

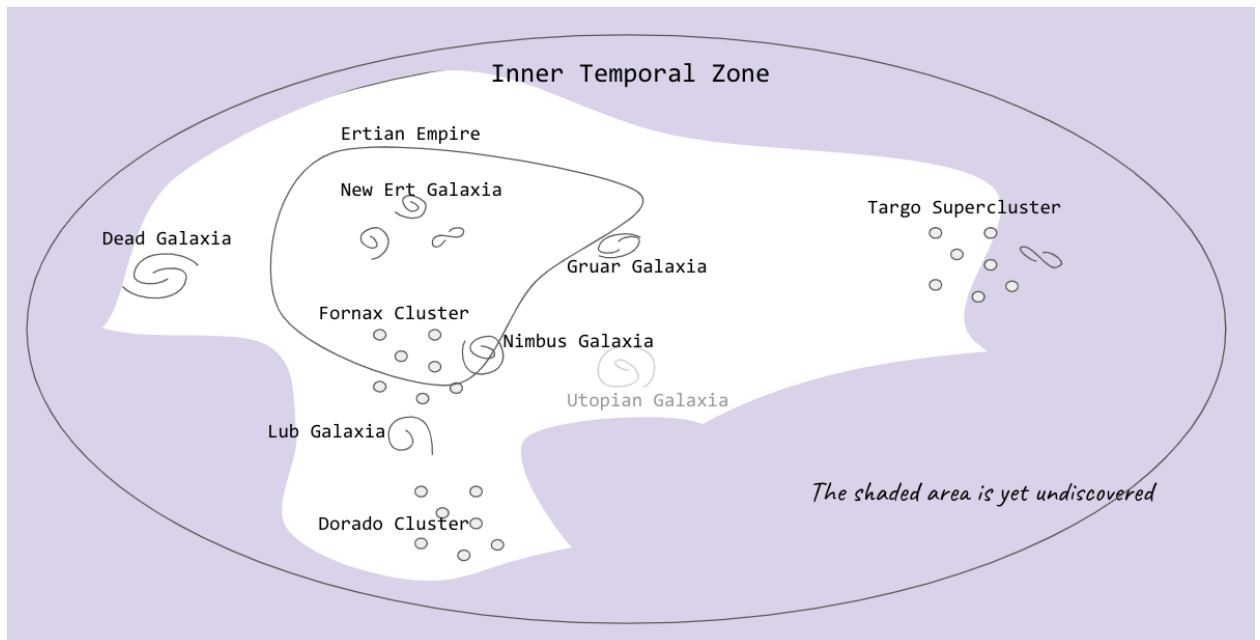
# The Council of Light

## Book One of the Mechanic and Architect Series

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135,000 Words





## Chapter 1 - Day 1: A scene of chaotic mess

*It was a painful start. Atoms tossed in every direction, ripping through nothing, forcing existence. Each particle, cold and alone, doing and becoming in complete exclusivity. Slowly, these worlds came together. Some bonded and others merged entirely to form new elements, abandoning their first identity. Slowly, energy was lost, but order was gained. Some resisted, defying immense power, but even these atoms were pulled into the flow that moved existence — a flow as ceaseless as the energy that propelled it forward, for without one the other could not exist. Slowly, the churning of the universe gained mass but lost momentum, until the energy was depleted. And for a moment, there was nothing. Then chaos began again, shooting out new life fated to endure the same painful struggle. Back and forth without end was fought, this battle of order and disorder, of movement and energy, of everything and nothing. Somewhere in the midst of the battle is where this story begins.*

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Lucia thought of herself as a woman who knew the way the universe worked. She may have only been alive for eighteen years as far as she could remember, but her soul felt like it had seen long forgotten ages. She had a knack for sensing when things were about to turn south, which was why on this particular day, she was not in a very good mood.

Lucia was employed as the cook on an itinerant mining vessel with no kitchen. Cooking in the year X1495 didn't require a kitchen, but the Ataxi miners preferred the luxury of a live-in cook. Lucia preferred to use her skills as a navigator, but she spent most of her days sweating over boiling Pheleranx, instead of feeling the cool wash of stars whip past her on the ship's flight deck.

There was a limit to the crossover between the Ataxi's language – produced from grinding the stones in their belly together – and the human tongue, so Lucia spent a lot of time by herself as they bounced from rock to rock, collecting precious minerals. Not that she minded being by herself; that was how things had been for most of her life.

Their mining vessel was currently parked at a waystation in the P1 quadrant of the Lub Galaxy — not a particularly nice area. Lucia was occupied with finding Pheleranx, a lard-like ingredient that, when mixed with salt, heated up to around ninety three degrees celcius. As the cook on an itinerant mining vessel with no stoves, Lucia used the stuff like air. So she stood in the waystation's Goods Window, using her left hand to scroll through the 'Baking Needs' section of the Goods Portal while her right hand rubbed the back of her neck, a motion she often did when she was nervous.

*They better not leave me again,* she thought to herself, remembering a few months earlier when a miscommunication resulted in the miners marooning her on a different waystation along the Lubian Flight Path. Lucia kept a close eye on two of the miners, who were playing a slot

machine twenty meters to her right. The flickering lights of the game reflected off their giant, bulbous shoulders, which swayed left and right in alien excitement.

She focused on the Goods Portal screen and selected twelve lbs. of Pheleranx. The screen projected an orange smiley face that then began to spin clockwise, indicating the order was processing. Lucia turned back to watch the slot machines, but an incoming ship grabbed her attention as it landed next to the Ataxi mining vessel.

It was a x1373 Duster — a model used by the Light Police. The small curly hairs on the back of Lucia's neck itched in her skin. The Light Police had once been a rare sighting, even in these parts, but their presence now meant certain conflict. Lucia looked down frantically at the Goods Portal screen, but the smiley face was still spinning, oblivious to the violence that was about to unfold. Suddenly, the crack of an electrical weapon pierced the silence, and it began.

One of the gambling Ataxis bolted, her rock-like body scraping the soft Waystation platform as she rolled away. Lucia watched as the other gambling miner had her throat sliced clean through by a neon disc, shot from the gun of a very determined looking human running in her direction. Lucia dove around the corner of the Goods Shop, slid between two fuel compactors, and curled up into a ball. *By the Council, they're after one of the miners?!* The Ataxi Race, while appearing to be very menacing and formidable, were generally a non-confrontational and peaceful race. This is why Lucia agreed to join their crew; it was an uneventful, safe existence. Lucia pondered the irony to a symphony of whirring discs, grazing phasers, and the high pitched whine of overheated personal shields. The melody was accompanied by two separate choruses of shouting — one Ataxi and one Human. At times, a soprano shrieking cut through the refrain, begging for it to stop — probably the guardian of the waystation.

The symphony became acapella as the weapons fire ceased and the miner was caught. The sound of rocks grinding together — the Ataxi's protests — gnawed at Lucia's ears as the miner was dragged onto the Light Police's ship. The terrible musical was punctuated with the slight blip of their Duster passing through the exo-sphere surrounding the station.

Lucia extracted herself from her hiding spot and rounded the corner of the building to a scene of chaotic mess. At least a dozen prone bodies, mostly Ataxi, were strewn on top of the remains of the slot machines and waystation structure. As the life bled from them, the stones that comprised their bodies slowly disconnected into indiscernible piles. It was dead and silent, the only movement coming from the Goods Portal, where the smiley face continued to spin, and smile, and spin.

## Chapter 2 - Day 1: She can cook

*I knew it.*

Those words echoed around her head mercilessly. Lucia was sure she was going to lose it. She paced back and forth amongst the carnage, rubbing the back of her neck furiously. The smiley face was laughing at her. She had known something was going to happen...why did she let them stop at the station, why did she join a crew of aliens in the first place, why did she even come to this galaxy...Lucia screamed through gritted teeth.

At that moment, another ship passed through the exo-sphere and landed on the rubbery waystation pad. Another Duster, this one even older than the last. *Curse Elia's name*, Lucia thought, *they've come back for me*. There was no use hiding, the way station platform was only 300 meters end to end. Lucia fell to the ground and put her hands behind her head, signaling submission to her new captors. She could hear them talking as they exited their ship, and was at least a little relieved to hear them speaking Ertish, and not in the broken sort of way her translator usually provided.

"...told you the intel was old, we never should have gave that guy 200 Reditis..."

"Old? Look around you, the bodies are still smoking! If you had not taken so long in the bathroom we could have captured him before—"

"If I hadn't taken so long we'd have a dozen more holes in our bodies than we need, so you're welcome."

Lucia raised her head and shouted, "Please do not shoot! I submit to the authority of the Ertian Empire!"

The pair, an Argruarian and a human, stopped bickering and regarded Lucia conspicuously. The Argruarian — a short, dark green creature that looked somewhat like a dog standing on its hind legs — spoke for the duo.

"We're not the Light Police, sen, you can stop pissing yourself."

His partner, a muscular woman, stepped forward with a bionic leg and added, "but do not get any funny ideas. We may not be police, but we are bounty hunters. That just means we do not have to fill out a database entry if we kill you."

"I...I didn't have anything to do with this! I'm a navigator who joined up with the Ataxi miners only five months ago. I had no idea they were doing anything wrong!" Though Lucia

trembled at the thought of what these bounty hunters might do, she was more afraid they might leave her alone on this Waystation.

"A navigator?" the woman queried. "What is a human navigator doing in the Lub galaxy with a gang of Ataxis? This does not smell right to me."

"Hold on Marim, let's see what else she has to say. We must be sure." The Argrurian motioned with three clawed fingers for Lucia to continue.

"I'm originally from the Triangular Galaxy, but I lived in many places before I came to Lub. I don't have a home or family and haven't for a very long time but I'm not a criminal and I'm not crazy."

The Argrurian looked at the large woman. "Well, that's either a good reason to trust her or a good reason not to."

The woman shrugged a hard, uninterested shoulder. "Let us search the victims and leave."

"Wait!" shouted Lucia, "I'm a very good navigator, I can customize your jump scheduler to —"

"Sorry child," interrupted the woman, "we already have a navigator." She had one sharp eye trained on Lucia while she sifted through a dead policetenant's jacket.

Lucia gritted her teeth. She was running out of options. "I can cook too!"

The woman stopped her search and stood up. "You can cook human food?"

"Yes!"

"Ertian food?"

"Of course!"

"Have you ever heard of strawberry shortcake?"

"Take me to another waystation and I can have it for you in a matter of minutes."

It was a simple dish, but not one that could be easily found in most of the universe. Strawberries, or cream, or even shortcake were not so rare themselves, but with the wide variety of food in the universe, finding a particular dish was a tough order.

"Consider my pilot lit," said the woman. "You may come with me to the ship. My name is Marim, and the Argruarian is named Dax," she said, gesturing to the dog-man.

"It's uh, nice to meet you." Lucia allowed herself to breathe again.

Marim nodded and started back towards the ship. "And by the way," she added, "we do not have a kitchen."

Lucia followed the duo up the bay stairs and into the old Duster. Marim had shimmery, bronze skin and large, angled eyes, common features of the original Ertian race. Her unnaturally large and muscular frame was more of a mystery to Lucia. She appeared to be middle-aged, a hundred years at least, but she moved with the ease of someone half that age.

Dax stood at one meter tall, his kangaroo-like body covered in a short, shiny, dark fur. His face looked like a common breed of Ertian dog, the Inu, which had a short-ish snout, round face, and piercing yellow eyes. He was kind of adorable, in a devilish sort of way. He was clearly

a member of the Argruarian species, but Lucia had never seen one act so...human. For the first time that day, she relaxed a bit.

Lucia did a double-take as they walked past a heat sink from an industrial mining drill welded to a generator in the hallway. Not only was this ship a decommissioned police vessel, but it seemed to be pieced together with parts from a hundred different spacecraft. After descending a short flight of stairs, they arrived in a sizable, open area plainly decorated as a living space.

"This is the Great Room," announced Dax. His voice was guttural due to his alien throat, his words filled with "rrr" sounds that shouldn't be there.

Lucia had been fortunate enough to have never seen the inside of a police Duster before, but she guessed that most of them didn't have a Great Room, which was probably why Dax was eager to show it off.

"Ben and I optimized the fission block so that it only takes up half the space, allowing us to expand this room out a good five square meters. Also we cannibalized the kitchen, to be sure. I found this delicious, aqua couch in an edge-dogs pad, if you can believe it!"

Lucia smiled politely. "It's very...great!" she said.

Dax smiled back. "Ben is our, er, mechanic. You'll probably meet him soon."

As if summoned, a man in a dark jumpsuit with a bandana around his neck appeared at the top of the stairs on the far side of the Great Room. He had messy hair that was equal parts brown and gray, though his face was young. He was covered in dirt and hadn't shaved in a while, which made his light gray eyes pop even from across the room.

"I thought the guy was supposed to be Ataxi?" He said, not moving from the top of the stairs.

"He was, we can be almost sure," said Dax. "We don't know because the Lighters got there before us."

"God dammit, we needed that Red," the man groaned. "So who the fuck is this then?"

"She can cook," said Marim, with authority.

"Oh. Does she fabricate the food too? Cause we're going to need someone who does now that we've lost that bounty."

"We wouldn't be so broke if you hadn't let that kid escape last week," Dax retorted, grumbling low in his throat.

"Oh, so you would have turned him in? Let a fourteen year old sent rot in a prison for the rest of his life because he was smart enough to steal some of the endless energy from the Council?"

"We're not judges, Ben, we're bounty hunters, and he was a stupondous bounty," the Argruarian insisted, albeit with mishandled words.

The mechanic opened his mouth to respond but Lucia quickly interjected, sensing his displeasure at her presence.

"I have some money. I'll buy you some food, cook you a meal. Just please don't leave me at this waystation. I have nowhere else to go."

The mechanic softened visibly for a moment, then ran a hand through his messy hair and slowly arched his back. "Fine, no shine off my boots. But if you try to rob us, just keep in mind Marim can rip a man's head off with one hand. Also, in case you weren't following along, we have no soffering money. Ping me when dinner is ready." He trudged out of the room.

"It is true," said Marim. "I will cause you great bodily harm if you cross me. Now let us get cake."

A couple hours later, the mechanic, the Argruarian, the warrior and the cook gathered around a table that had been raised in the center of the great room to eat a home cooked meal. At first, no one spoke. After a few minutes of silence, Dax lifted his head from his bowl and sat back in his chair. He let out a loud, low yowl that increased steadily in pitch. Lucia rubbed the back of her neck and looked around at the group expectantly.

"He likes it, kid," explained Ben.

"Fuck sen, this is incredible!" Dax gushed. "You're staying, Lucia, for sure, I don't even care if we have to share a bed!"

Lucia smiled nervously. "Uhhh thanks." She felt comforted by Dax's use of the word 'sen', a familiar, colloquial term, deriving from the word 'sentient'.

"Don't worry kid, we've got an extra bed, you don't need to sleep with this mutt," Ben said.

"Right, uh, thanks."

Lucia was almost too relieved to speak, not because she was getting a bed, but because the group liked her cooking. Though they'd only just met, she found herself caring about what these three storied travelers thought. As a wayward traveler herself, Lucia felt like she could fit in.

"You sure do say 'uh' a lot don't you," smirked Ben, taking a long drink from whatever was in his metallic mug.

"Oh yeah, uh, sorry, it's just been a while since I've spoken more than a few words to anyone. My translator software isn't very bright, and I haven't had the money to buy a proper replacement."

"So that's what you were doing with those Ataxi guys? Making money?" the mechanic drawled.

"They were element miners, traveling from cache to cache. I had just finished a navigating job that left me on the outskirts of Lub, so I figured I would hang around a while, get to know the locals. One of the people I met found out these miners needed some help, so I stepped up. Honestly, I thought the Ataxis hated getting involved in anything more complicated than breaking rocks, so it seemed like a solid gig. And it was, until today."

Dax shook his head. "These are tenuous times Lucia, to be sure. Peace is no longer assumed in the ITZ, and Solar Harnessing is lighting the beacon. Even the Ataxis can feel it in their thick, blind rocks. No one will be able to stay out of this mess when the shit hits the fan; not the Ataxis, and not even those ghosts in the Council of Light."



Lucia pursed her lips in a grim expression. She could feel it too, like an electrical heaviness in the air. It was the same feeling she felt right before the Light Police attacked at the way station, but more stretched out and vague.

"I heard the Reliance took out an Solar Harnessing Core back where I was born, in Triangulum," she said.

Dax nodded slowly. "Yes, I heard the same."

"Whose side are you on?" asked Lucia, unsure she wanted to hear the answer.

"There are far worse things in the universe than the Council of Light or the Reliance," replied Dax, "it is those things that I am concerned with. Surely not a petty fight between a group of wanna-be Gods, and a group of wanna-be heroes."

"But the Reliance wants to completely eliminate Solar Harnessing. That means no more intergalactic travel. Entire planets would be without power."

"The power of suns is not a gift that we can return, to be sure," Dax responded. "The Reliance spreads the message that Solar Harnessing will be the eventual downfall of life, and say that is why they need to overtake the Cores. But what they are truly afraid of is losing control. No one seeks to attain power only to destroy it."

Lucia remained silent.

"This one's a good listener Dax, I like that," said Ben. The mechanic had a slight slur to his speech. Whatever was in his cup must have been strong because Lucia had only seen him take a few sips.

"Come on Dax," he continued, "enough of your politics. Tell us a funny story. The kid is clearly starved for conversation. Regaaaale us with one of your wise Argruarian tales."

Lucia's eyes lit up at this.

"Ah, I'm tired Ben," Dax responded. "I've been talking a lot and my throat is overtaxed. What about Marim? She's barely said 20 words all day."

Dax gave a wry look in Marim's direction. It was true, Marim was not a woman of words, much less stories. She had remained stoically silent throughout the dinner, focusing on shoveling cream-covered sponge cake into her uncharacteristically small mouth. She took another enormous bite of cake and silently chewed while the rest of the table stared at her.

"Perhaps Lucia would like to know where she will be sleeping," she finally said.

"Um, yes actually, that would be nice," Lucia said as she rubbed the back of her neck.

"Fine." Ben promptly laid his head down onto the table and started humming to himself.

"It is surely bedtime for us all," Dax said as he hopped off of his seat. He lifted Ben's head and hoisted him onto his feet by his hips in a practiced motion. Ben stood for a moment, then listed to the side, stabilizing himself on Dax's shoulder. This was a dance they both knew well.

Marim took each of the mismatched bowls and stacked them in an uneven tower. "Come, I will show you to the sleeping quarters."

Lucia followed her down the hall and into a room with six bunks, stacked two high on each of the walls. Considering the state of the rest of the ship, Lucia was surprised to find the

beds were relatively normal, with Rollo foam Mattresses and sliding privacy screens that she could change the tint of, or display images on.

"You take the top left bunk," Marim said.

"Thank you," said Lucia, "I mean really, thank you."

Marim huffed, clearly as find of displays of emotion as she was of talking. Lucia hoisted herself into her new bed, felt the mattress expand and conform to her body, and fell into a warm, deep sleep.

## Chapter 3 - Day 2: That is crazy illegal

Lucia was awoken suddenly when the privacy screen of her bunk was thrown open.

"Hey Lou, um Lucia? Right? Are you awake?" It was the mechanic's voice. Lucia wasn't yet aware enough to verbalize the multitude of obscenities that were forming in her head.

"What...yes that's my name...what are you...WHO DOES THIS?"

Ben ignored the question. "You said you could navigate, right?"

"Yeah, I mean, I'm not an expert or anything like that," Lucia replied, rubbing her cheek that felt fuzzy from sleep.

"No, of course you're not, but I need you to take a look at something."

"Now?"

"Yes now, are you busy?" he asked impatiently. His long eyelashes made his gray eyes pop, as though he were wearing makeup for a theatrical performance.

"I..." she could see this was not a situation that could be fixed by pointing out the obvious.

"Give me a minute."

Ben recognized for a moment that he was getting what he wanted. "I'll be right outside, outside of that door there when you're ready."

Like a dog anxiously awaiting a new toy, Ben skipped out of the bunk-room and stood at attention by the door. Lucia sighed, then put her shoes on and slid out of the soft bed, joining Ben outside the room.

"Ok, you're ready, perfect." He immediately took off down the hall, waving a hand to indicate she should follow. "I've invented something I want you to see."

The slur he spoke with at dinner was still there, but it was cut short by a sharp, staccato excitement.

"Are you drunk, Ben?"

"Sure, you could call it that, not that it is at all important or relevant to what I want to show you."

Lucia saw once again that pointing out the obvious would get her nowhere, so she remained silent.

"Anyways, I've built a program that is going to put us five steps ahead of any other bounty hunter, and even ahead of the damn police themselves," he said, turning a corner into a room that was unmistakably his workshop.

The rest of the ship looked orderly and normal compared to the inside of this room. Unnatural manufacturing odors assaulted Lucia's nose, bringing tears to her bleary eyes as she surveyed the half-built mechanical hybrids that littered the room. Ben zeroed in on one particular object, a physical screen affixed to the top of a metal box with a series of short, cylindrical antennae protruding from one side.

"This computer can scan the chatter of every police and Tenant unit in the ITZ, and then identify when they're talking about a wanted criminal, and then tell you where they think that criminal is," he said, scrolling through long lines of unintelligible numbers and letters on the screen.

Lucia wasn't sure how to react. "Um...how?"

"Inside here is the communication transmitter from an LP jintum radio, well actually, there are a few transmitters in here, but basically, I've hijacked the jintum entanglement protocol so that it constantly pings every radio in the ITZ, which then sends the live audio data back to this computer. And then it's just a simple NLP program, modified with a spatial rendering program."

"That is crazy illegal."

"Yes, but if the police find out about it, then we'll know, won't we?" he said, touching his finger to his temple.

Lucia stared at Ben, noticing he was sweating and breathing heavily. His eyes were wide and bright, his mouth stretched into a manic smile.

"Well, what do you need my help with?" she asked, regretting the question as she heard it in her still-waking ears.

"Right, so, I haven't gotten around to designing a user interface for this," he said. "Right now, the output is raw six dimensional spatial code, ranked by the likelihood that the coordinates are where that offender is."

"As opposed to where the LP thinks they are, right?" Lucia asked.

"Precisely! Sometimes it outputs an exact location, sometimes it's more of a general area. Can you decipher raw spatial coordinates?"

Lucia furrowed her brow. "Oh boy, uh, if you gave me a few minutes I could probably work it out."

Ben looked surprised at this. "Really? I would have thought for sure that someone your age would have scarcely seen raw coordinates, let alone know how to navigate with them."

"Well I'm not your average person, I guess. You can't be more than 30 years older than me anyway."

"Close," he said, smirking.

"But if you didn't think I would know how to read it, why did you wake me up and drag me out here to look at this code?"

Ben blinked. "I thought you would be impressed."

"Seriously sen?"

"So you're not impressed."

"You know I am, I already told you I am!"

Ben nodded. "Thank you for not lying just to spite me, even though I dragged you out here at three in the morning."

Lucia was surprised to learn Ben was aware of what time it was, and did indeed have the clarity of mind to recognize this was more than a little inconvenient for her. It was almost a humanizing moment, until she realized that that meant he just didn't care.

"Well I'm not going to be able to fall back asleep now, so let me take a closer look at this...thing you've built," she said.

Ben smiled like he had just won a debate, and took a celebratory swig from a nearby plastene cup.

"It doesn't have a name yet, you can give it one if you want."

"Let me play around with it first," Lucia responded. "What is that you're drinking, exactly?"

"Something else I invented that doesn't have a name. Want to try it?" he said, holding out the cup.

Maybe it was because it was three in the morning, or maybe she was just curious, but Lucia took the cup and took a small sip. It didn't have much of a taste to it, just a hint of quinine and something else she couldn't put her finger on. Flowers?

"Hmm. It's not bad, I guess. Sort of tastes like flowers."

Ben laughed, "Ha! You're actually not the first person to say that."

Lucia laughed too, suddenly feeling very giddy. The pair sat in silence for a beat, enjoying a moment lost in their own memories.

Lucia turned her attention back towards the nameless machine. "I don't see a typing interface, does the AI take voice commands?"

"Yes ma'am, or you can open up the keyboard by pressing the screen here." He leaned over and selected a square icon on the screen.

Lucia spoke, "Comrec - where is the nearest bounty?"

A name appeared on the left of the screen, along with a list of associated crimes. To the right was the string of spatial code containing the probable locations.

Lucia read it for a moment. "Ben, if this thing is right, then this offender is only four lightyears away."

"No soffing way, are you sure?" He jumped up and read the screen, the white letters reflecting in his wide, glassy eyes. "Goddammit, you are right! And he's worth thirty times the cost of the power jab it'll take to get to him!"

He ran out of the room to wake the other bounty hunters, leaving Lucia alone. She began to walk toward the exit, but something on the crowded workbench near the door caught her eye. It was a small, expertly crafted model of a planet, with real dirt and water that was held together by an invisible field of some kind. It hovered above a circular plate that read 'Pluora' on the face. Lucia bent down to get a closer look, and saw that there was an inscription carved around the outside of the plate. It read:

*We knew the merry world was round  
and we could sail for ever more  
But in the endless sea we found  
naught but a longing for the shore*

Lucia heard the sound of footsteps pounding on the metal floor and quickly stepped back from the bench.

"We've got a live one!" yelled Dax as he ran past the workroom door.

Marim followed quickly behind Dax. Lucia considered following them, but was not eager to involve herself in another firefight. A few moments later, Ben came trotting down the corridor with a ludicrously large gun.

"Are you snooping, Lucius?" He asked.

"Lucia. And no," she lied.

"I'm a little hurt that you're not!" he said, putting his hand to his chest. "Stay here on the Scheherazade, but move aside because I'm going to lock this door so you don't keep — I mean start — snooping."

Lucia slowly stepped forward, out of the workshop, maintaining eye contact with Ben throughout her movements.

He swiped his hand over the door panel, then ran down the corridor and disappeared around the corner, his enormous weapon scraping the floor as he went.

And so, Lucia found herself alone again in a strange, but not quite alien, environment.

## Chapter 4 - Well then sents, gather round

Not 20 minutes later, Marim burst through the docking bay doors of the duster, a small green-haired man slung over her shoulder. He pounded away at her muscled shoulder as she leapt back and forth, dodging weapon fire. Her bronze face was a picture of focus; neither relaxed nor strained. Like a dancer, she swung her body around the rim of the bay door with one hand, the other holding fast to the flailing bounty-head. Continuing the arc of her body, she threw her foot to the right, flipping a switch with her bionic big toe. The bay door slammed shut, whirring as the safety locks screwed into place.

Marim bounded down one of the ship's corridors into a room filled with empty, open cells. She touched three of her fingers to a panel on the wall and a single stall lit up with white light. She threw her human cargo into the illuminated stall and a heavy red door closed the open side of the cell. The cell door changed from an urgent red to a satisfying pink, indicating the magnetic padding on the inner cell walls was engaged.

Marim paused for a moment to stand with her hands on her hips, nodding proudly at her work. After only a moment's breath she was suddenly thrown into the pink door as the ship lurched to the side. As she heaved herself to her feet, Marim cursed the fact that the cells were not padded on the *outside*. The ship was fleeing, as it should be, but the lack of grace in the takeoff was concerning. Marim ran out of the holding bay, keeping an outstretched hand on the wall to steady herself. She made her way to the flight deck, where Ben and Lucia were frantically steering the ship to avoid the incoming fire.

"I'm guessing you got the Mick?" asked Ben, without looking away from the controls. He had pulled the bandana he wore around his neck up to keep his hair out of his face.

"He's in the holding bay," said Marim, matter-of-factly. "Why haven't we jumped yet?"

"Maybe you haven't noticed, but these guys are shooting MEMPs at us, big ones," replied Ben. "Can't risk them hitting us with one of them right when we launch, so we've got to lose them the old fashioned way."

A voice came over the ship's com.

"Ben, we don't have the firepower to take out all of these ships, you've got to drop them, to be sure." It was Dax, speaking from the manual weapons control deck at the ship's stern.

"Soff it. Lucia, where is the nearest planet?"

"Planet? Uh, there's one about 1,500 gigameters from here, but it's not colonized."

"Don't care, what's the terrain like?"

"Mostly thallium and manganese rock, lots of mountains, some sulfur lakes."

"Perfect. Put in the coordinates."

Ben activated the ship's cloak, and threw the ship towards the planet at sub-light speed. They soon entered a vaporous, fuchsia atmosphere.

"They're still on to us, Ben," said Lucia, rubbing the back of her sweaty neck as she monitored the angry red dots on the radar.

"I said. Sit. Tight," he spoke through gritted teeth.

Ben quickly scanned the terrain map. He pushed the ship into a sharp dive, then a sudden curve to the right. He doubled back, then swerved to the right again. The only way the crew could tell they were careening through the fuchsia fog was the slight pull of inertia every time Ben changed directions too quickly for the dampeners to compensate. Eventually, the ship slid under a large outcropping of rock, and Ben cut all power, encasing the crew in darkness. He touched another active pad and even the pilot lights went dim. Lucia looked down at the metal device on the inside of her wrist and saw that it was off as well.

"You better not have just broken my Com-Palm," Lucia said to Ben, guessing that was just the sort of thing he would do without giving it a second thought.

"Cool your jets, little girl, it was just a tiny EMP. You can restart it as soon as these pig-diddlers give up the search." He stood, only his silhouette visible in the dim purple light that penetrated the thick clouds outside.

"You really think they won't be able to find us?" asked Lucia.

"Highly unlikely." Ben paused. "About a 1% chance," he said as he rooted around inside of a locker.

No one pointed out that that was still pretty high, considering the consequences of being found by their pursuers.

Lucia tried to be constructive instead. "Can we turn on a light?" she asked. "Surely one light battery won't give off enough of an electrical field to show up on their radar."

"You're right, one light wouldn't. That being said, I bet Dax is thinking the same thing."

As if summoned, a beam of light illuminated the corridor leading up to the flight deck, wielded by a relieved looking dog.

"That was some chief driving there, bud," Dax strutted into the room and clapped Ben on the shoulder. "Real chief." He flung a Com-Palm and a small bio-suit onto the floor. "Got the bounty's tech. He surely won't be revealing us."

Ben combed a hand through his brown-gray hair and sighed "Yeah, but now we have to wait for the izzers to leave. Could take hours." Ben produced a flask from his jumpsuit and took a long, deep swig.

Dax walked to the center of the deck and placed the light he was holding on the console. "Why don't you tell us a story then, Ben? You've had just about the most interesting life of anyone I've ever known."

"Talk about myself, you say," Ben stroked his chin in a comical fashion, "that may be a good way to kill a couple of hours. What do you want to hear about?"

There was a moment of thoughtful silence, then Lucia asked, with a brave face,  
"What is Pluora?"

Ben stopped in his chair mid-swivel. His gray eyes were fixed on something, except they were no longer seeing anything in this reality. He sat like this for 20 seconds, the longest Lucia had ever seen him stay still.

Finally, he dropped his chin to his chest. "You were snooping, in my workshop."

"Yes."

Ben let out a short, empty chuckle through his nose. Lucia felt a pang of guilt; she had clearly stumbled upon a bad memory.

"I'm sorry...I didn't mean to, um, intrude," she said.

"No, no," Ben waved his hand, "ask about any period of my life, and odds are, I'm going to have to tell you a sad story. This is one of the saddest, however."

Lucia was frightened by Ben's sudden depression, but nothing in the universe could have made her rescind her question. Marim and Dax were equally enticed, neither of them moving or saying a word.

"Well then sents, gather round," he stood, walking to the center console, where Dax had placed his light. It under-lit Ben's face, casting long, ominous shadows from his facial features.

"Let me tell you about the death of Pluora, my homeworld."



Pluora was one of four planets created by the Council of Light, a millennia after they discovered how to harness the power of stars. No longer would they have to search for the infinitely rare goldilocks rocks upon which they had molded their other worlds. With such immense energy, they were able to pull space dust into a concentrated point, birthing a molten planet. They cooled the atmosphere at an accelerated rate, until the weather conditions were appropriate for life. Super-plants were cultivated on the surface, turning volcanic rock to soil and removing any toxins from the air. Finally, they introduced animal life; birds and frogs and sagoats first, to make sure the planet was habitable, then humans.

It was a paradise. Giant trees scraped the blue-purple sky, vines with flowers the size of children covered the giant boulders that littered the landscape. Small streams snaked through the terrain, of crystal clear water never before touched by humans. There were mineral ponds, giant fields of vibrant yellow and green and red that bubbled and steamed. At night, the sky was filled with so many stars that it looked gray instead of black, and a nearby nebula blanketed everything in a rosy tinge.

The idea was to create a utopia, each planet a different experiment, testing the hypotheses of what made a perfect world. I was born on Pluora three years after it was terraformed. Children outnumbered adults thirty to one. We had no parents, only Teachers, but that didn't bother us because we didn't know any other way. We were told we were special, chosen even, destined to unlock the secret to happiness. The lack of adults ensured we weren't overly influenced by the



old ways, supposedly allowing us to discover a better path. Who knows if it would have worked out in the end, but I do know I was happy. I'm sure of it.

My first memory is of a Teacher taking me to the observatory outside of town. We walked through a path that was lined with giant white Sinia flowers in full bloom, up to the observatory made of jet black obsinite. It was warm outside, and I could feel the chill emanating off the cool stone walls as we stepped inside. The teacher adjusted the huge lens, and I remember wondering how all the sky could possibly fit into the tiny hole at the end of the telescope. Arval, the teacher, put my eye to the looking glass, and for the first time I peered into another galaxy. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I asked him if we could see the end of the universe.

"Not with our eyes," he said.

"Can we feel it?" I asked.

He laughed, "If you ever get there, please do tell me what it feels like."

Such is the confidence of a child, I thought he was giving me an assignment, an exciting challenge. A challenge to reach the edge of the universe, and explore the great beyond. I had watched ships come and go from the planet, learned the names of hundreds of galaxies, traveled to them in my mind, but I didn't know anyone who had been *out there* and returned to talk about it. It just didn't seem real to me, the rest of the universe. That's hard to imagine now.

I excelled in school, even compared to my classmates, who had also been handpicked from conception to colonize the planet. We had lessons every day, designed to hone our mental abilities, without teaching us what was right and wrong. We would memorize history, math, science, but were not taught to internalize them. Instead, we were taught to build structures in our mind: giant buildings where we could store the information, separate from the rest of our consciousness. The lessons would last for a few hours, but the majority of our time we spent together, just the children, playing. There were many places around our town that we weren't allowed to go, but we understood that was for our safety. Pluora was as violent as it was beautiful, as the new planet bellowed and shifted in its crust like a toddler in a new jumpsuit. Accidents were common.

After our morning class we were instructed to meditate on the mystery of the universe. One day, myself and two other boys, Fett and Neerav, left the grassy knoll where the children lay with their eyes closed, and ventured out into the wilderness. We came upon a black field of fresh, volcanic rock, and ran up and down the mounds of dried lava. We all came to rest there, standing and panting on top of a volcanic mound. The rocks exhaled steam from a recent rain. Fett and I watched the waves crash against the edge of the land. Neerav stared down into a deep fissure in the earth in front of us.

Neerav spoke. "In my dreams, I'm inside of a giant hole that I can't get out of. There is nothing, so much nothing, and I can feel it trying to turn me into nothing too."

"Just run away from it!" Fett exclaimed and began running again. I chased him, yelling, "I'm the darkness! I'm the darkness and I'm going to eat you!"

Behind me, Neerav laughed and began running too. But the rock was slick, and as I turned back, I saw him slip and disappear into the crevasse.

The Teachers explained to me that death was a necessity, for without it there would be no meaning to life. True contentment cannot exist if there is not depression to compare it to, they said. Chaos and order cannot exist without the other, but perhaps even chaos can be controlled within our minds. Think of the rain, they said. It comes every five days, as we command it to, heavy and wet. But we rejoice in the fact that the rain gives the plants life, and we are even happier when the sun returns.

“But death,” I said, “how can we control death?”

“Perhaps that is something you can tell us,” they said.

This challenge I was not as happy to receive. The thought of it terrified me. I was very careful after the day Neerav died, never straying too far from the town for fear that death might confront me, and I had no idea how I might fight against it. Little did I know that only by leaving the confines of my home would I learn how to fight death, and wield its terrible power at the peril of countless lives.

But the death in this story is that of Pluora, and every sentient on it. It began on a beautiful day, towards the end of Demeter, the second summer. I awoke that morning and decided to skip lessons. It was not such a big deal to do so; no one was really required to do anything on Pluora except respect one another. My best friend Fett joined me, and we ran to a small beach nearby to race Slyzards; salamander-like creatures that lived in the rocks by the ocean. We would strap mechanical helicopter wings to them and race them like drones. We were ten years old, and obsessed with competition. I kept building faster and faster wings, with better power cells, tighter harnesses, but Fett would always win. Almost always.

Fett had beaten me nine times that day, each loss only fueling my obsession. I remember looking over at him in the middle of the tenth race, the sun reflecting off of his sweat-covered, freckled skin, his brows screwed tight together in concentration...and I had this desire to bite his face, to chomp down on his cheek as hard as I could. The startling, animal impulse caused me to lose control of my Slyzard drone. The propellers hit the black sand, spraying Fett's drone with tiny particles. His wings couldn't handle the friction, and his Slyzard fell to the earth. My drone was fine, having been built by my crafty hands, and I was able to complete the course for a victory.

I celebrated like I had won the Ultimate Prix, waving my wriggling Slyzard in his face.

“You’re a cheater!” Fett shouted, pushing me into the sand.

I swiped my legs to the side, catching his ankles and knocking him over. I pounced on him and he started flailing, hitting me wherever he could land a blow. But I would not relent, pushing his head further and further into the black volcanic sand.

“Ok, ok, quit!” he shouted, spitting flecks of sulphuric rocks from his mouth. I rolled off of him and we both laid side by side, panting for a minute or two.

Then we both started laughing; maybe because we realized how stupid we must have looked flailing around in the sand, maybe because we were ten and the only thing we really had to worry about was Slyzard races. If I had known it would be the last few blissful moments Fett

and I would ever spend together, I...well if I'm being honest I still wouldn't have said anything special to him. But he was my best friend and the only person I felt like I would see every day for the rest of my life. We were supposed to unlock the secrets of the universe together, but I watched him drown the next day when the planet collapsed.

Fett and I were about to begin another race when I saw something strange on the horizon. It was a huge plume of smoke, billowing forth into the sky. A volcanic eruption, the largest I had ever seen. A second later, Fett and I were thrown to the ground by an immense shockwave. I was knocked out for a couple of minutes, and when I awoke my ears were ringing so loudly I couldn't think about anything else. Fett was on the ground to my left clutching his head. His mouth was open, but I could not hear him screaming.

I crawled over to him and tore his hands from his head, shouting that we had to leave, but no sound came from my mouth either. The water had already begun to recede from the shore, a clear sign that a tsunami was coming. I grabbed my friend's arm, pulled him up, and ran into the trees, dragging him behind me. We were halfway to our town when the ground disappeared from beneath my feet, then leapt upwards, causing my legs to buckle. An earthquake. Of course, a part of me knew what was happening, but I never thought it would deteriorate as far as it did.

We ran the last half kilometer to the town bunker, covered in sand and sweat. The damage to the town wasn't too severe, as the buildings were made to withstand the frequent earthquakes of the young planet. There was mass confusion in the bunker as everyone tried to communicate without sound, having been made deaf from the shockwave. One by one, sonic conduction headpieces were distributed. I affixed mine behind my ear, and tested it - "One two three, one two three" - I felt the conductor vibrate my skull, but still could not hear a word above the relentless ringing. The ringing was in my brain, and that was not so easily fixed.

I yelled to Fett as loud as I could, "Can you hear me?!"

He yelled back, "Not really!"

He gave me a small smile, which I returned. Everything would be alright, I thought. Teacher Byora approached me, brandishing a holoboard, like the ones we used in the classrooms. He spoke and the words appeared in the air, *Are you hurt, Ben?* I shook my head 'no'.

Teacher Byora dictated again, *Good. Mount Azucar has erupted. The seismologists do not predict any further activity, but we must stay here for another 20 hours, at least until the shockwave has traveled around Pluora and passed us again. Please excuse me.*

He disappeared into the crowd.

After the shockwave had made its second pass of the town, the bunker began to empty out as the teachers concluded that the threat had passed and saw fit to release their students home. By the 50th hour, only one teacher and ten students remained in the bunker, including myself. The ringing in my ears had begun to fade as the biobots in my body repaired my damaged eardrums. Our Teacher had directed us home, but only Fett had heeded the advice. I watched him leave from behind the thick windows of the bunker, too afraid of death to follow him.

From the bunker's position on the small hill in the center of town, I could see two girls, who I recognized from class, playing with a fallen sign. I could also see Teacher Byora, who was making his way back to the bunker, holding a package of some kind. The emergency sea walls were raised around the entire perimeter of the town, towering above even the tallest buildings, protecting us from the tsunami floods.

You are probably thinking, why didn't they start evacuating the planet after a tenth of the population was killed by an unforeseen disaster? It would certainly have made sense to do so, unless you understand the mindset of a Pluoran. We were pioneers, building a new future for sentientkind, on the first completely sentmade planet. We had endured earthquakes and tsunamis before. Apart from the Teachers, every single one of us had grown up with these events occurring on a semi-regular basis. Such events were a small price to pay for being special. We were chosen to live upon this experimental planet, and we did so proudly and of our own volition. Mortal anxiety was a feeling every Pluoran had to embrace constantly, and therefore never really felt at all. I was, of course, an exception to that.

Fett was almost out of my sight when the second earthquake struck. It was so violent that even the bunker shook in its gyroscopic base. I was thrown to the side, my face catching the sharp edge of an open panel as I fell. When I found my footing again, I immediately went to the window. I couldn't see Fett, but a girl was pinned under a beam that had fallen from a balcony above her. I was about to leave the bunker and help her, when I heard a terrible crack, loud enough to overpower the ringing in my ears, followed by the low groan of metal being pulled apart by an immense pressure. Then I saw it. The sea wall had broken, and was beginning to fall. Water poured forth from the growing fissure, engulfing the buildings below. I stared in horror as giant waves swept around the sides of the city, their crests dwarfing buildings far taller than the one I was in. I then saw Fett, sprinting down the street towards me. I turned to run for the door, but a large body stopped me. Teacher Byora.

"He will never make it in time. If you open that door you'll only doom us all to the same fate."

I cried out, fighting against his arms, but gaining no ground. I turned back and pressed my face and hands against the window, my tears covering the glass. In a moment Fett was gone, swept beneath the wall of water that had almost made its way to the other side of the fortress walls that were built to keep it out. I fell to my knees, the ringing in my ears now so loud that I thought my head was going to explode. Teacher Byora grabbed my head and forced it up so that I could see him miming a 'shushing' motion. I hadn't even realized I was screaming. He grabbed my arm and dragged me down the stairs to the lower level of the bunker. The earth shook violently yet again. He threw me into a small pod with thick walls and motioned for me to stay, wait. I had no idea where I was or what was happening, my face and hands were soaking wet with tears...not tears, it was blood, I was bleeding from somewhere...a woman appeared, the one Teacher that had stayed in the bunker. She was visiting from another town so I didn't know her name. She jumped into my pod, slammed the door shut, and pulled the ignition lever. We were thrust upward with such intense velocity that it pressed me down into the floor.

After a few moments, I was able to pull myself up and watch as we exited the atmosphere. I looked down at Pluora. Almost the entire planet was obscured by dark clouds filled with lightning. The woman began to type something into the control panel of the pod. She was talking, but I wasn't listening. Suddenly, a bright red light arced out of the northern hemisphere of the planet, like a spout of lava breaking through rock and then a second later - black. We were jumping, away from Pluora, into an endless sea of black.

## Chapter 5 - Day 5 - If you'll listen

It had been five days since Lucia had joined the intrepid team of bounty hunters on their ship. Every planet has their own system of days, but to those of an extra-planetary mindset — such as bounty hunters — a day consists of 24 hours. Always has and always will. When one jumps from world to world, and spends most of one's time floating in space, following the official Ertian calendar gives one a sense of grounding.

Lucia was starting to feel like she had begun to blend into the colorful flow of the hunters' daily lives. She now knew that the good toilet was in the bottom of the ship, and the microwave was in a cupboard in the Great Room, and there was a loose panel in one of the corridors that you had to avoid stepping on. She learned the name of their old Duster vessel: The Sheherazade. She knew that Dax loved Judan meat, Marim loved sweets, and Ben didn't eat very much at all.

Her endeavors to find out more about the three hunters had been most successful with Dax, who could often be found in the Great Room, passing the time between bounties by playing board games. Lucia would assist him in multi-player games, and in turn, Dax would tell her about some of his past adventures. His homeworld, like all other planets with life that had been found thus far, hadn't developed to the point of intergalactic space travel when the first humans landed there hundreds of years ago. Dax himself had been born outside of the Argruarian's home galaxy, to an adventurous mother. They had returned to Gruar not long after that, but not before Dax was blessed with the same wander-lust that had afflicted his mom. She taught him to speak Ertish from a young age, which was no small feat considering the difference between human vocal cords, and that of Dax's species.

Dax told Lucia that although he had teamed up with Marim first, he had known Ben for decades, after he had attempted to arrest Ben for drug manufacturing. When Lucia pressed Dax for details, he only disclosed that Ben had saved his life all those many years ago, and that he could probably tell the story better.

Ben didn't look like someone who was old enough to have saved a life 'all those many years ago'. Indeed Lucia wanted to speak to the young mechanic, but he had holed himself up in his workshop ever since they narrowly escaped the fuchsia planet. He spent almost every hour in his workshop, behind the thick, closed door. Lucia pressed her ear to it on occasion, sometimes hearing clanging metal, sometimes the low buzz of a flash welder, sometimes complete silence. Perhaps telling the story of his homeworld had sent him into a minor depression. It was almost as though he had transformed into another person while recalling his youth; his face became softer, his words more nuanced. Everything about Ben was incomprehensible to Lucia; he was so odd, so flawed, so intense. Where Lucia had been born, a tightly regulated, L2 world, such extremes did not exist. Or at least, they were not supposed to exist.

It took another full day, and a fresh bounty to pull Ben from hiding. This bounty was completed without a firefight, and the success seemed to shake whatever fog had been hanging over Ben's head.

"Cheers to a stress-free payday!" Ben raised a glass of pink wine to his crewmmates, who were gathered around a table at a bar near to where they had dropped off the bounty-head.

Marim held up her hands in a gesture of surrender. "I will sit this one out."

"Maybe you'd prefer to sit on my face, eh Marim?" Ben winked an exaggerated wink. "Come on, tonight's the night, I can feel it." He cupped his hand around an imaginary ass and smiled wickedly.

"The only thing you're going to feel is my hand down your throat." Marim made an exaggerated gesture of her own.

"Oh Marim, I knew you were kinky, but that's taking it too far, even for me," Ben said with fake shock.

"Before you two take this any further, just remember we've got a young, impressionable girl with us," admonished Dax.

"Oh, I don't care," said Lucia, "I've heard worse."

"See Dax? You underestimate our dear chef," Ben nudged Lucia's arm. "But we should get out of here anyway, I don't like the way that guy is looking at me," Ben said, lowering his voice and gesturing to a man sitting at the table across from them.

"Maybe he's imagining Marim sitting on your face," Lucia said.

Ben looked back at her, this time with genuine shock on his face. He burst out suddenly in laughter. "Ha! What did I tell you, Dax? She's got a sense of humor!"

Lucia smiled to herself. Marim, on the other hand, looked deeply troubled.

"What has you perturbed?" Dax asked her.

"I have thought of a story to tell."

"What, right now?" Ben asked.

"Now is a time to tell it."

Ben chuckled, clearly amused by the sudden turn of events. "Ok then, tell it."

"Ancient Ertian stories are most beautiful and powerful, so Ben, keep your mouth shut." She wagged a strong finger at the mechanic.

"I will do my best to withhold my genius commentary."

"Many thanks."

Marim began.



Long ago, there existed a planet that was poor and underdeveloped. The people of this land worshiped Makenchi, the Master Architect, who built the heavens above and the earth below by molding stardust in his bare hands. The people tried with all their might to build structures that would please the Master Architect, but they lacked all skill, and their creations would turn out lopsided and unsteady. One day, one of the largest buildings in the center of town fell, killing all who were inside. But when the dust settled, a woman saw an infant child perched on top of the rubble, completely unscathed. She took the child, naming him Sakenchi. His name meant "great builder", for he was blessed by Makenchi, the ultimate builder, and he was therefore destined to become the greatest architect in the land.

The child grew to become a man, and as he did, he built incredible structures that were so beautiful the people wept to behold them. Sakenchi's buildings withstood wind and rain, and the people rejoiced that their suffering was over, for now that they had shelter, they were able to devote their lives to farming and medicine. All were happy, except for Sakenchi. His creations were not large enough, not intricate enough to rival his namesake, Makenchi, who built the universe itself. Every year, Sakenchi would build bigger and bigger buildings, with thousands of rooms that each served a different purpose.

"Stop Sakenchi," the people said. "We do not need all these rooms, we simply cannot use all of this empty space." But Sakenchi did not listen.

"I will stop when Makenchi tells me that I have pleased him."

Sakenchi's adoptive mother prayed every night to Makenchi, thanking him for blessing their people with such a precious gift. She begged him to visit her son, and praise his work, but her prayers went unanswered.

After many years, Sakenchi fell in love with the most beautiful woman in the land. To win her hand in marriage, he built a monument that was taller than Mount Jira, the tallest mountain. Sakenchi was sure that a creation built with the love he felt for the woman would impress Makenchi. The tower was so beautiful, the woman was swayed to marry Sakenchi, but still the Master Architect was silent.

Soon after, Sakenchi's new wife became pregnant with a son. But instead of being overjoyed, Sakenchi was devastated, for his son would be born and see that his father had failed to live up to his namesake, and he would be shamed. Sakenchi decided he would build a tower so high that it would reach the heavens, and he would ask Makenchi face to face why he was not pleased.

Sakenchi traveled to the peak of Mount Jira, where he would begin to build his tower. There he met a giant bird, with gleaming feathers that glistened in the sunlight. He asked the bird if she had ever flown to the heavens.

"I have," said the bird, "but there is nothing up there that is more beautiful than what you, Sakenchi, have created on this earth."

"That is not possible, for if it were true, surely Makenchi would have visited this land."

"Makenchi sees the world in a different light," said the bird, and with a great flap of its wings, it flew away into the clouds.

Sakenchi set to work on his tower. All day and night, he labored, cutting down the trees from the mountain to use as material. Soon the trees were gone, and Sakenchi began mining the stone of the mountain itself to build his creation. As Sakenchi neared the heavens, the bird visited him again.

"From so high, can you see the beauty of your land down below?" she asked him. Sakenchi looked down. "I cannot, for the clouds are in the way."

"Climb onto my back and I shall show you."

Sakenchi mounted the bird, nestling into its luminous feathers. The bird soared down into the thick clouds, breaking through them and revealing the land below. She flew over Sakenchi's creations, which were even more beautiful when viewed from above.

"Look at all these monuments you have created, how they gleam in the sunlight,"

"They do not gleam brightly enough," said Sakenchi.

The bird flew closer to the ground.

"Look how happy your people are, safe in the shelters you have built them."

"Safety is not enough."



The bird flew even closer to the ground.

"Look at your wife, how beautiful she is, surrounded by her husband's creations, while she herself is helping to create your son."

"My son will not please Makenchi."

The bird soared back up through the clouds, placing Sakenchi back on top of his tower.

"Makenchi is pleased by all of his children's creations," said the bird.

"But mine are the greatest, why can he not see that?" said Sakenchi.

The bird turned away, and with a great flap of his wings, disappeared into the clouds. Sakenchi was unchanged, and continued building his tower.

After many more days, the tower finally broke through the exosphere into the cold beyond. Sakenchi looked around him, and saw that the stars were no closer, and there was nothing but endless empty space surrounding him. He fell to his knees and wept, for he knew that he could never build enough to fill the empty space around him. The great bird visited him again.

"Why do you weep?"

"Because I can see the vastness of the heavens, and I know that I can never create anything large enough for Makenchi to see, for I am mortal and will die."

"What do you wish for, Sakenchi?"

"I want to live long enough to fill the emptiness and please Makenchi."

The bird touched his beak to Sakenchi's head, filling him with hot white light.

"It is done," said the bird.

"I want to see it all," said Sakenchi, "I want to see the surfaces on which I will have to build."

"You will never be able to fill the space," said the bird, "you have already doomed yourself to never ending sorrow, for you will never die."

"If I am now immortal, then I am no different from Makenchi. You must obey me," insisted Sakenchi.

"Climb on to my back and I shall show you," said the bird.

Sakenchi did so, and the bird soared into space. She flew over galaxies, filled with millions of planets just like Sakenchi's, filled with millions of people just like Sakenchi. She flew over stars so huge they sucked in galaxies themselves. She flew higher and higher, revealing the universe to Sakenchi. Sakenchi could not stand to behold such immensity, and screamed for the bird to stop, but she flew higher still. Sakenchi ripped his eyes from his head, so that he could no longer have to behold the greatness of eternity.

The bird brought Sakenchi back to his home, where he slept for 20 days and nights. When he awoke, his wife came to him, and placed his infant son in his arms. Sakenchi felt him in his hands. "His weight is greater than that of the entire universe," Sakenchi said, "his name shall be Rachem, meaning Endless," and he began to weep without tears.

Rachem grew to a man, and built creations even finer than his father's. He built mountains, and trees, but Sakenchi could never see them. Rachem bore a son, and that son built a new planet, but Sakenchi could not see it. A thousand years passed, and Sakenchi's progeny continued to build greater and grander things, but Sakenchi could never see them. One day, as he sat alone in his room, Sakenchi heard a great flap of a giant bird's wings.

"Do you see now Sakenchi?" said the bird.

Sakenchi fell to his knees before the bird. "I do," he wept, "you were right, oh great Makenchi, I had already created my greatest work when I created my son, and now I will never be able to enjoy his creations for I am blind to them."

Makenchi bowed her head. "You have pleased me, Great Architect."

Sakenchi smiled, and fell into an endless sleep.

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Ben huffed and dropped a black pill of some kind into his pink drink.

"That was very, um, majestic, Marim."

Marim nodded and folded her arms, indicating she'd completed her task satisfactorily.

"I like this!" Lucia blurted out.

Each of the bounty hunters turned to look at her.

"I, uh...I mean this," she moved her slim arms in a circular motion. "Us, talking, telling stories. Together."

The crew continued to stare at her, eyes blank. Ben downed the rest of his drink, which was now a deep purple.

"I, um, I wanted to ask you..." she said, pointing her quivering hand at the mechanic. She regretted opening her mouth in the first place, but there was no going back now.

"Here I am Lucia, what do you need?"

"I want to know what happened next."

"After what?"

"After, um, well after you left Pluora. Was it completely destroyed?"

"It was."

"Did anyone else escape? Apart from you and that teacher?"

Ben sighed. "How about this Lucia. I've got nothing to do tomorrow except waste away on the ship waiting for the next machine to break down. Come to the Great Room in the morning, and I'll tell you what happened next."

Lucia swallowed and almost choked on the small amount of saliva trickling down her throat. "You will?"

Ben stopped too, turning to face her. He blinked his long eyelashes a few times. "Yeah, why not. It's a damn good story, and maybe it's about time I start working through some of these memories. Like therapy or some shit like that. And this way, I don't have to keep answering your dumb questions."

Lucia released the breath she'd been holding, ignoring his insult. She was getting what she wanted.

"Can we join?" Dax asked.

"Like I give a squirt," Ben replied, standing from the table. He ambled off in an unclear direction without another word.

Lucia shouted out to him, "I'll see you tomorrow!"

The next morning, Lucia was surprised to find Ben sitting in the Great Room, flipping through news bites on his Com-Palm. She thought he might have changed his mind once he sobered up, if that was something he ever did. She had to admit, he looked fairly sober, sitting there on the large navy blue loveseat, his face clean and calm, his jumpsuit wrinkled but washed. She sat down on the yellow couch that had mysteriously appeared across from the turquoise couch that always adorned the Great Room.

"You didn't tell the others?" he asked.

Lucia hadn't even thought to do so. "Uh, no, should I have?"

There was just a fleeting moment of disappointment on Ben's face, so brief that had Lucia not been studying it, she would have missed the sentiment.

"Do you want me to get them? I'm sure they would love to hear—"

Ben held up his hand, cutting her off, "No, they will probably walk in here at some point, and they can stay if they want to." He nodded his head definitively, reassuring himself of something.

As though summoned, Dax and Marim appeared from opposite entrances to the Great Room. Lucia was beginning to suspect that the old ship had a way of making people appear when called upon. Perhaps after all these years of passively listening to every conversation through the neural com system networked throughout its body, it had gained some sort of telepathic sentience, and amused itself by willing its passengers to appear when named. Lucia suddenly felt a little exposed.

"Ah, my dear friends, come take a seat." Ben stood from his loveseat throne and politely beckoned for the two to sit. Neither of them mentioned the appearance of the yellow couch, though both elected to sit on the more familiar blue one. Once they had, Ben took a seat himself and folded his hands on his lap.

"How long have we known each other, hmm? Marim, five years? Dax, I don't even think I can count that high. All that time, and I've never really told you very much about my early life." Ben averted his eyes from the blank stares of Dax and Marim, instead studying his thumbs. Lucia wondered if the other two bounty hunters were as confused as she was when he spoke of his 'early life' like he was a wizened entertainer in his fourth quarter and not a 40-something, drug-addicted mechanic.

"Anyways, I'd be cheating you if something were to happen to me without you knowing the full story. So I'm going to tell it to you, all three of you," Ben looked back up at Dax. "If you'll listen."

Dax furrowed his brow for a moment, before relaxing his face and smiling. "Mate, I can't think of a better way to spend a Forday."

Marim simply nodded her head in agreement.

Lucia would have added her vote of support as well, but Ben had already moved on. This was only happening because of her, she reminded herself, so that was acknowledgement enough.

"Fantastic!" Ben said, trying his best to hide his pride. "Then let's begin where we left off, in a tiny escape pod in the middle of the empty sky."

## Chapter 6 - Can you do that, Allison?

My mind and body were numb. It was gone. Not just Pluora, but the Sun, the moons, the nebula...all I could see were unrecognizable stars, and the vast emptiness between. The woman behind me spoke.

"I'm really sorry kid. I know this must break your heart. But you survived, that's got to count for something right?"

I did not reply.

"I'll be honest kid, I didn't know you were in this pod when I got in it. I'm not from your planet, I was just...visiting. Please don't start crying, because I wouldn't know what to do."

I didn't start crying. Instead, I crumpled onto the pod floor, facing her.

"Basar's beard, your face is a bloody mess."

She knelt down to put her hand on the Com-Palm in my wrist, authorizing the biobots in my body to direct full attention to the gash on my face. The woman opened the pod's meager first aid box and began wrapping my face in gauze.

"Fuck, you might actually lose your nose if this doesn't heal quickly enough. It's...kind of hanging there."

She seemed worried, but I felt no pain in my face. As she was bandaging me, I got my first good look at her. She was petite, only thirty centimeters taller than I was. She was middle aged, maybe 110, with brown eyes and hair. Her skin was almost blue-ish black, and the tip of her flat nose had a mischievous glint to it.

Anger flared up inside me. I pushed the woman away, knocking her off balance. My immediate reaction was to run away, but I quickly realized I was surrounded on all sides by grey-white plastic, and beyond that, the vacuum of space. My anger was replaced with fear, for now I truly was surrounded by death, cornered by it, into two cubic meters of space...breathing the last Pluoran air that would ever exist. It suddenly felt like I could not breathe at all, and the darkness enclosed on me.

We spent months in that pod. The private Slingshot that the Council of Light had built to the Utopian Galaxy had only gotten us within 20,000 LY of Ertian civilization, so we slowly crossed the remaining divide, snap by snap. It could just as well have taken a year, as I don't remember a moment of it. I'd retreated into that corner of my mind us children had been taught to build, to separate information from our consciousness. By the time we landed on the nearest waystation, the biobots had closed the wound on my face, but I was left with a scar that would never completely heal, from just above my left eye to the bottom of my cratered nose.

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"Wait hold on," Lucia interrupted the story. "You don't have a scar."

"Very astute of you Lucia. Now, if you'd please let me continue---"

"What happened to it? Did you get skin grafts? I don't see even the smallest mark on your face. Ben, if you are lying to us already, I don't want to stay here and listen--"

"Lucia!" Dax cut in. "He used to have a scar on his face, I've seen it."

"Thank you Dax," Ben said. "You'll all figure out what happened to it in due time, if you just shut. The fuck. Up."

Lucia withdrew into her seat and pursed her lips tight.

"Now where were we..."  
~~~~~

The woman, who eventually became known to me as Artemis, tried to leave me on the first waystation we came to. I must have looked so pathetic — standing by myself, staring blankly at nothing, not moving or reacting to anything around me — that she couldn't bring herself to leave me alone. I probably would have died, or worse if she left me on my own.

I don't remember where we went after that, but I do remember that she would talk to me almost constantly. Yadda yadda, blah blah, da, da, da. Day after day, holding a one-sided conversation with a catatonic companion. Whenever she had to leave, she would bring me back things to read or watch, mostly magazines and pamphlets she would pick up here and there. She had a Box on her ship of course, where I could have watched any number of Serials or shows, but I had no idea how to work it. So instead, I would take whatever free bites Artemis sent to me and consume them repeatedly, memorizing every page, exhausting every scene, allowing my mind to travel to this exciting outside world, while my body stayed motionless inside the comfort of whatever room I was in. I wasn't happy by any means, but I was safe.

My mind was split. My consciousness lived in the structures where I stored the things the Teachers had us memorize on Pluora. Tall, sturdy towers with compartments that I built, that I could access when I wanted, that I controlled. The other part of me, that part that felt the cool wetness of rain, the part that felt the love of friendship, the part that was a child...fled from the sturdy towers and fell into a bottomless crevasse.

I started to develop entirely new identities for myself, based on whatever story happened to hold my focus at the time. When I was reading *The Knights of Nihm* I was a young scholar, accompanying my master on his final journey to Eslandia. When I was read *Bound for Eternity*, I was a father who had lost his family, scouring the earth for revenge. Of course, most of what Artemis brought or sent me was filled with advertisements and nonsense, but I read those with the same voracity.

I stayed in this world of fiction for well over a year, as Artemis and I journeyed from the outskirts of the ITZ back to the Ertian Empire. There were no news bites about Pluora imploding, no mention in any Serial that the experimental planets had ever existed. They were a failed experiment, known only to the Council of Light, and me, and Artemis.

I wish I could tell you it was some grand event that eventually snapped me out of it, but the truth couldn't be further from grand. Of all the serials I consumed, it was a teen magazine that woke me from my catatonia. Specifically, one of those cheesy 'Which one are you?' quizzes aimed at teenage girls.

This quiz's theme was from a series called 'Standing Styll', about a girl who moves to a new planet after growing up on a Heckle Barge. BoomCritic gave it a 2/10. The point of the quiz was to answer questions about yourself, then the magazine would tell you which character you were. There was Tricia, the beautiful, confident girl that everyone wanted to be; Taly, the quirky one; or Jem, the timid main character. I will never forget the question that changed my life:

12) Every person in your class has to present a picture album of their favorite foods. When it is your turn, you walk to the front of the class and project your first picture, but instead chocolate pie, it is a picture of you as a toddler, naked in a bath! Do you:

- A) Run out of the room and change schools
- B) Immediately turn off the projector and hide under your desk
- C) Start laughing and point out how cute you were

I knew the 'right' answer. 'C' was Tricia, the popular girl; I didn't need to submit my answers to know that. Tricia took a bad situation and worked it to her advantage. Tricia was always happy, never caught off guard. Tricia was never alone. But I was 'B'. I had shut off the part of myself that interacted with the world, and hid under a desk of fiction. I was miserable. I was tired of being miserable.

An idea struck me with the planet-shattering force of a comet. Why couldn't I just pretend to be someone else in the real world like I did in my mind? I made a decision then and there. I wasn't going to hide from death, I was going to meet it head on and force it to bend to my will. I was going to experience all the things I had been reading about in these magazines and books. I was going to be Tricia.

The thought frightened me, but it awoke a feeling I hadn't felt in a long time. Excitement. Hope. I had been trapped in a tower, under an amorphous blob of sealing goo, and all of a sudden it had torn, revealing the world outside in bright, vivid color. I could smell again, feel the air, I could hear the noise of the bustling street below. I still had my city of sturdy towers to protect me, but now I could venture outside of the city, into the unexplored meadow beyond the buildings. If this was how Tricia lived, then I was never going to be myself again.

---

Some time after my epiphany, Artemis returned to the hotel room. She started into her usual rant about what she had done while she was gone.

"Allison, it was a day. I thought for a minute that Kirk was on to me when I suggested we divert the newest shipments to my cousin's supermarket, but he was just paranoid about the fact

that it was in a Promethian neighborhood. I don't see why people have such a big problem with Promethians, we've never hurt a fly."

For the first time in months, I spoke. "It's because you're clever; your ancestors had to be when they colonized the first galaxy outside the Milky Way Satellites."

Artemis stopped dead in her boots. She looked around the room, as if looking for someone to corroborate what she just heard.

"Allison, did you just fucking talk?"

"Yes, and my name is Ben."

"Yeah, well I've been calling you Allison."

"It's not my name." I truly hadn't noticed she had been calling me by another name.

"I thought if I called you Allison, it might piss you off enough that you would start talking, and it kind of stuck." She still hadn't moved or broken her gaze, as if she were expecting me to transform into a monster or something.

"Please call me Ben."

Artemis never did anything for anyone without expecting something in return. My request flipped a switch in her brain, reminding her who and where she was. A coy smile came over her face, and she moved toward me.

"Well, *Allison*, it's actually very serendipitous that you decided to wake up today. I was beginning to think I would have to drop you off with the authorities, but perhaps you can actually help me."

She put her hands on the bed across from me, using it as a surface upon which we might make a deal. Her smooth, dark skin in the dim hotel light made her look kind of inhuman, like an automaton. I could almost hear the wheels turning in her head

"You see, I need something from someone. Thing is, this someone is never going to trust me with what she has. But a kid...a poor, abused, scarred up kid...now who would suspect him?"

I had so many questions, so many fears. Was a Teacher asking me to...steal something? Was that what life had in store for me?

Artemis could see I was apprehensive.

"We're not going to be hurting anyone. See, the girl we are going to take something from has a lot of stuff. Way more than anyone else around here. We're just going to take a small piece, redistribute the wealth. And all you have to do is put something in your pocket when no one is watching. Can you do that, Allison?"

I nodded slowly, not sure what else to do.

"And if you do that, I will stop calling you Allison! Also, I pretty much saved your life kid, you kind of owe me. Think about that."

I thought about it. I ran this scenario through the filter of the hundreds of thousands of stories I had stored in my mind. In all the lives I had imagined for myself, I was the hero, so certainly I would be the hero in this story as well. I had made my vow, I was going to stop being afraid and actually live my life. Maybe I wasn't as cool as Tricia yet, but I was close. I was Allison.





## Chapter 7 - Picking the universe's pocket

Artemis explained that she was never a Teacher. She had only applied to the position so that she could sneak onto Pluora two months before the planet imploded. It had taken her months to get approval, but she had been assured by her connections that it would be worth it. Outsiders were allowed on Pluora for monitored visits, but only those approved and committed to be Teachers were allowed to stay long-term. Once approved, your assets were moved into a common account, and you could only retrieve them if you left Pluora forever. Artemis intended to come to Pluora and convince the more ardent Teachers to waive their rights to said assets, allowing the money to go to 'charity' instead.

Many Teachers were more than willing to give away what they had forgotten they even had. As Artemis reminded me, Teachers rarely left Pluora, so that money was useless to them anyways. She told me that Ertian charities don't even use most of the donations they receive for the cause they are supposed to be supporting. This was all easy for me to believe, as the Teachers had warned me countless times of the evil nature of the universe beyond Pluora. Now that I was a part of this big, evil universe, I had to learn the rules. For that, and for everything else, I was completely reliant on Artemis.

She explained our first play to me in detail by our hotel window. She called them 'plays', as though she were a coach, or maybe more of a director.

"There's a woman, Junet Lufiner, who lives in that purpleish building right over there," she said, gesturing to a tall, purplish building through the window. "She runs a broadcast network for this galaxy, and is therefore very busy, and very rich. But we are not after her money. What we want is her com-palm. Specifically, the information she has on the upcoming Summer Serial lineup, which is on her com-palm. You'd be surprised how much certain people are willing to pay for that information, little Allison."

She ruffled my hair, like an older brother would do.

"Here is what is going to happen. You're going to stand at the corner of a bakery that Junet visits just before flashing home. You're going to do what you do best, look pathetic and scared. She's going to ask where your parents are, you're going to tell her that mommy went away with a stranger a long time ago and hasn't come back. She's going to try to call Child Watch Services, but you're going to beg her not to. You're going to say that you just need to call mommy, but she took your Com-Palm away. Junet will detach her Com disc and allow you to call mommy from it. At that very moment, mommy – that's me in case you didn't catch on – will appear and cause a commotion. You will place the com disc against this Sucker, and the data will be ours."

Artemis waved a small black box in the air; the Sucker. For those of you that aren't tuned into the criminal trade, Suckers are highly complicated devices that can scan a device's internal

structure and mold itself into an exact replica on the device, right down to the data stored inside. They are extremely expensive and only good for a single use, so we had to get it right the first time.

"How do you know she will even stop to talk to me, let alone give me her com-palm?" I asked Artemis. She smiled manically.

"Ah, Allison. This is my genius, this is why I am so good at what I do. I've reduced the human brain to a series of equations, and therefore I know how they will react to any situation. See, Junet is young, only 40 years old. She's at the age that some women chose to start a family. In fact, she's the exact age that her mother was when she decided to start a family. And Junet loves her mother. I mean, who wouldn't; her mother is beautiful, wholesome, compassionate, makes a mean apple cobbler...

"Unfortunately Junet was born with a low probability of fertility. To have a child herself, it would probably take years of effort, and Junet doesn't have time for that. She could grow a child, but then she wouldn't be following in her perfect mother's footsteps. This is a conundrum Junet must face every day - her biological impulse to procreate at odds with her drive for personal success, her failure to live up to her mother's perfection at odds with the self-confidence that was instilled in her by her mother. It's a classic mindset really, one I've made millions off of. It's child's play, you might say."

"You've done all this before?"

"Well not this exact situation, but similar ones, yes. All my plays are based on my ability to quantify motivations and desires. I give people what they want, and I take something of equal value. Except what I take is valuable to more people than just the mark. Plus I'm not too bad at mechanical programming either." Artemis flicked her thickly braided hair over her shoulder.

"Did you make that?" I pointed to the Sucker.

"This thing? Nah. I could have, but I got a cousin back on Promethia who is way better at it."

"You've got a lot of cousins," I pointed out.

"Well I mean, he's like a third cousin or something like that. All Promethians are family, in one way or another, ya know?"

"I do know."

Artemis' eyes widened in realization. "Of course you do, you Pluorans don't even have your own parents, right? You're all like a bunch of brothers and sisters."

If she could tell it made me sad to think about my family, she didn't show it. "I've always wondered, if it's like that, how do you know who you're allowed to fuck?"

It was something I had never thought about, being only ten years old at the time my home was destroyed.

"I never really thought about it," I said. "They taught us about sex, and some of the older children did have bonding ceremonies...I guess you just know how you feel about someone, either as family you have sex with, or family you don't."

"Sounds creepy as shit to me," said Artemis. "But enough romance, let's run through a couple scenarios."

Artemis and I rehearsed the play, each time changing an outcome or behavior. She programmed entire virtual simulations to enable us to physically act out each eventuality. I was getting my first glimpse into the intricate game of psychological chess she was playing. Psyche-mapping, she called it. She had already figured out every potential outcome of my interaction with Junet, but she was showing me her work, walking me through the steps. I was able to follow her logic, but this was only one mark, one psyche to map. What would it be like to have two minds to account for, even three? Throw in multiple locations, longer time spans, and you'd have an equation that even an AI would find difficult. As she said herself, this was Artemis' genius.

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The next day, as the setting suns projected long, cold shadows through the city, we huddled around the corner of the bakery for a final run through of the play. Artemis was dressed in a brightly colored outfit that showed an obscene amount of skin. She would have fit in perfectly on any street corner of Harpen Rue, which was exactly the point. She had molded prosthetics to her face that made her unrecognizable, and had even gone so far as to mark her skin with trios of dots, the telltale sign that someone was a Pom abuser. My disguise was less elaborate; Artemis had merely rubbed a bit of dirt on my face and clothes, making me just slightly more pathetic than I normally looked.

"You know the play Allison," she said, "just remember to stay calm, and if anything goes tilted, we meet back at the rendezvous point."

She swiped the right side of her jaw twice with the top of her pointer finger, the signal we had agreed would mean the job was done. I nodded, and we parted ways. I took up my position to the left of the bakery door, and waited. I had every second of the play memorized, locked tight in my sturdy towers. Not ten minutes later, Junet came walking towards the shop. Show time. I began rubbing my eyes, and sniffing quietly to myself. Junet came right towards me, just like Artemis said she would.

"Hey there little guy, is everything ok?" Junet said sweetly.

"No," I said, looking down at my feet.

"Are your parents around here?" she said, empathy plain in her voice.

"My mom told me to wait here, but that was a long time ago and I don't know where she is."

"Oh, well that's no good. Is she not answering her com?" Junet was saying almost word for word what I had memorized from the simulations.

"I...I don't have one. I used to have one, but my mom borrowed it and lost it."

Junet furrowed her brow. "Darn, well that's a downer. Every boy needs his own com-palm, isn't that right? What is your name?"

"Ben." Artemis told me there was no harm in using my real name.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Ben. I'm going to call CWS, and we'll both help you find your mom, ok?"

I shook my head vigorously, "No, no, my mom will be so angry if she has to come pick me up from CWS again. She hates it when I talk to strangers. Can I please use your com to call her?"

I looked up at Junet with my saddest, most pitiful eyes. I could see her studying the scar on my face, wondering how I had gotten such a terrible wound.

She knelt down. "Of course, Ben." She smiled sweetly.

Then she began to extend her arm out towards my head. My heart skipped a beat. She was going to allow me to use her phone on her own palm. She could have projected the screen into the air - something Artemis and I had planned for. I would have simply held her wrist and pressed the Sucker against the receiver on the underside of her arm - but she was actually allowing me to touch her palm. I had never seen anyone extend their hand for such a purpose; it wasn't practical use of the technology. But this wasn't a pragmatic gesture, it was an emotional one. I couldn't simply grab the com-palm, only the fingers of the owner could remove it from its dock. And even if I could somehow take it, all she would have to do is twirl the edge of the empty dock and the receiver would wipe itself completely. I considered just running away...but that's not what Tricia would do. So I made an emotional gesture of my own. As her hand came close to me, I flinched away from it, as if I expected it to hit me. She immediately withdrew her hand, and gave me a look of pure sympathy.

"I'm not going to hurt you, I swear on the Council," she said, "here, take it."

She unclipped the small, circular disc from her wrist and held it out for me to take. I slowly reached out and pinched it in between my forefinger and thumb, then quickly withdrew my hand.

"Kimchee Vorty, New Hanover," I said to the Com-palm, and it dialed Kimchee — one of Artemis' cousins who knew not to answer. After the third ring, Artemis appeared around the corner and began running towards Junet, shouting profanities at her.

"What in THE HELL are you doin' to mis kid, you skud-guzzling WHORE!"

Junet jumped and faced Artemis, holding her hands up.

"Now hold on ma'am..."

This was my chance. I shoved the disc into my pocket and pressed it against the Sucker. It would take 30 seconds to finish, so all I could do now was wait and watch Artemis work her magic.

"You think cause you'n be CLEAN QUEEN that you cul' snatch my baby!"

I hoped the Junet didn't have her translator set to remove accents or patois, because Artemis' impression of this planet's lower-class dialect was highly entertaining.

"What you see here na make you fink you'n better mother than moi?"

Artemis threw her hands up dramatically and did a slow turn for Junet, giving her a provocative sneer the entire time. As she threw her hands up, she let out a holimote from her fingers that rained down holographic sparkles in the air.

Junet was speechless, trying to respond but unable to find words to respond to what was happening. She did look back at me for a second, but was too shocked by Artemis' accurate accusation to realize I had her com-palm in my pocket. Artemis was careful not to touch her — any forceful contact would likely be picked up by monitors and Artemis didn't want any record of this interaction.

She began clapping her hands in Junet's face, bringing her attention back to her for the final few seconds. I felt the Sucker buzz, indicating the job was done. I brushed my jaw with my finger to signal Artemis, and she brought her tirade to a close, giving Junet a final 'hmmpf' and marching over to collect me.

I held out the Com-Palm, which Junet quickly snatched. She walked in the opposite direction, but not before looking back at me one final time, her face full of pity towards me.

Artemis and I walked briskly away from the bakery, hand in hand, towards the small Flash Point a block away. We entered the pod together, and in a few seconds, we were back across the street from the hotel.

"Give me the Sucker, Alli," was the first thing Artemis said to me.

Eyes on the prize, as always. I handed her the small black box. Artemis pressed it to a pad, which illuminated a display screen that showed the contents within the Sucker.

"Gotta make copies immediately, I've learned that the hard way," she said, almost wistfully.

Neither of us spoke as we entered the hotel and rode an ancient elevator up to our room on the 103rd floor.

"Now we can talk about your performance back there," Artemis said finally as the room door slid shut behind her.

I hadn't even stopped to fully process what had happened. Had I done the right thing? Should I have run away? It all happened so quickly, it felt like it happened to someone else.

"You fucking nailed it, sen," Artemis clapped me on the back. "Passed with flying colors."

She removed the giant aquamarine wig she had piled on top of her head, and began rubbing solvent on her face.

"Did you know," I asked, "that she would try to let me type on her hand?"

"Course I knew kid good, look who you'n talking to here." As she spoke, her fake nose came loose and fell to the floor. She picked it up and added it to the ball of prosthetic goo she had already pulled from her face.

"I knew that the more starved for attention you looked, the higher the likelihood that she would try to connect with you on a physical level. Also she hasn't had sex in three weeks, so that played a part too."

"Then why didn't we run through *that* simulation?"

"I wanted to see what you would do. You're a bit of an enigma, Allison, hard to predict. I had a hunch and wanted to see if I was right."

"Your hunch was right then, I did what you wanted?" I asked.

"No. I was wrong. I thought you would run away," Artemis said, a hint of rare astonishment hidden in her voice. She paused her disguise-removal process to turn to me and place a hand on my shoulder. "I'm glad you didn't, Ben."

It was at that moment that I realized how much I had been missing the praise and affection I had grown so used to from my teachers on Pluora. And she used my real name...emotions bubbled in my belly, but shoved them back down.

"Yeah well...I, uh," I cleared my throat, "I owe you that much, at a min." Artemis took her hand from my shoulder and turned away.

"That's right," she said, quietly. She suddenly clapped her hands, spun back around and smiled.

"Well Allison, now you're really going to start pulling your own weight around here! This planet may be small, but there's a lot more sims out there, and we're going to squeeze them for all they've got! And when we're done here, we'll move on to the next planet, 'cause that's what we do. You and I, Artemis and Allison, trickster extraordinaires, picking the universe's pocket until the end of time!" Artemis finished her pitch with a flourish.

"It's Ben," I said. "Artemis and Ben."

"Ah yes of course, Ben. That will take some getting used to."

I'll tell you right now that Artemis never stopped calling me Allison. I corrected her a few more times, but gave up on that endeavor pretty quickly. It felt weird, her calling me Ben. That was what the teachers called me on Pluora, and Artemis was more than a teacher to me. Maybe it's more accurate to say she was less than a teacher to me. At any rate, our relationship was different, and I was different, and so I needed a different name. Besides, trying to change Artemis' mind was like trying to uproot a Shivas tree, and I had bigger battles to wage.

## Chapter 8 - It's more of a Sunk Cost Linear Regression

Now, a brief history lesson. The Council of Light worked hard to gently abolish crime from the ITZ, over the course of a millenia. Sentiency was lulled into a peace that lasted for generations, and still blankets the High L planets to this day. But as the minds of humans began to wake from the dream of the Ertian Empire and search for a new way, crime began to make a comeback. Everywhere, there were pockets of people that wanted to rebel, and do whatever it was the Ertian Tenants didn't want them to do. Society was supplying the criminals, but who knew how to actually commit a crime?

Artemis' Family did. Thousands of years ago, they had been an organized gang that fled to Promethia, where they helped colonize the first planet outside of the Milky Way. Artemis' family had resisted the influence of the Ertian Empire for millenia, doing whatever it took to protect the secrets of their trade. Hacking, forging, spying — they carried on teaching these skills to their children even as the world moved on from needing them. They were criminals, outcasts; it was in their nature to act contrary to whatever the status quo was telling them to do. Little did they know that by resisting the tides of time, they would end up being the sole protectors of mountains of knowledge — that is, the only protectors outside of the Council of Light and the Ertian elite. The Family could have become a major entity in the ITZ, along with the likes of Davos, Phalereon, and even the Council themselves, but they preferred to stay underground. The Family opened its doors to include non-blood relatives a long time ago, but I believe that was less about sharing the knowledge, and more about hiding the identity of the true Family lineage.

After my stellar performance during my first play, Artemis took me to Promethia to introduce me to her family. It was not clear from her intonation whether I would be meeting her closest colleagues in the Family, or the people she was raised with. I know now that neither of those descriptions would be entirely accurate.

We arrived at a town called Folina, which had been reclaimed by Artemis' grandparents two hundred years prior. She gave me no preamble, no introduction as we approached a large, wooden house and knocked on the door.

A wide man with orangish-brown skin and a moustache the color of rust burst through the threshold and embraced me in a tight hug. My nostrils filled with the sour smell of ammonia as I



stood there frozen, unsure of what to do. This was Uncle Y'ra; himself a founder of Folina. His speciality within the family was drug manufacturing, so he always smelled of chemicals, but his demeanor was unfailingly sweet.

As I began to wiggle away from the embrace, an even larger man wrapped his long arms around Uncle Y'ra's, closing me in a double hug. This was Yr'a's adopted son Ibis, who specialized in database hacking. Through the muted hums of the two men's suffocating torsos, I heard a female voice call out to show me some mercy. This was Auntie Sorah, Uncle Yr'a's partner, and mechanical genius.

On Artemis' ship I had gotten lost in fiction, and on Folina I got lost in facts. Her family surrounded me with the hard, elementary science I had loved so much on Pluora. Uncle Y'ra taught me how to synthesize a dozen illicit drugs; Uncle Ibis taught me how to hack into a Com-Palm; Auntie Sorah taught me how to make a reusable EMP emitter. These were the cold hard facts that could never change, and never leave. The bedrock of my sturdy towers.

It did not bother me one bit that some of the things that were being taught to me were forbidden knowledge. Right and wrong are not facts, and do not exist in the real world any more than they do in the stories I had been so fond of telling myself.

Artemis remained my primary teacher, training me in the science of psyche-mapping.

"Again."

"Artemis, this is the 127th simulation we've run through today. I don't even remember what real life is like anymore," I complained as the simulation reset around us.

The grey street on which we had been standing was replaced with green moss, the blue sky with white fog, and in a matter of seconds we were standing in an air spa. Artemis had done a surprisingly good job of recreating the various pressures and smells and feels of an air spa. Air spa's entire existence was based on the fact that different climates are hard to reproduce without expensive and intricate machinery, but there we were, standing in her simroom on her spaceship, feeling the cool ocean breeze of Terragon. A naked woman sat frozen in time on a wooden bench in the corner.

"I *need* to know if this is a viable play," Artemis said. "The payoff would be huge."

"We've tried this 127 times. Don't you think that means it's not viable? I've seen you give up on a play after only one failed sim."

"I spent two months dating a donk so I could find out what makes this woman tick. I'm not giving up that easily, Alli."

"Weren't you the one that told me about the sunk cost fallacy? Throwing more time at this doesn't make the initial time you wasted any less wasted."

"It does if we can make it work. Then, none of the time would be wasted. Have I not told you about the Sunk Cost Ratio? Two months of my work, even if it was on the side, is immensely valuable. Call that a numerator of 30. The prize, if I can get this woman to agree to

attending the Labor Gala, thereby introducing her to the Executive, thereby causing him to miss the meeting that our client needs him to miss, is a denominator of 1,000. A day of simulation adds 1 point to our numerator, still keeping us well below the ideal ratio of 1:7.”

“That’s a pretty simple calculation, for you.”

“Well I dumbed it down tremendously. It’s really more of a Sunk Cost Linear Regression. But I also have a Sunk Cost Ratio when it comes to explaining things to you, and the denominator is pretty low on that one.”

“Does my mental anguish factor into either of those equations?”

“Mine does.” She winked at me and tapped her Com-Palm, beginning the simulation.

I sighed and took my spot in the corner of the spa room. Suddenly, the room froze again.

“You see what I just did there?” Artemis asked.

I looked around the room. Brown, Argrurian walls, mossy ground, naked lady in the corner...

“I don’t see anything different,” I said with a shrug.

“Not in the room, *mooky*, what did I just do?”

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes; Artemis hated when I did that. “You restarted the simulation,” I answered, my voice fake echoing against the fake walls.

“But how?”

“With your Com-palm, of course.”

“Yes ff course, with my Com-palm. By tapping it. I didn’t have to tell it what to do,” she said, holding out the underside of her arm to expose the circular disc that was embedded there.

“That’s how all com-palms work, you don’t have to tell them what to do, they just know. Yours isn’t special,” I said.

“Of course it isn’t special, the fact that this manufactured disc in my arm can predict what I’m about to do. It was invented millenia ago by the great Discus AI, who are we to question how it can do that,” she said, looking me hard in the eyes.

I began to see her point. I don’t know how I had never made the connection before. “Its...psyche-mapping you. They all are, all this time.” I turned over my own left arm to look at the silver circle in my wrist.

“These things that I am teaching you are not just a way to make money, Alli,” Artemis said as she gently wrapped her fingers around my wrist. “Davos, that huge corporation who made this thing and put it in you before you were a year old, they hold this secret, this knowledge, this psyche-map of you. And of me, up to a point.” She closed her hand around my wrist and squeezed. “Do you want them to be the only ones who hold that secret?”

I squeezed my hand into a fist, feeling the ligaments in my wrist press against Artemis’ hand, and the com-palm housing that was embedded in my flesh. The sensation, normally ignored by my brain, felt unnatural.

“No,” I said, my voice cracking.

“Good.” She released my arm, the impression of her fingers lingering on my skin.

“Let’s try this again, Alli.”

Artemis and I spent the next four years going back and forth between Promethia and Andes, where we ran another four plays. I impersonated a politician's son and filmed him meeting with a member of a hostile foreign government. I helped a zealous android manufacturer run his competitor out of business by building illegal AI and planting it in his warehouse. I spent two months as a ward of the state, tracking down a lead that ended up not panning out. In hindsight, I suspect that Artemis really just wanted me out of her hair for a while.

After Andes, we ventured further from Promethia to Virgon, the journey taking us a few months as neither planet was near a Slingshot hub. Artemis handled all of the money we made from selling the spoils of our plays, and there never seemed to be enough of it. We worked constantly, but it didn't bother me. She had given me life by saving us from Pluora, she had fed me and washed me when I was practically catatonic, she taught me how to fend for myself. She had even named me.

I was still young, still dependent on Artemis to guide me, still so far from matching her talents. So I followed her from Nax to N23, doing what she said, learning what I could.

But as I entered my teenage years, I grew increasingly frustrated. Frustrated that I didn't have friends my age, frustrated that I couldn't pick up girls, but most of all, frustrated that I was failing to meet the expectations that Artemis had set for me. I had come so far from my innocent beginnings, and pulled off so many intricate plays, but it wasn't enough for her. She still didn't trust me to so much as take a shit without her supervision.

All that frustration reached a boiling point on my 18th birthday. We got into a shouting match, Artemis and I. I told her I wanted more freedom, she said I wasn't ready. I pointed out all the ways I had proven myself, she pointed out all the experiences I hadn't yet had. In the end I stormed off, borrowed a cousin's ship, and set off to have a little fun.

## Chapter 9 - Do you want to get lost?

My cousin Theo let me use his ship on the condition that he come with me. He was ten years older - old enough to cause some trouble, but young enough to not worry about the consequences. He had the same wiry, brown hair as Artemis, but a much fairer complexion. I suspected that Theo was a true blood relative of Artemis, but it was impossible to tell for sure, and ultimately not important.

"So Alli, where do you want to go?" he asked as we exited the Virgon atmosphere.

"Somewhere far away," I said steadfastly, adding, "with hot bitties."

He laughed. "So it's girls you want, eh? I know a good place. Sit tight, its only a snap away."

Within minutes, we'd arrived at our destination. From the ship's display I could see we were orbiting a colony named Virgon A in the same satellite galaxy of Andromeda as Virgon itself.

"Ah, the mothersphere. Ain't she a slice," he looked down through the flight deck window at the massive spinning orb affectionately.

"You're from this colony?" I asked. "I always thought you were born on Promethia."

"My parents weren't high enough to live on no planet. There's lots of us non-Promethia Promethians here."

"So this is where we're going?"

"Nah, we're going somewhere even better."

He flew the ship past the colony, watching the navigational display carefully.

"Should be right about here," he said.

"What's here? I don't see anything."

He held up a finger, signaling me to wait, as his other hand entered some numbers on the communications portal. Suddenly, the empty space before us began to ripple, revealing a large docking bay.

"Welcome," Theo said with a flick of his wrist, "to The Cove."

We entered the massive docking bay, each port illuminated with various neon colors that reflected beautifully off the dark metal walls of the bay. Above our heads there was a huge holo display covering the entire roof of the bay, projecting an image of a large-breasted woman drinking a decorative beverage.

Theo swiped his wrist over a panel on the wall where we had docked, and the wall turned from black to transparent, revealing a huge room full of arcade games and gambling stations beyond. I followed Theo through the room in a daze, slightly overwhelmed by the bright lights and half naked men and women criss-crossing the floor.

"Hey Theo, my Zen, what's dark?" A slightly overweight man with dark hair greeted Theo.

"Just doing life, Pacco, how's yours?"

"We good, we good. Who's this killer here?" Pacco motioned to me.

"This here is Alli. It's his 18th birthday, and he's looking to have some fun, you don' it?"

My stomach was a noxious mix of excitement, nervousness, and horniness, but I fought to look as though everything were normal.

"We talking 18 ITZ years? And he's got a scar like that? You must be a tough motherfucker, Zen. Come on in, we've got some fun or two goin' on."

Pacco beckoned us inside a shining blue door. Inside, the walls swooped up and down in waves, making groovy alcoves and seating areas. Theo was greeted by another group of friends, and I took the opportunity to explore this bizarre place a little further. As I walked, I stepped onto a strange looking floor tile that suddenly engulfed my foot, causing me to fall to the ground and yell out in terror. I scrambled to free myself from the rubbery material as it attacked my foot. Theo ran up to me, but instead of pulling me out, he put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

It was then that I noticed a pleasant feeling - the floor was massaging my foot. Theo and his crew approached me, laughing.

"You say this is Artemis' kid huh?" a large man with long hair nudged Theo. "Checks out man, I once saw that gal trip over a Rox combuster and fall 30 feet off a ship!"

He leaned down and pulled me up, out of the rubber tile.

"Welcome to the Cove, mate." He handed me a small vaporizer pen. "Suck down on this shit, ah."

I had never smoked anything other than nicotine before, and something told me that wasn't what was inside this pen. I inhaled, and my lungs were filled with a warm, thick smoke. I looked over at Theo expectantly.

"You'll feel it in about 20 seconds. The delay helps you not to get addicted." He pulled out a pen of his own and took a long drag.

Slowly, I began to feel a warmth spread out from the middle of my chest to the tips of my fingers. I exhaled slowly, a smile overtaking my face as I began to feel at home in this strange place.

"Ho, I think he likes it," the large man laughed. "Let's, ah, take a seat."

We settled into one of the alcoves with plush black sofas, and were soon joined by four gorgeous women that clearly knew Theo and his friends well. Pacco lumbered over to us, holding a box in each hand. He handed the small one to Theo, and the large one to me.

"Take a look at these, nimo."

I pulled off the lid to reveal a pair of dark blue and gray boots. I didn't recognize their brand, but they were clearly very expensive. Before I could say anything, Pacco pulled one of them out of the box.

"Check this shit out."

He wrapped the heel of the boot with his knuckles, and a sharp probe popped out of the boot tip, almost hitting me in the face. I jumped back. Everyone laughed at me, again.

“Careful, little nimo, one graze from this baby and you’ll have to buy yourself a new pair of pants.” He jabbed the tip towards Theo before tapping the heel again, retracting the probe.

“Got these babies off some poor Bostian that didn’t know how to play High Poker. They don’t fit my big ass feet, but they should do you, ah birthday boy?” He held the boot out for me to take.

I grabbed it from him, turning it over in my hands with delight.

“Really, zen? That’s super cool, thank you!” I gushed.

Pacco chuckled, and patted me hard on the shoulder.

“Just don’t kick anybody with those fuckers inside my place, ah? Not unless they really deserve it.” He laughed again and everyone else joined him.

“Much love, Kingamon, much love,” Theo clapped his hand quickly against Pacco’s, in the traditional Promethian way, and Pacco lumbered off, chuckling quietly to himself.

One of the women sitting with us, a young girl who had dyed her entire body a pleasant shade of blue, grabbed the other box from Theo and opened it as eagerly as I had opened my gift. Inside were dozens of drug patches in a variety of shapes. She scooted over closer to me.

"So tell me, Alli, do you want to get lost?" she asked in breathy voice.

I stuttered at the question. “Uh yeah, um, what does that mean exactly?”

The girl smiled.

“Have you ever left your family? Quit your job by walking out, and just kept walking, without a destination or a second thought about what you’re leaving behind? Have you ever forgotten what you like and don’t like, and decide to say yes to the next person who crosses your gaze? Have you ever gone somewhere so far from home that you don’t recognize the plants, the sky, the orientation of your cock?”

I stared back at her blankly.

“That’s lost baby.”

What she had said was nonsense, and yet I had never wanted something more in my entire life. It was as though she had taken the dark, amorphous hole in the pit of my being and given it a name, and a purpose. I wanted to get lost, I wanted to *be* lost, and I didn’t care where we were going.

Theo laughed. “Jesus Christ Pola, you sure know how to recruit for the dark side. Let’s get the felp started off with something a little more...not completely insane.”

Theo grabbed my shoulder, pulling me away from Pola’s blue face as if he were pulling me out of a cloud of magical dust. It snapped me back to reality, and the steady ache of fear that came with it. Theo poured over the box of goodies, humming to himself.

“Tell me how you want to feel, Alli.”

I thought for a moment. "I want to feel relaxed, but not conked like Pom does to you. And maybe a little thrilled too."

Theo smiled. "That's a delicate balance, zen." He pondered over the box a bit longer, finally pulling out a small patch in the shape of a sunflower.

"Try this," he said, handing it to me.

I pulled off the plastic top layer of the patch and placed it on my forearm, as I had seen others do before. A holimote of a bright, beautiful sunflower burst from my Com-Palm as the patch tech interfaced and took over control of the biobots in my body. This was a rare thing: typically a patch would just release drugs into your system, this one actually hacked my system. I let out an exhale that I had been holding for months. The air triggered a flood – happiness and relief spread through my body with such force I could not even complete my exhale. It felt so good the breath caught in my throat as my body momentarily ceased to function. I could not see or hear, I could only feel, happy. The amorphous darkness that exists forever in the center of my body was forced out by the wave of happiness, and for a moment I was whole and perfect. I was God, I was the stars, I was energy, and we were all dancing in a circle in perfect unison.

The next thing I remember, I was standing on top of the Cove in a space suit, firing lasers into empty space and watching them collide with the exo-shield, producing a burst of light not unlike a firework. Two of Theo's friends were laying on their backs, either watching the fireworks or unconscious. Theo himself was playing with one of the women's breasts, watching them bounce around in zero-gravity inside her skin-tight nylon suit. I felt exhilarated, and for lack of a better word, cool. Many people would look at my life up to that point and say, 'well now, he's done some pretty cool shit', but I certainly didn't feel that way at the time. Sure, I had escaped both the destruction of my home planet, and I was currently an active member of an inter-galactic criminal organization, but I was also friendless, scarred, and emulating my personality after a character on a teenage girls' television show. I had also recently hit a growth spurt, and was painfully lanky and uncoordinated in my new stature. But at this moment, I was good, surrounded by friends. It felt incredible, and I cursed Artemis for having kept this from me for so long.

Theo's large friend with the long hair, whose name I still do not remember, thumped me on the shoulder with one of his massive hands.

"Come over here mate, I want to show you a thing."

I followed him to a control panel sticking up from the exterior of the Cove's hull. He pulled a small object from a pouch on his suit and stuck it to the side of the control panel. The screen turned blue, then began playing a short animated video of a centaur shooting a uniformed Ertian official in the dick, then stomping on his head. I guessed it was a hacker's signature. The panel's normal display came back up, but now long-hair was able to control it.

"Watch this," he said, pointing to a large mechanical arm for loading packages affixed to the Cove's hull.

He extended the arm up and over to the girl with blue skin, who was lying passed out on her back. He clamped the mechanical digits over her helmet, then began to raise her up by her head. One of the other guys saw what long-hair was trying to do, and turned off the girls' affinity boots, freeing her from the surface of the ship. From her limp form I could see she was still

passed out. As he moved her further and further from the ship's hull, I began to worry – there was no way she could float away, numerous security measures made sure of that, but seeing her hanging limply against the backdrop of space, only tethered by a claw, it made my scalp itch.

My skin froze with fear as she woke up, and began flailing around, obviously freaking out at her sudden, sobering surroundings. She clawed at the digits of the arm, and in her panic, pressed the release button on her helmet. Not all suits would have such a feature, but as fate would have it, hers was designed for primarily aesthetic purposes. The suits' emergency measures kicked in immediately, covering her exposed head in a skin-tight protective film. She pulled the emergency oxygen tube from her shoulder and pressed it through the film and into her mouth. Everyone but me laughed hysterically as she activated her affinity boots and was pulled back to the Cove's surface. Her blue face was squished inside the protective film, making her angry expression cartoonishly exaggerated. She looked absolutely ridiculous – perhaps this was all simple fun after all. Long-hair was beside himself with laughter.

“Are you sure you're getting enough oxygen, love? You look a little blue,” he cackled.

She lunged at him, hands clenched tightly into fists. He pushed her aside with a wave of one of his massive hands. In his inebriated state, his hand accidentally caught her oxygen tube, pulling it from her mouth. The girl fell to her knees, then hunched over and began clawing at her face. I clumsily rushed over to her to make sure she was alright. What I found when kneeled down beside her, was that she was not. The film should have closed the gap from where the tube was removed, but it had not. Cheap materials, perhaps. Whatever the reason, this girl was now in real danger. I quickly scooped her up in my arms, stumbling when her boots pulled us back down. Switching them off, I carried her to the nearest door I could see. Her lips were already purple and frozen.

I waved my hand over the panel, and the door began to slide open, moving more slowly than I had even seen a door move. When the opening was wide enough, I shoved her head through the proxo-shield, allowing her to breathe. The rest of her body fell through shortly after, followed by myself, and then Theo. He shut the exterior door as I activated the gravity, causing the girl to drop to the floor. She was making an unnatural sound, not quite like breathing. Her mouth must have opened when I tried to lift her, exposing her throat and lungs to the frigid, pressure-less air...I tried not to think about it. We carried her through the interior door, down to the medical wing in silence.

I watched numbly as a medical droid rushed her behind closed doors. I never found out if she recovered. With all that had happened in the last 40 hours, I was too braindead to feel anything. The darkness that had been pushed away by the drugs had crept back.

“I think I'm ready to go home,” I told Theo.

“I hear that, Zen.” He punched me playfully on the shoulder. “I was right that you wouldn't have much of a taste for getting lost, ah.”

“That wasn't lost, Theo. I was nowhere close to leaving all this shit behind,” I said, gesturing generally to the world around me. Theo looked surprised, then grinned through the side of his face. “You're a real mug, you know that?”



I resented being called a mug. I was no hardened criminal, I was just barely getting by. I wasn't cut out for shit like this. Reading about it, watching it on a Box, maybe...but not living it.

"Whatever, man. Let's just get out of here."

Theo smiled.

"Happy Birthday Alli."

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I returned back to Artemis and my apartment relieved to be home. I threw my new boots on the ground and sank into the living room couch. I was ready to see Artemis, and tell her I was wrong. I was ready to get back to the ways things were, doing moderate plays at moderate risk for moderate reward. I had seen more than enough of death for my lifetime, and wasn't about to argue my way into seeing more of it.

A long lecture no doubt awaited me the moment Artemis walked through the door. She had probably figured out where I had gone, and probably even knew everything we had done. I wondered what she would say about the accident, about the girl...I scrunched my face up tight, trying to squeeze the memories from my head. I needed something else to focus on, something safe...I thought of the time Artemis took me to Ataxi World, a theme park on Andes that had living Ataxi leviathans roaming around the park. I was awestruck by the creatures, 20-meter tall boulders held together by dark purple organic matter, that slid across the ground at an almost imperceptible pace. As I was standing next to one, staring up at it and squinting to see the top, a piece of rock chipped off and hit me square in the forehead. Artemis laughed her ass off, but also vigorously ran her fingers through my hair to stop the pain while the minor wound healed. We were there to track someone down, a technician who had purchased some illegal AI. That was a good play. What was the mark's name? I drifted off as I tried to remember.

I awoke a short time later as the door to the apartment slid open and closed. I could hear Artemis swiping through the activity log, reviewing the movements detected by the monitors around our apartment. I decided I would come to her - maybe I could gain some kind of an upper hand by making the first move. I got up from the couch and faced her.

"Look Artemis, I - "

"Amican's stones!" Artemis jumped back, hitting the wall behind her. She wore her hair high on her head in two large, braided pigtails, which swung back and forth. "Alli, you scared the creepers out of me!"

"I thought you knew I was here."

"Barren voids, you're not the only meat on my platter, you know that right?" She seemed downright angry. "I'm a damn busy woman, I can't be expected to know everything all the time about everyone!"

She took a deep breath and threw her hair over her shoulder, calming somewhat. "Let's go sit down, we need to talk."

I lowered my hands, which had been raised in a defensive position, and followed her into the Box room. She took the couch, and I the minimalist chair across from her.

“Artemis, I-“

She held up a hand. “Let’s skip all of the emotional nonsense, Alli. You were right.”

“I was...right...” I said slowly, trying to keep the surprise from my voice.

“It’s time I gave you a little more rope, and let you decide whether to lasso some Red or hang yourself with it.” She closed her light palm into a dark fist, leaving only a single finger extended, pointing at me.

“It’s important that you think for yourself. If you can’t do that, people are going to take advantage of you. Anyone who tells other people what to do is fucked in the head, and they’ll end up taking you down before they fall themselves.”

I looked at her incredulously.

“Except for me of course. I always have your wellbeing in mind. But I said we weren’t going to get into emotional nonsense.” She cleared her throat and cracked her neck, then looked me square in the eyes. “Now, I’m going to give you some information, and you can decide for yourself what you’re going to do with it.”

I nodded, afraid that if I opened my mouth I might say something to change her mind.

Artemis cracked her neck on the other side. It was rare to see her this uncomfortable.

“Ok. There is a man named Petrus Smallwood. He’s a VP for Phalareon Co, the company that builds solar harnessing cores. Two years ago, Petrus’ son died, and he fell into a deep depression, disappearing into some sad corner of the universe. But two months ago, he made a sudden, triumphant return. Apparently, he was a bit of an overinflated hot air balloon before the death, but now he’s driven and focused, intent on making an imprint on the world.

“Now for the second bit. There’s a new anti-harnessing activist group, calling themselves The Reliance. They believe that solar harnessing will be the downfall of life, and there are quite a few powerful and wealthy members, on the down-low of course. Their mission is to seize and disarm as many cores as possible. So far, they haven’t been able to stop so much as a photon, mostly due to the fact that the location of the cores is a closely guarded secret.”

Artemis opened her mouth as if she had something more to say, then decided against it.

“So there’s the information. Now you have to decide what you’re going to do with it.”

She stood up from the couch, but I wasn’t going to let her get away that easily. This was a blessedly welcome distraction from my teenage existential crisis.

“He wants a protégé,” I said loudly, and she paused her exit. “I can get close to Petrus, become a replacement for his son. Make him rely on me for validation. He’ll trust me completely, and I’ll use that trust to find the location of the solar harnessing cores. Then, I’ll sell that information to The Reliance.”

I smirked; it only took me a couple of seconds to figure out her little equation.

Artemis sat back down. “How will you meet him? He’s one of the most important people in the ITZ. How will you convince him you’re worthy of even a second of his time, let alone worthy of him opening the deep wound that was left by his real son? And do you think that

Petrus himself has any idea where even a single one of the cores is? How will you find the Reliance, and convince them your information is worth buying?"

I frowned. "Those are all details, Artemis, I can figure them out with a little reconnaissance."

"Details?!" Artemis stood again, shouting, "Psyche-mapping is nothing but details! You think that I just learn a couple of facts and make up the rest as I go? Do you think that simply knowing where A and B are will move you from one to the other? A single detail, any detail, can be the end of your life or the fulcrum that swings your entire play to victory!"

Artemis threw her hand across the air with a power beyond her small frame.

"I'm sorry Artemis, I didn't mean that –"

"I know what you meant, Allison. You don't understand even an iota of the complexity of a play like this, and the sooner you understand *that*, the less likely you'll end up with your brains dripping out of a hole in your head."

"You've made your point Artemis," I said, biting my tongue. I knew she would never be able to let me work on my own, and this time was no different.

"I hope that I have," she said gravely. "You look tired, you should get some sleep."

I wanted to start working immediately, but I was truly exhausted. As I walked by her, Artemis reached up and ruffled my hair. "You're getting so tall, Alli," she said wistfully. I shrugged her off, and left for my room.

## Chapter 10 - I heard a strange sound

When I awoke eleven hours later, Artemis was gone. Not just ‘out for the day’ gone; she had packed a bag and left. She left no note, which was as clear a message as any: *Figure your own shit out*. I asked Uncle Y’ra and Auntie Sorah if they knew where she went, knowing full well they would never tell me, and they didn’t. I have to admit, I was hurt that she would do this so suddenly. I’d become accustomed to her constant presence. Of course, because of the way I was raised on Pluora, this was the only way I could really learn. Artemis knew that, though at the time I could not see it.

So I learned. After a day of self-pity, I began contacting Artemis’ connections. I knew she learned her precious ‘details’ through a mixture of virtual surveillance and the Promethian underground, but she hadn’t given me much insight into her process. I quickly came to find out that the information did not come free, especially not to a newcomer. Artemis had left me 7,000 Redits in my account; enough for two month’s rent and food, but little else. I sold what I could from the apartment and moved in with Uncle Y’ra, who was happy to have some help cooking his product. I worked myself ragged; synthesizing chemicals by night for extra Red, and chasing down leads and mapping psyches by day.

I had initially thought I would be able to complete the entire play and get the coordinates in six months – six months later I was still working and planning. My back ached from hunching over screens, watching hours upon hours of hacked video surveillance and texts and emails. My fingers were raw from chemicals, and I couldn’t wash the sour stench of acetone from my skin. I pushed myself to the absolute limit, determined to prove to Artemis that I was worthy of her attention.

Then one day, it all fell into place. It was so subtle I almost didn’t notice it. I was staring at a hologram of a Solar Harnessing Core, or at least what the Council of Light wanted us to think was a Solar Harnessing Core. The golden orb spun in the air, cylindrical beams of light poking out of the evenly-spaced holes in the exterior as though it were a gold, spiky disco ball. A message suddenly popped up above the orb — the psyche calculations for my latest iteration had finished computing, and the result was success, with 90% confidence. With that last piece of information, I had ticked every box, tied up every loose end, accumulated every tool. I ran through the play again and again, sure that there was some number I’d miscalculated, but there was nothing. I was ready.

I spent a week saying goodbye to the family, letting everyone know I was going to be incognito for a while. Ten months to be exact. A part of me held out hope that word would make its way to Artemis, and she would come see me off, but she remained silent. After the week had

gone by without her appearing, I pushed Artmeis from my mind; my focus was now Petrus, and finding the location of the solar harnessing cores.

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Ben stopped speaking.

“I think that’s a good place to stop. What do you say we pick back up after lunch?”

Everyone blinked and looked around, almost as if they had forgotten where they were.

“Sure, sounds good mate. My legs could use an interminable stretch,” Dax said, yawning.

Ben walked off as the rest of the crew prepared for dinner. He entered his workshop, closing the door behind him. As he sat, he glanced over at the model of Pluora, a wave of sorrow washing over his face. He pulled a canister from a mini-fridge below his desk, taking a deep drink from it, before returning it to the fridge. He set a timer lock, preventing anyone from opening the door for a few hours. He wanted nothing more than to down the entire contents of that canister, but a fire within him prevented him from doing so.

Instead, he picked up an object from his desk, turning it over in his hand. It was oddly shaped; a semi-circle of heavy, smooth stone connected by three thin bars to a brightly glowing core. He placed the object back on his desk, and began typing on a screen, adding a few lines of text in the middle of a thick wall of code. Ben pulled a shiny cover over his head, activated his personal shield, then poised his hand over the active pad next to the screen. With a sharp inhale, he pressed the pad, submitting the program. The core of the object began to dim, changing from bright white to dim blue, then red, then green. A beam arced out from both ends of the stone semi-circle, completing the circle with neon electric plasma. Then suddenly, the beam destabilized, shooting an electrical tendril out to an overload rod in the center of the workshop. Sparks flew out from the point where the electricity hit the rod, along with red hot pieces of crystal, and metal, and vapor.

When the elemental fireworks ended, the charred remains of the object lay smoking on the workbench. Almost immediately, the fractured pieces of stone snapped back into place, as though drawn together by some magnetic energy. The stone burned white hot, and when it cooled, the object was whole again. Ben picked up the newly restored trinket, then threw it hard against the wall, breaking it into a pieces again. The fragments re-joined as before, and Ben sank to the floor, head in hands.

There was a knock on his door.

“Ben, its Lucia. Lunch is ready, if you want to come eat. I made spaghetti.”

Ben stood, removing his head cover and turning off his shield before opening the door.

“Hi Lucia. I’ll come down in a minute.”

“Is everything ok?” she asked quickly, “I heard a...strange sound.”

“Everything is fine, just doing some experiments.” He stepped back from the door and began to close it, “I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Wait, Ben,” Lucia pushed herself through the door, almost bumping chests with him.  
“Did you ever meet someone named Oculus? A Promethian?”

Ben thought for a moment, “No, the name doesn’t ring a bell.”

Lucia looked crestfallen. “That’s a shame. He was a friend of my uncle’s. He was a great guy, claimed he had been to half the planets in the ITZ. I thought maybe you’d crossed paths along the way.”

“The universe is a big place,” said Ben.

Lucia rolled her eyes.

“You remind me of her, you know,” he said.

“Of who?”

“Artemis.” Ben studied Lucia with piercing grey eyes. “You have the same skin, like black coffee,” he said quietly. Lucia felt as though he were staring at her naked. She took a small step away from him, holding her breath.

“And you’re both annoying as fuck. Get out of here, and I’ll be down to tell the rest of the story.” Ben shut the door in her face.

## Chapter 11 - I wasted no time in making a name for myself

The headquarters of Phalareon Co was on Virgon in the Andromeda Galaxy, and that was where I would begin my campaign to win the trust of Petrus Smallwood. I forged documentation to have myself enrolled at the same tertiary school as his daughter, Amal. I was now Ben McLeod, 18 years old from Dipper, South Indus. My family had scrimped and saved to send me 3,000 kilometers from my hometown to attend the finest tertiary school on the planet. The school had awarded me a full scholarship of course, due to my fabricated academic accolades. I had purchased an entire lifetime of digital history for Ben McLeod, so I simply had to pick up where it left off.

My plan from this point forward was as follows: I was going to befriend Amal Smallwood. Following the death of her brother, she and her father Petrus had become estranged. I would convince her to confront her father, bringing me along as emotional support.

Artemis taught me that there are three key subroutines to winning trust. First, gain their attention with a gift. Second, prove your worth by showing them you can provide a reliable service they cannot provide themselves. Finally, prove you are trustworthy by making a sacrifice for their benefit.

The reconciliation with his daughter would be my gift to Petrus. Soon after, I would approach him, and ask him to consider me as an intern at his company. Glowing in gratitude from a second chance with his daughter, he would agree. I would then prove my worthiness by displaying my aptitude for data analysis, a skill Petrus was known for lacking. One of Petrus' associates had a habit of complaining about Petrus a lot at a local bar, and never missed an opportunity to bring up one occasion where Petrus had incorrectly predicted that a particular energy converter would win over public favor in the T3 Quadrant. How these people could live lives so boring that that was a story worth repeating was beyond me, but it gave me a gap to fill.

At any rate, for the final step, I would fabricate an attempt by the Reliance to bribe me for information on Petrus. I would expose the attempt to Petrus, sacrificing the purse, but gaining his trust. From there, it would only be a matter of time until I would be given an opportunity to actually steal the Solar Harnessing Cores location. Gaining Petrus' trust was the meat of the endeavor. Once you have someone's trust, you have everything in that individual's grasp.

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I had to admit, I was excited for my first day of Ertian school. I missed the structured, academic atmosphere, and the buzz of young minds together in a room. Like any teenager, I was nervous about how my fellow classmates would receive me. I wasn't exactly popular on Pluora, but I always had a core group of friends that I could rely on when push came to shove. I was going into a completely new world, with no assurance as to whether I could even pull off acting

normal, let alone befriend a girl to get to her father. Nerves shoved down beneath the surface, I stepped into the new world as my new identity: Ben McLeod, star pupil, hero of my story.

I knew from the thousands of Serials, shows, movies and Vgrams I had consumed as a semi-catatonic child that Ertian school was very different from Pluoran school. There was no meditation for starters, and the lessons took up the majority of the day, almost nine hours worth. Children weren't taught to memorize or visualize things, rather lessons were delivered through interactive VR and the information was somehow planted in their brains that way. I had to admit, it sounded a snap's reach more fun than the lessons we had on Pluora.

There are two ways to successfully live under a false identity: One is by hiding, making as few ripples as possible so as not to draw attention to yourself and escape unscathed. The other is by inserting yourself into as many other lives as possible, quickly proving your identity is real by being too large to be fake. The first method works well for quick jobs, the second was how I had to play this game.

I got myself kicked out of my first class for showing up the teacher, and spent every minute of my time in the principal's office loudly complaining that I was being persecuted for my intellect. The next day I overheard one of the students re-telling the story to his friends, conveniently inserting himself as a rebellious hero. Ben McLeod was a little perturbed that this random kid was stealing the glory, but Alli was happy to see the story I was weaving for myself was one that resonated with my fellow students.

It was quite simple, actually. Ben McLeod was essentially the same character as Tricia, the girl from my favorite terrible high-school drama: self-effacing but confident, genuine yet perfect in every way; a real woman of the people. Whenever I doubted what a likeable tertiary-school student would do next, I just asked myself, *what would Tricia do?*

It worked, but not quite on the scale I needed. Over 40,000 students attended this school, and there was more than enough gossip to fill the void of teenage angst before I stepped onto the scene. I needed Amal Smallwood to hear about me before we ever met, that way she wouldn't question my validity. My time was running out; with every passing day, the likelihood that I would be introduced to Amal by circumstances outside of my control grew higher.

The solution presented itself to me much more violently than I would have liked. As the third school day drew to a close and the students collected in their home halls to be dismissed, I was approached by a group of kids, two boys, a zam, and one girl. I recognized all of them, as I had memorized the names and faces of every student at the school. The black-haired girl at the front of the pack was Ho'shi Carr. She had broken the tail of Amal's pet cabril only a few months ago. Amal, a die-hard lover of animals, had reported her to the school administrators, even though she knew Ho'shi would have to undergo realignment for such an offense. Ho'shi was able to convince the school Tenants that it was an accident, and so her streak of malicious violence remained intact. Why she was confronting me was a mystery, but it was possible I could use this to my advantage.

"Hey, scar-face," Ho'shi said snidely as her group walked up to me.



Ah, the scar. In the early planning phase of this play, I had considered covering it up, for fear that it might make me harder to trust, but that would have been too difficult to maintain for 10 months. I had also considered having it fixed surgically, but I didn't have the money to spare. In the end I decided I could use it as a source of sympathy, to my advantage. Apparently I had underestimated the teenage compulsion to point out things that are different.

I smiled sweetly.

"Yes, that's me, the kid with the scar on his face." Maybe I could shame them into leaving.

Ho'shi didn't take the bait. "Yeah no bits, scar-face, you can see that thing from a mile away." She snapped her fingers, and a holimote of a digital explosion blinked in the air to punctuate her lame insult.

She and her compatriots laughed.

"Well I sure am glad that your eyes are working," I retorted, "but was there something else that I could help you with? Maybe an ear exam too?"

I had called her bluff. Now she had to come up with a reason as to why she confronted me or she would look stupid in front of her friends. Her solution was a classic.

Ho'shi cocked her little hand back and punched me square in the face. I hit the ground, hard, and laid there for a moment clearing the spots of black from my vision. I wondered what Tricia would do, as a foot connected with my stomach, causing me to cry out. No answers came to me. Another kick hit me from the back, right on my tailbone, sending tendrils of white hot pain through my spine. I felt a finger crack beneath the hard poxy sole of a shoe. I had no choice but to lay there and take it, like the helpless new kid that I was.

The beating was cut blessedly short by a diffusion bomb, which shocked my attackers into paralysis. I was also temporarily paralyzed, but I much preferred the uncomfortable rigidity to being hit. My entire body burned, both from pain and embarrassment. An Tenant stepped onto the scene, shoos spectators away. Ho'shi and her crew were rounded up, and I was pulled to my feet by the Tenant. As I was being escorted away, I caught the attention of a young, button-nosed girl that was watching the scene unfold with sympathetic Virginian eyes, large and almond-shaped. Amal Smallwood, the mark. My bloodied lip curled upwards in a small smile. Perfect.

Now that Amal knew that I existed, I could approach her about joining the Simulation Club. I knew from hacking into the school's data logs that Amal was a member of a handful of clubs, and given the fact that I already had experience running simulations with Artemis, the Simulation Club seemed like the best choice.

I approached Amal the next day and asked her how I could join. She expressed her distaste at how Ho'shi and her gang had treated me, introduced me to the pet cabril she had tucked in her shirt pocket, and invited me to the Simulation Club's next meeting. She clearly pitied me, perhaps a bit too much. Her pity worked well for the play, but it was not so perfect for a young boy's ego.

I became obsessed with impressing her. I spent many sleepless nights poring over iterations of code, and during the day my mind iterated over the idea of impressing Amal. Somewhere along the way, one of my simulations was submitted to a global competition, and eventually went on to win the grand prize, gaining me unwanted attention from numerous parties. It's nothing short of good luck that my grandstanding didn't blow my cover completely, but all I was concerned with at the time was gaining Amal's favor. I began spending more and more time with her, staying late after school to work on our simulations together. Eventually, my obsession earned an invitation to her home – her father's home. I thought I had finally done it. Here was my first chance to meet Petrus, and of course, spend some quality time with his daughter.

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Petrus and his two wives separated following his nervous breakdown, and Amal spent one week a month at her father's house; a fact that Amal was nearly too shy to tell me, despite how close we had become. Of course, I learned of her parents' separation months ago through my research, so I knew that her father primarily stayed at a condo located a few kilometers outside of the city center. Far from modest, the home took up several floors of a sleek, blue glass condo building. Amal swiped her hand over the front door to unlock it, and I followed her inside to a large greeting room.

"It's...huge," I said as I craned my neck to view the giant ammonite chandelier spiraling across the ceiling.

She laughed a cute laugh, the round tip of her little nose scrunching up. "Yeah, I guess it is," she said, "I only ever spend time in my room."

We stood awkwardly for a few moments, looking around the room in silence.

"So, um, is your dad home?" I asked.

She took a step towards me. "Now why would you be concerned about that?"

For a split second, my heart stopped. I had pushed too hard, moved too quickly, how stupid of me –

Then she kissed me. Soft and light, with closed lips pressed against mine. After a few seconds she stepped back, and looked at me expectantly, a lock of her long brown hair dangling across her face. All thoughts of the play flew from my mind. I grabbed her and pulled her close to me, kissing her back with open lips, hard and fast. Of course her father wasn't there. She made sure that he wouldn't be.

Never had I been more happy to watch a well-laid plan crumble. Amal took me into her bedroom, where we continued our frantic embrace on her bed. This was the first time I had ever kissed a girl, and my body was reacting hard. I wanted every inch of her pressed against me, even a hair's-width of space between us was too much. This was not part of the plan, in fact, I knew this could ruin the entire play, but I didn't care. I moved my hand beneath her shirt to feel a

tight, round breast, and I knew my fate was sealed. There was no going back now; my hormones had control and I was powerless to stop them. Luckily, or unluckily, the universe had other plans.

“Amal! Who is here with you?”

A voice rang out from the front of the house. Her mother, Mikalore. I had been so concerned with the father, I hadn’t even considered the mother. Damn. Damn, damn, damn.

Amal immediately tensed and broke our contact.

“Shit,” she said in a hushed voice, “she’s not supposed to be here, what is she doing?!”

She wriggled out from under me, leaving me cold and confused on the bed.

“Get up!” she shout-whispered, “act like we were studying or something.”

I immediately saw a problem with her plan.

“I...uh,” I stuttered, unsure of what to say. I sat up, and Amal saw the problem standing tall and proud on my lap.

“Shiiiiit,” she said. “Can’t you...get rid of it?”

I heard Amal’s mother walking towards her room. I looked around the room frantically, as though I might find a magical anti-erection machine laying around.

“The bathroom!” Amal’s eyes were wide. “Go into the bathroom!” She pointed to a door and I ran to it, shutting it behind me just moments before I heard the bedroom door open.

“Amal, sweetie, do you have a guest in your room?” Her mother asked in a high-pitched voice.

“Yea mom, his name is Ben, he had to use the bathroom.”

I could almost hear her mother’s eye brow being raised in suspicion.

“And you brought him to your room to do that?”

“We were already in my room, studying for the Jintation exam.” Amal was a surprisingly good liar, not too much detail.

“Ok then, when he’s finished in there, I’d like to meet him.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever mom.” Amal started moving things around, busying herself with something.

I took a deep breath of momentary relief. Ok, what did I know about Mikalore Smallwood? She went by Mika for short. She’d been badly injured in the accident that killed her son, but had made a full recovery after six months. She had a high capacity for self-delusion, and had stopped seeing her state-appointed therapist after only three visits. She loved to play Skip Solitaire, owned three dogs, painted her own nails even though she could easily afford to have them done professionally. There was little chance that she would do anything to disrupt my plans because she had had almost no contact with Petrus in the last year. So what was she doing here...

I emerged from the bathroom with a renewed focus on the mission, in both mind and body. Amal and I shared an exasperated glance before exiting her room. I followed behind her at a significant distance.

Mika’s face lit up with surprise as we entered the Greeting Room in which she stood.

“Hello! Ben, is it?” She held out her hand, and I grazed the back of it with the back of mine, as was customary for first-time introductions on Virgon. My name and face were now in her com-palm, should she ever forget them.

“Yes,” I laughed nervously. “I’ve known Amal for a few weeks, we’re in the Simulation Club together.”

Mika nodded. “How nice. I do believe that Amal has mentioned you. Apparently you are very talented?”

I smiled widely, unable to hold back my pride. “Oh, wow, that’s very generous of her to say.”

I looked over at Amal, who was shyly avoiding eye contact. We both wanted this to be over as quickly as possible. Mika seemed blissfully unaware of this.

“Well I’m sure it’s true, Amal is a very honest young woman,” said Mika without a hint of irony.

“What are you doing here, mom?” interjected Amal.

Mika ignored her daughter’s rudeness. “I came to pick something of mine up. Your father is refusing to answer my calls, claims he is too busy. Like all of a sudden he is the most important man on Virgon.” Mika shook her head as if shaking off an annoying insect. “I wanted some of the Elia Day decorations from the storage compartment here.” She finished with a bite of anger.

I wasn’t going to get anywhere convincing Amal to meet with her father while her mother was around. This was a woman who avoided confrontation like the plague. I’m sure she hadn’t even tried to call Petrus before coming here, and instead checked the condo’s activity log to make sure he wasn’t present, which is how she knew Amal and I were here.

“I should really be going,” I said, giving Amal a genuinely apologetic look. “Where is the nearest Flash Point?”

“Let me show you,” said Amal quickly, moving with me towards the door.

“It was a pleasure to meet you!” I yelled back at Mika as we exited the front door to the hallway outside. This had turned out to be a disaster, at least in terms of my play.

Once outside the condo, I could see Amal was uncomfortable. She was dangerously close to confronting her own emotions about her parents situation, and like her mother, she was fighting against it. I took the opportunity to give her the first push.

“Amal, you – “

“I’m really sorry about all that. My dad....my brother died in an accident a couple of years ago, and my parents haven’t been the same since. They all act like they’re over it, but they’re not. It’s fucked up.”

And so the subroutine had started. First I had to say the perfunctory lines. “I’m so sorry. That must have been terrible for all of you. If you ever want to talk about it, I’m here.” I put my hand on her shoulder. Now that that was out of the way...

“Have you ever talked to your dad about it? Like really talked to him about what happened?”

Amal looked up from the floor. “My dad? Hah...he disappeared for almost a year after it happened. Didn’t even go to the funeral. Then all of a sudden he shows up again and goes right back to work like nothing ever happened. Like he got replaced by some business bot while he was out drowning his sorrows.” Amal scoffed. “So no, we haven’t talked about it.”

“That is fucked up,” I said, “you’re a really strong person for putting up with all this.”

At this point in the conversation, many people would be tempted to tell a personal story, relate the other person’s suffering to their own life. It’s a natural human response, to try to compare someone else’s experience to your own. It’s a bonding exercise as old as life itself. Except it’s almost impossible to do correctly – best case scenario, you end up distracting the person from their own feelings, and instead making them feel sorry for you. Worst case scenario, you’re trivializing their suffering by comparing it to an event they can’t empathize with. If you’re trying to make someone in grief feel better, what you need to do is this: you reassure them that they are justified in how they feel, then you distract them with something completely unrelated to the events that are causing them grief. On the other hand, if you’re trying to manipulate someone in grief, you do this:

“I know what could make you feel just a little bit better.”

You give them an out.

“There’s nothing that could fix – “ Amal started.

I put my finger to her full lips. “You’re wrong. This turmoil between you and your father, it’s because you haven’t had the chance to mutually acknowledge what happened. He feels like he’s let you down, and that there’s no chance for redemption. If you talk to him, you will feel so much better, because you won’t have to hold your thoughts inside anymore. And I know he wants nothing more in this world than your forgiveness.”

Amal scoffed again. “You don’t know that that’s true.”

“Yes I do,” I said, looking her squarely in the eyes. No explanation, no sharing of common experiences necessary. All you need is to believe what you’re saying is true, and if they want to believe it too, they will.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said, letting out an exasperated sigh. “Every time I get near him I feel this knot in my chest.” She gripped her fingers into a fist by her heart. “Maybe by talking to him I can finally let it out.”

“I think you’re right,” I said.

Amal embraced me in a tight hug. I held her close, reliving the warmth of our earlier embrace, until she let go.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” she asked hopefully, throwing a holimote of a puppy with big, glistening eyes in the air beside her.

I nodded, throwing up my own holimote of a puppy wagging its tail. It was cheesy, but I had to play the part. Nothing more needed to be said, it was all in her hands now.

I wish Artemis could have seen it.

## Chapter 12 - I have a favor to ask of you

I let Amal mull over the idea for about a week, making excuses as to why I couldn't see her for more than a few moments here and there. Not only was it necessary for the play that she plan the reconciliation on her own, but I had also come very close to blowing the entire play with my dick, in more ways than one. The waiting was torture, as the entire plan hinged on what Artemis called a Faith Point: the idea that Amal's insecurity, combined with my careful manipulations, would cause her to ask me to join her in confronting her father. It was like performing a chemical reaction with an un-tested element. I added what I believed to be the correct ingredients: one part vulnerability, two parts familiarity, three parts reliability...simulations showed that adding Amal to that mixture would yield favorable results, but there could always be something I missed, some impurity I didn't account for.

Artemis called the point at which the psychological elements react the 'Faith Point' as a joke, because for her there was no faith involved. She always knew exactly what was going to happen because she had the exact formula mapped out in her head. I needed faith, but without it I had to settle for a constant reminder to be patient. My self-control was rewarded on a Friday after school, when Amal caught me as I pretended to study in the most conspicuous part of the home hall.

"I'm so glad I found you," said Amal. "I have a favor to ask of you."

"Let's hear it," I said, opening up my body language to indicate there was no chance I would turn her down.

"It's a big favor, but you seem so sure of yourself I thought maybe..." she paused to work up a final bout of courage. "Will you come with me to talk to my father?" She said, quickly and quietly.

I smiled. "Of course."

Amal let out a relieved noise. "Oh, I'm so glad. I've been so nervous these last few days, just thinking about saying anything to him. You don't need to say anything, just be there while I do it." She put her fingertips on the desk I was sitting at. "You're like my lucky charm." She threw up a four leaf clover holimote.

I had been hoping I was more of a 'Knight in shining armor', but I accepted 'lucky charm'.

"When do you need me?" I asked.

"Are you free now?"

"For you, Amal, anything."

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Ben paused abruptly.

“Is, uh, is this boring you guys?”

The gang shook their heads.

“I just feel like, compared to the other things I’ve done, this is pretty white bread. I mean, not to spoil anything, but I’ve been to every planet in the ITZ, and some outside of it. I spent almost a century on the Reptilian Planet learning to speak their language. I feel like maybe I’m burying the lead here.”

Dax spoke up, “you spending a hundred years on a planet full of lizards sounds like a pretty boring story too.”

Ben considered this. “Good point, Dax.”

“I want to know what happens with Amal,” said Lucia. “Do you guys ever do it?”

Marim cut in, “This Petrus guy, he is actually a business robot, is he not? He has been replaced by illegal AI.”

“What? Basar’s toe, no.” Ben held up his hands. “I guess you are pretty invested in the story. But I’m going to fast forward through the mushy father-daughter reconciliation stuff. Petrus said he was sorry for abandoning her, Amal said she forgave him, they both cried, it was truly very touching. Petrus thanked me on their way out to get ice cream or something together. Then, a week later, we had the opportunity to talk again.”

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It was my second visit to Petrus’ condo since the reconciliation, but the first time he was home. Amal and I were watching a flat Box show, ‘Journey into the Supercluster’. I chose it because Amal usually fell asleep when watching less-immersive mediums, plus I genuinely enjoyed learning about the parts of the universe sentience had only just begun exploring. With Amal’s innocent face sleeping softly on my arm, and the multicolored stars of the Targo Supercluster floating across the large screen before us, I considered for a moment delaying my plans to sneak away to find Petrus.

A large comet streaked across the screen, filling the room with yellow light. No, the timing was perfect, my plan locktight. With a sad sigh, I gently slid my arm from underneath Amal and tiptoed away to Petrus’ office. I snuck one final look at the stars reflecting on Amal’s glossy brown hair before I disappeared.

A man such as Petrus appreciated clear, no bullshit gestures. They left little room for subterfuge, unless of course, you are me. I knocked on the door and entered.

“Excuse me, sir?”

Petrus was picking apart executive charts on a large holo screen. His neat, textured hair was tinted blue by the light of the projection. His brow was also reflecting blue, and furrowed in deep concentration – no, it was frustration – he was having trouble using the immersive tech. His

blue lips pursed in embarrassment as he noticed my presence, and noticed that I had noticed his struggle.

He greeted me kindly all the same. “Ben, how are you? Is everything all right with Amal?”

His care and concern for her were plain; a welcome distraction from his current task.

“Yes, everything is fine, thank you. I actually wanted to ask you a favor.”

Petrus beckoned me into the office as he pulled a hovering seat in front of his desk and leaned back into it. The holo screen was still activated, slowly rotating organization objects through the air. A spherical shape with three spines that I recognized to be a manager’s annual growth pattern grazed Petrus’ cheek. It is quite possible he wanted to avoid further embarrassment by attempting to turn it off. He nudged his seat just outside of the screen’s immersion zone, continuing as though he was entirely unaware of its presence.

“If it’s true that I have you to thank for Amal speaking to me again, then I certainly owe you a favor.”

I smiled. Before I could respond, Petrus spoke again.

“You’re a smart prim, aren’t you, Ben? Can I show you something?”

Again, before I could respond, Petrus moved his hand to bring his com-palm display up.

“Watch this. Iris, bring me my spoon.”

A spoon flew from beneath a cloth on his desk and into Petrus’ open palm.

I was intrigued.

“That’s a cool trick. How did you do it?”

“Why don’t you take a guess.”

“You created a magnetic focal point on your palm,” I explained, “and the spoon is made out of Keritam, so that it is the only thing in this room that would be attracted to the focal point. Like Affinity Boots.”

Petrus smiled, “that would have been almost as clever. I did create a focal point, like you said, but a weak one. This spoon has been hyper-ionized – pumped full of so many prodrons that it is attracted to just about anything. That’s why I have it under that special cloth,” he motioned to the not-very-special-looking cloth on his desk. “The focal point is just strong enough to attract the small part of the spoon that was left uncovered.”

I was more than intrigued.

“Hyper-ionization...I’ve never even heard of that.”

“It’s new,” he said, “our scientists have only just started experimenting with it.” He covered the handle of the spoon with the cloth and held it up. “This spoon may very well be one of the most valuable objects in the ITZ.”

“And prodrons...that’s some kind of combination of Quarks, right?”

“The name gave it away? Well, I suppose that means it’s a good name. It’s all very top secret though.” Petrus smiled devilishly.

“Is it...sanctioned by the Council of Light?”

Petrus smirked. “We couldn’t be studying it if they didn’t sanction it.”



“Have you ever met any of the Council members?”

Petrus smirked audibly. “Met them? No. They have their business, and I have mine. And mine concerns the real world.”

“So tell me, what can I do for you?” he continued.

I cut to the chase. “I would like to work for you. As an intern. I’m at the top of my class, on full scholarship at Birney’s. I can code for you, or run errands, whatever you need.”

Petrus looked into my eyes for a few moments. He was thinking, wondering if I had ulterior motives, motives that might harm him.

“And why exactly do you want to work at Phalareon?”

“It’s the second highest grossing company in the Ertian Empire.”

“That doesn’t tell me much.”

“I think it says everything. I would work for the highest grossing company if that was an option, but you don’t work at Davos. I know you, and I know you’re one of the most powerful men in the universe, and I know I want to be too.”

Petrus narrowed his eyes, and curled one side of his mouth.

“That’s a hell of a pitch kid. Ultimately unnecessary, because I said I owed you a favor anyway, but I’ll give you points for honesty.”

“So, you’ll mentor me, then?”

“There’s never a shortage of tasks that require my attention. I’m sure I could find a few to delegate to you.” His head tilted almost imperceptibly towards the jumbled holo screen.

I nodded, and held out my hand for a traditional business handshake. Petrus accepted, giving my palm a firm squeeze and a single, hard shake.

And thus, the first step of the play was completed.

## Chapter 13 - Good thing she wasn’t here

To be perfectly honest, I couldn't stand Petrus. He had an admirable work ethic, but his personality was... well it was almost like he didn't have one. There are two basic types of actors: one has so much personality that he can rely on different facets to play different characters, and the other has no personality, and can therefore imprint upon himself whatever traits he needs for the required role. Think Jaryll Truise.

Petrus was most definitely the second type of actor. He adapted well to any single interaction, but if you watched him day after day, you saw a man who essentially didn't exist. Even his appearance was as plain as could be imagined; he wore the same color and cut of suit day in and day out, his hair was brown and unstyled, his eyes wet and dispassionate. Even his skin was the most average shade of medium bronze you could imagine.

I knew from my research that before the accident that killed his son, Petrus was a people pleaser; a master at negotiating deals that passed the Snell Positivity Test, but often had dubious long-term outcomes. As Artemis put it, he was an over-inflated hot air balloon. The Petrus I saw now was different. He was much more concerned with the outcome of his actions than their presentation. His son's death had turned him into a single-minded shell, powered by guilt instead of hot air. He was, truly, like a business robot, in a completely figurative sense.

Now that I knew him closely, I had less hope of actually becoming the plug that would fill Petrus' dead-son-shaped hole. That wasn't something anyone on earth was capable of accomplishing in the short term, maybe even in the long-term. The best I could aim for was to give him temporary relief, then leave before any further emotional damage was caused.

I am completely aware of how I sound, talking about human beings this way. I know it must seem like Artemis and I were about as unfeeling and impersonal as can be, to map someone's psyche and manipulate them for our own gain. But we did have a code of ethics, of sorts. The Art of the Dream – as Artemis called it. The ability to enter someone's life, give them what they want, take what you want, and disappear without a trace; leaving the mark with the impression that the entire experience was just a dream. Fundamentally, that meant leaving minimal physical evidence of your existence, but on a grander scale, it meant creating a fantastical moment in time for your mark. It meant taking their hands and waltzing them into a mental fog filled with Unicorns and Thereals, then returning them to the sun as you pirouette back into the abyss. *Did that really happen?* They will wonder, as they try to trace the steps of the dance from beginning to end, but find that they can't pin down any of the movements. Their memories will feel akin to dreams – vivid and pleasant, but ultimately a figment of imagination.

An unfortunate necessity to making the Art of the Dream a reality is that no one close to the mark witnesses any major part of it. For what is reality but a dream we dream together... in practical terms, this meant that I had to keep my relationship with Amal and my relationship with Petrus separated. *But Ben*, you might be saying, *you ensured that those two relationships were inextricably linked when you made them reconcile with each other. That was stupid of you.* Indeed, this was a snag that I spent weeks trying to work out during the planning phase. There was no way to get to Petrus without Amal. There was no way to use Amal to get to Petrus

without making them reconcile. I considered just leaving them both once I got what I wanted, and damn the consequences after I left. But I could feel Artemis' eyes watching the back of my head, and hear her condemning my plan to failure.

Failure was not something I could abide. Over and over I computed the various options, mapping out emotional simulations, moving around pieces of personalities until I could barely see straight. And then it hit me. I didn't need to manipulate anyone. I could remove Amal from the equation without even speaking to her. Even more, her life would be all the better for it. It was a brilliant, elegant solution, apart from the fact that it cost me most of my Red...

"I got in! Praise the Council!" Amal came screaming into her father's home office as I was showing him how to train his mail reply bot. It had been a painfully long week since I had stepped under Petrus' wing, made all the more longer by my anticipation of this day.

Petrus and I both stared blankly at Amal.

"The Norner Fellowship!" she exclaimed, "they accepted me!"

"I thought you didn't find out about that for another six months?" said Petrus.

"I applied early, and they were so impressed they accepted me immediately! I'm so happy I could scream!" She screamed.

She shook her fists in excitement, stopping suddenly after a few seconds, the glee in her face slowly melting into the kind of expression one makes when they want permission to do something bad. She bit her thick bottom lip, lowering her head and raising her eyes.

"There is one more thing..."

Petrus stood and walked toward his daughter, "What else, Kellie?"

"They say they want me to join them immediately, they don't care if I finish Tertiary school," she said, only managing to place a thin cover of solemnity over her clear excitement.

I ran to Amal and gave her a hug. Suddenly, the farewell speech I had rehearsed months before seemed so...disingenuous. I realized in a flash of fear that I had never before said goodbye to anyone I cared about. Should I be sad? Should I cry? What would I have said to Fett, or Teacher Byora, if I could have said goodbye? I shook these thoughts from my head before they overwhelmed me. *What would Tricia do?*

I pulled back from Amal and looked her in the eyes. "I am so happy for you! I know how much you wanted this. I'm going to miss you so much!"

"Oh Ben, I'll be back before you know it," she said into my shoulder. Relief washed over me. I wondered if Artemis ever felt genuine feelings about her marks. Doubtful.

I released her and she embraced her father.

"I'm proud of you, sweetie. But how soon are you leaving?" he asked.

"They said they can pick me up two days from now. We'll be going to study a new animal species called Jumpcats that was just discovered on Loyola B, within the Targo supercluster."

I looked crestfallen. "Loyola? That's almost 50,000 lightyears away from the new slingshot station. It will take you a min of two years just to get there."

Amal pursed her lips, and threw up a sad-face holimote. “I know.” She turned to look at her father, her eyebrows raised in the middle of her forehead, pleading.

He gave a slight chuckle. “How can I tell you not to go?”

You could just tell her, my brain shouted, surprising me. Petrus could tell her not to go, and all my careful planning, all the strings I pulled to send Amal years away from here would be ruined. And she would stay, and fall asleep on my shoulder again.

“It will be difficult, but this is a wonderful opportunity you need to take, my dear daughter.” Of course he would respond that way. I’d made sure of it.

She smiled, and turned her head back to me. “We’ll have to entangle so we have a direct line to each other, even though I’ll be eons away.”

I smiled sadly. Whether we had entangled Jintum particles or not, she’d still be in stasis for most of the next two years. This was a goodbye.

With my Amal problem solved, I doubled down on my efforts to sway Petrus. Even after working with him for two months, the relationship between us was...tepid. He was keeping me at an arm’s length, using me mainly for menial IT tasks and explaining pop culture references. I had spent hundreds of hours with this man, traveled with him to clients, met his assistants and lackeys. I was beginning to become frustrated. I had done everything right, why wasn’t I getting the reaction I desired from Petrus? Sure, there had been some hiccups and distractions along the way, but I had dealt with them all. Petrus should have been eating out of the palm of my hand at this point, but I was still finding him hard to read. Had I miscalculated his motivations? The idea seemed impossible, my research was expertly complete, my logic flawless. So what was I missing?

There was only one explanation: I wasn’t pushing hard enough. I was too willing to listen to Artemis’ voice that chided me constantly in the back of my head as I navigated this play. *Don’t let them into your heart...Keep interactions with other players at a minimum...Never enter a room where you aren’t in control...* Artemis had blessed me with a million reasons *not* to do something, and they were stifling me into inaction as she sat laughing in another galaxy. I had to act, had to do something drastic, even if it could expose me.

Whether my mark was ready or not, it was time to put the third act of the play into motion – The Fake Reliance Plot. Now that I had Petrus’ interest, or as much of it as I could hope for, I would expose a fake attempt by the Reliance to steal the plans for the location of the Solar Harnessing Cores. This would prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Petrus could trust me, and that was the key that opened up his power to me.

~~~~~  
“Wait just one minute,” interrupted Marim.

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NOW IF THIS WAS THE SORT OF STORY where the audience was allowed to ask questions, one might now ask this question: ‘Ben, wasn’t the point of this whole play to procure the location of the Solar Harnessing Cores so that you can sell them to the Reliance? Why would you alert Petrus to that threat, even if you’re blaming it on someone else?’ And I would say, ‘thank you for noticing, how very bright you are, you definitely needed to interrupt me.’

Indeed, you have noticed a detail that might be mistaken as a lack of creativity. However, this is yet another one of Artemis’ tricks: Don’t make shit up if you don’t have to. This is why I always use my real first name when doing a play. No one I’m interacting with knows who I am, so why would I change my name? It’s what I naturally respond to, and one less detail I have to remember. Petrus already knows that the Reliance wants to get the Core’s location. That threat is as real as my name. What I need to fabricate is exactly who that threat is coming from. And ultimately, it was completely irrelevant what the fake betrayal was about; all that matters is that I am the one to expose it. Crunch the numbers, stay as close to reality as possible, prove your loyalty, and leave no trace — Artemis always said that if I followed her rules, the outcomes I desired would come true as if by magic. I had no idea how accurate that was.

I decided pretty early on who I would select as the scapegoat for this play. Gingil, one of Petrus’ closest sycophants, and Class A ball sniffer. His position close to Petrus, yet slightly below him made him the perfect candidate for a slimy power grab. Plus he truly was the biggest tool in the galaxy. The man even looked like a villain, with jet black hair and eyes to match.

Now, exposing a betrayal is a surprisingly difficult thing to do, whether real or fabricated. Success rests on who is the more trustworthy – the whistleblower, or the accused. Video can be created, documents altered, voices changed...we’ve all seen videos of councilmen copulating with respected celebrities. Completely fake, yet indiscernible from reality in our eyes. For the betrayal to imbed itself in Petrus’ mind, he had to witness Gingil selling out the information in person, and I couldn’t be anywhere near him when that happened.

I could blow the whistle, but if my connection to the affair was above a certain mental coefficient, my character would be called into question next to Gingil’s when the shit hit the tailfin. Since Gingil has been one of Petrus’ closest colleagues even before his disappearance, and I was some kid that had shown up a few months ago, I was never going to win that battle. What I needed was 100%, incontrovertible, undeniable, *untraceable* proof. And for that, I was going to have to ask a favor from someone Artemis would have never approved of. Good thing she wasn’t here.

## Chapter 14 - This place sucks

Mel Far is a retirement colony, located in a satellite dwarf galaxy of Andromeda. Like its inhabitants, it is old and forgotten, filled with relics both carbon and metal. The days on Mel Far are short, about 10 hours, which gives the residents a sense they are living longer than they actually are. The man I was looking for was not quite old, but he did want to be forgotten, which is why he had been hiding on Mel Far for the last five years.

I was nervous when I first had Uncle Y'ra reach out to him, as I expected only rejection in return. This man, Ibis, had been a part of Artemis' inner family when I first joined them, but disappeared shortly thereafter. Although I only knew him for a couple of months, stories of Ibis' prolific skill with databases echoed in his absence. He could apparently hack into machines most people didn't even know existed, a skill that was both highly coveted, and highly dangerous. I didn't know exactly what caused him and Artemis to fall out; I only knew she thought he was too careless to work with. For Artemis, carelessness was a mortal sin, so I'm sure Ibis' crime, whatever it was, would have seemed minor to anyone else. I could only imagine Ibis felt wronged by his banishment from the family, which is why he had completely exiled himself from the rest of humanity. To my surprise, he welcomed my outreach, and even went so far as to buy me a slingshot ticket to come visit him. Apparently, being forgotten was not the break he was hoping for. I'm sure his aging neighbors felt the same way.

Mel Far was a very strange place to visit. I was escorted from the landing bay to Ibis' house by an overly-talkative android, in a plushy ship that was clearly equipped to handle all sorts of medical aid. We arrived outside of a long row of tightly packed town homes, each fashioned in completely unique styles, as though a schizophrenic anthropologist designed the neighborhood. The android helped me out of the ship with surprising strength.

"This one here is Mr. Farrow's house, Mr. Mcleod."

The android gestured to a home between a cabin made of Laxan Wood that was etched with ornate Arabic symbols, and a bright pink stucco box-house with a smooth, rounded roof. Ibis' house was in classic Promethian style: dark glass with straight wood beams throughout. It was noticeably un-kempt; all the other houses on the street were immaculately clean, with freshly-trimmed landscaping. In contrast, Ibis' grass was long, and the façade of his house smudged.

"Do you know Mr. Farrow well?" the android asked me as he walked me towards the door, gripping my arm firmly but gently, like one would a grandfather's.

“Well, it has been a while since I’ve seen him.”

The android nodded, and pursed his lips, giving the impression he had something difficult to say.

“Mr. Farrow, he is, um, well he can be a bit rude, you know? I just want to make sure you are prepared for his loud nature.”

Before I could respond, the door burst open before us.

“Ben, my dear child, look at you!” Ibis shouted in a deep roar, then leaned forward and embraced me in his large frame. My face disappeared into the bottom of his long, frizzy beard. After a few moments, he separated and turned to the android.

“Eh, fuck off now, you robotic Junker!” He yelled at the android’s face.

The android simply nodded and left. It was the first time he had kept his mouth shut since he’d met me at the ship.

Ibis nodded as well, and put an arm around my shoulder.

“Can’t stand those fuckers,” he said, loud enough that the android could still hear him. He added, more quietly, “I’ve got ‘em programmed so that they don’t bother me too much, asking me questions and cleaning my house ya know, but they’re fucking everywhere! Can’t even have a real conversation with one, ‘cause of the damned quantation intelligence cap.”

He led me inside and shut the door behind him.

“What about the people?” I asked, “are they any better company?”

Ibis laughed a gigantic, booming laugh.

“People?” He laughed again. “They’re less people than the androids are! They don’t feed themselves, don’t wipe their own asses, don’t bother maintaining human connections...all ‘people’ do here is cling to life, as much of a life as it is. Why any ‘person’ would want to live past 300 is beyond me, certainly not if it means being half-prosthetic and fully surrounded by fuckin’ androids all goddamn day.” Ibis’ white cheeks had become flush with frustration.

“Got it, got it,” I said. “This place sucks.”

A smile came over Ibis’ large, bearded face.

“Ah no, I’m being harsh. This place is a paradise for a guy like me! Did you know there’s 12 cops on this entire planet? And they haven’t seen a criminal for so long, they wouldn’t know if one stole the underwear from off their balls! I can do whatever I want here, and ain’t no one gonna give me shit for it.” He added particular emphasis to the last part.

“Ibis, that is great news for me.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Aye, I was wondering why you’d want to see me after all these years. I suppose it was too much to hope that you just missed me?”

I backtracked, feeling awful, “Oh no, Ibis, of course I missed you...I just...”

He gave another booming laugh.

“My boy, I don’t have a friend in this universe that isn’t my friend because of my particular talents. Why do you think I got so good at what I do in the first place?” He gave me a knowing smirk. “Some people have no friends at all, ya know.”

I relaxed. “I really did want to reach out to you sooner. Even after you left, I heard stories about you in all corners of the world...but I was always with Artemis, and--“

“Say no more, boy. I know what she’s like. But we don’t need to go into all of that, eh?”

Ibis’ eyes gleamed with excitement and a hint of madness.

“Tell me what kind of trouble you are trying to start.”

I brought him up to speed on the play, leaving out all the psyche-mapping details. That was never his bag, and to be honest, there was a small part of me that wasn’t sure if I could trust him. I can tell you now that I should have trusted Ibis more. When I was finished telling him what I thought he needed to know, he sat back in his chair, put his massive arms behind his head, and sighed.

“So you’ve got to convince this Petrus guy, that the dweeb guy, Gingil, is a rat?”

“Yes”

“And you’ve got to have some un-fakeable proof to convince him of that?”

“Yes”

“And you think I can fake that un-fakeable proof by hacking into a Fractal Datastore?”

“Yes”

I expected Ibis to laugh, but he didn’t. Instead, he stroked his beard and looked at me, for a solid two minutes. Finally, he spoke.

“What do you know about Fractal Datastores, boy?”

“Data is stored there in a physical form, so that it can’t be wiped by EMPs. All the biggest companies have one, but their locations are kept closely guarded, as are the Datastores themselves. They’re believed to be un-hackable. But they say the same thing about com-palms, and our Family can hack those. In fact, it is largely because com-palms use the same Fractal storage technology that we can hack them. Of course, no one knows that, or how any of it works, thanks to the Council of Light.”

Ibis hmphed, “Com-palms don’t only use Fractal storage...“. I opened my mouth to explain that I knew this too, but he put up a hand.

“What you’ve said is mostly correct.”

He brought his hand back to his beard, and stroked it silently for another few moments.

“I can’t hack into the Datastore and plant fake evidence of your dweeb friend collaborating with the Reliance. That really is impossible. But I can hack into the access log, and make it look like he’s up to something nefarious. This Petrus guy will have no idea that the logs can be tampered with, I guarantee it. Can you work with that?”

I thought for a moment.

“Would he still need to physically travel to the Datastore to view the logs?”

“Indeed he would. But why is that important?”

“Two reasons; first, the betrayal needs to be interactive, physical, in order to properly manifest in his head. Second, I can’t be around when he uncovers it, and I’m sure as shit not going to stumble into a Datastore.”



“Basar’s beard, you are a clever one, aren’t ya.”

“There’s numbers behind all of it. Petrus’ idea of me, and his idea of the betrayal can’t have more than a 0.008 connection score in his psyche-map,” I said, unable to resist showing off just a little more. “So, how are you going to access the logs?”

“That is not information you should know. In fact, I’m surprised Artemis has taught you as much about this Datastore stuff as she has. These are deep, dangerous secrets, the kind people are killed for knowing.”

“That’s bullshit, though, isn’t it?” I said, “its information, technology that’s been around for hundreds of years! How can the Council think they can keep it a secret?”

“They’ve done it for this long, haven’t they? It is what they do, it is where they get their power. It’s why I’m on this decrepit rock, for Amican’s sake! They kept solar harnessing a secret for 200 years, and even now all we know is that it exists!” Ibis threw up his hands and gave a loud “aaaacchh!”

He calmed himself down and told a story.

“When I was five, I asked my mother how they fit all the pictures inside my Com-Palm. She told me she didn’t know, and that it didn’t matter. I tried looking it up, but couldn’t find anything detailed enough to answer my question,” Ibis said, his fingers playing with the tip of his overgrown beard.

“So, I asked one of my teachers. You know what she told me? ‘You don’t get to learn that sort of thing’, she said. So, I spent every moment after that proving her wrong. I risked my life, and the lives of others to learn how to build the technology I was told was beyond my comprehension. Do you know how many people have died because of the things I’ve learned? How many friends? Do you know what kind of a life I’ve had to live because of knowledge?” He looked at me, hard. “I imagine you have some idea, living with Artemis. But it can get so much worse, and the thing that makes it worse, is demanding answers to questions you should never have asked in the first place.”

I disagreed with him. He had made mistakes, that much I believed, but learning more can never be a mistake. That was what I believed more than anything, at that point in my life. Escaping Pluora saved my life, and the wonders of the outside universe kept me alive. What Artemis taught me kept me alive. The people I had seen suffer, the people who died...it was because they *didn’t* know something. I was going to learn the mechanisms of Fractal Data Storage, but not from Ibis, not today. Today I had a different goal.

“Fair enough,” I said. “Hacking the Datastore logs is more than enough for me.”

The gigantic smile came back to Ibis’ face. “Now that’s what I like to hear! If you—“ Ibis was interrupted by a knock on his door. The smile disappeared.

“What it the HOLY FUCK is someone knocking on MY door for?!”

He ran to the door and flung it wide. On the other side stood a very old woman, with long, silky hair and thin, high eyebrows. I could see a small bit of plastic sticking out from the collar of her shirt, which told me she was wearing a body brace to keep her upright.

“Ibis, dear, as gentle as always. Michael told me you had a visitor! Naturally, I had to come see it for myself.”

Ibis seethed through his teeth. “Ooooo, I swear I’m going to make that fucking droid eat his own asshole!”

The old woman laughed sweetly at this. “Oh, like hell you will. You have the imagination, but not the balls.”

“Brittany, with all due respect, go back to watering your dusty old cunt or whatever it is you do all damn day while you wait to die and stay out of my fucking business!”

He slammed the door in her face.

Ibis hung his head.

“You got to go, boy. People in this town don’t get many visitors, and now that the word is out, we’re about to be hit with a load of unwanted attention.”

He came over to me and put his hands on my shoulders.

“Ah, I wanted another few hours with ya, but it’s for the best. Artemis may just kill me for spending what time with you that I did.”

“But the logs—”

“Don’t you worry about that, I’ll take care of it when you leave. I’ll shoot you a message as soon as I’m done. Now let me call you a shuttle...” He made some motions above his Com-Palm.

“Where am I going to go while I wait for the Slingshot? My place in line for the return trip isn’t for another five days!”

“There’s two colonies within spitting distance of the station. One’s got an amusement park like you’ve never seen. You’ll have a void’s reach more fun than if you stayed here!”

He walked me outside where the shuttle was about to land. There were at least 20 people milling about on the street, whereas when I had arrived, there hadn’t been a body in sight. I suddenly felt like a fresh steak about to be devoured by wolves. Ibis wasn’t kidding.

“Alright boy, this is you. Ach, I really am so happy you came,” He squeezed me tightly in a bear hug. “You’ve grown up so much, I barely even recognize ya. You’ve done well for yourself, boy.”

I was happy I came too, and not just because of the play. It felt good to see family, and get a little love, even if it was only brief.

We waved to each other as the shuttle took off. The rows and rows of colorful houses slowly faded into gray. I sighed, running my hands through my hair. Ibis’ hands had been there only minutes before. I felt sad, for some reason. Was it the sudden goodbye? Was it this depressing planet? Michael, the droid from earlier, was saying something to me. I snapped back to reality.

“What?”

“I asked you where you were heading off to?”

Oh yeah, that’s right. Where was I heading off to? Even if I could somehow get on an earlier Slingshot Jumper, I was supposed to be on holiday, visiting my parents. I couldn’t just go

back to Virgon and risk being seen by someone I knew. Ibis mentioned an amusement park. It was not at all part of the plan, but there was no one here to tell me I couldn't go. Hell, Ben Mcleod was supposed to be on vacation, so I was allowed to have a little fun, right?

Sadly, my attempts to have fun were thwarted by my overactive mind. At the bottom of every ride would be Artemis, berating me for wasting time, asking me if I was really cut out for this kind of life. *Don't you want to see me again, Alli? How is this going to help?*

I also thought of Ibis, and whether I could accept the same fate that he did. Most people feared being forgotten after death, but to be forgotten while you were still alive...I could hardly think of anything worse. That was failure in its truest sense. He was so afraid of the shadowy Council of Light that he was ready to die with the information he had worked so hard to uncover. I was thinking these very thoughts when I got a message from an uhhidden profile:

*You're good to go. Come see me again when you get a chance.*

Ibis. I guess he wasn't completely forgotten, as the universe appeared to be trying to tell me. Maybe the universe was trying to tell me to get back to work. Either way, it was right, as it always is.

## Chapter 15 - Nothing you need to get messed up in

I arrived back to Virgon with a renewed desire to finish this rollercoaster ride of a play once and for all. Ibis laid the bait; now I had to point Petrus in that direction. I arranged to meet Petrus in one of his many offices. As I entered the building on the 33<sup>rd</sup> floor, I turned the plan over in my head once more, preparing for the 70 or so eventualities that I predicted coming to pass from this encounter.

As I opened the door to his office, I was met with none other than Gingil himself, as he pointed out some business ob in a projection to Petrus. This was unexpected, but still an eventuality I was prepared for. Gingil turned to greet me, and I shook his hand with a smile.

"Ben, you tenderfoot titan. Petrus didn't tell me you had managed to find your way back here."

"I only recently found out he was back myself. How were your parents, Ben?" Petrus asked.

“They were happy to see me.”

“But you weren’t so happy to see them, ey?” Gingil cut in, clapping me on the arm with a smirk. He added, “My parents are off on Bost B. I left that puny colony as soon as I possibly could, same as you, boy. Who needs parents, anyway.”

I forced a smile. “Ha, yeah.” I couldn’t argue with him there.

“Well anyways, I’ll leave you connivers to it. Remember Petrus, don’t let that bitch get control, or we’ll really have to get our hands dirty.”

“I’ve got it situated, Gingil. Don’t worry yourself over it.”

“Me? Worry? Nah!” With a glib wave of his hand, he was out of the room.

I opened my mouth to ask about what Gingil was referring to, about ‘getting their hands dirty,’ but Petrus cut me off.

“Nothing you need to get messed up in, Ben. I’d like to keep you out of *that bitch’s* path for at least a few more years. She’s an associate at the company, and she’d suck a donkey’s dick if it would get her higher up the corporate ladder.”

While I disliked his crass characterization, I had to say, it cooled my nerves slightly to hear that he imagined us working together in a few years.

“I’m glad to hear you think we’ll still be working together in a few years,” I said.

Changing my tone to grave, I continued, “It is unknown if you’ll feel the same way after I tell you what I am about to tell you.”

Petrus leaned back on the floating seat next to his desk.

“I don’t like the sound of that. Please, do tell.”

I steepled my fingers at my lower abdomen and looked down at them.

“It’s actually about Gingil.”

“Hmmpf. What has he done now? He’s always getting into trouble.”

I cleared my throat. “I have a cousin, back home. We had some drinks and caught up while I was back there. She knows someone that’s part of, well, she knows some people that are in an eco-terrorism group. Called the Reliance.”

Petrus stiffened visibly. I continued.

“The word is that they’ve managed to get their hands on the location of every solar harnessing core in the ITZ. So, I dug a little deeper. I made her tell me how they got that information. She said it was stolen from a Datastore, by a man with a Bostian accent, and jet black hair.”

“Your cousin, she told you all this?”

“I made her tell me.” My look implored Petrus not to ask more.

He looked back at me very seriously, for what felt like ten minutes. He was clearly thinking, very, very hard. Was I capable of what I was implying? How could this happen? Who should he trust? Finally, he broke his gaze.

“Will you come with me somewhere?” he asked, the implication being that he was not asking.

“Of course, where?”

“Just follow me.”

We stepped through Petrus’ office window and onto the shuttle pod parked on the other side. Men like Petrus didn’t need to spend the extra ten seconds it took to wait for a communal shuttle; he had a personal vessel docked outside of any office he stepped foot in. We rocketed up 20,000 km or so to reach his personal Sky-Dock, and our pod was subsumed by the much larger ship waiting there.

Petrus blackened the windows and enabled the privacy setting on the ship’s control console, turning the entire panel into a single sheet of white-yellow light from my point of view. I felt the almost imperceptible click of the engines igniting. Petrus sat down in the captain’s chair, and motioned for me to sit off to the left side of him, in a jump seat. We sat in silence. It was deeply unnerving, not being able to see our surroundings, or monitor the ship’s trajectory on the console, or feel any kind of movement, yet know we must be moving, somewhere. From my seat, I could see only a portion of Petrus’ face. He did not appear to look concerned, rather his expression was a particular mix of vacancy and mystery that I had seen on his face more than once.

I, on the other hand, was more than a little concerned. I was in a room where I had almost no control. Artemis would have never tread this far into the lion’s den, not without the full schematics of the den, the den digger’s permission, and an escape tunnel she had built herself.

The lion broke me from my thoughts.

“Do you have any idea where we’re going, Ben?”

I had a few ideas, none of them good. Not wanting to speak them into existence, I shook my head.

“Don’t want to guess? That’s ok, you wouldn’t guess correctly, no matter how many guesses I gave you.”

“Can you tell me?”

“Technically I shouldn’t even tell you, let alone be taking you there. But I don’t have to follow the rules, and frankly, I want to see the look on your face when you see it.”

Oh no. No, no, no. We couldn’t be...

“I’m taking you to where Phalareon stores its most secret data. To a Fractal Datastore.”

Fuck me. This was exactly what I had been trying to avoid. I couldn’t be there when Petrus looked at the logs, otherwise I’d become associated with the deception. Artemis had taught me that. Of course, I had to admit that seeing a Datastore was something I had dreamed of for years...

“You’re taking me to an actual Phalareon Datastore?”

“Exactly correct. Phalareon has multiple Datastores, though naturally I can’t tell you how many. Not even I know that. The security really is quite impressive. The Stores move locations every second via a computer-generated pattern that might as well be random. To predict the location you’d have to get the key, which is a quintillion-digit number that has been broken up into many pieces, and one piece is stored at each of the Datastores themselves. Each of the

Phalareon VPs know where only three of the stores are at all times, to avoid someone compromising the entire system.”

“That is quite impressive,” I said. And it was.

“Almost as impressive as the Datastores themselves. But I’ll let you see that for yourself.”

Petrus opened the side door of the ship to reveal a small de-docking room.

There was no backing out. Ben Mcleod would never turn down a chance to see a real life Datastore, not for any reason. Hell, neither would Ben Shio. I could salvage the play after all this was done, I decided. I could handle myself. Basar’s wind, we’re talking about a real-life Datastore here!

“Remove your Com-Palm and any other devices, and place them here,” Petrus commanded, motioning to a box in the corner.

I did as I was told, and he did the same. The box snapped shut, and the room filled with a bright flash of light. A moment later, the door before us slid open, and a gust of heavy, warm air slammed into my body. I blinked my eyes in shock, as the red afterglow from the flash of light dissipated to reveal a massive, dark warehouse.

Black walls stretched out on either side farther than I could see. The ceiling disappeared into darkness after what must have been a kilometer, at the min. Filling the majority of this immense space was a glowing silver and purple shape with uncountable sides. It was as though someone had taken a bunch of magnetic blocks and stuck them together randomly, and then done that a trillion times until they had this monstrous Tetris mess. It reminded me of a giant Fluorite rock, with hundreds of cuboid crystals of varying sizes. This was a Fractal Datastore.

Swarms of nanobots hovered around the outside in clouds, creating sparks as they worked-- like lighting from a stormcloud, as though the Datastore was large enough to have its own weather system. It was undeniably ominous. All thoughts of the play were pushed to the back of my mind.

“Each square centimeter holds between one to two terabytes of data,” Petrus said, with a hint of pride in his voice. “That is approximately a twentieth of what the same area could hold if we were to use traditional magnetic storage, but then of course, the entire Store could be wiped out in an instant by an EMP. By storing the data in physical shapes, it is far more protected, even though the shapes are barely larger than electrons themselves. The mass you see before you is mostly empty space. Those swarms of nanobots that you see, they are building more data into the Store. They can also dive into the mass and read from it, in the rare case that some part of backup needs to get pulled back into the Cloud.”

To a normal sentient, even one as bright and well educated as myself, such knowledge would have never been taught to me. This was not a topic you could search on the internet and find more than a paragraph of conspiratorial information on. This was one of the many secrets that were guarded so closely by the Council that I doubted even Petrus knew as much about the subject as he was pretending to.

Still, knowing about FDS, and seeing a real life Datastore before your very eyes are two very different things. I was in pure awe of the giant before me. Tinkering with the miniscule

Fractal Stores hidden in Com-Palms did not prepare me for the true vastness of a Datastore. Nor was I aware that so many of them existed, traveling through space in random patterns.

I was struck with a new sense of respect for Petrus, as being one of the trustees for such information was a level of responsibility held by maybe a hundred sentients in the entire universe. I was jealous of him, that he was privy to secrets not even Artemis had uncovered, and he had risked far less to get them. I wondered if Ibis had ever been in a Store of this magnitude. Most people were walking around with this technology attached to their wrists, and they weren't even aware of its existence, such was the secrecy of this knowledge. I was so in awe of what stood before me, that for a moment, I even forgot why I was there, and who I was supposed to be.

"It is quite impressive," Petrus said, clearly seeing the amazement on my face. "I imagine you have a million questions, but you must also know that I cannot answer any of them."

"This technology...how are you able to show this to me?"

"I'm not strictly allowed to, but I couldn't resist seeing your reaction. It's not like you can figure out much by looking at it anyway. Now follow me."

I followed Petrus like an eager puppy. We walked across the dark floor towards a lone pedestal, standing about 500 meters in front of the giant structure. It was a long walk, but we were still quite far away from the structure itself. Petrus made some motions on the console sitting atop the pedestal. He scrolled for a moment, then a look of disappointment came over his face.

"You were right," he said. "The log shows Gingil accessing this facility yesterday at 14:23, but I cannot see *what* he accessed. How the hell did he manage to augment the log like that? It should be impossible!" Petrus raised his voice in astonishment, or perhaps anger.

I silently praised Ibis.

"It doesn't make any sense! You said your cousin got the location of the Solar Harnessing Cores from Gingil?" he asked me.

The unfortunate reality of this field trip descended on me like a heavy blanket. This is exactly what I had been trying to avoid, being tied to this hack.

"Well, my cousin never saw the man who handed over the information, he just heard that it was a Bostian man."

"Nevermind whether it was Gingil or not. Your cousin was sure that they had the actual spatial coordinates of the Cores?" Petrus' face began to turn red. He was getting more worked up than I had ever seen him.

"I...that's what she said," I responded.

"That is impossible!" Petrus said with a bite. "Let me show you."

He made a few more motions on the console, clearly entering a password of some kind. Unfortunately, the screen was privacy enabled, so I could not see anything. He stepped back.

"This will take a minute or so. See, the information I'm retrieving at this very moment cannot be removed from this facility. It cannot be downloaded, or uploaded, and the scan we underwent prior to entering this facility ensures that no photographic equipment of any kind

can capture it. It exists physically, and the nanobots that access it cannot be hacked to do anything they were not originally programmed to do. Never in history has anything bound to this Datastore ever been removed, unless decreed by the Council of Light, or the President of Phalareon herself.”

I cringed inwardly. I knew the security measures for this system would be incredibly tight, but I had underestimated just how tight they were. They were impenetrable, just like Ibis said. I saw now that the scenario of betrayal that I was trying to perpetrate on Petrus was truly *impossible*. This was a tier of technology I had never come across, in all of my adventures with Artemis. This was a mountain, whereas the FDS’s I had tinkered with were hills. I could only hope that Petrus lacked the technical knowledge to understand just how impossible it was. My mind raced to find a solution, an explanation, but my brain was overwhelmed.

My chaotic thoughts were interrupted by a beep from the console. Petrus blew the console screen up to appear before us.

A hundred thousand numbers and symbols hung in the air.

It was the coordinates to the Cores.

“This,” he gestured to the screen before him, “is what he would be trying to steal. Coded, raw spatial coordinates. There are translated versions on my own data network, that, while encrypted, would be far easier to get than this,” he said, gesturing angrily at the falling figures.

“Voids, if I were trying to figure out where all the cores were, I would just trace their machthermal signatures.” Petrus exhaled a long, exasperated breath. “Although, I’m not sure Gingil knows that much about the technology. What is clear, is that Gingil knows too much about something. And something must be done about that.”

Petrus turned and began to walk briskly away, seemingly lost in thought. After the distance between us grew to a significant length, he ordered me to follow him.

I followed him. Of course the location of the Solar Harnessing Cores would be accessible from areas other than a Datastore. The secret of the Datastores themselves were more valuable than the location of the Cores. I thought I at least had a basic understanding of how this technology worked. I was wrong, so wrong, but that didn’t matter. Because I was still a genius, and my genius had just won me the entire play.

As we exited, I could scarcely contain my glee. I had put this whole plot together, fabricated the story, hacked the Datastore logs, all so Petrus would trust me enough to allow me to get close to him and eventually reveal a path to the coordinates. I never dreamed this one trip would have actually given me the location of the Cores! It was like magic, just as Artemis had said.

See, Petrus was correct — the coordinates could not be uploaded, or downloaded, or screen grabbed. But he forgot the most basic way of storing data, even more ancient than hard discs. An ancient technique taught on the utopian planet of Pluora. Memorization. The sturdy towers.

I pushed any thoughts of what I had just seen to the depths of my consciousness, and fixed my mind completely on the digits in my head. In my practice on Pluora, I could keep even



the most intricate details locked in my sturdy towers for up to a half hour, but after that point, sequences over ten thousand digits began to leak from my mental storage. I blocked any external distractions from entering my mind, and thought only of the coordinates, and my final goal. We collected our Com-Palms and boarded the ship once again. I immediately began to dictate the string of numbers and symbols I had memorized into my Com-Palm through the thoughtlink. I was extremely grateful that Petrus was not much of a talker, as this required an immense amount of concentration to ensure I didn't accidentally visualize an incorrect figure. You know how messy the thoughtlink software can be. There's a reason almost no one uses it for mental dictation, aside from the fact that it is more than a little creepy.

I picked the coordinates, block by block, from the mental tower into which I had placed them during the few moments they sat before my eyes. I was almost completely through the portion I had managed to memorize when Petrus stood from his chair, indicating our arrival. I had managed to save two Core locations. That would have to do.

I finished dictating the second Core's coordinates as I followed Petrus out of the ship, and through a hallway. I could scarcely contain my glee. I noticed out of the corner of my mind that we were back at the office building where we had begun, and were walking towards Gingil's office. We entered the door and Petrus flipped the settings of the walls from transparent to opaque, shrouding us from the outside world. Gingil greeted us in his usual grandiose way, standing and extending a hand towards Petrus.

It happened so quickly I had no time to react. Petrus grabbed Gingil's outstretched palm with his right hand, and his left hand jabbed forward, sinking a sharp pick through Gingil's neck. Gingil inhaled sharply, then collapsed to the ground. He did not inhale again. Petrus rolled the pick between his hands, crushing it into a fine powder that disseminated into the air.

Petrus looked back at me with that empty expression on his face...was he deciding whether he should kill me now too? No, he wasn't looking at me, he was looking past me, as though I weren't even in the room. He didn't see me as a threat at all.

"We cannot tolerate any risk to our secrets, here at Phalareon Co," Petrus said as he rubbed his dusty palms together, grating away the last vestiges of the murder weapon.

"Our power does not come from the stars we harness. It does not come from the fact that we *know* how to harness energy from the stars. It comes from the fact that others *do not know*."

Petrus looked down at Gingil's limp body. "You must understand this, Ben, if you are to survive in this corporation."

I nodded my head.

"Good. Now, you grab his legs."

Together we carried Gingil's heavy weight to his own ship docked outside of his office, and laid him on the floor. Petrus input a destination on the console, and we both stepped back into his office as the bay door closed. The ship took off into the sky, now a coffin for the unlucky Bostian man.

"That will do it for today, Ben. I trust I will see you bright and early tomorrow morning?"

Petrus asked, the implication being that I had no choice.

“Of course, sir,” I said, my mouth moving on autopilot.

“Call me Petrus, son.” He smiled at me.

I swallowed deeply and smiled back.

“Of course, Petrus.”

## Chapter 16 - Did you murder someone?!

How could I have not seen it coming? So much of what had transpired today was not I had psyche-mapped. I had misjudged Petrus. He trusted me completely. I had been so preoccupied with earning that trust that I had failed to recognize I already had it. Why else would he have taken me to a Datastore? And murdered a man in cold blood right in front of me? I had done *too* good of a job filling the chasm left by the death of his son. I had pushed this man to depths we never needed to reach.

But still, I had been successful in the end, hadn't I? My plan had worked; I had gained Petrus' trust and then gotten the coordinates to the Solar Harnessing Cores. Artemis would be proud of that, surely. Basar's wind, I needed to reach out to my contact at the Reliance to tell them I had the coordinates. First I had to get somewhere more secluded.

As I walked down a quiet side-street, I could hear Artemis screaming at me from whatever dark corner of the universe she was in. *You went too far down the hole! You wanted more than the coordinates, and your greed got a man killed! And Petrus is calling you son now! Son! There is no unringing that bell!*

A hand grabbed me and pulled me behind a large, boxy Infrogrator.

“Slow down there, you big idiot.”

I blinked my eyes in disbelief at who the hand belonged to. Artemis, no longer berating me from a dark hole in my mind, was now berating me from a few inches in front of my face. I continued blinking in shock.

“What, have you actually lost your mind? Can you no longer speak? Do you remember who I am, Alli?” she said in a heavily condescending tone.

For almost a year, Artemis had been a voice in the back of my head telling me what to do and chiding me for my mistakes. I didn’t know where she was, or what she was doing, or if I would ever see her again. Now she shows up here, right after I witnessed a man being murdered in cold blood for a crime I fabricated. Oh god, did she know how about that? How in the Council’s name would she know about that?!

“Basar’s beard, Alli, you look like you’ve seen a ghost. Wait...you didn’t think I was dead, did you?” Artemis laughed nervously. “Alli come on, you knew I was alive this whole time, right?”

I finally managed to speak, “Yeah, yes...I mean, of course...I had no way of knowing, but I definitely assumed...”

I don’t know what I assumed.

“Ok, phew, you had me worried there for a second. I mean kid, I’ve been watching you this whole time, I sure as hell ain’t dead.”

That snapped me out of my fog.

“You what?”

“I’ve been watching you, kid, through your Com-Palm. Well, listening mostly. And not to everything, I mean shit, who has time for that, and also, gross...but I got the main plot points.”

Artemis, the real Artemis, had been watching me this entire time. My chest tightened with embarrassment, then burned with anger.

“How the hell were you doing that?! How did you...did you plant something inside my Com-Palm?”

“Alli, hun, do you know how many times you’ve taken that thing apart? You think it was that hard for me to slip in a little nano-tech of my own? Please, I did it years ago.”

“You think that’s ok? You think you should be allowed to follow me everywhere? You haven’t been a part of my life for a year, Artemis! You abandoned me after we got into one little fight! Who the fuck do you think you are?” I screamed at her, not caring who heard.

“I’m the woman who saved your life, you little shit! And I’m about to do it again, because you are about to get yourself killed!” Artemis was shouting now too. She realized this and took a deep breath.

“You’re hurt, I get it. I made a mistake, and I’m here to fix that. But you need to come with me, now.”

“Ha, a mistake! You still think letting me try this out on my own was a mistake? I got the fucking coordinates, Artemis! I did it, without you! I don’t need you, or your Hyell state surveillance anymore. So why don’t you just soff off back to wherever you’ve been hiding.”

Artemis had been trying to pull me away, but stopped. “You got the coordinates?”

“Yeah, for two solar harnessing cores. I went to a fucking *Fractal Datastore*, with Petrus, and got them there. Memorized them, in my goddamn head.”

Artemis' face gave no indication of her reaction. "You...didn't give them to the Reliance yet, did you?"

I shook my head no.

"Alli, that's great! You were offline, so I didn't know what was going on. I want to hear all about it, but we really need to snap the fuck out of here first." She pulled my arm again towards the Flash Point a few meters down the street. I wriggled out of her grasp.

"I'm not going with you, Artemis. I'm finishing this. The murder was an unforeseen obstacle, but I can still fix this."

Truth be told, I didn't know if I could, but I sure as hell wasn't going to let Artemis take this from me.

She grabbed my other arm with her other hand, holding me in a vice-like grip.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Murder? Who the fuck was murdered? Did you murder someone!?" she asked.

Wait...

"Wait, isn't that why you're here? Petrus..."

I trailed off, as we were too out in the open to be discussing murder for all the public surveillance of Virgon to hear. I started again, quieter, "Just now, the thing with Petrus and Gingil? That's why you came to get me after all this time, isn't it?"

"Allison, I only tuned back into your feed long enough to see where you were. I have no idea what you're talking about. Petrus is the minimum of our worries, believe me." She squeezed her hands so tightly around my arms, I could feel both of our hearts beat. "I'm going to say this one more time: we need to get out of here."

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Back on the ship, Artemis was pacing. The click-clack of her boots on the flight deck floor echoed in my cavernous mind as it tried desperately to hold onto a thought, any thought.

*Artemis is here*

*She was watching me this whole time*

*Click-Clack*

*Gingil was killed by Petrus*

*It was my fault*

*Did she see me masturbate?*

*Click-Clack*

*If I broke off a piece of a Datastore, would it fracture along the lines of a bit?*

*It was my fault Gingil got killed*

*I wonder if Amal has gotten to Loyola yet*

*Click-clack*

*Where has Artemis been all this time*

*Click-clack*

*It was my fault*  
*Click-clack*  
*It was my fault*

"I'm ready to speak now," Artemis said.

I looked up from my trance. The sight of her petite, athletic frame, standing there in front of me, brought a calming warmth to my chest. "So, speak then."

Artemis sighed.

"Alli, this is going to blow your mind just a little bit. That's why I had to think so carefully about what I am about to say. It sounds like you went through a lot today, but I need you to put all of that aside right now, because this is a matter of life and death."

I tried to care, but I was tired. I looked back at her indifferently.

"Ok," she said. "There is an alien species that has made contact with the Ertian realm, but you have never heard of it."

I hmphed. "Shit, that doesn't exactly blow my mind. I bet the Council of Light has pets from entire Galaxia no one knows about."

"This species is not a pet. They are more evolved than we are."

"You're telling me the Council has managed to keep a more evolved species a secret?"

"These creatures don't want to be known either. If people knew, it might be harder for them to assimilate us into their network."

"What?"

Artemis held up a hand.

"Let me explain as best I can. This species goes by one name, Silen. But it is not one being, not really. It is like trees in a forest; connected by roots below. Each tree exists and operates on its own, but if one is in peril, the others know. And Silen cannot breed on its own. It cannot grow a physical form in this plane of existence.... instead, it uses other beings. It takes control of their minds, and they become part of the forest. Whoever they were as an individual is lost."

I scoffed. "This is one of your tricks, Artemis. You're trying to scare me into abandoning my play."

"I'm not. I know how it sounds, but this is real fucking life, Allison."

"Well then what in the unknown voids does any of this have to do to me? Are we about to be taken over by this cosmic, brain-eating plant?"

"You and I are not at risk. We're far too intelligent and stubborn to become Silen."

"Oh great, that's convenient."

"We don't have time for your attitude, Alli. Don't misunderstand, Silen has the ability to bring down our entire species, the Ertian realm, and any shred of individuality that exists in the entire universe. It will kill you, and me, and anyone else that stands in his way."

Artemis spoke with the same serious tone that she typically reserved for lecturing me about the dangers of un-preparedness. This was real. I was meant to believe that there was a

cosmic plant trying to assimilate all of sentience, and it was apparently in our neighborhood. This sounded like such a preposterous notion that it didn't alarm me, at the time. Rather, my curiosity was piqued by another aspect of this insanity.

"How the hell do *you* know about this? And if it's so dangerous, why have you not told me about this 'Silen' creature until now?"

Artemis raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips, indicating she was yelling inwardly.

"It hasn't been a danger to you until now. Now you have stumbled across its path, and that part is my fault, but I am trying to make it right. There's a chance you may have even communicated with Silen at some point during your play, probably today."

My back straightened slightly, as though I had been pricked by a needle.

"When? Who?"

"Silen has infiltrated the Reliance. I know Yu-li, your contact at the Reliance, planned to meet you at 19:00 tonight to get the coordinates. She was going to bring someone with her. However, a couple hours ago, she witnessed her partner getting assimilated by Silen. Thank Basar it wasn't Yu-li's first brush with Silen, or she wouldn't have known what she was looking at."

"And Yu-li called you first, because you are apparently an expert on this nightmare alien species," I said sarcastically.

"Yes Allison, I fucking am, does that really surprise you?"

"I guess not. But why do you think that Yu-li was going to meet me tonight? She *is* my connection at the Reliance, but I haven't talked to her in months. I haven't talked to anyone at the Reliance in months."

Artemis stared at me, once again hiding her reaction with the skill of a champion High Poker player.

"It's not you, you're not the contact?" she asked, almost rhetorically.

"I told you, I only got the coordinates an hour ago, and I've been a little busy since then."

"Yeah, we'll get to that." Artemis paused. I paused. I'm not sure which of us had more to process at this point.

She broke the silence first. "It's incredibly unlikely, but it seems that another person has gotten their hands on the coordinates at the same time as you. Or perhaps this other person is just ready to sell. The Reliance has been broadcasting their need for the coordinates for years, so I guess it was only a matter of time before someone stepped up. It's a strange coincidence, I'll admit it, but not out of the realm of believability."

The realm of believability had expanded to include just about anything in the last few hours.

Artemis continued, "Wherever they are coming from, it is clear that Silen wants the Core locations, that's why It assimilated Yu-li's partner right before the hand-off. I can only imagine what sort of damage It could do with that information."

I interjected, "Then why doesn't It just infiltrate Phalareon? It would be much more direct."

“I don’t know exactly why, but I assume that it is because only incredibly intelligent, driven people are privy to that sort of information at Phalareon. Those sorts of people are impossible for Silen to assimilate, their brain activity is too...strong. And Silen would have had to expend an incredible amount of energy searching for any possible opening into the company. The Reliance is just more...easy.”

I nodded to show that I understood. I’ll tell you now that I was wrong.

“I can’t waste any more time explaining this stuff to you, Alli. We need to stop the hand-off from happening by any means necessary, and we only have a few hours to figure out how we’re going to do that.”

“And what do we get out of it? Do we have another buyer?”

“We’re saving the world, you dumb shit!” she said. “Do you *want* an evil being hell-bent on ending sentience to know where to get an almost infinite power supply?”

I wasn’t sure what to make of all this. Only once in my life had I seen Artemis care about something that didn’t directly impact her bottom line, and it was the day she took me from that waystation after my homeworld had been destroyed. Still, I had to say I liked the idea of saving the world, so to speak. Saving the Ertian Empire was something the characters I idolized did. It was certainly something Tricia would do.

I slapped my knees. “Fine, fine, you know I’m in for this hoot! Let’s hear it, what is the play?”

The unreadable look returned yet again to Artemis’ face.

She didn’t know what to do. This was not her territory. She didn’t know Petrus.

Luckily, I did.

“Can I propose something first?” I asked timidly, knowing Artemis’ ego had to be handled with kid gloves.

She nodded.

“We ask Petrus for help. Before you say anything, hear me out. This guy trusts me like a son. And he has a zero tolerance policy for leaks. Artemis, I watched him kill one of his colleagues today because he *thought* that he *might* be trying to steal information from Phalareon.”

Artemis ‘hmm’ed. “That’s the murder you were talking about. I expect a full report on what happened when all of this is done, you know.”

“Of course.”

“That being said, I think you’re right. But how can we use Petrus to stop this?”

“We tell him what’s going on. Not about Silen, but that Phalareon information is being sold. He already thinks Gingil was conspiring to sell it. We know the time and the place that Silen will be there for the deal, so we tell Petrus and he brings down the full might of a major corporate entity on Silen’s head.”

Artemis nodded. “Good. Surely he’ll come after me if I give him this information, though?”

“You’re the queen of escape plans, I’m sure you can come up with something.”

Artemis snapped her fingers. “I’ve already got a few ideas. What about you? You’ve got your taser-boots on, right?”

I pulled up my psyche-map of Petrus, and checked a few of my assumptions. “He won’t come after me. But it’s probably best if I also make my escape during the chaos.”

“Is that a clean break?” she asked.

I swallowed. There was no hope of me making a clean break from this play. But I couldn’t admit I’d failed at the Art of the Dream to Artemis, not after I’d come so far. So I did something I’d never done to Artemis in the context of a play. I lied.

“Of course. This is essentially how I was planning to do it anyways.”

Artemis had too many other questions to question that. “But what about Yu-li? She’ll get arrested along with everyone else,” she said.

“We’re saving the world. Sacrifices have to be made.”

Artemis nodded again. “That’s very good, Alli. I like this plan.”

Only then did it occur to me that Artemis had this plan in mind from the moment she pulled me behind the Inforgrator on Virgon. Schooled by the master, yet again. The whole Silen thing was probably just a dodge to keep me off her scent. An evil psychic forest? That was something only Artemis could come up with. I would just have to play along to find out where the truth was.

## Chapter 17 - Seek out the Oddballs



Artemis and I talked through some of the details of the play as we made our way to meet with Petrus. I had told him there was an emergency, and I needed to meet with him in private ASAP. It was a testament to how strongly I had built the relationship between us that he responded immediately, and suggested one of his personal ships as the meeting space. Artemis must have been impressed, though she didn't show it. The air was heavy between us, thick with words that still needed to be said. I wanted to tell her about Gingil. I wanted her to apologize to me for leaving. There was no time now. The play was in motion.

We docked next to Petrus' ship and entered it. It was not a very large ship, but the room into which we entered was round and cavernous, and richly decorated with red velvet walls. Petrus was standing to the left side, watching us eagerly as we entered and looked around. He bade us to sit in some chairs situated next to the wall, and we shared with him the story we came to tell.

Petrus listened intently to our entire plea, only nodding and raising his eyebrows occasionally in response. When we had finished, he leaned his head on his fist and sat motionless for a few moments.

"This is serious, if what you are telling me is true, Ben."

"It is true, Petrus. Rachil may be a member of the Reliance, but she is also my cousin," I said, gesturing to Artemis. "She knows that trying to sabotage the Cores is wrong, and that is why she is here, right now."

"How do we know she isn't lying to both of us? This could be a trap."

"If I might speak for myself," said Artemis/Rachil, "what would the Reliance gain from luring a few of Phalareon's ships into a trap? At the worst, we could destroy them, but Phalareon has fleets upon fleets of ships. It would be like kicking a skyscraper: far more damaging to the one doing the kicking than to the skyscraper."

Petrus sat for a moment, not moving an inch.

"Ben, is she the one who told you about Gingil?"

"Yes. I know this doesn't look good for me, Petrus, but I've never wanted anything to do with the Reliance. I can't help the fact that my family is caught up with them. In fact, I've done everything in my power to get as far away from them as possible. I want them to stop, I want them to- "

"It's ok Ben, I trust you. I really do. It's your...cousin I don't know about."

I looked to Artemis. She gave me a pitiful look, then turned away. I missed her brilliant acting.

"How about this," Petrus said after watching our silent exchange, "Ben, I would like a moment to talk to Rachil alone, to test her story. This whole mess, first Gingil, now this woman.... something is going on here. Whether you approve of her lifestyle or not, I can see you are protective over her, and I don't want her getting any help from you."

I looked at Artemis again, this time with genuine worry in my face. After what I had seen Petrus do to Gingil, the last thing I wanted to do was leave him alone in a room with Artemis.

Not to mention the fact that Artemis and I didn't have a chance to plan an elaborate backstory or fully debrief on the events leading up to this moment, so separating us left Artemis flying blind.

"Don't worry Ben," Artemis said before I could protest, "I'm not worried. He can ask me any questions he likes, I have nothing to hide."

I saw no signal from Artemis that she did not mean her words. Perhaps I was being too protective of her. I stood and nodded to Petrus.

"You may wait in the private room through the door on the left, over here," he said.

My feet carried me slowly to the door, which slid open as I approached it. I turned around, giving Artemis one final look before I entered the room on the other side. Though the expression was stony, her face shone with the same mischievous sheen I had noticed when I first met her, all those years ago in the Pluoran escape pod.

Then the door slid shut, sealing me off from the rest of the world. The room in which I stood was small and ash-white, equipped with only a short desk and a Box embedded in the wall behind it. The screen was blank apart from a twirling Phalareon logo. It was oppressively quiet, and immediately my mind flooded with terrible thoughts about what was happening outside.

To occupy myself, I opened the control panel for the Box and began to flip through channels. No, I was too amped up to watch anything, maybe a game would be better? Could I play a game while Artemis was possibly being murdered outside? I slapped the wall with frustration and turned away from the screen, running my hands through my hair.

I was trapped and powerless inside this tiny, useless room. Memories of the escape pod flashed through my head. I was tiny and useless, just like this room, just like I had been back then. Artemis was out there, saving the world like she had saved me, and I was trapped. I could not be trapped. I was getting out of here, damn what Petrus wanted. I waved the door open and burst forth into the red room.

Immediately I was hit in the shoulder with a sharp object that spread a fiery shock throughout my body. I fell to the ground, paralyzed instantly. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Artemis lying on the ground in a similar position.

"I thought I could trust you to at least stay in the room, Ben," Petrus said.

Dammit. I knew he wouldn't be able to let any member of the Reliance off the hook, not even if it jeopardized capturing the whole lot. But to stun me as well? What had Artemis said to him?

"You've put me in a very difficult position, Ben. I'm really not sure what to make of all this." I could hear him slowly walking behind me, each step heavier than the last.

"See, *Rachil* and I already know each other quite well. Of course, I know her as Artemis, but I suspect that is what you call her too. I've never really understood the need for names, especially when you can just change them."

I struggled with all my might to move any muscle in my body. My abdomen tightened uselessly, my eyes bulged with the strain.

Petrus walked around to stand in front of me, crouching down to meet my eye level. He cocked his head slightly.



“Disgusting. Anyway, where were we? Ah yes, Ben, you were going to tell me if I was right about you being from Pluora, or I was going to shoot this bitch in her soft brain.” He aimed the gun directly at Artemis’ brain.

I tried to yell out, but the stun had only worn off enough to let me get out a “Hhrrrrrggnhh!”

“Come on Ben, surely now you can manage a blink or two. Give me one blink for yes, two blinks for ‘shoot her’.”

I shut my eyes, fighting against my leaden body with every ounce of my being. I was even more helpless than I had been in that room. I let go of my useless body and retreated into my mind, meditating as I had been taught to do on Pluora. I laid on the soft grass with my classmates as the Teachers chanted to us...

*find the answers.... find the answers....*

An emotional warmth enveloped my being as I fell through dark sky and gray clouds. I walked across volcanic earth until I found myself, laying with my eyes shut against a red velvet floor. I felt tendrils lick at my heels, hissing at me. I did not know why Silen cared so much about who I was, but there was no reason for me not to tell him.

My eyes opened wide as I snapped back to reality. I stared at Petrus, at Silen, with the intensity of a cosmic explosion. I did not close my eyes again.

“Ha! Yes! One blink, I knew it!”

Without looking down, Petrus moved his arm and fired his gun into Artemis’ chest. He then flew over to me and hoisted me up by the shoulders.

"I can't believe, this entire time, I had a child of Pluora right under my very nose..." He laughed a single, echoic laugh. "Ha! The universe is a funny place, isn't it?"

I struggled underneath his grip, trying to form words, but unable to even lift my head.

"I'm guessing Artemis didn't tell you what really happened to your little utopia, did she?" he sneered. I tried to look at Artemis, but couldn't move my head far enough to see if she was even alive.

"See, we go way back, Artemis and I. And by I, I of course mean Silen, not this husk. It is quite a fine husk, though, isn't it? I mean, if I'm going to expend this incredible amount of energy to maintain my consciousness at such a great distance, you know I had to pick the best host. He may be the best deal I've ever found! Aaah!" Silen let out another inhuman shout.

"See, for me to assimilate a mind, I need to get my roots into it, and they can only penetrate soft soil. Idiots, followers, the weary and depressed: they are the soil in which I grow the seeds of my consciousness. Like your friend Petrus, here. I found him three years ago, at the bottom of a well, desperate for anything to erase his guilt, to erase himself. So, I squirmed my way into his mind, into his thoughts, and convinced him to release himself to me. It also helped that he was blazed out of his gourd."

Petrus wrapped his knuckles against his head and laughed.

“What was I talking about? Oh yes, the experimental worlds,” Silen spat, wiping his lips vigorously before continuing his speech. “Artemis was the one who destroyed Pluora for me.”

He yelled over his shoulder to her, "Isn't that right, Teacher?"

Emotions tore through my limp body like plasma rays inside a Solar Harnessing Core. I looked away from Artemis and Petrus, seeking the only escape I could manage in my paralyzed state. What he was saying couldn't be the truth, Pluora wasn't destroyed, it imploded. The Council was experimenting for the first time with building planets from scratch, and the results proved to be too unstable. It was a tragedy, but not one that was caused by sentiency. Not one that was caused by Artemis...

Petrus turned back to me and continued. "If I could just wield the secret of solar harnessing, I could extend my consciousness far beyond my current reach, and quench the destructive fire of poly-psychic sentience from this realm. But you, you fucking Pluoran and your greasy Promethian bitch." Silen became enraged again. "For years I have been maintaining this being across a billion lightyears, letting billions of myself languish and die to keep this one alive, and you RUINED it. She fucking ruined it!"

Petrus' face became red and engorged as he screamed and tightened his grip on me. What had Artemis done? What had she done....

"And here I thought you were just a spy for the Reliance. I was feeding you bits of information so that those wannabe terrorists could actually cause some real trouble for the Ertian Empire. If just one Pluoran could cause this much damage, I'm so glad I decided to vaporize all of your little brothers and sisters into cold oblivion!"

I'd heard enough. I tapped my foot back against the wall behind me, arming the taser that was implanted inside my boot. I then kicked my foot forward with every muscle I had at my disposal. It connected firmly with Silen's groin, paralyzing his body and causing him to release me. I fell to the ground with a thud, Silen's gun landing just ahead of me. I threw my arm towards it, feeling the hard hilt underneath my limp fingers. With the last of my strength, I pulled the trigger and shot Silen in the head. The impact splattered his brains across the room, where they blended into the red velvet wall.

I cried out, as I felt movement return to my limbs. I pulled myself to my knees and crawled beside Artemis. Her breathing was low and shallow. The bloody hole in her chest began to steam and hiss as her seeping blood vessels were cauterized shut by biobots, one by one. Her eyes opened then shut tightly again against the pain.

"Artemis," I said, voice cracking. My body shivered violently as it rid itself of the last effects of the stun gun.

"I didn't know, Alli. They told me to plant a device in the capital, and that it would kill the planet's leaders. I didn't know it would...I didn't know." She let out a pained sob. "It has my girl. It has Allison."

"You're not making sense, Artemis. I'm right here." Seeing her like this, vulnerable and confused, it cut through me like a knife.

Artemis shook her head once. "No, no! I have a daughter. Allison. She was born on a journey to the outskirts of the ITZ....she was barely a year old when Silen got her. Said It would

let her go if I did that one thing — " Artemis coughed up a mouthful of blood. "It didn't let her go. It will never let her go. Accchh!"

"Do you expect me to believe that Artemis? How can I believe anything you say!" I gripped her hand tighter, this time from anger.

"You gotta leave, Alli. What the hell does this all look like to you? The cops are coming, I called them as soon as I figured out it was Silen - caaach – look Alli, I'm not going to lie to you and tell you it isn't true. I helped Silen destroy Pluora."

"No, Artemis, don't do this -"

"Shut up and listen. I didn't know how much damage it would cause. I didn't want to know, because it was my only hope to save my daughter. I regret it every day of my – caaach – life!" Tears began to roll down her cheeks and she struggled to take in air.

I dropped her hand. "You knew what you were doing. You spent months on Pluora. How could you do anything to a place that perfect..."

Memories of Pluora bubbled up from beneath the thick black crust that had been built around my childhood. I saw the smoke rise from the volcano, felt the fear as the flood wall cracked and crumbled...I recoiled from her and shoved my head between my knees.

"What kind of monster are you?" My voice was small and whiny from within my self-made ball of protection.

"Alli, I am a monster. I deserve whatever punishment you are envisioning for me in this moment...but –"

Artemis made a terrible gurgling sound, then no sound at all. Was she dead? Was that what I wanted? No, she was the only thing I had in this universe, she was the only one who even knew that Pluora existed! I unfurled myself and fell forward beside her. I threw out my hand to her com-palm to read her vitals.

As soon as I touched her wrist, a jolt seized through my body and my vision went black.

---

I awoke in Artemis' ship, alone. I could see from the multicolored beams shooting past the deck windows that the ship was traveling at FTL speed. The air was cold, freezing. My Com-Palm vibrated – it was a message from Artemis. I opened it. It was a picture of her, holding an infant swaddled in a blue cloth, aboard some kind of deep space vessel from a bygone era. There was also a note.

Ben-

I'm sorry. I know you will never be able to forgive me for what I did, but maybe someday you will understand. This is a picture of me, holding my daughter shortly after she was born. Silen took her from me, and It took your planet from you. It will take everything in this universe, until It is the only thing that exists. I am going to go far away now, and I won't come find you again.

I leave you with one more piece of advice: seek out the oddballs in this world. The artists, the larger-than-life creatures, the ones who grab your attention – they are the ones Silen cannot imitate. Never put your full trust into anyone you can predict.

I love you,  
Artemis

PS. You don't owe me anything, and you never did, but please tell the family that I'm dead. You can make it as embarrassing and fucked up as you want, just make sure they don't come looking for me. No one should follow me where I am going.

I read the message as though it was in an alien language. Artemis, telling me she loved me. And in this picture — she was smiling and holding a baby. That wasn't Artemis. That wasn't the woman that had begrudgingly saved me. That wasn't the woman who had raised me in her clan of outlaw masterminds.

Was any of that real? Was anything I knew real? Artemis truly was the master of the Art of the Dream. Not only was I questioning her existence, I was questioning my own. Part of me thought that this was all another elaborate hoax by Artemis to test me. That she was out there somewhere, watching me, laughing at the thought of her having a daughter, and at me for believing there was a mind-sucking alien out to get me.

I miss her tests.

---

Promethians, by custom, have grand, bright funerals. Artemis was not a religious woman, and therefore never passed any of her beliefs along to me, but over the years I did learn bits and pieces of the Promethian theology. Death, for example, was to be celebrated, because it meant your soul no longer had to fight against the cosmic flow. Your particles and energy become one with the eternal circle of life, and when they complete a rotation and reach the same point, you will be born anew. Basar, the god of energy, keeps the cosmic flow spinning, and life eternal.

But beliefs in a spinning wheel of energy cannot always overcome mortal despair, so there were many tears shed at Artemis' funeral. I embraced her weeping friends, but my eyes remained dry. I was subdued throughout the funeral, though inside of me there was an intense battle being fought. This woman had killed everyone I knew and destroyed my homeworld. She had corrupted me, taught me how to manipulate and cheat people. This woman had also saved me, nursed me when no one else was there, and taught me invaluable skills. She both gave me my life, and made sure I would never be able to enjoy any lasting happiness within it. I hated her, deeply, for many many years. It wasn't until I faced the same horror as her that I understood how she could have done what she did. But I am getting ahead of myself.

I left that funeral with a fire burning so hot inside of me, I could feel the flames scorching my bones. I drank myself into oblivion to quench the fire, and when I could still feel it burning the next morning, I tried something stronger. When that didn't work, I tried another substance. I tried every substance I could think of. Eventually, I woke up naked and bloody on a dirty street, with no memory of where I was or what I had done - and a fire, white hot, burning a hole through the center of my chest.

End Part I

Part II: The Council of Light



## Chapter 18 - Day 30 - All will be revealed in time

Lucia breathed for the first time in an hour. She began panting as her mind turned over the words Ben had spoken. Her mouth stumbled as it tried to ask three questions at once.

“Hwha did you, um, where is Silen now? I mean, I know he - um - It can be multiple places at once, but, who does It...who is It in control of now?”

Ben answered. “I’ve killed just about every one that I have come across. But I haven’t seen one in a long time.”

“Then, It’s not a threat anymore?” Lucia continued.

“He’s stopped looking,” said Dax, flicking his ears.

Ben took a deep swig from a bright blue bottle he had been hiding in his jumpsuit pocket.

“Far from it. Silen is only getting better at masking who It is. And It is gaining the ability to control more minds here as It assimilates worlds closer to our realm. You should look out for birds, Lucia. It likes birds.”

“It can assimilate birds?”

“Anything smarter than a gnat but dumber than your average Professor. There is some wiggle room outside of that of course, as you learned with Petrus.”

“By the Council...Marim, Dax, you both knew about this...species?”

They both nodded in the affirmative.

Marim added, “I did not know of the Silen until I met Ben. Now we have a special contract, where we are paid the largest bounties for any of the Silen we kill.”

“You’re not supposed to tell anyone about that, Marim,” Ben said.

“The girl is ok. She is trustworthy, and part of our team.”

Ben waved his hand.

“Fine, whatever. I’m done talking about Silen, about Artemis, about soffing tertiary school. The next part of the story is the best part. This chapter is where I have fun, make tons of money and boff lots of hot bitties.”

Ben raised his hand for a high-five from Dax, who slapped it with a chuckle. Ben then offered his raised palm to Marim, who returned it with a death stare. Ben slapped his own hand and grinned, clearly pleased with himself.

Lucia ignored the exchange and launched into another question.

“But why don’t we—“

Ben held up his hand again, this time to signal ‘stop’.

“Lucia Lucia Lucia. The deal was, I would tell you my story, and you would stop asking me questions.”

“I never made a deal with you.”

Ben cocked his head to the side. “Wait really? That can’t be right...”. He looked up, trying to think. “Soff it, I must have been high, I can’t remember.” He sighed. “I meant to make it a deal, so can’t you just honor that?”

Lucia frowned. “But I have so many questions.”

Ben put his hands on her shoulder. “Just trust, Lucia, that all will be revealed eventually. I can’t just spoil the whole story for you, that’s bad television.” He looked her square in the eyes, willing her to understand.

Lucia felt naked beneath his gaze. How did he do that? She stood from the yellow couch, folded her arms over her chest and stormed off without another word. Ben was almost sad to see her go. Almost.

“I guess I’ll pick back up with that part of the story another day. Dax, where are we with bounties? Is there really no one to chase around here?”

“It was Marim’s idea to Slingshot out here to Nimbus in the first place, why don’t you ask her.”

“We were given a slingshot ticket to the Tarisian Galaxy. Such a ticket is one of the hardest to obtain,” Marim insisted.

“Just because we won the lottery, doesn’t mean we need to take the trip. I prefer Lub, the criminals are bigger donks there.” Ben complained.

“An old colleague of mine heard that some of the members of the durious Ruff gang have taken up residence on Taris proper,” Dax offered. “The trip will have been well worth it if we snag one of them.”

“Now *that* is a great idea. I bet Lucia’s never been to Taris.”

Ben yelled out towards the direction Lucia had stormed off,

“HEY LUCIA! HAVE YOU BEEN TO TARIS?”

When no response was forthcoming, he opened a line to her Com-Palm.

“Hey Lucia. Lucia, Lucia, Luuuuuuuucia. Lu—“

Lucia responded from the other end.

“What, Ben?”

“Have you ever been to Taris?”

“That ancient orb? No.”

Ben closed the line without another word and slapped the arm of puffy loveseat he was seated on.

“Well that tears it, we’re going to Taris!”

---

A few hours later, the ship exited FTL travel and the crew gathered on the flight deck to watch the oncoming planet swell into view. From afar, the planet looked like any other: a ball of blue, brown, gray and green, smeared with white. As the crew approached the surface, the differences began to become apparent.

The ship docked on a patchwork pad of various metals that had been crudely welded together. The landing station was surrounded with skyscrapers of all colors - Brown, gray, blue, yellow - that were in all states of disrepair. The cool, misty weather hid the streets below, giving the impression that the city had been abandoned, perhaps for hundreds of years. Dirt and grime covered rickety-looking tubes that wrapped around the dilapidated buildings and plunged into the fog below.

Lucia was beginning to think they’d taken a wrong turn when her eyes spotted movement through the clouds. Something was traveling through the grimy tubes at high speed, and outdated shuttles were making their way from roof to roof. Now that she looked more closely, she could see that the buildings were, in fact, not abandoned. Broken windows were patched up, or replaced with a different type of glass. The buildings’ sides were scratched and in bad need of a wash, but not one of them was defective or in danger of collapse.

Lucia looked around her at the landing pad with a tinge of disgust. The bounty hunter’s cobbled-together space vessel fit right in with the rest of the junker ships in the landing station.

“This place looks like a dump,” she said.

Ben looked around him, hands on his hips. “It does, doesn’t it. But in fact, Taris is one of the wealthiest planets in the Ertian system, and the rest of the ITZ for that matter.”

“No way.”

Dax chimed in.

“It’s true, Lucia. A millennia ago, Taris was where the majority of Alcubierre Drives were manufactured; the devices that allow ships to wield Sangum matter and travel faster than light. Most manufacturing now occurs off-world, but they are constantly refining the technology here, on this oneliest planet.”

“Then why does it look like a ghost town?”

“For sure,” Dax agreed. “The people here do not believe in spending time and resources on aesthetic matters. It is cormendable. They would much rather fix the part of something that is broken than replace the entire object. They know better than anyone how limited the resources are in this universe, in a grand sense, and it is central to their culture.”

“They’re not the only planet that functions like this, but they definitely take it to the furthest extreme,” said Ben. “It’s impressive. Not so much the fact that they recycle, but the fact that they are constantly aware of the eventual heat death of the universe and they haven’t all committed suicide.”

Marim frowned. “Ben, I ask you not to speak lightly of this. I lost billions of my ancestors to the Mass Suicides of-- “

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, Marim, we’ve all heard it a thousand times. Its ancient history, let it go already. Anyways, I was being serious. I don’t know how they do it.”

Marim continued frowning, but did not protest.

“Thanks for giving us all a minor case of depression, as always, Ben,” Dax joked, “but we did come here for a job.”

“Ah yes!” Ben cried, “A job! That’s what saved your people in the end, didn’t it Marim? Let’s find some bad guys and get paid already.”

The crew approached a row of 25 upstanding pods that lined a portion of the outer landing dock.

“Now this is a beauty,” said Ben, admiring the pods as people entered them and disappeared as if by magic. “They’ve been keeping these lines going for almost 1,000 years. I’ve bet you’ve never seen a Flash Point like this, huh Lucia?”

“Not in person, but I know about them. They still have these out in the Furget cluster in Lub. They’re still a good 500 years behind the times out there. Probably because they’re a decade away from the nearest slingshot.”

Ben looked slightly disappointed that she wasn’t more impressed, but powered through. “Ah, but Furgeters only built their tubes a few hundred years ago. These babies,” he said, gesturing to the pods, “were state-of-the art Hyper-tube technology when they were built. They laid billions of kilometers of tubes above and under the surface of Taris. It was the first time you could get to within a block of where you wanted to be in a matter of seconds. It blew people’s minds, Lucia!”

“Ok, so it was cutting edge back then, but you really expect me to believe they’ve been able to maintain a billion kilometers of infrastructure without any accidents for over *a thousand years*?”

“No, no, no, most of it has been shut down and replaced with the new Flash tech due to safety and cost concerns. Flash Points are actually far more efficient and economical than Hyper-tube tech. But Tarisans have developed a sharp aversion to change over the years of their environment staying mostly the same. They can’t help but keep repairing the most highly-used Hyper-tube lines.”

“I uh, still don’t feel too confident about getting into one of those things.”

“So you feel better flying through the open air, like a regular Flash Point? It’s perfectly safe, see for yourself.”

Ben pointed to a man whose single pod had just arrived into one of the receiving portals. The pod door slid half-way open, then got stuck. The man forced the door the rest of the way and walked out, unperturbed by the short inconvenience.

“See, not a problem. And besides, it’s free! They couldn’t be bothered to install the latest auto-charge hardware.”

Lucia liked that aspect.

The crew squeezed into a multi-pod that smelled faintly of dirt and oil as Dax verbalized their destination. Immediately they fell down into the tube and were whisked away, the walls of the tube producing a brownish-yellowish blur through the small pods windows. It was not as smooth of a ride as a modern Flash Point, but their motion could still hardly be felt, even as the pod flew through curves at 50 kilometers per second.

Moments later, the pod doors opened and the crew stepped out onto a street corner across from a dilapidated 10-story building. The streets were unsurprisingly filthy, and studded with a number of street urchins in various states of consciousness. The sun was almost gone from the yellow sky, and the area was hung with an energy of bad things to come.

Lucia looked around. “So, this is the nice part of town, I’m guessing.”

Marim smirked.

“Actually no, this is one of the not-so-nice parts,” Dax said. “But it is where we’ll find our bad guys, hopefully.”

“Cool, cool, yeah. So, how does this work, do we ask around for the guy? Do we knock a few heads together? This is my first bounty, tell me what to do!” Lucia said, clapping her hands excitedly.

Ben rolled his eyes. “We wait, Lucia. The hottest danceclub in Taris is just down the street from here, and we know the *bad guys* are going to show up at some point, probably in an hour or so. They start the party early here on Taris, yet another reason why this place is amazing. Dax, why don’t you tell Lucia about the bounty so that she doesn’t fuck it all up for us.”

Dax tipped his snout. “We’re looking for the Ruff Gang, a gang of unscoopulous thieves that mainly deal in high-end ship parts. That’s why they’re here on Taris, where the highest of

high-end Alcubierre Drives are produced. Any member of the gang is going to fetch us some Red, but the prize poog is Alfred A, the leader of the faction in this galaxy. It is unsure who from the gang is here tonight, so I'm sending you all their profiles to study up on." Dax flicked his Com-Palm and Lucia's wrist buzzed with a new package.

"Read them inside the club, I'm ready for a drink," said Ben, as he began walking down the street.

Lucia made sure the privacy setting was enabled on her Com-Palm and began reading the various gang members' profiles, lagging behind the group as they made their way down the street and into yet another crumbling building. The leader of the gang, Alfred A, was a short human with short hair and a large nose. In his public picture, he was covered in red and purple tattoos, but his bounty profile said he was subject to change them often. The member with the second highest bounty was a black-haired woman with nearly as many aliases as she had suspected murder victims. She was beautiful, in a terrifying sort of way. Lucia suddenly felt an all too familiar pit begin to form in her stomach.

"Hey Lucia, why don't you put that screen down for a second and have a drink with us?" Dax pushed down Lucia's hand from in front of her face and placed a drink into it.

Lucia accepted the glass and stared at it.

"You know, I wouldn't be able to drink this if we were on my homeworld. The second the alcohol hit my tongue my body would seize up, because of my age."

Dax sighed, "Yeah I know, I've spent plenty of time in the Hyell parts of the Ertian Empire. Saw a kid try it once, even though he knew it was forbidden. It's not such an awful place, though, once you let go of a little control."

"I just can't imagine going back to letting someone else decide what I can and cannot do."

"It's a society. There has to be rules. And everyone has to follow those rules for the society to function properly. Some would consider it a small price to pay for never having to worry about getting robbed, or raped, or killed," Dax said.

"People get killed in the Ertian Empire. That much I know," Lucia said.

"Fine, but surely fewer than out here in the rest of the ITZ."

"Do you miss it?" she asked Dax.

"Some days, for sure. I miss the Empire almost as much I miss my homeworld in Gruar. But I can't go back there again. Not now that I've had a taste of true freedom."

Lucia touched the tip of her glass to Dax's. "I'll drink to that."

They both took deep sips from their cups.

Lucia looked over to the bar and saw Marim in deep conversation with a man that was a meter shorter than her.

"Where's Ben run off to?" Lucia asked.

"I believe he's dancing," Dax replied.

"Ben dances?"

"On occasion, to be sure. He's not half bad actually, when he's not completely plastered."

Lucia walked over to the edge of the balcony they were standing on, which overlooked a large floor that was becoming more and more crowded with dancers as each second passed. A band stood in the center of the floor, playing instruments that sent pulsating notes to stimulate different areas of the club-goer's undulating bodies. Even from her position above the dance floor, Lucia could feel that this was a very chesty song.

Lucia scanned the crowd for Ben, who should have been easy to spot. Most of the crowd was wearing animated clothing, so Ben would stand out like a dark moth on a bright light. Finally, Lucia found his messy hair, which was currently being fondled by the long-nailed fingers of a woman. A dragon swirled its way through the fabric of her dress as she began to sloppily kiss him, and he grabbed a handful of her behind. Lucia found herself staring for a moment before tearing her eyes away angrily.

"I found him. He's not dancing," she told Dax.

"Oh? What is he doing?"

"Making out with some bitty."

"Ah, so he's plastered, then. Well, that didn't take long."

"He's so...unprofessional," Lucia scoffed.

"He surely is. But I thought you liked that about him?" Dax asked.

Lucia's face swelled with heat. "I don't like him! Uh, I mean I do, but I guess it's the old Ben that I like. The one he seems to have been in his stories. You can still see that person, sometimes."

Dax wiggled his nose. "I wouldn't hold out hope that you're ever going to see that Ben, really."

Lucia downed the rest of her drink and turned her head towards the bar, looking for an open spot to refill her glass. What she found instead was a frighteningly beautiful woman with black hair: one of the Ruff gang members.

Lucia grabbed Dax's shoulder and pulled them both to face the opposite wall. She leaned down to shout-whisper in his ear.

"I found one of them. The woman, Alfred's chief assassin. She's standing at the bar."

Dax's body tensed.

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Wait here."

Dax walked back to the bar with measured steps, eventually reaching Marim. He hopped up on one of the bar stools, and the pair exchanged a few words. Marim dismissed the gentleman she had been conversing with so intently. Lucia's fingers buzzed with excitement and rubbed the back of her neck, as she tried desperately not to blow their cover by jumping up and down. It was her first bounty – the first of many hopefully. Had she not been so over-stimulated by her surroundings, she might have noticed a gnawing feeling of doom in the pit of her stomach.

Dax and Marim approached Lucia and casually led her back over to the balcony edge.

“Ok Lucia, here is the plan: Marim and I are going to solicit the woman for a new Rox combuster. She’ll take us somewhere private to talk business. That’s where we’ll try to nab her,” Dax said, clicking his three nails together.

“Your job is to watch where we walk off to, and wait for the signal. If you get a red blip from me or Marim, something has gone wrong, and you should find Ben. If it’s blue, then we’ve taken care of her and you should get back to the ship as soon as possible. Sound good?”

Lucia frowned. “But what am I doing, really?”

Dax’s yellow eyes narrowed. Marim spoke for him, “You are going to make sure we have a back-up. In case of trouble.”

“Yeah, but I’m not actually going to be your back-up, am I? Ben is. And he’s tongue-deep in some girl.”

“That is why we need you!” said Marim with a smile, confident she had solved the problem. “Now, let us go.”

Lucia opened her mouth to protest again, but the duo were already making their way into the crowd surrounding the bar. This is not how she had wanted her first bounty to go, babysitting from the sidelines. Still, she had to admit she was terrified at the thought of even talking to the dark-haired assassin she had read about in the bounty profile. Lucia scanned the crowd for Dax or Marim, but couldn’t see either of them from her vantage point. She started making her way towards the left end of the bar, where the crowd was a little lighter. Before she could get there, a pale, skinny man grabbed her arm.

“Hey, bee-cakes, you’re a little young to be here all by yourself, aintcha?” He gave her a sickly sweet smile through bedazzled teeth.

Lucia pulled her arm from his grasp.

“Yeah, um, actually I was just looking for my friends. One of them is huge, really muscular, could crush a skull with her hand...”

“Don’t worry, little bee, I’m your friend. Let me buy you something,” he smiled again, sending a bone-shaking chill down Lucia’s spine. He was most certainly not her friend.

As Lucia tried to step around him, she caught a glimpse of Marim’s tightly wrapped ponytail above the crowd, moving toward a hallway that lead away from the bar. She pushed past the creepy man towards Marim. She had taken two steps when she felt a hand grab the back of her neck. She tried to slap it away, but her arm remained motionless by her side, refusing to obey her brain’s orders. Her vision began to fade as Marim’s head disappeared into the crowd, and before Lucia could even panic, she slipped into unconsciousness.

Lucia awoke to a tingling sensation in her fingers, though this time it was not from excitement. Her entire upper body felt like it had fallen asleep, and was now painfully being woken up. She shook the spots from her fingers and blinked the spots from her eyes, and found herself lying on a cold floor in a brightly-lit warehouse. To her left, leaning against a shelf of ship parts were Dax and Marim. Dax was still unconscious, and had some kind of apparatus



attached to his snout. Marim was wide awake and straining against the bonds that held her feet and hands together.

“What happened?” Lucia whispered to Marim.

Marim responded at full volume, “We were rendered unconscious by a spinal paralytic.”

“No, I mean, how did they know we were on to them?”

Marim did not answer, and continued to struggle against her shackles.

“What is on Dax’s mouth?”

“It is probably a sound dampener. Argrurians can be very loud when they want to be. These people are advanced. They have also disabled our Com-Palms with EMPs.” Marim sounded even less happy than normal.

Before Lucia could begin to think about a way out, the door in front of her opened and the black-haired woman stepped through, followed by two equally-intimidating men. She wore a long sleeveless trench coat that slowly oscillated between dark blue and black.

“Who sent you?” she asked with no preamble.

“How did you know we were after you?” Lucia blurted out, before she even realized the words had escaped her mouth.

The woman raised a thick, expertly manicured eyebrow.

“An Argrurian, a giant woman, and a child huddled together at a bar? That’s strange, even for this danceclub. I did not believe for a second that you are here to buy black market ship parts.”

Marim interjected. “It is true. Our ship needs a new Rox combuster. We cannot afford to buy one in a legitimate fashion.”

“If your ship had a busted Rox combuster, you wouldn’t be able to pilot it. And I suppose I’m supposed to believe it broke down right here on Taris? No, no, no. You’re either the worst bounty hunters I’ve even seen, or you’re here on some kind of revenge mission.”

She walked up to Lucia and knelt down in front of her, sticking a large, rectangular gun into her cheek.

“Tell me, who sent you?”

Lucia closed her eyes, trembling at the warmth of the wide barrel against her face. Her mind was blank- she could think of no excuse, no response, not even a few words to beg for her life.

Marim did not tremble. She stared at the woman, her entire body tensed with fiery defiance.

“Fine then, I’ll just kill you. Doesn’t really matter anyway,” the woman said.

Lucia felt the gun leave her cheek and aim at her head. Elia, Hama, Zaerpath, please save me, she prayed to the founding members of the Council of Light. Could this really be how her story would end? Lucia clenched her teeth and turned her face to the ground.

The room went black. Three shots rang out through the warehouse. With super-human quickness, the black-haired woman jumped over Lucia and slid behind one of the shelves. Lucia curled up into a ball and fell to her side, where she could see the outline of the guard’s bodies

slain and motionless on the ground. The woman returned fire from behind her. One of the plasma bullets struck a shield, causing an intense burst of blue light to illuminate the warehouse, blinding Lucia. To have a personal shield capable of stopping a plasma bullet of that size, this intruder had to be twice as dangerous. The mystery intruder returned fire, sending a single shot piercing through the darkness. The shot struck the woman clear through her mouth, causing her to drop her gun and slump to the floor.

The lights flicked back on, and Lucia saw Ben standing next to the switch, attempting to tuck some thick glasses back into the front pocket of his jumpsuit. The long-fingernailed woman he had been dancing with was standing next to him, mouth wide, clearly shocked by what had just happened.

“Night-vision glasses,” he said to her and smirked, swaying a bit. The woman made no action to show that she had heard him, so he simply shrugged his shoulders and turned back to his fellow bounty hunters.

“Pretty cool, huh? Night-vision glasses, and I built the shield myself.” He wrapped his knuckles against his chest.

“This baby can with stand up to 67,000 kiloamps of firepower!” He grinned like an idiot.

“How did you find us?” Marim asked, ignoring Ben’s showboating.

“Oh, Yessifer here is doing one of the baddies.”

Ben motioned to the woman who had been standing next to him. She was now crouched over one of the men that Ben had just shot, sobbing.

“Eeeek. Didn’t really think that one through. We should probably go now,” Ben said.

He sauntered over to the black-haired assassin, who lay lifeless in a pool of blood gushing forth from her mouth.

He made a “tch” sound with his mouth.

“Meant to get her between the eyeballs. Whoops.”

He leaned over her and fiddled with her belt. After a few moments, Marim, Dax, and Lucia’s bonds de-activated and fell off. Marim stood and slung Dax’s still unconscious form over her shoulder. She walked over to each of the bodies, scanning each of their Com-Palm’s to verify that they were deceased for the bounty. The woman, Yessifer, began to wail more loudly over the body of her dead lover.

“Come on Marim, wrap it up. Lucia, get on your feet and let’s gooooo,” Ben made a twirling motion with his hands.

Lucia shakily rose to her feet. She looked around her at the bodies lying lifeless on the ground, and thought how easily that could have been her, and Marim, and Dax. She ran to Ben and embraced him tightly.

Ben stood motionless, hands up in a defensive position, unsure of what to do. Lucia regained her awareness after a few moments and released him quickly, apologizing.

“Sorry, sorry.”

“No, uh, it’s ok. You’re welcome.” Ben ran a hand through his hair and looked away.

Marim ‘ahem’ed.

“Yes, thank you Marim, punctual as always,” Ben said. “Let’s, how do you say, get the fuck out of here.”

The bounty hunters exited the warehouse, slipped past some guards, and took the emergency stairs down to the ground floor of the building they had been held captive in. As Marim landed with a thud on the pavement, Dax began to wake up in her arms.

“What the fuck happened?” he said, groggily.

“You idiots got captured by the bounty. I saved your asses,” Ben filled in.

Dax rubbed his eyes. “Mmmm. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. They’re going to be looking for us now, though. We’ve got to find somewhere to hide out.”

“Can’t we just leave?” Lucia asked.

“They’ll no doubt have people watching the landing docks. Besides, we didn’t catch the big cheese, we can’t leave yet!”

“You mean Alfred? How the hell are we supposed to find him? He’ll surely be going into hiding now,” Dax said.

“For a little while, yes. But he’s a cocky son-of-a-bitch. Plus, my sources tell me he and the assassin woman had a bit of a thing. He’ll want revenge, and we can use that to draw him out into the open. We’ll have his head on a platter in 10 days, trust me.”

Dax smirked a little. “Look at you, psyche-mapping just like the old days.” Ben looked slightly embarrassed. “It’s not like that. Weren’t you paying attention to my story at all? And why the fuck are we still standing on a street corner outside of a building that is clearly owned by the gang I just murdered part of? Dax, you know this rock, where do we go from here?”

Dax hopped off of Marim’s shoulder and stretched. “I know the perfect place.”

“Well, let’s go there, now.”

The crew hopped into the nearest Flash Point, which was blessedly a modern model. Dax dictated an address that none of the crew recognized, and in moments they found themselves back-to-back on another street corner. Across the street was a bar, whose flickering, centuries-old sign read ‘The Old Man’s Beard’. Even compared to the scratched and peeling buildings around it, this bar looked dirty.

“Oh Dax, you remembered!” Ben was positively beaming.

“Well surely I did, you zoner. I thought it would be a phernominal place to hang out for a spell.”

“Er, what’s special about this bar?” Lucia asked as the group filed inside.

Dax sighed. “Ah...it’s a long story.”

## Chapter 19 - Day 10 - A third type of Argruarian

The inside of the “Old Man’s Beard” looked better than the outside, but that wasn’t saying much. The bar was a solid piece of brown Polymytex, an indestructible but plain material. The floor and walls were covered with Argruarian moss, and several round, dinged-up tables filled the dimly-lit space between. It was clearly an Argruarian-run establishment; a rare find on most planets. Dax greeted the two Argrurians behind the bar in his native tongue, which sounded to human ears like a series of low grumbles punctuated by occasional high-pitched whines. The gang gathered around a table, and a female Argruarian – gendered by her shorter ears and wavy fur - brought them menus. The Argruarians hadn’t developed a sophisticated written language at the time they were discovered by humans, so the menus were in Ertian.

“Family, this round is on me, in honor of Ben saving my ass once again,” Dax said.

Lucia placed her hands on the table and leaned forward. “Seriously Ben, thank you. That was incredible.”

Marim nodded steadfastly in Ben’s direction. The mechanic smiled to himself.

“Alright, alright. We needed the money. You guys distracted them, and it all worked out in the end. Not a big deal. Now, what I did to save Dax all those years ago, that is a story.”

“Exactly the story I wanted to tell you all.”

Dax took a sip of his drink, cleared his throat, and began.

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Now I can’t fill in much of the time between where Ben left off after Artemis’ funeral and when we met, but—

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Ben interrupted, “Oh but I can! It’s the best part of my whole story! Everything before this is tragic, and after it is just so...tragic!”

“You don’t consider operating a drug syndicate a mistake?”

“Dax, you know full well that I do not. Let me just tell you guys a little bit about how I invented the Xarabee drug... or about the fiasco at the M32 concert... come on Dax, you know that’s a good story!”

“M32 happened way after this, I think you’re getting your stories mixed up, Ben.”

Lucia interjected. “I want to hear Dax’s side of the story. Who cares about all the drugs you’ve done and the girls you’ve slept with.”

Ben looked at Lucia as though she had just betrayed him to his worst enemy. Marim snorted into her drink.

“Fine, what do I care. Ungrateful bitch.” Ben leaned back into his chair and folded his arms.

Lucia started to retort, but Dax put his small hand on her arm.

“Children, please. I’ve put up with enough of both of your sqwaking to earn my chance to speak. So both er you shut yer fucking traps and listern to ma soffing story.” He laid on his accent thick for emphasis.

“Now, as I was saying...”

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To tell this story, I first have to tell you about myself, and about my homeworld, Gruar. As you are aware, Argruarians are generally not too keen on exploring the outer reaches of the universe. While the rest of the ITZ would consider us to be less evolved than Ertians, we don’t see ourselves that way. Sure, our weapons and technology are poor compared to yours, and we didn’t have written language prior to contact with the Ertian race, but we believe our way of thinking and our connection with the universe is eons beyond all Ertian. Did you know that Argruarians have existed for almost 100 millenia longer than humans? Did you know we live to be 250 without the aid of any Ertian medicine? We find the way other races exert themselves to be barbaric, unnecessary, to be sure. Well, most of us do.

I was born to a star-crossing mother on the 200th anniversary of the Ertian-Argruarian Discovery. My mother, a clairvoyant female, was one of only a few hundred Arugrurians that had ever been outside of the Gruar Galaxia. Those few months she spent with the humans were enough to plant a seed in her that took on a life of its own.

On Gruar, we believe in something called Arjrn. A life's purpose. When a baby is born, one of the elder's from the village will divinate with the universe to determine what that baby will accomplish in his life. An Arjrn cannot be changed, this is most sure, no matter how undesirable, far-fetched it may be. A pitiable few do decide to fight against it, but none have ever won, as doing so results in immediate, permanent banishment from society.

Due to the relevance of the date of my birth, and my mother's adventurous accomplishments, and surely the will of the universe, I was given an Arjrn never before given to an Argruarian. I was to leave the planet and never return. Not immediately; with such a destiny I needed to be prepared, groomed to represent my species for the rest of my days. As it was all unsure, some did believe I should be cast out as soon as I could walk. My childhood was full of bitter snarls, icy shoulders. I was told my mother wailed for 2 days after being told of my Arjrn, though she never expressed anything but pride and acceptance to me. I learned Ertian, more than all Argruarian could speak it at that point. I was taught about Ertian and Ataxi culture, at least as much of it as was surely known to Gruar. I did receive a fair amount of misinformation. The same elder than bestowed me with this Arjrn later divinated that I would save many lives, and it was therefore determined that I should become a Tenant. The purpose of Tenants most closely mimicked the Gruin on our planet - an assemblage of Argurians that protected others from harm. That is what we believed, and what I believed.

On my 19th year I left Gruar. A great many Argruarians stood on porous indigo moss and expiditally pounded their left paws against the ground to wish me farewell. The soft, rumbling sound of their feet filled the caverns of my ears. The orange evening sky into which I was about to depart filled the valleys in my eyes. My soul was pregnant with such purpose and such fullness of being.

I was the third Agrurian to become a Tenant, and the first to become a full officer in every capacity. After three years of training, I was appointed a position in none other than the Light Police, highly esteemed unit in charge of protecting the property of the Council of Light. In those days, there were only 100,000 of us in the entire ITZ. My unit was to take orders straight from the top, from the Council themselves. For sure, us Argruarians do not feel emotions as humans do, but I think that in those few months leading up to my graduation, I was very happy. It is difficult to remember that feeling now. I would be aramiss if I did not mention the great isolation I felt as well, from being in such an alien place filled with alien people. But I more sure of what I was doing than of anything else in existence, because I was fulfilling my great Arjrn.

I received my first mission 5 months after joining the Investigations Unit. There was a drug syndicate operating in the Tarisian Galaxy that somehow escaped detection by the Council of Light until then. The Council was not so concerned with the drug usage, because it was occurring just outside of the Ertian Empire. However, they were very unsure about who these

mysterious, intellectual syndicate members were. Some of them had managed to jailbreak their Com-Palms, so the LP could not track their locations or communications. This meant that the Syndicate may be dealing in a product far more illegal than drugs: information. The precious proprietary information belonging only to the Council. Though this truth was very unsure, the Council insisted we must investigate. My colleagues thought it a waste of mission, as these desultory drug smugglers had probably just removed their Com-Palms altogether, and therefore were not long for this world.

I was to go alone to the N23 Quadrant, which comprised of the Tektenian and Sede galaxies, in Nimbus Galaxia. High volumes of the drug, called Xarabee, had been located there. Inexplicably, the drug was administered in the form of a liquid, and was therefore easy to track through spectrometers. My task was to discreetly, findly map the members of the Syndicate, from the low-level dealers to the kingpin, and ensure that no illegal information, schematics, history, etcetera, was being exchanged. I was to protect ruinous knowledge from corrupting sentiments, and I was to fulfill my destiny.

After a long journey to the outskirts of the Empire, I arrived on the planet Tekten, rivers upon rivers away from my home. With the authority of the Council, I was assigned Slingshot tickets almost immediately, and so the entire journey only took a few weeks.

I acquainted myself with the outlandish area. Sure enough, the Xarabee drug was everywhere. Plenty of people had it, and plenty of people were selling it. Relatively normal people too, not the edge-dogs or terrorists I had been expecting. Surely, in an area like N23 I did come across some sents that had removed their Com-Palms, but no one that was involved with the Xarabee Syndicate.

For months I searched, making my way further and further into the lightless, hyperborean depths of the N23 Quadrant. It was perniciously confounding, as though gigatons of the drug had been dropped from the heavens by Jurana himself. Certainly, I met many sents who believed that to be the case. To them, the drug was a godsend and a treasure. One day it wasn't here, and life was stale, then it was there, and now everything was marbelous. I had begun to start doubting myself, when I heard of yet another establishment where Xarabee could be purchased in droves, and it was back on Tekten proper. I did not know that this place would be the last I would have to search.

I entered the Renaissance Club. Of the dozens of bars, clubs, dens and lounges I had frequented in search of the elusive Xarabee syndicate, this one appealed to me the most. Its plain walls were backlit by warm-colored lights, and the plush-carpeted ground was soft like the homes on Gruaur. They played dulcious, early 1000's music, low, pulsating. I was not worried about being discovered, as nearly to sure in those days, none of the patrons had ever met a member of the Light Police. Nor was I worried about acting a fool; my research into the drug meant I was surely versed in the purchasing process and effects of the drug. As surely as the rock rests, I sauntered coolly up to the one human concierge behind the bar, and asked him where I

could find Xarabee. He pointed me to a plump woman, posted up alone at a hexagonal high-top. She was barely wearing any clothing, but her skin was covered in hundreds of inscrimate tattoos, none of which appeared to have any common theme. I transfered her the money with a coy nod, and she handed me a small vial of light blue liquid; the Xarabee.

“Fucking annoying man, having to carry around these bloody vials,” she sneered tiredly. “Don’t know why they don’t just make it into a patch or a Com-Palm chip, like a bloody normal fix.”

I huffed in aggreal, “Hear y’out. Whoever makes this shit has to be nuts, but I love ‘em for it.” I said, playing the part of a gruff miscreant.

“I tell Ben all the time, matey, why can’t you just make me like one batch of patches and see how they sell. But he’s like, that would be too easy, and easy isn’t fun.”

She paused for a second to see if I would say anything. When I didn’t, she continued,

“Yeah Ben is one of the manufacturers, like a top guy. We party sometimes.” She crossed her thick legs, clearly pleased with herself.

I almost dropped the vial in my hand. She just said she knew one of the manufacturers! I couldn’t believe my luck, after all this time and after all of the dealers I had talked to, this cherub knew one of the manufacturers. My brain betrayed me as I tried to think of what to say. My human words were less sure in those early days, so I stood silently, without words. Luckily, she wasn’t quite done.

“Yah know, I was hangin’ with Ben the other day, and he was sayin’ how he’s never partied with an Argruauriian before. You grunts are usually so square, no offense. But you seem like a pretty down bloke, I can just see it in your eyes.” She leaned in towards me. “I’m good like that, I can tell who peoples are from their eyes.”

She leaned back a little and turned her head to the left. Some lights on the ceiling overhead flashed various colors in time with the music and illuminted her face in pink, blue, purple.

“I bet he’d like to meet you, ya know, if that’s something you’d be down for.”

My words came back to me just in time to say, “Sure.”

She smiled a devious, sweet smile, “Alright matey, let me hit him up.”

She tapped her Com-Palm twice, and again once more after a brief pause.

“I’m guessing you haven’t got any plans tonight, well, apart from...” she nodded her knowing head to the vial I still clutched in my hand. I stared at it, having almost forgotten it was there. The blue liquid reflected hypnotic light back to my eyes.

“Right...yeah to be honest I was going to take this and climb down a sim hole, but reality is starting to sound glazer.” I traded her back a devilish smile. Her eyes widened a little, as humans do when they are excited.

“I don’t know when he’s going to message me back. If he’s bored it will be any second now, or it could also be a month from now...but he always gets back to me though.” She giggled a little, and patted the plush, pleen chair next to her.



“Why don’t you pull up a seat and we can chat.” She winked and flicked a holimote of a purple heart into the air.

I was going to do whatever this bodacious woman wanted me to do, for sure. We sat and talked for about an hour, during which I lightly pressed her for more information on Ben and the Syndicate as a whole, without much success. She had moved on and was now far more interested in telling me about an encounter she had had with an Arguruarian in heat, in expilacious detail. I listened closely, but my mind was also alight with anticipation.

“You gonna take that or what?” She blurted out suddenly.

The Xarabee. I had already accomplished what I came there to do, so taking it had slipped my mind. I couldn’t drop character now, surely, so I popped off the cap. A sharp, yet subtle odor of acid and Sinthis flowers filled the air. The woman, who I now knew was named Lucky, closed her eyes and took a deep whiff.

“That’s the good stuff, eh.” Lucky flashed me another devious smile. “You know, I’ve already had some tonight, but I suppose a bit more couldn’t hurt.”

She produced another vial from the small patch of fabric covering her nether regions, and we both tipped back the liquid together.

I didn’t feel anything for a few moments. I was beginning to wonder if I was somehow immune when an intensely sure emotion came over me. Argurarians have very few ways of explaining emotion so I’ve never been very good at it, but I felt...lighter. Lucky giggled again, apropos of nothing. Her plump, pink cheeks looked so soft, and then they changed to a cool blue and I wanted to swim in them, then purple, making her look like an alien. I suddenly wanted to know everything about her, and tell her everything about me.

Luck saved me from spilling my guts to Lucky, as her Com-Palm illuminated. She stared at it with fascination, and giggled.

“Ooo! Perfect timing Benny-boy! He says he’s at 5 Taurn 7, come meet him ASAP, bring the Gruaur....and then there’s a lot more words, I can’t even be bothered with that, but anyways yay!”

She reached out and put her hands on my face, softly, lusciously rubbing the sides.

“Ah he’s gonna just love you!”

5 Taurn 7, where Ben was supposedly located, was on a waystation about a lightyear away from the planet on which I met Lucky. I was relatively unfamiliar with the area, and as is common with waystations, there were no other objects in visible proximity, apart from the billions of brilliant blinking stars. They shone more brightly, and more beautifully than I had ever seen them that night. Red stars, blue stars, yellow stars twinkled in the sky, and if I looked closely at them, I saw a color I had never seen before, like all of the tenstrious colors had mashed together to form a new one.

Lucky pulled me through a door, suddenly breaking my view of the stars. I looked around to find that we were inside another club, must be 5 Taurn 7. It was very dark, but even in the darkness I could see a beautiful array of colors - charcoal black and chocolate brown and mold

green. I felt myself being pulled again and I shook my head in an attempt to reassure my thinking. Find the manufacturer, Ben, and befriend him, or at least one of his associates, who were surely here as well. I would probably have better luck with them, for if Ben was truly as high in the syndicate as Lucky claimed, he would be very protective over its secrets.

Eventually we ended up in a small, dimly-lit room with a semi-circular couch lining two of the four walls. On that couch sat three women wearing matching green and blue outfits, and a man wearing a long, baggy shirt-dress. The three pulchritudinous women were huddled together, watching something on one of their Com-Palms. The man appeared to have been doing nothing, but when Lucky and I entered the room, he immediately leapt up from the couch and ran over to us with arms outstretched.

“Lucky, darling!” he said in a low, drawling voice as he closed his arms around her lower half and squeezed her fastidiously ass cheeks, jiggling them up and down. I was mesmerized at how the fat rippled through her body, back and forth in a soothing yet also unpredictable rhythm.

“I think you’ve got a new fan there, Luck.”

The rippling suddenly stopped and I looked up to see Lucky and the ass-shaker staring at me, both wearing massive grins.

“Oh, I, errr, hi”, I sputtered out. My grip on Ertish seemed to be deteriorating somewhat, which was not good.

The man pulled his hand back and slapped Lucky’s behind so hard she yelped in pain.

“Oi Ben, what the fuck?!” she slapped him while vigorously rubbing her rump. So this was Ben.

Ben continued grinning shamelessly, perhaps even proudly. Pride is one of the expressions I have the most difficulty recognizing in a human, because it is akin to happiness in my mind.

Ben turned his gaze to me. Lucky, this guy looks pretty zonked. I thought you said he was cool?”

“He is! Believe me, he ain’t a zoner. I think he’s just a little shy.”

She knelt down and ran her fingers through the hair on my cheeks. I was temporarily transported by the luxurious pleasure.

“I was just saying to Lucky the other day, that I’ve only ever met two kinds of Arguarians. One type is the super straight-laced, unpleasant, ‘I’m just going to keep my nose down so don’t bother me’ type. The second type is the same type in every species - the zoners that just want to get out of their minds on drugs and prefer to spend their existence in a puddle on the floor. So tell me, whatever your name is, which one are you?”

I had no idea how to answer that question. I knew what he meant with the first type - us Arguarians have a reputation of being stand-offish, a trait I was occasionally guilty of myself. That ability to go ‘nose down and don’t bother me’ served me well in the LP Academy, but I had always hated how my brothers and sisters avoided interaction with other species. The language and culture barrier was an extricable obstacle, but we told ourselves a different story. We believed our species to be cleaner, simpler, deciderious, not as needy as humans. And surely we

didn't need humans, even though they could provide us with technology far superior to our own, so lengthening, enriching our lives beyond anything our ancestors could have ever imagined. Arguruarians believed they could use the humans to advance their own individual goals, while never fully understanding or immersing themselves in the human world. In that respect, I was surely not Gruaur.

I had been silent for too long. Ben and Lucky stared at me expectantly. I certainly couldn't tell them all that, so I started to panic. I had to say something, or else this entire opportunity was blown for sure, and who knows how long it would take me to get another one. My mouth opened and I said the first thing that came to my mind.

"I'm the type of Argruarian that likes fat chicks."

Both Lucky and Ben's eyes widened to the size of spotlights. I'm sure mine did too. Then, as though it were planned, they both burst into laughter at exactly the same time. Lucky's voluminous breasts heaved to and fro as she shook with laughter. Ben keeled over, alternating between wheezing and a fast, staccato laugh that reminded me of a small yapping dog that also had a cold.

Lucky's mirth petered out a full minute before Ben's, so she rubbed his back while he recovered from the full-bodied laughter. I found it all quite enjoyable.

Wiping his eyes, Ben finally spoke, "Well, I guess I'm going to have to expand my world-view to include a third type of Argruarian." He sniffed, pausing for a brief moment. "Fucking chub-chasers!"

In an instant, he was back on the floor and laughing uncontrollably.

The remainder of the evening passed with equal joviality, compersionality. I didn't talk much, but when I did, it almost always made Ben laugh. I had never considered myself a prigious comedian, but Ben seemed to think I was the funniest sent in the universe. Over the course of the next 20 hours, Ben took me to no less than three different clubs, two private parties, and one reverse-gravity pool. All the while, he engaged in his business, blatantly in front of me. After his fourth meeting, it was clear to me that Ben was more than just a prosaic manufacturer. He was discussing territory expansion and de-escalating disputes. I couldn't believe how much information he was giving me; through our entire time together, there were only a handful of conversations he bothered to hold out of my presence.

However, there was one glaring valley that I could not fill: who were the other members of the syndicate. Not once did I hear Ben mention another name, or even reference another partner involved in the syndicate, apart from low level distributors. It seemed that Ben was a spokesperson for the Syndicate leadership, and he was adept at keeping their identities secret.

To be sure, now I know that Ben was not just a spokesperson for the leaders of the Syndicate, he was the Syndicate. It was easy for him to keep the identities of his partners under wraps because they played relatively minor roles in his production. Ben was single-handedly masterminding the supply and manufacturing and distribution and politics of the entire Xarabee operation. Had I known my luck in finding him, I surely would have been on much higher alert

during our time together. But that was Ben's truest trick, all the partying and the drugs and the laughter were the perfect disguise for one of the most powerful sents on Tekten.

Our jubilant tour across the seedy underworld seemed to be winding down as Ben and I played a game of Flop somewhere on a luxurious space vessel. I'd lost track of Lucky some time ago, but we were being watched by two new women that rivaled her voluptuousness. I'd been awake for two days at this point, and I suspected Ben had been awake for even longer. He twirled a bright green game piece in his deft fingers, watching it spin hypnotically. His eyes were just beginning to droop when something collided violently with the ship and we were thrown to the ground, and I lost consciousness.

When I came to, I was alone in a cubic room, approximately 2 meters in length. The walls were made of metal with a rainbow sheen, denoting that this room had clearly been subjected to years of regular, thorough scrubbing. The air even smelled metallic, but my keen sense could tell that it was not only due to the worn-down metal. There had been blood in this room, lots of it. I sensed my blood too...I put a hand to my head and it came away wet with dark purple liquid. It was then that I saw something far more alarming: my Com-Palm and its housing had been wrenched from my wrist. The skin around the gaping hole in my arm had been sloppishly cauterized and wrapped in a crude bandage. I touched the wound with my other hand, fingers spuriously shaking in disbelief at what they were feeling. My luck had surely run out.

The door opened, and large rough hands grabbed my shoulders. Those hands hoisted me into the air, and suddenly my instincts kicked in. I started flailing, lashing out with all four sets of my claws, scratching feverishly at whatever I could. I let out my Ein — the powerful screech we Argurians can make, though I tempered it due to the fact we were in an enclosed space. The man dropped me, and I immediately took off running on all fours down the dimly-lit corridor, claws scraping at the sleeky metal floor. A door at the end of the hall ended my momentum abruptly with a heavy thud. I scratched at the door, at the floor, trying desperately to escape. My frenetic movements were suddenly stilled by the jolt of a stun bolt, and I fell limply to the floor. Rough hands, now bleeding, scratched and wrapped around my tense frame...

The hands threw me into a restraint chair inside of another room, this one slightly bigger than the last, but with the same rainbow-metal walls. A woman came walking from behind with slow, loud, clacks on the echoic floor. She pulled an ergonomial chair from the wall, and sat directly across from me. Her eyes were dark, almost black, but her hair was almost white. Argurian's cannot express many emotions, far less in Ertian. But I was sure, in that moment, that the word I was feeling was fear. A bone chilling unsureness ripped itself through me, as I looked into the hollow eyes of that women and saw my death before me.

"What do you do for him?" She spoke with a scratchy baritone, uncommon for human females.

There was nothing I could say.

She squinted her eyes, the leathery skin of her eyelids squeezing together in thick, wet ripples.

“You think you’ll be able to save him with your silence.” Her eyes narrowed even further as she continued. “He’ll be dead by tomorrow morning. Where do you want to be?”

There was nothing I could say.

In that moment, I regretted nothing apart from the fact that I had trusted a man that was so clearly untrustable. Ben, the manufacturer. A man steeped in criminal activity, and clearly not a careful, sane individual. Yet I had spent the last two days with him, indulging in his fast lifestyle of drugs and women and chaos. I had to admit, it had been fun. My eyes closed and I drifted away.

A sharp, deafening sound roused me from my surrender. My eyes opened, expecting to be shut again, but instead they saw a giant mound of crimson goo, dripping down the rainbow metal wall. I searched for the dark-eyed woman, unsure whether the goo was from her, as it did not feel like blood, but she had disappeared. Then I saw the toe of a black affinity boot, a tuft of white hair, and the form of the woman begin to appear beneath the goo as it slowly slid down the wall.

A low, drawling voice came from behind me.

“I really hope you didn’t tell her anything.”

Ben, the manufacturer. I craned my neck to try to catch a glimpse of him behind me and he appeared to be fiddling with the massive gun that he was holding.

“No, I didn’t, she...I, no,” I said.

“Good.”

He fired twice at me, and for a terrifying moment I thought he was shooting to kill me. There was heat, then sweet release as the shackles holding my body to the chair fell off with an echoic clank.

“I don’t know why, little dog, but I trust you,” Ben said as he stepped in front of me and roughly pulled me to my feet.

“I was just thinking the same thing, to be sure,” I said.

“Ain’t that sweet,” Ben said cheesily. He turned on his heels and abruptly exited the room.

After pausing for a moment to gather my thoughts, I looked over to the giant glob of red goo that held my former captor to the wall. Glinting on the floor beneath her was my Com-Palm. I grabbed it and ran out of the room to re-join Ben. I followed him down the militaristic hallway, now strewn with incapacitated bodies and globs of crimson slup. Ben hopped over the mounds as though he were playing a video game, his head darting back and forth as he searched for more enemies. Amazingly, none ever came, though I doubted they would have posed much of a threat to the demented, goo-bazooka wielding drug dealer with a heart of gold. After a few hundred meters of skulking through the wearily quiet building, we climbed through an external hatch, into the waiting arms of a single-person cruiser.

Ben and I escaped relatively unscathed, though I was more exhausted than perhaps I had ever been in my entire life. Ben, incredibly, suggested we celebrate our daring escape over a couple of drinks. I graciously declined his offer, for sure.

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“And I didn’t see him again for a very long time,” Dax said, flexing his clawed fingers and toes. “We said goodbye and I submitted my report to the LP and that was that. When our paths fatedly crossed again, Ben was in need of a job and I figured it was the least I could do, considering he saved my life.”

“You also got me arrested, and turned into a errand boy for the fucking Council of Light,” Ben interjected.

Dax winced. “Yes, well, I do feel bad about that.”

“Ah, so you can express your emotions after all.”

“Argruarians are aliens, not psychopaths,” Dax chided Ben, somewhat earnestly.

“Aliens and psychopaths, what antiquated labels you’re using. Why not bring back ‘autistic’ while you’re back there in the 2000s. Don’t you know we’re all the same if you simply adjust your mode of communication?”

Ben was clearly upset that Dax had stolen the limelight.

“I’m sure it was hard for you not to have an opinion for the last hour,” Dax said. “Do you want to tell your side of the story?”

“Fuck no, I barely even remember that shit happening. That was just another Twoday to me. I didn’t even recognize you when you crashed your ship into mine decades later trying to rob the same guy as me.”

“I wasn’t trying to rob him, I was after the bounty on his head.”

“And you realized, *after we robbed him*, why that was a mistake,” Ben said, emphasizing key words with a dramatic elongation.

Dax rolled his eyes. “You’re drunk, you futz.”

“Daaaaamn straight. Had to be to get through that snoozefest. For some reason I remembered it being a lot more of an epic tale. Maybe I’m thinking of when I went back to running the Xarabee Syndicate the second time. Now, what do you kids say to hearing about some really fun adventures of Ben, Leader and Founder of the Infamous Xarabee Syndicate?”

Marim stood up, the entire group turning their attention to her. They watched as she walked out of the room without saying a word. After a beat, Ben inhaled sharply and clapped his hands together.

“Soff her. Lucia’s game, she knows a good story when she hears one.”

Lucia, somewhat unsure of what she wanted, perked up at this.

“Sure Ben, I’d love to hear about an adventure. Just, maybe not one where you have freaky sex with a bunch of women?”

Ben furrowed his brow for a moment.

“That’s impossible. I never had any adventures where freaky sex wasn’t involved. Not just women either. But I can leave that bit out, you are practically a baby after all.”

Lucia de-perked, crestfallen.

Ben put his head down for a moment, thinking.

“Maybe I will tell you about a women after all. About The Woman.”

Dax made a high pitched wine. “Now there is a comperling story.”

“Com-pell-ing,” Ben enunciated pedantically. Dax huffed.

“Can’t tell my life story without Elle.” Ben pursed his lips together, and for a split second, Lucia could have sworn he was fighting back tears.

“And I mean, if we’re talking freaky sex, that bitch was the freakiest. She did this thing once, with a plusar gun...my ass was sore for weeks.”

Lucia sighed. She must have been mistaken.

## Chapter 20 - I am, before all else, a gentleman

I ruled Tekten, though I honestly can’t tell you how I ended up there. Most likely I had taken a trip on the Nimbus Slingshot, pissed the Ataxi off, and fled to Tekten, where a few billion humans had similarly settled after discovering the Ataxi’s lack of charm. I’ll admit I went a bit off the deep end for a period, ya know, after the whole Artemis thing. Ultimately, I found the price of numbing myself to the point of oblivion too much to pay. So, I experimented.

My intention was to create a drug that was not so powerful as to cause addiction or alter the mind beyond all sense, but would still provide myself with a highly pleasurable experience. I had to find the perfect balance; let’s just say it was a fun couple of months. What I ended up with was a liquid drug that I named Xarabee, after one of my favorite stars in the Pluoran sky.

Like I said, I set out to make the drug only for myself. But there are many people in this universe who are in pain — and one of the side effects of the drug is increased empathy — so I began sharing it with other wretched creatures I came across. Eventually, I needed money and, well, there’s a limit to how empathetic Xarabee makes me. Perhaps I built up a tolerance to it, or perhaps I was building up a tolerance to empathy itself. Whatever the reason, I began selling the drug instead of giving it away.

Soon enough I began getting questions about the syndicate that manufactured the drug. Syndicate’s were a relatively new invention, and while I liked the sound of being a part one, I didn’t like the sound of actually building it. That sounded like something that would involve paperwork, and that would involve actually trying, and that was something I wanted no part of. So I left it up to the gods, kept doing what I was doing, let people believe what they wanted to believe.

As demand increased I had to bring a few people in to help, but I gave little thought to titles, or compensation, or protection, or any of those things that gangs in shows care about. I'm sure I've had hundreds of thousands of credits stolen from me, but I was making millions, so what did I care? As far as physical protection, no one knew that I was the actual kingpin of the so-called Xarabee syndicate, so there wasn't a price on my head. Jotsna, the woman who kidnapped Dax, was the only rival who ever caught on to me, and as you heard, she was pretty easy to deal with.

It was probably three years after I had run into Dax. Having started enough fires to burn more than bridges in the Tekten orbit, I left the N23 Quadrant and bought a one-way Slingshot to Triangulum. Even in a galaxia as tightly controlled by Ertian philosophy as Triangulum, there were new pockets of anarchists hungry for ways to subvert the Ertian agenda. I took great pride in teaching others some of the skills I had been taught by Artemis, and felt the added thrill that came from leading one of the first criminal syndicates to operate within the Ertian Empire in millenia. Of course, I stayed away from hubs like Magnuis and Forttend - not even I am that crazy.

I thought I was being careful with who I chose to associate with. 'Seek out the oddballs', Artemis had told me in her touching farewell note. She had been warning me against Silen, but I found the advice much more useful for avoiding Lighters - Ertian elitists. Silen was still too hazy of an idea in my brain. I didn't want to think about it, so I didn't. The Xarabee made that all the more easy.

In my search for trustworthy oddballs I had picked up a friend, a fellow by the name of Anders. A tall, skinny rich kid from the planet of Silport that had been forced out into the great wide universe by his well-meaning parents. He was the eleventh of fifteen children, all of whom were cast out in the same way on their twenty third birthday, so you would think he would have been a little less bitter about it. But no, in order to spite his parents, he decided to team up with a dangerous druglord and fly around the galaxies. Anders made for an excellent sidekick, for a hyell, as he was naive and down for anything. He also had somewhat of a following himself, a harem of young sycophants that would come and go, executing minor tasks for him. They would get us meals, find glaze clubs to go to, wash our feet...it was something I was very unaccustomed to. I would have never thought to put together a harem, but I enjoyed benefitting from Anders'. There was only one downside to my friendship with Anders, and that was that we occasionally had to do something he wanted to do.

"I'm telling you, it will be fun," Anders said from his elongated lounge-seat.

"Let me guess, next you're going to tell me that's why it's called a fun-draiser."

"Uhg you have no idea how many times I heard that joke as a kid, I would never subject you to such torture."

"But you are going to subject me to the torture of actually going to one?"

"What you're failing to realize, which I also failed to realize as a kid, is that it is incredibly fun to feel better than everyone else. That is what fundraisers are all about. Having so much money you can give it away and still put on a positively extravagant bacchanal."



Anders waved his long, pale hands in a decadent circular motion. He had that white, Silportian skin that almost seems to glow unnaturally in the light.

“There is no way that there is anything at that fundraiser worth going to Silport for.”

“There’s free food and party favors! Besides, we are talking about an L2 planet, not an L1. It’s actually pretty glaze, I swear on the Council.”

I rolled my eyes. He continued.

“Aaaand we never do anything I want to do so you owe me.”

“You never want to do anything!”

“Well now I do!” he shouted.

We both stared at each other through squinted eyes. I decided it was too boring to keep arguing. Let him have one night, this small victory. What would it matter to me in the grand scheme of things. What would it matter, indeed.

“Fine. You’re in charge tonight. Load me that ‘high-L’ Hyell life.”

“Ha ha! Like you’d ever let me be in charge, you tronk.”

“When we get scooped up by the Tenants for staring at someone’s boobs for too long, you’re paying for the Corrective Therapy.”

“Oh please, it’s not as bad as all that. This isn’t Forttend we’re talking about.”

I stood up, grabbed Anders’ surprised face between my hands, and planted a long, hard kiss on his bony cheek.

The fundraiser was held on a mostly upper class planet called Silport, inside an overly-designed silver building that was Satellit for artistic purposes. Before Solar Harnessing was unleashed upon the greater ITZ, when energy was still considered a limited resource, many new developments utilized a technique called Satellighting to illuminate their indoor and outdoor areas. Light from the sun was reflected via satellite to various points down on the earth, where it was then directed through mirrored cables into rooms and onto streets and wherever else someone needed to see someone better. It required zero electricity, zero energy conversion, and generally looked a snap’s reach better than the traditional light sources of the time.

Whoever had designed this building apparently had some kind of hipster fetish with the dated technology, because the walkways leading up to the building were bathed in the glare of a midday sun in the middle of summer, despite the fact that it was well into the night. The foyer was contrastingly dark, apart from a series of spotlights that drew circles of light onto the ground, signaling the way into the main area when the fundraiser was being held. In that room, the designer had really lost control: hundreds of distinct beams of light, each in a different color and intensity, crisscrossed the large ovular atrium, creating the appearance that they were not light, but something more physical. The entire building was a shining shrine to light. The significance was lost on me.

Anders wore a traditional Taurn mesh gown, and I, in full defiance of the affair, wore a skin-tight lycra jumpsuit with enough shoulder padding to make an Ataxi wet. My outrageous outfit was an over-compensation for the anxiety I felt. I hadn’t told Anders this, but this was my

first time setting foot on an L2 planet without Artemis. Virgon, where I had run the Phalareon Co play, was classified as an L3 planet - it was still subject to Ertian philosophy and surveillance, but the restrictiveness of that philosophy, as well as the enforcement of it, was markedly less severe than here on Silport. Those that are born and raised on L2 planets rarely have trouble navigating the strict and complicated culture, but as someone who was born on a planet with no Monister, that was literally created for freedom, I found the 'perfection' of it all too sharp to process. As a result, my buttock was clenched tighter than the lycra over my crotch.

It didn't take long for my 'uncultured' upbringing to become apparent. Anders wandered off, so I struck up a conversation with a woman about our respective professions, telling her I was a pharmacist. I made an offhand comment about how I'd sort of fallen into the job, and she looked at me as though I were speaking Ataxi. I tried explaining myself further, but she simply could not wrap her head around the fact that my occupation hadn't been selected correctly. The conversation got awkward quickly. I excused myself and wandered over to a group of people nearby that I could overhear were discussing the Reliance. Very little was known about the terrorist group at the time, so it was a conversation I wanted to hear.

"They took control of a solar harnessing core!"

"Gratorwaste. I haven't seen anything about that on the news. It's an impossibility, anyways."

"My news hasn't even mentioned this so-called Reliance at all. Why would they do something like that?"

"They think that our evolved technology is evil. Evil technology, it's an impossibility!"

I stepped in their circle. "I heard that they think the Council of Light uses the solar energy to control the Ertian Empire."

The three members of the group looked at me as though I had just walked up and taken a dump on the floor. To this day I have no idea what grave faux pas I made. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that they were all wearing green hats?

I tried to re-join Anders, but I found him singing a strange song in harmony with two other men. This was a bizarre place indeed. I had to pee, and found myself worried that these hyell sents relieved themselves by doing a funny dance, or having a laser zap the urine away.

Finding the bathrooms was sure to be an adventure. My eyes scanned the perimeter of the room, and were suddenly drawn to a deep purple beam of light that cut across the atrium. My eyes followed the beautiful beam to its terminus on the wall across from me, where it bathed a single woman in a violet velvet circle.

She was intimidatingly beautiful, as though her looks hadn't made life quite easy enough for her liking. I walked towards her slowly, subconsciously, studying her heart-shaped face as it came closer to mine. I saw the look in her eyes. It was the look of someone who desperately needed something, but she couldn't quite put her finger on what that something was. It was a look I knew. She wanted to get lost. I moved closer still....she noticed me, but only as much as she noticed everything else around her that wasn't stuck to a wall. She's sent this signal out

before, in fact, she'd sent this signal out to anyone she thought in the back of her darkest mind might hear it. Save me. Take me anywhere else. Give me something I can't ask for.

My Com-Palm vibrated with a text from Anders, and I instinctively raised my arm to look at it. That was enough to grab her attention. Her eyes snapped to my fingers curled into a fist, then quickly but fluidly slid up my arm to my face, eventually resting on my eyes. I saw vibrant forest greens, and she saw cool grey. We both saw what we wanted beyond that. I took three long steps forward, closing the remaining gap between us.

"You're bored."

"I chose every single one of the speakers here tonight, I could not be more on edge," she replied.

"You're stressed, of that I have no doubt. But you're also. So. Entirely. Booooooooooreddd."

She looked at me with genuine surprise, tainted only with the smallest piece of desire that had escaped through the wall she had built around her. It was an adorable look of naivete and fear — fear being exposed — and that aroused something primal within me. A fleeting thought ran through my mind, that I wished I looked that sexy when I had first been given the option of getting lost, from the blue girl at the Cove so many years ago. At this point, I was a master at losing myself, but in that moment, for the first time, I wanted to get lost with her.

I grasped her fingers with mine. She immediately pulled them away, and I let her.

"I don't know what you think you're doing, but you're being very weird," she said.

I bristled a little at that. I had picked up girls before, and they never thought I was being weird. I doubled down on my approach.

"And you're telling me you don't like weird?"

She smiled at that. Back on track.

"I don't like people that touch me before they've even told me their name."

"Ben." I reached out and touched her hand again. She gave me an 'are you serious?' look but didn't pull it away. After a few moments, I returned my hand to my side. I had gotten what I wanted.

"Do you want to see something cool?"

"If you pull your cock out I swear to Elia—"

"Oh stars no, of course not" I said with clearly false outrage. "Not before I've told you my last name!"

"Ah, so you actually do have some manners."

"Miss, I am, before all else, a gentleman."

"Well then, good sir, what is it that you want to show me?"

"You'll have to follow me."

She gave me a hard stare, either trying to figure out if she should trust me, or wondering why she already did.

"I planned this whole evening, I can't just leave."

"If it's already planned, then you don't need to do anything else."

“Things never go as planned, and I need to be here when that happens.”

“So you plan on your plan failing?”

“I never plan on other people doing what they should.”

“So then why do *you* do what you should?”

“Because *I* am the one who makes the plans.”

I squinted my eyes. This hyell was even tougher than she looked. I wasn’t going to win her over with repartee. To be honest, I wasn’t sure if I could win her over at all.

“What would you do right now, if you could do anything? If you didn’t have to be here.”

She sighed, looked down at her Com-Palm, kicked her heel against the wall behind her.

“I would go to the remote islands of Terragion and pick sea-crystals from the black volcanic sands.”

A shock ran through me. It was as though all the Satellights shut off, except for the one beam that encased us in our own bubble of purple. The background of the fundraiser disappeared and I was suddenly transported in the bubble to the beaches of Pluora. I saw Fett digging through the black sand in search of crystalline Gudibranch shells. I saw him shoot up in victory, his tiny hand clutching an opalescent shell that glinted in the sun. His face, smiling like only a child can smile. His face, disappearing beneath the waves...

A hand waved in front of my face, snapping me back to the bustling party.

“Are you on something? Where did you go just now?”

“Somewhere I haven’t been in a long time,” I said, still somewhat hazy.

“Um...ok, well I’m going to go somewhere that is...not here.” The woman pushed herself up off the wall.

“No!” I cried out, reaching for her hand again. “I can take you. To Terragion, right now.”

She gave me an incredulous look, but didn’t pull her hand away. “It’s weeks away from here...”

“Not with the drive I have, on my private ship.”

“Well you’re here,” she gestured to the decadent surroundings “so I can believe that you own an amped-up Alcubierre drive,” she paused, “but that doesn’t mean I’m going to get on it with you.”

“Please?”

She gave me that ‘are you serious?’ look again. I gave her a look back that told her I was. We stared at each other, neither one flinching, for what felt like an eternity.

Then she flinched.

“Soff it. Let’s go.”

I was ecstatic. I took her hand yet again, this time pulling her away from the wall. I felt her body follow me subconsciously for a brief moment before it tensed up with better judgment.

“I’m telling five people where I’m going, just so you know.” She made a few swipes on her Com-Palm, which, of course, instinctively knew what to do.

“Hell, invite your mom! I’m great with parents!”

“Uh, I’m telling my dad.”

“I’ll pretend to be frightened by that. Oh, we are going to get along like Cheeras and Hutus!”

We walked together out of the rainbow room, through the dark corridor, and out to the blinding courtyard. Or maybe floated would be a more accurate verb. In the white light, her skin was the color of delicious toasted rice cakes, just a few shades lighter than mine.

My ship quietly glided down to meet us. I walked up the gangway and turned around to watch the woman have one final internal battle about what to do. Her better judgment folded to her devious curiosity and she slowly followed me into the ship. I took her hand as she made the final steps into the hull and the door shut behind her.

“Could I ask your name, miss?”

“Elle,” she said, and gave my hand an almost imperceptible squeeze.

## Chapter 21 - I’m not afraid of the Council of Light

The journey to Terragion passed without either of us ever noticing it took place. I learned Elle was raised on a Heckle Barge, an entirely self-sufficient colonizer ship of around two to four million people at any given time. She learned that I was raised in a small colony in the Lub Galaxia, which was much easier to explain than the truth. I learned that she worked as an event planner of sorts. She learned that I was a traveling salesman for Pane Pharma, which was much easier to explain than the truth. I learned she played the harp-synth, and loved anything with chocolate in it. She learned that I raced speed Buggies and loved chemistry, which was actually the truth.

As if by magic, we found ourselves walking along Elle’s favorite beach on Terragion. Though the sun was setting, the black sand held the warmth of the daylight sun. We maintained a respectable distance between us, but I wanted nothing more than to squeeze our bodies so tightly together our atoms would fuse. I was so completely enthralled by this woman, my mind thought of almost nothing else.

“Why is this your favorite place in the universe?” I asked her.

“When I was a child, we would come here, to Terragion. My father was one of the engineers in charge of terraforming the planets that the Heckle Barge would then populate. He

was always particularly fond of this one. He did an amazing job wherever we went, but I would have to agree that this planet is my favorite.”

“I have to commend his work as well. I discovered this planet on one of my...business trips, about a year ago, and it’s beauty made an impression on me.”

“My father is the best in the universe at what he does. He’s moved up from engineering to a management role now. 200 years in the Teraformation business. He had me at a later age.”

She seemed almost hurt by that fact. She was a daddy’s girl, that much was evident.

“He sounds like a truly amazing man.”

“If you’re trying to win me over by complimenting my father, you’ll have to do better than that.”

Foiled again. She was harder to pin down than a wet Slyzard.

“You got me. I meant it, though. This planet’s beauty is more than just superficial to me, and I am eternally grateful to the man that made it possible for me to stand here, beholding it.”

I looked at her, and only at her, as I said this.

“You’re pretty poetic, has anyone ever told you that?” she asked.

“A few. You’d be surprised how many people don’t notice.”

“Not much gets past me.”

“I’ve noticed.”

She smirked, causing a chin-length strand of her blond hair to fall from behind her ear.

“Tell me more about Pane Pharma. What is it like working for the largest biobot manufacturer in the ITZ?” she asked.

I grimaced inwardly. No matter how many times I tried to steer the conversation away from my fake job, she kept bringing it back. It wasn’t difficult for me to fabricate details about the job, Basar knows I have no problem pretending to be someone I’m not, but I felt bad doing it with her. It seemed wrong. And worse than that, it was impractical. If we were to spend a significant amount of time with each other, which was my goal, I would have to put an ever-increasing amount of effort towards maintaining that lie. I had no problem spending whatever effort it took to keep her around, but unlike my usual plays, I had no exit. I could not finish the Art of the Dream. I could not quietly dance my way out of this woman’s life once I had gotten what I wanted because...because I wanted her.

If this truly was the goal, there was no other option. There was no other play that worked. I’d run through thousands in the back of my mind on our journey to Terragion. Or maybe only hundreds...it was difficult to think. I had no other option.

I had to tell the truth.

“I don’t work for Pane Pharma.”

“Er, ok. Go on.” Her tan, beautiful face was unreadable.

“But I *am* in the pharmacology business. I invented a drug, called Xarabee. It’s...recreational. Totally harmless. I make it myself, and distribute it to a few people. And then they distribute it to a few people...you get the drift.”

“So you are a drug dealer?”

“I guess so. I never set out to be. I was just experimenting, and then it turned into this whole...thing. People like it, the Xarabee. They like it by loads.”

“Well of course they do. You’re manipulating their neurochemistry.”

“It’s not like Pom. It’s not a patch, not for your Com-Palm or even your skin. It’s just a liquid, like alcohol. They allow alcohol in the Ertian Empire.”

“Where it is carefully regulated and zapped out of your bloodstream if you ingest too much,” she countered.

“That’s one of the beautiful things about Xarabee actually, it acts within milliseconds of entering your system, so even if the Lighters did develop a way to zap it through Biobots, you’d still get high.”

“Do you hear yourself? You’re talking about subverting the Council of Light.”

“You think everything they do is righteous? You think the Ertian Empire is a fun place to live?” I said, getting heated.

“I think that it is a well known fact that poverty and idleness were wiped out when the Council took away hard mind-altering drugs thousands of years ago, and we’ve been doing just fine without them.”

“You’re telling me you believe that none of the Ert-sanctioned pharmaceuticals are mind-altering? You believe that the good feeling you get when you run a health scan or report an antisocial behavior is completely natural, and not a release of dopamine triggered by the Biobots that are controlled by the little circle of metal embedded in your wrist the day you are born?”

“You’re spouting off completely unprovable conspiracy theories.”

“They’re unprovable because no one knows how any of this shit works! The computer in our wrist, the machines in our body, the ships we travel in, the way we communicate...all we know is that they work, and they’ve been around forever, and they improve our lives, at least according to the handful of Lighters that actually know what the fuck is going on,” I said, digging my toes into the black sand.

“And you think that you, one of the trillions of people that doesn’t know how these things work, knows better.”

“I do know better.”

She scoffed. “We’ve made so many mistakes as a human race before: advanced artificial intelligence, neural manipulation, emotive plants — but in the last millenia, we’ve had no significant loss of human life. And we’re still able to reap the rewards of the Discus Age technology that is too advanced for you or I to understand. That is all thanks to the members of the Council, either individually or together. You cannot deny that. Our lives are better, safer, more productive, and at the end of the day, the decisions I make are still my own. Why do you care so much that they have a tiny bit of control?”

“They are impressive men, I’m not trying to say they aren’t—”

“So why is it bad to follow their direction?”

“Just because I idolize the man who invented Com-palms doesn’t mean he can control my—”

“What are you afraid is going to happen?”

I scoffed. “I’m not afraid of the Council of Light.”

“But you are afraid of not being in control. That is all that it is,” she said, putting a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. “Let me tell you; you’re not in control, none of us are. *That* is what scares you. It’s just easier to direct that fear at a shadowy cabal of geniuses.”

I’d like to say that her words struck me, or made me pause for a moment. What they did was spark a pang of anger deep within my chest.

“You don’t know what I know,” I said darkly.

She puffed a puff of air from between her perfect lips. “Tell me what you know.”

“Telling is boring. Let me show you something instead.”

I removed my Com-palm from its socket. I held it out in front of her with one hand, alongside my wrist with the empty housing, as though I were performing a magic trick. I then cocked my arm back and threw my Com-palm as hard as I could, into the ocean, where it disappeared beneath the surface with a small splash of saltwater.

She raised one of her almost-invisible eyebrows. Of course, what she would have expected, was that the moment the Com-palm got more than two meters away from me, it would have stopped mid-air as though it had hit an invisible wall, fallen to the ground and started beeping loudly. I studied her face expectantly. Her expression was more one of concern than shock. She said nothing, only looked back and forth between my face and the spot I had thrown my Com-palm.

I pressed the inside of the empty housing in my wrist and held my arm up, facing the ocean. The Com-palm flew from the water, making a bee-line through the air as though summoned by a wand. I winced slightly as it snapped back into my wrist. I have to thank Petrus, or Silen I guess, for that trick. It was a trick I had done maybe a dozen times before, usually to impress someone I wanted to woo. Typically, they would scream and clap their hands and marvel at seeing something impossible, dangerous, magical. And then they would sleep with me.

Elle looked at me with a corner of one of her ultra-blond eyebrows raised. I fanned my fingers out and said ‘ta-da!’ somewhat sheepishly.

She gave no response. “I usually get a bigger reaction,” I said.

She shook her head as though waking from a fugue, and said “oh no no no, that was...very impressive! I, er...how did you do that?”

Was she pretending to be impressed? I genuinely couldn’t tell.

“I did it by knowing how this thing works. I practically built this Com-palm myself,” I answered.

“How did you learn how to do that?”

“I belong to a group of Promethians, who learn these technologies and pass that knowledge down from generation to generation.”

“Wait, so you’re actually from Promethia?”

I caught myself. Had I really just told her about the Family? I had never talked about these things with anyone before. Sure, I would trade conspiracy theories about the Ertian Empire



with other outcasts, show off a bit here and there after having too much to drink, but to tell her about the Family...that was never done. Our very survival, and the survival of our knowledge depended on it.

“Are you ok?” She asked, the slightly concerned look returning to her face. I guess I had been silent for a while.

“Yeah, yes, of course, I’m fine. Just don’t really like talking about my childhood.”

“Oh. Well, I don’t want to pry. But you can understand why I’m curious.”

She reached out and touched my hand with hers. A warmth flooded through me, wiping away the paranoia that had gripped me a moment earlier. The warmth grew until it overwhelmed me. My legs buckled and I fell to my knees. Elle guided me down to lay on the now cool black sand. The last thing I saw as the light faded away was her beautiful face telling me she was sorry.

## Chapter 22 - That’s a lot of effort to go through just to ask a favor

I awoke in an extremely bright room. White light assaulted my eyes, causing me to shut them as soon as I had opened them, exclaiming:

“What in the holy fuck!?”

A faceless, skinless automaton stared back at me. It spoke with an inhuman voice from somewhere beneath its sleek white plastic head.

“You are a guest of the Council of Light. We apologize for the manner with which we transported you here.”

“You mean knocking me the fuck out? Wait, where is Elle? Where the fuck am I?”

“If you are feeling ok, I will escort you to the Council.”

I didn’t believe the automaton one single bit. I ran my hands through my hair, clenching two fistfuls in either hand. What did I know: I had been tricked by that woman, Elle. I had been drugged. I had been kidnapped. Whoever did this was pretending to be the Council of Light. I

could escape, I had well-concealed weapons. My hand went instinctively to my Com-Palm. It was not there.

I immediately sat up and looked at my wrist, not believing what I had just felt. It was impossible. It hadn't been cut out of me; the housing was intact, apart from two small scorch marks on the metal rim. My stomach felt like it was sucked into a black hole. I pressed the housing, praying it would fly back from wherever they had put it, but I knew it was useless. My fingers should be the only things capable of removing the disc from the housing, and if somehow, someone else managed to separate it from my body, I had rigged it to wipe itself. So even if it did return to me, it was nothing more than a hunk of metal at this point.

I stared at the strange automaton, wishing it had a face like a normal robot so that I could break its nose. I slid my legs over the side of the bed I was sitting on, and stood up, shaking with anger and fear. Someone very clever wanted to see me. I guess I should be polite and oblige them.

---

The automaton walked me out of the blinding room and through a series of long, unmarked corridors that emanated a blessedly soft, gray glow. It was so quiet I could almost hear an unearthly wind rushing through my ears. With every step I thought of another contingency, another escape plan.

We passed through a corridor that was adorned with holograms of each of the planets in the Ertian Empire. Ok, perhaps the Council of Light had caught onto my activities, and I was being dealt with by the mythical Light Police that handled 'special' infractions against the Ertian Philosophy. Maybe I was being taken to some Light Officers, if such a thing existed. I certainly couldn't be rehabilitated by the usual Ertian realignment classes, or even exiled. For all my knowledge, I knew very little about how the Ertian government operated. There was barely a government to speak of, just ancient rules passed down from the Council of Light through Monisters, and you either followed them, or you got kicked out by the Light Police, which never happened. So then where the fuck was I?

We entered another corridor, this one decorated with only four planets, lined up neatly along the left side of the curved wall. My current train of thought screeched to a halt as I recognized the first planet. I walked slowly by each of the holograms, my feet heavy with disbelief, my mouth agape.

Saturnity. Mercia. Urus. Pluora.

The four Utopias that were built by the Council, and destroyed by...my confused brain could not finish that sentence.

Saturnity was the last to be created, and had thankfully never been populated. Mercia was the largest of the four planets, and had five different-colored moons that decorated the sky. Urus was an animal sanctuary, but also home to a million or so missionaries. Pluora, well, you know about Pluora.

I had not seen an image of my home planet since the day I left it. The Utopias had always been a secret project, but after the tragedy that occurred, their existence was effectively scrubbed from history. There had been rumors, at one time, that the Council of Light was constructing planets from scratch, but apparently nothing came of it. That was the truth to everyone but myself and Artemis. And the Council of Light. For these holograms to be displayed here...the Council wouldn't risk exposing their secrets for the sake of decoration. Whatever this place was had to be locked down tighter than a Fractal Datastore. Wherever this place was could only be...couldn't be...

My breath caught in my chest and a feeling of nausea sunk into me. For the first time since I held a dying Artemis in my arms, I was truly scared.

"We must keep walking. The Council is waiting," the faceless robot said.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Please follow me and I will take you to them."

I stared at the back — or maybe the front as far as I could tell — of the robot's faceless head as we walked single file to the doors at the end of the corridor. I was as good as dead, or worse. Whomever, whatever was behind that door was more powerful than anything else that existed in the known universe. I knew a lot, but I couldn't harness the power of suns, or create planets, or bring peace to sentientkind. These men, or women, or AIs...fuck no one really knows who the Council of Light is. Only that they are God of our slice of the universe.

The hinged doors swung open dramatically, letting heavenly rays of light into the dim corridor. I raised my hand to shield my eyes from the onslaught of light. After only a few seconds, I decided I'd had enough of this and pushed past the automaton, bursting into the next room.

My eyes slowly adjusted to the brilliant yellow fluorescence and I saw four figures sitting in a row atop a long, tall podium. The bright light reflected off of their matching, white pearlescent robes, but somehow their faces seemed to be enshrouded in shadow. One of them, the man second from the left, spoke.

"McLeod. Ben. We've been waiting for you."

They were like hawks, perched on a cliff, watching their prey with cold, dead eyes, as though it was too much effort for them to glide down to my level, so they sat still and imagined tearing into my flesh with their sharp beaks instead. It was at that moment I remembered that I was wearing a skintight, flinked-out jumpsuit.

I began to laugh. It started as a silly chuckle, but soon erupted into rollicking guffaws that echoed sharply in the otherwise painfully silent room. The violent sparkles in their eyes intensified. No one asked what I found so funny, but I told them anyway.

"I can't believe you guys really exist. I mean obviously someone was behind the Police and the Ertian law, and all that shit, but like, you're really four old dudes in robes sitting in a secret room!"

"There's more than four of us, Ben."

A voice came from behind me, even-toned and authoritative.

A handsome woman with a sensible, shoulder-length bob of brown-grey hair and strong, symmetrical jowls walked towards me with her hands folded behind her back. Her mysterious appearance shook me from my laughing fit. But I wasn't done mocking them.

"Ok, and I suppose you're the leader then? You've got your tendrils all throughout the Inner Temporal Zone, and even the Outer Temporal Zone, eh? Let's see, who do we have here today..." I squinted my now fully-adjusted eyes and surveyed the stoic faces of the men that sat at the podium. Immediately I recognized Amican, the man credited with inventing modern solar harnessing, and worshipped like a God in some parts of the ITZ. I was stunned, of course, but didn't want to let that show.

"Amican Stone! Good God, how are you still alive?" I looked to his left.

"And Aldus Ertian, the man responsible for the human population quadrupling every year! Now you must be a busy man," I winked at him and then pointed to the man with long white dreadlocks next to him. "You, I do not recognize, you must not be very important..." moving right along to the last one, "and finally Geoff Azucarman, philosopher king. Haven't seen you post much lately, have you finally answered all the questions of life?"

If any of them were bothered by my jabs, their faces were too old and creased to show it. I dismissed their dismissal, turning back to the woman. She wasn't quite as old as her compatriots, or at least she didn't look it. I searched the not-quite-as-deep creases of her face in search for some sort of mirth, and found it in the left corner of her mouth, which was raised ever so slightly.

"I don't recognize you either, Madame. What is your claim to fame?"

Both sides of her mouth pulled back into a humble grin. "None at all, I'm afraid, other than being a member of the Council of Light. I am an academic, in the field of quantum entanglement. My achievements are known to even fewer people than your own."

"They may not know it was you who achieved them, but I'm guessing your discoveries are in use by every sent in the ITZ, otherwise you wouldn't be in the Council," I deduced.

"This is true. I created the element that allows us to impose the jintum state on the particles of said element with nearly zero failure."

"You invented Intraxium! So it is because of you that we can transmit data across lightyears almost instantaneously without losing any of it! Tell me, how close are we to being able to transmit video via entanglement?"

"Gamarcha, he already knows too much, do not make this worse," A deep voice from behind me chimed in. Aldus Ertian.

The dreadlocked man to his left retorted with a contrastingly high-pitched voice, "Oh come on Aldus, what harm is knowing who she is going to do if he already knows what Intraxium is?"

"You know what kind of a threat he poses. He could use even a tiny piece of information to draw connections and before we know it, he's got it all figured out."

"He's not figuring out shit," opined Amican dismissively. "He barely knows anything. I took his Com-Palm apart in two seconds."

My Com-palm! I'd almost forgotten about it. Amican said he'd...taken it apart? Did that mean it wasn't wiped? If it was in the hands of these blowhards, I would prefer it was.

Aldus rolled his eyes at Amican's bragging. "What I am trying to say is, why risk it? We have nothing to gain by telling him anything other than what he needs to know."

"Maybe I want a little recognition, eh Aldus?" Gamartha smiled calmly. She addressed me. "Yes, I made reduced the error rate when transmitting data via jintum entanglement to nearly zero. Now when it comes to video....the trick to being able to transmit more than binary information lies simply in supplying enough power to impose state on millions of particles, as opposed to only a handful. You simply need more power. And that," she surreptitiously slid her gaze to the panel behind me, "is the scientific territory of our dear Amican."

Now that was a slick burn. I turned around to see if Amican would retort. His grey eyes narrowed and burned. For a man that had to be a min of 500 years old, he didn't look a day over 300. It didn't shock me that these Sents could have discovered immortality and kept that a secret as well. I would be lying if I didn't still feel as though I were in the presence of Gods.

Amican, holy as he was, did not respond. An eerie silence took hold over the room. Clearly Amican and Gamartha were the leaders of this group; no one else dared to step between them. Well, except for me.

"Alright, I'm very impressed and everything with your...glowing faculties, but why the fuck am I here? What are you going to do with me?"

Gamartha gave me a motherly smile and sighed.

"You're a dramatic one, aren't you? We're not going to do anything with you, child. Aldus, do you want to explain?"

Aldus stood and momentarily disappeared behind the towering podium. Moments later he walked slowly from around the corner, towards me, his gleaming pearl robe shuffling on the ground as he walked. His hair was also gleaming white, and his skin not much darker than that.

"You are aware of a faction of anti-solar harnessing activists called The Reliance." He did not state it as a question, but paused for a brief moment afterwards, as though he had. Just as I was going to respond in the affirmative, he continued:

"For the last 40 years, they have been attempting to find the locations of our solar harnessing cores, and shut them down. Until two months ago, they had been unsuccessful. However, due to a leak in our ranks, they now have control of one of the cores in the Foreman Galaxia. You are aware of the Council's policy on interference in the matters of sentiency."

I was. The members of the Council were never seen in public, never heard from, with the exception of Geoff Azucarman, who would periodically share vague philosophical thoughts over the internet. Like the Gods of lore, they were silent in the face of both tragedy and bounty. I always thought they were pulling the strings from behind the scenes, but perhaps that was not entirely true.

Aldus stroked his white beard and continued. "We do not act against the tide of time. We do not stop wars, or start them. We do not share gifts with any one group more than another. We do not force our gifts on anyone. These are the tenets of the Council of Light."

“So tell me, has the ‘tide of time’ decided to ignore Amican completely?” I asked.

“What choices we make for ourselves are our own – it is the impact to others that we have vowed to minimize. We walk above the water, and we leave no ripples.”

“The people in this room have done more to impact sentiency than anyone else than has ever existed, what kind of ripples are you talking about?”

Geoff snorted haughtily from his perch. “Aldus, he’s not going to understand, just get to the point.”

“Oh, I don’t understand? I’m getting tired of the condescending, semi-philosophic word vomit you’re spitting down from on top of your big-dick pedestal, you ancient bags of –”

“You’re aware we have your Com-Palm.”

“Hollow bones!” I finished. I threw up my hands. “Yes, ok, of course I am aware! You got me! Lock me up, re-train my brain, just do whatever it is you’re going to do, because I’m getting a headache from standing in this fucking lightbulb.”

“We would never do such things. What we need is for you to do something for us. As we cannot get involved ourselves, we need you to stop The Relliance from tampering with the solar Core. They are soffing around with things they do not understand, and the outcome can only be catastrophic,” Aldus said.

I don’t know what surprised me more, his sudden use of language or what he was asking me to do. Did they know I stole the coordinates of two of the Cores from the Datastore I visited with Petrus years ago? Of course, that had to be why they brought me here in the first place...they weren’t risking the exposure of any more information by involving me with the Relliance. I was the perfect pawn.

“You want me to infiltrate the Relliance? Are they really that much of a threat to you?”

“They are a grave threat to the universe,” Aldus responded.

I let out an empty laugh of disbelief. “You know better than anyone that the science of solar harnessing is the most tightly controlled knowledge in the ITZ. Not even —”

I stopped myself before I told them that Artemis’ Family didn’t even have a clue how solar harnessing cores worked. Damn my mouth today.

“This is how we control it. This is how we minimize impact,” Aldus explained calmly.

“This is how you minimize impact? By having other people do the things you’re too lazy to do yourself?” I asked.

“The lazy thing to do would be to zap them all with a blitzray and let their bodies decompose where they fall,” Amican offered nonchalantly.

“Ok fine, you want to be the good guys. How do you expect me to convince the Relliance to abandon the thing they’ve spent the last 20 years trying to get?”

“We’re sure you’ll figure something out. And you’ll have help.”

“Don’t need it.”

“We disagree. Elle?”

Oh no.

I watched as Elle, indeed the same Elle from the fundraiser, walked over to Aldus. They bowed to each other.

“Thank you, father,” she said to Aldus.

“Father!” I couldn’t help myself from exclaiming. “*He’s* your father?”

She turned to me and gave me a sympathetic – no, a pitying look. “Hello again. Ah, I really am sorry about lying to you.” Damn it, my heart softened under her gaze to the point where I was almost ready to forgive her. Almost.

“Ok, well, first of all, fuck you. Second of all, how many of you guys have soffering kids?”

“You think it is strange,” Aldus non-asked.

“I’m having a hard time believing you would do something so human. I’m also going to have a very hard time believing your daughter...about anything.”

Elle sighed. “I tricked you, yes. But you understand why. You’d never have believed me if I told you where I wanted to take you, and if you did believe me, you’d never have gone.”

“Oh, Elle, I thought we had a real connection.”

“I dosed you with oxytocin-mu-anandamine; a love potion, you could call it. It was easy; I stood in a literal spotlight where you could easily notice me and shot you with a nano-dart right before you turned to look at me.”

“That’s a lot of effort to go through just to ask a favor.”

“Again, Ben, you do realize how unpredictable you are?”

“What about Terragion? If you knew you already had me head over heels in love, you didn’t need to come with me there, and talk to me for hours.”

“I wanted to find out more about your underground Promethian network.”

“Yeah I’ll bet you did.”

I suddenly lost my desire to tease her when I was reminded of just how close I came to telling her about my Family. I would sooner die before betraying even a shred of identifying information about them, but a few chemicals and a clever girl almost had me break that bond. I could feel the wrath of Artemis licking at the back of my head. It was the first time I had felt her presence in what felt like ages. I ran my hand through my hair to shake her out. Lesson learned.

“We have also deducted all but 2,000 Reditis from your accounts,” Aldus added. “We’ll return the remaining 763,170,025 upon successful completion of your task.

I sputtered. For one, I had no idea I had that much money. I maintained a number of different accounts under various identities in order to prevent something like this ever happening. That being said, I knew I had a wagonload, and these lighters apparently just stole it all.

“Alright fine, Elle can tag along and watch me do my magic if she wants, but she’s not going to be getting a thin byt of information out of me. If that’s why you’re sending her, you can forget it.”

“It is necessary that Elle goes with you on this mission. You find the terms to be acceptable?”

I thought about it for a moment. I wanted my money back. I wanted my Com-Palm back. More importantly, I didn’t want these dicks to have it. Ultimately, the money and Com-Palm

themselves were irrelevant. It was the fact that they were able to take them from me. It didn't matter if I escaped, managed to retrieve my Com-palm backup, and went into hiding; they would find me again – no doubt they had planted some imperceptible bug inside me – and then...they hadn't told me what they would do if I refused, but they didn't have to. They had me, cutter over tailfin.

“Fine, let's do it. Not like I have a choice.” It was at that moment that I realized Aldus' last statement hadn't been a question. They knew the position they had me in, this entire conversation had been a formality from the start. My follicles itched at the thought of them wielding this control over me. I prided myself on being free from the oppressive ethos of Ertian Philosophy from the day I was born.

I couldn't wait to be out of this room and somewhere else where I could think; think about how I was going to outmaneuver the Council. But I wasn't done here quite yet. I was in the presence of the Council of freaking Light, I had to at least try to answer the questions I had tried to forget.

“I have a request,” I said.

Elle looked at her father, who looked at me like I'd just spoken gibberish. Gamartha looked at me like I was an adorable toddler learning to walk. Amican let out a loud guffaw from the gallery.

“And what would your request be?” Aldus asked.

“I want you to tell me what happened to my homeworld.”

I've spent many hours studying the faces of the individuals in that room from the mental image I took after asking that question. Hours searching for some hint of information, some clue of what they knew. They were utterly unreadable, every single one. Except for Elle's face. She was clearly confused.

“Good luck,” said Aldus. And then he was gone. They all were, replaced by more of those creepy faceless automatons. Except for Elle. Her face was still there, still frustratingly beautiful.

“Avatars?! Seriously?! This whole time?” I exclaimed.

Typically, there was a sign, an odd shadow where the cornea met the eyelid, a smoothness to movement that seemed preternatural, but this time, nothing. Typically, to project an avatar even half that good would require massive amounts of energy. But there was nothing typical about the Council. They were probably in a galaxy far far away, projecting via jintum entanglement. Gamartha did say it was only a matter of having enough power, and they damn sure had enough of that.

“Yeah, he tricks me sometimes too,” Elle said. “You have to look at their robes...sometimes they'll walk over something that exists wherever they are, but not where you are, and you can see a little bump. Or you could try touching their faces, but I wouldn't do that if I were you.”

The automatons began filing out of the room, one by one. I began to wonder if any of that actually happened. Was this what my marks felt like after the end of a successful play?



“What just happened?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“We were given a job by the Council of Light. I suggest you do it.”

She held out her hand; inside of it was my Com-Palm. I took it greedily and turned it over in my fingers, searching for any sign of damage, any sign of the scrutiny it no doubt endured. There was none. I popped it back into the socket on my wrist, and it sang a happy tune. I was whole again.

“Yeah, right. I need some time to process all of this. Can we meet up again in a couple days?”

Elle giggled. Damn it, she was cute. “Uh, if you think I’m going to let you out of my sight anytime soon, you are sorely mistaken.”

“You really are smitten with me, aren’t you?” I said with a coy look.

She didn’t flinch. “You took the words right out of my mouth.”

“This is going to be fun.”

## Chapter 23 - Day 15 - What about not using guns makes it a fair fight?

Ben stared at the corners in the Great room, where the wall met the floor. He counted scuff marks, one, two, three...four. One had a orange tinge to it, what could that be from...oh yes, he had dragged a scavenged Matter Engine through the great room a few months ago. Why had he done that, he wondered idly, as his eyes listed lazily to another corner of the room. Five, six, seven scuff marks. One mark was slightly higher up on the wall, and in the shape of a dog. Or maybe a cat, a floppy-eared cat. Ben hated cats. He had adopted one as a very young child, and dropped it off the third floor of a building as an experiment. The cat hadn’t survived, and Ben didn’t like remembering that, so he hated cats. Eight, nine, teneleventwelve thirteenfourteen...Ben let his eyes go unfocused for a moment. 73, on that wall. He had always had the ability to count things almost instantaneously, like a sixth sense. The number just sort of...entered into his brain. He hated it. He hated when his brain automatically processed things, like it was better than him somehow. It bordered on compulsive sometimes. Ben let his mind run free for 2 seconds...73 scuff marks, 135 ceiling tiles, the entire cast of the TV show “Hard Treckle”, a schematic for a Rox Combuster he had built 7 years ago, the number 82,207...Ben stopped the stream of thoughts before he became aware of the significance of that number. Whatever it was, it was sure to be utterly boring to his conscious mind. His soul ached from the effort of stemming the flow of thoughts. He mentally, sarcastically, patted himself on the back for engaging in that little

exercise. He sighed, took a deep swig from the flask in his jumpsuit pocket, then folded forward, sliding off the turquoise couch into a sloppy handstand.

This was how Lucia found Ben, upside down, upon entering the Great room on Sithday.

“Uh, trying to get a new perspective?” she asked.

“Have you ever noticed how it’s harder to count things while upside down? Why do you think that is? It’s not like the number of things has changed.”

“Our brain’s aren’t used to it.”

“I guess so. Ah—”

Ben lost his balance and fell out of the handstand, landing half-on, half-off the couch. He laid there for a while. Lucia stared at him, waiting for something to happen. When nothing did, she decided to continue with what she came here to do.

“Alfred A, the gang leader.”

Ben muffled a “hmmf” sound into the couch.

“It’s been almost 9 days since we left Taris and started floating around out here. You said we’d have Alfred bagged and booked in 10 days. So when do we start, uh, doing that?”

Ben lifted his head from the couch so he could speak more clearly. “Doing what?”

“Capturing Alfred.”

“I’m curious to find that out myself,” said Dax, appearing conspicuously on the balcony overlooking the great room. “We need this bounty, Ben. Not that you pay attention to things like money, but we have almost none of it.”

“Bleesh, you’re so impatient.”

“We’ve been sitting here doing nothing, floating around Taris for over a week. You’ve spent half that time passed out on that couch.”

“I wasn’t passed out, I was meditating.”

Dax snorted “Ha! Yeah, surely.”

“Do not disrespect the practice of meditation,” said Marim, making her entrance behind Lucia. “It is a highly revered practice of my ancestors.”

“They’re all of our ancestors, Marim, by Basar’s name,” Ben sighed heavily and pulled himself up into a standing position. “Fine, if you’re all so bored, we can go catch a baddie.”

Dax snorted again. “You know, a month ago I couldn’t even drag you out to spy on a bounty, now you’re extolling orders to us. I might divine that you’re starting to care.”

“Couldn’t be further from the truth, Dax,” Ben said. “I care even less about the bounties, about you all, about any of this; that’s why I’m getting involved. I don’t even care enough to stay out of it anymore.”

Dax knew better than to continue arguing.

At Ben’s direction, the gang piloted their trusty Space Duster back to the patchwork planet of Taris. They landed at the same port as they had nine days previous, and took the same ancient flash tubes to another decrepit part of the nearest city. Within the space of an hour, Lucia found herself seated at a dingy bar, feeling an uneasy sense of déjà vu.

“Alright Ben, we all followed you here. What’s the plan?” she asked.

Ben took a shot glass filled with a bright purple liquid from the hand of the thin bartender, knocked back the drink, and promptly handed the glass back to the bartender. He looked around the mostly empty bar, pursing his lips. The bar was Satellit, but not as a gimmick; it was simply that old.

“This place is lame, let’s go somewhere else,” he said.

“Aw come on, seriously? I just got this drink!” Dax swiveled around in his chair, holding a mug of beer that was roughly the size of his head.

Ben snatched the mug from Dax, who watched with heartbroken eyes as Ben proceeded to chug the entire drink in a matter of seconds.

“I’ll get you another one at the next place, come on.”

Dax slid off his chair in a huff, mumbling to himself as the gang followed Ben out the door and down the street. After walking for a few minutes, Ben jumped into another bar, this one so crowded it was difficult to move. Ben slid deftly through the crowd to a Fundot portal, where he selected an Orange Pump from the screen. The lower portion of the screen parted to reveal a circle of opaque orange film approximately the size of a thimble. Ben put his index finger to the circle, bringing it to his tongue, where it quickly dissolved.

Ben shuddered slightly. “Hell yes, that’s what I’m talking about! Woo! Is everyone having a good time?!” he yelled.

A few of the nearby patrons nodded. Dax and Lucia both stared blankly back at him. Marim hadn’t even entered the establishment.

“What do you want Dax? A fringlejitter? Vodka soda? Purple Haze?”

“I just want a beer, sen.”

“Ok ok, let me see,” Ben scanned the bar with his glistening grey eyes, lips pursed.

“I don’t think they have beer here. Let’s go somewhere else.”

Dax and Lucia both groaned as Ben took off past them.

Marim said nothing when the crew exited the bar a few minutes later, though her stern face made her annoyance clear. Ben paid no mind to the complaints of his compatriots, walking gleefully down the street. He popped his head into another bar, then another, then into a salvage store. Finally, he spotted a relatively new-looking bar from across a wide intersection and announced proudly, “that’s the one!”

The bar had amber colored bamboo-like rails decorating the front, but apart from being slightly cleaner than the average Tarisian storefront, it appeared to be unremarkable. The inside was much the same: dimly lit, long and narrow, about half full with casual patrons. Ben offered Lucia and Dax two empty seats at the bar and stood between them. He offered Marim a seat as well, but she continued her silent protest from the wall behind them.

“Three BDA beers please, whatever you’ve got fresh,” Ben said to the bartender bot, which promptly filled three mugs with beer from within its chest cavity.

“Fucking finally,” said Dax, bringing the mug to his snout for a long, cold sip. “That’s good shit, to be sure. Now Ben, kindly tell me why I had to walk all over this beggardly town to get it?”

“We had to be seen. So that Alfred knows where to find us.”

“That’s your master plan? To go bar hopping until he finds us?”

“Yup,” Ben took a long swig from his mug.

“I don’t know why I expected anything else from you.”

“Why did we have to wait 9 days?” Lucia asked.

“Hey, yeah, why did we have to wait 9 days?” Dax copied.

“In order to give him enough time to figure out we’re the ones who killed his people. And to tell the rest of his gang.”

“You gave him 9 days for that? Why give him so much time to tell all his boonies? If he does manage to find us, he’s surely going to be prepared to kill us.”

“*When* he finds us. Which should be in about one minute.”

“Arr, that’s not the point, Ben. Are you intentionally making this harder for us?” Dax asked.

Ben responded by downing the remaining half of his beer.

Right on cue, three cleanly-dressed men that looked unmistakably like criminals entered the bar. The shortest man in front, who looked unmistakably like Alfred A, pointed a long-nailed finger at Ben.

“You.”

“Phew, I almost didn’t have time to finish my beer,” Ben said out of the corner of his mouth to Dax, following it with a wink.

“You’re fucking dead,” Alfred continued, pulling a gun from his side holster, ready to kill.

Just as the gun’s gold tip crested the tip of the holster, three thin beams of white-purple light shot down from the ceiling and up from the floor, piercing through the middle of each of the three men. Their bodies were instantly frozen in place, skewered on a beam of light.

“Boom!” Ben swept his hand in a semi-circle and laughed in true delight. “That’s how you do it! Excellent placement Marim.” He walked over to the warrior woman and clapped her on the shoulder. She nodded, a hint of a smile visible on her lips.

Most of the patrons fled from the bar as Ben strode up to Alfred and put his ear to his mouth.

“Breathing ok, pulse ok. Brightness. Can you talk?”

Alfred made some throaty sounds. His lips moved ever so slightly, but the rest of his face and body remained completely frozen.

“If I’m not mistaken, I believe you said something very, very rude. Great! Can you blink?”

Alfred’s eye’s moved back and forth, but his lids remained open.

“Hmm ok, will have to tweak that a bit. Humans can’t go very long without blinking before your eyes start to get suuuuuper dry. Like deserts, crying out for even a drop of water. Craving just one blink...”

Alfred growled through his teeth.

Ben smiled and turned back to Lucia. “Pretty cool right? Immobilization beams, they target the spine and render the victim totally, well, immobile. Not completely immobile, of course, you still need your lungs for breathing and tongue for swallowing and heart for blood stuff. I have to admit, it’s taken a few iterations to get that part completely right. Heh...” Ben ran his hand through his hair.

“Anyways, I had Marim set up the generation devices when we first walked in.” Ben bent over and picked up a small circular disk off of the floor. “I expected a couple more boonies to show up so there’s a few left over.”

He pointed to the ceiling of the bar where there were five disks in an almost straight line to match the ones on the floor. “Nice aim Marim.”

Marim nodded again. Ben turned back to Alfred and sighed.

“Really was expecting more of a fight. Shame.”

“Fi’ ne ‘en, you ‘ucking cud.”

“Fight you? What, like in a judo ring?”

“Ri ‘ere. Les ‘ucking fi’.”

“I don’t get it. You want me to let you go, and then let you shoot me?”

“No gunsh. Jus’ hansh.”

Ben looked over to Marim with an utterly confused look on his face. “Am I hearing him right?”

Marim explained. “He wants to engage in hand to hand combat. It is an ancient practice, centered around personal honor. By removing any weapons or handicaps, you are bringing balance to the disagreement, allowing the universe to reveal who is truly the right one.”

“So the universe is going to reveal that one of us is right by beating the other one to death? What about not using guns makes it a fair fight? What if he’s had years of punching training?”

“As I said, it is an ancient practice.”

“Weird. I’ve seen similar practices on distant worlds but wasn’t expecting to get challenged like this here. Hmm.” Ben tapped Alfred on the forehead a few times. “Maybe we can get some fun out of you yet.”

Ben started fleecing Alfred’s body, removing guns and sticks and anything that looked remotely like a weapon.

“Ben, this is not a good idea,” Dax said. “We have him, let’s get the 300k and be done with it.”

“Na, na, na. This guy insulted my, my honor!” Ben couldn’t help but let out a little laugh.

“I hate to be the one to bring this up, but you are terrible at hand to hand combat,” Dax said. “Marim, back me up here.”

“It is true, Ben. Remember when that Crucian escaped from the holding cell?”

“She was big for a Crucian. And she caught me by surprise.”

“She was four feet tall.”

“Ok well now my honor really is insulted. I’m doing this.” He pulled the bandana around his neck up over his head. It pushed his hair out into a spiky fan around his face, making him look crazed.

“You’re drunk.”

“And he’s going to be a little slow from the immobilization beam. See, balance in the universe.” Ben began removing his own weapons.

Dax looked at Marim, who leaned forward from the wall to immobilize Ben in her own way. Ben held up a hand to stop her.

“Ah ah ah. Only I can control these immobilization beams. Without me, these three are going to be stuck here until the batteries in the devices run out. And let me tell you, they’ll have gone blind from lack of ocular lubrication months before that happens.”

Marim sighed and backed away. She was sure that she was going to capture the criminal by the end of this, what did it matter if Ben wanted to get himself beaten up first.

“Alright, let’s do this. You ready, fingerlicker?”

“‘Ersona shiel’ osh.”

Ben smirked. “You do have a clever bone somewhere in there. Ben tapped his Com-Palm.

“Personal shield off. Now on the count of three...three, two, one!”

Ben tapped his Com-Palm again and the beam holding Alfred disappeared. Alfred’s knees buckled slightly and his arms went limp. The gangster barely had time to blink away the disorientation before he received a clean punch directly to his face, knocking him completely off his feet.

“How’s that for a fair fight?” Ben shouted down at him, grinning madly.

Alfred leapt to his feet with surprising speed and swung at Ben from the left. The mechanic reacted quickly and clumsily, bending so far back to avoid the hit that he lost his balance. Alfred quickly came in from the right, and Ben again flung his body away to avoid the hit. Alfred, seeing his opportunity, rushed forward, causing Ben to whip his body around yet again. This movement proved to be too much and finally Ben lost his balance completely, landing on his backside on the hard floor. With well trained speed, Alfred pulled a knife from a hidden pocket on his thigh and sank it into Ben’s torso. With equal speed, both Marim and Dax pulled their weapons and fired stun pulses at the criminal. As the pulses hit their target, but fanned out and dissipated in blue ripples, the tell tale whirl of a personal shield filling the bar. Alfred pulled another contraption from a hidden pocket on his opposite leg, and the bar filled with blinding light. The few remaining patrons screamed and shouted as Dax doubled over, his senses over-stimulated by the assault. Marim recovered more quickly, bounding blindly forward to where she had last seen the assailant. Her mechanical leg caught on an obstacle and she toppled over, her face landing in something soft and lumpy.

“Fuck’s sake...Marim...my balls!”

She realized suddenly that she had tripped over Ben's shoulder and had landed on top of him. Sparing no attention to embarrassment, she spread her legs over either side of him and launched herself upwards, careful not to put any more pressure on Ben's injured body.

Still blind, Marim followed the feeling of air, and found her way out of the bar and onto the street. She crouched behind a small Infrogrator that she had taken note of when they had first entered the bar. She listened intently for the sounds of Alfred escaping, but heard nothing. He was already gone. Marim cursed inwardly. There was no honor in this.

Dax scrambled out of the bar on all fours. He rubbed his face on the ground as though trying to rid himself of fleas.

"Arrrrrrrrggggrrnnn, blast it all!"

Marim stood, her vision starting to clear. She walked slowly over to Dax, calling his name.

Dax stopped rubbing his head and perked up. "Marim? Is that you? What happened?"

"It is I. We have lost the bounty, I do not know where he went."

"Blast it! Arrrnn, my head. Check on Lucia and the asshole, would you?"

Marim picked up Dax and carried him inside, not wanting to leave him out in the open in case Alfred's gang came back. The bar was mostly empty, apart from a few terrified patrons crouching behind tables, and the robotic bartender, who was asking her to leave. The two remaining gang members were still suspended in the beams, one of them spinning slowly around the center axis of the beam, having been pushed during the scuffle. Ben was still lying on the ground. Lucia was kneeling beside him, looking lost. She knew next to nothing about medicine, apart from the fact that humans were not supposed to lose a lot of blood. And there was a lot of blood.

Marim kneeled down on the other side of Ben, lifting his shirt to take a look at the stab wound. Ben hissed. It was a serious wound, but had already begun to close thanks to the biobots in his blood.

"He will be ok," Marim said to Lucia, seeing her concern.

"Y-yeah. I know." Lucia looked back to the gash, just above his pants line.

Ben pulled his shirt back down over the wound. "Alright ladies, that's enough staring for one day. There are other, much more interesting parts of me if you'd like to take a look."

"Another time, perhaps," said Marim, not getting the joke. "We have more important problems to deal with."

"Is he gone? Alfred?" Ben asked through gritted teeth as he propped himself up on his elbows.

"He has escaped. To where I do not know."

"Maybe one of these guys has a guess," said Ben, nodding towards the two remaining gang members. "Tie them up and I'll unfreeze them so we can take them back to the ship and interrogate them. We really need to be getting the hell out of here, I'm sure reinforcements from both the baddies and the goodies are on their way."

Marim and Lucia jumped into action, restraining the two baddies. When finished, Marim gave Ben the signal to turn off the beams. He tapped his Com-palm and they vanished. The larger of the two men closed his eyes for a moment. He opened them slowly and fixed them angrily on Ben.

“I have grown tall as the whispered years of yellow pistons,” the gangster recited.

“What? What the fuck does that mean?”

Before anyone could answer, the man began to convulse, and a black foam appeared on his lips.

“Oh shit no, he’s killing himself!” Ben shouted as he attempted to stand.

Marim laid the man down and attempted to clear his airway, but it was too late. He was dead.

Dax, no longer trying to rub the light from his eyes, let out a high pitched whine. “That’s commitment, to be sure.”

“Well shit, shove a sock in that one’s mouth before he tries to do the same thing.”

“Wait wait wait!” yelled the second ruffian. “I’m not gonna do that, I don’t want to die!”

Ben walked gingerly over to the man, who was more of a boy. His large eyes and hollow cheeks pleaded with Ben as he looked the skinny boy up and down. After waiting for a few moments to see if the boy would say anything else, Ben shrugged his shoulders. “Alright, I believe him. Let’s take him and get the hell out of here.”

“I know where we can go! Here on Taris. We don’t have to take a Flash Point. If we stepped into one now, like this, we’d be flagged for sure.”

Marim nodded. “We cannot make it back to the ship as we are now. We must regroup.”

“Fine, have him take us there, just as long as we get out of here!”

“Go out the front and make a right,” said the young ruffian. Marim led the group out the door, holding their prisoner in front of her like a human divining rod. He led them through alleys and back roads, until they finally arrived at a tall apartment building.

“You’ll have to take the stairs to avoid being seen. They’re round the back.”

“What floor are we going to?” Ben’s face was pale and slick with sweat.

“32.”

“Dosh that, I’m taking the elevator,” Ben said.

“You’re covered in blood.”

“That’s not a crime.”

“No, but you’re gonna get flagged walking into an apartment building you’ve never been to with a stab wound. That, plus the fact that your face was recently involved in an altercation at the bar, is definitely going to bring the LP here.”

“No, m’ face is obscured. Technology.” He was starting to slur his words.

“Enough of this debate,” Marim flung the gang member over her shoulder, and scooped Ben up in her arms. Ben protested, although she was surprisingly gentle. The group made their way to the back of the building and up the stairs. Receiving many odd looks along the way, they



made it to room 3211, as the man had directed them to. A scan of his face unlocked the door, and the gang fell inside.

The apartment was plain but messy, giving it the appearance that whoever lived there didn't think of it as a home as much as a hotel room. The appliances and furniture were distinctly Tarisian, in that none of them matched. A mostly bare, but ornate black-wood shelf sat next to a simple inner-Ertian-style gray couch, which bore a faded brown stain on its seat.

"What is your name?" Lucia asked the hog-tied gang member.

"Goose," he muffled, his yellowish tan face partially smothered in Marim's heaving back.

Marim deposited a groaning Ben onto the grey couch. She was not as gentle setting him down and she had been picking him up, still angered over the loss of the bounty. She placed Goose in a striped yellow and black love seat.

"You stay put, now," Marim said sternly to Goose, who was still tightly bound at the hands and feet. She then smiled, as this was Marim's idea of a joke.

"I don't think we have to worry about him escaping," said Ben, missing the joke.

Lucia humfed, "Not unless you were planning on challenging him to a fist fight too."

Ben sat up to look at Lucia over the back of the couch. "Alfred challenged me!"

He winced and laid back down defeated, grumbling something about honor.

Dax lightly nudged Lucia. "Doesn't matter how many times he gets his pitious ass pulverized, he'll never accept the fact that he's worthless in a fight without his toys."

"Why would I need to be good at punching when we have guns and shit?" Ben said, pouting as he lifted his shirt and looked at the obvious answer to his own question. The wound had already sealed and scabbed over with brown goo that had been produced by the biobots using his own bodily ingredients. His entire lower abdomen was intensely red and inflamed from the biobots' activity. Ben looked at his diagnostics on his Com-Palm.

"Looks like he punctured my lower intestine, the trash-fucker. It wants me to ingest a med cocktail, do you have a Medigator here?" Ben asked Goose.

"Yeah, yeah, in the bathroom," Goose said, gesturing over his left shoulder with his head.

Ben moved to stand, but Dax interjected. "I'll get it, I'll get it. Do not get up, that is sure."

The Argruarian entered the bathroom, spying the medigator, a contraption that looked not unlike a beverage dispenser, on the wall next to the toilet. He pressed his finger to the pairing button.

"Alright, send it over," he yelled out to Ben.

Ben tapped his Com-Palm, sending a recipe for the particular cocktail of substances that the biobots required to repair and protect him from further damage. The ancient Medigator sprang to life, whirring and clicking as it worked, finally producing four mauve oblong pills into the dispenser tray. Dax tipped his head to the cartoon face, which was warning him about the reduced effectiveness of using med cocktails generated from another human's byproducts, then grabbed the pills and brought them to Ben with a cup of water.

“Cheers,” Ben said as he knocked the pills back with the water, following it with a long swig from a flask he produced from his back pocket.

“Something tells me your Com-Palm didn’t tell you to drink that too,” Dax admonished Ben.

“Yeah, well it never makes the painkillers strong enough.”

“Why don’t you just change the settings? Seems like something you could do.”

“Slippery slope, my friend,” Ben said as he took another long swig from his flask.

Dax shrugged, then took a seat on the metal coffee table across from the bound gang member.

“Alright, Goose, your turn to talk. What’s your deal?”

Goose sighed heavily. “Well, it’s a bit of a story.”

“Phernominal. We love stories, tell ‘em all the time, don’t we surely do. If you could be just a smidgen brief as you tell us yours, however, we would greatly appreciate it. Got a bounty to catch, and all that.”

Goose cleared his throat.

“Yeah, yeah. Well ya see, I’ve only been running with the Ruff gang, Alfred’s crew, for a week or so. My brother, Moose, he’s been with them for a while, but he...well he died, just 8 days ago.” Goose’s giant eyes began to well up, but he screwed his face on tight, refusing to let any tears fall.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Dax said. “But, did you say your brother’s name was Moose?”

“Yeah. Moose and Goose, that’s us. That was us. Thick as bread, we was.” He sniffed. “Mom and Dad were both really into the whole minimalism lifestyle. Ya know, consuming and producing as little as possible. Moose knew pretty early on that that wasn’t the kind of life he wanted to live. He --”

Dax held up a hand, “I hear you kid, but remember what I said about keeping it brief?”

“Yeah right, sorry. Anyways, Moose started running with the Ruff Gang a few years ago, but it wasn’t really my scene. Too violent, plus I had this girl...anyways, I hadn’t seen Moose in a while, then I find out he’s dead. Been killed in an explosion at some factory. Alfred needed someone to take over his duties, and my girl had...well, I didn’t have a buzzing palm. So I took his place in the gang.”

“In’t that sweet,” Ben slurred from the couch.

Goose frowned. “Alls that to say, I’m not loyal to those guys, the Ruff Gang. You don’t have to worry about me hurting you. So please, please don’t hurt me.”

“We won’t have to if you tell us where Alfred is,” said Lucia, stepping forward ominously. Dax, Marim and Ben all stopped whatever they had been doing to turn and look at her, utterly surprised by her sudden aggression. Seeing their stares, Lucia stepped back, but kept the tough look on her face.

“Right...what she said,” said Dax as he slowly turned back to focus on Goose, who looked more nervous by the second.

“Yeah, yeah, 333%. I can tell you where his hideout is, or at least one of them. I went there the other day, to pick up Moose’s things.”

“And you think he’ll be there?”

“Aw I don’t know, sen! I only met the guy two days ago! He needed backup to find you izzers. The only reason I was there today is because I answered his call the quickest. I should have never—”

The tears Goose had been holding back broke through, squeezing past his tightly shut eyes, down his scrunched cheeks. It was Marim who came forward to comfort him by placing her large hand on his quivering shoulder.

Dax licked his teeth uncomfortably. “Look kid, were not going to hurt you, we’re just here to do a job. Once we find Alfred, you’re free to go back to your life.”

“What life?!” Goose sobbed, “I don’t have a job, my brother is dead, Carissa left me...what am I gonna do?”

“Ok ok ok, calm down now,” Dax held his hands up placatingly, “let me get you a tissue or something.”

Dax stood and walked away from Goose, who was saying between sobs that there were no tissues on Taris. He walked over to Ben, who appeared to have fallen asleep. After making sure he was still breathing, he pulled Lucia away from the troubling scene.

“While they, er, rest, let’s find Ben and Marim a change of clothes. You should probably wash your hands too.”

Lucia looked down at her hands, tinted orangey-red from blood that hadn’t been properly washed off. She shuddered at the lingering stickiness she felt when she opened and closed her fingers. Quickly, she walked to the bathroom, avoiding Goose and Marim. She felt as though she were partly to blame for Goose’s breakdown, since she had threatened him.

*Where did that even come from,* she wondered as she scrubbed her fingernails clean in the scraped-up golden sink.

Dax was throwing clothes haphazardly onto the bed when Lucia entered the tiny bedroom. He held up a pink shirt that was bigger than he was.

“This should fit Marim right? Does she need pants too?”

“Uh, no I think Ben only got blood on her shirt.”

“Good ‘cause I don’t think this guy has anything that’ll fit her thighs. I grabbed this for Ben, figured he’d like it.”

Dax motioned to a purple and gold pile on the floor. Lucia held it up; it was a jumpsuit, similar to the type Ben usually wore; however the purple fabric with shimmering gold accents were far more vivid than his typical palette. She couldn’t wait to see him in it.

“You want to do the honors?” Dax asked as he rifled through Goose’s extensive collection of flip flops.

“I’ll make sure he puts it on.” It served him right after causing them to lose the bounty.

Lucia walked back into the living room with the purple jumpsuit and a pair of black-speckled flip flops in hand. Goose had stopped sobbing, and was now telling Marim about

other members of the Ruff gang that he knew. Lucia knelt next to Ben, who was still fast asleep. He awoke surprisingly quickly when Lucia touched his shoulder.

“What did I miss?”

“I have a change of clothes for you.”

“Did Dax pick those out?”

“He said that this was the only option.”

“He knows I fucking hate purple. Whatever.”

Ben grabbed the jumpsuit and sat up slowly. He pulled his blood-stained shirt off gingerly, then tossed it aside. He was skinnier than Lucia would have thought, but nevertheless, she couldn't help but admit he was attractive.

“You should probably shower first,” she said, no longer wishing to punish him for his careless mistakes today.

“I'm getting to it, mom.” Ben stood, sat back down, then stood again. Lucia instinctively grabbed his arm to support him, wincing at the feel of his burning hot skin. Though that wasn't necessarily cause for alarm given the repairs the biobots were making to his insides, Lucia still felt a knot in the pit of her stomach.

Ben shrugged her off once they made it into the bathroom.

“You can stay if you want, but I won't be able to put on too much of a show in my current condition,” he said as he began taking off his shirt.

“I'm good, thanks,” Lucia said. She turned to leave, but her eyes lingered on a light blue tattoo Ben had on his left shoulder. It was an intricate series of markings Lucia had never seen before.

“It's Atlantian,” he said, noticing her gaze. “Or at least that's what I call it, there's not an official name for the species.”

“I'd ask you what the hell that means, but you probably wouldn't tell me.”

Ben smiled as he stepped into the cylindrical shower. “Not yet.”

Lucia left, shutting the door behind her with a firm click.

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An hour later, the bounty hunters, plus Goose, exited a flash point in a comparatively nicer part of the city than where they had been running around most of the day. Tarisian days lasted 31 hours, so to say it had been a long day for the crew would have been doubly accurate. Although Tarisian's were always peripherally aware of the ITZ date, its status as a highly self-sufficient planet meant that it's inhabitants followed the natural schedule of the planet; working 9-13 hours days, rather than using the extra time for leisure, as was the culture on most planets in the Ertian Empire with longer days. This meant that the streets in this financial district were still bustling at 24:00.

“Let's get to this hideout you've blabbing about,” Ben said, pulling at his purple jumpsuit that was slightly too tight on him. His face glistened with sweat, but some color and life had

returned to his cheeks. Marim did not seem phased by her large pink shirt, so laser-focused was she on finding the bounty.

“Alright alright, just keep your voice down, please!” said Goose, his large eyes nearly popping out of his head. “We have to go through this convenience store.”

The crew drew stares as they followed Goose in a single file line to the back of the store, then behind a privacy screen. Packed like sardines in the space between the screen and a metal door, they watched impatiently as Goose produced a grey fob from his pocket and waved it across the door.

“I got this key from Moose’s belongings, I bet Alfred doesn’t even know I have it. I just have to find the right spot...” The door suddenly clicked and began to slide open. Marim caught the door before it opened more than a few inches.

“As we discussed, I will enter first,” she said. “Ben will stay in the back of the group with you, Goose, so do not try any tricks or he will incapacitate you.”

“Or just kill you,” Ben said with a devious smile.

Goose gulped, standing aside as the rest of the crew squeezed past him through the door. They entered into a small foyer, furnished with only a single egg-shaped chair. Marim took a palm-sized circular device from her belt loop and held it to the door that led to the inner room beyond. The device blinked on, displaying a low-resolution image of the hide-out on the other side of the wall.

“There does not appear to be any one there. However, there could still be opponents in the bathroom, or the office as Goose described.”

“Or the closet,” Goose offered, trying to be helpful.

“No one is ever in the closet,” Marim said.

“Oh, well, probably not.” Goose conceded.

Marim pulled open the door to the center room, then jumped inside with impressive speed, hopping through a series of defensive positions as she visually scanned each corner of the place. Dax ran along the left side of the room to the office, pressing his ear to the wall to listen for activity. Lucia stood with Ben and Goose in the doorway, her gun held ready. The place looked like it had been ransacked — bottles and furniture thrown about as though someone had been searching for something in a hurry.

“I don’t hear anything,” said Dax as he waited a beat for Marim to get into position. He opened the door with a wave of his hand, revealing an empty, similarly disheveled office. The bathroom was also in the same state.

“It appears that Alfred may have fled the planet, or at least this city,” said Marim, clearly disappointed.

“There’s still the closet.” Lucia shrugged. “Maybe someone saw us coming and hid.”

Marim sighed, but walked over to the closet with the gun raised. The door was a plasma barrier, but it had been deactivated, so there was only an open doorway to the small, dark room. Marim activated the lights, and stepped inside.

“There is no one,” she said, deadpan.

“Shit,” cursed Dax from across the room. “There goes that lead.”

“Wait wait wait!” yelled Goose, “maybe we can find something here that will lead us to Alfred!”

“Look at this place, sen, how are we gonna find anything important with all this shit thrown around? We could be here for hours!”

“Meanwhile Alfred is executing his escape,” said Marim.

A loud disembodied voice came booming through the room, interrupting the search.

“Get the fuck out of my pad!”

Marim turned her head left and right, searching for the source of the voice. It appeared to be coming from all around them.

“I said leave you monty cuds!” it declared.

“No!” Ben replied petulantly. “Is that you Alfred? Back for a rematch?”

The voice laughed a breathy laugh. “I’m done with you, Bounty Hunter. At least for now.”

“Then why are you calling us up? Is it Goose you’re after?”

Alfred was silent for a moment. “Goose is a dead man. He’s a traitor to his gang, and to his brother. Do you hear me Goose?”

Goose looked petrified. All color but a yellow tinge drained from his face.

“You’re fucking dead, you hear me! And then you’re gonna have to answer to your brother, your flesh and blood!”

“We gotta get out of here,” said Goose, his eyes bulging with fear.

“Yes, run away like the coward you are, but I’m going to catch you sooner than you think!”

Dax held up a hand. “We’re not going anywhere, chum. Is that really all you exposed yourself to say?”

The voice was silent again for a moment. “I’m not exposed, I’m already far far away from you fucks.”

Ben smirked. “Did you really think that threatening us over a loudspeaker would make us leave? If you got what you needed from here and fucked off, you wouldn’t be wasting your time with this ‘oooo, I’m gonna kill you’ shit.”

“Just because I’m far away doesn’t mean I can’t blow you all up. You’re in my house, remember?”

“Do it then, shitsmeller!” Ben shouted at the ceiling.

“Ben!” Lucia hissed.

“He’s not gonna do it. ‘Cause whatever he still needs from this hideout would get destroyed too.”

“You underestimate me at your peril, hunters. I used to sell Alcubierre drives on the high market, before I got dropped for being too ‘erratic’. How erratic can I be if I now operate the only black market supply of drives in the entire ITZ?”

Ben laughed. “You can hear yourself talking, right?”

“Alright, burn the lot of you. Good luck getting that mutant bat to go anywhere with you. I’m out.”

There was a distinct click, then silence.

“Boy, he was pissed—”

“Shhh!” Dax hissed at Ben, “Did you hear that?”

“What, him hanging up?”

“No, the sound of engine jets. Right above us.”

“Bless you and your alien ears, Dax. It’s gotta be Alfred!”

Before Ben could finish his sentence, Marim was running for the door. Her body was tensed, but her voice level. “Time can not be wasted, if we flash back to the ship now we may be able to catch him.”

Marim took off through the exit to the nearest Flash Point. The rest of the group followed, making it there after Marim had already flashed away.

One by one, the crew of bounty hunters arrived on the ship docking pad. Goose was the last to flash there, leaving him momentarily disoriented, unsure of which ship belonged to the bounty hunters, or why he was following them in the first place. He had no time to answer either of those questions, as an old Duster suddenly began flying right at him with its scoop open. He tried to dive out of the way, but the ship swerved to catch him. The scoop, or Quick Onboarding Mechanism as it was officially called, sucked him into the ship’s control deck before he could step out of the way.

Inside the control deck, the bounty hunter’s were already fast at work.

“Find him Lucia!”

“I’ve got it, just give me a minute!”

“We were in around here,” Dax pointed towards the city center on the windshield display.

“I know, just give me a minute!”

“I can’t find the bastard,” Ben said from his controls.

“I can do it,” said Lucia authoritatively. “I have our previous coordinates mapped, now given the amount of time it’s been, and assuming he took the most direct path to take off-world...” She pulled images of three ships up on the windshield. “He has to be in one of these three ships.”

“The red one!” shouted Goose, excited to help. “That’s his prize ship, fastest in the Galaxia.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Ben and Lucia at the same time, as they both commanded the Duster to follow that ship at top speed. Everyone lurched back slightly as the sudden increase in speed overcame the inertial dampeners. The chase was on.

“He’s far,” said Lucia, “He must have figured out how to bypass the planet’s speed limits.”

“Well good thing we know how to do that too,” replied Ben.

Lucia could only clench her fists as they took off from Taris. The sky turned from yellow to grey to black as they entered space. She knew they would have only a minute to catch up with

Alfred as he prepared to FTL jump, assuming he would follow protocol and position himself in a safe bubble before priming the Alcubierre drive. It was rare, but once a drive was turned on, there was a chance it could spontaneously jump before it was supposed to.

"I can see him, he's hovering in the snap zone!" Lucia pointed out of the windshield display to a small red dot inside the sanctioned off-world space for FTL travel.

"We will make it in time, we will," said Marim.

"Uh, unknown," replied Lucia, "He could jump at any second, and then he'll be gone."

Ben gasped, "Dear Lucia, are you telling me you don't know how to track a jump?"

Lucia frowned, "you need access to the mach-thermal heat signature reading of the drive, which is only possible to read with a Light Police scanner..." Lucia trailed off, rolling her eyes. "Which you have, of course."

"Of course," said Ben with a smile. "Just keep your eyes on the—"

Alfred's ship's long, ovular Alcubierre drive exhaust lit up with a bright orange glow. Space rippled and stretched around it, pulling the entire ship into a flattened shape. As the red vessel reached ten times its normal length, it suddenly snapped back like a rubber band, then disappeared.

"Aaand he's snapped," said Ben. "Now my clever program will take his directional position prior to the snap, along with the exact mach-heat temperature, and calculate where he jumped to."

Lucia knew he was saying all this purely for her benefit. "How accurate is it?" she asked.

"100%! Give or take a few decimals."

"Well let's hope the decimals are in our favor, cause we'll have less than a minute to find him once we—"

The windshield suddenly flashed orange, then displayed the tell-tale multicolor array of FLT space.

"Jump," she finished. She plopped down into a control seat, exhausted.

"Might as well get comfortable, we're gonna be swimming for a min of four hours," Ben said, reading the navigational display.

Dax let out a high pitched whine. "Where the hell is he running off to?"

"Looks like the middle of nowhere," said Lucia. "It's dead space, not near or on the way to any civilization that I can see."

"Maybe he's got some hideout out there," shrugged Ben as he walked to a locker near the entrance to the flight deck. He pulled out a gold flask, and downed the entire contents with a wince.

"Ah fuck. That's good shit," he said, spinning on his heels to face the front of the flight deck. He took a few confident steps, then collapsed like a wet blanket onto the ground next to Goose.

"Oh cud!" Goose shouted, bending over to check on him. Dax and Lucia both ran over to where he had fallen.

"What did he just drink?" Goose asked in shock.



“I don’t think it was what he drank,” Dax said, looking at Ben’s Com-Palm. “He’s pushed his body a little too far today.”

“Is he going to be ok?” asked Lucia, the words rushing from her exhausted lips.

“Mmm fine.” Ben started to come to. “Just got a little lightheaded.”

“There ya go, friend. Just going to take a little peek here.” Dax opened the front of the purple and gold jumpsuit to look at Ben’s stomach. The bandage Ben had put on the stab wound had filled with splotches of blood.

“Doesn’t look too bad, doesn’t look great either, to be unsure. Did you not put a stitch seal on it at Goose’s place?”

“He didn’t have any,” Ben grumbled.

Dax grumbled back at him. “Lucia, you know where the med bot is right? Why don’t you go activate it and bring it here.”

Lucia nodded. Medical bots were expensive, but the expense was necessary given their line of work. Even though the bot had only a fraction of the skills hospital droids were allowed to have, it could still perform a wide range of medical procedures, including minor surgery.

The bot finished attending to Ben with an hour to spare before the Sheherezade reached their destination. In that hour, Marim busied herself by doing pull ups on one of the flight deck doors. Lucia studied Ben’s program for tracking FTL jumps. Dax secured Goose to a banister, leaving his hands free, but his overall movement limited. Ben sat with his head resting on his arm, thinking. No one left the deck, so high were the stakes of the task at hand. As the moment came when the ship dropped out of FTL space, the crew stood in tense formation, side by side. Suddenly, the multi-colored tapestry parted and revealed the dark velvet wall of deep space.

“Where is he?” murmured Ben, scanning the ship’s controls.

“Got him. Voids, he’s 500 gigameters away!” she cursed. “Wait, what is that?”

Lucia spun around. The rear wall of the flight deck faded into empty space as the ship displayed a hologram of what was behind them, like a rear windshield would.

“What is what?” Ben looked out the virtual window. After a moment, he spied what looked like a bright orb steadily growing larger. “Oh...” He looked back at the navigational controls to confirm what he saw. “Shit.”

Lucia plotted a course and engaged the Alcubierre drives to send them full speed away from the object. Dax caught on to what they were to running from.

“He’s fired a goddamn hydrogen torpedo at us! Where in the unknown voids did he get one of those?” he shouted.

“I don’t know but we’ve got to snap the fuck out of here. How long until we jump Lucia?”

“Uhhh...”

“What do you mean ‘uhhh’?”

With a swipe of her hand, Lucia pulled the drive’s control screen up so that it was visible to the rest of the crew. A frowning emoticon overlaid Lucia’s own frowning face, accompanied by an error message that read “Insufficient Sangum matter in vicinity for FTL travel.”

Lucia stepped from behind the holographic screen to address Ben.

“What does it mean there’s no Sangum matter here?” she asked. “Sangum is everywhere, that’s like, what makes it Sangum matter!”

“Well apparently there’s not enough! It fucking happens! 20% of the ITZ doesn’t have enough ‘Gum to power an Alcubierre drive, and usually that’s not a problem because it can be stored in the compressor, but that last jump must have really drained us.” Ben swore, his face pale and sickly.

“Friends...” Dax interrupted, pointing out the rear display. The orb surrounding the torpedo was now clearly visible, heading straight for them.

“What do we do?” Lucia asked, exasperated. A proximity alarm began sounding off. “I’ll think of something, everyone calm down.”

“There’s not enough time for thinking!” Dax shouted as he strode up to the panel in front of Ben, threw the casing off of the emergency control joystick and pulled it as hard as he could away from the encroaching ball of explosive light. Lucia snapped into action, adjusting the ship’s velocity so that they were moving in the exact opposite direction of the blast, at top non-FTL speed. The whole team stared for a moment at the giant ball of light in the virtual window. It appeared to be only a few meters away from the ship.

“That was a close one.”

“We’re not out of the dark yet,” said Lucia, looking grimly at the ship’s positional information display. “According to the PID, that blast is moving at 2 chops under the speed of light.”

“Fuck!” Ben swore. “And we’re moving at just 4 chops. That’s as fast as we can go without the Alcubierre drive. How soon until it reaches us?”

“A minute and a half,” Lucia said grimly.

The ship fell silent for a few moments as all aboard contemplated their fate.

“So you’re saying that torpedo is going to obliterate us in 90 seconds if we don’t speed up?” Goose unconsciously pulled at the tethers that were binding his legs to the ship. “Surely we can jettison something to boost us?”

“The amount of force we’d need to generate to push a ship of our size closer to the speed of light would be astronomical,” Ben said dismissively. Suddenly, he looked like he had just realized something he’d rather not have.

Goose continued. “Then, let’s get to a patch of Sangum matter. Traveling at 4 chops, we should be able to get to one in a few seconds!”

“We’re in a totally dead zone,” Lucia said. “The biggest one in this entire Galaxia, almost a quarter lightyear across. That has to be why Alfred lured us here.” She began breathing quick and shallow. “We have 40 seconds.”

“40 seconds,” Marim said softly, as she stared out of the front window at the dark empty space in front of them.

Goose’s bug-like eyes widened into saucers. “Then we abandon ship!”

“Won’t get far enough away from the infernal blast,” said Dax, his eyes closed, head bowed.

Lucia stared at the bright yellow light of the torpedo, now filling half of the virtual rear screen. “Ben...” she pleaded, looking over at the mechanic.

His eyes were also closed, his hands spread out on either side of his, leaning on the hard frame of the control panel as he looked at the screen intently. He appeared to be murmuring something to himself, drowned out by the background noise of the ship.

Lucia sank into her control seat. It didn’t matter what ideas Ben was trying to concoct in that addled brain of his. There were certain laws of physics that even he could not get around. Today, those laws were sentencing them to death.

Lucia felt a pulling sensation in her chest, as though something were trying to remove her soul through her sternum. It was not unlike the discomfort she felt when something bad was about to happen, a sensation that had been ironically absent that day. She looked down at the ship’s controls.

They were speeding up. 3.5 chops. 3.1 chops. 2.9.

“What on Earth...”

She looked back at the torpedo pursuing their ship. A yellow tendril had burst forth from the ball of light, like a thin tornado snaking its way towards them.

Ben made a strange, throaty sound. He collapsed into his seat, and ran a trembling hand through his hair, keeping his eyes closed. “How fast is the torpedo moving now?”

Lucia checked, as confused by the question as she was by the answer. “Uh, it’s saying 3 chops now. And we’re going, uh, 2.9.”

“Oh thank the gods” Goose said, his shackled legs turning to jelly with relief.

“But how, er, why...” Lucia stumbled over her words. “Ben?”

“We borrowed some energy from the hydrogen bomb. No dying today,” he said, exhaustion coating his words like a thick molasses.

“I don’t...understand,” she looked over to Dax, then to Marim. Dax’s ears flicked with happiness, and Marim had turned away from the windshield, a calm smile on her face. Neither of them offered her an explanation.

“No dying today!” echoed Dax. “How long until we reach a patch of ‘gum? I’m not too keen on having this thing nipping at our tail, even though we can outrun it, to be unsure.”

Confused, but grateful to be alive no matter what the reason, Lucia answered him. “3 days, it looks like.”

“I’m guessing an Ertian Empire garbage collector will find and sweep up that mess of a bomb before then. Maybe they can rescue us too.”

“I hope not,” Goose said, not wanting to draw the attention of the Light Police, or the Tarisian Tenants.

“We’ll be fine,” Dax waved a hand. He walked over to Ben, who was now slumped over on the control panel, and patted a hand on his shoulder.

“A great thanks to you and your gift. It is fortuitous to see you use it again.”

Ben only ‘hmmf’-ed in return.

Dax looked back at the torpedo in the rear window and felt his hair stand on end. He pulled up the ship’s display controls, then with a wave of his hand, wiped the sky from the rear of the deck, taking with it the looming torpedo. His hair relaxed itself, almost as though he had removed the threat entirely.

“There, it’s like it isn’t even there. We can rest easy while we wait for the garbagemen to come get rid of it for real.”

Ben rose from his chair and stumbled out of the flight deck, through the door where the hologram used to be. Lucia wanted so badly to ask him a hundred questions, but it was clear he needed to rest. He’d called her annoying enough times that she could hear him say it before even opening her mouth. So she kept it shut, for now.

“We have lost the bounty,” said Marim, the glee of having her life saved wearing off quickly.

“Perhaps today, for sure. But whether we will never see him again, that is less sure.”

Marim only ‘hmmf’-ed in return.

The next morning, the crew shared breakfast together in the Great Room, silently ignoring the hydrogen elephant that waited just beyond the walls of their duster. Sharing breakfast was a habit that they had begun to form without realizing, and the lack of conversation that morning finally brought the odd habit to their attention. So they sat in silence, together, each wondering what decisions they’d made in life to bring them to this awkward moment. It was in the deepest moment of their collective musing that Ben, without preamble, began to continue his story.

## Chapter 24 - This is Ben, My Husband

It was not fun, working with Elle. Not at first, anyway. We left the floating barge that I had been taken to, which as I discovered, was hidden within a Posci field – shielding it from detection by virtually every detector known to sentis. I set to work the moment we took off, running simulation after simulation in my head, trying to figure out how to free myself from the Council's grasp. There was no way they'd release me from being their pawn if I was successful in this mission they'd sent me on, but it wasn't like I could just run away. Staying hidden was not a viable option; there was just no way to know and eliminate all their methods of finding me. Not to mention, the Council held answers to questions that I had been afraid to even ask myself. Questions about my homeworld, the terrible earthquakes that brought it down, and an evil psychic tree that had some hand in causing that all to happen. There were so many things I needed to do, scenarios I needed to consider; but before I did any of that, I had to solve my most pressing problem.

Elle would not shut up.

From the moment the Council of Light had disappeared, she had been talking. She asked me about my homeworld, which I did not reveal. She asked me about my family, which I also brushed off. She asked me about my favorite serials, which I couldn't help but answer. She told me about her life, told me her thoughts about how to infiltrate the Reliance, told me how she learned about solar harnessing from Amican's Stone's own protege. She was like Artemis in the months after we left Pluora, while I was lost in my sturdy towers, when she would talk at me for hours. Just like back then, I was mostly silent, but could not help but listen. Elle was fascinating, brilliant, funny – and she was making it absolutely impossible to plan my takedown of the Council.

A few days of this madness went by, and we somehow made our way to a homeworld where the Reliance was known to be active. I honestly don't even remember which planet it was, that's how full my head was with Elle and the Council. I'd dusted off my psyche-mapping skills and managed to convince her that we needed to take this slow; that we needed to spend weeks collecting data and preparing multiple contingencies before even introducing ourselves to anyone from the Reliance.

Soon after arriving on-world, Elle rented a hotel room on whichever planet it was, and for the first time since we met on that fateful day at the fundraiser, I had an hour to myself, alone. Elle went out to secure us a more permanent residence to make our home base, and with her out of the room, I finally had a chance to run some scenarios with the aid of my Com-Palm.

I took a few moments to enjoy the solitude, and was hit with a wave of exhaustion that nearly knocked me out. I hadn't slept for days, spending the precious hours while Elle slept turning over plans without the constant disruption of her talking. I'd been relying on chemical stimulation to stay awake and aware, and opted to take more in order to not waste this crucial time.

I pulled up the necessary programs, arranging them in a semi-circle in the air before me. Finally, *finally*, I could offload some of the computation to an actual computer.

I first searched through the access history of my Com-Palm. I had to know what Amican had seen in there. Particularly if he had learned anything about the whereabouts of my Promethian family. Due to the nature of fractal storage, if you want to access some particular byt, you have to first scan everything that has been stored after that byt, on that particular fractal block. Consequently, this means you can trace what byts have been accessed by the number of times the rest of the block has been scanned, no matter what steps one might take to cover their tracks. Of course, this meant that I could see that Amican had looked through my data thoroughly during the time period I was living with Artemis. Not good.

Strangely, he had not accessed any of my Com-Palm's history prior to the first time I arrived on Promethia, or after I moved to Virgin to start the Petrus play.

This begged a new question; why the hell had the Council brought me into all of this if they didn't know that I already knew where some of the solar harnessing cores were? Could it be because I was Pluoran? I pulled up one of the floatings windows in front of me and started drawing a psyche map of Amican.

As if on cue, the door to the hotel room opened and Elle stepped through, followed by a bald woman with sharp features. I quickly pulled the widgets from the air with a swipe of my hand. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. What was she doing back so soon?

"Ben, meet Oxara. Oxara, this is Ben, my husband."

FUCK.

"So he's the mechanic? Pretty young to be as good as you claim."

"He's the best there is, and I'm not just saying that because I love him."

Whaaaat was happening? We never discussed any of this...

Elle looked at me with a fondness I didn't recognize. "He may be a few decades younger than me, but that's part of his charm."

The bald woman, Oxara, gave Elle a curt nod. "I trust you enough to introduce you to Christopher and Jana. They're the ones he'll have to impress."

Christopher and Jana, as in the known Reliance faction leaders, Christopher and Jana? My brain was moving at a lightyear a minute. I quickly came up with a retort.

"I know my shit," I said, stupidly.

“We’ll see about that,” Oxara replied. “Our scientists are the best in the Zone. You’ll have to submit to a scan, naturally.”

Elle nodded. “Of course, we’re willing to put up with the invasion of privacy for a chance to help you take down the Lighters.”

Oxara gave me another stern once-over, then looked around the hotel room, as though she might find a tablet labeled ‘Secret Plan to Take Down the Reliance’ laying on a desk or something. Having found nothing incriminating, she turned to Elle and pressed her fist against Elle’s right shoulder. Elle returned the gesture, and they nodded to each other.

“Tomorrow morning. I’ll text you the location. We’ll be there in person, no Avatars. No weapons.” She turned to me as she said that. I widened my eyes and shook my head briskly back and forth. I’m sure I looked like a Tweakhead.

Oxara raised her eyebrow at me. “He’s as strange as you said he would be, Elle. I hope you’re right about everything else.”

With that, she left, shutting the door gently behind her. I waited approximately seven seconds before taking two fistfuls of my hair in my hands and falling backwards onto the bed behind me.

“Whaaaat the fuck was that Elle?! We said we weren’t going to make contact for a month, at a min! What, did you run into her at the market?”

“I’ve known Oxara for almost a year. We’ve been organizing this introduction for the last few weeks.” She couldn’t have been more pleased with herself.

I slapped my hands down onto the bed. “Why did you not tell me any of this?”

“Uh, because you would have tried to slow me down. And it was so much fun watching you try to figure out how to get yourself out of this. But now I have to burst your bubble, Ben: You’re never going to get out of this. You can’t outwit my dad, let alone the entire Council. You have to accept that this is your life now. Take it from me, it’s a pretty great life to live. You should be grateful.”

Clearly she did not know who she was talking to.

“Ok, clearly you do not know who you’re talking to. I don’t expect you to believe that I can outwit the Council after the performance you’ve seen so far, but trust, I am the smartest sent you have ever met, and nobody tells me what to do.”

Elle sat down on the bed next to me. “Aren’t you tired of this? I know you haven’t slept the last few days.” She reached her hand towards my shoulder but I slapped it away. I rolled over onto my side, defiant.

“Ok Ben, tell me what is so bad about this. You get to infiltrate a terrorist organization, and stop them from taking out the source of energy for a dozen planets. No one is telling you how to do it, and you’re partnered with a sexy bitty.” I could feel the grin on her face radiating into the back of my head.

Damn it all to the void, she had a point. There was no way in hell I was going to submit to the Council’s whims forever, but maybe I could see this through. Take a nap. Worry about answering my burning questions tomorrow. It felt good, laying here with Elle next to me...

If I hadn't been strung out I probably would have fallen asleep. But I was amped up on 20 mg's of Tweak and wasn't about to let this 'sexy', 'intelligent' 'liar' convince me of anything.

"Did you drug me again?" I accused.

"What? No! You've taken enough shit yourself, you don't need my help."

I sat up and scanned through my bio metrics. I couldn't see anything obviously out of place, but I knew what I had felt...Elle could not be trusted.

"Just, soffing, don't touch me, alright? So what, we're going to meet the heads of the Reliance B Faction tomorrow?"

Elle looked hurt, but brushed it off.

"Yes. Christopher and Jana. They need another set of hands to help with re-programming the Core, since they've apparently figured out how to do that. I've offered our services."

"Ok, fine. Why in Basar's name did you refer to me as your husband?"

"Christopher and Jana are married. They're...pathological about it. Never do anything apart. I think it will help them trust us if we're, you know..."

She brought her cupped hands together and leaned her head pointedly to the side. I'm not sure on which planet that means 'married', but I'm willing to bet Elle has never been there.

"But why 'husband'? That sounds so ancient."

"That's how they refer to each other, husband and wife. They're history buffs, apparently. Besides, those terms haven't completely fallen out of fashion."

I hadn't had enough time to research the two faction leaders to know how they would react to any of this, I had been so focused on the Council. We were going to walk into this completely unprepared. Damn it, Elle, you likeable, traitorous bitch.

"And just how are we supposed to act like we're married when we only met a few days ago, huh? Did you think about that?" I asked.

"Look asshole, this isn't my first rodeo. I've been tailing the Reliance for years. I'm also the one who actually knows a thing or two about solar harnessing. Just let me do the talking, and every so often, look at me the way you did when we were walking on the beach in Terragon."

"Is that why I'm here? Just so you can have a fake husband? How do you know they won't look at us as competition, or immediately disown us because our bond isn't as strong as theirs?"

"You're here so you can point out shit like that!" she shouted. "This is what you're good at, right? What you were raised to do, you and your secret Promethian tribe, right? Except unlike the other members of your tribe, you're stupid enough to openly operate a drug syndicate AND wander around an L2 planet, hitting on random women! So, how about you stop trying to subvert the Council of Light and focus on something you can actually do, you stubborn child!"

Like Cregan rods sliding into place, it suddenly clicked for me. Of course...when the Council introduced themselves to me, they referred to me by my assumed name, Ben Mcleod. They didn't know I was Pluoran, nor that I knew where the Cores were. The only reason I was here was because I was, for lack of a better word, loud. They wanted to know more about the



Promethian family, and I happened to walk under their noses when they needed a pawn to play with. Of course! How could I have been so blind! This was...this was....

This was fantastic news! Those old bags may claim to be all-knowing, but they didn't know how special I was. Even the Family was more of an afterthought to them, what they really cared about was the Reliance. The Reliance was fucking with the Council's main source of power, both figuratively and literally, and that wasn't just another deviance they could simply watch happen. The Council was going to deal with them in the easiest way possible, and by their calculations, that was by making me do it.

It was obvious now: I could get the Council to leave me alone by doing the opposite of what they recruited me to do. I had to ensure that the Reliance shut down the solar core. Once I'd 'failed', the Council would recruit some other wanna-be hacker to do their dirty work. Basar's toe, maybe they'd even do it themselves. How effective could they be, after all, if they had to rely on a drug dealer that had already failed them? I'd lose my money, but 700 million Reditis seemed like a fair price to pay for my freedom.

"Elle, my dear, you are so right. I haven't been thinking clearly. I should focus on the mission before us, and worry about taking down the Council later."

"You're never going to —" she stopped. "Wait, what, you...what just happened? What did you figure out?!"

"I have a thing for tough bitties that yell at me. Maybe I'm thinking with my cock here, maybe my brain has finally given out from all the Tweak I've taken these last few days, but I'm done fighting. I submit."

I laid back down on the bed and threw my arms out on either side of me, then gave her the most suggestive look I could muster given my very real exhaustion.

She laughed disbelievingly. "Uh, yeah right." But I could tell she was considering believing me.

"You're right Elle, now isn't a good time. Take me once we've made it into the Reliance, and we've been working side by side for a couple of weeks, and you start to think that maybe I'm not so bad after all, and then our fingers touch while reaching for the same sonic wrench..."

"I was thinking it would be after you bravely save me from getting hit by a falling hull panel," she said, putting a hand to her chest.

"I suppose that could work as well. As long as there are other people watching, I'll get off."

"Oh really, I took you as a shy performer."

"With the kind of performance I put on, it would be a crime not to let other people watch."

"I'd imagine they'd have to be uncomfortably close to see anything."

"A small dick joke, really? After you saw me in the outfit I was wearing at the fundraiser?"

"There was a load of lying going on that night."

“I’ll say. I can guarantee you one thing Elle, and that is that what you saw beneath that silver lycra was 22 centimeters of truth, waiting to be uncovered.”

“I guess that’s one mystery of yours I’ll have to leave untouched.”

“C’mere, just give me your hand.”

To my surprise, she put her soft, somewhat manly-looking fingers in my outstretched hand. As I gripped them, she tickled the inside of my palm with her middle finger, surprising me and causing me to instinctively pull my hand back.

“Ew, what the heck was that Elle? You smell!” I shook my hand out like she’d wiped something gross on it.

She began giggling with childlike mischief. I couldn’t help but join in, the ridiculousness of this entire situation seeking release through my laughter. For a moment, it was like we were two seven year old kids that had just heard someone say the word ‘butt’. Then we remembered we were both adults with some very real work to do, and the laughter died down.

“I should get some sleep,” I said.

“You don’t want to run through some of your simulations first?”

It was eerie how well she knew me already. “Nah. I’ll leave this one up to the fates.”

She looked at me hard in the eyes, searching for something. I stared back, unblinking.

“You’ve got really thick eyelashes,” she said. “Are you wearing makeup?”

“No. Jealous?”

Elle shrugged her shoulders and went into the bathroom to take an air-bath. I was alone again, though I knew it wouldn’t be for long this time. I folded my hands behind my head and stared at the ceiling. In my sleep-deprived state, the shadows on the ceiling began to dance and flow like rivers, turning into cogs and gears for a few seconds, then losing their form again. It occurred to me that I should probably take something to induce sleep. As Elle exited the bathroom and wordlessly climbed into bed, I slapped a patch onto my arm and succumbed to its effects.

I lay in bed, both awake and asleep, my mind doing happy somersaults through the haze of the downer I had taken. Memories of the day I’d met the Council jumped in and out of my consciousness. Following the automaton down the grey hallways, seeing the likeness of Pluora, meeting Amican Stone, walking next to Elle on the black sand...My thoughts swung like heavy pendulums through the fog of sleep...I’m going to shut down a solar harnessing core, I’m going to get my money back, I wonder if that old lady still bothers Ibis...I felt no need to follow any of these thoughts to see where they went, nor did I feel the usual pang of guilt I feel when leaving a loose end untied. Something told me everything was going to be fine. And I didn’t care what that something was.

## Chapter 25 - Well that's a ringing endorsement if I've ever heard one

Refreshed, curious, and newly invigorated by my plan to screw with the Council, I hummed to myself as Elle and I made our way to meet the Reliance Faction Leaders the following day. I was excited to have the opportunity to pull off such a difficult play with barely any prep time. Artemis would surely marvel at the work I was about to do once we arrived at the waystation to meet Christopher and Jana. And if all went well, I'd get a chance to lay my eyes on an actual Solar Harnessing Core...something that probably fewer than 50 people had ever done.

Sitting next to Elle in our space vessel, I recited these boons to myself, in the hopes that it would get rid of the slight anxiety that was preventing my giddy glee from being an all-encompassing good mood. Something was off, but I couldn't place my finger on it. I looked across the dash, then over to Elle, then back to the dash. It was so quiet. Of course, that was it! Elle wasn't talking. In fact, she had barely said a word the entire morning. After enduring ten full days of her nearly incessant chatter, the silence was downright creepy. I cleared my throat.

"Did you ever figure out why the pamphlet was taken down?"

"Uh, what pamphlet?" she responded tiredly.

"Your friend, Millyon. She was advertising the Greyson's Disco in a pamphlet, but it was taken out of internet circulation. You told me about it the other day."

"Wait, you were actually listening to that story? I was just trying to distract you from your scheming. I didn't think you picked up any of it."

"Well I was listening. You're a good storyteller. It was interesting."

"I never thought of my side job as particularly interesting."

"Your side job?"

"The event planning. Obviously my main job is helping my father. The event planning is more of a front."

"Ah, right. Of course."

"I mean, it's not like I can tell anyone who my father is."

We descended back into silence, although this time it was far more uncomfortable.

"So, have you really never met Christopher and Jana before, or was that a lie?" I asked.

“No, that is the truth. Their reputation is well-known amongst the B faction, but they rarely make public appearances. To protect themselves, of course. I’ve attended a few faction rallies, made myself known to leadership, demonstrated my worth. But it wasn’t until I invented this husband character that I got any real attention.”

Her methods sounded similar to psyche mapping. Far more rudimentary of course, but I had to give her some credit.

“What made you decide to lie about having a husband?”

She scrunched up her face. “Uh, that’s unknown really, I was at a bit of a loss for how to break into the upper ranks, and I’d heard about how inseparable Christopher and Jana were, and it just kind of came to me.”

Now that I had had some time to sleep and actually think about the situation, I recognized the genius in her idea to pretend to be a couple. While I never really saw myself ‘settling down’, I was conditioned by the wagonloads of stories I consumed as a child to see the appeal in having a life partner. To have someone that you trusted with your life, who knew everything about you, who you could rely on and grow with...there I go, getting all cheesy.

That kind of relationship; it wasn’t something that I thought could really exist in the world, at least not for me, but I could certainly pretend.

“What is your favorite Serial?”

“What?” she said without looking at me.

“You know, your favorite Serial, show, series, simgram, any of the dozen different ways we consume media these days.”

“Yeah I know what you meant, it’s just a random question to ask right now, while we’re on the way to hijack the Reliance.”

“Well we’re supposed to be married right? Shouldn’t I know what your favorite Serial is?”

“Ok, fair enough. Hmm. Honestly, I don’t follow many series these days, nor have I ever been into the full immersion grams. I’m more of a reader. But I do like...er, you’re going to laugh.”

“Now I am truly interested. Please continue.”

“I really got into Draggin,” she said, squinting her eyes.

I did laugh.

“Draggin. As in the show about a renegade drug dealer in the 29th century who’s trying to save his daughter’s life?”

“Yes. It’s...suspenseful, alright? And the girl who plays his daughter is a brilliant actress.”

“And what about the main character, do you like him?”

“He’s tolerable. And not half bad looking. It’s a very highly rated show!”

“Of course, of course, I agree with you!”

“Yeah I knew you’d enjoy that one.” She fidgeted in her seat and started scrolling through something on her Com-Palm.

“Well I already knew your type,” I said, subtly gesturing to myself, “so that doesn’t give me too much additional information. You already told me your favorite food on Terragon...Ah, I know what to ask: Am I your first love? Secondary School Sweetheart perhaps?”

“Let’s say for the purposes of this charade that you are. Except we met later, in Technical School, where we both studied Solar Physics.”

“And what about in real life? Was I the first man you ever fell for? Other than Ming Draggin, of course.”

“Setting aside the fact that you have not yet succeeded in making me fall for you, yeah, I’ve been in relationships before.”

“But not now?”

“I’m a little busy at the moment.”

“And I can imagine it’s hard to impress your dear old dad.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a father being protective over his daughter.”

“I never said there was!” I said.

With that, we were back to the silence. Luckily, the Waystation was nearly in view.

We landed the ship on the docking pad, which was empty apart from another small cruising vessel. Either Christopher and Jana weren’t here yet, or they traveled with a very light crew. The Waystation itself looked like the typical kind you would find scattered along a common flight path, except that there were no travelers milling around, stretching their legs. It appeared deserted, however it had clearly been kept up and cleaned regularly. The Reliance must have taken control of the Waystation to use it for meetings, like the one we were about to have. They were well-organized, I had to give them that.

Elle and I disembarked and walked towards the main building on the platform, unsure of what else to do. Our only instructions had been to come here at 10am, with no other crew or weapons. Neither of us even knew what Christopher and Jana looked like, apart from general descriptions, which sounded too fanciful to be true. Christopher apparently looked like a nerdy dwarf, while Jana was a tall, terrifying stick-woman. There was a rumor that the two of them were never separated, not even to use the bathroom. As we approached the building, a male voice beckoned us from within.

“Elle and Ben, please come in! The door is unlocked.”

Elle and I exchanged a mutual expression of ‘here goes nothing’, and then she opened the door.

Inside were two humans: one man and one woman. The man was stout, with short brown hair and an animated, boyish face. The woman was conversely tall and lanky, with dark, sharply cut hair and thin, pursed lips. Based on what I knew, this had to be Christopher and Jana.

The short man stepped forward and bowed energetically.

“Welcome to both of you! Thank you for making the trip, I hope you didn’t run into any trouble on the way. Lots of people out there want to do everything they can to cause us — and anyone who associates with us — trouble. My name is Christopher, and this beautiful work of art to my left is Jana.”

Jana nodded, her stern expression unchanging. Her skin was so pale I could see the tiny blood vessels around her nose. ‘Work of art’ wasn’t a term I would use to describe either of them. Cartoon, maybe. But I had to hold my tongue; Elle was running the show today.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with us, we are both truly honored to be --” Elle trailed off as Christopher began waving his hand back and forth dismissively.

“Yes, yes, we did take a considerable risk to be with you in person today. The people out there that want me dead, well, they don’t need much to make it happen!” He laughed snarkily, with just a hint of nervousness. “Do you, you Lighters!?” Christopher moved closer to us, yelling his last question at our torsos. I then realized he was speaking at our Com-Palms.

“They’re watching us now, of course. They record it all, every movement we make through those things, but they only pay attention to the important bits. And this meeting is very important. Congratulations, you are officially on the Council radar!” He clapped Elle on the shoulder, seeming genuinely excited for us.

“Now, you’ll have to take those off pretty often if you’re going to be working for the Reliance. I hope that’s ok with you. We’re not asking you to go full Mongo and rip your casing out, but you will have to go without your Com-Palm for hours at a time. Can’t be helped, sorry to say.”

Elle nodded firmly. “We’re both well aware of the dangers that come with these things, as we are aware of the dangers of going without them.”

Christopher laughed, “Ah, if only you really knew! The things we could tell you, if you can prove yourself to us...ah, but that’s a good start! Good answer!”

He looked over to me and winked, before turning around and walking slowly back towards Jana.

“You’re probably asking yourselves, why did we take this risk, Jana and I. To come here and meet you in person, two people we’ve never met before! Well, that’s just it. Jana and I feel there can be no substitution for meeting someone in person. It’s part of our religion, in fact!” Christopher took Jana’s hand in his, and they looked longingly into each others eyes.

“Looking into the eyes of another human, you can see them for who they really are. Their eyes, their face, their body - to look upon another human who you love, and who is good, truly good - you can see a piece of the great Architect. Do you know what I mean?”

Elle and I looked at each other. Our eyes locked, like they did when we first met at the event. I traced the line of her crescent-almond shaped eyes. For a moment, I could almost see the same purple light shining on her face, and feel the same giddy warmth.

“See, you can see the goodness in each other, and we can see the love that that creates,” Christopher said. He and Jana were staring at us with doey eyes. Elle and I both stifled and smiled awkwardly.

“Jana my dear, I think I’ve seen enough. But you’re far better at this than I am.”

The dour look returned to Jana’s face as she moved to action.

“Accurate as always, Chris.” She walked slowly towards us, eyeing us as though we were a pair of apples at a market that might be past their prime.

“I already know that we will be successful in our endeavor to shut down this core, I have traveled and seen it happen.” She looked back and forth between us, daring us to question her statement.

“This one - you,” she said, walking closer to me and squinting her dark eyes, “you have the brightest aura I have ever seen. It has been blinking at us for months. And her -” she pointed both of her hands, palms opened inward, to Elle. “You brought him here, and I can see why.” She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, then began moving her hands in waves as though she were miming feeling up an oddly shaped woman.

“Beautiful. Isn’t it, darling?” she said. Christopher nodded knowingly.

“Our life partners are so often given to us at a young age, by machines,” Jana continued. “It’s hard to imagine any other way. How could two truly compatible people in this wide universe to ever meet by chance? I tell you, it’s not such an unbelievable thing, if you really think about it. That two people, so well matched, would walk the same path for a period in time. With you two, I think it would have been statistically impossible for you not to meet. And even less likely that you would have never met us. I can only hope that your deception will not cause as much harm as your truth will bring us victories.”

With that confusing jumble of words, she turned and walked stiffly back to her perch at Christopher’s side.

“Well that’s a ringing endorsement if I’ve ever heard one,” Christopher said cheerily. I didn’t know if I agreed with him or not.

“Er, thank you,” said Elle. She looked at me expectantly, as though she hoped I knew what to say. I always do.

“Let’s shut down this core then, shall we?”

Christopher took the words right out of my mouth, so precisely that I wondered for a second if I had said them myself. I settled for nodding instead.

“Perfection. Oxara will escort you to our base of operations shortly. It was a real pleasure finally meeting you Ben, Elle. I think we have a lot to learn from each other,” he said with a half-smile.

Christopher walked briskly up to Elle, and pressed his fist to her shoulder as Oxara had done back in our hotel room yesterday. He came and did the same to me, his eyes fixing on mine as he pressed firmly into my right shoulder. I quickly returned the motion, nodding and maintaining eye contact. His eyes were a warm brown, almost orange. There was something I trusted in those eyes, something intimate and passionate. For the first time, I wondered if they had been assimilated by Silen. It didn’t seem possible, given what Artemis had told me. *Seek out the oddballs*, she had said in her letter. Those two were about as odd as you could get. Then again, Petrus had been pretty odd too. The difference was, Petrus’ oddness didn’t reveal itself until I got close to him, and his strange behaviors were all explained by the fact he was actually an alien trying to sabotage the human race. Christopher and Jana wore their oddness on their sleeves, and it didn’t seem to be particularly useful.

The two of them walked into a wall, which opened to reveal a door, and made their exit.

For the third time that day, Elle and I looked at each other, unsure of what to say.

"I think that went well," I offered.

"Unless someone is playing a prank on us and that wasn't even the real Christopher and Jana."

"You know, I wouldn't be surprised if you turned out to be right about that, Elle."

"I mean, what was all of that about you having the brightest aura she'd ever seen?"

"Are you worried that she was hitting on me?"

"Can you be serious for just one second?"

"How can I be serious about someone *reading my aura*?"

"Don't you think it's worth trying to figure out what she meant?" she asked.

"Would it be worth it for us to ask a crystal ball what it thinks?"

The door behind us slid open in response. Oxara stepped through.

"Glad to hear the good news, Elle. I'm here to take you to the Core operations base."

"So does that mean we're in? I mean, we're cleared for the scientist and mechanic positions?" she asked excitedly.

"Orders are to get you started right away," Oxara responded. "It will be a year-long journey to the operating base. Do we need to grab anything before we go? I will warn you, there's a good chance that anything you do bring will be confiscated for safety reasons."

I grabbed Elle's hand with my own. "All we need is each other."

Elle had to stifle a laugh. "That is quite true, however, I do want to ask what will happen to our ship?"

"We will keep that here on the waystation for the time being. Grab any tools you need, but I would recommend leaving everything else. We will provide you with food and clothes and anything else you may want. You're one of us now." Oxara smiled a surprisingly kind smile, making her sharp face almost unrecognizable.

"We're glad to be a part of the team, aren't we, Starlight?" Elle said to me sweetly.

"1,000%, Plushie-bot," I cooed back

"That's...great to hear," said Oxara, her face returning to its usual toughness. Perhaps we'd overdone it a bit.

Elle and I let go of each other's hands, and followed Oxara to a sleek gunship, with long fins on the top and bottom that gave it a sharp, aerodynamic look. Like Oxara herself, and the vast, empty space surrounding us, it was intimidating. Elle and I looked at each other one more time, seeking comfort in the contrasting warmth of the other's eyes. I had to admit, she grounded me, the way another person can when the world is crumbling around you, and you forget that people, even the ones you love, are temporary too.



End Part II

Part III

26 - Day 26 - Can I call my mom?

Lucia rubbed the back of her neck. She had just enough Flubian cheese to make ghiken melts for four sents, not five. Having ditched the hydrogen bomb, and the curious Light Police that were altered by it, they had jumped back to the Tarisian galaxy, which they now floated through, waiting for a new bounty. She could cut the cheese slices she had in half, but then it wouldn't taste nearly as good. It would be a few days before they would make it to a waystation, traveling at their fuel-conserving speed. Maybe she'd just make salads.

"I don't have enough supplies for ghiken melts for all of us, sorry Dax," Lucia shouted over her shoulder to the Great Room.

Goose pulled at the collar around his neck, looking at the perturbed Argurian sitting on the couch across from him. Upon confirming that he was too new of a Ruff Gang member to have any bounty on his head, the bounty hunters were content to keep Goose a prisoner, to be used to bait Alfred A, should he ever show his face again. Goose was about as happy a prisoner as there could be, knowing that he wouldn't survive long on Taris now that he'd been labeled a traitor of the Ruff Gang. Dax kept him in check with a proximity collar that was anchored to his belt, so Goose was forced to follow the Argurarian around.

"Just make me one then," Dax shouted back. "Goose can eat a ready-made meal."

Goose was more than fine with that, but he had a question he'd wanted to ask since he'd been 'captured' two days ago. They were already upset with him, so he might as well go for it.

"Can I call my mom?" he asked.

Dax let out a low grumble. "Your mom?"

"Yeah, she lives in a monastery out in a Tarisian satellite galaxy. She's waiting at a phone booth to talk to me."

"She has to use a phone booth?" Dax asked.

"Yeah, she uses a special com-palm that isn't integrated into the new Jintum network, and the Ertian Empire hasn't built an entangled tower out there. So they just have the entangled phone booth."

"Unsure why she'd choose to live there. But I'm indubitably sure that I don't care who you talk to."

Goose breathed a sigh of relief and answered the waiting call from his mother. The bust of a short haired woman appeared before him. As with all jintum telegraph communication, it was not an actual feed of her, but rather an AI-generated avatar, built from a public profile. Real video and even real audio were too onerous to send in real-time, so any communication over distances greater than 100,000 km required some fabrication.

That didn't matter at all to Goose. "Mom!" he exclaimed at her avatar bust.

"Goose, by the Council, what has been going on? Please tell me what really happened to Moose? He's, he's not..." her large brown eyes blinked rapidly.

Goose fell silent, his giant eyes bulging out of his head. He looked at Dax. "Can I take this is another room?"

Dax grumbled loudly, tapping the active pad on his belt. "You can leave for all I care. It's not like Alfred is ever going to show his face again."

Goose scampered out of the room with no intention whatsoever of leaving the ship, for there was nowhere out there he wanted to be.

Dax continued grumbling. Lucia exited the room that had become her makeshift kitchen, holding a still bubbling ghiken melt, which she handed to Dax.

"I think you need this," she said.

"I surely do," Dax said quickly, before taking a large bite of the melt.

"Arrr that burns! Oh, deepest sorries Lucia, that was rude of me."

Lucia placed her own melt on the tea table, and waved a dismissive hand. She waited for it to cool as Dax tenderly chewed the steaming food. She preferred this life, she decided, compared to the dangers of bounty hunting. Her place was on the ship, where it was safe.

Marim appeared from the makeshift kitchen, holding her melt on a plate. She nodded to Lucia in thanks.

Lucia watched as the two delightfully devoured their meal. Then she asked a burning question of her own.

"Dax, do you know what actually happened to Ben's homeworld? Was it really Silen?"

Dax hummed. "Ben's never talked about that."

"How can he *not* talk about it? I don't understand how he didn't do everything he could to figure that out, back then, when it happened."

"It is unsure if you've noticed this already, but Ben has a way of avoiding these things. Avoiding perniciously difficult things, that is. And the way he does that, is by focusing the laser of his mind on something else."

Lucia looked down at her ghiken melt, shining with cooled oil.

Dax continued. "It is a terrible thing, to have one's homeworld taken from them. More terrible still, to be unsure of who did it, or why."

"There is a more terrible fate even than that," Ben said, coming from around the corner. He looked more tired than Lucia had ever seen him, his normally orange-tinged skin now grey and dropping. "It is nice though, to recall a time when I still had doubts about what happened to Pluora. When a part of me could still believe that it had simply imploded under the weight of itself."

"Maybe you didn't want to know then, but I do, now," Lucia insisted.

"I already told you the story I wanted to tell about Pluora. Maybe someday I'll tell you a story about Silen. But this story I'm telling now is about me. Ben the mechanic and his dastardly deeds."

Lucia leaned back on the couch and folded her arms. "I want to hear more about Ben the hero."

A hint of vigor returned to Ben's face for a moment, before his skin sagged back down. He lowered himself gingerly into the brown loveseat, careful not to disturb his still healing wound.

"I don't know who you're talking about," Ben responded. "But I'll tell you more about what I did."

## 27 - We're Trying to Take Some of Those Secrets Back

The Reliance Faction's Core Operating Base, or COB, was a small, outdated barge, originally used as the scientific exploration vessel for a 90-year journey to the outer-reaches of the Foreman cluster. Oxara shared this bit of trivia with us as we approached the barge, catching sight of the retro decorative circles that framed each window, instrument and external fixture. She pointed out a tiny blue point of dim light, sitting unremarkably amongst thousands of other points of light in the dark sky. That was the solar harnessing Core, she told us. I don't know why I thought we would be closer to it.

We spent most of the 13-month journey in stasis, much to my chagrin, as I would have liked to have used that time to prepare for the upcoming mission. I suspected Elle felt the same, but it was Oxara's ship; she controlled the stasis schedule, and to ask her to allow us to remain conscious while she slept would have been out of the question. Perhaps it was because I was raised outside of normal society, but I never understood why going into stasis for long trips was all but required. Yes, it can be boring to stay awake, and stasis decreases the aging process somewhat, but only by around 30%. In my line of work, 30% more life is worthless if you miss a clue that winds up getting you killed...but I digress.

On the COB there were approximately 50 people, each working diligently on various tasks throughout the vessel. Oxara introduced us to nearly every sent we crossed paths with as she led us on a tour of the first two levels. We met Morry, a laser technician; Cynthia, who cleaned lab equipment; Titus, who cleaned the sleeping quarters...there were a lot of janitorial

duties apparently. Despite the age of the COB, she was spotless — even the old hardwood hallway floors sparkled.

At the end of the first day, Oxara handed us off to a thin, nervous looking woman named Mohan who would show us where we would be living for the coming months. She walked ahead of us with small quick steps through a narrow hallway with a curved ceiling.

It was a modest but well-kept room, like the cleanest hotel room I'd ever stayed in. Thick, light blue molding ran across the top of the walls, and framed the only door, which led to the bathroom.

“Here is your home sweet home! The bed is here...”

Mohan waved her hand to turn off the privacy screen that bisected the room.

“Oh my —” she exclaimed.

Mohan leapt forward to the two single beds that jutted out from the wall. She quickly pressed them together, and the Rollo foam mattresses coalesced to form a single queen sized bed.

“Whoever arranged the room must not have known you two were married! Apologies for that.”

“Ha, not a problem, “ I said, running a hand through my hair.

“It's perfect, thank you,” said Elle.

“The Box is only 4D, I'm afraid, but I'm sure you two will be busy enough that you won't have time to watch anything!” Mohan said, gesturing to the small gray cube jutting out from the wall.

“Yes, about that,” said Elle, “where should we report to tomorrow?”

Mohan smiled nervously. “That I do not know, but believe me, you'll be over your head with work soon enough!”

“Right, it's just that we're supposed to be working directly on the Core, and we weren't introduced to the scientists that do that.”

“That's a bit above my clearance I'm afraid, but I do know that the chief scientists recently made a breakthrough, so they're even more heads down than usual!”

“That is wonderful to hear, I just wish I could help,” Elle tried.

“You’re helping by being here! I’m sure Christopher and Jana, or someone else will come to get you shortly. Word is that they could have the Core decommissioned in only a few weeks!” She clapped the tips of her fingers together excitedly.

“I know quite a bit about solar harnessing, I’m sure my knowledge would be invaluable at this time,” Elle said, trying to hammer her point home.

“Do you really?” Mohan exclaimed, her mouth hanging open in pure awe. “Was the information given to you during a melding?”

“A...melding?” Elle asked, a crease forming between her faint eyebrows.

“Oh, are you not practicers of The Religion? My mistake,” Mohan looked deeply embarrassed. “Most of us here on the COB are, so I just assumed. But anyways, I must be going,” she said as she side-stepped past us through the small entryway. “I’m needed on the first floor.”

The creases in Elle’s forehead deepened into a wince. “Ah, ok then. Just, please, if you can find out where we should go tomorrow, do tell us!”

“I most certainly will! Bye now, Elle and Ben!” Mohan’s voice faded as she speed-walked away.

Elle put her hands on her hips and sighed.

“She was odd,” I said.

“This whole place is odd,” Elle said. “What in the stars is a melding?”

“Beats me. I’m more concerned about what we’re supposed to do.”

“She said they could be only weeks away from decommissioning the Core? That’s not good, not good at all...” Elle looked at the bed, then plopped down on a simple white couch at the other end of the room.

If it was true, it *was* good for me. Perhaps all I would need to do was keep Elle out of whichever room the chief scientists were in.

“Should we try out the bed?” I said, jumping onto the clean, white mattress, “Our marital bed?” The joke made only myself laugh.

“Uhg, please,” Elle rolled her eyes. “Get off of it so that I can separate the beds again,” she said, standing and placing her hand on the active pad at the corner of the bed frame. “Besides, we have more important things to do, like find out what we’re supposed to do.”

“More important than consummating our marriage?” I rolled to the side and stroked the middle of the mattress suggestively.

“What are you, still in the Milky Way? You have to get off the bed or it won’t separate,” she urged again, frustration clear in her voice.

“You’re no fun,” I said, standing. I hadn’t yet had the chance to properly psyche-map Elle, but I knew if I appealed to her sense of duty, she would eventually give in to me. With her on my side, perhaps I’d have another opportunity to ask the Council about Pluora.

“This will start being fun when we start working on the Core. I’m sure you’re dying to learn anything you can about it,” she said.

She was completely right of course, my brain was throbbing at the prospect that I might get to lay my eyes on a genuine Solar Harnessing Core. It was a shame I’d have to let them destroy it.

“Fair enough. Shall we go and do some exploring then?”

For two weeks, Elle and I got settled into the goings-on of this base. We tried to insert ourselves into important projects, but no one knew what to do with us. They told us to be patient. They told us to spend time learning before Christopher and Jana had us working our asses off. Unfortunately, *they* were too busy working *their* asses off to teach us anything. No one on the COB wanted to talk; that is, apart from the dozen or so janitors on the ship.

At the end of every day, Elle and I would compare notes and try to tease apart fact from rumor, and together, formulate a plot to take down the entire operation. On my own, of course, I would do the exact opposite; seek avenues to ensure the Reliance would meet its goal of taking down the core. Both of us were equally unsuccessful, although if the rumors were to be believed, the Reliance was doing just fine on their own.

Most of my minimal progress had been in improving my relationship with Elle. There was still a massive chasm of lies and latent animosity between us, but I allowed a professional fondness for Elle to grow in the abyss. As far as her feelings towards me...she still kept me on a tight leash, rarely letting me out of her sight. She wasn’t as annoying as when we had initially started this mission, but she didn’t leave me a lot of free time to psyche-map her. I took that to mean she liked me.

Together, we made friends with as many people as we could. We quickly learned that this required indulging in conspiracy theories, a lot. Some were plausible, like the theory that the Council of Light had discovered the secret of immortality, while others were all the way out in



the Outer Temporal Zones. One morning, over breakfast, one of our janitor friends tried to convince us that Earth wasn't real.

"Have you ever been there?" Titus asked.

"Well no, but I haven't been to most of the planets in the ITZ and I believe that they exist," I said.

"But do you know anyone who has actually been there?"

"My dad's been there," said Elle through a mouthful of cereal. Titus shook his head.

"Your dad's been to what he *thinks* was Earth."

"Why would the Ertian Empire lie about where human life started?"

"The same reason they lie about anything: to control it. They don't want us knowing where we really came from, because they want to keep the secrets of the Architects to themselves."

"Ah, the Architects," I said, rolling my eyes.

"Don't roll your eyes," Titus admonished. "The Ataxi and the Argrurians both believe in a similar idea. Ancestors that came before. Both the Ataxi and Argruians were multi-planetary species from the very beginning."

"That's just not true," I retorted. "The Ataxi spread to multiple worlds a hundred thousand years ago, but were almost wiped extinct by an interstellar gate explosion. They had to start over, separated from each other, but they still evolved on a single planet to begin with. As for the Argurians; they were on a single planet when we discovered them. It's only been in the last few hundred years that they started colonizing a second planet."

"That's the story we've been told, but it's not the truth."

"I've met Argruians who have told me the same story."

"They've been told the same lies. Just think about it, logically. How is it possible that each of these sentient life forms all evolved on a single planet? So many incredible coincidences had to happen to give rise to sentient, self-powered beings, and that series of events happened exactly once per species? And we're supposed to believe that the humans from thousands of years ago, the same humans who couldn't figure out how to feed themselves properly, they're the ones who invented spaceships and decided to explore the galaxies?"

"No. It makes far more sense that a greater species made us and placed us here. And that greater species has been guiding us, giving us directions and technology ever since, which has allowed us to evolve and expand ever further into the universe. But the Council, somehow, has

taken control of these secrets, has made it so that they are the only ones to receive them from the Architects. That's what this is all really about," Titus said, gesturing to the bustling activity around him. "We're trying to take some of those secrets back."

"How did the Architects get the answers?" I asked. "How do they know how to travel the universe and harness the power of stars?"

Titus shrugged his shoulders. "They just do. They make the rules."

I sighed. It was hard to argue with that 'logic'. It had only taken a few days on the COB for me to realize that trying to pick apart these conspiracy theories didn't get you very far.

Titus' friend, Xero, joined in the discussion. "The Architects are bullshit. The Council is so powerful because they're masters of Grammercy."

*Grammercy*. That was a word I had heard before on this barge. I was happy to talk about something other than conspiracy theories.

"Grammercy, that has to do with your Religion, right?" I asked.

"It's the practice of The Religion. Ketermancy is how we study it, Grammercy is how we practice it."

Titus interjected, "Really they are one and the same. Honestly, Ketermancy is barely worth mentioning."

"Uh huh, right. And what is that you believe, exactly? Like what Gods do you believe in?"

"The Religion underlies all other religion. We do not worship any particular Gods, for in order to worship something, you must give it a form, and the Truth has no form that we can percieve. Rather, we endeavor to find all paths to the Truth."

"How do you know you've found something if it has no form?"

"The Truth is not a destination that can be reached. We know we are on the right path because of the powers we obtain while searching for it."

Xero added, "The Religion is not something you do, it is something you are."

"Right," I said sarcastically.

"We know it sounds crazy, that's why Ketermancy is barely worth talking about. You'll never be able to wrap your head around the core concepts by hearing them. You have to actually do them."

“I’ll have to give it a try sometime.”

“You’re welcome in my pod anytime,” Titus said, winking at me, then at Elle. “You both are.” With that, he threw his bowl in the melting can at the end of the table and left. I watched as the material disintegrated into the clear liquid.

“We should get going too,” said Elle, tossing her bowl into the fluid where Titus’ bowl used to be. I nodded and followed her out into the hall.

She waited until we were out of earshot of the mess hall before launching excitedly into her plan for the day.

“So I was thinking, maybe we could run through a few more of your simulations today? I feel like we should spend more time on the meeting of the Chief Core scientists.”

“If we ever get to meet them,” I said with a half yawn.

“There’s no use to assuming we won’t, you told you agreed.”

“I must have been feeling uncharacteristically optimistic that day.”

“Well anyways, the simulations were quite spotty last time we ran through that interaction, so I’d like to do it again.”

“They were spotty because you wouldn’t reveal how much you actually know about the Cores,” I retorted.

“Those are details I’m not going to share with you until it’s absolutely necessary. And don’t think I didn’t pick up on the fact that you designed those simulations specifically to pry that information out of me.”

She was right, of course.

“All that to say, I want to go again, and this time, don’t try to psycho-map me.”

“Psyche-map.”

“Whatever, Dr. Halker,” she said, flicking her bob of blonde hair.

I had reluctantly revealed some of the basics of psyche-mapping to Elle in order to prepare her for the upcoming play to preserve the Core. She would be the first to tell you that she didn’t much care for the science behind it, but she was quite taken with my simulation skills. It was a good way to keep her distracted, so that she didn’t cause too much trouble with her continuous efforts to insert herself deeper and deeper into the matters of the Reliance. Every day

she had a new plan, a new angle on how to sabotage the Reliance. It was not unlike how I had been with Petrus, when I thought I wasn't making any progress in befriending him. I'd learned that lesson the hard way, of course.

"...then we can convince Jana that the engineer is actually the traitor! What do you think?"

I realized I had zoned out during another one of Elle's plans. Before I could respond, a worker I'd never seen before intercepted Elle and I.

"Christopher and Jana are here. They'd like to see you now."

The simulations would have to wait; reality was unfolding before us.

## 28 - Alright, Three Months Then

Elle and I were escorted by Bill, the wiring technician, to a floor of the barge that we had not previously been able to access. We walked down a long, thin hallway, past various rooms that served various scientific functions. Most of the rooms were obscured by darkened windows, but from what I could tell, this wing appeared to be where the biological research took place, back when the barge was a research vessel. The door at the end of the hallway had no signage, but did have what appeared to be a piece of paper or plastic adhered to the door.

On the paper was the Reliance Logo; a long R on top of a semi-circle mirroring the round part of the R.

As I was studying this odd marking, the door opened and revealed Christopher and Jana, facing away from us, engaged in conversation. Christopher quickly turned around and greeted us with the same positive energy he had when we first met weeks ago. He was dressed smartly, in a thick, black and red utility suit.

“Ben! Elle! Admiring the sticker, were you? Such a fun little contraption; you can print things on them and stick them wherever you want! What will they come up with next? Anywho, how have you been getting on here at the COB?”

Elle responded with energy that nearly matched his own. “Fantastically, Boss! You’ve got a really incredible crew here.”

“Only the best on the COB. You’re very lucky to be here, you know. We have to keep numbers down to protect our mission!”

“Well we’re excited to start contributing, Boss,” Elle said eagerly.

“Start contributing? What have you been doing for the last month?”

“Oh, er -” Elle looked at me, but I wasn’t sure what to say either. We had to impress Christopher, and looking like we’d been sitting on our asses doing nothing was not ideal.

“Ah, I’m just kidding!” Christopher slapped his knee. “Your faces! Of course you haven’t been able to do much yet, we’ve kept you strapped with safety helmets this whole time. Had to see if you fit in! But I daresay you’re ready to meet the kids.”

“The kids?” Elle asked, trying to shake off any nervousness.

“The core Core team! I call them the kids ‘cause, well, I guess I don’t really have a reason. They’re the ones in charge of putting that death sphere out of commission, and let me tell you, *they are close*. They’ve been at it for so long though, just the four of them, they could really use a fresh pair of eyes. Which is where you come in Elle, and Ben. As you well know, finding people that know anything about this Core stuff is damn near impossible, what with the Light Police eliminating anyone that even thinks about solar fusion these days. But you Elle, a student of Professor Balkan, who was a protege of Amican Stone himself! You are a find *indeed*. You must be some kind of brilliant for Balkan to teach you. And Ben — her partner in crime, and not too shabby with a sonic wrench if I’ve heard correctly!”

Elle smiled through gritted teeth. I know it was hard for her to hear accusations against the Light Police without refuting them. She would be right to argue; for all the LP did to remove information on solar harnessing from common knowledge, they didn’t go around ‘eliminating’

sentients for studying it. However, defending the Council of Light or their Tenants was not a position you wanted to take on this barge.

Elle held it together masterfully. “I feel as though every decision I’ve ever made in my life has led me here.”

“Beautifully put, friend,” Christopher said. Jana nodded thoughtfully behind him. “You don’t yet know just how important this work is. How many lives will be saved by what we are doing on this very barge. Oh the things you do not know! But that is why you are here today. So that we may enlighten you, on at least some of these things.”

Finally, the moment we had been waiting for was here. We were going to learn about the Cores. I was vibrating with excitement.

Christopher activated a holo screen against the wall behind him. A stationary metallic orb appeared in the air — the Core. It was awesomely beautiful, its sheer massiveness apparent despite there being no other objects within its vicinity to compare it to. To my surprise, it looked surprisingly similar to the renderings that the Council allowed to be distributed throughout the Ertian Empire: a massive metallic sphere that completely enclosed the star, apart from a even pattern of circular holes, through which starlight beamed. Two bulbous rectennas hovered on either side of the core; presumably the main Core machthermal transmitters. The only difference from the images I had previously seen was that the Core’s surface was a silvery, deep gray rather than gold.

Christopher addressed Elle with a question.

“Do you know how many cores there are?”

“Not exactly, but there is believed to be around three or four. The first one was built around 1,500 years ago, somewhere in the Triangulum Galaxia.

“Partially correct.” Christopher said. “There are three cores that we know of, but the oldest Core is actually the one we are working on here, in the Foreman cluster. It currently provides approximately 40% of the power consumed by the Ertian Empire, though for most of history, it provided nearly all of it.”

“I didn’t realize the Empire’s energy consumption had increased quite that much in recent history,” Elle said.

“It has increased considerably, but that is not why the supply is coming from elsewhere. This Core alone could power the entire empire for the next thousand years. No, this core provides dwindling energy because it is in the process of being *decommissioned*.”

“You mean, by someone other than us?” she asked.

“By the Council themselves.”

Elle and I sat in confused silence. Christopher continued.

“The Council will decommission this Core, and the Triangulum Core, over the course of the next 50 years. They are doing this because of a fatal flaw in the Core technology. Striped Radiation, or Amican’s Radiation as we call it.” Christopher wrapped his hands behind his back and leaned his stout torso forward.

“The act of *harnessing* the energy from a molecular reaction in a star emits a kind of radiation that appears in bands, or stripes if you like, hundreds of lightyears away from the Core itself, hundreds of years after that reaction occurred. It’s not detectable by any instruments in the market today, but it’s effects are very real. Degradation of cellular membranes, mammal and plant alike. Reversible to a certain extent in humans with biobots, but ultimately, deadly.” He frowned, his boyish face suddenly becoming more manly.

Elle cleared her throat. “Are we in danger here, so close to it?”

“No, we are completely safe. The pattern of radiation reflects outward from the Core in various strengths, kind of like when light shines through a diamond and you see refractions in seemingly random places around the room. Only it’s not random. You can calculate where the radiation will end up, if you know what you’re doing,” Christopher said with a snap of his fingers.

“And where does the radiation from this core end up?”

“In five years, it will intersect with part of the Triangulum Galaxia. Some months later, Gruar will be hit by the Triangulum Core’s radiation. That we cannot change. The radiation is already in motion, traveling through a dimension beyond our own. But in 137 years, a band from this very Core will cross the Targo Supercluster and parts of the Andromeda Galaxy. If we can shut this core down within the next year, we can stop that from happening. We’re talking about saving entire worlds. Billions of sents, and even more subsents.”

Elle couldn’t stop a moment of genuine outrage from leaking out. “What proof do you have for any of this?”

“The kids can show you the simulations. It’s scientific fact. I was tipped off about it by a super secret contact, but the proof is there in cold computation,” he said, his typically warm brown eyes emanating a glazey chill.

Elle balked. “Well the Council obviously knows about this, right? That’s why they’re shutting the cores down. Your calculations must be flawed, there’s no way that more sents will die if the cores remain in production for a while longer.”

“The Council has known about this from the very beginning! They don’t give a flying fowl about human life, and even less about other forms of life. They think they’re Gods, and these Cores are what made them so.”

“You’re wrong!” Elle shouted, before she caught herself. “I mean, this is so wrong, even for the Council. It can’t be true.”

“You don’t know how the Council *truly* operates. The most important thing to them is their influence, which comes to them from their technology — their inventions — that only they control, correct? Wrong! Their influence comes from their reputation. It is their reputation that lets us *allow* them to hold such supreme control over those technologies. Us, proud humans, who used to riot in the streets when any one group attained too much power.”

Christopher began speaking at a higher pitch. “But the Council’s never done anything bad, right? And they don’t force us to do anything truly impactful to our own lives, right? They wouldn’t force us to, say, evacuate our homes due to radiation, or go without power for years? That would be a true overreach!”

I cut in. “He has a point, Elle. An order like that, from the Council, would be...unimaginable.”

I could see the fire burning in Elle’s eyes. Perhaps I shouldn’t have pushed it further. This was probably yet another one of the Reliance’s far-fetched conspiracy theories.

“I, hrr,” Elle gritted her teeth. “You do have a point, both of you. It’s...just a lot to digest.”

“Indeed it is, dear comrades. It is truly terrible that we have allowed ourselves, as a species, to be manipulated to such an extent. And we’re already too late to save billions of people! It’s infuriating!” Christopher slammed his fist against the wall.

Jana walked over to Christopher and put her hand on his shoulder. She spoke softly.

“But there is still hope. The work we are doing here, the work you will do here, will save us in the end. I have seen it.”

Christopher perked back up at Jana’s words. “We’re close to a breakthrough here at the Foreman Core,” he said, his voice loud and low. “And we’re in the process of setting up a base at the Triangulum Core. We don’t have the location of the third core yet, but we’ll get it, oh yes, same as we got the first two. We will rid the ITZ of this terrible technology, and then, we will rid it of the Council of Light!”

It was possible this was all another insane Reliance theory. I wanted to ask where they had gotten the location of the first two Cores, but I knew Christopher would never reveal that.



Was it possible they had come from Petrus? I thought Artemis had foiled his plan to give them to the Reliance, but maybe he'd managed to get the information out before we'd intercepted him.

"Rid the ITZ of the Council? I like the sound of that," I said, approaching Christopher with my fist extended towards his shoulder. I had gotten a hang of their secret handshake in the last few weeks. He returned the gesture, our fists and beaming smiles mirroring each other.

Elle stepped forward to do the same, but I could see in Christopher's face that he sensed her apprehension. This was not good. We were so close to reaching our goal— well, my goal at least — I couldn't let any hint of doubt enter into Christopher's brain. I had to think quickly...

I grabbed Elle by the shoulder, flipping her around, and pulled her lips to mine. It was our first kiss, I noted in the back of my head, as we both got lost in the moment. Our mouths hungrily tasted each other, finally, before a nanosecond of hesitation brought us back to reality. We separated, a thick air of lust and surprise lingering between us. It was hot.

Breathing heavily, I looked over to Christopher to see if it had worked to distract him. I kid you not, the man had a literal tear in his eye. My body surged with energy, victory, testosterone - this was incredible. Thoughts flooded my head...maybe this could be more than a one-off mission for me...maybe I could join the Reliance, for real. They were a bit kooky, but otherwise well-organized, and powerful in their own right. Not to mention I could do some actual good for a change. Maybe I was supposed to be here. It felt so...right.

"Sorry about that, I got a bit caught up in the moment," I said.

"Not at all, man! When the spirit seizes you, *you must act!* Do not keep your love hidden for any reason, not even for a second!"

Christopher turned to Jana, and pulled her into a kiss — well, pulled her down would be a more accurate description, due to the almost half-meter height disparity between them. He flung his arm around her neck and almost hung off of her as she bent over with practiced finesse, like she was bowing to royalty.

I looked over to Elle to confirm she found this as funny as I did, but when our eyes met, an unexpected awkwardness was there, and we both quickly looked away.

Christopher and Jana finished their long kiss, and spent another few moments staring wistfully into each other's eyes. Any thoughts about Elle's protests were long gone from their minds, as I had hoped.

"Ok then!" Christopher clapped his hands together, "we're off to meet the kids then, yes? I will lead the way!"

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We walked back down the hallway to one of the obscured research rooms we had passed earlier. The door opened for Christopher, and the four of us filed inside. There were numerous screens pulled up in every corner, bathing the room, and the sents inside in a blue-white glow. Our entrance seemed to spook three out of the four ‘kids’, who all stared back at us with wide, tired eyes. The fourth, and only one who was remotely close to being an actual kid in terms of age, seemed not to notice us at all.

“Here they are, like moles in a cave, aren’t they?” Christopher laughed jovially. “They’re all geniuses, that goes without saying of course. The smartest sents in the galaxy, if you ask me. They know, really *know* the details, you know what I mean? It’s a lost science, truly. Me, I know the value of the details, but my brain just thinks *big picture*, I can’t help it. I’m always thinking about the next thing, even as I’m engrossed in a conversation. See, even now, I’m wondering how Cynthia, who I’ve got to talk to next, will react to the rather unfortunate news I have to tell her. But that’s another thing. Here we are now, great minds meeting for the first time!”

He rubbed Elle’s shoulder excitedly, his other hand rubbing the air in the general direction of the scientists. “Seb, why don’t you pay attention, I promise it will be worth your while.”

The one scientist who hadn’t taken notice of our arrival looked up begrudgingly at the sound of his name.

“Mmm.”

“Yes well that’s Seb, he’s a fellow we found through a coven out in the Lub galaxy. A truly powerful Grammician and an even better scientist. Hates meeting new people, even if he knows it’s a good thing.”

I wanted to ask more about the ‘Grammician’ part of what he said, but I figured Seb wouldn’t welcome me asking any more questions about him.

“Here we have Skrim, Mathias and Jylla. Skrim, Mathias, Jylla *and* Seb, meet Ben and Elle. I’ll leave it to you all to get acquainted further once we leave.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all,” said Elle, bowing her head.

Christopher nodded. “Now, the kids are well aware of who you two are and what you’re doing here.”

Mathias, a tall Laroonian woman greeted us with a tilt of her dark, bald head.

“We’re happy to have the help,” said Skrim, a skinny, pale-looking fellow.

“If you know what you’re doing,” added Jylla, who was round and purple-haired. “Not to mean any offense, comrades.”

“I do appreciate the skepticism,” said Christopher. “Anyways, the kids know what you’re here to do, and they’ll fill you in on all those details. Details! I appreciate them almost as much as skepticism! Ok, off we go. Jana and I have our big picture that we need to keep drawing.”

Christopher turned and exited the room. Jana followed behind him, after exchanging a silent nod with Seb.

The door slid silently shut, and a brief staring match began.

Elle broke the tension. “I just want to start off by saying that neither of us have any intention of stepping on your toes. We’re happy to sit here and watch if that’s what you’d like us to do.”

Excellent Elle — she was following the script we had prepared for this meeting.

Skrim stepped forward. “Not at all. I welcome your presence. Truthfully, we’re really glad to have someone who knows these Cores on the team.”

Elle bowed demurely. “Well I did learn about them from my mentor, but you have the hands-on experience! I’m excited to learn from you.”

“That’s very kind, but I’m sure there’s not very much that we could teach you. Christopher said you studied under Professor Balkan.”

“No need to be modest, Skrim. Everyone on this barge says you’re close to having this Core decommissioned.”

“Oh, we still have a ways to go...”

“Well tell me about the progress you have made so far. Are you dampening the churn rods?”

“Well, we tried that but the reaction couldn’t be slowed for more than a few minutes.”

“Interrupting the chain axial flow?”

“Oh, um, we couldn’t access that pro--”

“Releasing heavy metallic gases?”

“No, not that.”

“How are you doing it then, I’m dying to know!” Elle said excitedly.

Skrim stammered for a few moments. “You mean, um, you mean you don’t know?”

“I don’t know what?”

“How to shut down this soffing core!” Mathias cut in with a voice that was loud and deep for a woman.

I saw the excitement turn to dread on Elle’s face, mirroring what I was feeling in my stomach.

“I, er...you mean *you* don’t know?” Elle said, almost copying Skrim.

“No, genius, we don’t!” exclaimed Jylla, throwing up an angry holimote.

This was...not going as expected.

“Ok then,” I interjected, “exactly what progress have you made?”

“Well, we decreased the energy output to 11 million tons!”

“From?”

“From...11.8 million tons”

“And how did you do that?”

“Well...we think it was because we shifted the Julius Quotient—”

“We don’t know,” said Mathias. “We’ve been scanning, poking, prodding this thing for months, and we still don’t know how it bloody works.”

Elle gulped visibly. “You mean you’ve been poking around in a machine that harnesses the power of a Class C star, and you don’t have any idea how it works?”

“Now hold on, we’re not a bunch of amateurs, we’ve each studied the physical sciences for at least 50 years,” complained Jylla, as she blew a strand of hair out of her face.

“But how long have you studied solar harnessing?”

“You know better than anyone that there’s only enough material on it for two courses!” Jylla said.

Elle, of course, did not know that, as she had been tutored privately by her father and his colleagues.

“Yeah, I know that!” she lied. “But surely you’ve been able to piece together more knowledge on it from your other studies?”

“Piece together how to build a fucking solar harnessing machine? Are you mental?” Mathias asked. “I’ve been able to acquire some of the neural circuitry schematics through the underground network. And Seb knows the Fortation formulas for solar fusion reactions, somehow. But those are only tiny pieces of the puzzle. I don’t know who you are, but you’ve got to help us.”

“Do Christopher and Jana know that you’re completely lost?” I asked cautiously.

“We’re not completely lost,” Jylla insisted. “They know we need help, that’s why you’re here. We may have overstated our progress a little, but you know Christopher, he’s always looking ten steps ahead. I don’t think he grasps just how complicated all of this is.”

“What about the other 40 people on this barge? What are they all running around doing if you’re not taking this Core apart?”

“How the fuck should we know what everyone else is doing? We’ve been holed up in this room around the clock for the last six months.”

It all made sense now. The fact that no one could tell us what the lead scientists were working on. The frantic energy that pervaded this barge. The 20 janitors for a crew of 50 people. They were all lost, and not in a good way. No one knew what they were doing. When Aldus said they were soffit with things they did not understand, I thought he meant the grand forces of the universe or some shit like that. Not that they literally had no idea how solar harnessing worked.

Jylla began typing furiously on her Com-Palm, probably venting her frustration to her social circle.

Skrim hadn’t given up yet. “So you do know about the Core, right? You know how it can be turned off?”

This was a question I had prepared Elle for. She would not tell me what she knew about Solar Harnessing, but no matter what the truth was, she had to reassure the other scientists that we knew what we were doing. We had to assert our dominance.

“I know how the Cores work. I’ve never decommissioned one, no one has, but I have more than a few ideas on how it can be done. If you follow my lead, we can do it,” she said, balling her strong fingers into a fist.

She spoke with an air of authority that had me convinced. I studied the faces of the other scientists. Mathias’ heavy brow relaxed a bit. Jylla had stopped texting on her Com-Palm and was focused on Elle. Skrim looked like he was ready to marry her.

Seeing she had their attention, Elle continued, “It is going to take time to do this safely. There are at least 100,000 energy conversion units in that Core, and they each need to be neutralized and dismantled separately. If you haven’t even started that process, this could easily take another year, maybe two. But we don’t have that kind of time, as Ben and I were just informed. Each one of us is going to have to work our spines out, in unison, without making any mistakes, for us to have even a 2% chance of pulling this off. I’m not going to ask if you think you can do it, because there is no other option. As far as I’m concerned, from this day forward, we are going to succeed.”

I had to stop myself from breaking into applause. Who knew Elle could be such an inspiration? I looked over her audience; they were clearly inspired. Damn, I was inspired! She almost had me convinced that she actually wanted this Core to be shut down.

“Three months.”

Seb spoke. He’d been brooding so silently this whole time that I’d forgotten about him.

Elle addressed him. “Sorry?”

“Three months, seven days, and 367 minutes. That’s how long we have until the Core produces a band of Amican radiation that will wipe out a colony in the Andromeda Galaxy.”

Apparently Elle’s inspirational speech hadn’t worked on Seb. This could be a problem.

“Alright, we’ll do it in three months then.”

“That doesn’t change your calculations at all? About whether this is possible?” he asked. “Or could it be that your optimism is based purely on convenience, and has no ground in fact?”

“Ok Seb,” Elle said, “three months, seven days and 376 minutes you said? Let’s see, taking into account perfect execution, the price of phaleranx, and we can’t forget your obvious brilliance — I’d say we’re hovering around a 1.678% chance of success.”

Seb glowered at her. This was not helping, Elle.

“Sound about right to you?” she continued. “Or is it possible that my optimism is based on the fact that I know a void’s reach more than any of you, *and* I’m your only goddamned hope?”

The inspired glints in the eyes of the kids began to fade. I stepped in.

“What my partner means to say, is that we’re here to help. We know what to do, but we can’t do it alone. We need your help, all of you.”

“And who the cud are you?” Seb asked me.

“I’m married to your only goddamned hope,” I replied, gesturing to Elle with as much confidence as I could muster.

Elle cleared her throat. “Right. I think maybe it would be best if you could share with us your notes, documentation, schematics; everything you have so far regarding the Cores. Ben and I will take the rest of the day to look it over, and we can start again tomorrow morning.”

I expected a look from Elle to confirm the plan, but she ignored my gaze, continuing to address the kids instead. “How does that sound?”

“I think that sounds good,” said Skrim, looking expectantly at his colleagues. Both Mathias and Jylla nodded. Seb was already engaged in some program on his Com-palm screen. That was enough of an agreement from him.

As Elle and I said our ‘see-you-laters’, my mind was focused primarily on Seb. Elle could handle the other three scientists, as long as she didn’t let her hot head get the best of her. Seb was going to be an issue. I needed to win him over; absorb his scrutiny so that he didn’t push Elle over the edge. It was going to be a challenge, even for me. I didn’t have the ability to do months of research leading up to this. Hell, I’d only learned of Seb’s existence 10 minutes ago. Lack of preparation seemed to be the theme of this play...a dangerous thing, Artemis would have said. No, Artemis would have never even considered what I was doing here a play. This was my own kind of game. This was me saving the ITZ, or so I thought.

## 29 - I Never Took You for a ‘Silver Linings’ Kind of Gal

Elle and I sat in our twin beds, a wall of text and charts and schematics plastered in the air before us. She hummed softly, her head in her hands, eyes sucking up information like a ship’s Scoop. My eyes darted around the room, unable to focus on anything for more than a few seconds. I’d scanned through most of what the kids had given us and committed it to memory, but I’d processed none of it. I was too busy thinking about the Core, about the kids, about Elle.

Was she still going to take down the Reliance, and leave the solar harnessing core running even though it might mean the death of billions? She would only ever let me in on her immediate plans, which up until today consisted of finding the chief scientists and learning what they knew. Now here we were, the cumulation of those scientists’ work laid out before us. A load of information, but still far less than either of us ever imagined. What was her next step?

“So, what is your next step?” I asked as nonchalantly as I could muster.

She was silent for a few moments while she finished reading the text in front of her. Or perhaps she was pretending to read while thinking of a response that would reveal only what I needed to know.

“It’s a good thing, really,” she finally said.



“What is?”

“That they’re so incompetent.”

“Sure, it means we don’t actually have to prevent them from shutting the core down,” I said, playing the part.

“Right.” It almost sounded as though she were trying to convince herself. Time to pull on that thread.

“You don’t think there’s any truth to what Christopher said, do you? About Amican’s radiation?”

“The striped radiation,” she unconsciously corrected. “If it does exist, I can’t possibly believe that it’s anywhere near as fatal as Christopher claimed. And the Council certainly wasn’t aware of it when they built the cores. You know they’d never release something so dangerous into the universe.”

I don’t know if I agreed with her. The Council certainly talked a lot about morality, and minimizing their impact, but maybe letting billions of people die was their idea of ‘staying out of it’.

“It is a hard thing to imagine, that the Council of Light would be responsible for so many deaths,” I said. “If it is true, this would be the greatest sentient disaster since the Lost Ages, perhaps ever. You know they’re not exactly my favorite people, but I don’t think they’re capable of that.”

Now I was convincing myself. It was a chilling thought, at the min. This kind of tragedy just didn’t happen to humanity anymore. We’d evolved beyond that; largely thanks to the Council.

“So does that mean we’re done here?” I asked, not sure of what I’d do if her answer was yes. Amican’s radiation or not, I needed to shut the core down for my own sake.

“No,” she responded solemnly. “They may be lightyears away from figuring out how to shut a core down, but they’re still a threat. Mathias mentioned some neural circuitry schematics she’d obtained for the core, but I can’t find them in this payload. Have you seen them?”

I shook my head. I’d looked through every document, and the only circuitry schematics I’d seen were for a temperature regulation system, which was fairly commonplace.

“They’re hiding something,” Elle said. “Maybe they’re actually a lot further along than they told us, and they were just putting on a show for us today.”

“Now that’s an idea. It would make sense...all this time and effort and they’ve only managed to reduce the energy output by a fraction of a ton? Seems a snap more likely that they just don’t trust us.”

“They shouldn’t, after all,” Elle snickered mischievously.

“Good point, I almost forgot we were super secret spies.”

“Two dastardly secret agents, sneaking our way behind enemy lines.”

“Cozying up to the top tenants, only to betray them.”

“Escaping by the skin of our suits, hands scarlet with Red.”

“Wait, you’re getting paid?”

“Whoops,” Elle playfully put her left hand to her mouth “you weren’t supposed to know about that!”

I put my right hand to my mouth in hyperbolic shock, then leaned towards her with a wry look on my face. “Well you know, in all serials with a spy duo, one always betrays the other.”

She feigned outrage. “I’d never do that to you, Starlight!”

“But my dear plushie-bot, you already have!” I caressed her cheek with the back of my hand. “I forgive you though, you’re simply too beautiful to stay mad at.”

Elle laughed. “That’s right, I forget you’ve already fallen for my tricks before. Many times in fact.”

“I’ll get you back, just you wait.”

“I’m looking forward to it, starlight.”

She pulled away from me and turned her head back to the screen. “I’m also not finding anything about the supposed radiation in here. Could be more evidence that it’s all made up.”

I re-adjusted myself to the center of my twin bed. “We’ll have to ask to see some proof, but we don’t want to make it seem like we’re questioning whether it’s real or not. The kids buy into the dogmatism of the Reliance...we want to match that unflinching belief system as much as possible.”

“Understandable. See, I knew there was a reason I kept you around.”

“I’m more than just a ruggedly handsome face.”

“Your face is rugged, that’s for sure.”

I knew she was referring to the scar. Often I forgot it was there; forgot that I was deformed.

She winced, seeing my expression fall. “I’m sorry, that was too mean. I didn’t mean it seriously.”

I shrugged, playing up my hurt feelings.

She continued, “No really, I think your scar is sexy. How did you...er...could you tell me how you got it?”

Shark attack. Fight with an Ataxi. Eating pussy too hard. Those were all typical responses I’d give when asked that question. Somehow, none of them sounded right in that moment.

“I was in a spaceship collision when I was seven years old. My mother and I survived, protected by the emergency jettison pod. We were far from any homeworlds, so it took weeks for them to rescue us. Long enough for my face to have healed like this,” I gestured to my cratered nose.

Elle was visibly uncomfortable. “There was no medibot in the jettison pod?”

“They’re not standard on non-Ertian Empire ships.”

“Oh, sorry. That sounds awful. But you both survived?”

“Everyone else on that ship died. My entire family. Apart from my mother.”

“Oh gods. Sorry to bring that all up.” I could see her struggling to think of something to ease the tension. “At least you got a sexy scar out of all of it, right?”

An uncontrollable laugh burst from my mouth. If I’d been drinking something, it would have ended up all over Elle’s face.

“*That’s* what you say right after I tell you my family died in a ship crash? *‘At least you got a sexy scar’?!?*”

“I was trying to be positive!”

“I never took you for a silver linings kind of gal.”

“Uh, did you hear my little speech for the kids earlier?”

“That was less ‘silver linings’ and more ‘grasping at straws’.”

“Is there a difference? I know it’s a long shot, but I find it’s better to believe you’ll succeed rather than fail. I’ve faced dozens of long shots in my life, and I’ve made almost every one. So when I look at a target, I see a silver lining, not a straw.”

I thought about that for a moment. “What even is a silver lining? Where does that phrase come from?”

“I think it’s from back in the day, when space suits were bulkier...they had an inner lining of a platinum fabric for heat insulation. So even when you’re alone, floating in the emptiness of space, you still have a silver lining keeping you warm and giving you hope.”

“Wouldn’t it be a platinum lining then?”

“I don’t know, silver lining just sounds better.”

“Hmm. What about grasping at straws?”

“I have no idea about that one. Maybe someone tried to take away all the straws at some point?”

“Who knows, when it comes to ancient humans.”

Elle yawned. “I think that’s enough speculation for one day. I’m going to get some sleep, let my revical lobes process some of this info.” She pointed her right hand to her head, gesturing to the posterior portion of her brain. Her left hand swiped the documents and schematics from the air. I sat with both of my hands in my lap, unsure of what in Amican’s name I was going to do next.

## 30 - Influence in a Higher Dimension

The following morning, Elle and I walked to the lab where we had met the kids the previous day. I still had no plan, and that was beginning to cause me some anxiety. I knew what I wanted to do: prevent Seb from undermining Elle — persuade Elle to reveal her knowledge of the core to me — shut the core down — go back to doing whatever I wanted to do, having proven to the

Council that I'm not someone they should fuck with. Somehow, the parts in between weren't coming to me as they usually did. I had the pieces of the puzzle, but I couldn't put them together. Perhaps I was missing one.

I woke from my inner musings to find myself standing in front of three out of the four kids. Jylla had green hair today, as opposed to the purple ponytail she wore the day before. Skrim's yellow mop was so frizzy that it was as wide as his narrow shoulders. Mathias' bald, brown head still loomed forebodingly. As you might have guessed, Seb was the one missing.

We stood in silence for a moment, analyzing one another. A scientists' hello.

With that out of the way, Elle spoke. "We had a chance to look over everything you sent. There's some serious gaps we need to fill, but you're off to a good start."

There's that silver lining.

"One of those gaps is the neural circuitry," she continued. "The system through which the core makes real-time decisions on how to operate and maintain fusio-stasis. If I'm not mistaken, you mentioned yesterday that you were in possession of some of the model schematics for that circuitry?"

Mathias, Jylla and Skrim all looked at one another. If they were trying to be furtive, they weren't doing a very good job at it. Mathis stepped forward, produced a virtual document, and flicked it over to me and Elle.

"I got these on the Underground," Mathis said in a low voice. "I had them locked in a fractal vault, with no connection to any network, so we didn't send them to you with the rest of the stuff."

Elle slid the schematics in front of us so we could read them. It only took me a few seconds to identify what they were for. I couldn't help but start to giggle.

"Who did you say you got these from, Mathias?" I looked at the schematics again and my giggle turned into full blown laughter.

Mathias frowned, the skin above her eyes forming deep, foreboding creases. "From a bon, said he got them on Promethia. They're legit, I know real circuitry when I see it, and it doesn't create any network I've ever studied."

"Oh they're real alright," I wiped my eyes, "real schematics for a quantum transmitter interceptor!"

They didn't find it as funny as I did. I cleared my throat again and continued. "I can see how you got confused, I mean they both have a mechanism for interrupting molecular reactions, but, ah...yeah, this is for spying on deep space communications. Not harnessing solar power."

I knew this neural circuitry well, as Cousin Theo had taught me how to make a transmitter interceptor back when I was a teenager, so that we could pick up information to blackmail a smuggler. He could have been the one to sell these schematics to Mathias, for all I knew.

Mathias pulled the schematic back in front of her. It was a fiz document, so only one copy existed and it could only be transferred in person, physically. “You’re shitting me!” she exclaimed.

I wished I was. This meant that the kids weren’t pretending to be clueless, and I really was going to have to figure out how to shut down a soffing solar harnessing core on my own.

“He’s not,” Elle spoke for me. “Those aren’t from a solar harnessing core.”

Mathias puckered her full lips. “I’m going to kill the fucker who sold me those...”

Elle huffed. “I guess we’re going to need to start with some basics. Where is Seb?”

The kids responded with a collective ‘we don’t know’. Elle turned to me.

“How about you go find him and bring him here, Ben, while I start the instruction?”

If I did as she said, I was going to miss out on Elle’s teachings. Not ideal, as I needed every bit of information I could get on solar harnessing if I was going to crack that hull.

“I’m sure if he wanted to be here, he would be,” I attempted.

“He’s probably doing a grammercy ritual and forgot to come. They usually take their com-palms out,” Skrim said

“So go remind him and bring him here,” Elle prodded me again.

“Skrim, it sounds like you know where he might be...”

“Honey, I need Skrim here. I’ll record our session so Seb can catch up,” she said. She must have caught on that I didn’t want to miss her instruction. I doubted I could trust her to record it, but I could see there was no winning the argument.

Luckily, I’d come prepared...inside my jacket I had a recording device of my own. It was an Artemis original...a small disc that you could stick to any surface, and it would record a room in 3D. On the downside, I wouldn’t be able to see any 2D documents they were looking at, but on the upside I wouldn’t have to worry about placing it in an optimal location, as it would scan all surfaces no matter where it was facing.

It would have to do, this time. I pulled the device from my jacket and leaned with one hand on the table in the center of the room. As I pouted at Elle, I discreetly stuck the device underneath the lip of the table.

“Fine. I’ll be going then, brightness,” I said sweetly to Elle as I exited the room.

I figured I would find Seb in the Church, which is what the Relliance members called the main room where they practiced the rituals of The Religion. It was an antiquated term, Church — to this day I don’t know if they were trying to reclaim it, or if it was a facetious nod to the religions of old. The only time I had ever been to the Church was during a tour given to Elle and I when we first came to the barge. The inside was dim, lit by tiny, warm bug lights and even a few real candles. A large, square altar stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by a single circle of chairs. As I had been told, there was not much use to observing the practice of their religion.

I pulled back a heavy red curtain to peek inside. Inside the room on the otherside, there was a ritual in progress. Six people wore giant hoods that draped down their front and back, sort of like a robe with the sleeves and sides cut out. Apart from that, they were naked. They were also levitating, probably through the means of an anti-gravity beam. A woman lay prone in the center, facing the back of the room, as the other members levitated around her, chanting words that I did not recognize in deep voices. One member began to tip backwards, as can happen if you lose your center of gravity, and the man next to her reached a hand out to steady her, continuing the chant. I squinted my eyes to try to see if I could see Seb among the ritualists. For some reason, it was hard to focus on any of them, almost like my vision was blurred. I began to hear a low, pulsating sound, accompanied with a similar feeling in my chest, like a body-song you might hear in a danceclub. It got louder, to the point where I could feel my eardrums vibrate in sync with my lungs. Suddenly, a voice cut through the noise, as though it were coming through my implanted earphones -

“You should probably leave.”

I instinctively looked at my Com-Palm to see if it was giving me the warning, but it hadn’t. All the same, I quickly exited back through the curtain. It was quiet and bright out in the hallway, a stark contrast to where I had just come from. My heart was racing as though I had just awoken from an intense dream. I was also incredibly thirsty all of a sudden. I ran my hands through my hair to shake out the fuzz, then made my way to the mess hall. All thoughts of Seb and the rest of the kids were absent from my mind; I could only think about what I’d just seen, and how thirsty I was. I don’t know how long I stood in the mess hall, sipping cold water.

A hand on my shoulder broke me from my reverie. I turned, somewhat startled, to see Seb staring down at me. He hadn't seemed that tall when I met him in the lab the other day. His hair was shiny black, plainly cut to the length of his ears. His eyes were dark green, narrow and hooded. The most striking feature on his face were his cheekbones, high and prominent, covered by smooth, yellow-tinted skin.

"Does your head hurt?" he asked as though he were hoping I'd say yes.

"Hurt? No. Why?"

"That was some pretty powerful Grammercy you just walked in on."

So he had been one of the naked levitating people.

"Were you trying to give me a headache? That's not very nice."

He smirked. "You haven't done enough to incur my wrath, yet."

"Oooo, spooky. I'd say 'remind me to stay on your good side', but I don't think you have one."

"On the contrary, I'm really a pleasant person once you get to know me."

I raised an eyebrow. I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

"You can understand my skepticism the other day," he continued. "I don't know you or your partner, and she was already attempting to take control of our group."

His frankness surprised me. I decided to return the favor. "We wanted to establish our position. Normally we might have been more gentle, but we don't have the time for that kind of fluff in this situation."

He tipped his head to the left, sort of like a quirky nod. "I accept that."

I was more surprised than a underprimed drive. Seb was being downright reasonable.

"This was not how I expected this to go."

"Like I said, I'm really a pleasant person."

"If I get to know you. Could I ask about what you were doing...back there?"

"That is one of the few things I like people asking about. May I suggest we take this conversation back to my room?"



I was the one that was trying to get to know *him*, so that I could manipulate him into staying away from Elle. Yet, it almost felt as though he had just asked me out on a date. This was intriguing.

“Lead the way.”

I followed him to the third floor and into his room. His bed and personal corner was stored away, so that the bulk of the space could be used for daytime activities. Everything was neat and well matched — he clearly had an eye for simple design. He pulled his dark brown couch into two pieces so that we could sit opposite one another.

“Tell me, what do you want to know?” he asked, leaning back against the minimalist seat.

At the time, I wasn’t too interested in The Religion. As far as I was concerned, religion existed to comfort the minds of people by giving them a set of rules to follow. If you were raised on those rules, then they made sense to you. But I hadn’t been raised to follow any particular religion, only to learn what religions existed. I adopted the Promethian customs of Artemis’ family, I knew their beliefs; but a part of me never accepted the rules. The part of me that believed in something greater than myself hadn’t had time to discover what that something was before it was killed on Pluora. My god-o-meter was broken, you could say. But, if it helped pull Seb onto my side, I could certainly pretend. That part of me was, if anything, overdeveloped.

“What exactly were you doing in the Church?”

“A ritual for clarity of mind.”

“Right. For the girl in the center?”

“Not exactly. She was the vessel in which our thoughts were clarified.”

“So she was like a human filter?”

“Her mind was the filter. And the mind exists not only in the body.”

“Her mind exists in her brain.”

“What about your nervous system? What about the nerves that carry impulses from your heart to your stomach, without your awareness? Are those not part of your mind?”

“I guess so,” I conceded, not really caring about the philosophy of the mind. “So what’s with the levitation?”

“In the purest practice of Grammercy, levitation is possible. I have done it before.”

“Gratorshit,” I swore. “You were using some kind of anti-gravity tech.”

“I said I’d done it before, not that I was doing it then. We use the antigrav beams to more closely simulate how the rituals should be done.”

“Ok, then what about the chanting?”

“The sounds we make are how we affect change in reality.”

“I...don’t know how to respond to that.”

“When you say words, there is a reaction in reality. If I were to tell you that I was about to slice your head open with a dagger, you would probably leave, or attack me. Those words have a certain effect.” He paused, blinking his narrow eyes. “There are other words that have effects of a different nature.”

“A different nature? So you’re *not* trying to tell me that if I just repeat ‘clear my mind, clear my mind’ enough times, my mind will become clear?”

“Correct. Because those are not the right words.”

“And what are the right words?”

“As close as I can say them now, gurrriburrrr yuuuuuu varriirrrruuuu...”

Seb proceeded to make a series of sounds I have never heard a creature, human or otherwise, make before. It was low and gravely, yet somehow also high and tinny, as though he were speaking through two mouths. It sounded more like Argruian than Ertish, but was far from either. He sounded completely insane.

“You sound completely insane.”

“I’m aware of that. We have to use what we call a vibrophone to get the real effect, but it wouldn’t make you understand the sounds any more. Because you don’t have any idea of what I’m talking about.”

“That’s because you’re speaking nonsense. If these words, or sounds, or whatever, can do something like make your mind clearer, or make you levitate, how come we’re not all speaking that language? That is pretty powerful stuff, after all.”

“There’s more to it than just saying the words. But if you’re asking why Ertish sounds so different from Grammercy, it is because as sentients, we place importance on what we call the traditional dimensions of influence.” He picked up a black candle from a side table next to him. “That was an example of influence in a traditional dimension. The candle was there, now it is here.”

He placed the candle back down. “Me explaining The Religion to you so that you can have some kind of a picture in your mind of what it represents, that is also influence in a traditional dimension. Now, if I were to recite a chant for, say, increasing your wealth, and the next day you happen to purchase a winning lottery ticket — that is influence in a higher dimension.”

“I don’t buy that. If it really were possible to turn a lottery ticket into a winner by saying a few words and spinning around in the air, we would all be doing it.”

“You misunderstand. I cannot transform a lottery ticket into a winner; what the Ritual would do is, perhaps, compel the individual to enter a store and purchase a ticket at the exact moment a winning ticket was next in the rotation.”

“You’re misunderstanding what I find ridiculous about all of this,” I countered. “Humans have been trying to do magic for as long as we’ve been sentient, over five million years. And you’re telling me that this whole time, we just haven’t been saying the right words? That *that* is the secret to casting actual, real-life spells?”

“Is that so hard to believe? There’s a reason we don’t communicate by changing the color of our skin or farting clouds of gas with different chemical compositions. We’ve always known in some way that the sounds we make with our mouths are capable of magic, as you call it. It has taken not 5 million years, but 13 billion years - the age of the universe as we know it - of trial and error for these secrets to have been revealed to us. We are on the Path to the Truth.”

“Ah yes, the Path. Titus mentioned that.”

“The Path is the core of Grammercy. We know we are on the Path when we are able to affect change in a higher dimension. It is the conclusion to our hypothesis.”

“And you’ve been able to make these non-traditional scientific discoveries purely through trial and error? You keep trying different words and seeing what works?”

“Partly. There have been great advancements made through the use of substances, dreams, meditation, and simulation. There is some part of humans that can sense the Path, but it is severely underdeveloped and requires assistance. Some study the Argrurians for this reason...it is apparent that they have some means of actually seeing the Path, in a way. Perhaps an organ of some kind that we lack.”

“You mentioned substances? Now you’re speaking *my* language. What kind of drugs are we talking about?”

“Psilocibe variants. Anadimine and tryptophan compositions.”

“Hardly a new discovery that those chemicals ‘expand the mind’.”

“I accept that, but we’re talking about psychedelic compositions that have been perfected over millenia. Things I’m sure you haven’t tried.”

Now I was genuinely interested. “Let me try them, then.”

“We need to start on a more basic level first. There is a very real risk that you could lose your mind on some of these drugs.”

I smirked. “Seb, I know you don’t know me very well, but I can assure you that whatever concoctions you and your witches have brewed up pale in comparison to the things I’ve synthesized.”

He ticked his head to the side. “Well that is intriguing, but I will still need to insist on a safer demonstration first.”

“You don’t believe that I believe?”

“No.”

I sighed. I suppose I hadn’t done a very good job of pretending this time. “What do you suggest then?”

“Dreams are another excellent way to interact with the higher dimension. What I am going to do is send you some dreams.”

“Right now?”

“No stinker, your unaligned Kee would throw everything off. I’ll do it later.” He sighed, looking me up and down with his pointed eyes. “You’ve been told before, no doubt, that you are overflowing with Almighty Light?”

“Yeah, enough times that I’m starting to get genuinely flattered.”

Seb gave me a small smile. “Tonight, you will have a dream. I won’t tell you about what, because then you’ll think I will have incepted it into your mind. Instead, I will attach a note to your chamber door the following morning, describing the contents of your dream.”

“Attach a note? What do you even mean by that? No, forget it.” I had too many questions. “Is that the best you can do? Give me a dream?”

“Soix. Of course not.” He let out a condescending ‘heh’. “I’m not going to waste a whole day just trying to impress you. Influencing dreams is a simple Multah. Multah’s are foundational, less-complicated rituals.”

“Well alright then, I’m down to try anything once. Just be careful while you’re in my brain, it’s a minefield in there.”

“Of that I have no doubt. But I’m not going to be ‘in your brain’. I’m simply affecting it.”

I chuckled inwardly as it occurred to me that what he was describing was a literal ‘Art of the Dream’. Artemis would have found this all hilariously preposterous. It sounded nice, but there was no way that Seb’s fancy words could make me levitate, even if he was employing some of the same tactics Artemis and I would follow.

Seb and I walked back to the lab together. There, Elle was wrapping up her instruction for the day.

“Ah, there you two are! Seb, I want to apologize for coming off so strongly yesterday. I can be very, er, passionate.”

“I accept that,” Seb replied.

“Well, I did record our little session today, if you’d like to take a look. I shared my knowledge on the microwave transference element. I’m sad to say that I completely forgot to start recording until about an hour into our discussion, but you didn’t miss anything you didn’t already know.”

Of course, she ‘forgot’ to start recording. Was this her plan, to keep coming up with excuses for me to be out of the lab while she revealed the secrets of the cores to the kids? If so, it was a shitty plan.

“I’ll give it a watch,” Seb said blandly.

“Great. Well, I actually have to go. I’ll see you all tomorrow!” Elle said, leaving with a quickness.

Something was off. She seemed nervous, on-edge. Now she was avoiding me? Could it be that she was already running out of tactful ways to confuse me? I scratched my head with both of my hands. This whole fucking barge was out to confuse me today.

That evening, I pulled up a privacy panel in our pod so that I could review what my recording device had picked up. Elle hadn’t come back to the room yet that night, but she could burst in at any moment. I didn’t care that she would find the privacy panel suspicious; it was clear she didn’t trust me anyway.

I played the footage, my footage. I watched the blue, semi-pixelated forms of myself and Seb exit the room. Elle began asking some basic questions. Nothing groundbreaking. Then, she asked about the striped radiation. In response, Mathias pulled up some charts —

two-dimensional, so they only appeared up as solid blue squares to me. Mathias was strangely old-school, like so many of the other Reliance members. They flipped through a few different screens as Elle nodded and asked a few follow up questions. She was mostly silent, stoic.

I zoomed in on her face. Her features were imprecise and shadowed due to the device's recording mechanism, making her expression unreadable. I ran a microexpression scan on her face just in case the AI could pick up on an emotion they even my trained eyes couldn't see, but the scan also came back inconclusive. Whatever was on those screens appeared to confirm the existence of the radiation, that much was clear from the conversation. What was less clear was whether Elle really believed it or not.

After discussing the radiation for a while, she changed the subject to the Core transference elements, and made a show of remembering to start a recording. She ejected one of the cameras from her Com-palm, stuck it in a point in the air, and tapped her Com-palm screen.

I switched over to Elle's footage so that I could see what they were looking at on the holo-screens. Elle dove into an explanation of how the Core was able to transfer the solar fusion energy into usable, Farah-Watt energy. She spared no detail, from what I could tell. I watched the entire four hours of her instruction — learning quite a bit in the process — but the radiation was never brought up again.

Of course, it was possible that the kids had in fact shown her undeniable proof that the radiation was a real threat, so there would have been no point in Elle arguing with them about it. Then again, if their evidence was fallible, she wouldn't have exposed them to their faces. Elle knew better than to question the Reliance so blatantly.

My head was spinning. I turned off the privacy panel, hoping to find Elle sitting on the bed across from me. But I was still alone, with no one to give me the answers I needed. Frustrated, I angrily asked the lights to turn off, and I shut my eyes tight, willing sleep to overtake me.

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I stood in an inner-city park that looked vaguely like one I had visited a few times on Virgin. I looked up at a hyper-tube track that bisected my view of the dark blue sky above. I tried to focus in on the edges of the opaque, rectangular tunnel, but couldn't. Something was wrong with it. A man came up to me and confirmed it was clogged.

Clogged? With what?

Ducks, he said.

Ah, that made sense. There were hundreds of brown ducks in the pond in front of me.

But how did they get up there?

New city management, he told me. That made sense.

The man handed me a hard hat, similar to the one he was wearing. We began climbing a ladder up to the hyper-tube track. It was nearly two hundred meters up, and there were so many ducks in the way, it took us forever to climb to the top. Shaking, I pulled myself up to the roof of the track, trying not to look down.

There were no safety harnesses because of the new city management. Of course, that made sense.

I jumped down into the tube tunnel. It was hard to see. That was wrong.

I heard quacking to my right. I began walking, my hands held out in front of me. My foot crunched down onto something. I looked down and saw a duck, its neck crushed beneath my foot. Oh god, we weren't supposed to kill them!

Then I saw it. A wall of ducks, hundreds of them smushed together, completely blocking the tunnel. I began pulling them out, one by one. Their quacks were deafening, echoing in the chamber. I had to get them out, get them free. Their wings flapped in my face, dirty feathers brushing against my lips. I started throwing them, one by one, up out of the hatch in the ceiling. Soon they began flying out themselves, into the blue sky. That was good.

Our job was complete. The man in the hard hat brushed the back of his hand against mine, and began walking down the tunnel. The daylight was shining through the frosted walls.

I called out to him, but the only sound I could make was a quack.

## 31 - Something Less Corporeal Than Ducks

I awoke with a shout stuck in my throat. It was daytime on the barge, the fake morning sunlight streaming through our fake windows. Elle wasn't in her bed, nor was there any sign that she had come back to the room while I had been asleep. I opened her storage compartments — from what I could tell, all of her stuff was still there. I went into the bathroom to piss, and noticed her cleaning wand was gone. Was it possible she slept over at another person's pod? She had made a few friends, but she wasn't that close to any of them. Though we had our secrets, we spent the vast majority of our time together, so it seemed unlikely that she'd formed a tight friendship without my knowing.

However, it was even more unlikely that she'd somehow left the barge...even if she had managed to borrow a ship, we were a year away from anything else. Not to mention how strange that would look to our fellow Reliance members...No, she had to be here.

I exited our pod for the mess hall. As I turned down the hall, something attached to the wall next to our door caught my eye. I recognized it as a piece of paper, one of the few I'd ever seen in real life. On it, there was a single word written.

Ducks.



Damn me to the void. Seb. Elle's bizarre behavior had caused me to completely forget about his promise to affect my dreams. Now my thoughts of Elle were taken over by the ducks. How was this possible? Unconsciously influencing someone's mind was possible, I knew that better than anyone, but I also knew that I had not seen or heard of anything related to ducks in years. Virgon was the only place I had even been to that had native ducks. I had no distinct memories associated with them, no feelings about them, no thread that could be pulled to make me think about them. So how did Seb make me dream of them?

I ducked back into my room and immediately called Seb. He answered after only a couple of seconds, a grin plain on his face.

"Sleep well?"

"What the fuck is this?" I said, brandishing the note in front of the pinpoint camera that hovered in the air before my face.

"It's called a sticky note. It's an ancient technology I find just adorable."

"I mean the ducks, you cud!"

"Do you not like ducks? I figured it would be a pretty neutral, unattached notion to send you. Plus 'duck' rhymes with 'fuck', and I find that pretty adorable too."

I groaned. He was egging me on. I took a deep breath.

"I want to know how you did it. How did you incept the notion of ducks into my head?"

"Just as I told you yesterday, with a simple ritual called a Multah."

"Seb, again, I know you don't know me that well, but I know a great deal about...psychology. Did you put something in my room that made duck sounds while I slept?"

Seb laughed. "Duck sounds. You mean quacks?"

"You're a fucking quack!" I shouted. I did not like having my head messed with. It reminded me of Artemis.

"Calm down, calm down. I swear to you on my life, I did nothing other than the ritual."

"I don't believe you."

"How about this: tonight, I'll send you another dream; this time, about something less...corporeal than ducks."

"No thanks."

“It will be something I couldn’t possibly incept into your brain, something I wouldn’t even know about. You’ll see, I’m telling the truth.”

What could I do? I needed Seb on my side, and the best way to do that was to engage with him on this Religion bullshit. I hated that I couldn’t understand any of it, but maybe that was all I needed to understand. Play with Seb, and he won’t play with Elle. Wherever she was.

“Alright, but if I find a note that says ‘frustration’ or ‘homicidal thoughts towards Grammicians’, I’ll know you’re cheating.”

“I accept that. This will be fun!”

“Mmmhmm.” I ran my hand through my hair. “Have you seen Elle?”

“She’s not with you?”

She should be. We’re supposed to be practically inseparable.

“No, she went to the lab early this morning, I thought maybe you were there.”

“Negative, I am in my chambers. But I’ll be at the lab soon. I watched her lesson on the transference element last night and I have a few follow-up questions.”

That was a good sign. It meant he respected her knowledge, if not her authority.

“Alright, I’ll meet you there. Bye.”

I hoped to Basar that she was there.

A dull pain began to form in my head when I walked into the lab to find only Seb, his head resting in one hand as the other flipped through a news article.

“Did you find your lady?”

“She must have gone to talk to the electrical technicians, she mentioned that she had been meaning to do that.”

“You two don’t share your locations with one another?”

“She finds it unnerving. We’re almost always together anyway, so it hardly matters.” I rested on one of the backless floating chairs, the circular seat sinking beneath my heavy weight.

“You’ve spent almost as much time with me as you have with her, since I’ve met you. Maybe she’s jealous,” Seb said.

“Jealousy is not a problem we have. But honestly, I don’t much like talking about my marriage.”

“I accept that. Should we get to work then?”

Yes, work. A problem I could solve that didn’t involve a devious woman or magic. That sounded nice.

“Should we wait for the rest of the kids?”

Seb smirked at my use of the term ‘kids’. “It’s still quite early. We don’t typically meet here for another couple of hours.”

“Alrighty then.” I knew exactly where to begin. “I’d like to know more about Amican’s radiation. Specifically, how did you discover it?”

Seb stood and walked around the table he had been sitting at. “Christopher is the one who brought the radiation to our attention. But it was us ‘kids’ that calculated exactly where and when it would appear. It wasn’t easy, let me tell you. We had to model the trajectory of  $10^{20}$  sub-atomic particles from the solar fission reaction, and factor in the trajectory of every heavenly body in the ITZ, including the expansion of the universe...”

He pulled up a DUDD simulation. For those in the audience that haven’t had the pleasure of working with one, that stands for “Drill Up, Drill Down”. It’s a way of visualizing a multi-dimensional, multi-layered simulation — you can drill into the various layers, manipulating the simulation as it unfolds, complete with various accuracy metrics and assumptions. Currently, this DUDD was depicting the velocity of electrons through the quantum 2nd dimension. I stood from my seat and cycled through the layers, analyzing the numbers and chaotic atomic patterns.

The kids’ assumptions were all correct, the math flawless. I continued flipping. Halfway through the layers, the atoms congealed to form a solar harnessing unit, one of millions that encased the sun beneath.

I drilled all the way out, producing a hologram of the ITZ. As the galaxies and nebulae slowly moved throughout the sparkling space, stripes of red appeared and faded in clusters throughout the universe, as though it were being scratched by invisible claws. The radiation was legitimate. This was not, could not be faked.

A cold feeling washed over my skin. “When did you say the radiation would first appear in an inhabited zone?” I asked Seb.

“February 30th, 4 years and 10 months from now.”

I moved the DUDD simulation's time forward to that date and zoomed into the cluster of red stripes over the Triangulan Galaxy. The longest of the radiation's marks cut through empty space, and five marks fanned out on either side of it, decreasing in size, forming a diamond shape. I zoomed further in. Each of the red marks was actually made up of multiple stripes overlapping and shadowing one another, like light viewed through a crystal. The smallest of the stripey clusters eclipsed the entire Forttend C colony. I looked to see if the kids had simulated casualties as well. Indeed they had. 1,462,012,329 sents would die. A number my young brain could not comprehend.

Seb reached over and re-adjusted the display to the Gruar Galaxy. He moved the time forward, years passing in the simulation. Then an identical diamond of scratch marks appeared directly within the path of Gruar, the Argruarian's original homeworld. I watched with horror as the planet passed through the center of the diamond pattern, slicing the green orb with radiation. Six billion casualties predicted; nearly half the entire population of the planet, and a third of the entire Gruar species.

"We have to warn them," I said, almost whispering.

"Soix, we've been shouting about this since we discovered it almost a year ago," Seb said. "But Forttend is L1; they're so complacent and loyal to the Council that no one will listen. As for the Argrurians, they claim to have the situation under control. It's true, we have been seeing an increase in migration from Gruar to their second planet, Jinjy, but they're not moving quickly enough. I wasn't present when we told them, but Christopher said they hardly took it seriously at all."

"Surely sents on other planets would listen and take action?"

"The Council is blocking us left and right. Even under normal circumstances, it's hard work to find anyone with enough of an understanding of this science to know what they're looking at, but with the Council discrediting us, it's nearly impossible. Almost everyone we have been able to convince has dropped everything and joined us on this barge, or is elsewhere working for the Reliance. Our numbers have increased sevenfold since we made this DUDD. But it's not nearly enough."

I grabbed two handfuls of my oily hair and held on. "We have to shut the Core down."

Seb nodded, his lips forming a long, loaded line across his face. "That is what the Reliance has been trying to do even before we were aware of the radiation."

I sat back down in the floating chair, expecting it to sink all the way to the floor beneath me.

Seb continued. "As I said, there's no way for us to stop the radiation that will appear in Triangulum and Gruar. Those particles are already travelling through time, so to speak. But we

can stop part of Andromeda from being completely decimated 137 years from now. That radiation will be generated in a matter of months.”

Seb sped up the DUDD to show me. My jaw clenched tighter than a vice, I watched as he moved forward the timeline 137 years. He zoomed into the Andromeda Galaxia, then into one of the Satellite Galaxies. He zoomed in further, stopping when the Virgon A colony was in full view. Cousin Theo’s homeworld. Home of The Cove, the seedy establishment where I decided on my 17th birthday that I wasn’t made out to be a criminal. The irony, the despair, and the anger set in as a stripe of radiation fell over the colony. Three billion sents would die. I felt cold, as though I had been exposed to the vacuum of space.

This is what Elle saw. Not this DUDD specifically, but she saw the numbers. She saw the tragedy, laid out in irrefutable figures. Was the idea of her father being complicit in the death of billions too much for her to handle? Did she leave, or...a new, sick thought entered my mind. Would the Council kill her for uncovering this information? Would they kill me? I hadn’t thought they were capable of such atrocity, but this...the radiation changed everything.

I had to believe that wherever Elle was, she was doing what she could to stop this from happening. I needed to do the same. It was time for me to get to work.

## 32 - Day 33 - He was a cruel man indeed

Ben smiled, his face now returned to its typical scruffy, but healthy appearance. His audience looked at him with widened eyes. It was the reaction he’d expected...his time with the

Reliance was something he hadn't spoken of in many, many years. Not even Dax had heard these tales.

Lucia was the first to speak. "How much of this is true?"

"What do you mean?"

"These stories you've been telling...are they true?"

Ben hung his head for a moment, then leaned back in his large loveseat. "Yes, dear Lucia, I'm afraid it's all true."

"Then the Gruar Plague..." Lucia trailed off.

"Ah, is that what they're teaching in the Ertian Empire? I'm surprised they mention it at all..."

"But the Gruar Plague happened decades ago," Lucia said, disbelief plain in her voice. "The Argruarians themselves say that it was an infectious disease, not radiation."

Ben looked at Dax quizzically. Dax shrugged back at him, his mind processing behind his yellow eyes. "Well, if that's what they say..."

Lucia continued with the glee of a detective who'd caught a perpetrator in a lie. "And the colony. There is no Forttend C colony. There never has been. I'm a navigator, so I would know."

"You can believe what you want to believe..." Ben said in an increasingly high-pitched tone, as he stood and began to dramatically shamle away.

Marim hummed. "You have claimed before to have met the Council, mechanic. I thought these to be lies, but what you describe...it is similar to another story I have heard."

Ben stopped walking and turned around. "Is that so, bounty hunter?"

Marim frowned. "I do not wish to say more. I do not share your desire to share."

"Amican's beard, I don't know what to believe," Goose said, then suddenly clapped his hand over his mouth. "Oops, sorry."

"For saying Amican's name?" Ben chuckled. "Don't worry about it."

"Anyways, I think that's enough of my tale for today," Ben said, turning again to leave.

Lucia watched as Ben walked out of the room. Her hands were balled into fists. She had so many questions, questions she knew Ben wouldn't answer. Or if he did answer, she couldn't trust what he would say. She squeezed her fists even tighter. Everyone else left the Great Room,

leaving her to stew alone. She had to at least try to get more out of Ben. She stood and stormed defiantly up to his workshop door.

Ben looked down at the various parts and pieces strewn about on his workbench. He heard knocking at his door, but ignored it. He turned on a loud, angry song and began putting the parts and pieces together into the odd but familiar shape. He couldn't hear the knocking anymore, but he could feel it, pounding away in his head. Why was he telling this story? Why let these innocent people learn of the evils and dangers that permeated their universe if there was nothing they could do about it? Perhaps after all these years living in obscurity as an outlaw mechanic, he was tired of being alone. He was tired of being the only one who knew that the end of sentience was coming, much sooner than anyone thought.

He was a cruel man indeed.

I stood on a Waystation, the one Artemis and I had landed on after our long, harrowing escape from Pluora. The vast, black-grey sky surrounded me. I was alone, the only movement coming from the droids that manned the station, the only light coming from animations on the Goods Portal screens. Just as it had been on that day. Except for Artemis, who reached out and took my hand. I looked down from the sky to her hand, brown and hardened, clasping mine, pale and shivering. She pulled me towards her ship. I wanted to see her face, but she was already facing away from me, looking ahead as I trailed behind her.

She led me to Pluora. We walked along a black sand beach. I asked her how we got there, but she would not turn around and answer.

I followed her into a city I did not recognize. The streets we walked down were bright blue, and the people we passed wore only shades of red. Her back was still towards me.

Suddenly the earth began to quake. The buildings crumbled, then the very earth and sky itself. Artemis held me to her chest as pieces of the sky rained down around us. I cried, then the shaking stopped. The universe had broken around us, but I felt completely whole in her arms. We were one, we were all that existed, we were the universe. Then she exploded.

I awoke from the dream and was immediately overcome with a deep sadness. A latent longing made flesh by sudden loss. I curled into myself, trying to squeeze out the pain. The first thought that made it through the din was that I needed to get high. Apart from the occasional swig of Xarabee, which I had been able to synthesize using the chemical equipment on the COB, I had been completely sober since we arrived on the barge. That was, until a couple of days ago. I had taken a few ug's of Amp in order to stay awake and work on the Solar Harnessing Core. Last night was my first time sleeping in 80 hours, though it felt like an eternity. So long that I had forgotten about Seb's promise to send me another strange dream. Until now.

I looked over to the other twin bed. Empty. Elle was still nowhere to be found after five days. I'd done some digging, and the only lead I could find was a record of a ship leaving the COB approximately an hour after I'd last seen her. The record said there was only one passenger named Kirby, but it was possible Elle had forged it somehow. It gave me hope, a chance that she was out there, and not vaporized by the Lighters. The fact that I hadn't been vaporized yet was



also a good thing, I suppose. A silver lining. If it was Elle on that ship, I had no idea where she went.

I rose from my bed with a groan. Moving felt even harder than existing. I had to take something. I had the Amp that another crew member had given me, but that wouldn't take the edge off, only make it sharper. There was the Xarabee, but that wasn't strong enough today. I needed something of the opiate variety. I could synthesize something in the lab...but that would require interacting with people, and it would take at least an hour. I needed something now. That left me with one option...biohacking my Com-Palm. Programming the biobots in my body to release the neurotransmitters I required.

When done correctly, you can produce the same effect as many of the drugs that are out there, without any additional chemicals. When done incorrectly, you can kill yourself. It was very hard to do correctly, but the real danger was sliding down the slippery slope. Start directly manipulating your neurochemistry, and you're only a few steps away from drooling on the floor, perfectly content, until you die.

I'd experimented with biohacking for pleasure only twice before. I'd had one success, one failure, and both of those scared me equally. Scared me enough to stop. But I still had the program I'd built for it on my Com-Palm...I opened it. I could keep it simple, just release some dopamine from the mu, delta and kappa opioid receptors...my fingers moved to make the changes before my better judgment could stop them. I carefully adjusted the neurotransmitter levels, adrenaline flooding my viens naturally from the risky task.

Relief washed over my body, spreading throughout my limbs, driving the pain away. I flopped back down onto my bed, basking in the dopamine glow for a moment. I thought of Artemis. I hadn't dreamt about her in years. The feeling I had felt as she held me to her chest...it was almost like what I was feeling now. Whole. Warm. So many good feelings today...what had I been so sad about? It didn't matter now, all that mattered was that I felt great, and it was time to get back to work.

After showering and changing my clothes for the first time in days, I glided out of my pod. Another one of Seb's sticky notes caught my eye: it read 'Jrna - that which you are missing that will bring you lasting happiness'. Well, it certainly was abstract enough. So abstract, I had no idea what it meant. Is Artemis the thing that is supposed to bring me lasting happiness? If she is, I'm fucking doomed.

I sauntered over to Seb's pod and knocked on his door. As I did so, it occurred to me how odd it was for me to do that, rather than ping him. Perhaps the Reliance's fondness for ancient practices was rubbing off on me. I smiled widely when Seb opened the door. Now that was satisfying! To bang on a door and have the person I was seeking appear, without any planning or advanced notice. Perhaps these oddballs were onto something after all.

“You look like you’re in a good mood,” Seb said, rubbing his right eye. “I take it you finally got some sleep?”

“Indeed I did, but you knew that already didn’t you,” I said, letting myself in and plopping down on his leather couch. “I had another dream.”

“What was it about?” Seb asked, curiosity plain in his voice. He sat next to me on the couch.

“It was about my mother. She took me places...my homeworld, and a world I’d never been to before. Then she held me while the universe crumbled.” My candor surprised me.

Seb looked surprised as well. “What did you feel?”

“Scared at first. Then, when she was holding me, more complete than I ever have. Then when I woke up, utterly devastated.”

“It should have occurred to me that making you dream of your Jrna could cause you intense emotional pain. I’m truly sorry for that.”

I waved my hand, “I’m completely fine. But, a little confused, I guess. What is a Jrna?”

Seb looked at me analytically, as though he sensed something was wrong and was looking for evidence on my body. Finding nothing concrete, he explained, “Jrna is an Argrurian word actually. We have no word for what it represents in Ertian. There is something out there for all of us, some thing that would make us whole. Your soulmate perhaps, or your crowning achievement, or your worst injustice righted; the one thing you are missing. That is your Jrna.”

I furrowed my brow, leaning towards him. “Just one thing?”

“There is one thing you need the most, yes.”

I frowned. “But I already had my mother.” Seb smirked. “You know what I mean. I had my time with her. She already gave me what she could.”

“You must need her again. Where is she now?”

“She’s gone. Not dead, I don’t think, but she is gone.”

“Well it certainly sounds to me like you could benefit from some kind of a resolution there.”

I humphed. “That ain’t happening. Does that mean I’m destined to be unhappy for the rest of my miserable life?”

“Your Jrna can change, but that is unlikely to happen if you ignore it.”

“That’s exactly what I intend on doing, so I guess I am a lost cause.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that. You’re already starting to believe.”

“Believe in what?”

“Grammercy.”

“Gratorshit. I never said that.”

“But you haven’t once questioned whether I sent you this dream.”

“I...was getting to that.”

Seb looked at me incredulously. “Sure you were. I can send you another dream if you’re still not convinced, but it’s hard to imagine how you could still deny the powers you are seeing.”

“I’ll admit I’m finding it hard to poke holes in your Religion today. But that’s only because I’m in a particularly accepting mood.” I reached out and tapped Seb on the forehead.

Seb’s look of incredulity suddenly broke, changing to one of realization. “Are you high right now?”

“Is that a problem?”

“You tell me. Can you work?”

“Seb, my dear misguided friend, I can always work.”

Seb stood, taking his warmth with him. Opiates always made me want to be close to people. I instinctively reached out and grabbed his arm. He looked down at me expectantly. I wanted to tell him I had no idea where Elle was, that I had no idea where Artemis was, that she wasn’t really my mother. That Elle wasn’t really my wife. That I was lonely.

I let his arm go. Shit, I really was high.

“Ben, I want—”

A flurry of words from my mouth interrupted him. “I know people that live on Virgon A. One of the colonies that will be hit by the radiation if we don’t shut the Core down. Some of them will still be alive when it hits a century from now...and I think about their children, and grandchildren, how they have no idea what’s coming...”

Seb stopped the flurry of words by covering my mouth with his own. I immediately grabbed him, my fingers imbedding themselves in his smooth black hair, and on his firm back. There was no room to think. This was what I needed.

His tongue played with mine, and I responded by pulling him even harder against me. I rubbed myself against him, letting him feel my need.

He brushed his hand down my side, sending uncontrollable shivers through my spine. This felt so good...

A beeping from my Com-palm interrupted us; a call coming through. It was from Elle. I leapt up from the couch, breathing fast.

“It’s Elle!”

“Oh...” he looked conflicted. We hadn’t talked about her absence, even though we had spent the bulk of the last four days together, without her. I didn’t bring it up, and he didn’t ask, though I’m sure he must have wondered.

I shook my head, unsure that any of this was actually happening.

“I have to take this, I’m sorry.” I winced.

“Jealousy is not a problem I have. You’ve got some other problems, though,” Seb said, leaning back on his brown couch.

I ran out of the room, heading back to my pod. Before I answered the call, I turned off the bio-hacking program I’d been running. The effects would wear off within a half hour. I couldn’t be as high as a feather right now.

I accepted the call, Elle’s tan, heart-shaped face popping up on my personal screen.

“Where have you been?!” I practically yelled. Jacoby, one of the janitors, gave me a curious look as he passed me in the hall. I turned on the privacy settings so that my Com-palm would pick up my vocal cord vibrations without producing outward sound.

“Figuring some things out. I’m back on the COB, where are you?” Her voice sounded like honey in my internal earphones. I swallowed a moan that rose unbidden from my solar plexus.

“I’ll be back in our pod in a minute. Can you meet me there?” I hoped I sounded normal.

“Beat you there,” she said, hanging up.

For the record, I beat her there by a full minute. She walked through the door, as out of breath as I felt. Before I knew what was happening, our arms were wrapped around each other. She smelled like space dust, cold and metallic.

“What the fuck, Elle!” I exclaimed after we released our embrace.

“I know, I know, I’m sorry. I had to make contact with my father, and I couldn’t trust you not to soff that up.”

She was right, but I was angry nonetheless. “Still, You couldn’t have at least told me you were leaving?”

“I don’t know who I can trust! I didn’t know how you would react, I didn’t even know if I was coming back...”

I frowned. She would have just left me here to answer to the Reliance alone...

“I would have said something eventually.” She waved her hand. “Anyways, you would have come up with some brilliant story about why I had to leave, making me the villain no doubt. You would have been fine.”

I had to admit, I did invent seven different contingency plans for dealing with her sudden and potentially permanent absence.

“Forget about me then, what about the mission?” I ran my hand through my hair, hoping to squeeze out the chemical foggiess in my brain.

“That’s what we need to talk about. It’s real, Ben. The striped radiation.”

“I know.” So that was what sparked this chain of events afterall. “I’ve seen the figures.”

“Well, as you can imagine, that threw me a bit off balance. I needed answers. So I left in order to establish a secure connection with my father,” she paused. “You’ve done a sweep of the room today, correct?”

I hadn’t bothered as there had been no one here to have secretive conversations with. We’d never found any listening devices in any of our sweeps, but there was too much at stake not to stay vigilant.

I sighed. Elle gave me an ‘are you serious’ look, raising one of her almost non-existent eyebrows. Then she ran a program to detect any previously un-accounted for mechanical devices in our vicinity. After a couple of minutes, it returned nothing, and we both breathed a sigh of relief.

“As I was saying, I spoke to my father. He was adamant that I was mistaken, said that he had heard the rumors but was assured by Amican and the others that they were untrue, a

fabrication by the crazy Reliance terrorists. Then I showed him what Mathias had shown me.“ Her voice was low and grave, barely above a whisper.

“He left me alone, to go and confront Amican. When he returned...I’ve never seen him so distraught. Amican Stone is now no longer a member of the Council.”

Basar’s beard, they’d removed Amican fucking Stone from the Council of Light. “Was he the only one who knew about the radiation? How did he manage to deceive the entire rest of the Council, and for so long?”

“We didn’t discuss those details.”

She was holding something back, I could tell.

“What are they going to do now? Evacuate the effected colonies?”

Elle bit into her lip, saying nothing.

“Elle, I know you can’t trust me, but I’m a part of this now. This affects me, at the very least as a member of the sentient races.”

I stared at her, pleading with my eyes. I recognized the expression on her face; though it was blue and grainy at the time, there was no mistaking that it was the same expression she’d given while looking at the striped radiation with Mathias. Now that she was standing before me, real and exposed, I knew exactly what the expression was. I could see the intense conflict that was being waged in her head, and in her heart. Her loyalty versus her humanity.

“They’re not going to do anything,” she said finally.

“You can’t be serious?”

“The first generation cores are scheduled to be decommissioned in 50 years, and that is still when they will be decommissioned. The second gen cores don’t have this issue with the radiation, or at least, they’ve found a way to redirect it. As for the radiation that has already been generated...though it has not reached Triangulum or Gruar yet, it still exists in the quantum realm, and it is not something they can interfere with.”

“They’ve built shields to protect us from solar radiation, and forecasts that enable us to avoid solar winds. How is this any different?”

“Those are random, naturally occurring phenomena. This is sent-made, and the Council does not interfere in the choices of sents.”

“The sent that caused all of this *is one* of them! This is directly their fault!”

“Amican acted against the Council—”

“Are you fucking kidding me?! Billions of sents are going to die because those Lighters don’t want to cause a fuss!”

“It’s not just a fuss, Ben, revealing this truth would cause the entire Ertian Empire to fall. As long as the people believe in the Council of Light, not even a trillion deaths can bring our civilization down.”

“Then fine, they can keep it a secret, just like they do everything else! Tell people it is radiation from a supernova, or another soffing dimension, whatever, but put them somewhere safe!”

“The Council may keep a lot of secrets, but they do not lie. They have never lied.”

“That’s a god damned convenient line to draw between what is the truth and what is a lie. Elle, how can you defend this?”

“I’m just telling you what he told me! He...I...it’s what he said, alright!” Elle raised her voice for a moment, then regained control of herself. “This is how they work, and it’s how they’ve managed to keep peace in the ITZ for more than a millenia. It’s awful, you’re right, this all feels awful. It feels wrong. But they know what they’re doing. My father knows what he’s doing.”

“Your *father* allowed his friend to poison the ITZ for hundreds of years.”

“They don’t work together very often, he and Amican, so he was completely in the dark on this.”

“Is that any better? To be a self-appointed guardian of the human race, and be blind to his own colleague’s complete disregard for life?”

Elle flew into a rage. “You have no idea what it is to be a member of the Council of Light, what they’ve sacrificed for the good of sentiency! They are men that have transformed themselves into Gods!”

“There’s no such thing as Gods!” I shouted back.

Our faces were mere centimeters from one another. I could feel the heat from the fire that burned in the forest of her eyes. My own outrage burned and threatened to move my hands to attack. Her straight hair framed her face, a terrifyingly beautiful picture of defiance. She refused to back down.

I took a step back. “I can’t lie to you anymore, Elle. I don’t know if there ever was a point in lying to you, since you always seem to be a step ahead of me.” That got a small, almost imperceptible smile from her. “But I’m not going to stand by and let this happen. I don’t care

what your daddy or any of his psychopath friends do to me. I'm beginning to think their threats were hollow anyways."

"I'm not going to stop you," she said, the rage gone from her. "I don't know if there was ever a point in trying."

"You did a pretty good job. You kept me distracted, kept me in the dark. I could never figure you out," I said. It was true, the progress I'd made on her psyche-map was minimal.

She looked away from me, taking a few steps toward the door. "You're one to talk. I've lost years from my life worrying about what you were going to do next. "

"That makes two of us." We both laughed wistfully. I couldn't believe this would be one of the last times I would be in Elle's presence. "I sure as hell don't know what I'm going to do now. My only hope for figuring out how to shut the Core down was to copy off your test, so to speak."

"And what makes you think I'm going anywhere?" she asked, tucking her chin-length hair behind her ear.

I shook my head, unsure that what I had just heard was correct. "But you just said you weren't going to try and stop me from shutting the Core down."

"I'm not. I'm going to help you."

"Help me? You're going to disobey the Council?"

"The Council refuses to act, but that doesn't mean they want billions of sents to die. They're not evil, they're just..."

"Lazy?"

"Detatched. They've spent so long operating in their own world that it's like they can't even understand how to act in this one. Like how you or I would never bother to relocate a dying ant colony, even though we could. Even if we stepped on it ourselves."

"That sounds pretty evil to me."

"My point is, the Council does what is necessary for the greater good. I will always believe that. I do not question their judgment, but I do think it is incomplete. We need to act where they cannot."

"I see, so this is just like before. They're sending us on some vague mission because they don't want to get their hands dirty."



“No, that is not what is happening. My father explicitly told me to continue with the current mission. Prevent the Reliance from shutting down the core. Disband them.” She held her hand out in a rigid line.

I could see that Elle was straining herself, but I had to keep pressing her. “And you’re going to disobey those orders?”

She swallowed visibly. “I am. I have to. The Council, they’re bound by the zone they created. But I’m not a member of the Council. I couldn’t live with myself if I caused the death of billions, even indirectly.”

Neither could I. Especially not when I had seen first hand what that kind of guilt can do to a person. Artemis was a far harder sent than I was, and her involvement in the Pluoran mundicide ultimately drove her to cut herself off from everything and everyone she knew.

“Well, I’m glad to have you on board. If I didn’t try everything I could to stop this, I couldn’t live with myself either.”

“Then it’s agreed. We’ll work together, for real this time?” She pressed her fist to my shoulder.

I had to admit, the idea of working in unison with Elle greatly excited me. I could finally finish my psyche-map of her, and then everything she knew about solar harnessing would be within my reach.

I returned the gesture, pressing my fist firmly against her shoulder.

“The kids are going to be so thrilled that mom and dad are back together again.”

## 34 - Sadly, I'm Still Stuck

We assembled the kids, or rather, we went to the lab where they were already hard at work. Seb eyed us judgmentally as Elle and I walked in together. We told them Elle and I had had a fight, which was why she left for a time, to clear her head. I hoped word of our marital issues wouldn't make it back to Christopher and Jana, but that was unlikely. Another problem for another day.

Life continued on for another week, almost as though the events leading up to it hadn't happened. Elle and I kept up our ritual of pulling our beds apart at night, and putting them back together in the morning to keep up appearances. She continued lecturing us all on fusio-stasis, while we each tested solution after solution. Seb continued lecturing me on Grammerical rituals, but nothing else. The rest of the kids ritually worked with us in the lab from morning to night, attempting to crack the Core. But despite our ritualistic dedication, we weren't making any progress.

It began to feel like I was slowly losing my grip on sanity. Surely, my new, true partnership with Elle would yield some kind of results? At the very least, all the hundreds of hours I spent turning the Solar Harnessing Core over and over in my mind would lead to a plan, an idea, anything that could move us forward towards shutting it down?

Everything was fine, and nothing was fine. It was maddening; I was stuck in a labyrinth, walking in circles without getting anywhere. Above me hung a dozen different swords, any of which could fall at any minute and cleave my body into two dead slabs of meat. No matter what I did, none of them ever seemed to fall, but that didn't make me feel any safer. It only meant that someone else was in control of my fate.

And then Elle brought one of the swords down.

She began to cry, one night, when we had both collapsed exhausted into our twin beds at two in the morning. It was the first time I had ever seen tears in her eyes, and it made me feel like I wanted to hurt someone.

“Elle, Elle, hey, what’s the matter?” I asked her as I cautiously approached her shaking form. She covered her face with her hands and sobbed into them.

Having made progress on my psyche-map of her, I knew what to say to calm her.

“You can do it. You must do it. You will do it.”

I’d found Elle’s mother, who was a humanitarian that posted with some frequency. She often quoted Xinian proverbs like that one.

Elle’s sobs subsided and her hands moved to uncover her wet eyes.

“My...my mother used to say the same thing,” she said, her voice airy from the surprise that was currently distracting her from her sadness.

“No way,” I said, feigning my own surprise. “I heard it on my feed the other day.”

Elle covered her face again and moaned. “Ben, I have some bad news to tell you.”

I put my hand on her knee, then, feeling her twitch ever so slightly, removed it.

“Lay it on me, I guess.”

“We are never going to figure out how to shut down the Core.”

“You’re usually more positive than that,” I said.

“Yeah, well the positive Elle you see in front of the kids isn’t a good indicator of how Elle really feels,” she said, a hint of anger in her voice.

“Talking in third person, that can’t be good.”

Elle threw her hands to her sides, slapping the mattress beneath her. Her eyes shone like emeralds against her red corneas.

“Today was it. My last lesson. The last of my knowledge about the Core,” she said like she was delivering a death sentence. She was, in fact, for billions of sents.

“You mean, you really don’t know how to shut it down?”

“As of today, I have told you everything I know about Solar Harnessing.”

That wasn’t good. The skin on the top of my head began to itch. “You’ve still given us a mountain of knowledge. Surely we can figure out...”

Elle let out a sad exhale that might have been intended to be a laugh. “Ha, a mountain of knowledge? Compared to the kid’s knowledge, yes. Compared to the handful of engineers that

built the Core, no. Compared to the Discus AI that designed it...Ben, you know how futile it is for any human to attempt to even approach that level of brilliance.”

She was right, in the back of my constantly thinking mind I always knew it was an impossible goal. Still, I wracked my brain for things to say to cheer her up. Why couldn't I think of something like that...

“We can come up with some kind of brute force way. Obviously a bomb would be taken out by the defenses, but there must be some way to attack it.”

“Even then...I don't even know where to begin. Three months to shut down a Core...if I had three years it would still be impossible. There are millions of elements to a core, and I only know about a dozen of them. It would be like a Spacewagon driver trying to build an Alcubierre Drive.”

Years of psyche-mapping had trained a portion of my brain to be constantly predicting the future. It was maddening sometimes, like a switch I couldn't turn off. Right now, that compulsion was showing me the dark events that I knew would come to pass as surely as I knew the supermassive black hole at the center of this galaxy would eventually swallow it whole. We would work tirelessly for three months, but ultimately fail to shut down the Core. Christopher would urge us to keep trying anyways, but the weight of our failure would crush our spirits. Elle and I would switch our focus to attempting to evacuate the impacted areas. We'd have some success, especially once Forttend was hit, but most sents wouldn't listen. Thousands of years of evolution still hadn't changed the fact that most people would rather live in ignorance than face a harsh reality. Billions would still die. The Council would win, the Ertian Empire would remain, the galaxies would keep spinning, but we'd be doomed. I would have to watch all those people die...

“Ben, listen to me,” she said, piercing me with her gaze, “we have to find Amican.”

I scratched the skin on the top of my head until my fingernails were full of dead cells. “And what, make him tell us how to shut the Core down?”

“Yes.”

“He's been kicked out of the Council of Light and even they don't know where he is. Wouldn't we have an easier time trying to convince your father, or one of the other members to help us?”

“The fact that he's no longer in the Council is exactly why he's the only one who can help us. Besides, I believe my father when he says he doesn't know how to shut down the Core. Amican took over the Solar Harnessing project from Cerisan, who took over from Zaerpath Foreman himself, before there even was a Council. With each handoff, the Core secrets have

become more locked away. If there is a way to shut the Core down, I know with all my heart that Amican is the only one who knows it.”

“You said yourself that there’s no way a human can understand enough about the Core to shut it down. Even if that human is Amican Stone.” I cut Elle off before she could respond, “but of course there would have to be a killswitch of some kind.”

“That’s the secret that has been passed down for generations. It’s up to us to make him tell us what it is.” Determined creases formed around her ultra-light eyebrows.

“Setting aside how the fuck we’re going to do that, how the fuck are we even going to find him?”

Elle pulled her blonde hair over her face like a curtain, then exhaled heavily, creating a part in the middle that exposed her tan nose. “I know what planet he’s on.”

“You do? How? What planet?”

I could see Elle was struggling internally. “New Xin,” she said through gritted teeth.

“And how do you know this?”

“I was told by someone close to Amican.”

“What did they say, exactly?”

“Only that he was on New Xin. They didn’t know what city. But I know they’re right. Just trust me.”

I pfff’ed. “Sure, ok. Let’s say that I do.” I didn’t. “How in the deepest voids are we going to search an entire planet in less than three months? No...” a cold realization sank into my chest. “We’re over a year away from New Xin. The radiation will have been created long before we could even get there.”

“You know, we don’t need to physically be there, necessarily. We could use automatons.” Elle said.

“Do you have the kind of money we’d need for a physical avatar? And one that was entangled to this remote region, no less?”

“No,” she said, a hint of offense in her voice, “but Christopher and Jana might.”

They were well connected, so she was probably right. “You can always rely on the Reliance!” I said, imitating Christopher’s orator voice. Elle didn’t laugh. “Do you really think we can do this, Elle?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice dead.

“It doesn’t seem like you do.”

“It’s not that, its just, er...”

She closed her eyes, shutting me out. I waited for her to say something more, but she just layed there, unmoving, like a doll. I leaned over her until our foreheads almost touched. Her eyes opened in surprise, revealing her forest green irises.

“What is it?” I asked, quietly. She continued staring at me, unblinking. I was so close I could feel her outrage, and her breath. We’d shared a room together for a month, yet it felt like this was the first time we’d been so close.

I stayed where I was for a full minute, neither of us moving or making a sound. I wanted her to speak, I wanted her to yell, I wanted her to do something. I dared to plant a kiss onto her lips.

They were plush and soft. I explored their perfect shape, preserved by their eerie stillness. She closed her eyes again. I felt as though I were losing her.

I leaned back defeated. I looked down at her small frame, completely still apart from her chest, slowly rising and falling. I placed my hand there, over her heart, wanting to feel that she was still alive. To my surprise, she covered my hand with her own, laying her fingers over the back of my hand.

We sat there, lightly touching, not saying a word, until I could no longer bear it.

As though she could sense that I was about to leave, Elle spoke.

“You don’t believe in Gods, but you’ve never seen a miracle with your own two eyes. If you had witnessed the miracles the Council performed, you might feel differently...”

## 35 - You are able to see the good that I do

I will do my best to tell Elle's story as she told it, but I'm sure I will fall short. She was full of a sense of love and...hope, that I could never recreate, as detailed as my memory may be.

---

I lived on a Heckle Barge as a child, one of the last few that remained in the ITZ. It was filled with the most desperate of the desperate, the most lost of the lost. Families that had been without a homeworld for seven generations. Old men that had never seen a real sky. Children that were too glitched out to tease one other about their cybernetic implants. To walk the cold, innermost halls of the barge was like touring a morgue. But the truly haunting citizens of the Heckle Barge were the ones who had come from real worlds. Young men and women whose sky had been taken from them by overpopulation, or hatred, or mistakes. Unlike the generational residents, they knew what they were missing.

The Heckle Society, established hundreds of years ago, did everything it could to make the barges hospitable. There was natural gravity, and areas of lush vegetation, and copious simlight that was even healthier than starlight. The best medical technology in the Zone counteracted the physical harms of barge life. Sim programs that were banned in L1-L3 worlds were permitted on the barge to distract from the uneasiness of floating. But nothing could make the residents forget that they were there because there was nowhere else for them to go. Nowhere where they would be truly accepted, except for this Heckle barge, one of the last few that remained in the ITZ.

I lived on this Heckle Barge while my father and the rest of the Council of Light terraformed the homeworld now known as Antaria. It was the largest planet ever terraformed, a Jupiterian-sized rock with more than enough space for the last few Heckle Barges to unburden their loads and allow the sents to spread out. Of course, space was never the issue - there was enough uninhabited space on the 26 existing Ertian planets to accommodate trillions of sents.

But it wouldn't be *their* space. It might be the single defining trait of the human species, our need to own something, and the cycles we burn to define what ownership means. Why is a slice of a newly terraformed planet acceptable, when a patch of land on a 500-year old planet isn't? You could come up with a dozen reasons. Alledge lack of resources. Claim divine right. Bring up past injustices. It all means the same thing — it just doesn't *feel* right. It wouldn't be human, to simply accept what someone else hands you. It has to be earned, or bought, or fought for, because that means someone else wants it. And that means you're not alone in this universe.

My father. The Council. They know humanity. They know what is best for humanity. If the most dejected members of our species needed a place to really *live*, then the Council would build them one. They would pull the energy from the stars, and bend the elements to their will. For humanity. For the poorest of humanity.

My mother is humanity. She was born and raised on our Heckle Barge, and dedicated her life to helping the people on it. She has the same goal as my father, but she acts on it at an intensely personal level. She hones in on a single person, envelops them in her warmth, solves their every problem. She did that to my father when they met on his second visit to our Heckle Barge, decades before my birth. She continues to do it today, on the now bountiful Antaria, years away from me. Some children might feel abandoned by a mother like mine, but I know it's because there are others that need her so much more than I do. The poorest of humanity.

I was far from poor. Though I lived on the Heckle Barge, I was not bound to it like the rest of the inhabitants. I visited three Galaxia before the age of 12. I was tutored by some of the greatest minds in the ITZ, my father included. He had other sons and daughters, but none that he doted on like me. I witnessed first hand how he crafted a world for the last few Heckle Barges, as he had crafted a dozen worlds before. I watched him turn the vacuous voids of the ITZ into a home for all sentiency, one that would last us until we no longer needed a home at all.

I can remember the day he arrived to celebrate my seventh birthday, only two days after I had actually turned seven. My mother would say, 'he was present for your birth, and he knows you will live a very very long time, so what does it matter that he misses a birthday or two?' He'd missed them all, apart from the first, but I knew he had good reason to.

My mother took me shopping to buy a new outfit for my father's visit. Small bursts of air fanned my face as my mother flipped through partitions of muted pants, each posed as though they were being worn by an invisible child exactly my size. The colors were drab, such was the fashion on the Barge. Occasionally a new group of people would arrive on the Barge, and spark a trend of more brightly colored fabrics in a quadrant, but eventually even the trendsetters themselves would slip into loose-fitting grays and browns, and the spark would fade.



“I think I saw some deep fuschia pantaloons in here yesterday, I wonder where that model might be,” my mother said, ever lit by her own flame.

“Why were you in here yesterday, did you buy me something?” I asked excitedly.

“No no, dear, I was helping Mem. Jarviston buy some clothes for her son. He’s lost more weight unfortunately and she just can’t bring herself to pick out anything new for him...” she trailed off, a familiar look descending on her weathered face. My mother’s bright hazel eyes and round plum lips beamed vitality, but decades of barge life had sucked the youth from her bronze skin, leaving her with many small wrinkles around her eyes, and deep lines around her mouth. ‘Smile lines’, she called them.

“You mean Kurt Jarviston?” I asked. “He’s been watching school from his pod all week. Is he sick?”

“His house you mean,” my mother corrected me. “I hate this new lingo you kids have come up with, it makes it sound like we’re all living on a workshop. And no, he’s not sick, he just needed a little pick me up in the form of some new pants!”

Sick was a word that had a special meaning on Heckle Barges. The communities were so tightly contained and curated, there were no viruses or bacteria to cause the sicknesses that occurred on real planets. Enpathogenic diseases like cancers were as rare as they were on any homeworld. When someone ‘got sick’ on a Heckle Barge, there was only one sickness that was being referred to. The Waste.

There’s a medical explanation for the Waste involving neurotransmitter physiology, but a better way to describe it was giving up. It was a depression that acted like a virus, sometimes lasting for days, sometimes for months. It was every bit as contagious as a virus, often jumping from one family member to the next. It could be fatal, if the sufferer had opted out of neural agonist treatment while they were healthy.

It may come as a surprise, but healthy people often opted out of medical intervention on the Barge, and so the Waste was a terrible, real threat. It was one of the only ways a person could die on the Barge, other than old age, and thus the right to do so was a strongly held prize. A way out for those that had no other escape. Some prayed for it to come. Once word got out that someone was sick, some would even flock to the sufferer in an attempt to catch the Waste.

I didn’t know it then, but my mother knew the Jarviston’s were sick, and that they had elected not to receive neural agonists nearly a year prior. As my mother was not a medical bot, but a mere human, she could therefore provide them with care without violating the Bargian laws. Often she was able to save the sufferers. But Kurt Jarviston, his mothers, and his two sisters were all dead before my next birthday.

It was on my eighth birthday that my father finally cured the Waste and delivered the poorest of the Heckle Barge from their suffering. I thought I could not be any happier when he appeared that morning to help me cut the birthday cake, but that moment was surpassed only hours later when I helped him launch the terraformation of Antaria.

I was sitting on the floor of my father's office in the Heckle Barge, playing with chrome mini-mag bricks, when Amican appeared at the door.

"Aldus, we have the power supply ready," he announced.

My father turned off the privacy screen that had been shielding his work, and his face. He was a handsome man, I've never been embarrassed to say it, even more so then than he is now. He cut his gray beard closer to his face in those days, and the vertical dimples in his cheeks weren't quite as sunken. He wore a simple, long-sleeved dress made of a hardy white fabric. The hem rippled ever so slightly as he sighed heavily.

"Now?" my father asked.

Amican rolled his stoney eyes. He caught a glimpse of himself in the shiny paneling of my father's office, and patted the perfectly smooth bun of dark, blue-gray hair that sat atop his head.

"In about 20 minutes," he replied. "We've diverted it to this galaxy. I suggest you make any final preparations."

"We've been ready for terraformation to begin for months, as you well know. Why did you wait until now to tell me you had the power?" my father asked.

"A lot of string-pulling needs to take place to sanction a power jab of this size, *as you well know*. Not to mention, I had to be sure that everything would go smoothly on your end. We don't want any disasters to happen."

My father's wise eyes narrowed. "You question my techniques, after we've already terraformed so many planets?"

"Mistakes have been made," Amican said carefully. "I merely wanted to ensure that they wouldn't be made again."

My father closed his eyes, still not moving from where he stood. "A review is good every so often. After all, we've been doing this for hundreds of years. But that does not explain why you waited until the last minute to tell me this news."

"Aldus, the complexity that is required for this undertaking—"

"You forgot," my father interrupted.

“I forgot,” Amican conceded, bowing his smooth head. “I made the final preparations a few weeks ago and thought I texted you, but then realized I never did, and—”

My father chuckled. “Let us be thankful that you remembered at all.”

“I came here as soon as I could. In person, no less!” He walked over to my father’s side and gripped him firmly around the wrist, his fingers pressing against my father’s inner wrist and the Com-palm that was embedded there, sending the unfakeable sensation of real flesh into his body.

My father smiled and embraced Amican’s Com-palm in his own hand, so proving that neither man was a projected avatar. The intimacy of the moment was not lost even on my young eyes.

“We must get to work then,” my father said.

He cleared his throat and spoke in a voice that carried throughout the Barge.

“Antaria Team, please report to Operations at once. We are ready to light the beacon.” My father’s smile widened, and the rest of his body jumped into action.

Aldus Ertian is a reserved, measured man, except when he is not. Like a marble statue coming to life, he broke away from Amican and strode out of the office with surprising speed for a man of his age. He barked orders through his Com-palm to a dozen different people as he entered his personal Flash Point and disappeared. Amican and I reacted only a second later, following my father’s path. My tiny legs matched the speed of Amican’s ancient ones, and we squeezed into the Flash portal together. He huffed in annoyance, but knew better than to try to get rid of me. He’d failed in that endeavor more than a few times before.

Moments later, we arrived in the terraformation operation’s headquarters, where men and women were already running back and forth in frenzy. The Flash Point beeped insistently, urging us to quickly vacate the portal so that a queued traveler could take our place. Amican ruffled the bottom of his white robe to shoo me out. I happily hopped away from him, looking through the frantic movement for a glimpse of my father. I found his fluttering linen hem next to a young woman, pointing out something on a holo screen.

Before I could take more than a few steps towards him, he’d left the woman and was barking orders at a group of technicians huddled over a power control panel. He then crossed the room again to speak to a middle-aged man who’s thick brows were deeply furrowed in concern. I decided my best course of action was to climb on top of a storage cabinet against the left hand wall, out of the way of heavy foot traffic. I’d been stepped on enough to know what to do at times like these.

From my vantage point, I watched my father's head bounce from group to group like a light gray ball. I couldn't make out most of what was being said, but it was clear that he was running the show.

Finally, he made his way over to the atmospheric control center, where my storage cabinet was located.

"MAVEN predicts there will be CO2 leakage from quadrant -3," a petite woman with pale skin told my father. "Can we spare a dome for that hemisphere during phase four?"

My father looked at the figures the woman had presented him. He ran his fingers through his beard nervously, though his face remained calm, unreadable.

"We need all of the domes protecting the hole created by the energy beam. Have a tug-bot fire a burst of radon at the area during phase three. It's nothing to worry about."

"Thank you sir," the woman smiled with relief.

My father moved over to another atmospheric control panel, right next to the storage cabinet I was perched on. I craned my neck to see what he was looking at, trying to make sense of the numbers and lines. Nitrogen injection projections, equatorial temperature gauges...Tyson's score, I knew what that was! Just yesterday, my father had explained to me that it measured chloroflorocarbon absorption rate. I was so pleased with myself I almost slipped over the sharp corner of the cabinet. My father slowly lifted his head to look at me, a proud smile barely hidden beneath his beard. He reached up to take one of my tiny hands into his long, bony one.

"I feel fortunate that I do the work that I do," he said. "Most people have jobs that are so subtle, so subordinate that it is impossible for a child to grasp the impact they create. You are able to see the good that I do. That is why you are here now."

He released my hand and flew away, making his way through the crowd to the center of the operations room. He stood on a raised pedestal, next to Amican and Mave, the Chief Bargian Officer.

My father cleared his throat, and the entire room fell immediately silent. He projected his voice to the room, and to the remaining few Heckle Barges elsewhere in the ITZ.

"This moment we have waited for, for our entire lives. Some of us for years, some of us for generations. After this, for the first time in history, and for the rest of time, there will be no humans without a home. After this, we will begin our lives anew. Humanity has searched for its place among the stars from the moment the spark of sentience alighted in our brains. After this, we will have found it."

The room erupted in a chorus of whoops and hollars. Video feeds from the other Heckle Barges showed similar scenes of celebration behind my father. Through it all, he looked at me, and beckoned me to join him.

I hopped down from the cabinet and pushed my way through dancing legs until my knees hit the stairs that led up to the central platform on which my father was standing. I felt his large, bony hands pull me from the crowd.

“This is the future I have created for you, Elle. Therefore, I feel the honor should be yours.”

My father prodded Amican, who somewhat reluctantly handed me a fiz terminal with a single red button on the screen.

“You may press it to begin the power transfer, and start the terraformation process of Antaria,” my father commanded, in his unique, un-commanding way.

I scrunched my face at the ridiculous red button.

“You didn’t need to make it so simple. I’m not a baby.”

Amican laughed loudly.

My father smiled. “You don’t want to do it?”

I pressed the button.

Seven light years away, a massive beam of pure, solar-harnessed energy shot into the center of the Antarian planet. Red circles of swirling gas appeared all across the sphere, raising the temperature of the surface to 2,000 degrees K. Soon, the entire planet would be obscured by gray clouds as the atmosphere congealed. In a month, seed bombs would detonate at strategic sites, covering the planet in wet vegetation. Shortly after, bots would begin constructing the buildings and roads. The planet was being born again, under a new God.

Nine months after I pressed the red button, I stepped foot onto Antaria. Heavy rain poured from the sky. The smell of sulfur and ozone seeped through my oxygen cannula into my nostrils. Oppressively hot air squeezed my small frame. It was glorious.

We had landed on a large outcropping of rock, from which I could see for miles. Lush green forests steeped in fog surrounded a gleaming white city with Flash highways fanning out into the mist. To the right, the mighty forest yielded to a giant open field of untouched grass. It evoked the same mix of eeriness and anticipation I felt when looking at an empty playground. It was exciting on its own, but it needed life, needed movement.

A deep rumbling came from the distance. Rain clouds began to part, making way for the first Heckle Barge to land; my former home. It came down a few hundred kilometers outside the city, in the giant grass field. It was over half the size of the city itself, and the force of the underburners flattened the acres of forest that surrounded the field. Even from our distant vantage point, my earbuds engaged to quiet the sound of the barge as it cut through the virgin atmosphere, finally coming to rest on the fresh soil. We were too far away to see the Bargians disembark, but I could imagine the wonder and joy on their faces as they took their first steps on their new home. Their first home.

My mother was among them, somewhere. She had wanted me to stay with her on the Heckle Barge that morning to help the sick get moving, but I chose to join my father, who stood next to me on the outcropping, watching from afar.

As my father had said on the day the terraformation of Antaria began, homelessness had now been eradicated from the ITZ. New planets and colonies would be established in the future for convenience of location as new galaxies were discovered, and in a million years, when populations began to outgrow the existing homeworlds, but humans would never again want for a place to feel connected. They would no longer suffer from the Waste. At least, not at the scale that mattered. For thousands of years, humanity had tried to eradicate the issue of homelessness by building houses, and providing jobs, and instituting programs, but they could never solve it completely. The chain of human wanting had been broken too many times to be made whole by such minor gestures. My father, he knew humanity, he knew what it needed. And he gave it to us.

36 - Day 55 - It's only fair

Ben fell into one of his depressions following his recounting of Elle's story. Lucia saw neither hide nor hair of him for two weeks, though she could occasionally hear him pounding away in his workshop. But mostly, she heard nothing but concerning silence on the other side of the cold door. She couldn't explain to herself why she would stand there each day, listening, other than the fact that sometimes, when she stood outside of the door for more than a few minutes, she would suddenly be overcome by a deep sense of relief, and a strong conviction that the man on the other side was fine. She found herself drawn to the workshop door whenever she felt anxious, which was often, seeking that preternatural calming sensation.

On a fiveday, Lucia awoke far too early, having had a deeply troubling dream about mushrooms. Unable to fall back asleep, she got out of bed, and unconsciously began to make her way towards the workshop door. She passed by the Simroom, and saw that it was occupied. Ben's childish face, one eye squinted shut, stuck his tongue out at her from the profile screen.

Lucia walked up to the door and it opened, to her surprise. She had assumed it would be locked.

Inside was a desert. She wandered through the short entryway, ignoring the simsuit that was offered to her by a robotic arm. Inside the Simroom, Orange sand blew over her feet, though she could not feel it. The horizon was blurred with dust that stretched on for hundreds of kilometers. A few, spiny trees poked through the sandstorm. And one spiky head of hair, growing out of a bandana, atop of a jumpsuit-clad mechanic.

As Lucia walked further into the desert, her earbuds began to hum with the sound of hot wind and sand particles colliding with each other. She walked slowly across the sand, her feet dispersing the grains she could not feel, towards Ben. He had yet to notice her, as his back was towards her and his head was bent down, looking at something in his hands.

Lucia waited until she was only a few meters away from him to speak.

However, as she opened her mouth, Ben cut her off. "You should take a bitebath first, the heat is tittilating."

He was referring to the simsuit, which would have bathed her in a layer of nanoscopic bots that would affect the hot desert heat and grainy windblown sand.

"I didn't come here to feel the desert. I came here to talk to you."

"Your mistake," he said, not turning around or raising his head.

"I thought I could, uh, ask you a question." She wondered for the first time just why she actually had come here. There was something magical drawing her here...yes, magic. That is what she wanted to ask about. What Ben had done that day, to save them all from the hydrogen bomb.

“You know you’re always asking me questions,” Ben said. “What if I had something to ask you?”

Lucia sputtered, unable to reply.

Ben lifted his head and looked casually over his shoulder. “You’d have to answer, it’s only fair.”

Lucia’s brain finally caught up. “You barely ever answer my questions, don’t act like I owe you.”

Ben dropped his hands and stuck them in the deep pockets of his navy jumpsuit, concealing whatever he’d been holding. He turned to face her.

“I’ve given you more than enough information to justify you telling me something. So. How did you end up marooned on a waystation, in the middle of Lub, by a bunch of Ataxi?”

“I must have told you when I first came aboard. The Ataxi I was working for were involved in some kind of criminal activity. We were attacked by the Light Police.”

Ben’s head dropped again, then he began to slowly walk towards Lucia, his feet dragging in the orange sand.

“I know that. I mean, how did you, an eighteen year old Hyell from Triangulum, end up cooking for a bunch of Ataxi?”

Lucia frowned, looking out to the burning mirage on the horizon.

Ben continued walking forward until he was only one step away from her. He folded his arms and stared at her with his cool gray eyes. Lucia looked at them briefly, then her gaze darted back to the horizon, before returning defiantly to stare him down.

“My father was mentally unstable,” she said. “He was brilliant, but also cruel. Such instability shouldn’t exist in an evolved family on an L2 world, so he was able to hide it, which only made the problem worse.” Lucia swallowed heavily.

“He, um, murdered my mother and sister when I was thirteen. The day after I graduated secondary school. I went to live with my Uncle after that, who flew a spacewagon between the Nimbus and Lub Galaxia. I set out on my own after a few years of that.”

Ben’s eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly, but showed no other reaction that Lucia could see from his face, which was partially obscured by his bandana. He stared at her for an uncomfortably long time, before he raised his left hand and tapped his com-palm. The desert disappeared, leaving them in the circular gray room with smooth walls. Though she could not feel the heat before, Lucia suddenly felt cold.

Ben lowered his bandana, revealing lips that curved down in a concerned frown.



“That’s a terrible thing that happened to you. I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

Though she had heard that sentiment too many times before, Lucia couldn’t help but feel comforted hearing it from him.

“I didn’t see it happen,” she said quietly. “Him, um, taking their lives. I was at school. I think, I think he knew that, somewhere in his twisted brain. He wanted to spare me from the violence, if he could spare anyone at all.”

“You’re worth sparing, Lucia,” Ben said. She felt his words touch her soul. She shrugged, wanting the feeling to be over, while simultaneously wishing it would last forever.

Ben coughed into his hand. “I know the sand isn’t real, but damn if I don’t feel some grit in my mouth.” He walked over to a dispenser in the entryway and poured himself a cup of water.

Lucia cleared her throat.

“So now I can ask you a question.”

Ben narrowed his eyes, taking a sip from the cup. “Fine. Shoot.”

Lucia cleared her throat again, happy to move on. “The hydrogen bomb, you slowed it down. How?”

“Magic.”

“I’m sorry, but, uh, that’s bullshit.”

Ben shrugged. “Anything you don’t understand looks like magic.”

“Um, no. I don’t understand how my Com-Palm predicts what I want to do, but I don’t think it’s magic. What you did, there’s nothing I’ve ever seen, no concept I learned in school that could explain it. That was...something different.”

“And let me guess, you want to learn more about it.” Lucia could see that he was beginning to get irritated.

“Uh, well, yeah.” Lucia shrugged her shoulders.

“Trust me, it’s not worth getting into.”

“You literally used magic to slow down a bomb, and you’re going to tell me it’s not worth getting into?”

“What I did back there was nothing, basically child’s play, and you still would never be able to do it yourself, so just drop it, ok?” Ben put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed firmly, urging her to stop.

A heat flared inside of her, propelling her on. “How do you know I couldn’t do it if you won’t even tell me what it is?”

“It will come up again in the story, Lucia.”

“But, when?”

“Eventually! If you would just let me tell the soffering story the way I want to soffering tell it, you’ll get the mystic fucking answers you seek!”

Ben threw the cup he was holding against the wall, casting droplets of water into the air.

“And then you’ll be disappointed cause it will just be another thing that you can’t do!”

With that, Ben walked out of the room in a huff.

Tears came to Lucia’s brown eyes. She fell to her knees on the cold, hard floor. She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes until the tears could no longer squeeze through, as she would often do as a child. “I’m so confused,” she whispered to herself.

From somewhere within the depths of the ship, Ben’s voice rang out.

“Get used to it!”

## Part IV

## 37 - Nice to see you're moving again

I awoke the next day alone, the bed next to me, empty. I checked my Com-palm feed through bleary eyes. Virgon was celebrating its Founding Day. A Monister on New Laroon stepped down after 120 years of service. One of my Promethian cousins announced she was pregnant. They were all living their normal lives, unaware of chaos that was tearing its way through the ITZ. Unaware of the death that would come to them sooner than they thought. Unaware that their Gods would do nothing to stop it. Who knows, maybe they'd make me a God if I managed to save them.

I hoped Elle was in a better mood than me. I pulled up her profile, thinking I would scroll through the pieces of her psyche-map in search of a tool I could use to pry more information from her. She claimed to know the planet Amican was on, but refused to tell me how she knew that. And she expected me to trust her? How could I even trust that her source was valid if I didn't know what it was?

I did come across something shocking in her profile. Elle had shared her location with me. She was in the gym. I rolled out of bed, not bothering to change my clothes as I had fallen asleep in my blue work jumpsuit last night. On second thought...I put on a fresh pair of black pants and a gray shirt that brought out my eyes. Time to go see my wife.

I found her running on a treadmill. The circular tread projected a misty, green valley, and holimotes of musical notes danced around Elle's head. But I could see from Elle's face that she neither heard the music, nor saw the valley around her. Her thoughts were somewhere dark and quiet.

I approached her slowly, rehearsing what I was going to say in my head. A bead of sweat dropped from her chin and fell into the small stream that flowed down her chest in between her breasts, which bounced hypnotically as she ran, spilling ever so slightly over the rim of her tight workout shirt.

She glanced at me and turned off her music as I walked up to the treadmill. The holimotes disappeared, but her expression remained the same. She was pissed.

"Nice to see you're moving again," I said. She kept running, staring forward.

"We don't have the time to sit still," she replied.

"My thoughts exactly. We should ping Christopher and Jana and tell them our new plan."

“Except that we don’t have one yet.”

“Christopher isn’t into details, remember? We need to know if we can procure physical avatars before we can make a plan, because if we can’t...”

We could recruit people to search New Xin on our behalf. But to coordinate a search of that size... We could get someone to scan the planet in the hopes he was just walking around. But he would no doubt wear a disguise if he ever went in public... We could hack into public surveillance records in case he’d passed by a camera when he first arrived. But he’d never be that stupid... My brain spat out a hundred possibilities and cut them each down just as quick.

“Hey Ben, are you ok?” Elle hopped out of the treadmill and came to rest in front of me, her hands on her hips.

Her concern was enough to pull me out of the hive of flashing points in my brain. “Oh yeah, I’m fine, just thinking.”

“You looked like you were in pain.” She put a hand on my shoulder, filling me with warmth. “This is a lot to process, I know. But we’ll figure it out,” she smiled, the pink lips I had kissed last night stretching from ear to ear.

“I already talked to Christopher this morning,” she said. “He said he’s more than happy to foot the cost for two automatons, and the power it will take for us to use them as Avatars. So that’s something.”

It was something. Now we could walk the symmetrical streets of New Xin as though we were there. We could interrogate Amican, even use force if necessary. That is, if we found him.

“Christopher said they’ll work on procuring them, and that we should have them at our disposal in a day or two. He’s also ordered all Reliance members within three months of New Xin to travel there.”

“And how many people is that?” I asked.

“So far, eleven people,” she said with a wince. I let my heavy head fall back in despair, causing my neck to audibly crack. “I know, I know, but they’re going to work on recruiting more!”

“So there will be thirteen of us, including our avatars, to search an entire planet of eight billion sents. Great,” I moaned gutterally, the words sounding muted from my backwards bent neck. We’d gone and traded one impossible task for another.

“We’ll have to get creative,” she said. “But Ben, I think you should put your focus into Amican, and how we’re going to get him to talk. Do your psycho-map thing.”

“It’s psyche-map and you know it.”

“Yeah, alright. You need to do your thing, because you’re the only one that can.”

“It’s not that simple Elle. A big part of creating a psyche-map is doing research on the person. Getting information from friends, public surveillance, profiles. It’s not going to be easy to find that kind of stuff for Amican Stone.

“On the contrary, I think a lot of that work is already done for you. There must be thousands of articles and books and serials about Amican’s life.”

“There could be some quality information in some of that, but most of it is going to be useless. He’s been alive for over 500 years, and most of that time he’s spent in almost complete isolation. It’s true most of our psyche is developed in the first 30 years of life, but a person can change dramatically given enough time. And he’s had a lot of it. Who knows if the man we’re chasing really is the same Amican Stone who built the second generation Cores.”

“That is why you should get started on this now,” she said.

She had a point. Then again, she could be trying to distract me from figuring out what she knew. Shit, I was being paranoid. Was there a part of me that really believed she could still be working for the Council?

“You know, I’ve spent a decent amount of time around the man over the years. I’d be happy to tell you everything I remember,” she offered.

Now there was an idea. Not only would it help me to map Amican, but I could learn more information for Elle’s map as well. We could spend more time together, maybe we could even...

*You need to stop.*

It was Artemis’ voice in the back of my mind. I thought I had gotten rid of her nagging. Why was she suddenly back...with uncanny timing, an alert from my Com-palm sounded in my earbuds.

*Your emotional quotient threshold has been breached.*

Emotional separation is a key factor in the success of a play. For the Art of the Dream to work, you can’t allow your mark to experience emotions above a certain quotient for an extended period of time, otherwise you will remain imprinted in their brain, no matter how smooth your exit. The same goes for yourself. It’s naive to think you’d be able to interact with someone without feeling any emotions of your own, so you need to monitor them to ensure they stay below a certain threshold.

I haven't brought this up in the telling of my story thus far, because it hadn't been an issue in my life up to this point. But there was a cardinal sin in the science of psyche-mapping, which Artemis shot into me even harder than the thousands of other lessons she injected into my skull.

You cannot build a psyche-map of a person you love.

The repercussions are obvious, but I'll explain them anyway. If you are in love with someone that you can manipulate in any way you desire, you will never stop, you will never end the play. None of your relationships will ever be real. You'll be cheating yourself as much as the subject of your affection. Artemis told me stories of her ancestors who had gone down this road themselves, and the result was always catastrophic. Suicide, murder; terrible things that never happened in the Family otherwise. A life without real love is something that a person cannot stand.

And I was in love with Elle. My mind realized it only a second before my monitoring program.

"Ben, you're making that face again," Elle said to me, her faint brows arching in concern, beautiful, heart melting, concern. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"I...I'm fine, really, Elle. Just tired."

"You slept for like eleven hours last night, is it possible you have an illness? You're not doing loads of amp again, are you?"

Basar's beard, what was I going to do? I'd already built more than half a map for her, I'd used the research I'd done to play her just last night. Not to mention we now had to find a fucking rogue Councilmember together or billions of sents would die.

"I'm just worried," I finally managed. "About all of this. About trying to manipulate a member of the Council."

"Soffing stars, I am too. But for what it's worth, I trust you to do the right thing."

"The...right thing?"

"Yes, the right thing. I trust you are going to figure this out. I trust that you are going to save people's lives. I trust that you are not going to fuck me over. You'll make the right decisions. Or at least, the good decisions."

My entire body felt like it was being squeezed. Even my vision was narrowed to a small circle. She thought I was good.

“I...will,” I said stupidly. The air around me became even thinner. I had to get out of there. “Sorry, maybe I am sick, or, I mean, coming down with something.”

I walked as quickly as I could to the clear door leading out of the gym. My shoulder bumped against the edge of the door as I slid through it, but I felt nothing. All I could feel was my heart beating so quickly I thought it might stop. My arms and legs were numb, fuck, I might actually pass out. As dark spots filled my eyes, I caught sight of the purple curtains of the Church. I fell through them, onto the dark hardwood floor inside.

## 38 - Not bad for your first time

On my hands and knees, I sucked in air though my swollen throat in sharp, painful gasps. The darkness had enclosed on me and I could see nothing, only feel my heart beating so hard it shook my entire body. Maybe I was dying, or I'd been poisoned. Where was Elle? We had to shut down the Core, I couldn't fall apart now. I needed to take something...

I felt something touch the crown of my head. My brain froze, then my body stopped shaking. Slowly, my heart began to calm. I blinked my eyes, unable to move anything else for fear that I might fall back into the pit. I could see the faint outline of my own hands on the dark brown wood floor, in the dim of the church.

“Welcome back, Ben.”

I dared to raise my head. It was Jana, wearing a long dark-colored robe. She removed her hand from my head and slowly pulled it into her robe.

“I believe you were looking for me?” she said, her voice echoing slightly in the open room.

“I, um,” I cleared my throat, not wanting to be rude. I sat back on my heels and looked around the church. It was empty, the only movement coming from the flickering orange candles that were scattered around the room.

“Where is Christopher?” I asked. I’d never seen them apart.

“Even we need time apart from one another, every so often. Solitude is an important state, for both the mind and the body.”

I hummed nervously. It was odd, seeing her here alone.

“Take a seat,” she gestured to one of the few benches that were placed around the circular altar. I obeyed, my legs shaking as I took the steps to the bench. She glided over to the altar and rotated to face me. She struck an intimidating figure at over two meters tall, though her thin face wore a kind expression.

“How are you feeling?” she asked me.

I rubbed my hands together between my legs. “Um, better. Yeah, I’m ok.” I straightened my back a little.

“I’m disheartened to hear you have yet to begin practicing Grammercy.”

Sure, why not talk about this. I had no words for any of the other feelings I had barely contained in my chest. “You’ve been talking to Seb?”

“We discuss matters relating to the Religion. Among other things.”

Basar’s wind, she was worse than Seb. “I don’t think I believe in it. The Religion.”

She raised a thin black eyebrow.

I lowered my head like a child in trouble. “I mean, I don’t have a solid idea of how this Religion works. I know, being confused by it is *part* of it, but how can I believe in something I can’t understand?”

“There are four stages of Grammerical powers,” Jana said as she raised a bony finger, signaling she was beginning instruction. “The first is the ability to manipulate thought in yourself. This includes the ability to see glimpses of the future.” She raised a long, thin arm above her head.

“The second is the ability to manipulate thought in others.” She pointed at me.

“The third is the ability to manipulate matter.” She pushed her hand toward the ground.



“The fourth is the ability to create matter. Only the Great Architect himself can accomplish the last.” She returned her hand beneath her robe.

“In other words, I could gain the ability to do any of the first three?”

“With the right training, the right tools, and the right state of mind, yes.”

There was no part of me that wanted to discuss manipulating thought at that moment. “When you say you can manipulate matter...”

“What I’m talking about is moving matter in a way we wouldn’t think is humanly possible.”

“So like, telekenisis?” It was easy to see how that could be useful.

“While ultimately, anything is possible using the Religion, the abilities we cultivate are of a different nature. Through focus on a single kind of particle, you may be able to manipulate it. An example would be directing a beam of light in a different direction. Doing something like bending a spoon, that would require focus on too many different elements — it would not be prudent to use the Religion for such things. Equally valuable in the Religion is the ability to see that the best course of action would be to pick the spoon up and bend it with your hands.”

I leaned against the back of the bench, moving my hands to the tops of my thighs. “Show me then. Bend light.”

“I do not think that would be the most helpful use of my energy today. I think you have another problem that I can help with.”

“And what problem is that?”

“You tell me.”

The list of problems I needed help with was as long as my dick. I couldn’t explain the situation with Elle, but I suppose there was another problem that was, in the cosmic scheme of things, more important.

“I need to find someone. Amican, I need to find Amican.” A thought occurred to me. “Wait, you said the second stage of power was the ability to manipulate thought in others. Can you do that for this individual? Can you find his brain, wherever it is, and make him reveal himself?”

“Again, I think that is not the best use of my energy at this time. Stand up.”

I sighed heavily, but stood.

“I think the solution is closer to you than you realize. I think the obstacle lies in here,” she said, raising a long finger to my forehead. “We will do a ritual together. But first, you must do a cleansing Multah. Your aura is all over the place,” she waved her hand around in the air as though she were swatting flies.

Jana glided over to a large cupboard that was sitting against a wall and began rifling through it. “Where were you raised?”

“All over the place.”

“Inside or outside the Ertian Empire?”

“Both.”

“What cultures do you identify with? What races?”

“Promethian culture. We worship Basar, the energy that fuels all motion.”

She stopped rifling for a moment, then continued. “Interesting.” After another minute of opening and shutting drawers, she motioned me over to her.

She turned up a light so that it illuminated the cupboard. On it sat a dozen or so objects. I saw a straw doll, a cleaning wand, an ornate plate, a blue gemstone...”What is all this?” I asked.

“We must choose tools that speak to you. So much of Grammercy is deeply personal. The tools will symbolize a concept within you, so they need to be objects that are already tied to existing ideas in your mind. I do not have time to teach you exactly what each tool represents, but as long as it is something you are familiar with, that will do for today. Choose four.”

I looked over the objects. The plate was clearly Oloran-style: one of the cultures that existed on Promethia, primarily in the western hemisphere. It was brightly colored, with thousands of spirals emanating from the center, representing the motion of existence. I touched it, feeling the grooves, remembering how the sweet sauce from Auntie Sorah’s Jerrico chicken, my favorite Promethian dish, would pool in the center.

“This one,” I said. Jana picked it up and gestured back to the objects.

They were mostly things I recognized; common objects I’d seen a hundred times before. I guessed the cupboards hid other ‘tools’ that would be more familiar to someone from an high L planet, or who had been raised in a typical family. I chose a vacuum bag, a flashlight, and the cleaning wand. Jana took them each and placed them on the altar at the center of the room.

The altar was plain, gray stone, apart from four red markings at the top, bottom, left and right sides, where the tools were placed. She turned on a command screen on the surface of the altar, which overlaid the stone with precise lines. Jana made some adjustments to the placement

of the tools, then turned the projection off. All the lights apart from a single overhead spotlight turned off, and I felt the floor begin to vibrate.

“Stand here, facing this wall.” She gently moved me so that my back was facing the altar, right where the cleaning wand was. She handed me a clear, stick-like object that had been sharpened to a point at the tip, almost like a knife. It had a weight to it, like stone, though I could not tell what it was made out of.

“Do as I do, and say as I say,” she ordered me, then bowed her head and closed her eyes. I did the same.

“Feel the energy emanating from the floor. Pull it into your feet.”

I did my best. I imagined my feet sucking in glowing light through the vibration of the floor.

“Feel the heavy metal beneath you, and the ship’s engine beneath that, and the heavy metal beneath that.” The vibrations of the floor increased, until my feet began to feel almost numb, as though they had fallen asleep.

“Good. Now pull the energy up from your feet, into your shins, then your thighs. Feel the warmth, or the coolness. Let it inside of you. Draw it up into your head. Now stick your wand into the center of the energy. I opened one of my eyes to see that Jana had pressed the sharp tip of her wand into her forehead. I did the same, then immediately pulled the wand back as it pierced my skin. I felt a drop of blood trickle down my forehead.

“Good. Now use the wand to raise the energy above your crown.” Jana slowly moved her hand up so that the wand hovered above her head. The tip glowed brightly with a yellow light. “Pull in the energy from the air, into your ball of light.”

I looked up at my own wand. There was indeed a point of light at the end of it, though it was much dimmer and smaller than Jana’s. I did as she told, closing my eyes and imagining light being pulled into my wand.

“You are not pulling the energy into the wand, but into the space above your head. Your Keter. The wand is simply in the middle of it.”

I opened my eyes enough to shoot a suspicious look at Jana. Her eyes were still shut, her wrinkled face serene and unblemished.

“Now do as I do and say as I say, as close as you can.”

She lowered the wand back to her forehead. “Ah-nrrrah tah-greeeee.”

Her voice sounded at once both low and high, like Seb's sounded when he demonstrated the language of Grammercy to me. I tried my best to recreate the sound, channeling the throaty tones of the Argruarian tongue.

Jana pointed the wand towards the ground and vibrated "Ah-marrrrrr larr tooooooook."

Then she pointed the wand to the right, then left, making a string of similar sounds, before finishing with the wand clasped between both of her hands at her chest.

"Ahrrrr-mennnnn."

From there, she began to draw a spiral shape in the air with the wand. As she did so, a blue trail followed her hand, like the after image of a bright light. I mimicked her movements as she walked around the altar, drawing similar, yet slightly different spiral-like shapes in the air. As she did this, she continued speaking in that guttural voice.

We completed our circles, facing the same wall as when we had began, Jana standing a half-meter in front of me. She began to slowly raise her hands, the long sleeves of her robe sliding up her forearms, as she chanted in Ertish:

"Before me, blow,

Behind me, wave,

To my right, burn,

To my left, rest,

Above me, the Truth."

As her hands reached their zenith, a bright orb of light appeared between them.

"Let the divine light descend!"

She released her hands to her sides, as the bright white orb crashed into her head. I did the same, and felt a cool mist wash over me, pickling the skin on my arms and neck.

Jana raised her wand once more, which now emitted a beacon of solid white light that shot through the ceiling.

"Ah-nrrrah tah-greeeee!" she said, impossibly loud. I shouted with her, fear creeping its way into my chest. She shot her arm out to the right, shooting the beacon in the same direction, shouting more words. She continued the circle to the floor, her arms moving swiftly, while her the rest of her body remained as still as the trunk of a tree.

"Now repeat these words with me, Ben. Hooo rrrreyyy hooo rrrahhh!"

We shouted the words together, over and over, as a fountain of sparks shot up through the ground, then fell back to the ground again, showering us in light.

Then, suddenly, Jana stopped, and lowered her wand.

All the flashing lights and vibrations faded, leaving me breathless and vulnerable in the dark.

“Not bad for your first time,” she said, as the background lights of the Church slowly illuminated. “How do you feel?”

“A bit silly. But...also lighter, somehow. Recharged.” It was the truth. The anxiety I had felt before was distant, overpowered by a directionless excitement.

“Good. The better you can become at saying the words and doing the movements correctly, the greater the effect will feel. Now we can begin the real work. The Ritual.”

“Is it going to be more complicated than that?”

Jana laughed a short, high-pitched laugh. “Yes. What we just did is referred to as a Multah. For your...problem...we will need a full ritual. But don’t worry, I will be doing most of the work.”

Jana had me strip down and put on one of the hood-robos that covered only a thin slice of flesh down the middle of my front and back. She did the same, making no effort to obscure her naked body from me. There was no backing out now, the clothes were off.

What followed was a series of postures, whispers, moans and shouts. Jana danced around me, occasionally directing me to say or do something. She would have me move until she was satisfied I had done it right, each time re-doing many of the previous steps herself.

After a while, I began to fall into a sort of trance. My limbs moved into position without thinking. My mouth formed words I didn’t understand. I began to levitate, but without the feeling of weightlessness you typically get in zero gravity. It was as though my world, my plane of existence was being moved a meter above the plane I was previously in. White, blue, yellow and purple light swirled around me. Jana’s voices growled and whistled in both of my ears simultaneously. I leaned back. I saw a room above me, where the outer walls spiraled into the center, then down into the floor, then up again, in an endless loop. A room made of motion. It looked familiar, somehow. I wanted to go further inside, but a face appeared in the center of the room, blocking my way.

“What do you see?” Jana’s voice asked.

Who did that face belong to? I focused my eyes on it..it wasn’t a face, it was the back of a head. Short, bright red hair on tan skin. Could it be...

“Uncle Y’ra.”

As I said his name, he turned to look at me, smiling as wide as the tips of his moustache, as he used to do whenever Artemis and I would walk into his home on Promethia.

“Why do you see him?”

“I don’t know.”

I wanted to ask Uncle Y’ra why he was there, but the lines of his face slid down the central pillar and were replaced by Auntie Sorah, her long braids dripping with gold.

“Why are you here?” I asked her.

“You can’t ask in this way,” Jana’s voice whispered. “Gooooorr rrraaa k’ mmmmeerrrr rrrrrnnn k’ rrrnn...”

I tried to copy the sounds she was making, but couldn’t move my throat in that way. Auntie Sorah was replaced by Cousin Theo. He stood in front of a city, his hand outstretched.

A snake slithered through the air between us. It hissed, turning in a circle, following its tail faster and faster, hissing louder and louder. Suddenly it lunged at me, baring a hundred fangs in spiny rows.

I felt myself stumble, pulled away from the tall buildings of the city. I tried to pull myself up, but I tripped and fell into a deep crevasse. I watched the buildings get further and further away, until finally they disappeared, the lip of the crevasse swallowing my world into total darkness.

As soon as I lost sight of the last sliver of light, my back collided with a force that knocked the wind out of me. It was an idea. A thought.

I opened my eyes to find a blinding bright light shining down on me. It was the overhead light in the Church. I was sprawled out on my back, on the cold, gray altar, my hood-robe no longer covering my body. Jana stood to my left, hands clasped in front of her. I cleared my throat, which was raw, and spoke.

“I need to speak to my family. They will know what to do.”

Jana bowed her head, almost concealing a small smile, and walked out of the room.

## 39 - Shooting for the stars

It was not a revolutionary idea. It was not even a new thought. I'd considered asking the Family for help before, but I was worried they would be upset with me for not speaking to them for so long. The last time I had had a real conversation with any of them had been at Artemis' funeral, years ago. So no, it was not a new idea. What was new was the way I regarded the idea. Before it hadn't seemed worth the trouble. What could my family do to help shut down a solar harnessing core, or find Amican Stone? They were each incredibly skilled, but not that skilled. Besides, I would be subjecting them to extreme danger, and I couldn't live with having a hand in the death of another family member. They probably didn't want to hear from me because of what happened with Artemis.

Yes, before, I had 100 reasons not to speak with my family. Now, I believed with my entire being that it was the only way I was going to solve this problem. I did not know what they would tell me, or what I would say to them, but I knew I had to see them. Of course, I couldn't see a real feed of them, only an AI generated facsimile of their voice and likeness projected over the jintum telegraph, but their words would be theirs. I buzzed with excitement at the thought of speaking with my family for the first time in years. If this was what The Religion was capable of, then I may just have to convert.

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Lucia raised her hand.

"Lucia, I told you I'm not just going to explain how the Religion works to you..."

"It's not about the Religion. My question. Isn't," Lucia said.

"Well then?"

"What did you tell your family, about how Artemis died?"

Ben's gaze traveled from Lucia to somewhere on the ceiling. "I said that she was shot by a mark that had discovered he was being played."

“And they believed that?”

“I told them that he was going to shoot me, because I was the one who accidentally exposed us, but she rushed him. Killed him, and got herself blasted through the heart.”

“You took the blame?”

“Don’t make shit up if you don’t have to. It was a story that was close to the truth. I didn’t have the energy to come up with some elaborate cover-up tale.”

“But you could have removed any blame from yourself. It wasn’t your fault, what really happened. Neither of you knew what evil creature you were messing with until it was too late. Why let your family think you made some grave mistake?”

“There was a lot happening at the time, if you recall Lucia. I’d just discovered that there was a network of evil aliens secretly rooting itself into the ITZ. I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

Lucia let it go. She’d undergone hundreds of hours of intensive therapy to remove the concept of blaming herself for the deaths of her mother and sister from her mind, which was why it seemed odd to Lucia that the truth Ben chose to create for Artemis’ death was one where he was at fault. But when Ben became fixated on an idea, it was impossible to change his mind. She slowly sank back into the yellow couch.

“Glad we got that out of the way. Anyways...”

~~~~~

I sauntered back from the Church to my room to find Elle sitting on her bed, reading something on her Com-Palm. She was wearing a thick baggy sweatshirt that she had pulled up over her nose. She looked at me and pulled her head out of the neckhole, then slowly began to extricate herself from her bed like an old woman with creaky joints.

“There you are. Are you...feeling ok?” she asked, bending backwards to stretch her back.

“I’m feeling much better. Just had to take a shit,” I said.

“Ah yeah, know the feeling,” she said, sneaking a glance at me before bending forward in another stretch.

She probably suspected something else was going on. Artemis’ voice was telling me I should limit my contact with her as much as possible, but my heart strongly rejected that idea.



“I have to make an important call now,” I said, sitting on my bed.

Elle snapped up. “An important call? To whom?” I hoped against my better judgment that she would stay.

“My family.”

“Your...family? As in brothers and sisters?”

“Cousins. Aunts and Uncles.” I didn’t bother explaining they weren’t of blood relation. It wasn’t the way I thought about them.

“Well this I have to see.”

I loved her, it was so clear to me now. The way she was looking at me, her interest in me, was bliss...no, I had to focus. I needed to speak with my family. Would Elle’s presence disrupt that? Should I ask her to leave? It occurred to me that I was asking that question to something...not myself, not Artemis...was it God? Basar? The Architect?

I decided to let her stay because it was *my* decision.

“Fine, you can stay. But it may not actually be happening for a while, because I haven’t reached out to them yet.”

I pulled up the profiles of the family members I had been the closest to before Artemis’ death. My mouth fell open when I saw Y’ra, Sorah and Theo’s location. They weren’t on Promethia like I guessed. They were all on Antaria. Only a few days away from New Xin, if you had a ticket on the inter-Triangulum slingshot.

I had directly entangled lines for each of them. I tapped my Com-palm to send a simple group message to them:

*Hello, sorry it has been so long. Can you talk?*

Auntie Sorah was the first to respond, within seconds.

*S: Ben, it’s been a day or two hasn’t it? I’m here with Y’ra, in Kantuky on Antaria. Where are you?*

*B: I’m over a year from you. Do you know where Theo is?*

*S: Here’s somewhere around here. He met a girl!* A holimote of a blushing face came through with Sorah’s message.

*B: Poor girl. Let’s not wait on him, I’ll call now.*

I began a call, and added Theo in case he decided to join. As I waited for Uncle Y'ra and Auntie Sorah's avatar's to appear, I was struck with a pang of nervousness. Would they be willing to help me after I had ignored them for so long? After Artemis had died under my watch? Was I still considered part of the family?

They appeared in the air before me, 3D images of their head and shoulders. Even though they were a fabrication, their likeness pulled from thousands of hours of us interacting in person, they still looked so real.

Uncle Y'ra wore an expression of mild annoyance. "Alli, you cuss. You know it's Winter in Northern Antaria? Mighty dark outside..."

He was giving me shit for calling so late. Deep winter was when the gap between standard time and planet time was largest on Antaria. Despite the fact that his inter-planetary drug smuggling business kept him tied to standard time, he couldn't pass up on the opportunity to blame it on me.

"You know, it's pretty dark out here too, in the middle of space. Sometimes I get confused," I responded.

"Eh, doesn't surprise me, with a brain as dim as yours..."

We both burst into laughter. Auntie Sorah chuckled as well, the AI perfectly capturing her signature elongated ha's.

"It's nice to see you again, milla." Auntie Sorah used the Promethian word for a deeply loved one, which loosened my chest's tight grip on my heart.

I beckoned for Elle to join the call before they said anything too embarrassing.

"I'd like to introduce you to my latest partner in crime, Elle."

Elle waved.

Auntie Sorah widened her eyes. "She looks mighty pretty on our end, is she the same on yours?"

"My public profile is 100% genuine," Elle insisted before I could.

Uncle Y'ra cleared his throat. "And when you say partner in crime..."

"I mean we are literally committing crimes together." I let the 'nothing more' remain unsaid.

“Glad to hear you’re still in the family business,” Uncle Y’ra said. “Last I heard, you were tied up in a drug syndicate. Is that still your main gig?”

Of course Y’ra would be proud of my Xarabee syndicate. After all, he was the one who taught me how to manufacture drugs.

“That was a sweet gig for a while. Honestly, I’m not sure who’s running that show now. I’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

Theo’s head suddenly popped up between Y’ra and Sorah.

“Family! What’s bright, eh? Alli, you’re still alive! And you’ve got a pretty bitty with you!”

“This is Elle, my *professional* partner.” I would have rather kissed an Ataxi than delved into our complicated relationship.

“Why are they calling you Alli?” Elle asked.

I grimaced. “It was a nickname when I was a kid. Which I’m not anymore,” I said pointedly.

“Ok, ok. I know how it is, *Ben*,” Theo conceded. “So, what’s the thing? Why are we seeing your ugly mug again?”

I ran a hand through my hair and launched into the long background of the situation we now found ourselves in. Uncle Y’ra nearly exploded when he learned I had met some of the Councilmembers. They were all stunned into silence when I dropped the news about the fatal radiation. It didn’t take much convincing to make them believe Amican was responsible for it, as they had all been raised with more than a healthy dose of skepticism toward the Council.

As a result, they were not thrilled to learn that Elle was a former student of Amican’s protege. Of course, I left out the fact that she was also related to Aldus Ertian, and had worked for the Council most of her life. Trust would have to be built between them; my vote of confidence wouldn’t be enough.

“Who told Elle here that Amican is on New Xin?” Y’ra asked.

Elle looked at me expectantly. I stared back at her, wanting to know the answer myself. With every second that passed, I could feel my family’s suspicion growing.

“Her former professor told her,” I finally said. “They keep in touch apparently, Professor Balkan and Amican do.” It could be the truth for all I knew — whatever Elle’s real source was, I had to tell them something.

Sorah had other things on her mind. “Why not sabotage the energy transport mechanism, rather than the Core itself?” she asked, flexing her mechanical expertise. “It’s possible to divert machthermal beams—”

I cut her off. “The Core doesn’t send out Machthermal energy. Each unit harnesses the fission reaction that occurs within its plasma field, then converts it: first into machthermal energy, then microwave energy. Next, the transference element in each unit transmits the microwaves to the long-range rectennaes, which distribute the energy out to wherever in the ITZ it needs to go.”

Theo sucked his teeth. “Damn, you’re telling me we’re actually getting jabs of microwaves, and not machtherms? How did we not know this?”

“The last transmitting rectenna does the conversion back to machthermal energy. It’s not something we ‘needed’ to know about,” I said, putting air quotes around the word ‘needed’.

“There’s got to be some way to hack into the neural circuitry of something in that big old ball. Confuse it for just long enough to insert some bad arcs—”

I cut Theo off too. “Even if we managed to trick the AI into doing something it shouldn’t, it would immediately detect the inconsistency and restart itself. We’re talking pre-Lost Age technology that has been watched over by the Council more than any other tool in the ITZ. It’s the source of power for all their other projects. They’re not going to let us play around with it.”

“And we’ll never be able to learn enough about it either,” Elle said. All the floating heads turned to look at her. After a moment of silence, she pressed on, “It’s more complicated than you can even begin to imagine. Even a single harnessing unit has millions of elements at work within it.”

“You’d be surprised how complicated we can get, brightness, down here in the underground,” Y’ra said with a cautionary tone. “If the Council taught this shit in school, perhaps we could actually be of some use.”

Elle gritted her teeth but did not respond.

“But they don’t teach it, not even to lighters like you,” Y’ra continued. “And now we’ve got this radiation to deal with.” It was as though he could sense Elle was sympathetic towards the Council, even as she was trying to subvert them.

“Only millions, if we can help it,” I said, trying to break the tension. “Like I said, Amican is our best bet. Even he wouldn’t know everything about how the Cores work, but he will know how to shut them down.”

“And what makes you think he will tell us about it?” Y’ra asked.

I'd barely had time to analyze Amican's motives, but I was getting used to working on the fly. "He's no longer loyal to the Council, for one. Who knows if he ever was, considering what he allowed to happen. So he's not bound by their unbreakable non-interference policy.

"He'll be protective over the Cores, that is for sure. They're his children. But when confronted, in person, by a group of sents that have no qualms with interfering, he may be frightened into letting the first generation Cores go. They weren't built under his watch, after all, and they're not necessary to keep the ITZ in power." It was a weak play based on guesses and gas, but it was all we had to go on.

"My, my, it's almost like Artemis is back here with us again," said Auntie Sorah, smiling. I felt a pang in my chest at the mention of her name. It was fear — fear that what was coming next was anger, castigation for my role in her 'death'. However, none came. I saw only expressions of pride and nostalgia from my family's floating busts. I suppose it was nice to hear that I could bullshit as well as the master.

"She's always with me," I told them. For better or for worse. I mentally tipped my hat to Artemis's omnipresent presence.

"I feel her in the wind every day," Y'ra said.

I shifted uncomfortably, changing the subject. "I will work on generating leverage against Amican, but we have to find him first. This is what I need your help for." I internally begged them not to ask why I needed them, because I had no answer for that. Only my magical faith.

"Well it will take some thinking, that's for sure," said Uncle Y'ra. "Knowing what planet he's on is barely better than knowing what dimension he's in. Though I suppose it's a fair bit of luck that we happen to be visiting Brianna just next door."

Of course, that's why they were on Antaria. They were visiting my Cousin who had just announced her pregnancy. "You're a little early to see the baby, aren't you?" I asked.

"This is her second try, poor thing. She was originally due last month, which is why we left Promethia 10 months ago. We were supposed to be late! But we don't mind waiting a little longer," Sorah said, then displayed her strong white teeth in a grin.

"Ah, I see," I said. "At any rate, it is a miracle you're there. We'll need as many feet on the ground as possible." I stopped myself. "That is, assuming you'll help us."

Uncle Yr'a and Auntie Sorah looked at each other. "Alli — er — Ben," Y'ra began, with one thick orange eyebrow raised, "I'm offended you didn't ask us sooner!"

"I thought you'd finally retired!" I retorted, "surely you'll want a few days of relaxation before the great breeze finally sweeps you away!"

“I’m too heavy to be swept away!” he shouted, then laughed deeply.

A tingling began to well up behind my eyes. I had to cut this short before things started getting mushy.

“Elle and I have a couple of physical avatars coming our way, over there in your parts. It will take a couple days to get them set up, but once we do, let’s all meet in Kentucky and brainstorm.”

“Physical avatars, eh?” Theo whistled. “Where’d you get the digits for that?”

“Courtesy of the Reliance,” I said. “You’ll likely end up meeting some of them as well.”

“They don’t sound like bad friends to meet,” Sorah said.

“I guess we will see you soon,” I said, breath catching in my throat. I needed this conversation to end soon.

“Trying to leave so quickly, milli?” Sorah asked, narrowing her golden eyes. “We have four years of lost time to catch up on.”

My mind raced with ways to worm my way out of this. Things were about to get serious. “I’m so sorry Auntie Sorah, but we have an incredible amount of work to do. There’s so many lives on the line...”

“I understand this, Ben. But Family comes first,” she said. Soffing voids, there was no escape.

“We all missed you terribly, after Artemis’ death,” Sorah said. “We called you so many times, milli. Why did you not answer?”

Memories of missed and ignored calls, barely registering through the haze of my drug and adventure-filled existence, rose painfully in my mind.

“I..” I stammered, averting my eyes from my family, and Elle. “It was wrong of me, I know. But I loved Artemis so much, and the pain of her loss was too much for me to handle. And I knew you would want to talk about her.”

“Oh my child,” Sorah said, tears filling her avatar’s eyes. “You have been through so much. We would never want to do anything more to hurt you. It is you we want to talk about.”

“Artemis lives on through you,” Y’ra said, his gruff voice cracking as he spoke. “But say the word and we will never speak of her in your presence again.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “No, no. Please. That would be wrong. I just needed time.” I couldn’t control the words I was saying.

“We must speak her name on the wind, so that it may be carried to her ears,” Sorah said, quoting Promethian scripture. “But as the Book of the Wheel also tells us, time is the greatest gift we all receive.”

“So we will gladly give some more to you,” Y’ra added, his shoulder moving, probably to nudge his partner. “Shall we, Sorah my gentle breeze?”

Sorah hmm’ed. “I’ll let you go for now, but we’ll have to catch up on our lost time when we talk next!”

I let out an exhale that nearly emptied me.

Uncle Y’ra nodded. “It was mighty great to see your face again, Al- uh, Ben. Even if it has been too long.”

“Same to you. To all of you. Goodbye.”

I hung up quickly. What else could I say to them, after what had happened. After what had really happened with Artemis...

Elle’s voice caught me before I dove too deep inside my mind.

“Phew, all this suspense is making me sweat like a summer squash!”

She grabbed the bottom of her baggy sweatshirt with both hands and pulled it over her head. The soft skin of her stomach, slightly wet with perspiration, stretched and bounced as she wiggled the shirt off. Her undershirt was a thin crop top that fell just above her belly button. Thoughts of my tongue caressing the curve of her waist swam through my mind as she shook out her hair.

Her short blond locks came to a rest in a perfect frame around her face. She noticed me looking at her, and smiled.

“So Alli, where’d you get that nickname from?”

Painfully, I looked away. I knew we’d have to have this discussion sooner or later. Not about the nickname, I mean, about who gave it to me. If I told her the complete truth, then I’d have to admit that I’d lied to her about...well just about everything when it came to who I was. I couldn’t hurt her like that. The cold emptiness I felt when she slipped away from me, I couldn’t let that happen again.

So I lied. “I was really into alligators as a kid.”

“Ah, that’s not as funny as I wanted it to be. Um...”

I could tell she wanted to ask a question, but wasn't sure how to phrase it.

"What's the deal with your family? I know you told me most of your family died in an accident, and you don't exactly...look...related..." She scrunched up her shoulders and waved her rigid hands back and forth.

"They were of distant relation to my mother, and they welcomed us into their home when I was young. After the accident." I hoped my solemn face would dissuade her from asking more. It took every ounce of my focus to keep my mind from coming up with ways to use her psyche-map to get her to stop.

She put her hands on her knees, gently pushing her breasts together. If only there were some way I could hide in the beckoning dip between them...

"What has it been like, to not talk to them for so long? For four whole years?"

"Longer than that even. It's...I didn't think about it a lot." I shook my head. "No, that's not true. I thought about them a lot. But then, I would be reminded of what happened, and I would think of how they weren't my real family, and that they must not care." Despite my best effort, tears began to fill my eyes, blurring my view of Elle's cleavage.

"I..." I choked on the words. "I think they do care. About me."

Her watery form stood and embraced me. The tears broke loose and fell down my cheeks, as the torrent of emotions crashed through my body with the force of a waterfall. I ran from it, waves licking at my heels, deeper and deeper into the dark, quiet place in the center of me.

I found a fortress, protected in the middle of the sturdy towers. The torrent ceased. I was ok again.

"Ben, you know what I just realized?"

Elle released her hold and stepped away from me. Her expression was different now. Her eyes wider, her light brows raised in the middle. Her lips open.

"What?" Could she be about to say...

"We've basically met each other's parents now."

I let out a pained laugh. "I guess you're right."

"That's a big deal, you know how many guys I've introduced to my dad? Exactly one, other than you."

"And who was this other lucky lad?"



“Oh, just the guy I thought I would spend the rest of my life with. But that didn’t happen, obviously.”

“He wasn’t kinky enough for you?”

She shot me a barely angry look. “No, I just outgrew him. I met him when I was much younger, and he taught me a lot about life, but after a decade together, I still wanted to learn more and he...he was done. Some people don’t need to keep shooting for the stars, forever.”

I could think of nothing I wanted more than to fly through the universe with her, forever. I wish I could have told her that, in that moment, but I’d retreated into myself, and was too numb.

“Sometimes I wonder if I would have been happier if I had stayed with him, and stopped pushing him to grow. But then I wouldn’t be here, and you’d have to save the ITZ all by yourself.” She gave a small, sad laugh. “Silver lining.”

There it was. The light, the small fire that burned in her eyes. So small, yet it threatened to consume me. She was dangerous, I should run away now and forever keep a safe distance between us. No, she was salvation, she was everything I wanted and she was here for me to take.

I wanted to reach out my hand, to touch her glistening skin, and pull her against me. But my cold body refused to obey me. I was in uncharted territory, paralyzed and helpless.

She looked at me, her face pleading. “You’re still so young Ben, but I hope you never lose your fighting spirit. There’s so little of it in our slice of the universe these days, because there’s been so little to fight against, but,” she turned away to look out of the window at the vast beyond, “I guess that’s changing.”

## 40 - I'm thinking Potilongo, but on a planetary scale

I peeled my clothes off my body for the first time in four days, stripping down to just my tight underwear. With my cellular lineage, it took weeks for my body to start producing a bad odor, but it did produce sweat, which stuck my soft shirt to my skin like a layer of bio-glue.

Elle looked at me sideways as I tossed the soiled shirt on the ground. "Maybe you should take a quick air bath before you step into your avatar suit?"

I shrugged. “I haven’t had time to bathe in the last four days, and I don’t have time now. You’re the one who told me I needed to put all my focus into psyche-mapping Amican.”

“Hey, don’t blame the fact that you’re a pig on me,” she said, as she stepped her foot into the leg of her specialized simsuit.

I grumbled and pulled on my own suit. While waiting for Christopher and Jana to procure automatons on Antaria, I’d retreated further into my mind, overwhelmed by thoughts of Amican, Elle and my family. I wasn’t sleeping, wasn’t eating healthy food, and as mentioned, wasn’t bathing. I pulled the hood of the suit over my face and fastened it at my chin, causing the shiny black material to tighten and conform to every millimeter of my body. I was glad to be an avatar today.

I turned to look at Elle, who had finished putting on her suit as well. She was essentially naked, the only difference being that everything — her skin, eyeballs and hair — were sleek and black. She held her arm across her breasts, and her other hand over her genitalia.

“Ready to leave this barge?” she asked, going to stand in position on the motion pad.

“I don’t know, all of a sudden it doesn’t seem so bad here,” I responded, admiring her backside.

“Careful, or you’re going to end up meeting your family with a hard-on.” She turned away from me and held her hand out in front of her. An arm of white plastene descended from the ceiling, holding her pair of Simr goggles.

My family. I’d talked to them a handful of times over telegraph in the last few days, but now we’d be meeting face to face — or as near to it as possible. Right on time, Sorah messaged me to tell me they in the room with the blank automatons. I grabbed my Simr goggles and told the program to activate.

I stood on my motion pad and considered all of the ways I could incapacitate myself to avoid seeing my family again. Around me, globs of white plastene fell from the ceiling, forming the shape of a table a meter in front of me, and the shape of a palm-like plant just to the right of Elle.

Drugs were the easiest. I could chug a bottle of Nambian, slap on a patch of Pom, drive up glutamate production via my Com-Palm.

I mentally listed the dosages required to render me unconscious for fifty different drugs while I put my Simr goggles on.

I could put myself into stasis for a hundred years.

I could fry the anterior helical section of my frontal lobe with a laser.

The blackness in front of my eyes began to populate with the items that were in the room where our avatars were standing on Antaria. I saw a dark purple palm in a blue pot by Elle, and a tea table made of light wood in front of me.

I could ram my head into the edge of that table.

Oh sweet peace, it was happening. One by one, the forms of Y'ra, Sorah and Theo appeared before me.

Had Seb not taught me a Multah for blacking out?

Uncle Y'ra embraced me in a bear hug. I felt his strong grip through my suit, indistinguishable from reality.

For a moment, my mind went blank on its own. I thought of nothing.

Then it came back. Sensation returned to my brain, and that sensation was discomfort. I gritted my teeth against the ache.

"Hello again, Uncle." I studied the many deep lines on his old, brown face. His red moustache was curled on both ends in celebration.

Auntie Sorah came in for a hug as well. Cousin Theo punched me in the arm before squeezing me around the waist. I couldn't believe how small they all looked to me, even though I'd barely grown since I'd last seen them at Artemis' funeral. I wondered if it had to do with the projection AI...my view of the three of them had been updated with pictures that had been telegraphed to the AI over the last few days. They should look and move exactly as they would if I were standing on Antaria with them, and yet I felt like I was looking at them through thick glass.

"You all look so....short," I sputtered out.

"Hey kingamon, you're still way shorter than I am," Theo stood up straight next to me, and passed his hand from the tip of his hair to mine. We were the same height, however Theo had his wiry hair styled in a large afro, so his hand hovered above my head by ten centimeters. I slapped it away.

"Whatever you say, mug," I retorted with a tiny smile.

"I may be shorter, but I'm also wider!" Uncle Y'ra exclaimed as he proudly patted his belly, which had indeed increased in circumference.

"All that's changed about me is my hairstyle." Auntie Sorah proudly patted her hair, which was braided into thick spirals. She did look the most like when I had last seen her, her tan skin only showing creases around the eyes.

“It looks great,” I said to Auntie Sorah. “You all look great.”

“Great and tall,” Theo said out of the side of his mouth.

I gestured to Elle, who looked the same as she had before she put on her avatar suit, except that she’d chosen to project a v-neck blue shirt instead of the longsleeved white one she had been wearing in reality.

“Everyone, this is Elle, again,” I said.

“Pleased to meet you in, er, person,” Elle said, as they all politely bowed to one another. A few moments of awkward silence hung in the air.

“I know I’ve said it a dozen times already, but I really appreciate the help you’re giving us,” Elle said. “Amican won’t be easy to find, but someone has to do it.”

Auntie Sorah waved a hand. “Child, we were born not trusting the Council. You might as well put ‘someone has to do it’ on our family crest!”

“Are you sure we don’t have time to sit down and catch up for a bit?” Uncle Y’ra turned his attention back to me. “It’s been years since we could sit next to each other and chit chat.”

“I wish we could, but the clock is ticking. We have less than 85 days before the radiation that will hit Andromeda is made,” I said, pulling my shoulders to my ears.

“Well, I guess we’d better get to scheming,” Y’ra said. He pulled a chair out from the wall for me. I hesitated for a second before sitting down. The sim room in which my real body was standing should have created a white plastene chair almost instantaneously, to match the environment on Antaria, but without being able to see it in the real world, I felt distrustful of it. It would take another half hour or so for my brain to adapt.

Elle sat across from me, Y’ra across from Sorah, Theo to my left. For a brief moment, I was reminded of the times we would gather around the dinner table at Y’ra’s home in Folina. The warm smiles, the smell of the delicious food only inches from my face.

My thoughts returned to Amican, and any joviality from the family reunion was sucked through the floor, leaving only sober determination. We were here to catch a psychopath.

How we were going to do that, I had no idea. I looked at Uncle Y’ra’s thick black boots, Theo’s stylish white sneakers, and Elle’s elegant yet practical flats, praying that one of them would have something to say, because I had nothing.

“So we have to lure Amican out of his hiding place,” Sorah started.

“Don’t suppose you could offer him a treat?” Y’ra half-joked.

“There is truly nothing we could offer him,” Elle said, coldly. “He has no family, no vices, only what’s left of his life.”

“Even if there was something we could offer, we have no way to get in contact with him,” I said. “We have a planet. Which may or may not even be the planet he’s on. That’s it.”

“We have to force him out,” Elle said, “like a mole from it’s hole.”

Y’ra looked up. Sorah caught his eye.

“What is it?” she asked him, as though she wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

Y’ra smiled devilishly, his red moustache enhancing the look. “I’m thinking Pontilongo, but on a planetary scale.”

Sorah’s eyes widened. “You’re mad.”

“What is Pontilongo?” Elle asked impatiently.

“Not what, where,” Y’ra responded, leaning his hefty belly forward in his seat. “It’s a town on Andes. I did a job there with Ibis and my partner Yum, more years ago than I care to count. We had to catch a mark, but he’d holed himself up in a high security tower. We weren’t going to make it into the lobby, much less his apartment. So we smoked him out.”

“With smoke? Poison?” Elle asked.

“You could call it a poison, but it ain’t deadly. Pink parathemane, my own variant. It’s a noxious powder that can be easily aerosolized. Get it anywhere near your eyes or skin, and you’re gonna want to get the hell out of wherever you are. It won’t get stopped by even high-grade filters, and it can only be neutralized by my own concoction.”

“How did you get it into the tower, on Pontilongo?” I asked.

“Well, we didn’t know where in the tower this izzier was hiding, much like our situation now, you see. So we shot a bomb full of the pink stuff directly into the tower’s ventilation center. Blew a hole right through the side of the building, totally wrecked the HVAC, but spared the air turbine. And that baby blew the parathemane all through the tower. Ten minutes later, every dunk in the place was out on the street, coughing and crying their eyes out. Including our mark,” Y’ra finished with a wink.

“That’s a great story Uncle, but we can’t shoot a bomb at every house on New Xin.”

“Don’t need to shoot it at every place, child. We’re talking about an L2 planet. They’ve got centralized ventilation. Air farms that pump conditioned air and whatever else the Council decides into every home. We’re talking six, maybe seven farms that serve the entire planet.”

“Five,” Auntie Sorah said, having looked it up while Y’ra was telling his story.

“Hah, easy,” he said with a wave.

“Let me get this straight,” Elle said, raising a flat rigid hand like a knife. She brought her hand up and down as she spoke, cutting each step. “You think we should synthesize a thousand tonnes of this harmful chemical, shoot it at highly guarded compounds across the planet, and poison every sent on New Xin?”

“It’s entirely non-lethal, even to sensitive folk,” Y’ra explained, “but otherwise, you got it.”

Elle folded her arms, thinking for a moment. “I kind of...love it. Is that bad?”

Y’ra burst into a deep laugh that brought me back to his home on Folina again. “Ben, I think we may turn her to the dark side after all!”

Elle smiled nervously.

“Y’ra darling, do you really think you can get your hands on the materials to synthesize enough Pink Parathemane to fill a billion homes?”

Y’ra huffed. “It won’t be easy. It’s the Para-dichlorobenzene I’m the most worried about. It’s a key ingredient, and we’ll need loads of benzene to make it, unless we can find a mountain of PDB itself.”

My ears perked up. “I may be able to help with that. But it’s going to cost us.”

Y’ra huffed again. “We’d need at least 7,000 kiloliters of the stuff. You got that kind of Red?”

I barely had that much money even when my drug syndicate was functioning at its peak. “The Council took all my digits. I don’t even have enough to buy one kiloliter.”

“And the Reliance is already shelling out hundreds of millions of redits for these,” Elle said, gesturing to herself and the automaton beneath her projection. “Christopher made it clear that they were already going above their budget.” I could see her curling her hands into fists out of the corner of my eye.

“Y’ra looked between the two of us and sighed. “You two are blowing up solar harnessing cores, but you don’t have two cents to rub together? You’re just like Artemis, truly.”

I thought back to how Artemis and I were always pressed for Redit, despite the fact that we were pulling them in by the pound. At least I knew what happened to my money now. The fucking Council.

“Well, maybe not exactly like Artemis,” Y’ra continued. “She always claimed to be broke, but like a lot of her claims, it wasn’t true. After she joined the wind, we received a mighty transfer from her account. Half a billion Redit. Not sure what she was saving up for, or why she didn’t have it set to pass to you, Ben. Basar knows I don’t need it. But it would go a long way towards doin’ 2,000 tonnes of Pink Parathemane.”

My mouth fell open. All the times Artemis told me we couldn’t eat a nice dinner because we couldn’t afford it, all the dangerous jobs we had to take in order to ‘keep the lights on’...that whole time, she was sitting on a pile of Red? And then she just gave it all away, to Y’ra and Sorah? My ears burned at the thought that she didn’t want me to have it. My fear must be true, that she blamed me in some way for what happened. Or maybe she just didn’t think I was responsible enough to have it. She never did.

“Why do you look so sour, kid, this is the answer to your problem! We don’t have the time to be pinching digits,” Y’ra exclaimed.

“Alli,” Sorah put her hand on my shoulder, “it’s your money. You earned it, working with her all those years. Maybe she wasn’t always clear about it, but she cared deeply about you.”

I suddenly felt the urge to cry.

“Fine, you’re right, it’s a bloody miracle,” I said, running my hand through my hair. “We don’t have time to be pinching digits, or sitting here crying about it.” Y’ra and Sorah looked at each other, slightly confused.

I stood, “Let’s get on the line and build some fucking bombs.”

## 41 - The same fear we all have

There was a sizeable group of Promethian Family members living on Antaria, one of whom had a sizeable chemical manufacturing plant. She was all too happy to shut down production for a few days to allow us to synthesize the Parathemane. She refused to accept payment, especially after she learned we were seeking to take down Amican. There were rumors



he'd opposed the creation of Antaria, rumors that Elle didn't feel the need to correct, given there was a hint of truth to them.

We needed to save our Reditis however we could, even though Artemis had gifted us a wagonload of them from beyond her non-existent grave. The ingredients Y'ra needed to make the Parathemane were not cheap, and procuring them in such a short amount of time was more expensive than a trip around the ITZ. The most precious of the ingredients — the PDB — required me to call on a 'friend' I hadn't spoken to since I had suddenly abandoned my Xarabee syndicate a year ago: Jaspar Koln, a chemical shipments associate for EastKo Carriers.

Jaspar lived in the Lub Galaxy, but his employer had spacewagons hauling chemicals under every sun in the ITZ. In my syndicate days, Jaspar would reroute some of those spacewagons to me, ensuring I had the substances I needed to make the Xarabee. I don't know how he did it, but I knew why: because I paid him to. Unlike most of my associates in the syndicate, he wasn't interested in the glamor of crime, or living life outside the oppression of the Ertian Empire. He just wanted money.

He was no different when I called him up this time. He didn't ask where I'd been for the last two years, why he hadn't heard from me, or what I needed that much PDB for. He simply gave me an amount.

"611,000 Reditis." Jaspar's avatar looked at me plainly. He had heavy bags under his eyes, the same color as the rest of his skin, like clay. Not unlike Y'ra's skin color, though Jaspar had black hair where Y'ra had red.

I knew better than to try to haggle with him. His price was his price. But I couldn't help giving him a hard time. "You'll finally be able to retire now, eh sen? Get you a nice house on Kempect, and Memphis, and Bost, and Andes..."

"I'm going to need a dozen houses to hide in after you do whatever it is you're going to do with that much PDB, donk," he said. Perhaps a part of him was curious.

"If you cover your tracks on your end, you won't have a thing to worry about on mine."

The bags under his eyes curved as he looked at me with suspicion. "You're not going to be hurting people with this, are you?"

Jaspar was full of surprises today. "No," I replied, testing his curiosity with bluntness.

"Fine," he answered. His curiosity appeared to extend no further than that. "You're a madman, Ben. Out to lunch in the OTZ."

"I know. Thanks Jaspar." I hung up, another win for myself.

Once I'd put the order in, I returned my entire focus to psyche-mapping Amican. At the same time, Elle took over the day to day operations at the plant. It gave me some much needed distance from her, though I still longed to be with her every day.

Amican was the toughest mind I had ever had to slice open. There were copious details to be found on his early achievements, as well as an abundance of dry facts, like his date of birth or where he attended quaternary school. But these were simply bones; there was none of the muscle that makes up a man. Things like who he first fell in love with, how he decorated his current home; that was the meat that I required to determine who Amican really was, and how I could take him down. I was starving for something to sink my teeth into.

After countless sleepless nights spent searching for weaknesses, I only found one to exploit. And I was going to have to talk to Elle about it.

I found her in the virtual world, on Antaria, at the manufacturing plant, speaking with a worker. We'd both been spending the majority of our days as avatars, as switching back and forth scrambled the brain, and we were needed more on Antaria. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd taken off my headset, though the cold emptiness I felt in my stomach told me it must have been at least 24 hours ago.

"Elle, can we talk?" I asked her. She nodded, but was then approached by another worker who needed her attention.

After she had helped him, she answered, "maybe we should do this in the real?"

"Sure, I'll see you on the other side," I said, reaching under my chin to press the active pad and turn off the program.

I removed my goggles, then unfastened the mask covering my face. The entire avatar suit loosened to its default shape, allowing me to pull the hood around my neck. Elle had done the same, her suit hanging off of her like a black trash bag. She'd lost a noticable amount of weight, as had I, due to the fact that we were only leaving Antaria to eat once a day. There was a reason it was forbidden to spend this much time in the virtual world. But of course, everything we were doing was forbidden.

Elle ran her fingers through her chin-length hair. "Ew, greasy."

"Want a bar?" I asked, offering her one of the nutrition bars someone had left by the door.

"Yes please, I'm famished."

We sat on the ground and devoured the sweet and salty sustenance in silence.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" she asked, opening a second wrapper.

“This is going to shock you, but I want to talk about Amican.”

She gave a small laugh. “How’s the psyche-mapping going?”

I sighed. “He’s a ghost. He’s sanitized any public information on him to the point that it’s essentially useless to me, and there’s not a single byt of activity from him after the year X1079. Most sources declared him dead around that time.”

Elle chewed slowly, her eyes distant.

“But,” I continued, “there is one fear that I think we can exploit.”

She looked at me and straightened her back slightly. “Well go on, what is it?”

“It’s the same fear we all have. The fear of death.”

Her interest in me turned to concern, and I felt the food harden in my guts. I was terrified that she wouldn’t think I was good after I told her what we had to do.

“Are you saying we have to kill him?” she asked me in a low voice.

“His life is the only thing he cares about now. If we’re going to force him to cooperate with us, we need to be prepared to take it from him.”

Elle put down the half-eaten bar she was holding. “I came to the same conclusion.”

This woman never ceased to surprise me. “You...did?”

“Maybe for different reasons, but yes. When we find him, he’s going to be pissed. For exposing him, for trying to shut down the Cores...we’re essentially his greatest enemy. The only reason the two of us are walking around right now is because of the Council’s non-interference policy. But Amican isn’t in the Council anymore. *He* will try to kill *us* the first chance he gets.” Elle cleared her throat. “Once we find him, whether he tells us how to shut down the cores or not, we will have to kill him.”

Where was this coming from? Could she be trying to get revenge for...I stopped myself. I was psyche-mapping her. Damn me to the fucking voids.

“If we do get the information from him, could we not hand him over to the authorities?” I asked.

“He’s escaped from the literal Council of Light. There’s no guarantee he wouldn’t do it again, don’t you think? Anyways, weren’t you just saying we needed to kill him?”

“I was saying we had to be prepared to kill him. He will know if we’re bluffing. We will have to hurt him, probably very badly, and bring him to the brink of death, and then...maybe... go further.” I swallowed heavily.

I thought of the one sent I had killed, as I did most days of my life: Petrus. To think I worried so much about adding another tally to that score back then...

“It’s not like he wouldn’t deserve it,” Elle almost whispered.

This was a side of Elle I had never seen before. It was the Council of Light’s first declaration, when they were formed in 2980, that any murder, by any entity, under any circumstance, was forbidden. I would have thought Elle would have been the last person to question that decree.

“He’s a murderer,” I agreed. “He’s the most dangerous sent in the ITZ. Dangerous to us, dangerous to the population, dangerous to the Council...” I trailed off and looked pointedly at Elle.

“He can’t be allowed to live. The risk is too great,” she said.

She was right, I knew that. Yet still the thought sent a deep space chill through my body.

“Oh, you’re shivering,” Elle said, putting a hand on my arm. “Stars, you’re so thin.” Before I knew what was happening, she wrapped her arms around me, holding me in an embrace. The movement pushed hot air from within her baggy suit into my face. It smelled like her, sweet and safe and delicious. I inhaled deeply and enjoyed a high better than any drug I’d ever taken. Well, apart from that first time on the cove.

“I’m scared too,” she said, blowing warm, mellifluous breath into my ear. We sat there, holding each other for a hundred heartbeats. Then our Com-palms buzzed simultaneously — an urgent message from Sorah — the last shipment of PDB had just been delivered. It was good luck too, as we now had only 28 days until the band of radiation would be produced.

“It’s happening,” Elle said. “If everything else goes to plan, the bomb will be ready in five days.”

The steak was in the pan, and there was no stopping the cook now.

## 42 - Day 96 - Would you talk to her now, if you could

Ben stared into the dark chocolate brown of his coffee, pouring his thoughts into it before he could acknowledge them. He didn't really like coffee much, but he found the process of making it soothing, and the warm, murky liquid comforting to look at. The smell reminded him of the Relliance mess hall, as that was where he first encountered the ancient beverage. It was an exciting, exotic scent, full of...full of...

"How do you drink that stuff? It smells like dirt."

"Hello Lucia." She stood in his open workshop door.

"Hi. I'm serious, everytime you make it, I can smell it from the other side of the ship. And then you just leave the full mugs sitting around, ya know."

"I can only drink so much of it. I like the taste, but it really fucks me up."

Lucia winced in disgust. "Like, it makes you sick?"

"No, it has a very strong effect on me. It's one of the few things that do, anymore."

"Coffee does? But sents have been drinking that stuff for millenia."

"I can't explain it to you. It makes me vibrate," he said, taking a small sip of the steaming liquid.

Lucia raised an eyebrow, unsure of what to say to that. "You, um, said it reminded you of the beautiful color of my skin, once."

"It reminds me of Artemis' skin," he corrected, "which is sort of like yours, I guess."

"We must have very different lineages, though, Artemis and I. My genetic lineage is highly evolved, you know, not Promethian. My mother could trace her roots back to the original Laroonian line."

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "Bragging about lineage, how very Hyell of you."

Lucia gritted her teeth. When she was nervous she had a tendency to default to social topics from her childhood. "Did you ever..." Lucia reconsidered her question, and asked one she had a better chance of getting an answer to. "Would you talk to her now, if you could?"

Ben exhaled through his nose into the coffee, causing it to splash little specks on his face. "She can see me any time she likes."

"Well maybe she's not sure if you want to talk to her."

"No, I mean, she can literally see me any time she likes. I never removed the bug she put in my Com-Palm, the one she used to spy on me while I was playing Petrus."

Lucia's mouth fell open. "You, you're joking right?"

"Nope. I honestly forgot about it for years after that shit went down, and by the time it occurred to me, well...what difference would it have made at that point?" Ben took another small sip of his coffee.

"So she could be watching us now?!"

"It hasn't been activated again, as far as I can tell. But you never know with her."

"That's....that's kind of adorable."

Ben coughed. "Excuse me?"

"It's like she's watching over you, all of the time. No wonder you haven't removed the bug."

"Believe me, the time when Artemis could still pull the wool over my eyes has long since passed. She ain't watching, not through this thing." He shook his wrist.

Ben put the coffee down on his workbench and moved to close the door. "Alright, coffee's kicking in, time for you to leave. I've got work to do. Come back in a couple of hours and I'll finish the story."

"Finish it?"

"You know what I mean. Bye."

Ben shut the workshop door, before promptly opening the door to his private bathroom. He disrobed entirely, squatting over the toilet portal with a grin on his face.

"If you're watching, now would be a good time to stop."

## 43 - There is nothing that cannot be done with enough power

Five days and three hours after the PDB was delivered to the manufacturing plant, I ran my hand along a smooth, shiny missile in the plant's cavernous warehouse. I stared back at a warped reflection of myself in the silvery metal.

Four other missiles, each twenty meters long and identical to this one, were being loaded into ships to transport to New Xin. Inside their shiny exterior, tonnes of tightly-packed pink powder sat, ready to be unleashed on the unsuspecting planet.

Elle's smooth face appeared next to my scarred one in the missile's reflection.

"I saw one of these in a museum once. Did you know they used to fill them with explosive powder?"

"I learned that as a child, yeah," I said. "Even after nuclear weapons were invented, they continued using gunpowder for a long time. Because otherwise, their only planet would have been destroyed."

"New Xin was formed recently enough to have never known war. We'll be the first people to ever try to bomb it."

"As far as we know."

"I mean, we're banking on the fact that the planetary defense system won't be searching for attacks coming from within the planet's own atmosphere. If there's been secret domestic terrorism happening in the Ertian Empire this whole time, we're fucked," she said.

I gave a small nod, and she continued reassuring us both.

"There's none of that, believe me. It wouldn't be a consideration to even the most paranoid New Xinian Tenant. Attacks from other planets, or even aliens are more likely, as unfathomable as that scenario is. Can you imagine, the Argrurians attacking us?" Elle giggled. "Or the Ataxi?" It was a funny thought.

"No," Elle finished, "the bombs will hit their targets before the planetary defense system has time to react. I'm sure of it."

"I hope you're right," I said, rapping my knuckles on the missile, producing a deep echo. "We've put an awful lot of time and money into this plan. It would be a shame to let all that pink stuff go to waste."

“It’s been a feat to pull all this off. The sheer volume of chemicals we produced...it’s miraculous to see the results here in this warehouse. It makes me feel superhuman.” Elle pressed her face up to the surface of the silver missile, making funny faces with the warped reflection.

“Even if it doesn’t end up working,” I said, “I may be willing to admit that we make a good team after all.” I turned my head to look at the real Elle, as opposed to her reflection. She was adorable, pressing her fingers into the soft creamy caramel skin of her face.

She let go of her cheeks and faced me. “I’ll only be willing to admit that if this works. We could very well end up exiled at the end of this, or dead.”

“True,” I conceded.

“But,” she placed a hand on the missile, breathing a cloudy palmprint on it’s shiny surface, “we did make one hell of a silver lining.”

I blew air in her face, disrupting her bangs. “Aluminum-steeltryne-dragonbeak alloy lining.”

“See, silver sounds much better than that,” she said, puffing air into her bangs to move them back out of her eyes.

“Not to a chemist,” I corrected. The missile began to inch forward; a truckbot was beginning to load it into the spacewagon. We’d borrowed it from the chemical plant in order to transport the five massive missiles to New Xin on the Slingshot. Once on New Xin, I would have to rent a small fleet of shuttles from a local business to serve as the launching points for the missiles. Under a false identity, of course, because otherwise my credit would be completely ruined.

“I guess it’s time, eh boy?” Y’ra approached Elle and I with a serious look on his face. Auntie Sorah was close behind him, her thick braids pulled into a hard bun on top of her head.

“Can you tell us now, what you plan to do with Amican if we find him?” Sorah asked. We’d kept our murderous intentions secret, not wanting to worry the family. Today, however, Sorah was not asking, she was demanding.

“We’re going to kill him,” Elle said, before I could speak.

Sorah raised her eyebrows almost to her hairline. “*Kill* Amican? I thought the whole point of this was to get him to destroy the Foreman Core.”

“Once he tells us how to do that, we’re going to kill him,” Elle said authoritatively.

Auntie Sorah blew disbelieving air through her wide nostrils.

“You’ll never be able to kill that man. Voids, he’s not even a man.”



“Whatever he is, Amican has to be taken out. He’s poisoned the ITZ enough.” Elle said.

“Yes, you’ve told me a thousand times about the radiation. I agree that something has to be done. But trying to kill a member of the Council of Light is signing your own death warrant. And signing yours too,” Sorah said, pointing a gold-painted fingernail at me.

“I know its a terrifying thought,” Elle said, “but the alternative, which is that a man who murdered billions of sents is freely roaming the Galaxia, is even more terrifying.”

“It’s not a question of fear,” Sorah said forcefully. “I was just thinking...we have money, Y’ra and I. Why not try campaigning to get people to evacuate the affected worlds?”

“The Relliance tried that, and it failed,” Elle said.

“We have better people than the Relliance,” Sorah countered.

Elle narrowed her eyes. “You didn’t grow up in the Ertian Empire, did you?”

I inhaled sharply. It was true, Sorah had been raised on a small colony in the Lub galaxy, and hadn’t moved to Promethia until she met Y’ra.

“No, I was raised in Lub,” Sorah said, quiet and quick.

“Ben told me the same thing. I never knew if it was the truth, but from the way the both of you act, it has to be. People in the Ertian Empire do not question their safety. They do not question the Council. It would be like questioning the existence of gravity. Even if I started flying, you’d sooner believe I’d invented invisible wings than believe gravity didn’t exist. They will never believe that the Council has betrayed them like this. Never.”

“*You* believe it, don’t you?” Sorah asked Elle.

Elle pursed her lips. It was a question we all wanted an answer to.

“Yes, I believe it. But I haven’t spent my entire live in the Empire. I’ve seen what is outside the veil of protection. They have not.”

Sorah looked Elle up and down, then huffed. She’d spent enough time in the Ertian Empire to know Elle was right. “Then we try finding more of Amican’s proteges, figure out what exactly causes the radiation from them,” she suggested.

Elle sighed with a bone-crushing heaviness.

“What would you tell a mother that will lose a child two hundred years from now?” she said, looking Sorah deep in the eyes. “She’ll be born soon, on Andes, where she’ll eventually give birth to her own beautiful baby. And then Amican’s radiation will hit their planet, torching her daughter’s nursery. She’ll lie awake at night wondering how she can continue living when

everything she cared about has been taken from her. And the man that took it from her will have passed peacefully into non-existence, never even having to look his victims in the eye. Is that a reality you can live with? Because I can't."

"You think sad hypotheticals are going to sway me?" Sorah asked.

"I'm trying hypotheticals because you're not getting the point. Amican is our only hope at doing anything to stop the radiation. He's the only living person who knows how those Gen 1 Cores work. It's not like we can go searching for a book with all the answers - they're in his head, and his head alone."

"And you want to put a bullet through it!"

"I'm ready to do whatever it takes to save those people," Elle stated. "If you think that I would put revenge over preventing the devastation the radiation will bring, you're sorely mistaken."

"But you would put *our* lives at risk to prevent that devastation?" Sorah asked.

"Yes!" Elle caught herself. "No...I can't do that. I can't offer the lives of a few to save the lives of many, because they're not my lives to give. I'm asking, begging for your help because this is our only chance." Her shoulders fell as if the weight of a Solar Harnessing Core had been put on them. "But it's wrong of me to do that."

"No Elle, it's not," I said. "My life is worth sacrificing for the good of billions."

"As is mine, of course," Sorah said. "That is why we're here. But is taking Amican's life going to save the others'?" She looked at me, her worry producing lines in her face I'd never seen before.

"If he refuses to cooperate, it will be our only option," I replied.

The lines at the edge of Auntie Sorah's hazel eyes pulled with pain. "I pray to the wind that it doesn't come to that." She exited the room.

Elle blew exhausted air through her lips. "Soffing stars, I sound like my father."

"You're a better person than your father," I told her.

"No, I'm not. I'm just more human."

She started to say something else, and my finger instinctively rose to her lips. Her big, round eyes pleaded with me to fix all of this. Suddenly, I was struck with the memory of Amal Smallwood — the two of us standing outside her door, after my first visit to her house. Where I'd finally manipulated her into asking me to help her reconcile with her father. I'd put my finger to her lips, just like that...

I pulled away, feeling sick. Elle looked confused, then hurt, then resolute.

“Let’s get moving then,” she said, turning away from me. “Amican’s time is up.”

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The plan from here on out was relatively simple.

We arrived at New Xin at 1:00 in morning, standard time. From our vantage point facing the southern hemisphere, the Triangulum Major sun was just beginning to crest over the edge of the planet, shooting beams of light from behind the dark orb. I wondered where Amican was on that orb; was he just about to go to bed? Was he making lunch? Was he worried at all? Did he have any inkling of how close we were to finding him? Then again, he might not even be anywhere on New Xin at all. I considered doing a Multah for good luck, but decided there was no time for Grammercy. Basar knows when there would be time for religion again.

For better or for worse, we were here. We rented the shuttles, loaded them each with a girthy missile, and moved them into position above each of the planet’s five Ventilation Centers. We waited in free orbit above the homeworld, on Y’ra’s ship. Every minute that passed felt like an hour.

Once the shuttles were in place, we could drop the bombs. I repeatedly mashed the ‘increase speed’ button for the last shuttle, which hadn’t yet arrived at its destination on the other side of the planet. Ten sad faces regrettably informed me the speed couldn’t be increased, then ten angry faces told me to stop pressing the button. Finally the button was taken away, replaced with a relaxed face that told me to chill out.

“You chill out!” I yelled at the screen.

“Ah, Ben, have a bit of patience!” Uncle Y’ra approached me from behind. “You used to have a lot of it! What happened? Usually people get more patient as they grow, not the other way around.”

“I guess I got tired of waiting for the universe to catch up.”

I ran my hand through my hair. He was right, I used to be more patient. Maybe I needed to start meditating again, like we did on Pluora.

I seriously doubted I was ever going to have time to meditate again. There certainly wasn’t time now. I looked at Theo, who appeared to be sleeping on a command panel.

“Theo, are you ready?”

Theo raised his head from his folded arms. He looked exhausted; even his afro had wilted from lack of attention.

“Zen, you’ve never been as ready as I am, right now, at this moment,” he said blearily, before resting his head back down on one of his propped up hands.

“Maybe you want to make yourself a cup of zoom? When it’s time to scan for Amican’s face, you’ve got to act quick.”

“All I gotta do is press a button and let the AI do its thing. You tell me when, Alli-Ben.”

That was going to be the hard part, deciding when to start searching for Amican amidst the sea of faces on New Xin. We had a 30 second window, and if we didn’t time it right, then all of this will have been for nothing.

“I’m going to sleep for ten days when this is all done,” Sorah said with a yawn. “I bet that you’re looking forward to a nap more than any of us, wouldn’t you say Ben?”

There was no time for napping! There was still so much to do, did they not see that? The idea of resting...no, that was not in my future.

Elle understood. I looked over to her; she was standing in front of the tall flight deck windows, staring off into space. Not hearing a word of what was being said. Probably thinking of what she was going to do with Amican once we had found him. We had our plan, but I could only hope that she would follow it. She became more of a mystery to me with each day that passed, which I told myself was a good thing.

The shuttle pilot screen updated to inform me the final shuttle had arrived at the designated coordinates.

My stomach tightened like a bolt. It was time.

“Get ready, everyone!” I commanded. Our small crew stood at their assigned control panels. The air in the flight deck suddenly became thin, as though the oxygen had been sucked out into space.

On my order.

On *my* order.

Why was it so hard to...breathe...

Elle came up on my right, her arm brushing against mine. My lungs suddenly filled with air, as though I’d broken through the surface of a lake. With the powerful exhale, I spoke.

“Y’ra, drop the missiles.”

“Aye aye, Ben.”

One by one, the storage shuttles moved from a horizontal, to a vertical position. One by one, their back bay doors opened. One by one, the missiles fell out, dropping down, down, down to the surface of the planet.

From the ground, a worker at the first ventilation plant would have seen a shiny dot glinting in the sun, if he was watching. As the dot grew larger, he would have heard a faint whistling sound, if he was listening. He would have covered his nose and mouth, if he knew what was about to happen. Of course, he didn’t, but it wouldn’t have made a difference anyway.

The first missile collided with the plant, just north of the 500-meter long circular turbine that pushed treated air through the primary ventilation shafts. A cloud of Y’ra’s pink powder exploded through the plant, filling every pipe and crevice with noxious gas. Alarm messages describing catastrophic damage sounded throughout the plant. Workerbots and worker sents ran in circles, neither knowing how to react to what had just happened. Soon, the sents began to flee, unable to stand the acrid air, leaving only the clueless machines.

The planetary defense system caught up to the attack. One by one, drones swarmed the shuttles, neutralizing them with mEMPs. But they were too late — each of the five missiles had already hit their target.

Our execution was flawless. The Pink Parathemane traveled through the underground ventilation shafts, which dispersed it city by city, town by town, home by home. From our orbiting position, we zoomed our ships’ camera into various cities across the planet. New Xin was a uniquely organized planet; sents flooded the identical, gridded streets, coughing, crying, blowing their noses in vain. Uncle Y’ra whooped with delight, trading a high five with the equally thrilled Theo.

The plants began to initiate emergency shutdown procedures, the wind turbines grinding to a halt. Again, it was too late. The Pink Parathemane was so light, it needed only the slightest breeze to carry it through the air. Whether it would reach every home was unknown. We only needed it to reach one.

I waited, barely breathing, watching the pink gas disperse throughout New Xin. It hit Bablock A, Bablock B, Bablock M, Bablock O...Bablock W appeared to be unaffected still. Theo scanned through zoomed in shots of each of the cities, narrating the chaos that he was seeing so that Elle and I could imagine the details that the avatar AI failed to relay.

“Oh man, five dogs just ran out of this sents house, all giant shepherds,” Theo scrolled to a street on another Block. “All these sents are dressed the same, that’s not just what you’re

seeing on your side. Weeeeird.” He scrolled to another street. “Looks like these sents are calming down, not much coughing going on.”

Soon, people would begin going back inside, the gas having begun to clear. The planet’s atmosphere was slowly becoming visibly pink as the Parathemane rose into the clouds.

Just a little longer...

“Ben, we should run the program,” Theo said.

“Wait!” I thought I said the words myself, but they came from Elle’s mouth.

Just a little longer...

In Bablock M, giant cargo ships appeared above the cityline. They fired their ground burners, forcing the pink gas out of the most densely populated area.

We could wait no longer.

“Theo now, go!” I shouted.

Theo executed his program to hack into the planetary surveilliance system. With the security AI temporarily tied up, his own AI was able to scan through every feed on New Xin, checking every face for Amican’s wrinkled visage. Ten seconds went by without a match. Fifteen. Twenty...

No, no, no. He wasn’t on the planet! Or maybe the Pink Parathemane had not made it to him...

Then, a ding. The slightly blurry face of an old man with slicked back gray hair appeared on the screen at the front of the flight deck. It was Amican.

“Basar blow me down, we found him!” shouted Y’ra.

“Is it really him?” Sorah shouted.

“Only one way to find out,” I said, pushing down my excitement until I knew we’d actually done it. He was in a small town, Chome 136, in the southern hemisphere. I went to chart a course to the town, but Elle beat me to it. Her determination radiated off of her like heat.

We hurtled down through the planet’s atmosphere, curving around the arch of the planet. Down, down, down, over a perfectly symmetrical city bathed in pink.

“Are the buildings really that identical, or is it just the avatar AI?” I asked Theo.

“No man, that’s what it really looks like,” he said. “What a weird place.”

We continued on as the buildings became more sparse, until we arrived at a quaint town with nearly identical red-roofed homes. I navigated us into a small landing pad situated next to a park, half a kilometer from Amican's hide-out. Elle and I equipped our gas masks, which were custom-made by Y'ra to protect us from the Parathemane.

Elle and I waited impatiently behind the bay door as our ship slowly lowered to the ground, and the side door folded open. When the ship had reached a height of five feet, Elle jumped out of the ship and took off running. Sorah's hand gripped firmly around my forearm, preventing me from jumping after her. I looked into Sorah's hazel eyes, and they burned me. I wrenched my arm from her grasp and ran from the ship.

I caught up to Elle just as we reached the street where Theo's program had found Amican.

Every window frame on the block was covered in a layer of powder, and there were roundish clumps of pink scattered everywhere as the avatar AI struggled to figure out what it should fabricate. Elle and I slowed to a walk as we approached Amican's address, Chome 136, House 100.

It was a simple, yellow, single family home, identical to its neighbors. Elle hopped over the fence surrounding the backyard.

An old man stood in his garden, doubled over, his hand pressed against the back fence. Loud hacking coughs shook his aged frame as he attempted to clear the Parathemane from his lungs.

I landed next to Elle, who had stopped in her tracks on the other side of the fence.

All that was to come, our pursuit and confrontation of Amican, came down to this moment.

We stood still for a few seconds, watching him wheeze. Eventually, he noticed us. As soon as he looked up, Elle sprinted over to him, just managing to grapple his arms before he was able to tap him Com-Palm.

"Hello there, Amican," she sneered.

Amican's tear-filled eyes widened with realization before a fit of bone-shaking coughs wracked his body, bringing him to his knees. Elle followed him down, her hands still clasped tightly around his forearms.

"You..." was all he could get out.

I went to grab a canister of Y'ra's neutralizing agent from my utility belt, to clear the gas.

“Stop,” Elle commanded, “let’s get him inside first.”

I stayed my hand, but Elle didn’t move. She just watched him, sputtering, his nose leaking gobs of snot all over his face. Through her gas mask, her unblinking eyes burned, as her hands gripped Amican’s straining wrists tighter and tighter.

“Elle, let’s go,” I said firmly, breaking her from her reverie.

With a rough jerk, Elle pulled Amican to his feet, dragging him through the backdoor of the house.

Inside, she bound his hands and feet with a single, heavy duty cuff behind his back. As she got him situated, I did a quick sweep of the house.

It looked like a surprisingly normal home, as though a family had been living there right up to the moment Amican kicked them out. All the blinds were drawn and windows shut, but apart from that, it looked quite cozy.

I began spraying the neutralizing agent throughout the house, disarming the Pink Parathemane. When I made it back into the living room, I found Elle sitting cross-legged across from Amican, her mask dotted with what I guessed were globs his of spit and snot.

I sprayed a few circles of neutralizing agent around Amican’s kneeling, shaking form. He wore a long robe the color of slate, through which I could see his frail bones and exo-skeleton. Slowly, his coughs began to subside and were replaced with heaving, deep breaths as he sucked in the precious, clean air.

Elle sat completely still, patiently, watching him catch his breath.

“This was...your doing...the gas...?”

Elle simply nodded.

“When did...you find me?”

“You mean how? We gassed the entire planet. Waited for you to poke your head out of your hiding hole.”

Amican responded with a long, wheezing exhale.

“How do we stop the striped radiation?” Elle asked, powerful and loud.

Amican coughed. “ You cannot.”

“There is nothing that cannot be done, with enough power,” Elle said in a low voice. “You told me that once.”



“I was...wrong.”

Elle grabbed Amican’s soaked robe at the shoulders. “Then you’ll shut down the core and evacuate the affected areas!”

“We can’t...stupid...misguided.”

“You’re the misguided one, you sick old man!” she shouted. “You think you can wash your hands of this world that you created. You think you can run and hide from the consequences of your actions. Well, we’re here, and there’s no escaping us now!”

“I wasn’t hiding...from you. I was hiding from it.”

A bang from the wall behind Amican temporarily broke our focus. Probably a bird colliding with the window, disoriented from the Parathemane.

“What do you mean, it?” she asked.

Amican smiled sadly. “You don’t know. Who do you think told the Reliance about the radiation in the first place?”

Two more bangs came from the kitchen area. A sickening feeling washed over me.

“What are you talking about, Amican? Who were you hiding from?” I yelled at him.

“From...Silen.” He broke into another coughing fit.

I knelt down in front of Amican, grabbing his collar and yanking him away from Elle.

“Say that again!” I shouted.

“It is called...Silen.”

The banging sounds began to come from all around the house; a terrifying, off-tempo drumbeat to accompany the fear pulsing through me.

Amican took in a long, shaky breath. “It is here.”

“No...” I stood, running over to a window.

“You brought it right to me,” Amican said with a hollow laugh.

I threw open the blinds. The window was streaked with blood and feathers. I jumped as another bird flew headlong into the poxyglass, leaving an imprint of its head and beak. A cat suddenly threw itself at the window with surprising force, then fell to the ground with a sickening thud. I pulled the blinds shut.

“Elle, we need to leave. Now.”

She stood. “What is happening? Is it the Parathemane?”

Amican chuckled again, then wheezed.

“I don’t think s—”

A loud crash came from the left side of the house. The tinkling sound of poxyglass shattering. I turned to look down the hallway, and could see the bleeding head of a deer lying dead on the bedroom floor. Suddenly, a flock of birds came spilling through the hall and into the living room.

They descended on Amican, pecking at his head. Bits of flesh were pulled from his face as he shook his head wildly, unable to protect himself with his hands bound.

Elle flung herself over him as a mouse tangled itself in her hair.

“Call the ship!” she shouted.

I rang Sorah, who responded with a terse message seconds later.

*Animals attacking us, can’t move!*

We had to help them. Our avatars could be destroyed, but my family's bodies were less disposable. If I lost them now, after everything we’d been through...I pulled Amican out from underneath Elle and an ever increasing swarm of rabid animals. My hand gripped his gray dress, but I didn’t feel the sensation for a second. The AI must be struggling to keep up with the chaos that was unfolding.

A loud pounding came from the backdoor. Before I could do anything, the door burst off of its hinges, and a large man came barreling into the house, his dislocated right arm flailing wildly.

I dropped Amican and instinctively pulled Elle to the side as the man descended on the former Councilmember.

“No! We need him!” Elle shook me off and pulled her gun from its holster, shooting the wild man with a deadly bullet to the neck. She stood with legs spread over Amican’s prone form, shooting and kicking away the onslaught of animals. Sparks flew from her arm as a cat tore the fleshy material from the surface of her automaton.

I pulled out my own gun, killing a deer just as it was about to gore Elle with its antlers. Another human, a blonde woman pushed her way through the backdoor past a swarm of rabbits. She lunged forward, grabbing my arm and sinking her teeth into my flesh. I grabbed her short

hair and pulled her off of me, the chunk of flesh in her mouth coming with her. My gun now free, I shot her straight through the right eye.

“Elle leave him, he’s done for! We have to get back to my family!”

“We NEED him!” she screamed as she delivered a fatal blow to a red panda.

She didn’t know what she was up against.

I watched with horror as a giant shepherd dog ran in from the kitchen and lunged at Elle. It sank its canine fangs into her shoulder, causing her to drop her gun. At the same time, the blond woman rose from the ground and pushed me back, her empty eye socket splattering blood across my face.

The dog lunged again, knocking Elle to the carpeted floor, which left Amican exposed. A second dog, a fluffy white samoyed ran in and clamped its jaws onto his neck.

“Nooooo!” I screamed as more birds and marsupials and pets descended on Amican. His garbled cries mixed with the sounds of flesh being torn from bone.

I plunged my arms into the pile of animals, unable to feel what I was reaching for as they tore apart my automaton, sending impulses of muted pain through my real arms. Then, my fingers closed around something.

“Pull me, Elle!” I shouted.

Elle produced a knife from her sleeve and plunged it into the neck of the dog on top of her. She grabbed me around the waist and pulled, freeing me from the horde and throwing us onto our backs. I raised my damaged hand, which was no longer projecting my skin onto it. Clutched in the mechanical fingers was Amican’s arm. And inside it, his Com-palm.

The blonde woman reappeared, lunging at me from the ground. I shot her in the other eye, finally causing her to go limp. I took Elle’s hand and pulled her to her feet. Thankfully, she came with me, her own survival instincts taking charge. Shooting at animals left and right, we cleared a path to the street. As we sprinted away, I snuck a glance behind me— hundreds upon hundreds of animals of all kinds were attempting to shove their way into the house through every opening. It was a horrific, sight, unlike anything I’d ever seen before, even in movies. I tried calling Theo, but got no response.

Suddenly, it got eerily quiet. The animals ceased their frenzied cries.

I felt a glimmer of hope, though I didn’t dare stop running.

Then the noise picked up again, a terrible mash of snarling, chirping and barking becoming louder every second. I looked behind me, and saw that the animal mob was no longer trying to get into Amican's home — instead, they were headed straight for us.

This was it. In all my simulations, I never imagined this outcome. I thought I was prepared for the worst. Failing to find him. Being apprehended by the planet's Tenants, or the Light Police. Amican setting a trap and killing us. But no, witnessing our only hope being mauled to death by a horde of Silen was not an eventuality I had prepared for.

A cat dodged my bullets and lunged at me, scratching the skin from my neck.

I looked back at Elle, my fear reflected in her eyes. There was outrage there too. I'd failed her. I'd been wilfully blind, and death snuck up on me. How could I have brought my her, and my family into this chaos. Had I learned nothing?

Through the shrieking of the animals, I heard the roar of a ship's burners. I looked ahead to see Y'ra's dark grey ship hovering over us, an ocelot clinging to the front cutter.

Maybe there was still hope. I waved my arms, including Amican's appendage above my head. The ship came lower, and I heard Y'ra's voice in my ears.

"We can try and scoop you, but we'd get the animals too," he shouted. "Sorah and Theo are already fighting off a pack of 'em in here!"

"Pull me up," I shouted back, "the arm!" A hairless dog sank its teeth into my left leg, then a mancoon cat bit into my right. I stumbled to the ground, and a deer jumped onto my back. "Now, Y'ra, now!"

Through the corner of my eye I could see a panel open on the bottom of the ship, through which a mechanical arm extended. A flock of birds flew into the opening, bouncing around in the cavity, attempting to destroy it.

I pushed with all my force to free myself from the animals on top of me, but there were too many, even for the enhanced strength of the automaton. I thrashed and strained as the weight got heavier... I had to get Amican's Com-palm to safety, it was all that was left of that great, terrible man; it was all that was left of our plan...

Suddenly the weight shifted. Elle flung her body into the horde, knocking the deer off of my back. I reached my barely functioning arm into the air — the mangled flesh and bone that had once been Amican's forearm poked out of the horde like a macabre beacon.

The ship's mechanical hand closed around the wrist of the bloody arm, and quickly retracted back into the ship. I looked up, through a small crack of light between the rabid animals that were piled ontop of me — the ship's panel was jammed with the body of a bird, allowing me

to sneak a glance into the hull before my automaton's feed finally cut out. Inside the hull was the arm, clutching fast a hunk of flesh, and between its fingers, a small, round disc of metal.

44 - Remind me why we haven't been doing this the whole time?

There was only black before me, the sound of my heavy breathing and pounding heart in my ears. I ripped the mask from my face, saliva and sweat erupting into the air. The white room had reset itself to its default, empty condition, with an error message projected onto the blank wall, next to a worried emoticon.

My first thoughts were of my family. I messaged them all, asking of their status. One by one they messaged me back, assuring me they were ok, and high-tailing it out of New Xin. My legs crumpled beneath me. If they had been killed because of me...

I felt Elle fall to her knees beside me.

“Do they have it? Do they have the Com-palm?!” she yelled through heavy breaths, as she pulled her Simsuit from her face.

Of course, I’d almost forgotten. Before I could ask, Theo messaged me that he was holding Amican’s com-palm in his hands.

“They have it,” I said, my voice cracking.

“Thank the Council,” Elle said, falling backwards to the floor. “Shit, I mean, thank...er...”

“Thank my family,” I said, laying beside her. “Thank...us.”

“Thank us,” she said with quiet wonder.

We laid there for a moment, staring at the white ceiling.

“Fuck,” Elle said, digging her own fingers into both sides of her head. “What the fuck happened?”

I looked at the wall. The final shrieking, desperate cries of Amican echoed in my ears, causing me to shudder violently.

“I mean, we found him,” Elle said, putting one hand on her stomach. “We actually found the bastard. He was right there, and then...”

The wet, ripping sound of Amican’s flesh being torn apart by rabid teeth invaded my mind. Petrus’ manic face, his mouth hanging open in a terrifyingly inhuman way flashed before my eyes. It was Silen.

How could I tell Elle what I knew? Hell, I didn’t *know* what Silen was to begin with. Or why It hated Amican so intensely.

It also hated me. And now Elle was in danger. She saw the fear in my face and her mossy eyes widened. Not in fear, but in sympathy. Her kindness soothed me immediately, reminding me that there was good in this world. Elle saw the good, and she saw it in me.

“I have to tell you something that you’re not going to believe,” I told her.

She threw her hands up into the air. “I think I’m past the point of not believing you.”

That earned a small smile from me. I was past the point of lying to her. “There’s an alien sentiency that’s been discovered within the ITZ, but its existence isn’t public. I actually don’t know if It originated here, but...It is here.

“It’s name is Silen. It has a sort of hive mind. It can take over an already living being, at which point that being becomes Silen. That’s what the animals were.”

Elle’s face reverted to a blank slate. “How do you know this?”

“I was warned about it by someone who had been attacked by Silen before. She told me a few things about It, but I honestly wasn’t sure It was real until today.”

“Today was real, that’s for sure,” Elle said, her expression completely neutral. I’d been around her now long enough to know that meant she was deeply conflicted about something, even without psyche-mapping.

“Why did it attack Amican? And then us?” Elle asked.

“I don’t know. I think it wants to assimilate as many sents as possible. The person who warned me about it, years ago, she said it assimilated her daughter while they were on a journey through the outer reaches of the ITZ.”

Elle allowed a hint of realization to spread across her face.

“I was told a story, when I was very young, by one of the Councilmembers,” she said. “Scared me so bad I couldn’t sleep for weeks, though I’ve hardly thought about it since then. It was about an evil tree that grows around the perimeter of the ITZ. It feeds off of itself, and so the larger it becomes, the more powerful it grows. If its roots find you, then you become part of the tree. So, he warned me, you must never travel to the outskirts of the Inner Temporal Zone.”

“That...sounds like Silen,” I said. “Though, It’s not staying on the outskirts of the ITZ anymore, apparently.”

“I can’t believe my father wouldn’t tell me about this,” Elle said, her faint eyebrows crumpling. “I can’t believe you wouldn’t tell me about this.”

I turned onto my side, and pulled her shoulder so that she was facing me. “Listen to me, Elle. I’m telling you the truth when I say I didn’t know that It was real. But now that I know It is real, I know another terrible truth. Silen destroyed my homeworld.”

Elle looked at me, puzzled. “Memphis?”

“I lied to you when I told you I grew up on Memphis. I’ve...I’ve lied to you a lot Elle. But I see now how foolish that was. I see now what we can do when we tell the truth.” I stopped,

swallowing the phlegm that suddenly filled my throat and poured from my nose. “I was born on Pluora.”

Elle stared at me as though she were looking at a ghost. “Pluora, the Utopian planet?”

I nodded my head. Elle sat up, then stood, walking around in a circle, her loose avatar suit swishing as she paced.

I stood too, blocking her path, taking her cold hands into mine. “Elle, I love you.”

Her eyes welled with tears. “Ben, I...soffing stars, I’ve always known.”

“That I loved you?”

“No, I mean, I guess it was pretty obvious, but...”

“That I was from Pluora?”

“No, er, damn...I guess...that I was in love with you too! I didn’t want to believe it, but fuck, I’m the one that found you! I’m the one that chose you, chose you to bring to the Council, and infiltrate the Reliance with me! I...”

She shook her hands, trying unsuccessfully to free them from mine. “I’m sorry.”

It all made so much sense. It wasn’t the Council that plucked me from my world, and brought me into Elle’s. It was Elle.

I wiped the wetness from my face. “Thank you.”

She let out a laugh through her tears. “Thank *you*. I was missing something in my life, before we met. And I feel like I’ve found it.”

Elle grabbed my face and pressed her lips to mine. A warmth spread from the center of my chest to my belly. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her still so that I could feel the perfect shape of her lips, as I had the last time I kissed her.

But this time, her lips had life; they moved against mine, brushing me with a soft kiss. They parted, and our breath mixed together, creating something new. Our tongues moved together, and our feet shuffled in a dance as old as humanity. The warmth spread from my belly down to my groin. Wanting more, I pushed her back, step by step, until she had nowhere else to go.

Her rear hit the white wall, reminding us that we were on solid ground. We broke apart long enough to look deeply into each other’s eyes.

Elle’s lips parted again to ask the question I was thinking. “Are we...doing this?”



I gripped Elle firmly around the waist with both of my hands.

“Yes.”

I picked her up, setting her down on a jumpseat I pulled from the wall.

“We are doing this.”

I gripped her again, pulling her juicy hips against me, then back on the seat.

“I am going to fuck the lights out of you.”

With that, I hastily pulled off my baggy black suit. Elle sat stunned for a moment, before pulling down her own suit, exposing her round breasts.

We crashed together again, our bodies now mostly naked. Her hands felt the rough skin on my neck, on my back, on my sides. When they reached my underwear, they dove beneath the fabric, following the lines of my groin muscles to their terminus.

My breath caught in my throat as her right hand found my dick. I weave no fiction when I tell you the exact word she said to me was, “Wow.”

I responded by pressing myself into her hand. She squeezed me hard.

I broke away from our embrace for a moment to remove my underwear. Elle balanced perfectly on her ass and slid her own undergarments up the length of her tone legs, then flicked them to the side with her foot. She scooted forward to the very edge of the seat, exposing herself to me.

I descended on the meal I had waited so long to taste. I could barely hear her soft moans as I lost myself in her delicious peach. After only a few moments, she pulled lightly on my hair.

“I need you inside of me now.”

That was an order I was happy to follow. I stood, and her hand grabbed me again, guiding my dick to her opening. I pressed forward, my head entering the warmth and the wet. Elle cried out, digging her fingers into my hip. I pressed forward more, her legs widening to let me in.

Elle shuddered as she fell back against the wall, lost in ecstasy as I moved inside of her. Her perfect apple breasts bounced up and down while her fingers clawed around the edge of the seat. Seeing her like that, exposed and uninhibited, after we had spent so long hiding our intimate sides from each other, was almost enough to make me come then and there.

It did not take much longer for the pleasure to overwhelm me. With a final, deep thrust, I climaxed, our moans filling the small room.

For so many blissful seconds, we held each other, breathing heavily, thinking of nothing.

Then I stumbled back, allowing Elle to rise and clean herself off with her discarded avatar suit. I found my jumpsuit folded against the edge of the wall and clumsily pulled it jumpsuit over my lower half, not bothering with the underwear. Elle grabbed her day robe from the corner and wrapped it around her perfect body, then sat back down on the jumpseat.

“Remind me why we haven’t been doing that this whole time?”

I let out a nervous laugh, leaning against the wall. “You know, I honestly can’t remember.”

“I’m sure there was a good reason...” Elle said, slowly rolling her eyes up to meet mine.

We stared at each other for a few moments. My mind raced with the memory of what had just happened, and what else I wanted to do.

Elle was perched on the jumpseat, her right leg crossed primly over her left. She looked at me coyly, and the warmth returned to my core.

Before I knew what was happening, Elle had jumped off of the seat and was in my arms again. Our greedy mouths tasted each other, already hungry for more.

The universe, as always, has other plans. My Com-Palm buzzed with a call from Uncle Y’ra and the others.

I stepped away from Elle, answering it without a second thought.

“It’s wonderful to see your beautiful mugs again,” I greeted them, hopefully with my breathing under control. They looked disheveled, but healthy.

“It’s good to be seen,” Auntie Sorah said as she refastened a fallen braid into her bun. “That was quite a revolution. Do you have any idea how or why Amican chose to attack us with house pets?”

Of course they would assume it was Amican’s doing. My heart was racing, full of post-coital bliss. I wanted to keep it that way, at least for now. “Beats me,” I answered quickly. “Maybe he didn’t want to keep any traditional weapons in the house, for fear they might be flagged in some planet-wide sweep?”

Elle looked at me, but didn’t say anything.

“Hmm,” Uncle Y’ra hummed. “I would think that a former Councilmember would know how to hide a gun from detection, but you could be right. Maybe it was part of the conditions the Council set when they let him ‘escape’, ya know?”

I liked that explanation a lot more than a mind-hungry alien creature, so I was happy to agree and move on. “I like that explanation, Uncle.”

“What I really want to know, or perhaps I don’t,” Y’ra grumbled through his frayed orange mustache, “is how you ended up with Amican’s arm.”

“And his Com-palm, right? It was still in there?” I asked.

“Yes boy, we have it here. Just tell me, is he going to come looking for it?”

I inhaled the stale simroom air until my lungs stung. It seems I would have to take credit for this death as well. “He won’t,” I said. “Amican is dead.”

“I killed him,” Elle said, breaking her silence. “He’s no longer a threat to you, or to anyone else in the ITZ.”

I saw Sorah begrudgingly nod. “The wheel turns,” she said.

“What about the Core,” asked Theo through a busted lip that was beginning to heal. “Did he tell you anything, before the pew pew?” A holimote of a gun shooting slicer disks appeared underneath his shoulders.

“We barely had time to question him at all, before the animals started attacking,” I said. “That’s why I grabbed the Com-palm. It’s all we got now.”

“All that work, for this little tingly,” Theo said wistfully, holding up the disc. “And who knows if we’ll be able to get anything off of it.”

“If anyone can hack into Amican Stone’s Com-palm, it’s Sorah,” said Y’ra, his head looking proudly at his partner’s.

All this work, and lives of billions rested on Auntie Sorah’s mechanical skills. Even if I still had my automaton, the projection AI still wouldn’t be able to keep up with the intricacies of the device. I had to trust that the steps I had taken this far would lead us to victory. This would be the hardest Faith Point I had ever reached.

No, I had to stop thinking that way. Where had psyche-mapping gotten me? It was because of my family, and Elle, that we found Amican. I took Elle’s hand into mine, feeling the sexual warmth flowing through her fingers. I didn’t need to psyche-map her anymore, she was mine of her own volition.

## 45 - You want to talk of death?

Auntie Sorah's first report delivered bittersweet news. Unsurprisingly, Amican's Com-palm had deployed defensive measures the moment it was stolen. It's connection to the internet had been severed, preventing us from accessing any data that resided in the cloud. Half of the mini fractal database within the disc had been torched as well. Only a few small cubes of the fractal store remained untouched, however even such a small FDS contained zettabytes of information — more than a lifetime of a human's every interaction.

It quickly became clear that what was contained within these undamaged cubes was not the typical recordings of Amican's life, but something even more valuable. It was schematics, neural circuitry, formulas — all about solar harnessing. A treasure from beyond the grave. Information I couldn't be happier to receive.

For a moment, it seemed we had our salvation. That was, until we realized that it would take months to transmit all that data to the COB over telegraph. Even if we could send it all instantaneously, there was no way we could possibly process the data in the five days we had left before the radiation was created. Sorah utilized her best, most illegally intelligent AI to comb through the information at superhuman speed, but without knowing what it was looking for, it was barely better than random. All the minds that knew anything about Solar Harnessing were stuck on this barge, millions of lightyears away.

But I had faith. When my brain started to spiral into realistic simulations of the future, I found Elle. Just the sight of her face would be enough to pull my mind from the well of doubt and into the light.

We spent most hours of the day with the kids, all of us locked into the lab, pouring over the slow stream of byts that Sorah and her AI sent to us. With each hour that passed, we all learned more about Solar Harnessing than we ever dreamed we could, and with each hour that passed, the Core was that much closer to producing energy that would poison Virgon and Gruar.

Then one morning, two days before the radiation deadline, an urgent message came through from Sorah. I was in the laboratory, explaining a circuit to the kids when I received it. I

stopped mid-sentence and read the message, one, twice, thrice, as the kids huddled around me, trying to get a glimpse.

“Well? What is it?!” Jylla finally said. Her hair was a fiery shade of red today.

“We have it,” I said, scarcely believing my own words.

Skrim jumped and put his hands to his mouth. “We have it? Really? What do we have?”

“A detonation code. We can thank Sorah’s forbidden AI. It plucked it from the trillions of other codes in Amican’s Com-palm. No idea how, such is the mysterious nature of high-QI AI. But it’s 99.99% certain that what it found, when entered into the global terminal, will trigger the detonation of the Foreman Core.”

I grabbed a fiz terminal from a drawer, and typed in the commands that would allow Sorah to securely deliver the detonation code to it.

“She’s sending the code now,” I said, my hands clasped firmly around the thick fiz screen.

Elle came behind me and stood on her toes, resting her chin ever so slightly on my shoulder. “How long will it take?” she said loudly in my ear.

“It should only take a few seconds. It’s only a code, after all,” Mathias said, looming behind me. She was tall enough to see clearly over my head without standing on anything.

Sure enough, the fiz terminal alighted with a smiley face, indicating the code had been delivered.

We all stared at it, silent for a moment.

“Who’s going to be the one to submit it to the Core?” Skrim asked nervously.

“Do you want to do the honors?” I asked Elle.

“Oh, well, you’re in the captain’s seat, you might as well push the button.”

“If you want to do it, please be my guest.”

“No, no, no, this was your idea, your dream. You can do it.”

“You provided most of the technical expertise, and were basically our leader...”

“I’ll do it!” Skrim piped up.

“No!” Elle and I both said simultaneously.

“I’ll do it,” I said, turning off the terminal screen and tucking it under my arm. “But we should tell Christopher and Jana first, I imagine they’re going to want to turn this into a event...”

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Elle, myself, and the kids walked together, huddled almost as closely as we had in the lab, to the lecture hall. The room had been repurposed by the Reliance as an exercise facility, but today had been restored to its original function, so that the 51 inhabitants of the COB could watch the outcome of their dedication, janitors and all.

We entered the large room in single file, and I set the terminal down on the desk positioned in the middle of the lecture stage. The hall slowly erupted in applause. It startled me, so lost I was in the abstract implications of this moment. As I looked across the amphitheatre seating at the Reliance team members, many of whom I’d come to know personally over these last five months, my heart swelled with pride. I’d seen this moment happen a hundred times, on a screen or in my mind, in the stories I consumed as a child. Someday, I thought, I will also be applauded by a room full of people. I had to admit, it felt every bit as good as I thought it would.

I looked up to the large screen behind me, projecting a live feed of the Solar Harnessing Core, dimmed down so we could see the Core itself through the blinding light that escaped the exterior holes. Even against the disorienting backdrop of empty space, its colossal size struck a sense of unease in the heart, as though it were a living Leviathan.  $1.2 \times 10^{29}$  kg of material, assembled over years by thousands of magnetic cranes, utilizing technology that none of the geniuses in this room understood, myself included. The first fully functional Core that had ever been built. This glowing orb changed the course of humanity, of all life in our known universe. It allowed FTL travel to be accomplished without months of preparation and billions of Redit. It allowed humanity to expand beyond a handful of colonies, exponentially increasing our population. It allowed us to discover a third sentient species, the Gruar, whose relative inferiority to us proved our dominance over our temporal zone. And I was going to destroy it.

All the kids except Seb took a few awkward bows before Christopher quieted the room. With a deep inhale, he began his passionate speech.

“This is the moment we have all worked for. Our very bones have become dragonbeek through our efforts...”

I tapped the active pad, submitting the code. A few hushed gasps echoed through the crowd as Christopher stopped his speech with a defeated sigh. This had been our plan, though Christopher’s angst at not being able to deliver his passionate words was real. The surprise execution was necessary, in case the Council was somehow surveilling our activity, and waiting to intervene at the last possible moment, before the damage could be done.

We watched the screen with bated breath. A single flash of lightning sparked across the upper-left surface of the Core. Within a matter of seconds, the entire left-hand side of the core was alight with bolts of white electricity, which soon covered the entire sphere. A faint bullet of light shot from the bulbous tip of the left core rectenna, and then — the Core burst, issuing forth massive arcs of plasma energy into the abyss. The screen filled with light, and then the signal cut out.

The room erupted into jubilation that put the earlier applause to shame. Elle and I looked at each other, stunned. It had worked.

Jylla bounced her way to us, scooping Elle and I into a hug, her round body jiggiling against us with jolly laughter. I felt Skrim's thin frame embrace us from behind, followed by a much stronger squeeze from Mathias. Though he waited a fashionable amount of time, even Seb joined the group hug, his typically serene face stretched into a full-blown smile.

We had done it, we had saved —

Suddenly the cheering stopped, leaving an empty void in the air. Blinding light assaulted my eyes, as the celebrating figures of our fellow Reliance members disappeared, and were replaced by a chillingly familiar bright white backdrop.

“You FOOLS!”

Aldus Ertian shouted as he angrily strode up to us.

Elle jumped back in shock, pulling her robe tightly around her.

“How you came from my own flesh and blood is one of the great mysteries that remain to me.” He spat at her, flecks of saliva catching in his sleek, gray beard.

He rounded on me. “You, I could have expected it from. I did not want to trust you, as minor as your role in all of this was supposed to be. Damned Gamartha and her machinations. Damn Amican and his greed. The Council is in the most vulnerable state it has ever been, and then you two do this!”

Elle was frozen.

“You don't even know what you have done. What you could have done,” he said.

I didn't know if he was referring to the Core, to Amican, or to the fact that I had rocked his daughter's world.

“You're...talking about the Core?” I asked.

“Yes, you child! Not that you haven't done enough in the last week to banish you from the Empire forever!”

“If we had not done what we did, billions of lives would have been lost!” I shouted back at him, in disbelief at what was happening.

“And what do you know of life, boy? You think in terms of death. Billions lost, you say, but how many billions have been born at my hands alone? How many billions live, and reproduce from the energy that Core provided? How many billions will thrive under the foundation this Council has built?”

I stared back at him as he continued.

“Not billions. Not trillions. It is a number so high your feeble brain could not comprehend it.”

He exhaled slowly through his dry nostrils. “You want to talk of death? You know what would have happened if we did not step in?”

I knew it was not a question.

“No, of course not. The main core transmitters, the two that collect the Core’s output and transmit it to the receiving rectennas throughout the ITZ. You turned those off, Elle?”

She knew it was not a question.

“Indeed you did, because you knew that they would transmit the surplus of microwave energy from the core, which would obliterate any receiving station that wasn’t at least a T6. Yes, those few years you spent studying under Amican’s protege taught you well. So well you thought you could dismantle a Core yourself.” He narrowed his eyes.

“No, if it were simple hubris, like with this idiot Ben, I might find it forgivable. But you knew you were tampering with things you did not understand, things capable of mass destruction, and you tampered with them anyway. And this is what is consequence...”

Aldus gestured with his hand, and a screen appeared, though it did not seem to be coming from his Com-Palm or any source I could see. On the screen was an asteroid with a tall pole on it, floating in space. The pole had a bulbous, round tip, identifying it as a rectenna. Suddenly, it exploded with such force the asteroid broke in two.

Another video began, this one showing a handful of rectennas perched on top of a floating disc, like a waystation. It too exploded soundlessly.

Another video, this time of a building with rectennas and other devices scattered around it. Gone in a red-white ball of plasma and sparks.

We watched two more videos with similar outcomes before Elle finally spoke.

“Stop. Did the energy burst reach anywhere...” She trailed off.



“With life? No. We were able to remotely disable the remaining rectennas *properly* before the jab reached populated areas. But not before 22 stations were destroyed.”

Elle shifted uncomfortably.

“Getting the power back should be no problem for the Council of Light,” I said.

“Of course it is not. There are plenty of remaining stations, and the energy lost from the Foreman Core can be pulled from the Triangulum or Taxit Cores before the deficit reaches the inner rectennas. But those Cores will now deplete twice as quickly, requiring immense changes in the planning of our civilization. Not to mention, there will also be a stark increase in that radiation you’re so *deeply* concerned about.”

“But that radiation won’t hit any populated worlds, will it?” I retorted, “you’d have done the calculations already, and that would have been the first thing you threw in our face!”

Aldus looked at me like I was a piece of bird shit that just landed on his windshield.

“The fact that the additional radiation happens to miss our zone is the truest form of luck that exists in this universe.”

“There’s nothing wrong with relying on a bit of luck now and again. If all that destroying that core has done is inconvenience you, then I call that a win win.”

“I would not expect anything more from you. That would require you to comprehend of ideas that could not fit in ten of your minds.”

He turned away from me, fixing his baggy, brown eyes on Elle.

“I tried so hard to protect you. To protect everyone in this realm. What do I always tell you, Elle, more than anything else?”

Elle was biting her lip, her entire face gripped with emotion. She released her lip to talk, the impressions of her teeth leaving deep, white marks.

“Walk above the water, and make no ripples,” she whispered.

“Make no ripples. Keep the noise to a minimum. And you drop a bomb on New Xin, then detonate a sun!” He closed his eyes for a moment, exhaling a long breath. “You are in It’s path now, there is nothing I can do about that.”

“What...what do you mean, father?”

“The alien known as Silen. I know he has told you about it,” Aldus said, gesturing to me. “You think your precautions prevent us from listening,” he non-asked.

“Had I known this man had already interacted with Silen, I would have never let you near him. When Silen comes across a desirable host that It is not able to assimilate, It marks that host. To keep track of the victim, so that when It has more power, It can return to claim him.” He locked his eyes onto me. “Or to kill him, if he proves to be too much trouble.”

Elle took a step toward her father. “Why would you keep this from me, if you wanted to protect me?! How can I avoid an alien that I don’t even know exists!”

“Even thinking about Silen can draw It’s tendrils closer. Elle, you question that I know what is best.”

She looked at her father, her eyes filling with tears, pleading with him to stop.

“To you Elle, I have only this one thing more to say. If you decide to continue down this path, I will not come to your rescue next time. You will feel the consequences of your mistakes.”

In a flash, she was gone from the empty white room, leaving only Aldus and I.

Aldus put his hands behind his back, the long arms of his robe gracefully arcing through the air as they moved. “Ben, on this 12th day of July, you are hereby forbidden from stepping foot on any planet, colony or waystation within the Ertian Empire. Your punishment might have been more severe, but we appreciate that you have dealt with Amican.”

He pivoted slightly, his robe spinning majestically with him.

“Stop!” I shouted with a power I’d never felt before. I wasn’t going to let him disappear without answering my question this time. I was a force to be reckoned with.

Aldus turned back to me.

“My homeworld. *Pluora*. Why did Silen destroy it?”

Aldus’ long, white eyebrows raised, revealing his glistening eyes. “You...you are a child of *Pluora*?”

This was the first real question he’d ever asked me. “Yes. I escaped in a pod, before the implosion began. When I met Silen, he told me he ordered the Utopian planets to be destroyed, that they weren’t poorly built. Why would this alien want them gone?”

Aldus took a few slow steps towards me, really looking me for the first time. “Soffing stars, I see it now,” he whispered.

“What do you see?”

Aldus closed his eyes, and I saw a glimmer of tears in the ancient edges of his drooping lids. “We built the Utopian planets, not only to see if creating a planet from dust could be done.

They were experiments in higher consciousness, in autonomy. In the very things that Silen's roots cannot grasp. But we did not know It could feel such wrath."

I felt a shiver run down my spine. This was the truth that I had been avoiding for years, with the drugs, and the crime, and the saving the universe. Silen was real, and he was to blame for the death of everyone I had known. Even Artemis.

My hands clenched into fists. "We have to fight back! I can do it, I will do the work, just tell me how!"

Aldus hung his head. "Ben. Unfortunately, this changes nothing. You are a threat to the peace of the Ertian Empire, and the authority of the Council. I only wish we could have found you sooner, perhaps we could have saved you from the path you've taken."

In a flash, we were back in the lecture hall. I blinked, my eyes adjusting to the dim light, and what had just transpired. The room was filled with chatter that sounded at once both excited and anxious. Slowly, the chatter quieted as people noticed our magical return.

I looked at Elle. She was staring straight ahead, her face blank, two lines of tears painting her cheeks. I reached out to hold her, but she threw up her hand, commanding me to stop.

I could not stop my mind from racing. *This changes nothing*, Aldus had said. Everything that I had done, that we had done, meant nothing? My soul was forever tainted by the damage that had been done to me. The Council could do nothing, I could do nothing.

Finally, the helplessness I had been felt from the moment I watched Fett run from the flood exploded from me. I grabbed a treadmill and threw it to the side with all my might. As it hit the ground, I punched my fist into the shelf to my left, knocking cleaning supplies onto the floor below. I stared as various colored liquids spilled from their containers and onto the hardwood floor, the only sound coming from my heaving breaths. It felt incredible.

"Azurcarman's asshole, what happened to you two?" Christopher exclaimed, running up to us and patting our torsos to check that we were really there. "I've never seen anything like that, it was as though you were Flashed without a Flash Point!"

"I...I don't know." My anger seethed from me. I was truly dumbfounded as to how we got to wherever we did, it was unlike any technology I'd come across.

"Well dammit man, where did you go? What did you see? Was it the Council?"

I almost laughed. Only Christopher would have made that guess.

"Yeah, it was, actually." I looked over to Elle, who only stared blankly ahead.

Christopher, on the other hand, looked like he was going to faint. His mouth flapped wordlessly as he struggled to comprehend his wildest fantasies suddenly coming true.

“What did they say, Ben?” Jana took over for her gobsmacked partner.

“They were angry. He was angry. Aldus Ertian, he was the only one there. Told us we were tampering with forces beyond our control, told us to cease and desist.”

Of course, Aldus never flat out told us to stop meddling with the cores, but his message was clearer than if he had said it outright. We had officially incurred the wrath of the Council.

“Elle, child, are you alright?” Jana noticed Elle wiping her eyes.

“I’m fine, really. It’s just a lot to process...the Core exploding, and the Council, and all this...”

Christopher finally regained control of himself. “Have a sip of some fine Forttendian Buble!” he said, grabbing a cup from a nearby table and handing it to Elle. “Its an X1382 vintage, quite fine, yes indeed.”

“Could we maybe talk somewhere more private?” I asked Christopher.

“Yes, yes, we have much to discuss. Aldus Ertian, of all the members to meet...and yes of course he’s alive, probably more machine than man at this point, if he ever was a man, which I have my doubts about...”

Christopher continued mumbling to himself as he escorted us out of the room, to the disappointment of everyone still gathered there. On the way, I grabbed the large blue glass bottle of Buble from the table.

“My man!” Christopher said, slapping my shoulder as we walked through the hallway, his boyish face beaming. My fingers were squeezed the neck of the glass bottle so tightly I wondered if it would break. I hoped it would.

A loud, deep clashing sound rang through the ship, as though something huge had collided with us. My body immediately tensed, sensing an attack.

“Stars above, we’ve been hit!” Christopher yelled.

“What are our defenses?!” I yelled back, my mind ramping up again. Elle barely seemed to notice what was happening.

I looked to Christopher, who was staring back at me with a giant grin. Why wasn’t he running to the control room...

“Ho ho ho, young Ben, you are too easy!” He chuckled deviously. “That’s just the portable Alcubierre drive being attached to the COB. Had to call in quite a few favors for that, let me tell you, but it was worth it for the look on your face alone.” He chuckled again. Jana playfully hit him on the shoulder.

Of course. We’d have to get out of the voids somehow, and a research vessel such as this one wouldn’t have permanently installed drives. Still, to rent an Alcubierre drive large enough to move the COB, for the nearly two year span it would take for delivery and return...I’m sure ‘a few favours’ was putting it lightly.

“It arrived yesterday. Rather good timing, I should say. I never doubted that you and the kids would have the job done in time, did I, my dear?”

“Neither of us did, my love.” Jana bent over and placed a tight-lipped kiss on Christopher’s forehead.

I tried to laugh, but it came out as more of a whimper. I swallowed a few large gulps from the bottle in my hand, the tart, fizzy liquid burning my throat in a masochistically pleasant way.

I clinked the bottle to Elle’s cup, and she took a sip with a small smile. I would have given anything to know what was going on in her head at that moment.

Looking through the virtual keyhole window in the hallway, I could see the front portion of the portable drive being attached to the barge. The drive itself was in two massive pieces, a cutter for the front, and a tailfin for the rear. The blast from the Core supernova wouldn’t hit us for another hundred years, but it was time to leave. Our job here was done.

What work lay ahead of us was less certain. I knew one thing for sure: The Council had underestimated me for the last time. I was not Ben Mcleod, I was Ben Shio, child of Pluora. Master of psyche-mapping. Destroyer of Suns. Hunted by Silen. Lover of the daughter of the Council of Light. But I would not hide like those ancient Gods, I was a new God. I was done hiding from the death, and the pain, and the sadness.

Elle slipped a hand around my waist. How could we go back to the way things were, now that our eyes had been opened to the vile darkness of our universe? Perhaps I will tell you all, some other day.

## Chapter 46 - Day 100 - I told you not to focus on the details

Lucia stood suddenly from her seat on the couch across from Ben. Ben, having only just completed his tale, looked up at her with confusion. Dax scratched his furry head with one of his three claws. Marim regarded Lucia expectantly.

Lucia cleared her throat, fixed her chin high, and spoke.

“I’ve long suspected you were older than you looked. Some of the details in your story gave me hints, but I thought you might just be making the entire thing up.”

Ben leaned back into the couch, folding his hands behind his head dismissively. “I told you not to focus on the details, Lucia. It’s a story about a lot of shit that happened a long time ago.”

“Well, uh, if it’s a story, you’ve gone a long way to plant details that are specific to the late 1300’s. Actually, it was Dax’s story that gave me the biggest clue. But just now, you mentioned a bottle of Forttendian Buble from X1382. Which means, I know how old you are.”

Ben raised an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Uh, just about. You’re 136”

Ben smirked. “135, in this temporal zone.”

Lucia wrinkled her nose. Just like Ben, to give her only a subsecond of satisfaction before dangling another mystery in her face. No, she refused to play this game. She’d done well to discover Ben’s true age, so she deserved a modicum of respect from the man. She locked eyes with him, returning his petulant gaze with her fiery stare. He stared back at her with wisened gray eyes that suddenly showed their age, but Lucia refused to blink.

“You may be asking yourself, ‘What do you mean, in this temporal zone?’” Ben finally said, folding his arms. “What I mean is, I have lived a good many years longer than that even, though I was born 135 years ago, in X1375.”

Lucia wasn’t going to let him distract from her revelation.

“What it means, is that you’re an old man!” she said.

“I don’t look it though, do I?” he sneered right back.

“Well...” Lucia looked at the ceiling innocently, “you have some wrinkles that made me suspicious.”

Ben straightened his back. “I do not!”

“You do. That’s what made me suspicious in the first place.” Lucia saw anger flash in Ben’s eyes.

“You don’t know shit. None of you do.” He ran a hand over his hair to smooth it down, unsuccessfully. With a groan, he stood and stormed out of the room.

“I didn’t say anything!” Dax protested to Ben as he left. He looked at Marim, who shrugged her shoulders.

“You surely got to him Lucia, I haven’t seem him that genuinely upset in ages,” Dax said. “Bravo!”

Lucia laughed nervously. It did feel good to finally turn the tables on the great manipulator.

“Yes,” Marim said, nodding her head a single time. “I believe this calls for celebration. Shall we have cake?”

Lucia stood to begin cooking, but Marim’s firm hand stopped her.

“I will prepare the cake,” Marim said, bowing ever so slightly to Lucia.

Lucia could scarcely believe her ears, as she had never seen the warrior woman cook. She sat back down on the couch with the weight of the moment. Unfortunately, there was a gnawing question causing a niggling unease in her chest.

“I’ll be right back,” she said to the two bounty hunters.

She ran out of the Great Room to catch up with Ben on his way to his workshop.

“Wait, I was just joking! You look great for 135.”

Ben didn't respond.

Lucia skipped past asking him whether she could ask a question, and just asked it.

"What happened to her? Elle, I mean."

Ben continued walking, not turning to address Lucia as he responded. "Same thing that has happened to all the people I've loved over the years. She left."

Lucia stopped in her tracks, leaving Ben to continue down the hallway alone.

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The mechanic picked up a cup from his desk. He brought it to his mouth, but stopped before the rim touched his open lips. He stared at the clear liquid inside, watching it wave from one side of the cup to the other, until it became still. The only perceptible movement in the liquid now came from tiny vibrations that disturbed the flat surface in rhythm with his heartbeat. Thinking better of it, he planted the cup back down on the desk with a thunk, a tiny spout splashing out of the cup to wet the dusty desk. He wouldn't drink it today, as he did almost every day. No. Today he needed something else.

He moved deftly to a plastic cupboard, kneeling down to pull open the bottom drawer. It stuck, blocked by something wedged against the drawer above it. Ben reached his hand inside, and pulled the obstruction free with a firm tug. It was a toy gun, made of blunted metal with a handle of smooth fake wood. The mechanic looked at the gun in disbelief...it was a gift from a dear friend that he'd long believed to be lost. A friend who he had forgotten until today, when telling of the day he detonated the Foreman Core. A friend he had chosen to forget, like so many others.

"I'm not taking the hint," he grumbled at his ship, a friend he'd built with his own hands. He liked to think it had a mind of its own, so that he could blame it for coincidences like this.

"I'll get there when I get there."

He cast the gun aside, its soft metal changing against the hard polished floor. He dove back into the messy drawer, searching through odds and ends for the black box he'd hidden in the clutter. He hadn't been trying to hide it so much as he'd been trying to put something,



anything between him and the box. It was barely a deterrent, as he still sought the box on a monthly basis.

Holding it like a treasure chest, he pressed the button to flip the lid open with a satisfying click. Inside sat a hundred drug patches, nestled side by side in the paper-thin notches of the box. The mechanic removed one, a pink spiral, from the box and placed it on his forearm.

He deposited himself into the silky bean bag chair in the corner of his workshop, and allowed the drug to take effect.

Memories of the toy gun and his friend seeped from his mind. In their wake, Elle came dancing through the mist. She was one he could never lose. Artemis entered the dream as well, joining Elle in the grassy clearing. Ben would have stayed there, dancing with them for hours, but he had other things to do. He left the sunny meadow, traveling in his mind's eye to the cold city of endless sturdy towers. The walls of his imagined mental storage crumbled and buckled from the weight they held. So treacherous was this city to traverse, the mechanic could no longer do it without the aid of the patches.

He forced himself to read through the words and numbers and pictures that filled the sturdy towers, like rifling through a billion of the drawers in which he kept his patch box. It had been a long time since there was anything resembling order to the thoughts and memories he kept there. The Great Architect himself had reached his hand into the towers and thrown them into chaos, where Ben now lived. But the mechanic stayed there, his mind tossed amongst the infinite rubble, clawing his way through the mire.

Because the longer you look at chaos, the more sense it begins to make.

