

History Lesson

Jonathan Brewster, ©2019 All rights reserved

Chapter 1

The Xero'pah named Nysander went through the ship searching for Theo Cosineau. He'd disappeared after a conversation with herself and Vuli an hour. Athena had declined to answer respond when Nys had asked where Theo had gone, so she was in the somewhat ridiculous position of having to search the small ship, compartment by compartment. Finally, she found him in the large cargo area the Ulthiri were using as a temporary home. Athena, their ship, had created a small seat and foot rest for him in one of the upper corners of the compartment reading a paperback.

She was annoyed, the ship wouldn't respond when she'd asked for the Lieutenant's location. Looking around, she spotted a ladder to where he was sitting but when she put her foot on the first rung, a firm hand landed on her shoulder.

"Lieutenant Cousineau has requested that he not be disturbed," a translator said from behind her.

Nys turned and was face to face with the largest of the Ulthiri. Not large enough to be warrior caste but larger than any of the technical specialists.

"You are Jurgen Chah," she said. "The Overseer."

"That was only true previously. I am now an escaped criminal."

"I would enjoy arguing that viewpoint with you but I need to speak with Theo first. Colonel Teydora is meeting us on the next transit between gates. Theophile should be informed."

"Informed of what?" Theo asked from behind her.

Nys turned around, Theo had come noiselessly down the ladder. The young human prefcoria was not quite as tall as she was. He had intensely blue eyes and curly black

hair. He looked even younger wearing the unofficial shipboard uniform of shorts and t-shirt.

"Lieutenant, when we transit to the next Slingshot, Colonel Teydora and her...sister will be waiting to rendezvous with Athena. They'll be aboard during the transit to Frontier Red."

"Fine. With respect, how many more little surprises do you think we can expect before Haven?"

"Excuse me, Theo," Athena interrupted, projecting her voice so that it seemed she was a third person standing with them. "Contingency orders for the rendezvous were relayed at Long Axis. Movements of the Colonel, and Lady Shly'ap, are restricted information due to their ranks. Field Captain Nysander was informed of the orders four standard minutes ago."

"Thank you," Theo said. "My apologies, Nysander."

She waved away the apology. "Lieutenant, I know what I told you was distressing to hear. You will get past this, I'm here to help. Perhaps you should recall that I was exiled by my own *family* for the simple and involuntary act of dying. This is why Teydora reassigned me specifically to work with you."

Theo nodded toward the crew common area. "We should probably discuss this in private. Athena, how far from the gate are we?"

"Two hours, twenty-eight minutes, Theo. Do you require privacy?"

"Uhm, sure. Please."

The bulkhead next to them shifted and flowed around them, creating a small compartment.

"This still weirds me out a little," Theo said, patting the bulkhead. "Thank you, Miss Athena."

The light in the compartment pulsed once in reply.

"Okay, Nysander, I could not care less how the rest of the galaxy feels about humans or why. What really pisses me off here is that your rank and assignment was never revealed to any of us, especially the fact that you and Vuli are our *babysitters*. I'm sorry, but I really doubt Captain Moana would have lifted an inch off of Earth had she known about these secret agendas."

Nysander's corneas widened and shifted from black into a green-gold color.

"Why do you say that, Lieutenant?"

Theo looked at Nysander like she was simple. "Maybe I've misunderstood your idea of rank and responsibility. My responsibility is protecting those people from everything I can, while they do *their* job. Withholding information as basic as who is in charge, makes me wonder if we're getting the whole picture on *anything*."

Nysander nodded slowly. "We have misunderstood each other, Theophile. I realized your anger as a reaction to how your people are regarded by others."

He waved a hand. "How does that help us kill more Bugs, insane robots, or whatever? Nysander, I honestly do not give a *shit* what you or anyone thinks about us. I care about my people and our mission."

She held her hands palm out, obviously thinking she needed to calm him down. "Captain Moana, she is fully aware of our role with your team. Obviously, a rushed rescue deployment wasn't the time and she didn't think she had the strength afterward. I was ordered to begin the process by Teydora with the same contingent order we received today. I was not properly prepared, I see that I should have begun our conversation by mentioning the captain's plans and I apologize."

Theo pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes closed. Nysander wondered if he knew he had copied the gesture from his twin.

"That changes...well, everything," Theo said and was quiet for a few seconds.

"I'm being a dic...*difficult* about this. The apology here needs to be my own, Nysander."

She put out her hand. "Perhaps if we bring the count of mistakes to one apiece?"

He shook her hand. "Even score then. Am I allowed to know who Vuli represents?"

Nys smiled slightly. "She's a convicted criminal, Theo. This is her punishment duty. That is all I know."

He shook his head. "Next you'll tell me the Commonwealth is really a package delivery service."

Nys' eyes lit up. "I love the art of Matt Groening! I first saw his work in a cultural exhibition years ago. We are still friends?"

"That never changed and I apologize again. I've fallen into the deep end of the pond here and I'm doing my best to learn to swim."

"Then think of me as a friend with a rope, rather than a babysitter," she said. "Otherwise I'll start making sure you're in bed at the proper time. It will be a very...personal kind of task."

Theo's eyebrows went up. "I'm tempted to find out what you mean by that."

She smiled. "Good. For now, you should go and see to your team. You might want to avoid any babysitting topics however. I'm concerned certain members of your team would embrace the idea too enthusiastically."

He laughed. "I agree."

"A slumber party on the other hand, that's something we might all enjoy. Topless pillow fights for one thing. I believe human females also practice their kissing techniques with one another?"

"Nys, unless you want me to meet our commander with an erection, we should shelve this discussion until later."

"If you're sure. Athena? We are finished here."

The light pulsed again and Nysander took a step closer to Theo as the walls around them began to flow back into the bulkheads. One of her hands found its way to his hip and then brushed across his crotch. He jumped as she felt his stiffening cock.

"Good news, everyone!" she giggled as the bulkheads finished retracting into the walls.

With a hint of a teasing smile, Nysander headed aft. Betsy was coming down the corridor toward them and stood aside to let her pass. After the elf had passed her, Betsy raised an eyebrow at Theo.

"So, whatcha' doin'?"

"Nothing like what you're thinking. It was just a quick command discussion."

"Right, you were locked in a closet with Her Royal Hotness, talking about commands? As in taking commands? Who's giving and who is receiving? The commands I mean."

Theo snorted and shook his head. "Not everything is lewd."

Betsy took his arm as they walked to the crew area. "That's what you think. Let's talk about how much it's going to take for me not to tell Emma you were snogging with our resident elf."

"I'll prove it. Athena, do you have a record my conversation with Nysander?"

"I do not, Lieutenant. You asked for privacy."

Betsy did her mad little giggle. "I claim your desserts *forever*."

Theo shrugged. "Is that all? Then I agree."

"What? No, we're supposed to bargain...why did you give in so easily?"

"Because Emma usually steals my desserts. It took a siege in an abandoned city to distract her long enough for me to eat some cake."

"I dunno if I'm up to wrestling Emma every night. And get your mind out of the gutter."

Theo sighed. "Me? Right, sorry."

The rest of the team was gathered in the open common area, making small adjustments to each other's dress uniforms. Emma was talking quietly with Toni and her husband when she saw him go through the hatch to his quarters and followed him in.

When Theo stepped into his stateroom, he was surprised to see that the unfamiliar dress uniform had been pressed and hung up. He stripped down and took the underclothes.

"Did Emma do this?" Theo asked, trying to imagine his twin using an ironing board.

"No, I pressed and arranged your uniform," Athena said.

"You're going to spoil us all," he said, pulling the black undershirt over his head.

Doubtless, it was some amazing advance in textiles, but it felt like one of those stretchy t-shirts to Theo. Emma appeared, looking over his shoulder in the mirror.

"Hey, I'm changing here," he said.

Emma just nodded and stuck her head back out into the common area.

"Who wants to watch Theo get dressed?" she called.

There were whistles and laughs, then Ayr peered around the hatch. "He's still got a cute ass," she called and there were more catcalls and laughter.

"Thank you both, I'm sure," Theo said, pulling on the pant. They were flat black and closed with magnetic buttons. The jacket (Theo still refused to call it a blouse) was next. It was the same black, almost light-absorbing. It closed with dull red magnetic clasps and a muted gray and red button closing his collar was the only other decoration. In spite of the tight fit and high collar, it was far more comfortable than he'd imagined.

"What about the cover," Emma said, holding out a shallow box.

"We're indoors and I have no idea how to even put it on."

The uniform hat was a weird mix of baseball cap and something found on one of Santa's elves. There had been a few attempts to properly wear the thing but it had rapidly turned comical. Theo looked at himself in the mirror. They'd gotten the dress uniforms from the outfitter on Long Axis but there hadn't been instructions on how to wear them. There was still a long belt-like thing and a braided cord but he had no idea what to do with them.

Emma took the cord and looped it around a button on his shoulder. It had the same gray and red of the collar button with a bright silver cord braided between them.

"Not quite right, let me help you," Nys said from the open hatch.

Emma moved out of the way and Nys took the cord from Theo. She carefully tied several intricate knots along the braid.

"What about this part?" Emma asked, pointing at the other long strip of red cloth.

"You only wear the sash with the campaign hat," Nys said. "It is optional in this situation, we can don them if you like, Lieutenant."

"No," both twins said in unison.

"Then we just need to attach this to your shoulder."

"It shows his rank?" Emma asked, seeing a similar cord on Nysander's shoulder.

"Rank and awards, yes. You won't need to re-tie this each time, just leave it on the blouse. Until your rank changes anyway."

Theo smiled at her reflection. "Thank you, Field Captain."

Nysander stuck her tongue out at him in the mirror before stepping back through the hatch.

"That was unexpected," Emma said. "You've both been moody since we left Long Axis."

"A stupid misunderstanding. We resolved it a few minutes ago."

Emma studied his face and smiled after a few seconds. "Whatever it was, you showed your ass, didn't you? You're a little embarrassed and she was a teensy bit smug."

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Well, good. I'm tired of Lieutenant Grouchy-Pants. Is this arrival anything I need to worry about?"

"I think we will now find out *why* humans are the pond scum of the galaxy. She seems to worry that it'll spiritually damage all of us somehow."

"Oh good, I was afraid this was going to be boring. Your uniform looks very good on you by the way," Emma said, brushing a speck of lint away from his sleeve.

"Thanks. It's a little too close to an SS uniform though."

"That's what Toni said. But Ian, ever the history nerd, says the cut is completely different. We look pretty badass though."

~~~

Eighteen minutes after they had passed through the gate, Athena slowed and the team began to hear the clunks and thuds of the docking process. In the cargo bay, the team had formed into ranks and the Ulthira were in neat rows behind the troop. Antoinette "Toni" Laurine was the senior NCO after Theo had sent bodyguards with their wounded captain, and she was walking up and down the two lines of troopers, stopping once or twice to correct small problems with the unfamiliar uniforms.

When it was Theo's turn, Toni inspected him just as carefully. Turned away from the troops, she gave Theo a quick wink as she unnecessarily adjusted his collar. Emma got the same looking-over and Theo wanted to roll his eyes when Toni nodded at her without adjusting anything. Emma joined a gap they'd left for her in the front rank, directly behind where Theo was standing.

They felt a slight breeze as the main hatch was opened and pressure equalized between the two ships. A minute later, Nys entered the cargo bay, leading Colonel Teydora along with another Xero'pah Theo hadn't met.

Both of the elves wore casual pants and tunics and of course, were far more elegant than anyone else. Theo stiffened to attention. Behind him, there was a rustle as the rest of the troop came to attention. As promised, Athena used to the floor to synchronize their boot heels slapping together. Teydora and the newcomer took in the assembled team for a moment before Teydora smiled at Theo. Her unearthly beauty didn't faze him as much the last few times but he certainly noticed it.

"It's considered very rude to make your colonel feel like a slob," she said to him quietly, with a smile. Raising her voice, Teydora addressed everyone else; "Thank you all. I am humbled by your appearance, thank you for taking the time. In return, allow me to present the Most Illuminated and Revered Lady Shly'ap Shly'aphanae...." A long litany of Xero'pah names and titles followed, rolling effortlessly from the colonel's tongue. He didn't understand any of it but enjoyed the smooth rhythm of the Xero'pah language as he studied the newcomer.

She was dressed in the same fashion as Teydora and had the same kind of smooth ageless beauty as the other Xero'pah. From her appearance, she could have been Nysander's sister, or her grandmother. Theo could sense that the woman with the very long name was much older than any of them. The feeling of immense age spread out from her like vapor from a flask of liquid nitrogen. When Teydora had finally finished with her names, the woman stepped forward.

"But of course I will not burden your young simple minds with so much," she said in a low melodic voice. "You may address me as Your Grace, Lady Shly'ap. And don't you all look very splendid. As my younger sister said, thank you. Now, you couldn't comprehend how immensely valuable my presence, but no matter. I have come a...very great distance from the center of civilization in order that I may impart certain information to you prefcoria, most importantly the...*humans*."

Her tone was self-assured to the point of arrogance and when she said "human" it was with an unmistakable distaste. Theo could feel a hot prickle on the back of his neck and knew it was Emma's irritation. He tried to send her a sense of calm but had no idea if that really worked.

Teydora cleared her throat. "Again, thank you for honoring my regiment. However, you don't look very comfortable and we will need your close attention for a long while.

You are dismissed, I recommend casual clothing, there is much to hear. We will meet again in half an hour. Lieutenant, a word please."

Theo followed Teydora to one side of the cargo bay as everyone else quickly filed out. She stepped close to him.

"Lieutenant, I've reviewed your reports from the rescue mission. That was a no-win situation from the beginning but I would have followed the exact same course of action. Although, I wonder if I could have remained as calm. You continue to impress me, Theophile. Well done."

"Ma'am, do you have any idea what that thing was? Vuli thought it might be Founder-tech."

"Lieutenant, what did we say about calling me madam? But yes, she was correct. You encountered the remains of a terraforming system created by the Founders. This one was originally from a world called Tarradya Ghan."

Theo recognized the name but it took him a second. "The first destroyed colony. We were working in the same area?"

"No, you were a very long way from Tarradya. I don't understand how a terraformer even escaped, let alone how it managed to go that far. We may never know the answers. Now, I have happier news for you. Kawehi is safely on Haven, along with her guards. That was an...interesting decision."

Theo heard the implied question in her voice. "Between the casualties and...other issues, I wanted her safe."

Teydora nodded. "Ah, the other issues. Your instincts are correct if perhaps a bit unsubtle. We will discuss things before I depart."

"Can they help her?"

"Yes. It sounds strange, but the damage to her nerves is completely novel to our scientists and this is a good thing. Our curiosity being what it is, every neurological expert we have is applying for positions on Haven. I don't know how much she'll

recover, or how long it'll take, but some of the best minds in the galaxy are looking after her. She was already able to sit up and speak clearly when I saw her last."

"Thank you," Theo said. "And thank you for taking such good care of her, Colonel."

Teydora actually smiled at him. "You're not the only ones who love her, Lieutenant. As for our unexpected arrival, Nysander began to explain that humans are not well regarded by most of the Commonwealth?"

He nodded. "She mentioned there was more and she was concerned it might destroy us somehow."

"Not destroy, but I fear your people may be badly wounded by the knowledge."

"How could it possibly be worse than knowing the Bugs are coming for our planet?"

She smiled sadly. "As young as you are, you have yet to realize that there are worse things than death."

Theo couldn't think of a reply to that and Colonel Teydora went back to Shly'ap. Going to strip off the uniform, Theo wondered how much worse things could possibly get.

Athena had changed the layout of the squad bay, squeezing each berthing compartment down as they were vacated. The end result was a seating arrangement that looked like an amphitheater. All of their attention would be on the seat that was raised slightly, putting the Xero'pah slightly above the rest of them. Not surprised, Theo sat directly opposite the woman. Theo refused to think of her as "Your Grace," no matter what her rank was among the elves. She reminded him of the church ladies of his youth, arrogant in the certainty of her superiority. Hopefully the rest of the team had dealt with this kind of bully before. Still, he wished for a few minutes of privacy so he could talk to them, warn them what was coming.

Toni's husband Willi was the first of them to come in and sit down. He had a strange grin on his face as he surveyed the new seating. Behind him, Toni muttered something about it being "precious" as she stepped in and Theo wanted to laugh. Of course they'd

handle it. They'd been experts in fighting the Dominion and their proxies since before he could shave. They'd be fine.

When they were all seated, the Xero'pah woman made her entrance. They all stood up and waited politely as she settled herself in her chair. The memory of his childhood brought the image of a broody hen settling on her nest and he bit his lip to keep from smiling. Anything that had survived for thousands of years would be dangerous in its own right. He had to take her seriously, no matter how ridiculous she looked. Beside him, Emma felt his amusement and put her arm around him. Leaning against her slightly, Theo felt a little calmer.

"I am unknown to you," the new Xero'pah said. "I realize that your ignorance is not totally your fault. Your 'Colonel' and I share parents, until her most regrettable accident removed her from our Lineage. You would have already considered me ancient before she was born however. Our Father claimed our home planet in the era of..."

Theo waited while Lady Shly'ap went through a long litany of names and places that didn't mean anything to him. Theo studied Teydora as he waited and noticed her pupils rapidly morphing shapes and colors. He had to stifle another flash of amusement. Back on Long Axis, Nysander had mentioned that the shifting shapes and colors of their pupils could be an indication that a Xero'pah was using complicated mental processes involved with memory or was indicative of strong emotions. Whichever, Teydora wasn't paying any more attention than he was.

"...and it was at this time that my superior wisdom and family rank assured my place with one of the scientific factions of the Ancients..." Lady Shly'ap was saying and Theo figured it was time to pay attention again.

"They had recently finished creating a race they called *Nephilia sed Adninani* and were settling them on the third planet in an isolated system. There were other candidates but perhaps they used the third planet because this was only the third time they had spread their prefcoria. You are all aware of this word's meaning?" she asked, her gaze locking onto Theo.

"We're told that it refers to the children of the Founders but the meaning is not easily translated," he said.

The woman smiled slowly but there wasn't a trace of humor behind it. "Ah, you've only spoken to diplomats. The word comes from our tongue, the True People named you, not the Ancient Masters."

Nys cleared her throat slightly and Theo noticed Teydora look at her, face expressionless.

The ancient Xero'pah twittered, hand over her mouth. "It is perhaps a little unkind, but the root word, *prefcorialve'ah*, means an infestation, an invasion of pestiferous but otherwise meaningless creatures. We were astounded as the Ancient Masters spread their science experiments on perfectly good colony worlds, but they were superior to the True People, so what could we do but follow their orders? That has been bad enough, but manageable. But then *humans* arrived. The Ancient Masters must laugh as they show us what an infestation *really* is."

"We are proud to be of service," Willi said cheerfully.

Lady Shly'ap clapped her hands, laughing. "What odd little creatures you became! My scientific faction was assigned to monitor the third planet, sharing our insights with the Ancient Masters. We gathered our data from the countless tiny mechanisms that swirled around the planet, you will personally witness the things I will tell you of. Be strong, little ones."

## Chapter 2 Ancient Earth

"Momma, come look!"

Mihr sighed, wiping her hands with a towel and walked to the screen door of the summer kitchen. Her daughter, Karlel was hanging by her knees from one of the new fruit-trees.

"What did Poppa Adriel say to you?" Mihr asked. "About his orchard?"

"I'm not that heavy yet!" Karlel protested. "Anyway, I wanted you to see *this*."

Before Mihr could say anything, the girl flipped forward, somersaulting as she fell and landing on her feet, just barely.

"Wasn't that good?" Karlel asked as she ran over.

"I am relieved you did not injure yourself or the tree," Mihr said, and went back to her bread.

Seeing that she'd get no approval, Karlel's face fell. She sighed and sat down on the step outside the door. She'd been sick when all the other kids had gone to the reserve to see the indigenous animals. She was feeling better, but was by herself. Even her father Adriel was away, busy at one of his conferences.

Mihr was putting the last of the bread in the oven when she heard Karlel's shrill scream.

"Mercy's tears!" she snapped, striding to the door.

There weren't any acrobatics this time. Instead, Karlel was pointing to the sky in the north. A thick finger of dirty gray smoke trailed across the blue and disappeared over the horizon. As she picked her daughter up, Mihr saw another fat thread flash overhead, then a third.

"What are those?" the girl quavered, throwing her arms around her mother's neck. "Is a ship crashing?"

Mihr watched two more bright trails appear overhead, and disappear over the northern horizon just as quickly.

"No, my love. There won't be any ships for another season. Let's go and talk to Iofiel, he may know."

There were a number of others already at Iofiel's house when the two of them reached the porch. Before Mihr could ask the news, the sound of a distant explosion began to swell. Mihr dropped into a crouch, pulling her daughter against her chest and covering the little one's ears.

When the noise had died to echoes, she looked around to see the others in much the same posture. Karlel was clinging tightly to her, crying in terror.

"Get to shelter!" Iofiel bellowed from his porch. "There was a warning, there's more coming! Get yourselves safe!"

Clutching Karlel tightly, Mihr was immediately on her feet, sprinting back toward the semi-underground house her family lived in. By the time she'd reached the door, the ground was already beginning to shiver under her feet.

~\*~

Far to the northwest, Adriel struggled to his feet. The ground below still shook and trembled but the violence of the movements seemed to be fading.

"Asteroid?" he asked the geologist that had been thrown to the ground next to him.

She shook her head, looking up at the almost root like trail of contrails. "Looks more like a comet to me."

They both staggered as the ground heaved again.

"Although, the results are much the same. Let's get to the shelter," she said, taking his arm.

Unsure of what to do, Adriel let her lead him to the safety of a specially reinforced building. It was a place to retreat to if the indigenous species attacked, he had no idea if it was appropriate for earthquakes or whatever was going on.

Inside, the astronomers were studying their instruments carefully and the geologist hurried over to join her work group. Everyone was babbling words he didn't understand. Botany had been his whole life. The Astronomer Adept saw him and came over to lead him to a seat.

"Large objects are appearing unexpectedly," the head astronomer said quietly. "There have been fourteen impacts so far, the speed and trajectory strongly indicate a string of comet debris."

"Any near the City?" he quavered, thinking of his wife and child.

The other Adept shook his head. "In the northern hemisphere only. Even the nearest struck a long distance from Haltienes province."

"They're safe then? Thank the Lights!"

The astronomer just nodded, hurrying back to the instruments. Perhaps it was a mercy that the man didn't understand much science beyond his fruit trees. He'd let someone else educate him, the Botanist Adept was a little high-strung at the best of times.

Once the shaking had calmed to occasional aftershocks, the communications workers managed to get their antenna working again. It didn't have the range to reach the City but they were able to talk to a few other research posts to the east. From the west there was only ominous silence.

~~~

Mihr paused to take a deep breath as they climbed. Below, she could see the orderly rows of homes, interspersed with the huge moats that had originally protected the city. They'd been used as places to swim and boat for the last hundred years. They'd lived between the sixth and last moat, there were Adriel's experimental trees and, barely visible, the blue tile roof of their home.

She shifted her shoulders, adjusting the straps that held her daughter. Luckily, Karlel was late coming into her second growth and was still easily carried. Taking a deep breath, Mihr turned away from the city below and began trudging up the slope once more. Ahead of her was Sizouze, her older sister and neighbor. Her own children were already grown and she'd come to help Mihr escape.

Ahead of them rose the peak of Third Sentinel, one of the eight peaks that surrounded City. If Mihr had had a decent telescope, she knew that she'd see the ant trails on the other slopes as other Adninani from the lower moats fled to higher

ground. There would be large waves generated from the impacts or from the seismic activity, perhaps both. Iofiel had ordered everyone to flee to High Moats, the highest point of the City. When Mihr had run back to the house to get food and warmer robes, Sizouze had been waiting for her.

"No use following all of them into the High Moats," she said. "The Sentinel is higher."

Mihr looked at the peak and then up at the inner fortifications of the City that were much closer. Seeing the look, Sizouze had shaken her head.

"The bridges and passes will be overrun with everyone from the Outer Moats," she said. "We can climb higher than the City and more quickly from here."

So Mihr had followed her older sister who strode confidently ahead. It was almost like being a child again, except she had her own little one this time. Finally, she led them to a flat spot on the slope where they could take a short break. She took the sleeping Karlel gently from the carrier on her sister's back, cradling the child tenderly.

"She's still so small," she whispered.

"Not quite two meters yet," Mihr said, rubbing her shoulders. "I was late too."

"Oh, I remember. I decided you were faking it so you could ride my shoulders longer."

Mihr grunted a laugh. "How would that even be possible? As tall as Adriel is, she might be taller than you someday."

Szouze was still taller than her younger sister by half a meter. Nearly four meters tall, she was on the large side, even for the Adninani. After a few hurried bites of dried fruit and meat, the two women resumed their climb upward. The wind had begun blowing steadily from the south and the rushing air was loud in Mihr's ears.

Her sister swore softly when she turned to look at the City. They were nearly as high as the central hill that carried most of the City. Terraces and wide streets were dark with fleeing people. Below them, the water in the sea canals had turned black and was flowing toward the city. In the distance, they could see a black shadow spreading across the lowlands.

"What's that noise?" Mihr asked, hearing a roar like distant thunder.

"The water," her sister said grimly as she pointed.

The shadow across the lowlands was a wave, advancing inexorably toward the city. As they watched, the canals disappeared under the wave and it poured into the lowest of the City's fabled moats. Mihr half expected to see the flood recede then but the black water kept advancing. Even from where they were, the women could hear the eerie sound of screaming begin from below. It was drowned out by an explosion, a sound so loud that they felt it as much as heard it with their ears.

"Momma, what's happening to the City?" Karlel whimpered.

Turning to look, Mihr wanted to whimper as well. The central peak that had sheltered the Nefeiah for so long had large cracks forming along the sides. As they watched, a crevasse widened and was lit from within by a dull red glow. The nearby buildings were collapsing, the wreckage falling down to the sullen fire below. Mercifully, they could no longer hear the screams over the roaring of the water.

"Mercy has turned Her face from us," Mihr said quietly.

Szouze put a large hand on her shoulder. "We abandoned Her a generation ago. Now we pay our debt."

It was an old argument between the two of them and now that Mihr was finally ready to concede her sister's point, it was far too late. The ground beneath them heaved once more and slowly began to slide down toward the black waters below. Karlel grabbed her mother as Mihr and Szouze wrapped their arms around her and each other. Above them, the peak of the Third Sentinel disappeared in an ear shattering explosion and the three of them disappeared in a massive landslide as the ancient volcano shook itself awake.

~*~

That evening, the sky became a dirty yellow, something Adriel had never seen before. He left his precious trees and went up to the research station. There was a strange breeze from the east, blowing his hair up around his head. He grumbled as he smoothed it back down. Usually the wind was from the northwest at this latitude.

When he reached the top of the hill, Adepts and research staff alike staring out over the ocean to the east. He went over to see what they were watching so intently. All of them were silent but he saw the focus of their attention. A smear of dirty orange light across much of the horizon made it look as though a second sun was rising while the original set in the west. He saw the Geologist Adept that had pulled him into the shelter earlier and went to her.

"What *is* that?"

She looked at him with hollow eyes. "The Western Lands are burning."

"We can see it from *here*?" he asked, appalled. "That's over a thousand lengths away!"

They all looked at Adriel as though he was simple.

"The entire continent is burning," someone said.

"I thought the impacts were limited to the ice sheets and sea. How?"

"What happens to snow when you throw it in a furnace?" a junior researcher growled at him.

Adriel returned to his hut and began to transcribe the day's notes. He was distracted however; how could anything as massive as those glaciers disappear that quickly? He suddenly froze, stylus falling from numb fingers. How much water was locked up in all that ice? What had happened to his family?

~~~~

Nine days after the impacts had shaken their world, things weren't close to normal but the earthquakes and firestorms had begun to fade away. Life for most of the survivors at the station had settled into more of daily routine.

Josieh, the leading ethicist and greatest philosopher of the Nefeiah sat in what had been an observation room and watched Adriel work. While most of the people there had begun to adjust to their new reality, the botanist was locked in a self-made prison of despair.

The ethicist understood his pain; his own partner and their children had been working with the western *skrajijel*, beasts that had evolved separately than their cousins to the east. He had no illusions about their chances of survival.

But the ethicist recognized that the botanist was suffering more than just the loss of his loved ones. The man was a devout apostle of the Great Lights and, probably for the first time in his life, his faith in their wisdom and guidance had been shaken loose. Rather than adapting to his new circumstances, like most people were doing, Adriel had retreated to a place he could ignore what was going on around him. His early mornings were spent in the small ornate room that was set aside for the contemplation of the Great Lights. After that, he spent the remainder of his waking hours tending to his beloved trees, rarely speaking to anyone. Josieh had seen the man stagger in when darkness had fallen and go directly to his sleeping room. This was most unusual, the Folk had not been made to function in isolation, a lack of interaction had a detrimental effect on the mind. On the screen, the man did something complicated to the branch of one of the fruit trees he'd developed. Mental health aside, it was to their benefit the man was so single-mindedly obsessed with his work.

On the screen, one of the station workers appeared, presumably to deliver the invitation. Surprisingly, Adriel nodded and put down his tools and began to follow the other man back. He'd wait for the botanist in the conference room.

"You're still sure this is the best course of action?" Anstance demanded as Josieh as he entered the room.

Josieh blinked at the sudden, and rather rude, question but smiled. "If I was not certain, I would choose another course of action."

"What if the man begins destroying his work instead?"

One of his assistants, Affamios stood up from the table. "I could have answered that, Chemist Adept. While Adriel has been distracted, we have made copies of his work. It is in a safe place."

There was a stir, not quite gasps, from the other scientists seated around the table. Old habits died hard and the sanctity of personal privacy was deeply ingrained in all of them.

"What about *our* work?" Anstance demanded. "Have you invaded our seclusion as well?"

"Of course we have," Josieh answered, drawing their attention away from the junior member. "In this very room, in full view of everyone, I said that no branch of ethics applies in the struggle for the survival of the Folk. We are in a battle for existence and it is only our ongoing survival that matters. Ethics are a privilege for gentle times."

The others were silent but Anstance was stubborn, one of the many qualities Josieh admired in the man.

"Why are we dealing with Adriel then? If his research provides a way forward...." He fell silent as Josieh held up a hand.

"No, Adept, you have not grasped the subtlety. Why lack Mercy where there is no need? She will find heavily against *all* of us at the Reckoning. Why turn our faces totally away? The final tally will record as monsters already, sir. If nothing else, the decorum and small mercies may keep us from destroying ourselves before the outside world has even begun."

The younger man quickly agreed and Josieh saw that he had truly changed his mind. Privately, he had prayed to Lady Mercy that some remnant, some speck of decency would keep him sane in the cycles to come. And even in his meditations, Josieh knew there was no hope for his petition. Knowing what lay ahead, Lady Mercy would turn Her face from him for the audacity of even asking.

When Adriel arrived in the conference room, Josieh was dismayed at the sight of him. He'd known the man in the City, Adriel had been at least as punctilious about his appearance as his role in the claiming of this world. The man standing at the foot of the table hadn't bothered to wash the soil from his body. In fact, they could all smell that Adriel had not bothered bathing himself in some time. His hair hung in a lank curtain about his face, rather than gathered neatly at the back of his neck.

"I was summoned," Adriel said.

He didn't bother with honorifics or any of the other niceties that oiled the social machinery of the Folk and there was a rustle around the table as people reacted to this.

For his part, Josieh almost approved. Here was a man who knew that nothing but the battle for survival was left. It was a shame about the smell though.

"Adriel," Josieh said in his warmest, most welcoming voice. "You are welcome here, please sit down with us."

The botanist looked at the clean, comfortable chair and then down at his own filthy body but sat down in the chair at the end of the table.

"Do not fret over some soil," Josieh continued. "Your dedication to your art has taken you from the discussions of our path forward. This is not a rebuke, honored colleague. In fact, I envy your determination. Great Lights shine through your eyes and heart."

"Gratitude, Mercy with you," Adriel replied immediately and automatically.

Josieh ignored the other Adept's lack of reflection. It would have been rude a month ago but again, this man seemed to understand their new reality more than anyone around them. "Since you last shared your fellowship with us, we have learned more about our present situation. It is not a pleasant picture. There is no answer but static when we call the outposts to the north, as well as the west."

Adriel realized that Josieh had lost as much as he had. He looked up and into the older man's eyes.

"Mercy gather them up and shine upon them," he said quietly.

"Gratitude," Josieh said, after the appropriate pause. "From the south there are a few places that answer. There was an expedition sent to Aoranathys. Our beloved City has vanished, no survivors were found. There are undoubtedly more Folk scattered around but until they find us again, we move forward with the knowledge that less than three hundred Nefeiah remain."

"How is that possible?" Adriel asked. "There were nearly a million in the City, even more settled in the Outer Moats. Surely some have escaped."

One of the geologists cleared her throat and Josieh nodded at her.

"Aoranathys and its surroundings, including the Seven Sentinels were formed in an ancient volcanic event," she said apologetically. "The Lights deemed it a safe place, the eruption was extremely ancient, even by their reckoning. However, the magnitude of shockwaves created by the impacts were beyond imagining. We have reports of eruptions everywhere, dormant volcanoes waking even as new ones are born. The City would have been extinguished in just moments."

"Surely the Great Lights have noticed our plight," Adriel said. "They will send help."

"Surely, but what will our rescuers find?" Josieh said. "Our beloved City has become a fiery place in a blackened sea. The amount of debris thrown up into the atmosphere will hinder communications. Our solar energy levels are already dropping due to the same dust. Our projections show that our power will be long gone by the time of their arrival. Of course, they will search but this planet is large and our outposts are miniscule. The chance of a ship accidentally stumbling on an outpost is very small."

Adriel stared at him for a few moments and then slowly nodded as the last of his hope vanished.

"Botanist Adept, this disaster was upon us before we had the pleasure of learning your progress. I am just a humble thinker, I beg pardon if I misspeak the technical aspects. You were working with the efficacy of your fruit tree pollen as a carrier?"

Adriel looked startled but sat straighter, with just a hint of his old demeanor. "I already knew that it works. I was attempting to determine the proper mutagen to attach. It's a tricky problem, too much and the virus creates tumors along with an early and painful death. Too little creates an effect that does not properly express in following generations."

"Were your outcomes from projections or from actual populations?" one of the junior chemists asked.

"Both. I moved my family from Second Moat to the Outers in order to begin my orchards. The trees proved themselves by attracting breeding populations. Enclosing the *skrajijel* there provided a handy population to experiment with. My results were given to the Planning Masters to create projections with. They have a relatively short lifespan, was crucial to obtaining stable results. Were it possible to still spread my

trees, projections were that there was a nearly certain chance of success. Within one of *our* generations, the very last of them would have been living out the rest of their days. This planet would have been ours painlessly and mercifully."

"You had nearly completed truly heroic work," Josieh agreed.

"It would not have been possible without the Geneticist Adept," Adriel said, nodding at a woman halfway down the table. "My contribution was simply the delivery method."

"Simple?" Josieh asked. "Your solution provided a mechanism that not only was self sustaining, but one that the *jijel* would help spread themselves. I am not delivering empty praise, Adriel. Fruit trees were an ingenious solution to a very complicated problem."

Adriel actually smiled. It was a shaky smile, like he'd already forgotten how to do it.

"We believe that a path exists that will lead us from this unhappy moment. At the center of it is your remarkable trees and their pollen. I will ask Adept Hyria to expand from there."

Hyria, the Geneticist Adept, cleared her throat. "First, I will say that the Quieting Virus was a very exacting thing to engineer. Our progress was greatly helped by Adept Adriel's tireless dedication and ideas. He showed a way that our virus could only loosely connect to the pollenating agent, allowing for easy detachment when the pollen began the task of creating a new tree. His insight has shown us the new path forward."

Adriel nodded in the usual sign of humble acknowledgement but could not imagine how any of his work would save the Nefeiah. His trees created a means of removal, not salvation.

"Now that we have such a brilliant solution for dissemination, it is a simple matter to modify the pollen grains to carry a new viral agent..."

"Forgive my interruption, but what can a virus do to help the Folk now?" Adriel asked, sounding more like his old self. "It is pointless to remove the *skrajijel* from our world if we are at an end ourselves."

"Forgive me, I had forgotten you were not available for previous meetings," the Geneticist Adept said. "This is an effort with multiple paths. We will use all the means at our disposal to increase fertility among the Folk and begin raising a new generation of Nefeiah. At the same time, we will begin to spread your trees with modified forms of the original virus. Instead of sterilization, we will introduce similar mechanisms to increase the jijel fertility rate, with genetically separate offspring. When the modified jijel breed, their offspring will retain the induced change."

"Which is what?" Adriel asked, dreading the answer.

"Editing of the jijel genome, bringing their genetics more into line with our own. There will be some functional improvements, larger brains with more specialized centers, some physical changes as well.

"Yes, yes," Adriel said, waving his hand. "But what is the *point* of all these changes?"

"The *skrajijel* as they are now, will quickly disappear, replaced by smarter variants," Josieh said. "The similarity in our genetic coding will make it possible to create hybrid lifeforms, more suited to..."

There was a sharp crack as Adriel slapped the table, face twisted in disgust.

"You mean to breed *us* with those...*things*?" he shouted. "You have been mentally damaged, that path can never produce true Nefeiah."

"Adriel, find the calm within yourself," Josieh said soothingly.

The man was quiet, and after watching him for a moment, the Geneticist Adept continued. "The result of this harmonization will be a secondary race of sterile individuals. They will be less than ourselves but more than the *skrajijel*. With so few Folk left, we will need overseers to mind the modified natives that will replace our own workers. We will remain the masters of both races, enlisting them to help us settle our planet as the Great Lights commanded. When the Nefeiah are once again at their full strength, perhaps they will remove the *skrajijel*. Or keep them as slaves. We will not live to see this thing, it is far into the future."

Adriel pushed himself to his feet. "You want to use my life's work for this...for this *abomination*? I refuse! Speak up, you silent watchers. Why have you not denounced this mockery of what the Great Lights created?"

Adriel looked at all of them. No one would meet his eyes, and were quiet as they all watched him.

Josieh cleared his throat. "Adept Adriel, this is the only path that allows a chance for us to thrive on this world. There are simply too few of us left to do all of the work alone."

"You may not have my work in order to create monsters," Adriel replied.

"I am sorry, we have already stolen it," Josieh said sadly.

Adriel's shoulders slumped. "Does a race that commits atrocity and sin deserve to continue?"

"Happily, we are not the ones who will provide that answer," Josieh said.

"An answer for everything, yes. Is there anything else you wish to ask me?" Adriel said, looking around the table. "Otherwise, I will take my leave."

"I asked you here hoping to gladden your heart. *Your* work will allow the Folk to go on from this point of despair."

"Instead, you have weighted my heart with the knowledge that my life's work was the defilement of my people," Adriel replied.

Without another word, he turned and left the room with the large table behind. A moment later, they saw him walking down toward the fruit orchards.

"That much sorrow cannot be carried without cease," someone said.

"Mercy will find him," Josieh said. "One way or another."

Outside, Adriel walked numbly to his gardens. He could barely comprehend the evil this *ethicist* was committing without getting physically ill. He walked through the grove of his masterpieces and another patch of seedlings.

Adriel fell to his knees and vomited then. His own careful work, everything he'd worked toward would be used in the greatest of sins. The Great Lights had made them as their own lesser reflection. Mixing that reflection of the Gods with a common *animal?*

He got up and stumbled on after a time, leaving the carefully tended gardens and walking into the wild. He ignored everything around him, focused on

After some time, he came to a steep walled ravine with a dirty torrent rushing at the bottom. The effects of the black rain were slowly being washed out to the sea. The planet would rebuild itself but Hope was hollow and mocking, as he always was. This world could never be made clean again, not inhabited by the abominations *he* had made possible.

Adriel followed the cliff for hours, walking through the deep twilight. He laid on the ground and slept when it became dark. Waking soon after daybreak, he found that a number of the little jigel had found him while he slept. They were gathered curiously around him but scampered back as he opened his eyes and sat up.

"You again prove yourselves senseless," he told them. " You should have smashed my head in with a stone for exterminating so many of your brothers and sisters."

They made the usual grunting and hooting in reply. His imagination turned the sounds into confused questions.

"You will learn true speech soon enough. I wonder what tales you will tell of us, your minds are too small to see our true nature."

They simply stared at him, so Adriel turned and walked back to the cliff edge that followed the path of the swollen river. Soon the current faded as the dirty brown water entered the black stinking morass that had once been the beautiful blue-green sea. Adriel ignored it, ignored the jigel that continued to follow. Finally, he was at the brand new headlands of the river. It had been shaken as hard as the rest of the world and it looked like something had taken monstrous bites from it. He carefully climbed to the highest point, pausing to wave the idiotic jigel away from the dangerous slope. When he reached the top, Adriel looked over the black heaving plain below.

In time, his molecules would find those of his wife and only child. Maybe that was enough. Without another thought, he leapt off the newly exposed cliff and hurtled down to the refuse choked water below.

### Chapter 3 Aboard the Athena

They blinked and looked around at each other as the images surrounding them lost their color and disappeared.

"So, Earth was never really lost?" Betsy asked.

Her Grace sighed. "While you are amusing, know that your interruptions become quite tiresome. The True People do *not* lose knowledge, somewhere there were records, yes. But as the Nefeiah began the process of debasement and degradation, we grew increasingly horrified and disgusted. To mix noble blood, directly granted by Ancient Masters themselves, it was a incomprehensible sin to us. In fact..."

Teydora interrupted in the tongue twisting, rolling vowels that made up the Xero'pah language. Theo watched as Lady Shly'ap's face went from surprise to what looked like anger. He risked a quick glance at Nys and her shock at whatever Teydora was saying was easily seen. When Teydora was done talking, Shly'ap replied in a shorter speech before looking at the prefcoria.

"I am reminded that your minds are incapable of comprehending Xero'pah history and culture. I will answer your curiosity with the barest minimum of crude facts. When the Ancients withdrew, the existence of your world was not lost. We intentionally severed any contact with that place. Imagine our utter revulsion as the rogue Nefeiah began to create their foul creatures, beings that were made in *our* sacred image, degrading themselves. I cannot express the revulsion we all felt. The lesser races have short lives and their memories soon fade. It was not difficult to let them forget a minor colony. Are there any *further* questions in your minds before we proceed?"

Theo glanced at Nys. He wasn't completely sure, but the young Xero'pah looked to be practically vibrating with rage. Then Teydora glanced at her and made a small hand gesture. Nys took a deep breath and some of the tension left her body.

"If you have control of your tongues, we will move on," Lady Shly'ap sniffed. "Four generations after the comet..."

~~~

"Great Golden One, there is dust approaching."

He opened an eye and looked at his hael standing respectfully next to him.

"And what is *your* name?"

"Tesu' Maers Zhonif," the hael said, speaking humbly and keeping his eyes on the ground. "And in your depthless wisdom, you deign to call me Tesu, Glorious Brother of the Immortal Sun."

Odiel sat up. "Yes, that's what I remember as well. That is why I do not refer to you as a Zhonif be Hael constantly. But you have called me from slumber as Great Golden One rather than my own name. So how have I offended thee, oh Brother of the Newest Sun? I already weep for your pardon."

There was snickering from behind his tent but they both ignored it.

"Offense? Nay, Great Lord of the South, it is respectful subservience to your newly revealed and exalted rank as Lord of Thunder."

The snickering and coughs intensified on the other side of the canvas walls, as though people were smothering laughter. Odiel saw the hint of a smile on the other man's face. He rubbed his face and looked around.

"That bad?"

"Bad? Never! It was a moment of awe for all of us, we witnessed the birth of Thunder herself, born from your very breast!"

Odiel snorted a laugh. "As bad as *that* then. You know to wake me, I would have rolled over."

"In terror of the thunder, we beseeched you to rise, Golden Lord. However, Your magnificent and terrifying slumber defeated any attempt to rouse you. I *did* consider

piling rocks upon thy radiant countenance to tame the thunder but alas, I remembered words contained in our Sacred Record."

Odiel scratched his chest. "Any words in particular, or the whole thing in general?"

"Know that our Great Mother has borne much and do not bring additional suffering into Her house," Tesu quoted. "You see, I feared for the rocks, Golden Thunderous One."

Odiel laughed. "Greater Mercy, you're in rare form this morning."

Tesu grinned at Odiel and offered his hand. Though the hael barely reached his shoulder, he was easily as strong. On his feet, Odiel stretched, enjoying the warmth of the sun. It was late morning, far later than he usually slept, and the sun had risen two fingers above the ridgeline above them.

"I slept out here all night?" Odiel muttered. "What the hell were we smoking?"

"Local mixture of herbs added to dream-leaf. I stole a little for analysis," Tesu said, equally quietly.

"I only remember smoking a single pipe."

"Just so. Your personal dream-weed is wrapped in the bottom of your trunk though. I'll pack your spare pipe full and slip it to you tonight."

"You're a good man, Tesu."

"I just need my rest, Odiel."

Odiel laughed as he went to his tent. Everything was immaculate and his possessions were neatly laid out, like always. A large bowl of gently steaming water was on the table and Odiel began to wash up.

"Tesu, what am I going to do without you?" he asked the smaller man by the tent flap.

Tesu' Ma had been Odiel's assistant, instructor, guide, and friend for the last eighty-seven cycles. Over that time, he'd taught the younger Nefeiah any number of the new

languages that were emerging, tutored him in diplomacy among Tesu's tribe, the *Zhonif be Hael*, the Kin of the Early Dawn. He'd also learned the strange intricate ways of the little *Saviment Daiba*, People of Life's Destiny. After all, the hopes of Hael and Nefeiah might ultimately rest on the strange little people.

Odiel was a mathematician and engineer, quite young by Nefeiah standards, not even two-hundred cycles old. Tesu, however, had seen four-hundred of the revolutions of their home around the sun. Odiel was his third protégé, and the last. He had finally achieved marriable age and tonight he would wed another of the Hael. The next day, Odiel would say goodbye to his mentor. Tesu and his wife would journey to a burgeoning city, a day's walk to the west. They would remain there for the rest of their lives, assisting the Nefeiah that supervised the city. More importantly, the couple would guide the little Daiba as they built their civilization.

Odiel would continue his travels for several hundred more cycles, spreading the universal language of numerals wherever he was needed. Most Nefeiah remained out in the wilds when their days of wandering were over. Some had attached themselves to their own projects, others had adopted cities and aided the Hael. A few returned to the South and rejoined the settlements of the Nefeiah.

Odiel knew he would not be one of those, he had no particular love for the Little Mothers and their creches full of children, nor for the increasingly desperate lies of the Reclamationists and their historians. None of their projections had been met in at least a generation and their efforts to conceal the truth had been taxing on his patience.

More pressing was his need to chose a replacement for Tesu. It was probably the hardest decision he'd made in his young life. They'd arrived in this camp late yesterday afternoon. He'd briefly met the three Hael that had been sent. Nefeiah were forbidden to travel by themselves. Either because the wanderers were deemed valuable or to keep control of them, he wasn't sure which. Probably both. The law makers in the south in the south did not care to answer questions, especially as shaky as everything was getting down there.

Tesu grinned at his Lord and shrugged. "Without me? I am not certain what you will do, Odiel. Without my constant guiding hand, I fear you will soon fall into a deep hole. Or perhaps you will not pay attention and heedlessly walk into a boulder, thereby dashing out your brains."

"Yes, these are things to be wary of," Odiel sighed.

"Or you may become distracted and simply walk into the sea," Tesu continued helpfully. "Perhaps you will just forget to wear clothing, I can hardly say."

"Right, thank you."

Tesu laughed and threw him a clean tunic. "Odiel, listen closely. The three out there are the best of my brothers. I chose them, they will bring you honor, no matter who you choose. You don't have to hurry the choice. Spend a few days with each to decide."

"Whichever one I least want to throttle then?"

"Just so. Now, oil your hair and when you emerge looking less a victim of Hope, I shall have you fed."

~~~

Several hours later, the two of them stood a little ways in front of the crowd of the little Daiba. They always gathered around parties of Hael and Nefeiah, no matter where they went. Odiel had some trouble telling one from another but they were fascinating to watch.

The procession bringing the cloud of dust toward them was a large one, which was strange but probably a good sign. As it drew nearer, Odiel and Tesu were surprised to see a figure, much larger than the rest, leading the column.

"That can't be Suriam," Tesu said. "He has Daiba carry a canopy on long poles so he can enjoy the shade as he walks."

"Maybe they couldn't keep up in his mad rush to bring you back to his true heart."

Tesu glanced at him sideways and Odiel grinned without looking over. Tesu had mentored Suriam and from his occasional stories, Odiel knew that it had been a productive partnership but far from idyllic. They had both been surprised when the message came. Tesu was summoned to meet and marry a female Hael before settling in Suriam's city.

As the long procession entered the small valley Odiel had chosen for their camp, horns sounded and the procession began staggering to a halt. The Nefeiah and a few Hael attendants kept striding along toward them however. Odiel swore quietly and even Tesu's eyebrows went up when they saw that the Nefeiah was a female. It was unheard of, the women of the Nefeiah were kept safe and close in the South. Their service to the Folk centered around the care and education of Nefeiah and Hael children while the males wandered the land, creating civilization those children could benefit from.

It was very strange to see a female traveling outside of the South. Especially unaccompanied by other Nefeiah.

"What's all this?" the woman called mockingly, when they had come close enough. "Do I really see two beautiful males? Are they wandering these wastes unsupervised? The shame of it! Whatever shall we tell the Little Mothers?"

Both men laughed, recognizing her voice and tone.

"But what's all *that*?" Odiel yelled back. "A delicate flower of the Nefeiah in the scorching desert sun? Madness!"

They three began to run toward each other and then the woman was in Odiel's arms and they were kissing each other's cheeks and foreheads. All too soon, she let go of him and turned to Tesu who bowed low to her.

"Lady Cafriam, your appearance is surprising and most pleasing."

She laughed, pulling the smaller man into a tight hug. "*Lady?* What nonsense have you been teaching him, Odiel?"

"He's been like that all morning. It's probably a sign of approaching senility. But Caf, what *are* you doing here?"

She let go of Tesu and linked arms with Odiel, gently leading them toward the procession and out of earshot of "his" Daiba.

"Suriam disappeared, about fifty cycles ago as far as I can understand. One day they're working on his monuments, the next, Suriam and all of his Hael had vanished.

A few Daiba saw them go and they say Suriam 'led them down to the water,' whatever that means."

"And thus, you see what happens without my guidance," Tesu muttered.

Odiel ignored him. "And the South sent you to replace him?"

Cafriam shrugged, tossing her long copper colored braid over a shoulder. "Not exactly. I was already headed up this way when I heard about it from a wandering bunch of little ones. I went and found his city to pick up where he left off but so far it has been picking up the pieces his absence caused."

"Fifty cycles? Then you forged his letter!" Tesu exclaimed. "It had his name code at the bottom."

"Of course I did, my dearest. I need my two closest friends here with me, not uselessly tromping all over creation. Oh, and before I forget; Tesu, I have a surprise for you."

The Hael tensed. "Ah, my..uhm, thanks. And will I again be required to...move with haste to truly appreciate your gift?" Tesu asked carefully

"Tesu, that was a long time ago. Now stop your quavering and show me that famous Hael fortitude."

He bowed low. "Always, Golden One."

"He really *is* being impossible," Cafriam said. "Perhaps this will soften his countenance. Dearest Naala, join us please."

Tesu gasped at the name. One of Cafriam's Hael stepped forward and pushed back the hood covering her head. With a great shout, Tesu sprinted toward her. The woman responded with an ululating warrior's call as she ran toward him. They hit each other with enough force to make Odiel wince but the two had thrown their arms around each other. Tesu picked Naala up and spun her around while they laughed and cried and spoke over each other, all at once. The two had been lovers and friends many cycles ago but had lost touch as their lives took them in different directions.

"This is good of you," Odiel said, watching them. "He was deeply worried."

"Knowing Suriam, I don't doubt it. I saw Naala working in one of the cities near the South. So when I left, I stopped in to ask her along. I needed a friendly face on my journey. Of course, it was all done under Suriam's name."

Female Nefeiah were only free to roam when they were near the ends of their lives, or in the very rare instances they were sterile. Odiel had met Cafriam when they were both undergoing the invasive breeding procedures. He didn't think he would have made it without Caf holding his hand through the worst of the surgical procedures. He had done the same for her when they harvested the first of her eggs.

So he knew that she wasn't sterile and that only left one thing....

"Caf, you're ill? How long do you have?"

"No, no. Put away your fears, longest beloved. Yes, I contracted one of the wild variants of the Quieting virus, This one created a high fever for a short time. When I began to get better, the Little Mothers found that the temperature had damaged my remaining eggs beyond repair. You know how they are, the whispering and rumors were across half of the South. Instead of listening to it, I packed a few things one night and went walking."

"You're whole and sound?" Odiel asked, letting out a long, relieved breath.

She turned to face him, eyes sad, and put her arms around him. "Didn't you just hear me? By their judgment, my greatest contribution to the Folk is lost."

Shocked, Odiel gently touched her face. "The Little Mothers can go and dangle from their necks. *You're* the greatest thing about the Folk."

She reached up and covered the hand on her cheek, looking into his eyes. "Flattery."

Nothing needed to be said after that.

~~~

Tesu and Naala were married that night. The ceremony was at midnight, like all Hael weddings. The bride and groom disappeared into the darkness holding hands and the

raucous wedding feast began. Odiel and Cafriam sat together, occasionally feeding each other. It reminded him of their earlier romances but sharing pleasant memories wasn't what Cafriam was interested in. Seated so closely, they could quietly talk with the laughter and the din of the celebration covering their words. The Little Ones unabashedly eavesdropped on the conversations of the Hael and Nefeiah alike. It wouldn't be a cause for concern except for the disturbing habit they had writing and saving everything they heard. He had heard stories of some very odd beliefs that first bloomed from the most banal of overheard conversations.

"I have a proposition for you," she whispered into his ear. "Stop walking and stay here. We will make my city a beautiful home together."

"Eventually, someone will notice that you are here instead of Suriam," he murmured back. "What then?"

"Sweetest, the South is worse now than you remember. Our people are on the verge of collapse. I didn't want to frighten Tesu with the whole truth but the mutations of the Quieting virus are becoming stronger and coming faster. Or perhaps we've become weaker. Regardless, I was not the only one affected by the last outbreak. The same variant popped up at several centers simultaneously. Somehow, every cycle brings new variants, each more insidious than the last. If the Nefeiah are going to have anything left, now is the time to prepare for the disappearance of the South and eventually, the disappearance of the Folk."

He had known things were rough, but Odiel hadn't imagined it was that bad. His duty was to walk the world here, spreading civilization to the Daiba that had not already joined the great cities. As he thought, Caf spoke with one of her many attendants in the local language. Some words had an almost liquid sound to them, others were more guttural and harsh. He'd have to learn it in the next few days. She smiled at the small woman who bowed and left.

"I know your nearly sacred Duty is calling to you," Cafriam whispered into his ear. "I can practically hear it tolling in your heart. It is one of the many things I love about you but the time has come for *all* of us to see the world differently. The Folk came to this world as thieves. The Great Mother knows that just as well as we do. She has turned our own Quieting sickness against us, to return this place to its owners. Before

she casts the Folk into the darkness, I will create such monuments here that none of the little ones *ever* lose their memories of us."

"You'll need engineers for that," Odiel said, hiding his disquiet at her words.

"Indeed I will. And I plan to seduce the greatest engineer I know and bind his heart to my own."

"A good plan. Is it anyone I know?"

She laughed and blew in his ear. "You've probably heard his name here and there, he's a terrible rogue."

"What of the Hael to replace Tesu? They cannot help but spread tales of this place."

"First, you don't need to replace him if you stay. Secondly, I won't send them back. They will appreciate my orders, Naala isn't the only woman of the Hael here. More Hael will come as the South fades away. Naala and her new husband will help gather them."

Odiel nodded. Cafriam's plans made sense, especially if the collapse of the South was imminent.

"So. Once more I will dare to ask; will you stay here with me?"

He turned to look into her deep blue eyes. "You never need to ask that, Lady Cafriam. I am yours. I always have been."

Odiel was surprised when she pushed him onto his back in the pile of cushions. He recovered quickly as Caf pressed herself against him and kissed him deeply. His arms went around her as they lost themselves in the kiss. There was a shocked silence from around followed by a great shout of laughter. Both of them laughed through the kiss and sat up. Odiel's face had reddened in embarrassment but Caf looked pleased with herself.

She spoke to the Daiba for a few minutes but he had no idea what she was saying. It was well received, even the Hael scattered in the crowd cheered. Odiel got his feet when she did and she led him out into the night.

"I have declared three days of celebration," she said. "That should give us some privacy, there's something I want you to see."

"In here?" he asked as Cafriam led him to her tent. "Three days may not be enough."

She chuckled. "Braggart."

They stepped inside her pavilion, lit with many small lamps. The floor was thickly covered in large cushions. Cafriam greeted the few Daiba lounging on a large cushion and they all leapt to their feet and bowed.

"Yes, we will certainly need more than three days," Odiel said, looking at the richness of her tent.

She laughed and began unwrapping the folds of fabric that made up her dress. "This *isn't* what I want you to see. Well, not the *only* thing."

"It is more than enough," Odiel said, watching her with a dry mouth.

Small hands pulled at his belt and one of the Daiba smiled up at him as they loosened the belt and unwound the sash beneath it.

"I can undress myself," he said.

"This is more enjoyable to watch," Caf said, laying back on a pile of cushions. "Does being nude in front of the Little Ones bother you? They're asking you to kneel down by the way."

Odiel knelt and the four smaller women carefully removed his tunic, folding it carefully before gesturing him back to his feet.

"Showing my skin, no. Intimacy, yes. Their size is overly reminiscent of young children and it disturbs me greatly. There are whispers about some Nefeiah choosing lovers from the Little Ones and they are not pleasant stories."

His trousers were unbuckled and removed as he spoke. There were gasps and excited whispers when his penis was exposed.

"Come lay with me," Caf said, reaching out.

Odiel was happy to comply and reclined next to her. One of her hands rubbed across his stomach and chest before taking his hand and turning on her side to face him.

"Firstly; these women are *not* children. They are adults with children of their own. And yes, a union between our people can be harmful, especially we are cruel or ignorant. You are neither of those things."

"What are you saying?"

Her eyes crinkled in a smile. "Are you really not aware where the Hael come from?"

He shrugged. "They are creche born in the same way we are."

"You are beautiful but young yet. Yes, their genes are taken from two parents, but they are Daiba and Nefeiah. Since I have no Little Mothers here to mix the seed and egg for me, I must rely on more basic methods."

Surprised, Odiel sat up and stared at her. "You want me to breed with them."

She leaned over and kissed his chest. "Yes. I would like to present Tesu and Naala with a child. Or several, if you are compatible with these four."

Odiel stared at her and Cafriam chuckled. "Don't look so fearful, old friend. I will be right here with you."

Her attendants had begun to sway to a drumbeat from the feast tent and Odiel watched as they languorously removed their own, and each other's, clothing. He had seen enough of the *Daiba* to know their bodies were smaller copies of the Hael and the Nefeiah, although the *Daiba* were covered in fine hair where the other two races were hairless below the shoulders.

As he watched them, he saw that they weren't remotely childlike in their movements. All four of them watched as Cafriam began to use her tongue on Odiel's nipples while her hand stroked his member into hardness. She noticed them watching and said something and the four of them surrounded the couple, kissing and stroking their large golden bodies.

"I think they like you," Caf murmured as two of them took over stroking and licking his penis.

A thick pad was brought and put across his pubic bone. Caf explained that the Daiba's first offspring had opened the way for him but that his length remained dangerous. Before Odiel could really respond, two of them were helping a third to straddle him.

"Now, lie back and enjoy," Caf said in his ear.

Odiel did exactly that, several times. Four times his member was wrapped in tight warm flesh. The feeling was always too much for him and Odiel didn't last very long for any of them. But they seemed happy enough, talking quietly as they reclined around the couple.

"Finally, it is my turn," Cafriam said, holding on to him as she rolled on her back, legs spread wide. "I want *all* of you."

She took his penis and guided it into herself, moaning at the feel of it. Her legs wrapped around his waist and she pulled Odiel's face down to kiss her.

~~~~

The next day, Caf led him up to the sight she had wanted him to see. They climbed a steep hill together, leaving everyone but Tesu and Naala behind. When they reached the top, Odiel could see her city in the distance, the great forest marking the edges. A mighty river was born here, two large rivers merging downstream of the city."

"He certainly picked a beautiful place," Odiel said, shading his eyes. "What are those things on the far side of the city?"

There were three massive pads set away from the city and the white stone was nearly blinding in the morning sun.

"That's what Suriam had started to build. What he had in mind, I have no idea. There is a large Jackal statue already carved into the bedrock but you can't quite see it from here. It's impressive."

"And what would you have me build, oh Queen?"

She laughed. "A monument to our Folk, of course. But simple stelae are so boring and whatever the language, it will change and fade. The rapid lives of the Daiba will make certain of that. Odiel, I want you to build me something that will never be lost, something one of a kind. Something that will keep our memory alive for a thousand lifetimes."

"Words change, numerals do not," Odiel mused. "I will make you a monument that will carry your grandeur out across the ages."

She took his arm. "I know you will, beautiful engineer, but we are mates now. Make *our* names sing out."

Odiel turned and kissed her. "It shall be done, oh Queen."

#### Chapter 4 Aboard the Athena

"Holy shit," Emma breathed, perched on the edge of her seat. "Those were the *Pyramids!* What happened next? Was those two the inspiration for Isis and Osiris? Did we just see a pair of *gods* being born? Show us more!"

Lady Shly'ap ignored her. "As the Nefeiah declined, the Ancient Masters began to withdraw to their secret places. When they were gone, we left that foul place behind. Obviously the sin of the Nefeiah thrived and grew and was rediscovered by the Commonwealth much later."

The ancient Xero'pah looked at them with the very definition of a pitying smile. "I can imagine the shock and horror you must feel. I pity you but I saw this these wretched things with my own eyes. You humans will need some time to collect your thoughts but my schedule is so much more important, young ones. I will answer one question before I depart."

Jack immediately stood up. "Yes, ma'am, I have a question. You had real-time surveillance of the Nefeiah, why didn't you organize a rescue? Your neglect is what led

them to the events you referred to as degenerate and sinful. Doesn't that make you complicit, at the very least?"

Lady Shly'ap stared at him, shocked. Before she began to answer, Willi was on his feet.

"Ethics are mutable and nebulous. Explain to me how your technology was able to spy on an entire planet, but you somehow missed a huge object on a collision trajectory?"

"Technology is the most mutable thing there is!" Betsy said, bouncing to her feet. "Lady Shly'ap, are you sure that this sequence of events wasn't exactly what your Masters were planning? They seem like they probably knew what they were doing. Are you sure they just didn't bother to tell *you*?"

Teydora stood up before anyone else could "ask" any more questions. "I believe Her Grace is on a strict schedule and will not be able to answer your questions after all."

The other Xero'pah was livid. She was on her feet, practically sputtering. Teydora took her hand as she glared at all of them. But then her face softened.

"But I see many of the Ta'avi here. And three of the noble Garragh. Understand that the disgrace of humans is not *your* story."

"Yeah, we're the *good* infestation," Ayr said cheerfully. "You dirtlings keep that in mind!"

Lady Shly'ap managed to ignore the interruption. "I recommend pity in your dealings with these half-poeple, Lieutenant. Their barbarity needn't..."

"You should shut up," Emma said calmly. She could have been giving advice on a menu choice. "Like, right now."

Ignoring the Xero'pah's outrage, Theo nodded. "She's right. You don't know anything about us, *elf*. I am half Garragh *and* half human. After your little fairy tale, I'm even prouder of that than I was before."

The anger on the Xero'pah's face was replaced by a look of disgust. Teydora guided her back toward the hatchway and their ship. It was quiet and the team could hear her sputtering something and Teydora's deeper voice trying to soothe her as they went. Finally, Toni got up and went to the center of the room.

"As the senior NCO, I guess it falls to me to comment on the little display you performed for our VIP," she said, looking at each of them. "This includes you, Lieutenant, and your Warden."

Toni put her hands behind her back and stalked back and forth in a reasonable impersonation of Marisol.

"First, your deployment was too sloppy," Toni continued. "The questions were too slow, only a few of your engaged the targ...I mean the Lady. I want a crisper response and more participation in the future. You three that *did* engage weren't perfect either. I noted a distinct lack in impertinence and none of your special Sunday School language was displayed. If we're a bunch of degenerate barbarians, I want to hear someone at least drop an F-bomb or two. Any other comments?"

"I would like to say something," Teydora said from the hatch behind her.

Toni jumped and turned around. "Yes ma'am!"

Her face a deep shade of red, she quickly sat back down.

"Shly'ap is safely aboard her ship and has ordered me to put you back in your proper places," Teydora said, sitting on the chair in the center of the room. "Since I have no idea where those places are, you may consider yourselves back in them."

"Before I left Haven, I spoke with Kawehi and we discussed the necessity of telling you of your origins. She requested, demanded really, to be brought along. In my naivete, I thought she wanted to be here to help you deal with the truth of your origins but I've just decided that what she really wanted was to see were these reactions. *That* was why she was laughing when she ordered me to bring her..."

"I have full motion-capture of the entire event," Athena said helpfully.

For some reason, the interruption set Theo off laughing. Soon the rest of them were roaring with laughter as well. As the laughter died down, Betsy said at least she'd finally learned the secret of Jonesy's sexual appeal and it set everyone off again. Teydora sat in front of them with a small smile on her face and Nys got up to stand next to her to whisper in her ear.

When the laughter had run its course, Teydora looked at each of them. Rather than the condescending look of her sister, the Colonel looked amused.

"I have to admit that was not the reaction I thought there would be. I assume that humankind does not worry overmuch about their origins?"

"Colonel, they started telling us we evolved from other primates when I was seven-years-old," Willi said. "It's pretty widely accepted."

"True that," Theo said. "Other than religious extremists, it's common knowledge that we never existed in some perfect state of grace. We've learned the only way to win the Big Game is by making sure we stay in the game. Maybe we inherited that pragmatism from Nefeiah like Odiel and Cafriam. I hope so, I think I would have liked them."

"I'd like a cock that big," someone whispered from behind Theo. He really didn't want to know who.

"And I think they would be proud of what their children have become," Teydora said. "Nysander would like to say something to all of you."

The young Xero'pah stood up and looked around at them. "I am shamed at not realizing what your reactions would be. I have not been able to look at any of your faces for several days because of this, because I did not realize the depths of your hearts..."

Her voice broke and there were several variants of "aww" from people as they all hugged Nys, more or less at once. Jack was last, but being the most extroverted of the bunch, decided that Teydora could use a hug as well. He soon realized that he was way over his head as Teydora responded to the friendly hug by pressing her whole body against his. Startled, Jack started to let go of her but the Colonel held him close, putting her head next to his. Theo saw she was whispering something as the others began to laugh.

"How long does a Xero'pah hug last?" Theo asked Nys.

"Mm, perhaps you learned hugging from us, but we do it for very different reasons," she said. "For us, it's less a feeling of affectionate companionship and more of a proposition. She is returning his interest in...working off some tension is probably the most accurate way to say it. I do not know if Jack is aware of what he has proposed."

"From the blush on his face, I think he just found out," Emma said. "Nysander, I ask your forgiveness. I have not been as kind as I should."

"Don't be ridiculous, you felt Theo's discomfort. When you learned I caused it, you simply stepped in to protect him."

"Wait," Theo said. "Back to the hugging. That whole group hug was more or less an invitation to an orgy?"

Emma rolled her eyes as Nysander laughed. "Were they to do that to an average Xero'pah, yes. I know the human meaning of a group hug and appreciate the intended sentiment. Teydora does as well, I think she is toying with Jack."

"Except they both left," Emma said, looking around. "Looks like our little Jack is becoming a man today."

"Except he's ten years older than you are," Theo said. "Athena, please make sure he's getting enough fluids. Where has Vuli been through all of this?"

"As a convicted criminal, she isn't permitted freedom around high level members of the Commonwealth."

"That's not the way we're going to do things. Athena, please let Vuli know that she can join us."

"Vuli is currently enjoying a recording of Johan Sebastien Bach's Toccata and Fugue," Athena said in his ear. "I'm not sure if she's aware of much more than that. When she recovers, I will tell her of course."

"Do you know what she was convicted of?" Theo asked.

"Plans to illegally distribute stolen melodies for profit, and smuggling in the course of those plans," Athena said. "Sergeant James Shepherd was named as her accomplice but was not charged by the Gyr. I do not think this was fair at all."

"No, it's not," Theo said. "How long is her punishment?"

"It is more complicated than that, Theo," Athena said. "Do you want me to set up an educational session centered around Gyr hierarchy and law?"

"Please don't."

~~~

Teydora and Jack didn't reappear until late into the evening. Both looked happy, though Jack definitely looked more fatigued. Nys mentioned that it must have just been a quickie to Emma who looked at her boyfriend, Holm, with a raised eyebrow. He quickly realized that he was needed elsewhere, making both women laugh.

"There a few things you need to be aware of," Teydora said to them at breakfast the next morning. "Think of them as the *real* lesson behind my sister's visit. You're now aware of how the older member races of the Commonwealth view you. You also should know that Shly'ap is regarded as an enlightened liberal, more or less."

"How hostile is this disdain?" Theo asked.

"Your safety is never in doubt, especially as my Lanterns. Humans are already regarded with an degree of discomfort or even fear, so many races will go out of their way to ignore or avoid you. Never count on anyone other than yourselves for help."

"I get the restriction on tampering with genetics, but that was long before our time," Toni said. "We're pretty much blameless for what the Nefeiah did, right?"

"Many will continue to blame you, nonetheless," Teydora said. "But the real source of fear comes from the fact that there are so *many* of you, and more importantly, because humans are far better at warfare than most of the races. Your membership among the Lanterns will do nothing to dispel that..."

They all stopped talking as the compartment lighting shifted to red.

"Pilot, we were just contacted by the courier ship that just left the gate," Athena suddenly said from overhead. "Emergency broadcast."

"Summary," Rachel said, already on her feet.

"It's Earth. There was a wave of major terrorist attacks across the planet over the last twelve hours. Approximately six hours ago, a large object impacted in the Mozambique Channel, between Madagascar and Mozambique. Casualties in the area are reported to be heavy. This event is projected to be the first attacks of the Black Swarm."

"Navigator, use my priority code and put a message on that courier," Teydora said. "I want every one of my transports in the sky and headed for Earth, *soonest*."

"Confirmed," Athena said. "Course change for Earth ready for approval, Pilot."

Rachel glanced at Teydora who nodded and waved her toward the cockpit.

"Most of the transports were used for the Ta'avi relocation," Teydora said to the rest of them. "They'll be that much faster getting into the sky. Our priority for loading will be your families followed by a number of critical personnel from Echo Base. Lieutenant, we will create a list of other critical personnel and material to be taken to Haven."

Theo nodded and Teydora turned to face everyone else.

"Listen to my voice, Lanterns," she said loudly. "The attacks on your world do not spell certain destruction. Your world has had time to prepare and the Commonwealth will send every available ally. Your fight is the Commonwealth's fight, irrespective of any feelings about your origins. Be strong, you are not alone."

Epilogue

"We could land in the front yard," Rachel said.

"Better not," Kiki said, looking over the terrain below them. "They'd just crap themselves and run away."

"If they were smart, they'd do that anyway," Rachel growled.

Theo put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently. She looked back at him and smiled before putting her hand over his for a moment.

"The town is empty, or near enough," Theo said. "I don't think the New Faith Brotherhood exists anymore."

"You be careful all the same," Kiki said. "Make sure you're packing, LT."

Emma made a rude noise from the hatch. "He'd just shoot his own toes off."

Theo grinned as he left the cockpit. "Care to find a range and make a friendly little wager?"

Emma laughed. "No, I learned my lesson last time. It's just part of my job to keep you humble."

Athena finally landed on a piece of ground across the main road from the farm. The doors of the cargo compartment swung open and the twins hopped out while the ramp was still extending.

The old farm house had seen better days. The fence around the old pasture was standing but the grass and weeds had grown up enough to make it obvious that nothing grazed there anymore. The fields surrounding the place were green with new corn, but the No Trespassing signs had some corporation's name at the bottom.

"Think there's anyone in there?" Emma asked as they walked up the long drive.

Theo shrugged. "With the Crabtree place burnt to the ground, this is the only other house I really knew."

Emma sighed. She'd argued against the trip out here but her brother could out-stubborn her sometimes. But, as Teydora had said, they had plenty of time. Whatever the opening attacks had been trying to achieve, it seemed to have failed. Everything

had been quiet since the large ball of rock had murdered Madagascar and the East African coastline.

No one opened the door as they approached the house, the place appeared to be abandoned. Then Theo pointed at an old pickup next to the barn.

"That's Junior's truck at least."

They walked over to see if the vehicle had been moved lately. The big doors of the pole barn were open slightly but Theo knew Emma would have a meltdown if he was dumb enough to try going inside.

"Don't even think about it," she said.

Theo shook his head and tried to look like he hadn't been thinking about it. Emma rolled her eyes in response.

"Theo, is that you?"

The voice came from inside the barn and one of the doors opened wider to reveal a plump blonde woman standing there.

"Is that Julie?"

"Yeah, it's me," she said, stepping into the light and squinting. "This is a surprise, I didn't expect to see you again, 'specially around here."

"What happened to everything? I went up to the Crabtree house but..."

"Yep, Junior went and burned it himself."

"Why?"

"After Brother...no. Elmer and Mildred were arrested a few months after they took you. Something about kidnapping, was that over you?"

Theo suddenly found it hard to meet her eyes. "Not them personally, but they sure knew I wasn't an orphan. What about Junior?"

Julie blushed slightly. "He lives here with me now. Ma passed away not long after you left. Da drank hisself to death soon after. It was just me here after that and Junior offered to lend a hand. Finally, we just moved him and their animals down here. Ain't bothered to get hitched yet, don't know if we will. Hope that don't offend."

"What? No, I'm happy you two can help each other out." Theo smiled at a memory. "He was always sweet on you."

Finally there was a trace of a smile. "I know, I had my eyes out for him too. But Da had his heart set on me marrying you. Honor thy Father and Mother, y'know?"

There was a double boom, muffled by distance. They both looked up at the cloudless sky.

"Hear that a lot around here now," Julie said.

"It's a ship re-entering the atmosphere," Theo said. "Bound for the new field outside of DC probably."

She looked at him again. "You believe those stories about aliens and them dropping that rock on Africa?"

Theo smiled. "Yeah, I've been out there to meet them even."

"All green and scaly?"

Now Theo laughed. "Haven't seen any like that yet. Mostly they look like you or me."

Emma came around the corner of the barn and into view, startling Julie.

"It's all good, this is my twin sister," Theo explained.

Julie and Emma looked at each other.

"Yep, y'all are definitely kin," Julie said with a nervous smile. "Cain't tell if you look better as a boy or a girl."

"Oh, I'm *way* better looking than him," Emma said.

Julie laughed a little but still looked nervous. She glanced at the pistol on his hip and the SMG hanging from Emma's side. "You come looking for revenge on Junior?" she finally asked.

"What? No!" Theo was shocked that she'd even ask that until he remembered what life had been like here. He'd gone a very long way since then and it made him sad to realize that kind of life had just kept rolling along. "Honestly, I just came to see if y'all were around, I wanted to talk to Junior."

Julie didn't look too convinced and Emma snapped her fingers at Theo, holding out a hand. He unclipped the pistol and handed it to her.

"Theo and I belong to a special part of the military," Emma explained. "He's an officer and my job is to keep him in line. We're so used to it that neither of us thought what it would look like, showing up with guns."

"You don't have to explain nothing to me," Julie said but looked relieved. "Way he got treated aroun' here, he probably deserves some pay-back."

"Maybe that's true," Theo said. "But not against you two. You never did me wrong."

She sighed. "I might argue that but you came to talk with Andy. He don't go by Junior anymore, hates his Daddy's name too. He's asleep in the house, they got him working third shift down at the new ammunition factory. He's gotta be getting up any time now. Let me finish here and I'll go fetch him."

She returned to the barn while Theo and Emma went over to sit on the front steps of the farm house. He could see paint peeling up all over the place, revealing the gray wood underneath. When he'd lived up the road Theo figured this place was as nice a house as it got. He'd seen enough to realize the mistake but it was still sad to see the place falling to pieces.

The screen door opened behind them and the twins stood up. Junior emerged, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Well, Brother Crabby, looks like you finally avoided getting up early," Theo said.

The heavysset young man jumped and stared at them.

"Theo, is that you?" he asked, coming down the stairs.

"Hey Junior," Theo said, putting his hand out.

Junior's face split in a wide grin and he grabbed Theo's hand with both of his and pumped it. His eyes got even bigger when Theo introduced Emma.

"Who woulda guessed it? You two as alike as two peas in a pod!"

"I was just as surprised as you are," Theo said.

Junior-Andy let go of his hand but kept staring at the two of them. "Julie's trying to get that damned old tractor running again, I'll get her."

"We saw her on the way in," Theo said. "She's just finishing up."

Junior, Theo was having trouble thinking of him with any other name, chuckled. "We still call that old beast 'Theo's tractor.' You got some time to set awhile and tell us what happened?"

"Of course we do," Emma said. "I'll let them know."

Junior watched as she pulled out a small device and turned away, speaking quietly into it. Then he noticed the sleek black shape sitting across the road.

"You came in *that*?"

"Yeah. It's a pretty weird story."

Julie came out of the barn, wiping her hands as Rachel and Kiki emerged from Athena and started up the long driveway. Junior had insisted on arranging chairs in the shade. They were all sitting down when Rachel and Kiki arrived.

"You!" Junior said, pointing at Rachel. "You're the one who put that gun on me!"

Rachel was startled but Kiki laughed delightedly. "She does have a way with people, doesn't she?"

"Uhm, I'm sorry about that," Rachel muttered. "I didn't have my finger on the trigger if that helps."

Junior started to laugh. "First time I'd wet myself since I was little and I didn't even notice. Come and set, no hard feelings. You gotta be related to these two as well, same hair and eyes."

"Distant cousins," Rachel said and shook hands with Junior. "Glad to meet you in better circumstances."

Theo told Junior and Julie a very abbreviated version of his last few years. Julie nodded now and then but Junior just listened with wide eyes.

"Theo, I gotta ask," Junior/Andy said when Theo had finished. "I heard tell Brother Dark did some pretty terrible things to you. That true?"

Theo kept himself from shuddering at the name. "Afraid so."

Junior just shook his head and Theo was surprised to see him wipe his eyes.

"You okay?"

"Hell no, I'm not okay! You were my best friend, acted like a brother to me even when I did you wrong. I'd have kept him away from you if I'd known but everyone just kept saying you were sick in the head because of the devil."

"He was more than human," Theo said gently. "No one could have stopped him from doing whatever he wanted, not even you. You don't need to worry about him anymore."

"Your life here was as good as hell and I feel awful about that. I'd ask your forgiveness but I don't deserve it."

Theo looked at Emma, Rachel, and Kiki, who stuck her tongue out at him.

"You didn't do anything all that bad, but if you want to hear me say it, I forgive you. But it looks like it all turned out pretty good, Brother Crabby."

Junior still had his booming laugh. "Not brother anything now. They say that whole church was for spying on folk. Wasn't sure what to do when they came and took people away but Julie tells me I can talk to God just as well alone as in a building."

Theo nodded. "She's smart."

Junior beamed at Julie. "Way smarter than me, good thing too. So those stories about aliens are true."

Theo nodded. "They're coming, Junior. That mess over in Africa, all those terrorists, that was the start of their war here."

"What do they want with us?" Julie asked.

Emma rolled her eyes. "What alien bad guys always want, destroy the planet, wipe out the pesky humans, that kind of thing."

Julie looked at her. "I'm not sure whether I should laugh or scream at the things you say."

"Oh, that's normal," Rachel assured her. "We all feel the same way."

"Anyway," Theo said, ignoring Emma who was flipping Rachel off. "Colonies on other planets are being set up, just to be safe. They're going to use a lottery system for most people. So I came to see if you were still here, I've got guaranteed seats for you both. We're taking a bunch of folks to a really nice place to live."

Junior stared at him. "Why would you do that after everything that my parents did to you? Looking back, they were monsters Theo. When I realized that, I went and burnt that house to the ground."

"Did you warn them first?" Theo asked with a small smile.

Junior bellowed another laugh. "Hell, they were long gone. Hear they're in prison out east of here. Good thing too."

There was another distant rumble in the sky and they all looked up. This time, there was a thin contrail tracing a path to the east. Junior/Andy looked at Julie who nodded.

"Do I have to be a farmer?" Junior asked after a moment. "We had to sell off all the livestock. I liked that part of things but dirt farming just ain't for me."

"You can be anything you want to be, Brother Crabby," Theo said.

"And I could use a hand keeping him on the straight and narrow," Emma added. "You wouldn't believe the things he gets himself into."

Junior/Andy chuckled. "I can just imagine. Well, Brother Runt, we'd like to accept. When do we leave?"