It felt as if all of Argos was on its feet. People started yelling and complaining against this turn of events. It seemed things would go bad and someone would get hurt at any minute now. Alex kept watching as the events unfolded and felt pain and anger at the same time. He decided that this needed to be sorted once and for all.

"Everyone! Gather at the Agora. General gathering immediately," said Alex over the communicators and speakers.

"This city has a leader. We did not come here leaderless, and we did not come here to stray idly while the people back on Earth suffered the sacrifices to send us here. We have to advance! Advance and progress until we can expand and once again begin to unfold the secrets of the cosmos. This is our quest, and some of you agreed to it when you came on board. Most of you were born on the way, and some of you were born here, so you have no idea of the sacrifices and the pain we have gone through as a species to reach the peak in which we are now."

Hearing the murmuring of voices in the crowd, he continued. "Whoever wants to leave Argos is free to do so. This will happen only once and never again. This was our fault. We arrived at a world with so much action that we forgot to set clear rules on ourselves. No more. The group that will leave will be supplied with weapons and provisions as well as machinery to start anew wherever they want. We will even transfer the equipment they will need, to make your transition easy. Whoever remains will stay and follow the rules and chain of command. No exceptions. You will all submit your weapons as instructed because that is what has been agreed by those in command."

"And what of the other species?" asked Maria.

"The new system and its details will be uploaded into the database today. Read and decide what you want to do. Maria, you seem confident that you can lead people to a better future than I. You are free to do so. I will help you prove me wrong. But if you choose to stay, I will have none of it ever again."

"I will prove you wrong all right!" said Maria with confidence.

About ten days later, nearly two hundred people were ready to leave Argos. It was less than 10 percent of the population, but still larger than expected, who followed Maria and Jonah to their quest for Utopia. They planned to make an area they found

ideal into their capital. Utopia would be its name, and they would be leaderless. They gathered provisions for the two-hundred-day trip, which they chose to do by foot as it is more natural, and in the morning, just one day before the events of Argos's second battle, they set off, leaving Argos behind. They left with only their geolocation systems. No drones. No scouting. No fear. The plan was that after they reached their destination, Argos would send them provisions and machines required to begin building their city.

Chapter 17

Argos's Second Battle

Y:48 D:7

Morning in Argos

From all directions, alarms were sounding. The expedition that left Argos had sent a distress signal just a few hours before, a signal that was seen in the morning. There were armies gathered all around the city. The satellite villages were used as hubs to gather armies in disguise. The turmoil of the past few days in Argos gave the opportunity to whoever orchestrated this to gather the biggest army they could have ever mustered. Bara estimated the numbers to be nearly a million. There were soldiers from nearly every species on the planet, including some never before seen. Ogres and giants seemed to have traveled from very far to join the battle. The expedition that left to build Utopia was captured. Their weapons were still in their backpacks. They were immediately threatened that any suspicious move would result in execution of all of them, including their young. Only one signal left during the night as a warning to Argos, but it arrived at the communicator of a sleeping friend. They left truly unprepared.

"How could they gather so many without us seeing it?" asked Alex.

"This looks well organized. Someone was working on it for a while now. But it must have been someone who understands the way our scanners work. Even so, it still does not answer ..."

Before Bara could finish his sentence, Alex interrupted. "There is no time for that now. Answers will be dealt with later. Bara, organize the soldiers. This time I want all civilians behind walls and in bunkers. Only trained personnel out."

"We need to land the Cerberus machines and form a perimeter," said Bara, while ordering soldiers to mount the walls and stationary weapons. The gates were closed and barricaded immediately while the armory was powering up drones.

"We do not have time for that. I can have them drop in twenty-five minutes. Better to drop them directly on them," said Steve.

"Clive! Take all loads off your Eagle, and load any weapons it can carry. Fly off and stay as high as necessary so they cannot reach you with nets," said Bara.

"We need to strike them so hard that they realize we are not afraid of them, and that this is the last time they betray our trust!" yelled Alex while checking from the drones the movement of the army. They would be at their door in minutes.

"Prepare for battle. I want to see strategies. I want to contact the expedition that left, and I want to hear from the Naga. Right now!"

Prana was contacted over the equipment that the humans had given to almost every species they had relations with.

"Has it started?" asked Prana.

"You knew and did not warn us?" said Alex furiously.

"I will not betray the species of my planet," said Prana. "There are more things involved here. They are all going into their death in agreement."

"I don't understand. Just tell me, will I find you on the battlefield?" asked Alex.

"You will most definitely not. I do not wish for my deal with you to break. I think you keep your deals, and so do we. Also, I do not want to see my people perish over pointless hatred and jealousy."

"I am guessing you know more than I initially thought. We will talk after all of this is over?"

"We will," answered Prana

Alex returned to the observations as the army was closing in. He knew that the expedition was captured and most likely imprisoned to be used as leverage. Konoya provided moral support with other calmer citizens to those who seemed to be overtaken by fear. The sound of the drums of war began to reach Argos. The ground trembled. An army reaching as far as the eye can see was marching with the sole purpose of eradicating the threat that shadowed their world. For the first time in tens of thousands of years, the species of this planet united. After the armies reached within a few hundred meters of the walls of Argos, their singing, their drums, and the tremors that followed hem, stopped. Some of the leaders gathered and walked toward Argos. Alex began walking angrily toward them. Bara, Eldon, and Mullo, who was almost eager to fight, followed him, a few steps behind. It was Habo and his son Tiel, together with a few unknown leaders of different species, and Ags who were marching to meet. Before reaching Alex, Habo raised his hand for all to stop and alone with his son moved closer to Alex to speak first.

"Habo!" said Alex. "I have not congratulated you for becoming the leader of the entire nation of Orcs. Congratulations. But what is it you think you are doing?"

"The only thing I can to survive," answered Habo.

"No, Habo. You don't have to do this. It will not end well. Why did you include the young one in this? Why is Tiel here?"

"Because this is the safest place for him now." Habo's eyes betrayed sadness and fear.

"Habo, I am not sure what you mean, but we don't need to sacrifice all those people to a lost cause. I have a plan to unite us all and march forward." Alex looked at the army and shook his head "Does talking have any reason now?" he asked.

"I know you have a plan, Alex. And we will discuss this later. Now it's time to finish this." Alex frowned in question, and Habo continued. "You saved Tiel once. Now I need you to do it again. Take him in your bunker," he said and then yelled a command. The Orcs marched forward toward Argos from all directions.

"We will stand by your side!" yelled Habo and turned his axe against Ags and the others.

As the Orcs walked and formed a wall around Argos, Habo grabbed Alex's hand and put Tiel's inside.

"Take my son to safety, please," he asked of Alex.

The leaders of the other species were divided between those who were confused and shocked and those who were furious. Most of all Ags, who thought that this was the chance for him to finally exact his revenge.

"You filthy, disgusting traitor!" he yelled. "Your species is that of traitors. You are worse than the humans you defend, and now you will die with them!" He then looked at the sky.

That's when Alex realized that something was wrong. He turned and looked at the Eagle flying high over Argos.

Alex saw a glimpse of something else. "Clive! Prepare! There is a plane ..." he started to say, but before his words were finished, a plane came from the sky and shot the Eagle with two powerful and precise shots.

"Clive! No! Kieran? Why?" screamed Alex when he realized who was behind this.

Before Alex had a chance to vent his anger, Ags gave the order for everyone to start storming in. Habo grabbed Alex and started leading him and the two Vampires next to him toward Argos while yelling to prepare for battle. "Now, brothers! We stand our ground, united with the ancients to bring an end to the wars of our world! Tonight, we sleep in peace!" He yelled those words to his people while he was running to get Alex to safety. His fellow Orcs formed a wall around Argos with their shields and their bodies.

Kieran dove from the sky with his combat plane alone. He aimed at the group running toward Argos. He could hit Alex, but he shot at Mullo, who fell dead right next to the shocked eyes of Alex.

Anais took her sniper rifle, raised it, and with one shot, she wounded the flying machine. With a second, she took it down. From the crash, Kieran came out and ran toward the battle formations while giving commands through some telecommunications devices. It seemed he had been planning this for a while.

The Cerberus that was landed in Argos's first battle was stored and upgraded inside a silo. It was ready to rain havoc among the lines of opponents. But it had been there for a while. The moment it turned on, a large explosion made the ground tremble, and the Cerberus with its entire silo fell inside a hole. That's when Alex and the leaders realized that this battle had been planned a long time ago. It was orchestrated carefully, and that they would need to put everything they had to make it out of it alive. Alex composed himself. *It is now*, he thought *The final battle is now. After it, I will not allow for any other to take place.* He took a deep breath and gave the hand of Tiel to Gakuto. "Take him to safety!" he said.

He knew all the civilians were safely in the bunker. It was only Bara and his soldiers outside along with some from his close circle, trying to help in any way they could. He began giving orders, but his voice for the first time sounded strange. No fear, no remorse. Just war.

"That's it! Land all but one Cerberus right on them! I want all self-controlled drones in the air. Identify Orcs as friends! Mount the walls and fire until you can't hold your weapon anymore. Stand your ground."

The first few seconds of battle were devastating, mainly for the Orcs. The waves of giants, beasts, and footmen, along with the rain of arrows that was falling in Argos, meant that the casualties were great. The air smelled of iron and blood. The grain around Argos had been stepped on and flattened while the boulders were falling on buildings, making explosive sounds. Alex was yelling now to both humans and Orcs alike through his speakers. The valley echoed with his voice.

"Hold for four more minutes. Four minutes to victory!" he said in both languages.

Humans knew what was coming in four minutes. Orcs did not. Yet Habo's reinforcement of Alex's voice gave hope to his people. "You heard him! Just a bit longer and we finish this. Hold!"

All the drones, all the weapons meant nothing when faced with the relentless attacks of endless waves of agile fighters. Every species would take a role and collaborate their attacks. Kieran proved to be an incredible strategist. He too knew that once the battle started, he had time only until the Cerberus in orbit dropped. He had calculated the timing of the battle so that both groups of Cerberus in orbit would be as far away as possible. After that, everything would be over. He needed to have his people deep inside Argos to achieve victory before the machines landed. Humans would need to surrender if the city was taken. He heard Alex talk of the four minutes, and he understood what was coming. *Only four minutes?* he thought. "Attack with all you have!" he commanded everyone.

Why did you shoot one of your own? Why Mullo? Why would you organize such an attack on us? Eldon was thinking while looking at the battle slowly creeping into the city.

Amid the battle, Alex realized that if the Orcs had not come to their aid, the enemies would have entered Argos. *The Cerberus would not be able to shoot inside the walls*, he thought. *The Orcs literally saved us.* He noticed that while firing from the top of the walls, humans would mainly shoot behind the front lines to avoid risking injuries to their Orc allies. That meant that on the front line, the Orcs were faced with a continuous attack. He grabbed his plasma weapon and ran to the wall.

"If the Orcs fall, we fall!" he yelled. "Three minutes left. If their shields drop, we die with them. Don't let any Orc die."

With that, he jumped over the walls. Smaller in size as he was, he went between the Orcs of the first line and began shooting between them. Bara saw what Alex did and yelled, "Follow Alex!" and he too jumped over the wall. Like a wave, humans jumped over the wall and passed through the Orcs. They reinforced the line of defense and gave a breathing moment to the Orcs to reset their shields. Habo saw this and yelled at his people, "Drop your axes and shield them. Hold!"

The battle's intensity made some mindlessly move out of the lines to meet death. Eldon, armed with his sword and armor, could not contain his rage. He too jumped in front of the Orc line and began spinning and slicing like a machine. His rage forced him to scream while killing. Human and Orc alike could for a moment stop and think of how lucky they were to not have Death himself against them.

Drones were emptying their ammo and flying back where civilians would reload them. Again and again their relentless power devastated the larger targets. The barrage of weapons was blazing from the top of the wall and from between the Orcs of the front line, while the sound of the Orcish shields protecting from the torrent of arrows was deafening.

The giants proved to be less of a challenge, since Anais alone would take them out from the top of her tower. Giuli was not there to help, but the city was holding.

"One minute left. Hold the line, brothers! Don't let them into the city!" said Alex after looking at the timer on his arm.

With his finger shaking from exhaustion and his weapon hot, he was firing like a madman.

"Thirty seconds left. Almost there! Hold! Hold!" continued Alex.

The armies of Gaia were at the throat of the city. Alex and the humans had to stand on top of the dead to fire. The Orcs had a trench of bodies in front of them and were about to fall.

"Brace! Brace!" The voice of Steve over the loudspeakers was heard over the sounds of battle in both human and Orcish.

The Orcs did not know exactly what it meant, but when they saw lights from the sky coming down, they realized. Habo thought all this time that Alex was bluffing and that he did not have more of those machines. "One last hold, brothers!" he yelled. "One last hold and it's over. Strength!"

Three impacts. One after another, they landed right on the armies on a triangle around Argos. The shock from the impacts shook Argos to the point where screams of fear could be heard from inside the bunkers. The cells opened, crushing anyone who was unlucky to be around, and the machines stood up.

Purposely for intimidation, the machines began making extremely loud screeching noises while firing everything they had. This was the apocalypse, as far as any species could recall. The drones left the battle and gathered around the Cerberus, protecting them from smaller creatures climbing on them and destroying them. Bara had planned it well. Kieran tried to retreat, but it was too late. No orders could be given to the soldiers. They could not hear anything anymore. The sounds of the firing weapons, the explosions of the rockets, the screeching sounds that made the Cerberus look like metal death, momentarily froze all who were targeted by them. Any mythological representation of death they had ever devised was now belittled by reality. The merciless barrage of fire led most to run without looking behind.

Humans would remain the scariest creature for all who witnessed the event and lived to tell the story. Less than thirty seconds later, the Orcs stood up and began looking in awe. Their shields stopped making their music of horror as they were pummeled by arrows, swords, and spears. The drones immediately flew over the leaders who were previously identified; they marked and threatened them to not run away but to move toward Argos.

"Habo! The day is won!" yelled Alex.

At that point, all the machines stopped firing. With them the enemies stopped fighting. There was absolute silence for a few seconds, then the ears, blocked until that point from the buzzing sounds of war, began picking up the sounds of the battlefield. The cries and screams of agony filled the air. The battle did not end with celebrations. Not from any side. The leaders gathered in front of the main gate of Argos. Alex, alongside Habo, stood there waiting for them.

"Kieran, why? Why did you do this? We could have united everyone with peace," said Alex.

"Why are you looking at the small picture now, Alex? You will move on from here. What peace are you talking about?" said Kieran in his own language.

"Why don't you speak in a language that more can understand?" asked Alex in anger. "Why do you speak in riddles and with such confidence? Speak for everyone to see that your vanity and hatred cost them all their loved ones. You knew

they could never defeat us, and yet you led them to slaughter, just so you could drown your own sorrow."

"It is early for you to understand," said Kieran. His confidence and posture were unchanged.

"Your hatred is such that when you had the chance to take a shot on me, you decided to punish one of your own for joining us. You should be ashamed! Talking in riddles is no longer amusing." Alex turned to the confused eyes of the Goblins and other leaders. "We can sit here and continue this, until there are none of you left. Or you can put down your weapons. This land and the lands surrounding it until the Alpha city and the borders of the Orcs will be human land."

Ags furiously breathed to vent his anger and frustration. He had lost again, and this time he had no words.

Alex explained to them, "You will not submit to us. We have a system which will welcome all of you. Or at least the ones who want to be included. You will come here and learn of our system after the horrors of today end. Now gather your dead and treat them as it is customary for you."

The expedition that was captured was released and returned to Argos.

"What did you do with the rest of the people? This is three fourths of the number you captured," said Bara to the representatives.

"We needed to convince the rest not to ring any alarms," said one of them.

"So, you executed twenty-five people?"

"We did. It was hard to hold some of the leaders from indulging to their darker sides," another said with a smirk.

"Have you lost your mind?" said a third. "You challenge them after what you saw?"

No reply followed.

The brief Battle of Argos meant the end of an era for humans and aliens alike. Alex demanded that for now, Kieran would be banished to the fifth planet with the rest of his people and with minimal technology. Just enough for them to not face any survival issues. He knew now that Spirto was right. War will always follow. His peacemaking plans were not going to work for long. He needed a change of heart. The leaders had also become far stricter with their ideas and their hopes for a peaceful system. They decided that they would take a different approach.

"The simpler systems work the best," said Dimitri. "Overly complicated economies with peace-evolving strategies will have hard time expanding and growing."

"These species here understand very simple things," said Bara. "They all respect power, and we currently have it."

Phrases and ideas such as those began building the next page of their constitution. The day came when the leaders of all species who took part in the war were gathered at Argos to hear the outcome. They all were now unable to deny the military superiority of humans. Together, leaders of species that did not fight were invited, including Prana and more. This meeting was also broadcast to the rest of the humans. Ags had already been replaced by another leader who was far less aggressive. Ags was overthrown after his defeat, since the Goblins were worried that with two losses and so much hatred, he was no longer able to lead. The lands lost during the war were not as devastating for the Goblins, who controlled huge areas.

After the greetings, Alex jumped directly into the matter at hand. "We will move our city to Alpha city. We will rename it Argos, and that will become our capital."

"What will become of your current city?" asked Prana.

Argos was a spectacularly automated city but not large enough for the plans Alex had in mind.

"Argos will be tributed to Habo and the Orcs. The least we can do is teach them how to use the city so that they will never have to worry about food and water again."

This brought a big smile to Habo's face. Prana smiled as well.

"Habo will rename his city as he wishes. Argos, the new Argos, will grow to become once again the center of this world. Every neighboring species will allow for routes to lead to Argos from every part of the continent."

"These are orders?" asked the leader of the Chepi.

Alex looked at him and the rest around with a forced smile. "There is no system that satisfies everyone. I will conquer this solar system and create an empire of unprecedented size and power."

His words stirred the table.

"And if we want to have nothing to do with you and your empire?" asked Prana.

"How would you answer to a small group of your people if they told you they want to have independence from you?" asked Alex.

"These," said Prana, while pointing around him, "are not my people."

"But they are *my* people," said Alex. "You are all my people. Our empire will grow with all of you. It can't survive without all of you. So, you are all my people."

The curious looks were accompanied by smiles of disbelief. "Are you so naïve as to hope this will work?" asked one of the leaders. "What do you say about this, Habo?"

Habo looked around him, and with seriousness, he said, "Many things I thought were impossible until I met Alex. We have bathed in war since before we can remember. The idea that my child can grow without war is worth my submission to the humans."

Alex did not like the word *submission*, but there was no other way to put it. "We will open schools in Argos," he said in an effort to divert attention. "Schools where children of all species can attend. You will have access to technologies that will make sure none will go hungry again. Most importantly, none will attack the empire and its people again."

"Why are you advertising it if we have no choice but to submit?" asked Prana.

"Because it will work better and faster if you realize that your people will gain from it," said Alex. "Your people are suffering because of you! All of you," he said while pointing around. "You lead your young to die for reasons that should soon be forgotten. Now you have a chance of joining the only force that can balance the world, and you struggle to understand it. Your people want water, food, shelter, and education. They will have all of this and more. They need just to accept that they will coexist with others that are different from themselves."

Habo stood. "I am convinced, and I will lead by example. My people and I are yours." He kneeled before Alex.

This was an action that Alex did not anticipate. "Don't kneel," he said, "stand up. I need you with me. I need all of you with me. I need advisers to help me understand how we can offer the best life to your people. I don't know your people and their needs."

Habo sat down. The tension on the table was peaking.

"Go home," Alex said. "Go home and think of the future of your people. There is no need nor is there a way for you to stand up to me. Join us, and together we will travel the stars. I will be expecting your answers soon."

Alex stood and left the room. While walking, Juuda contacted him on his communicator. "Alex?"

"Hello, Juuda," said Alex deep in his thoughts.

"I read the details of the new system you are planning to implement and unite the world."

"What do you think of it?" asked Alex.

"You will force everyone to join? Making wealth countable. Gathering gold? You made yourself and the table of elites indefinite rulers. There is no switching of command unless you deem it to be so. We have seen how this turns out, and it's not good, Alex."

"I have come to understand that soon we will be faced with more challenges. The systems we brought from Earth with us cannot work here. In fact, it could not have worked on Earth either. With the cities' transport system, we already saw these systems faults back then."

"But we are making so many steps back we are finding ourselves in totalitarian monarchies, Alex. Are you sure there is no way out of this?"

Alex was walking to the command room where the rest of the leaders were waiting.

"Did you all agree to this?" asked Juuda, addressing everyone in the room.

"We have. We don't think that there is another way to halt conflict with those species," said Jain. "Do you think you might be able to help with a better idea?"

"I don't," said Juuda, with his voice lowering. "It's hard here. I am constantly characterized as evil. No major resistance yet, but I fear that I might be having my own war here soon."

"We will help with your problems there soon, Juuda."

"I for one will sleep more easily now. The way things are going, I see a bright future coming," said Bara.

That same night, Spirto made his appearance to speak with Alex. He found him talking with Jain about the possible futures that unfolded in front of them. He stood listening for a bit before interrupting. "I see things end well with your little war."

"Spirto!" shouted Alex like a child. "I wanted to speak to you."

"I am all ears," said Spirto with a smile.

"Where do you get those expressions from?"

"Your database. You used this expression a while back. I think it's funny."

"Did I do the right thing? I assumed the role of someone I don't feel like I am."

"Who do you feel you are?" asked Spirto.

Alex almost apologetically said, "I am a simple person. I wanted to lead a small city to prosperity. Now I have a world to lead, and soon I am sure we will start expanding to the other planets."

"What do you have to say to that, Jain?" asked Spirto.

"I think that if there is one person who can manage this task, it's Alex. I have full trust in you. I know you will be fair and just."

"I think so too," said Spirto.

"And what comes next?" said Alex. "What do I do with those who will oppose me? They will become more and more aggressive until I have to do something about it, and then use my actions against me."

"Calm down," said Spirto "There is no system that works everywhere. Trust me, I have tried. This is something that the species of this planet understand immediately, so I think it's a good start. You need to place education as your top priority. Later you can change the system again."

"You make it sound easy," said Alex with a frown.

"Nothing is easy" said Spirto. "You will need to figure out how to deal with that soon."

The conversation continued for a bit longer until Alex and Jain bid Spirto goodbye and went to bed.

Over time, one by one, the other species submitted to Alex's empire and joined the humans. Mostly without conflict, Argos grew. The group who was led by Maria to establish Utopia was no longer granted the tools and necessities required to build their city, and together with the war they had all experienced, the plan failed.

Chapter 18

Foundations for the Future

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New Argos

Over the years, Alpha City, now called Argos, transformed into a glorious center for trade and education. Every species had been given a small part of the city and prompted to command their people from there. This way the city could function as the control hub for the entire planet. With populations continuously being added to the still-unnamed empire's numbers, it looked as if Alex's plans were working. Many cities of the already-known species were slowly joining Argos, and many new species were found and added. The first schools were already giving out diplomas, and the first universities were being built. News of Argos spread throughout the planet, and many species came to join voluntarily, if not just for the pursuit of knowledge. The teachers taught science and history, including the complete story of the planet—all except the parts of Spirto's story. Although the rumors had begun to spread, nobody had any clear idea of the truth of Spirto, other than the people close to Alex. The explanation of how many species such as these were gathered on one planet and there was no evolutionary history of them was answered by a twist of truth. An advanced long-gone civilization brought them there to make an experiment. This was used as a driving force toward the focusing of everyone to the grander scene, the expansion to the stars. This kept most species focused on advancement.

Juuda continued to be the voice of opposition to nearly everything that was happening but had never truly betrayed Alex. His own problems were mounting at Gant and he couldn't spend too much time thinking of the problems of Gaia. Habo and Prana were becoming students of engineering, and Ags, who somehow returned as a leader of the Goblins, was growing old and not taking part in everyday life events.

The team provided Alex with a set of tools to experiment with new laws and systems, so the empire could be managed. Many conflicts were still happening due to racism between different species. Taxation and investments on projects began creating a gap between those who better understood the system and made profit out of it and those who didn't. Humans were especially bad at understanding how the economic system worked. They had never before lived with a system of reward for work and production, so they failed to catch up. To keep his empire, Alex knew that he had to keep humans above the rest until the average education level of other species was equal to that of humans. This was a very troublesome problem to be solved, since Alex knew that for the time being, things were easy. Soon, however, many would have access to technology, and a new war could break out. If that was to happen, how would Alex manage to keep control? A war would mean everyone against everyone. A second circle of the past would be repeated, where everyone

with a spaceship would leave, and whoever remained would go on fighting until there was no opponent left. Teaching of the past wars made new generations better at managing peace, but it was in no way a guarantee.

After careful planning and many conversations with his leaders, Alex came up with a solution that would leave many of his own people with more negativity. He devised a plan where the elite scientists of any species would be gathered and develop technologies available to humans alone to control. The research department had its existence advertised and was moved to one of the moons of the sixth planet of the solar system, a gas giant, very hostile to life. However, it was surrounded by a plethora of moons, all of which seemed to be hiding their own secrets. The most desolate of them all was a rocky sphere, just a bit smaller than half the size of Earth. It somehow had retained a thin layer of atmosphere, and it had a variety of precious metals and minerals. Building an Eden there was, in itself, a project worthy of admiration. Part of the reason for this whole plan was the fact that surviving and prospering on a moon like this was a challenge that would provide much-needed technologies for deep-space travel and colonizing other systems. Additionally, an empty world such as this provided the perfect ground for new weapons and technologies to be tested.

The plan began to take form, and a research base was made, powered by another antimatter engine. Without the fear of mistakes and malfunctions on that moon, the first successful, contained, small-scale, and energy-efficient large-atom fusion was achieved. Although antimatter was more efficient, the engines were nearly impossible to mass produce, so fusion had its place in the society. It could also produce tremendous outbursts of energy, dwarfing any nuclear bomb before it. Now Alex had in his hands a tool that could be used to intimidate and control the different species. By allowing any researcher advanced enough to take part and go live on Moon "Tech," as they called it, he reassured everyone's knowledge of the place. Through this, he managed to reduce the wars that were constantly taking place around Gaia and on the other planets. However, the peace and prosperity of Argos was not a global phenomenon. It would take more to unite the entire planet.

In the meantime, a huge breakthrough was made. With the help of some machines found in other vaults, and by decrypting the ancient languages to a deep level, Margaret and her team managed to decrypt the first data crystal. It turned out that every crystal could hold an immense amount of information. A hand-held storage unit that could store the equivalent of thousands or even millions of times that of humanity's best storage systems of similar size. Most data turned out to be private information, recorded by individuals. Over time, more and more important finds took place. From designs for buildings to machines and literature, it was all there. The technological boosts were such that even within a couple of years, devices that Steve and Hypatia thought they might never see were coming to life. Slowly, all crystals became decodable, all but the one given to Alex by Kieran, who was recently found dead of an unknown cause.

After his death, his people asked and were granted access to Gaia and united with the population. Still, from time to time, Alex tried to understand what went through Kieran's mind. *Why did he attack? Why did he give me that crystal?*

Margaret had been working on the K-Crystal, named after Kieran, for a while now. She could see that there were data inside but could not decode them. Every

crystal could be read differently from each side, which was also one of the reasons their capacity was so big. The K-Crystal had hundreds of sides. Hypatia suggested that sides had to be read in conjunction with others, but it was impossible to figure it out properly.

As technology was being taught throughout Gaia and tech was built, Alex began focusing on Juuda's problem. Gant was nowhere near ready to unite with Gaia under the rule of Alex. For the past several years, Juuda was trying to educate people on Gant, and his first students began traveling the planet to spread the message of unity and prosperity that Juuda was trying to use to unite everyone.

Slowly, Argos began looking like the city of dreams. Many different species were living in harmony and progressing together. Within the harmony, however, there was cruelty and crime. Especially between different species, crime was not rare. Certain areas of the city became hard to police. It was particularly rare for a human to be part of the police force. The other species who were asked to police with equality and justice often bent the rules in favor of one species over another. Harsher punishment, which included banishment to a remote island for those deemed unfit to join society again, were not showing much promise. In an effort of balance, a ruling table was made, where one representative of every species would be present and led by one human, Alex.

"Our people prefer the underground," said Ags. "It is still a dump, and the ones living above often dump their waste to demonstrate against us."

"What you are referring to," said Lorf, the leader of the Kalikantzari, "are isolated events. We all face misbehavior toward one another," he added with a provocative smile.

"This is not an isolated event!" yelled Ags. "You systematically target us. Especially you and your people," he said, pointing at Lorf.

It was clear that no one was ready to coexist in harmony yet.

"Calm down, everyone," said Alex. "We have been anticipating that it would not be easy to coexist, but we need to make it happen." Alex took a deep breath and began explaining what he had already planned with his leaders. "Any species who thinks that it is targeted by another will inform this committee, and an investigation will be launched. Any leader who is proven to work against our unity will be charged with treason. Other than that, the crime that is currently affecting our people is not easy to combat. We can, however, use it to our advantage."

The wording made everyone look at Alex curiously, as if they were ready to prove something yet to be put in words.

"We need better monitoring systems, better schooling, and better lifestyles," continued Alex. "For that, the crime that we are currently facing will become the fire we need to extinguish. All higher education and all of you will focus on coming up with ideas that will combat this. We will use it to spark a new direction in innovation and a better justice system."

After the meeting was over, some left empowered, but most felt like nothing would change for a while. Society was growing fast. The young ones of all the species had the ability to learn, and they were immediately capable of joining an advanced society.

The base on Tech had begun spewing out technologies, and without the fear of contaminations or collateral, small domes were built with plant life to be used as

experimental areas for all sorts of directions. Tech was a planet where any secret Alex and the humans wanted to develop, any unethical research, and any experimental biological weapon could be tested in a safe environment. There was already a plan in motion for an asteroid full of water to be brought from dead space. It was found drifting, and they thought of adding a few lakes on Tech.

As Gaia was covered by the Empire and Alex gained more and more power, secrets of the ancient past were continuously unfolding. Technologies and artifacts of a great civilization were shining light on the details of the history.

The next target would become Alpaz, the native name of Solis-A, a small planet with rich vegetation. It was mostly rocky, with a lot of water for its size and proximity to its star. With a strong magnetic field and fast rotation, Alpaz created some magnificent natural phenomena. It looked like a perfect paradise for anyone who would enjoy hotter climates. Alex's curiosity sparked when the drone that landed for exploration saw structures, far more complex and less damaged than on any other planet, yet almost no life. Some deforestation in certain places was the only indication of civilization still existing.

Alex waited for days to speak to Spirto and ask him of the fate of Alpaz. Spirto, however, appeared only when he felt like it, and there were no means of communication when he was gone. Juuda's situation seemed to be getting out of hand. A meeting was arranged to discuss this, among other subjects, between the humans.

"What can Spirto be doing?" Alex asked Jain. "Where is he going?"

"I guess he sleeps. If it was me, I would sleep for longer periods than him, just to see the evolution of this place here faster."

"Then let's hope he does not think like you," said Alex.

"There are some notable places to visit on Alpaz," said Bara while checking on data sheets and maps. "Perhaps it's time to create an outpost there."

"Yes, we should. What is the situation on Gant?" asked Alex.

"From a military point of view, nothing in particular is happening yet. But they are organizing in ever-growing groups of deeper and deeper fanaticism. Juuda seems to have finally broken them. I think a major war is imminent."

"I have analyzed a lot of data that have come from Juuda, Hypatia, and Giuli," said Konoya. "The population is very hesitant to accept us. Those who opposed the previous system were fast to join us, and with their help, we have established a few key point cities. The vast majority, however, are trying to take back the cities by force. They do not like that their old god-leader is gone. They like it even less that Juuda told them he was of another species, using them. I too think that was a mistake."

"Our people there may be in harm's way, and it's hard to establish a functioning city when you have fanatics demonstrating at all times," said Jain. "Juuda's work is hard."

"Why is it so hard to remove the fanatics from the cities?" asked Bara.

"Goblins have a way with the underground. It has proven nearly impossible to isolate cities. They always find a way inside," answered Juuda from the coms.

"Juuda," said Alex, "do you have a plan, or shall we intervene?"

"I don't know why this is not working, but those creatures are driving me insane. It seems they do not want to understand what is good for them. Over this

period of time, more than half my direct students have been executed. Now I don't dare take new ones."

"You make me feel that things are getting out of hand there," said Alex.

"I am not sure of what to say. If I have no results with my last plan, I will have to ask for help."

"I am happy to hear that. What is your last plan like?"

"Well, I made laws. Stricter than before. I tried with the soft, and they seem to enjoy looking at everything fall apart. Hypatia has more influence than me here. Even though her opinions are so wrong from time to time and I am curious as to how can someone think this way, she has gained more trust than me. Perhaps that too is a way for them to mock me." Juuda sounded depressed. "I have applied the laws in the city for almost a year now, and it's been a few days that I am policing the capital. It does not look good, but I hope it will work."

Y:74 D:2

Gonton capital, planet Gant

Juuda's way of seeing things was different Alex's. Now, for the first time, it seemed like he was losing his composure. He called Alex in distress. "I messed up. I really messed up. Haz has gained so much power," said Juuda with a shaking voice.

"Haz? The prophet you told us about in the past? The same Haz?" asked Alex.

"Yes. He has managed to gather around him a vast army and is headed toward Gonton. He has his people already in the city, and he is marching a tremendous army toward me to take the throne as spiritual leader. They still don't seem to understand I am not a spiritual leader."

"How long do you have?"

"From what I see, they will be here in about five days. I need to make a plan on how to avoid this bloodshed. Many of those creatures here are wonderful and heart-warming people. They love and feel compassion. We can't let this war destroy everything."

"If it comes to it, do you have enough firepower to defeat them?"

"I don't think I can do that."

Jain interrupted. "I understand your moral dilemma, Juuda, but if it's a war they ..."

"No, no, you don't understand," said Juuda "I can't do that because I don't have the means. I made no military and no weapons. I only have a couple of handheld devices and Giuli, who has expressed her negative feelings toward my actions enough times to bore herself out of it. I am sure she will find it funny that now I need an army."

"I think it's time for us to come help you," said Alex

"No! Please don't. I want to show them another way. I want them to try and understand. Let me finish what I came here to do. Hypatia and Giuli will be ordered to leave Gonton and go stay on a safe outpost far away from the war."

"Try whatever you feel it is right, my friend. Just make sure you don't get yourself or the ones who are with you in harm's way."

"I will. I promise."

"What did you call me for, if it is not help you want?" asked Alex.

"It is help. Just not military. I want a few big bombs to explode in the sky. I think your intimidation techniques that worked well in the past on Gaia might work here too. I will show them that they can't fight against me."

Alex and Jain looked at each other with their lips shut. "I don't think that will work as you expect there, Juuda," said Jain.

"We will, however," added Alex, "send you what you asked for. It will take about five days at best to be there."

"Thank you," said Juuda and closed the conversation.

Alone in contemplation, Juuda was trying to think of a way to avoid bloodshed. He called for Arzib, one of the greatest and most progressive minds of Gant. For a long time, he was prosecuted for his ideas and his philosophy. He was one of the closest Goblins to Juuda.

"What are we going to do?" asked Arzib. "They will be here soon."

"I am still not sure. I don't seem to be able to find a way to make them understand that bloodshed is not the solution."

"What alternative do they have?" asked Arzib while trying to make a point.

"They can leave us be. They can continue their way of life in other cities," said Juuda. This conversation had taken place many times in the past, and Juuda always had hard time understanding what Arzib was trying to explain to him.

"What cities will stay unaffected from what we are doing here?" Arzib seemed tired. "We have had this conversation many times, Juuda. You can't expect them to just take your way of life as better and implement it just because your logic says so."

"I know. I get it," said Juuda in frustration "We have left them no choice. But they need to see that their system is not functioning."

"Their system was functioning for thousands of years, Juuda. Also, if tomorrow, another species comes and tells you that your way of doing things is wrong, would you listen?"

"If they were able to prove a better system, I would, yes!"

"Why would you change your mind so easily?" asked Arzib.

"Because that's what you need to do to progress."

"And how did your species reach the point of thinking this way?"

"I guess education. But I don't have time to educate everyone."

"So, you need to work with the education they already have."

"What do you mean?" asked Juuda, almost sure of what Arzib would say.

"They know how to submit to power. You need to fight and win this war. Use your technology and weapons."

"It's too late for that, Arzib. I have not brought weapons with me here."

"But Giuli can kill anything anywhere almost by magic."

"And that's just about all the power we have here. It turned out that without Giuli's powers, we would not have this city at all. You're right, they only listen to fear and power. Gather everyone capable of fighting. We need to prepare."

The hours ticked away while preparations for battle were taking place. Many were in denial. Juuda had promised everyone that through his ways, war would never knock at their door. Now he was preparing for a battle, and his lack of experience could be seen by his generals, who corrected his strategy for defense

repeatedly. People were locking themselves in their homes, both under and over the ground. The few who knew how to use weapons, mainly for hunting, were more than eager to use them. They mounted the walls and were waiting for instructions. In front of the city walls lay an army as far as the eye could see. Juuda felt powerless behind a badly fortified wall, full of patches and parts half broken. He was actually ready to meet death. Hypatia and Giuli were asked to leave, but they chose to lock themselves in the tallest tower. Giuli could not leave Juuda alone. As the night crept in, the sleeping army woke. With torches and songs, they approached the wall.

"This is the power of belief. They have gathered everyone they could into a sea of people ready to sacrifice all our lives to their delusions," said Arzib with sadness.

"Where are you, Haz?" yelled Juuda from over the main gate. "Come forward and talk!"

"I am in command of the holy army of Gant!" yelled Haz while walking toward the front. "We are here to take what is ours and exterminate the source of evil that is corrupting our world!"

"We are not here to corrupt. We are here to teach and learn. We are here to be your friends," said Juuda in a desperate attempt to prevent the inevitable.

"Teach?" laughed Haz "You only want what's ours. You are a spawn of darkness who killed the voice and tried to embezzle his words."

"This is not a war you want to have. Your ways are wrong. If you will, I will show you." Juuda's words meant nothing now; their sense was fading.

"A war I don't want? You! You are the ones who came here without being asked. You killed our prophet and assumed his place. Why are you here? If we are so wrong, then why did you bother? What is that you want from our world? *Brothers!*" Haz yelled with all his might. "You inside the walls! His lies have clouded your minds! They are the ones from the dark side. The ones our ancestors have warned you will come. They are here now! Don't stand on their side! They see this army and cower in words! We will show them the might of our convictions and cleanse this world of their filth once and for all. You can still be forgiven!"

And with that, Juuda's nightmare minutes began.

With screams and cheers, Haz's army began to storm the city. Like a sea covering a rock, so it was with the Goblin war. Ladders and ropes were quick to cover the outer walls, while battering rams were pounding on the main gate. Impact after impact, its ever-increasing volume boosted the morale of the attackers.

Fear and panic caused many to turn against Juuda and their comrades. As the Goblins were pouring inside the city, some found helmets and gear from fallen attackers and wore them in a display of conversion. They became the most damaging ones, since they pointed out key locations for ammunition and food silos. They opened gates and lowered bridges, allowing for the army to storm through the different layers of Gonton's protections.

As the defenses of the city were falling, Juuda witnessed homes opened and people killed like animals. The bloodshed had no end. The righteousness of their cause blinded them into seeing the enemy as non-Goblin, as an animal not worth breathing. They dragged women and children into the streets and laughed while atrocious acts took place.

Even beneath the ground, other battles were taking place. The Goblins in the tunnels had not heard the speech of Haz, and their defenses were holding well. The tunnels were safe with just a few weapons. But soon, from above, the enemy came like water filling the gaps of a sponge. The city fell, and surrender meant nothing. They did not want prisoners or slaves. They had come for cleansing. Haz laughed and chanted his holy words as he marched through the city gates. "Justice!" he yelled. "Cleanse the rot!" He stepped to the side to avoid the blood on the ground. "Their filthy blood has to be washed away," he said to the generals around him.

Deep in shock, Juuda could barely speak. He stood atop the center of the main gate wall, looking at the chaos and destruction with tears in his eyes. "Why?" he was yelling alone. It took him a second to realize that every Goblin that went near him would drop dead from Giuli's precise attacks. Her shots were so devastating that the attackers who witnessed it thought it was divine intervention. Juuda, however, did not want to live. The death around him made him turn and look in Giuli's direction at the top tower. He shook his head and sent her a message: "Let me be. Save yourselves."

Haz saw that whoever went near Juuda fell dead immediately, and before he tried to make sense of it, he yelled, "Let Juuda live. Bring him to me unscathed so I can pass my divine judgement upon him."

Kneeling in tears, amid the chaotic screams and begs for mercy, Juuda heard Alex's voice, distant in his ears. "Wake up! Look up, damn you! Giuli, keep him safe for a while longer," is all he heard through the horrific sounds of the massacre.

The never-ending sea of Goblins was still outside the city, celebrating the death of their own people in a frenzy of bloodlust and mindlessness. Their voices of happiness while seeing bodies hanged from the walls stopped abruptly. With a flash of light, three space Eagles, fully armed, came from the sky at speeds that caused them to be enveloped in flames. With tremendous sound, they began firing. After Gaia, it was Gant's turn to witness the devastation of human ingenuity firsthand.

Haz could do nothing but watch. From inside the walls, the remaining forces of Gonton, as they saw Juuda's miracle take form, began to fight back. Haz climbed to the highest point he could see. Close to Juuda, in an effort to empower his army, he began to scream. "Now is our test! Now is the moment of glory! Now we will push them to extinction!" His words, however, could not be heard. His voice barely made it to his own ears. Alex made sure that his intimidation techniques were functioning. The Eagles, purposely as always, made screeching sounds that made them look like dragons, here to end the world. He had enough experience now and knew the fears of every species. Goblins were particularly sensitive to loud noises. The war on Gonton ended soon after Alex's arrival with Juuda, weeping with his head in his hands. Alex projected his image onto the sky and informed all the Goblins that they were now under the watchful eye of the empire. That they should rejoice, drop their weapons, and be at peace with one another. Then he went to find Juuda.

Alex placed his hand on Juuda's shoulder. "Come now," he said. "Compose yourself."

With tears unable to stop, he looked at Alex. "I tried ..." he cried. "I tried everything I could."

Alex nodded in understanding. "I know you did. I am just glad you are unharmed. Come, let's go home."

Juuda jumped up and hugged Alex. "Thank you," he said, but the tears would not stop.

After the fall of the armies of Gant, Haz was taken prisoner. Despite the pressure for an execution, the decision was made by Bikz to let him be. Bikz, who had become quite acquainted with the human way of life, went to rule over Gant. One after another, the planets were being occupied, and the empire grew. Alex was making sure that multiculturality was treasured, and he made sure that all planets got their share of migration from all species. The primary goal of every city and village was access to food, water, and then education. Although Gaia, Gant, Alpaz, and Spi were mostly plentiful, the same couldn't be said for the rest of the planets and moons. Large areas were suffering from drought, and people there starved for many years.

Alex's arrival with engines and the ability to bring water to everyone meant that his arrival was easily accepted in the more desolate areas of the solar system. The empire grew so strong, with people wanting to take part in the elite forces, that he started building, and the top scientists strived for a position at Tech.

Chapter 19

Alpaz

Y:86 D:47

Alpaz

The first planet of the Solis system was a small paradise. A dense solid core with a very strong magnetic field protected Alpaz from the sun and provided the surface with warm temperatures. A tropical paradise where no landmass was bigger than ten thousand square kilometers. It looked like a blue, endless sea with millions of islands sprouting all over the place.

The first human settlers who went there were non-research and non-military personnel, since the planet seemed to be supporting only a small population of a few species. The first reports pointed to very friendly and peace-loving people. The islands contained a few of every species, and there even was communication with one another between some of the islands. It seemed that most islands had their own architecture, but none lacked in luxuries and infrastructure.

Alex already knew that this planet would hold the most answers, since it was the planet where Spirto had informed him that the kings resided. There had to be so much to discover there and perhaps even information on Spirto himself that Alex decided it would be best if he and Jain led the expedition. Along with Bara, Anais, and a couple of civilians, he landed on the largest, most built-up island they could find.

“This place is unreal,” said Jain, inhaling the morning air.

“It’s like we are visiting Atlantis,” said Alex, feasting his eyes on the beauties that surrounded them.

Most of the structures were covered by vegetation. The ones that were not were clearly still in use. The people who greeted them were of many species, and with smiles on their faces, they presented fruits of many colors.

“Welcome,” their leader said. “Your people, before they left, told us that their leader would be coming.”

“I greet you as well. You must be Alge, the leader of this island,” said Alex, smiling at him. The smells of the fruits made them feel euphoric.

“If you have any questions, we will be happy to answer them,” said Alge.

“Thank you,” replied Alex. “We will establish a small base in one of those buildings, and we will soon come to you to speak.”

“Then we will prepare food for the night. Let’s all eat together.”

“We will be happy to,” said Alex. “This is for you” he said and gave Alge a communicator. “With this we can talk at any time, wherever you might be.”

Alge took the small equipment and left Alex and his team to rest and prepare their base.

“They are very friendly,” said Bara.

"Yes," said Jain. "They don't seem to have any problem co-inhabiting this island with many species for thousands of years."

"We need to use this as an example for everyone. We should learn of their history and their ways," said Alex.

"We will ask them about it tonight," replied Jain.

"The planet is swarming with technology," said Anis, holding an analyzer. "Those white, ancient-looking pillars and walls are filled with circuits and chemicals that I can't identify. Even the air contains nanobots that don't seem to be affecting us. They are there, though."

"Take samples of everything so that we can analyze them back at Argos," said Jain, excited. "I can feel that this place will open our eyes to so many things."

After setting the basis for their base, they spent some time at the beach, where Alex found himself hugging Jain and enjoying a much-needed break. The sound of gentle waves, diminishing on white and golden sand along with the fresh air and the warm temperature, made it very hard for anyone to do anything other than wait for the night to fall while playing with the sand and water like a kid.

The hours went by, and in what felt like mere minutes, night was upon them. They followed the shore as they were told, and soon they could hear the sounds of music and laughter. After they climbed a small hill, they saw a beautiful beach with many small fires burning. On every fire there was something different being cooked.

"Alge! this is too much!" said Alex, looking all around him with his palms open.

"Too much?" asked Alge.

"Yes! All those people, all this food and music."

"This is how we live all the time. Some days smaller and some days bigger. Depending on how many people are around, that's how many would gather."

"This is how you eat every day?" asked Jain.

"Yes, everyone brings whatever they like. Go around and try from everything you might find interesting. It is an honor to choose someone's food."

Jain leaned over to Alex's ear. "I am never leaving this place," she joked.

"They should call it paradise, not Alpaz," said Alex and then turned to Alge. "Are you aware of the wars that took place thousands of years ago on the other planets?" he asked.

"No. The team that came before you mentioned war, but we have no idea of what they mean. We would like to know of this war you all seem to be referring to."

"Who built these magnificent buildings?" said Alex, pointing at a palatial structure.

"The kings and the engineers built these for us," Alge replied.

"Can you be more specific?" asked Alex. "I would like to hear the whole story."

"Then sit by that fire and grab something to eat," said Alge, sitting down. "The kings, just like yourselves, came from the sky. The landed here, and together with their engineers, they built these villages on every island."

"Villages?" asked Alex.

"You call it palace, but we all live there. It has rooms connected with one another, and the large courtyard in the center is for our kids to learn and play safely."

It is not a palace. The king resided here, but even back then, everyone lived together. These are villages," said Alge.

"I understand," said Alex. "What happened next?"

"After they had finished building, they left."

"That's it?" asked Alex.

"Well, yes," replied Alge with a confused expression. "Our ancestors were providing them with food and water as well as working hands and anything else they needed until the digging was completed, and once it was all over, they left us to live here."

"Wait," said Alex, holding up his hands. "Digging? Left you for what reason? Why was it over? Your story has so many questions."

"Let me try and answer them for you," said Alge. "Digging, yes. Under us there are corridors and rooms expanding like veins in our bodies throughout the planet, connecting all islands. We use them to signal each other when there is a food scarcity and help islands that might need help."

"Okay, I see, but how do you know all this? Do you have a library?" asked Alex.

"No, the group before you asked as well. We explained that we don't read or write."

Alex breathed out in disappointment. "In the end, the kings came, built, and left with their engineers. How do you repair the damaged buildings?"

"They don't need repairing. That's why the kings made them eternal," answered Alge, who clearly did not understand the point of the conversation.

At that point, a young female Tamki, from a strange species of small creatures, approached Alex and gave him a piece of fruit. She pulled on his shirt and whispered in his ear. "They were servants. Left behind without directions or education." Alex quickly turned in shock and looked at the little creature. Her eyes were those of Spirto, who smiled and walked toward the forest.

The night ended with joy and people sleeping all over the beach. Alex notified everyone not to mention too much of the wars on other places, and when Alge in his turn asked Alex what they all were talking about, he replied, "Some species grouped with each other and fought with others. Madness!" and left it there.

The next day, they began to scout the underground passages, since at the palaces, everything was gone. They found many rooms sealed. Alge told them that these were the private areas of the kings, and after they left, they were never to be opened again. Alex asked for Alge and his people to leave them alone. He did not want them to see the opening of those rooms, as they might find it insulting or sacrilegious.

"We need to figure a way to open them without much noise," said Alex, looking at the first sealed door.

"I have just the thing," said Bara. "Steve and Margaret were developing a tool to open vaults more easily, and they figured out how to make a perfect can opener."

"How does it work?" asked Jain.

"I am not sure," replied Bara. "I only know that it worked when the power has been out for long enough that every capacitor and battery had run out of power. I think it gives power to specific parts and reprograms the lock, but I am not sure of the details."

"Let's see if it works, then," said Jain, pointing at the door.

Bara placed the device's mouth on the wall where the input pad was located and let it work. A few minutes later, the door opened almost by magic.

"Well, that works great," said Jain. "No more dropping Cerberus on stuff, I suppose?" She smiled.

The vault was almost empty. Solid data-storage devices were the only treasures. As the search was progressing, they reached rooms dug deep beneath the surface, rooms rarely reached by the people living there. Only kids would sometimes be dared to go down deep and knock on one of the vault's doors before running scared that a mythological monster would open up and eat them. The treasures were more and more valuable as they went further and further down the basements.

After almost ten days of searching, they loaded the Space Eagle with samples of weapons, jewels, and even art pieces, but primarily the data crystals that they found in the most isolated vault rooms.

Upon arrival at Argos, the team quickly took the crystals to Margaret, who began decoding them and providing Alex with the data. Alex, Jain, and almost the entire team of leaders spent the next days going through the seemingly endless stream of data generated by the crystals.

"By far the most boring job we could have ever put ourselves through," said Gakuto while working. "How come we have not developed an AI to categorize those for us?"

Konoya, who almost seemed to enjoy this kind of work, was quick to reply. "Because the word *Spirto* is mentioned a few thousand times in the languages we understand, and we have already found another four names for him."

"Yes, yes I get that. I am just complaining," said Gakuto.

Eventually, enough data was filed in so many categories that it could start being useful. Steve got information on upgrades in nano-printing technologies; records of the spaceships made by some of the species were found, along with an endless stockpile of daily reports of people on Alpaz and the other planets. The kings kept eyes on each other and on their species' populations living on the other planets.

"We have many new developments," said Alex to begin the meeting with the leaders. "On each field, we have found data that will take years to fully read and implement. I took time to read about Spirto. I believe that if we are to make our empire a success and begin expanding to other stars, we will need organization. Spirto organized this entire system, and it still did not work."

"Why are we getting his advice and directions then?" asked Juuda. "He has failed, apparently many times, to bring balance to a conquered galaxy."

"Because we will step on his failures. We need examples of failures more than examples of success," said Jain. "In engineering, war, art, and everything else, we make successful attempts after many failures."

"Precisely!" said Alex energetically. "Spirto made many attempts, but he was not crazy. He did not try the same thing all the time. We do not have data about his previous attempts of grand empires, but we have the one here."

Alex took a deep breath and pushed himself a few centimeters back. He looked around the table, and with seriousness, he said, "They did not like Spirto. The kings hated the idea of his very being. After they found out that this was not their home planet and that they all came from a different one, they began seeing it as if

they were kidnapped children. They were kings, but only as puppets, and that their entire solar system was an experiment. These reasons, along with his attitude, made them resent him," he said.

"What does that tell us?" asked Bara.

"That alone nothing, but," said Alex with his finger pointing up, "they hated each other as well. They even have records of the disgust they felt when they saw each other eat. They were repulsed by some species, and some even saw others as potential food. Yet, they united and created a plot to escape from this solar system. They put all of their hatred aside, united, and made it happen."

Jain smiled a bit and nodded in understanding of where this was probably going. The room fell silent as if they all eagerly waited for something.

"Don't you see?" asked Alex. "Their goal was not noble. They did not try to save their people. Their people lived in harmony and technology; they didn't even hate Spirto more than they hated each other."

"I don't understand," said Gakuto.

Alex thought about it, trying to find the right words to explain his thoughts. "Our empire will fall," he said to everyone's curious and displeased expressions. "We are following the same pattern as everyone else in our history, and apparently on other planets too. It repeats over and over again. It does not matter the state of your empire or the advancements you make. It will fall. War is a constant. It follows us everywhere. We will have to use it."

"What do you mean, use it?" asked Juuda.

"I mean that once we see that it is inevitable, then we should use it to the advantage of our empire." His words were heavy in the ears of most.

"Are you suggesting we go to war with others to provide our empire with a distraction?" asked Jain, also curious about what Alex had just said.

"I am not suggesting anything now," said Alex. His expression betrayed that he got to the point he wanted. "I am simply informing you that Spirto is right. War will follow us everywhere. We need to be prepared, or we are destined to fall. We need to first make sure we all understand that it is inevitable. That we will be fighting to keep this empire growing forever. If we do that, then we stand a chance." He moved his chair until the table touched his chest. "I want all of you to help me prepare. We prepare for war. Both inside and outside of our borders. Once the other species have our technology, they will retaliate against us."

The meeting went on with other developments, but in everyone's mind was the weight of Alex's words. "Preparing for war is the same as going to war," were the thoughts of some. "We are building an empire based on perpetual war? Can there be no other way?" others thought.

Gakuto broke the short silence by explaining the finds his research had led him to. "Can I have all your attention?" he said. "I have finished the most amazing research of our time."

"You're not hyping it up," said Konoya with a smile, in an attempt to ease away from the previous conversation.

"Well, I have finished mapping the genome of most intelligent species of the planet."

"And?" said Jain.

"It looks like we are related," said Gakuto with a smirk.

"How do you mean?" asked Juuda, full of interest.

"I mean our genome, at the very fundamental level, is shared. It looks like we all evolved from the same monocellular life. I do not believe it to be the case, though."

"What do you believe?" asked Juuda again.

"My hypothesis is that chemical bonds form in a similar manner all over the universe. Meaning that the same carbon molecules form everywhere and nature's laws kind of force the eventuality of life in a specific form. It's carbon doing carbon things. What I am trying to say is that we are not really related from the same living creatures but from the same laws of nature. Nature seems to love repetition and patterns."

"That would not explain the molten beasts of Pals. Their chemistry is vastly different than ours. We don't even know if Spirto put them on that moon or if they evolved there," said Juuda, who was very interested in the subject for a while.

"Just because one system works well does not mean another can't work at all. It just means that most life in the universe will look and evolve in a similar direction as it did with us and almost every other species that Spirto brought here."

"However, there is another hypothesis," said Hypatia, attracting everyone's attention. "The evolution of a microorganism to becoming a human or a Naga is well understood. Even the evolution of DNA from organic matter is quite well managed. There is a step missing, though. When you enclose DNA on a cell, what is the energy benefit of the cell? Since we are talking about molecules and we work with the notion that they have no will or direction but simply obey the laws of chemistry, why does the DNA, which is also replicating outside of a cell, need it, and what do the molecules of the cell get in return?"

"Yes, we have steps missing, but we will get there," said Gakuto.

"I think that after countless experiments where even small strands of DNA were made, we never managed to enclose it in a primitive, self-assembling cell, simply because it is very hard and unlikely to happen," Hypatia said to Gakuto.

"So, what is your hypothesis?" asked Alex.

"I think that conditions of the early universe were very different. Before the creation of suns, the universe was dense, and the first fusion reactions started taking place. The first planets were formed around the primordial giant suns, only to live short and violent lives. This was, however, the ideal place for life. I think that in those giant gas planets, life came to be. Due to the pressure and violence of the environment, the molecules were more closely packed together, and they were forced into an evolution of something very resistant, simply because whatever was not as resistant would not continue to be."

"But we have even less proof of that," interrupted Gakuto.

"Let me finish," said Hypatia. "From there, it becomes easy to see. Those early suns exploded quickly, spreading their guts and the gas giants around them in every direction. This action planted life in probably every galaxy. Then, within the galaxies, slower supernovae would continue this process even till today. We are actual cousins with all life in the cosmos. I think the universe is littered with life and we are all connected. This does not mean that life could not emerge differently in other places or the same way over and over again. It's just not as common as to

explain so many species. Spirto mentioned endless arrays of life throughout the galaxy once."

Juuda was very satisfied with this hypothesis. "This sounds amazing," he said, and momentarily he forgot about Alex's war talk.

The meeting went on with some more announcements until it was eventually finished. They all left with thoughts about the future and with the task of forming a system that will anticipate wars. Although the idea was not pleasing, they all tried their best to fulfill their duties and think of ways for that to work.

The following day, Dimitri asked for Alex's time. He had some information to share about the system Alex was trying to create. After their meeting was finished, Alex called the rest of the team to talk to them.

"Dimitri," said Alex, "has some information to share about the conversation we had yesterday."

"Yes!" said Dimitri. "I wanted to say that we are a group of people too small to come up with political systems that will somehow work magic in a multispecies community. Back on Earth, our history is paved with failed attempts at political systems. Some of them attempted to unite different people. They too failed."

"Are you saying this cannot be done?" asked Juuda.

"No. What I am saying is that there is a solution. It's just not something we should build from the ground up."

"Elaborate, please," said Jain.

"I propose armed neutrality. Or at least a form of it."

"Can you make that clear for those of us who are not politically inclined?" said Steve, with the same question written on the faces of many.

"Picture it like this," said Dimitri. "We are an empire that, anytime anyone wishes to join, can. However, we remain neutral to the conflicts around our empire and even to the ones inside unless they are a direct threat to the empire itself."

"So, what happens if the Orcs and the Goblins go to war?" asked Juuda. "Are we to let them kill each other?"

"Unfortunately, probably," said Dimitri. "We have to weigh the consequences of interfering with their war, even if they are both under the empire. We obviously will try to deter their conflict, but if unsuccessful, we let them fight."

"I am hating this idea more and more," said Juuda. "This will lead them to make cities and districts in our cities that are hostile to minorities or to other species."

"Yes," said Dimitri as he nodded in agreement. "It will most definitely not be a utopia of peace and harmony, but it has a good chance of making our empire grow strong."

"And that's the first step," said Alex. "A strong empire with technology and army that cannot be matched by any individual species will be the tool we will need to expand into the cosmos and create the Utopia of peace we all wish to see."

"But we are surely taking the path of war now," said Juuda. "Are we to inform the leaders whom we made friends with that we will not back them up if the empire does not seem to benefit from it? It's not correct."

"I agree with Juuda," said Jain, "but I also don't think that there is a way to make a perfect system that deters war. I don't think that you yourself, Juuda, can think of a system like that. You tried once and failed with just one species."

Juuda bowed his head. Jain had struck him at a sensitive spot.

"Let's proceed and finalize the system. We will inform all leaders of all species that the empire will take this path, and they are all free to join us in our quest for expansion. The universe has space for everyone," said Alex. "We will share all commercial technology with everyone, but military technologies coming out of Tech and other future research areas will remain the property of the empire. Spirto said the second barrier to cosmic expansion is war. We will use this barrier to build an empire stronger than ever before."

"We will need a name and a flag," said Dimitri.

"Yes, I meant to say that as well," said Gakuto.

"I am happy to tell you," said Alex, "that I have thought about this and I have a proposal. Thira. Our empire will be called Thira."

"What does it mean?" asked Konoya.

"It traces back to ancient times, and it means *gate*. It can also mean *hunt* as well, but 'gate to a better tomorrow' sounds better than *hunt*," said Alex. "For the flag, we will petition all artists from every species to submit ideas. Then we will ask them to work together and produce a flag for our glorious empire. We will be Thirans, and everyone who wants to join us will be a Thiran. We accept anyone and everyone with a goal to unite the cosmos."

Although Alex began to seem more skillful as a leader and more confident as a speaker to the eyes of the leaders, they could not shake the feeling that he was also becoming more aggressive. This was not an exciting moment for all but a few members of the team. Most were worried of what the future would hold. Alex was gaining the trust of an ever-growing number of people, and his authority was becoming ever more absolute. His embrace of the idea of multispecies society, although positive, gave him support from all directions. Nearly every species saw the empire and Alex as one. Soon after, Alex would have authority over everything in the Thiran Empire.

More than fifteen days later, Argos was organizing leaders for each species under the umbrella of the Thiran Empire. Alex traveled back to Alpaz with Jain and Bara in an effort to find an answer to a riddle that had remained unsolved.

"What exactly are we going to look for?" asked Jain as they were landing. "I didn't ask before because I love this place. I could live here forever."

"Kieran!" said Alex, and both Jain and Bara turned curiously toward him. "Kieran died, and we never saw a body. He attacked with no benefit in victory for himself. He gave Juuda this crystal" he said while taking the crystal out of a box, "and told him it is mine."

"Yes, I also found Kieran to be strange, but this is just how he was, perhaps," said Jain compassionately.

"We are searching for the island of the Vampire king. There I hope to find clues to decode this crystal. Everything else has been decoded. This seems to be impossible to make sense of."

"I see," said Jain. "We need to speed things up. Thira will not be built on its own. The team is doing an excellent work, but most leaders of other species want to talk directly to you."

"We will leave soon. I just need to find answers. Kieran troubles me. Did you know that he was vouched in place by the previous vampire leader, who also died

and vanished? The Vampires joined us, and among them there are a few ancients who never knew who Kieran was before he became leader."

His search, however, was futile. The vegetation made it impossible to recognize in such a short time the island of the Vampire king. Flying back to Gaia, Alex thought, *I will be back to search soon. I just need to put things in order.*

Chapter 20

Thira

Thira was an empire ruled, in essence, by one person. His goals were becoming ever blurrier than when he started off. He was not quick to communicate his dreams to anyone, but as long as the empire grew and everyone was occupied, nothing seemed to matter. The general direction seemed to be progress. As predicted, an ever-growing number of species wanted to let go of their leaders and their old ways in favor of the empire. Hard at first but easier as time went by, Gaia became almost entirely the property of the Thirans. Other moons and planets were progressing slower. It did not matter. The plans were now looking at a trip to nearby solar systems. Perhaps even a trip to Earth. Their new antimatter engines had multiplied and offered near light-speed travel, which meant that Earth was now just forty years away.

Alex, however, could not manage the empire from afar. With ruling came a burden. His days were completely filled with meetings and decisions that, even though they would affect millions of people, he took without much trouble. The mass populations were still completely uneducated and unable to grasp how technology could do what they saw with their own eyes. It would take time to form a crew and a society to support the expansion into the stars. For now, the moons and planets were groomed to be perfect places for the progress of Thira. Since everyone knew that this system was made by a higher species, they also felt comfortable changing nature and shaping it in ever better ways. Always obeying the laws of "life's rights," they soon managed to unite most species and speed progress up.

Year after year, the empire grew. Alex made sure to prioritize education and teach the goal of interstellar travel. Advertised everywhere and promoted in many ways, the idea of migration to other stars and terraforming lifeless worlds became "To be a Thiran" slogans.

Y:109 D:09

Argos

After years of absence, Spirto made his appearance. He had missed the events of nearly the last sixty years. He found Alex, swimming in the sea with Jain and a couple of others, surrounded by people of all species, playing with games that looked like miracles.

"Hello, Alex! Hello, Jain! Hello, everyone," he said.

Alex turned to him, and for the first time, he did not look like a child. He looked at Spirto and smiled like a person who saw an old friend after years. "It's been a long time, my friend. What happened?"

"Who is this?" asked one of the children.

"Where did he come from?" said another as they were gathering around.

"He is a friend from old times. Before you were born," said Jain. "As for his arrival ... he loves to surprise."

"It seems like you have done well. I see everyone is an immortal now. There is little strife, and the empire is growing wealthy and healthy."

"We still have some wars to fight, but yes, we did a nice job."

"You do know that war is coming, right?" said Spirto gently.

"Yes," Alex replied, "I am betting on it."

"It's rare, but you intrigue me. You have changed a lot," said Spirto with a curious expression.

"Not really. I have a goal now, which I will not share yet. I also go unafraid into the dark of space. Thira will become a galactic power. War is not coming. War is following. But I wage war under my conditions and my terms. Have you seen the spaceships we are building?" asked Alex while walking along the beach, leaving the others behind.

"You have resolve. That alone is reason for me to follow. As I have told you before, I will be by your side in this quest. I have not seen your spaceships yet. I will go in a while."

"These will be the first wave of expansion. We are preparing to visit the nearby stars. Also, you say you will be by my side, but you were gone for years."

"This is a blip," said Spirto. "I was gone sixty years. A mere nap, compared to the timescales that your quest will lead you to."

"Speaking of quests, I need your help with something manual."

"What do you mean?" asked Spirto.

"I have a crystal. It has been years that we have learned how to decode all crystals, and yet this one remains a mystery. From the way it arrived in my hands to its shape, everything about it is strange."

"I don't usually offer help like this, but I will make an exception. Show me this crystal."

Alex guided Spirto toward his sleeping chambers while talking of various subjects.

"You really have built impressive things," said Spirto as he looked upon the city's architecture.

"A-Concrete was only the beginning. We mixed it with other composites, and we managed to create things that almost defy logic. Although it is still only Argos which is developing this way, we are placing increasingly more investments in art. We want our cities to look like magic. Everyone who finishes his studies can choose to get the COD vaccine for immortal life. That means that soon we will begin overpopulating. The system is ready to withstand that population increase for over one thousand Gaia years, but after that, it will become imperative to move to the stars. I am sure that by then it will be easy."

"You seem very confident in the function of your empire," said Spirto with a smirk.

"I figured out a long time ago that the best I can do is to go fearlessly forward. Here we are! This is the crystal," he said, taking it out of its intricate box.

Spirto grabbed it and began scanning it with his hand, which seemed to be leaking into the crystal. Then, with visible shock, he turned to Alex.

"Where did you find that? Who gave this to you?" he asked.

"Spirto? You seem stressed. What is this face you're making? It was given to me by Kieran."

"Who is Kieran? Where is Kieran now?" Spirto said while hacking into the nearby terminal with his hand.

"Kieran is dead. You will not find anything useful in our databases. Just that he was the leader of the Vampires for some time," said Alex. "Tell me what's going on."

"I am so confused. This is written in my language. I mean my mother language. It is lost for billions of years. Kieran must have been one of the remnants of my people!"

"Also, he was the one who guided all species in the last attack against Argos. The memorial is standing there to remember that day," said Alex, pointing far out from his window.

"He must have been a member of my species," said Spirto, looking for answers in his memories.

"Why would a member of your species attack me with primitive weapons? He could just kill me instantly," said Alex.

"Well, look where it brought you. If he wanted you to advance, which I am sure he did, he gave you a tool and a war. You have won both, and you have advanced faster than ever." Spirto raised the crystal and held it with both hands. "I will decode this for you and see what's inside. I can't possibly imagine how someone from my species survived for so long and stayed under my solar system for that long without me noticing."

"If Kieran was like you and wanted to help me too, that means he is probably not dead."

"It's highly unlikely that he would die just when things are becoming interesting," said Spirto. "I recognize it. It's the Rem! In your languages, it would translate as *death* ... or better, *end*. He gave you the schematics for Rem! He really is one of my people. I should search for him."

"What is it? What is the Rem?"

"The Rem is a ship. A ship that was meant to end the war with Vartars. A ship which was never made. Kieran ... why can't I find out who Kieran was? Not more than a group of perhaps fifty of my species had knowledge and access to this file. I knew all of them individually. I don't seem to see any of them having survived, but my memory from back then has gaps. I will need every interaction with Kieran. I will need to know every move he made and every word he said. Anything you have at all will help."

"I will provide you with everything I have. Talk with Juuda, who is also dying to talk with you in private. Can we go back to the crystal now? Can we build the Rem?"

"That's not something achievable. You are closer to evolving to my level than building the Rem. In all relative time spans, you will never make the Rem. I don't understand why Kieran gave you this. You can never even decode this without me."

"Then he gave it to me knowing you will decode it."

"That makes it a message to me more than you. It's hard to explain, but the Rem is completely out of your understanding. The energy source of the Rem,

however, could be something that perhaps one day, once you've advanced enough, you can possibly begin working on."

"I see I will not have any use of that crystal for a very long time then. Are you going to keep it?"

"It is not mine to keep. Kieran gave it to you, so it's yours. I would like to copy the contents, however, if that is okay," said Spirto.

"Aren't you able to do that in an instant?"

"Not with this. This will take a long time to decode and copy. The information in here is ... well, a miracle it still exists."

"You mean you did not know how to build it already?"

"Building a spaceship that can take me to a star is like you building a boat to take you to a nearby island. You can do it alone. To make the Rem, would be the equivalent of making the *Hera* alone. You can never do this. Similarly, it is completely out of my abilities as a single entity to build the Rem."

"Copy it then, and I would welcome such a treasure with me. I would like to keep it until I can learn to decode it myself. When I say *myself*, I mean as a species," said Alex.

"Thank you," said Spirto, and he took the crystal away to copy it.

The empire continued to grow. Eventually, under Alex's rule, the whole solar system had joined Thira, with few exceptions, some villages of species who refused to let go of their control. The empire's reply to this was always the same: "You will be left alone until you change your minds." The isolation that those places were faced with forced them to succumb and voluntarily join the empire as well. For the populations of Solis, this was a good thing. They would have access to technology and education as well as rights. It was the leaders who did not want to let go. But in time, some passed on, others changed their minds, and some were even taken out by their own people. There were no leaders in Thira. Only Alex and his circle. No other position of power would be allowed. The circle opened spots for nonhumans eventually.

The discoveries do not stop there. Under the soil, all the planets held the notes of their history. The technologies that came out helped Thira to become a power unlike what the humans had calculated at the beginning. The progress surpassed even their wildest dreams. Most species were so well prepared to adapt to schools and technology that in one generation, all was different. An army of the multispecies Empire of Thira was developed with its sole purpose of preparing for the imminent expansion. The spaceship armada was nearing completion, and generals were swearing oaths to fight for Thira.

Y:123 D:36

Archytas Space Observatory, in orbit around Gaia

Dr. Graf made an alarming discovery. An object of intelligent design was entering the solar system. Within hours, Alex was looking at the data. His words were barely heard by Jain next to him.

"This is human made ... from Earth."