

Juniper

By: David Lettis

Dedicated to the believers.

## Prologue – Colonel Sartor

Colonel Raymond Sartor stared pensively at the plane that sat dark and silent on the tarmac of the Shenzhen Military Airport. Even with the doors now open and inspectors from the Center for Disease Control scanning the area for any virulent pathogens, the plane cast an eerie pall that unsettled Sartor's stomach. He brought his half-smoked cigarette to his lips and slowly inhaled, hoping the smoke would jog loose some sort of insight that could help explain how this happened. As he exhaled, he broke his hypnotic gaze from the plane to watch the smoke dissipate into the dense Shenzhen smog that blotted out the September sun. Once gone, he assumed, the smoke would not suddenly reappear twenty-eight days later.

*What am I missing?*

As the director of Project Juniper, he had anticipated that he would be intimately involved in the fallout from the disappearance of American Airlines Flight 246. Planes weren't meant to disappear into thin air, and when they did, they weren't supposed to reappear perfectly intact twenty-eight days later. But that is exactly why Juniper was established in the first place, and exactly why Colonel Sartor was asked to spearhead the investigation. Juniper understood what otherwise seemed incomprehensible and created what otherwise seemed impossible.

*How did it come back? Unless...*

Sartor shook the thought out of his head. He shook multiple thoughts out of his head. He had already accepted what had happened to the plane, but even as the director of Juniper, he struggled to reconcile that reality. There had to be another explanation.

He dropped his cigarette onto the pavement and began to make his way toward the plane. His Chinese counterpart and escort, Xi Wang, walked a step behind him. Sartor always noticed that Wang remained a step or two behind him when they were together.

"How'd it land?" Sartor mumbled through the cold afternoon air.

"We assume the autopilot," Wang replied in perfect American English.

Sartor looked over his shoulder. He wasn't so sure a plane that was heading from Colorado to Texas could land via autopilot in Shenzhen nearly a month later, but at this point, anything was plausible.

"I have been asked to convey our gratitude for reaching out to us so quickly."

"We wanted to assure you that China had nothing to do with the disappearance."

Sartor stopped walking to look at Wang.

“Should we have suspected you?”

“If a lost Chinese airliner ended up in the United States, we would suspect the United States.”

Sartor slowly nodded, accepting the logic from his longtime friend and adversary. He could see that Wang was having trouble reading his response, but that’s how Sartor preferred to approach a situation. Colonel Sartor was a notoriously aloof man. His affections toward the Army were nebulous at best, and his chillingly dispassionate facial expressions frightened even the sternest of Generals. Every year he muttered to the few people that he considered his friends that he was going to retire, yet every year the military kept promoting him into positions on experimental programs that could have just as easily crashed and burned as succeeded. Eventually, he figured, a program would crash and burn and the Army would simply give him his papers of separation. Yet as he stood among a very select amalgamation of Chinese and American military officers, he couldn’t help but worry that this plane would tarnish his otherwise exceptional track record.

Colonel Sartor pulled his pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and made Wang wait as he took one out and lit it. He took a purposefully long drag as he contemplated the right question.

“So if the Chinese military isn’t responsible for commandeering one of our planes, where’d it go and why is it now here?”

Out of character, Wang walked past Sartor, his hands clasped together behind his back, his eyes glued to the plane seemingly out of suspicion it could consume his very being at a moment’s notice.

“We have no idea, Colonel. We were hoping you could tell us.” Colonel Sartor began to walk alongside Wang. He looked around the airfield. To his knowledge, no American had ever set foot on it before that day. The guards in the tower couldn’t decide if they should monitor their foreign visitors or if they should monitor the skies for misplaced planes. Either way, Sartor felt no threat or animosity. This was outside the realm of traditional international posturing. When Wang spoke again, Sartor realized he had not acknowledged Wang’s comment for several seconds. Wang asked, “Colonel, how’s your wife?”

Sartor was grateful for the small talk.

“She bought another horse.”

“Another?” Wang asked with genuine interest. “Is that her fourth?”

Sartor was momentarily taken aback by Wang's intimate knowledge of his wife before remembering they had hosted the Wang family to a night in DC three years ago.

"Her fifth, actually." Sartor's annoyance made Wang laugh. "And yours?"

"She doesn't like to fly. Disappearing planes haven't helped her phobia."

Sartor put the cigarette to his lips as they approached the plane, ignoring Wang's joke.

"Xi, tell me about the passengers."

Wang paused to look at the plane. Sartor tried to get a read on his silence.

*Is he stalling?*

"Colonel, we found no passengers, but there are vessels in the cargo hold. We're assuming they're some kind of body bags."

"Body bags?"

That got Sartor's attention, dropping his spirits even further. Wang noticed and continued with, "Highly advanced. We've never seen anything like it. We haven't been able to open them yet."

Body bags. Sartor knew the Juniper member who had been on board was probably dead, but he ignored the horrific implications for the moment.

"If they were in body bags, then someone must have put them there."

"That was our conclusion as well. Which is why it doesn't seem like such a mystery that we only found 301 body bags."

Sartor took a deep breath, this time relying on Shenzhen's brown air for his fix of toxins. He thought about his wife brushing their horses and wished he could be there beside her. Working for Juniper was meant to be about progress, not conspiracies; space suits, not body bags.

*Could we really be responsible for killing these people? There must be another explanation.* Sartor made a mental note to call Captain Holiday when he had a free moment.

"Did you say 301?"

"Yes."

"Am I wrong, or did I read in the newspapers that there were 302 passengers aboard flight 246?"

The whites of Wang's eyes widened and his hands behind his back tightened as he nodded.

“Yes, Colonel, that’s correct.”

Sartor’s rimless glasses caught the glare of the afternoon light as he turned his whole body to look at Wang. The sun was sinking rapidly behind the Shenzhen skyscrapers, making the crisp air even chillier. Wang, who was noticeably shorter than Sartor, refused to let the sun distract him. He stood practically at attention and allowed Sartor to stare down at him.

“Well, then tell me,” Sartor asked, “where the hell is passenger 302?”

“That, Colonel, is a very good question.”

Part 1

(1 day prior to the disappearance of American Airlines Flight 246)

## Chapter 1 – Augustus

Augustus Octavia stood beside Franklin Veneral in the middle of the observation tower that overlooked the containment chamber. Augustus was an old man with a young complexion and an even younger heart. At the ripe old age of 268 years, he had long since passed the traditional expiration of High Governors when Seriam law dictated an end to life-extending cellular regeneration, but his only daughter was born when he was in his 247<sup>th</sup> year and the High Council allowed him to rule beyond his allotted tenure. He now embraced his status as an elder statesman and even appeared to enjoy his position as the High Governor of Seriam, which had not always been the case. He had once looked forward to expiring in an outer colony, getting older and drifting peacefully away into the Consciousness, but he accepted that would likely not happen.

On any other occasion, this would have been a momentous juncture in history. The High Governor of Seriam standing beside his First Minister of War and Culture, together overseeing the final trial of the newest and most prestigious addition to the Empire's arsenal. But this was no regular occasion. This was the beginning of the age of sentient technology, living creations with independent thinking and independent decision-making. It was the next step in nature's evolution.

*And it was never supposed to succeed.*

Augustus watched the Explorer pulsate in virtual steady-state breathing. "So this is your Explorer, Franklin?"

"It's an abomination," Lilith Octavia said, standing behind her father beside the First Minister of Science and Space Exploration Raze Anders. Lilith's fiery red hair and pale white skin stood in stark contrast to the sea of beige skin around her. It was a rare condition among a small portion of the population of Externus, but seemed particularly apt for the Solis of Power, the title given to the one individual beneath the suns that is next in line to lead the Empire.

Augustus looked over his shoulder, accepting his daughter's comments but refusing to acknowledge them in front of Veneral.

The Explorers, which were large spheres that seemed to pulsate between translucence and opacity, were as close to living organisms as technology allowed. Veneral had convinced Augustus to order the Ministry for Science and Space Exploration to design it to travel the cosmos, either manned or unmanned, choosing its course completely



autonomously. Veneral, of course, personally oversaw the development, giving Augustus brief respites from Veneral's constant haranguing over improving planetary and galactic defenses.

Augustus sighed.

"Despite your honorable daughter's hesitation, High Governor, I promise, the Explorers are the future," Veneral insisted through his teeth. "Not only will they revolutionize space travel, but they will harden our planetary defenses, neutralizing threats before we even realize a threat exists."

"That's a lot of power," Augustus said.

"Of course, fully answerable to the High Governor," Veneral quickly assured.

Augustus took a deep breath, trying not to gawk at the glowing sphere before him. It was magnificent. Augustus tapped his right temple once and data appeared in his eyes via his Ocular Implants. He used his eyes to scroll through the data, opting to put some aside so he could quickly reference it in the future. He paused on words such as, **Can create and enter gravitational alignments for intergalactic travel**, and, **Advanced electromagnetic weaponry**, and then finally, **Self-healing skin and fully autonomous consciousness**.

*Lilith is right. She knew it from the start. It was never supposed to get to this point. This type of intelligence is contrary to our values. Veneral will never understand.*

As he cleared the data from his Ocular Implants, another thought crossed his mind.

"Franklin, did I see you sent another Security Battalion to 48-Quasi 2?"

Franklin hesitated, not anticipating the question.

"Yes, High Governor, that's correct."

"Your infatuation with Jonas is starting to raise some questions."

"High Governor," Veneral began, trying to maintain his calm demeanor, "48-Quasi 2 is in a strategically significant location in the galaxy. It can be a hub to new worlds, and at worst a first line of defense against unknown threats."

"It's a minor colony with rancid air and almost zero chance of thriving."

"It's a colony of Seriam," Veneral persisted. "It deserves our full support."

"Support, yes, but resourcing it as a future military outpost is premature. Shut it down."

Veneral knew when the argument was over and nodded casually. The two of them, as well as Lilith and the scientific team, continued to watch the Explorer bob and pulsate in

place. The enormous sphere had a menacing glow to it, akin to a dog whose hackles are alert to pending danger, as though it knew it was about to be threatened.

“You say it will obey my every command?”

“Yes, High Governor.”

Augustus placed his hand on a glass board that protruded from the containment chamber. Red veins began to extend from his hand through the board as the system accepted his control.

“Explorer 1,” Augustus said, his voice echoing through the chamber, “do you know who I am?”

Blue pulses extended through the sphere like a heart pumping blood through a body.

“You are the High Governor of Seriam,” it replied in a male-sounding voice.

“And will you obey my every command?”

“Affirmative,” it quickly said, although to Augustus it sounded like insistence.

Augustus looked to Veneral, who appeared pleased with the answer.

“Very good,” Augustus said, considering his options. “Explorer 1, in a few seconds, I will give the command for an Artificial Humanoid Fortis Series Squadron to enter the chamber with you. The squadron will be commanded to attack you. You are to do nothing. You will accept the attack. You will not retaliate. Do you understand?”

“Augustus!” Veneral shouted. When Augustus’ glance indicated he was being insubordinate, Veneral clarified. “High Governor, I do not understand your command.”

Augustus looked back to the Explorer, who had yet to respond. Finally, though, it said somewhat reluctantly, “Yes, High Governor. I will accept the attack and I will not retaliate.”

“Good.” Augustus removed his hand and looked at Veneral. “You say it will obey my command. Let’s see how loyal it is. Give the command.”

Veneral sought to object, but opted to bite his tongue. He looked at the Explorer and then, as though he were giving an order to send his own child to his death, dropped his eyes and tapped three times on his right temple. Doors immediately opened to the Containment Cell. Ten AH Forti entered, all holding the metallic prongs of ionic burst arrays that in theory should annihilate the Explorer.

The AH Forti, as the advanced security artificial humanoids were referred to, were given flat reinforced glass faces, with a single seam running down the center. Only the

presence of red flashing eyes allowed observers to know when they were activated. The purpose of the sleek glass frontal covering was to differentiate them from the AH Service series, which were designed to act and look as much like a Seriamite citizen as possible.

The ten Forti surrounded the Explorer, weapons raised. The Explorer's soft blue heartbeat turned a fiery red. Augustus was transfixed.

"Give the order."

In his periphery, Augustus saw Veneral tap his temple once. Almost immediately, the blinding white flashes of ionic bursts began to pummel the Explorer. The Explorer's response was fast and surgical. Its skin initially hardened into what looked like reinforced steel, but then its fiery red pulses lit up the room like the second sun of Seriam. Flashes of red bursts – ten, to be exact – took direct aim at the Forti, blasting through their chests and obliterating them from the waist to the neck, their sinewy metallic skin melting onto the floor before them.

The whole incident was over in a matter of seconds. All that was left were the heads and legs of the Fortis squadron. The mammoth sphere once again bobbed up and down, pulsing its soft blue heartbeats.

Augustus nodded once and turned to Veneral.

"Shut it down. This program is over."

Veneral began to object, but Augustus allowed no time for argument. Followed closely by Lilith and Raze, he exited the room, leaving Veneral staring helplessly at his now defunct program.

## Chapter 2 – Justin

Justin Staggert sat with his back to Captain Kris Holiday. His eyes focused on the curved composite of seven computer monitors in front of him, which as a whole created a 3D model of the terrain around them.

The Juniper instructors allowed Justin and his team thirty seconds to identify the situation and prepare to act. At thirty seconds, Justin knew, Ariana's soothing voice would inform them of the specifics of the training scenario she had concocted.

Justin, at twenty-four years old, was in his third year of Juniper, handpicked from all Air Force and Marine Corps recruits to effectively join a non-militarized program. It was a tall order for Justin, who wanted to honor his father's memory and be a role model for his little brother by becoming a Marine, but after four months of a hellish boot camp, he had no qualms about joining the secretive program meant to "broaden the scope of interplanetary science and exploration."

At the moment, what Justin saw in front of him was baffling.

"Staggert, give me some specs," Captain Holiday said.

"I, uh, it's, I don't," Justin muttered incoherently.

*What on Earth is that?*

"I don't think it's Earth," he heard Peter Sabien yell over the growing chorus of voices.

Justin began to shake. He had the same information. He had come to the same conclusion. The rolling hills of red grass and creatures marching in formation could only have been alien.

"How're the shields?" Captain Holiday asked.

"The shields? Certainly not designed for combat," Sabien said warily, but then with more confidence, "but, if we get in the air, shields are good."

"Weapons! Talk to me!" Holiday excitedly bellowed.

"Sonics and Plasmas charged and ready, hot damn!" Micah Camp shouted in his deliberate Southern drawl. Justin snuck a glance and saw Micah holding holographic joysticks. To Micah's right, George Compton gazed at monitors similar to Justin's, but he was actively finding targets and locking them into Ariana's firing queue. "EFPs, Grinders, and Sidewinders armed and ready."

"Justin, where's the deviation?"

Justin was almost as impressed at the amount of firepower the X-40 carried as he was at Captain Holiday's ability to compartmentalize and focus. Never before in a training scenario, though, had they been forced to use the arsenal.

"The deviation is, uh..." Using his hands, Justin threw the 3D image back into the screens and focused his attention on the gravitational readings of the bottom screen. Somewhere in the near vicinity, Ariana should be homing in on a gravitational signature caused by the negative energy that deviates from the planet's normal readings. "I don't know, Ariana can't..."

But Ariana cut him off. Ariana's voice sounded like any typical twenty-something woman would sound. It was soft, reassuring, and all too often, confusing to the testosterone-ridden males.

"Good morning, Team Alpha. You have crash-landed on a small moon in the solar system of star 8-Juliett-24-echo-9-4-2. The locals are hostile. You must find the deviation, or you must defend yourselves. The mission is to get back to Earth alive."

Ariana's instructions ended as abruptly as they started.

*How does she come up with this shit? Find the deviation. Where's the Goddamned deviation?*

Justin's hands began to shake with more intensity. He felt Captain Holiday's stare burning into his back.

"Peter," Holiday shouted, "Anything?"

"Negative. JJ, why haven't you located the deviation?"

"Because this planet's gravity is different than Earth's." This was not Justin speaking. Jackie Blaine sat in her seat at the front of the ship, trying in desperation to redistribute the power from the ship's fusion reactor into the thrusters. "Thrusters can't break the grip, Sir. We'd have to go straight to the Drive."

"Ariana, would that work?" Holiday asked.

"In theory, it could work," Ariana answered in frustrating poise. "However, the ground could damage the exterior shell of the negative energy bubble, rendering the ship and your lives obsolete."

Captain Holiday laughed.

"Well don't sugar coat it, sweetheart. Justin, Peter, switch to sonics. Cover our flank. Micah, if they turn hostile, you are weapons hot with your plasmas."

"You better fucking believe it."

Justin once again looked in envy at Micah. Looking at his own screen, scanning one more time to find the deviation, he pulled a video game-looking controller from his seat and plugged two wires into two of the bottom screens. It was a jury-rigged system, but Justin and Peter weren't on the weapons team, Marines or not. The controller and original computer composite formed a new image in front of him. Moving the controller, he was able to home in on the individual creatures beginning to surround their ship. The creatures, inevitably from Ariana's imagination, were easily nine-feet tall and had on iron armor over their bodies, to include their four legs. Justin wasn't even certain that a sonic blast would have a lasting effect on their wellbeing.

"Tinker Bell, any chance we can communicate with them."

"I wouldn't even know where to begin," said Ashley Bellington, a miniature girl with electric-white hair.

Captain Holiday leaned back in her chair behind her crew of six and laughed again. From the moment she entered the Air Force Academy, Holiday established herself as a natural captain known for her easy and fearless nature. When Justin first met her after being recruited to be Holiday's navigator at Juniper, Holiday refused to allow anyone to haze the newbie unless also inflicting the same punishment on their captain. Of course, that was before the two began sharing a bed. Once the crew found out that juicy bit of gossip, it became open season on the guy who slept his way onto Team Alpha.

"All indications suggest imminent hostilities from the alien species," Ariana said through her soft vocals.

"Alright, let's hit them with the sonics," Captain Holiday commanded confidently. "At least that way they might realize we aren't utilizing lethal defenses just yet. Micah, stand by for plasma charges. Sonics, fire fire fire."

At her command, the ship experienced simulated shaking as loud *BOOMS* blasted from the X-40's right flank Sonic Pulse Cannons. Justin continued to stare at the battleground in front of him, but remained motionless. Images of his mother and brother, bloodied and broken, flashed before him.

"Sonics appear effective," George updated.

"Hostiles continue to approach," Ariana chimed in.

As Justin prepared a target to blast with the sonic pulse, his hands shaking uncontrollably, a blip appeared on the gravitational readings.

*The deviation.*

“Ca – Uh, Cap – Captain,” Justin stammered.

“Jesus Christ, Staggert!” Holiday yelled. “Fire!”

“The deviation, I found it!”

“It won’t matter if we’re dead! Fire fire fire!”

As she yelled, Justin looked back at the display. The creatures were on him. They all heard the sound of tearing metal as the four-legged-being fired a sort of laser at the X-40. Justin put his hands in front of his face in an instinctive defensive position. When he looked again and tried to fire, his control was unresponsive.

“The shields are not designed to sustain direct laser fire. There is damage to Navigator Staggert’s firing mechanism,” Ariana informed the crew. “For continued survival, please consider alternate defenses.”

They once again heard the sound of tearing metal as the ship’s shield was hit with the blast of the alien laser.

“Micah, switch to plasmas. Weapons hot.”

Without acknowledging, Micah swiveled in his chair to look toward his target. It was an unnecessary move, but one that Justin had seen Micah do before. He maneuvered and compressed the two joysticks, squeezing the triggers and releasing the baritone fizzle of plasma fire. In his display, Justin could see the aliens begin to drop.

“Plasmas are cutting through ‘em like the Georgia offense on game day! Yee haw!”

After a few seconds, Micah swiveled from right to left, scanning for targets.

“The immediate threat has been mitigated,” Ariana said.

“Staggert, where’s the deviation?” Holiday asked, immediately shifting to the next order of business.

Justin looked at his gravitational scanner, looking for the blip he had seen. All the lines, however, remained flat. It was gone.

“It, it uh, it seems to have disappeared,” he said meekly.

“Staggert, do deviations just disappear?”

“Not usually. But, this gravity is all over the place. It almost seems like it’s changing, like there’s waves.”

Justin heard Captain Holiday breathe in deeply and then sigh. He began to laugh. Suddenly, the lights on the ship came on, reminding Justin of the lights turning on in the gymnasium at the end of a school dance in high school. It meant taking stock of the girls you danced with and inevitably feeling disappointed. Or in Justin’s case, it meant finally getting

to stand up after sitting at his table all night. In the current scenario, it meant the simulation was over and the team had to prepare after action reports. Justin knew his name would not be a celebratory topic in the pending write ups.

“Hey, Justin, thanks for lettin’ me have some fun again,” Micah quipped. “I can always count on you to freeze like a lassoed jackass.”

“Pipe down,” Holiday said.

Micah laughed to himself and shook his head as he began to shut down his system.

“Team Alpha,” a voice said over the speakers. It was no longer Ariana. This was an intercom. It was the Director. Justin sighed and clenched his jaw. He had hoped Colonel Sartor hadn’t been around for this one. But of course he would be. This was the first simulation with hostile alien contact. “Report to the debriefing room immediately.”

“Justin ’s gonna get his ass handed to him, just watch,” Micah whispered to George.

“At least he didn’t crash land on another planet,” George grumbled.

Jackie immediately popped up, her cropped brown hair bouncing up and down as she did so. She threw her hands in the air.

“What the fuck? That happened before the simulation even started.”

“Didn’t exactly get us off the ground,” George said.

“Hey, it’s not like Tink successfully talked them down.”

Tink giggled. “No, not at all.”

The crew began to rise, but Justin stayed seated, silently reprimanding himself missing the deviation.

*It was there. I saw it.*

He must have been sitting for longer than he realized because he suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder.

“This is why we train, Justin.” It was Holiday. Justin looked above him to see Holiday staring down at him. “This is why we have a crew; to catch one another when something goes wrong.”

Justin nodded and looked at the blank space where the holograms had once displayed the terrain around them.

“I just don’t get it. I saw it.”

“I don’t doubt it. But next time, threat first.”

“Right.”



Holiday took her hand off his shoulder as Justin unbuckled himself and stood up. The designers of the X-40 had purposely given it more space than required, sacrificing some maneuverability for living space. "The crew will kill one another if they don't have space," they wrote in their proposition. Colonel Sartor concurred immediately.

When Justin stood, Holiday stepped to him and embraced him.

"Some day, this will be real. Traveling through space to another star, another planet. You need to be a part of this crew. I want you there with us. With me."

Holiday blushed as she said it. Romantic affection didn't come naturally to her, and it certainly did not come naturally to Justin.

"I have every intention of being there with you."

Holiday smiled. "Kind of romantic, right? Out in space, locked in this ship together."

"Micah and George watching our every move."

She slapped his shoulder. "Fine, kill my attempts at romance. I'm sorry I yelled at you in front of the others."

"I choked. Like you said, I'm a part of the crew. You're my captain."

She nodded. "Good."

They dropped the embrace and slid around their respective chairs and out the back of the command module to walk through the curved living compartment and then the chow hall, which doubled as an exercise room and study hall. The close quarter conditions were still cramped considering they were discussing interstellar travel, but there was more than enough room for comfortable living. The simulator kept the rooms curved, even though it was missing the spinning Negative Energy Drive at the center. "The Drive," to which it had become known, or NED, powered initially by a fusion reactor, created artificial gravity and the negative energy shield that entry into a gravitational connection, enabling passage through space. As a byproduct, the Drive fired electromagnetic pulses into the rear propulsion system, which in turn replenished the Drive's ignition fuel, thereby creating an endless and wholly sustainable energy system.

Holiday allowed Justin to climb the ladder out of the top of the ship and followed closely behind him. The rest of the crew had already departed to make their way for the debriefing room. As the final two crewmembers that slid down the curved backside of the ship, they locked the hatches and then stood and admired it.

"She is a beauty, isn't she?" Holiday said.

Justin sighed, agreeing with his captain but feeling his own prospects for space flight drifting farther and farther away.

“Think she’ll ever fly?” Justin asked.

“I think we’re closer than you might realize.”

Holiday turned to walk to the briefing room. Justin took one more look, savoring the image as if it was the last time he’d see it, and then he turned to walk next to Holiday.

“Think I’ll still be around when it happens?”

Holiday rolled her eyes.

“Justin, I’ve known you for close to three years now. You raised your younger brother almost entirely on your own. Your scores in physics, math, and every other bum-fuck useless class are off the charts. And then you make the crackpot decision to join the Marines. You crush boot camp. You’re not my navigator because we feel bad for you or because we... well, you know. You’re my navigator—you’re Juniper’s Team Alpha navigator—because you’re exceptional. You are impressive. You need to start realizing that. Right now, you are the only obstacle to your own progress. And besides, I like my man to be confident. This sad-sac nonsense is a turn off.”

*I raised my younger brother because my dad abandoned us and my mother was dead,* he thought to himself, ignoring her final comments. He dutifully nodded, though, not letting on he missed most of her speech.

As they left the hangar that housed the three X-40 simulators and entered the hallway that led to the classrooms and auditoriums, Justin continued to think about his brother, Bryce. Justin had unsuccessfully tried to convince Bryce not to enter the Marine Corps, but Bryce would hear none of it.

“You know, when Sartor recruited me, I said my first choice was to be Captain,” Justin said to Holiday’s rather rude amusement.

“Still think you’d want to be captain?”

“Want to be? Or capable of being?”

Holiday roared with laughter, her harsh, guttural bellow bouncing and echoing down the concrete hallway.

“Stick to navigation,” Holiday said, before saying, “and never forget that dead navigators don’t find deviations. Pull the fucking trigger.”

Holiday’s words made Justin momentarily stop, stunned at her excoriation. Holiday opened the last door in the hallway and entered. Justin sprinted forward to enter with her.

At the front of the room was Colonel Sartor along with Juniper's science and technology team. Their presence could only mean one thing: training was coming to an end.

## Chapter 3 – Colonel Sartor

Colonel Sartor stood motionless at the front of the room, putting enough of his weight against the table to take some of the pressure off of his feet. It had been a three-pack-of-cigarettes kind of day and he wished he had been wise enough to purchase a fourth pack. He knew his green battle dress uniform stank of tar and nicotine and almost certainly made the members of Team Alpha slightly nauseous, but having three senators tell him that the program was to go live or lose funding challenged his otherwise stolid demeanor.

Most of the seven-man team had already entered; he only waited for Captain Holiday and the team's weak link, Navigator Staggert. He had personally recruited each member, except Staggert. The Secretary of Defense himself had ordered Sartor to make Staggert a member of the team. Staggert's brilliance certainly proved its worth, but not pushing back on the orders was a decision he regretted to this day.

*But who else could do Staggert's job?*

Staggert scored off the charts in physics and math and still managed to be socially and physically able enough to become a United States Marine. Hell, he practically raised his little brother.

*Ugh, the little brother. Another headache soon to be coming my way. A maniac with a bad temper. Justin I can handle, but what the hell am I going to do with the whole fucking family?*

When Captain Holiday and Navigator Staggert entered, most likely tardy so Holiday could impart some wisdom on Staggert, he watched patiently for them to take their seats. As expected, Captain Holiday took a seat behind the rest of the team, but Sartor had to bite his tongue while Justin looked at Holiday for some direction. Watching Justin try to decide between joining Holiday in the back or taking up a seat that would fit his place in the team's formation made Sartor squirm in irritation. Even Micah turned his head and opened his mouth to say something, but Colonel Sartor stared him back into silence. Micah's silent excoriation made Tink giggle. Sartor moved to scold her as well but rolled his eyes in defeat. The team's chemistry was what made them work. The only thorn was the navigator.

"Just sit down, Staggert," Sartor finally said.

Justin immediately tensed. Colonel Sartor could see the quiver in his arms and his muscles begin to twitch back and forth, but he finally slinked into the seat next to Holiday while Micah and George exchanged annoyed glances.

Sighing, Colonel Sartor pushed himself off the table and began to pace in front of the team. Behind the table sat two men, Melvin Russell and Tim Thomas, whom Sartor had hoped would act as an entourage. Both pale white with soft features and thick glasses, the men barely seemed to notice even the Colonel pacing in front of them, let alone possess the wherewithal to be firm. Colonel Sartor looked sharply at his “entourage,” hoping to remind them to help reinforce his agenda. Instead, though, he saw they were frantically sifting through their twenty-year-old brief cases and couldn’t possibly have showered in a number of days. “Guys,” he would frequently tell them, “you need to wear a tie and brush your hair to be taken seriously.” But they were young, they were geniuses, and they were usually all the firepower he needed.

Looking back at the Alpha crew of the X-40, a ship he personally helped design, he stopped pacing and began to speak, his lips barely moving as he did so.

“Team,” he said, but immediately paused. As he said it, he saw Peter immediately pull out a note pad from his jacket pocket and prepare to diligently record all the comments for later studying.

*If only Peter had the ability to spot the deviation in the exercise.*

Colonel Sartor shook off the thought and began to speak again. “As you all are aware, today’s simulation presented a unique variation from our past exercises.”

“It’s cuz Jackie crash landed the ship, Sir,” George grumbled, much to the team’s amusement.

“Hey what the fuck?” Jackie fired back.

“Hey!” Captain Holiday yelled, stifling any further outbursts. “Apologies, Sir.”

“No apologies necessary. You guys have good chemistry. It can’t be taught.” He momentarily paused to look at Justin, took a breath as if to say something, but moved on. He began to pace again and looked at Melvin and Tim. They continued to sift through the papers in front of them, reading over notes and exchanging documents. “I’m sure you’re all wondering about the odd nature of your simulation today. For those purposes, I brought Doctors Russell and Thomas. They head up Juniper’s sciences division.” He turned to them. “Doctors?”

Melvin and Tim both stopped shuffling their papers and stared up in absolute terror as though they had forgotten they were sitting in front of a room of people. Colonel Sartor turned back to the team.

“Clearly, we hired them for their social skills.”

Micah unleashed a booming laugh, apparently pleased at his director's sense of humor. Sartor allowed the outburst, and then he sighed and proceeded to begin the discussion he had hoped the doctors would have presented. "Captain Holiday, can you please tell me the purpose of Juniper?"

Without skipping a beat, Holiday, the top half of her shoulder-length hair pulled back in a ponytail, said, "Yes, Sir. Juniper was developed and implemented to ensure America leads the world in technological and scientific advancement, to guarantee America's energy needs, and to ultimately devise the tools to travel through space."

Colonel Sartor nodded perfunctorily and looked out of the corner of his eyes, expecting Holiday to elaborate. To Sartor's disappointment, Holiday was too smart to continue into uncharted territory. He decided to push her.

"The tools to travel through space, you say," Sartor posited. "Curious, isn't it, that one program would be established for those types of advancements, and yet, here we have a team of the finest Marines and Airmen in the world flight testing an experimental aircraft with advanced weaponry?"

Sartor waited for Holiday's reply, but none came.

"We're preparing, Sir." The meager voice caught Sartor off guard. It wasn't Holiday. It was Staggert.

"Say again?"

Justin gulped. "Technological and scientific advancements benefit all Americans. It's the type of investment that might one day lead to the next technological or health or communications revolutions. But we need all these things—the propulsion, the quantum computer, the Negative Energy Drive—to ensure space flight can extend beyond near-Earth or even the Solar System. Why are *we* here? Because I have to imagine that the people who decided to fund this program weren't quite sure what we'd find on the other end."

Sartor stared mystified at Staggert. He suddenly remembered why Justin's recruitment actually made some sense. *Maybe they knew he was a genius.* Justin sat quietly in his seat, waiting for Sartor to acknowledge his comments. Sartor stared a moment longer, hoping that Justin would continue. Eventually, though, Sartor knew that his cold eyes were the reason that Staggert began to recoil in his chair.

*And that's why I always thought his recruitment was a mistake.*

"Very good, Staggert. Which of course begs the question: what would compel our leaders to believe we would ever find something on the other side? Yes, technology always

gets commercialized and benefits society, but why the extreme amount of resources to devise a spacecraft and devise new weapons systems and train multiple crews in the seemingly absurd notion that we might, with zero percent certainty, not only encounter life, but encounter hostile life?"

"Because this isn't about *aliens*, Sir," George muttered. "This is about international combat. There is no ship that can counter our weapons. This is so when China decides to get bold, we can fire an EFP up their ass."

"Ooh Rah!" Micah yelled.

"I'm sure the Russians wouldn't appreciate a couple of grinders mowing them down either," Jackie quipped, leaning back in her chair like she had a bone to pick with the Colonel.

Colonel Sartor stopped pacing and stood motionless as the team tossed out theories. It saddened him that they were all aware of those possibilities, but he couldn't in good conscience deny it.

*Those are definitely possibilities.*

"Captain Holiday," Colonel Sartor started again, seeking to end the conspiracy theories, however real they may be. "Why is this program called Juniper?"

Sartor looked on as the Team Alpha captain turned pale.

"Sir, I, uh..." Holiday stammered, trying to sit up a little bit straighter than she already was.

"Team," Colonel Sartor said, cutting the captain off. Colonel Sartor instinctively brought his hand up to put a cigarette in his mouth, but short of a cigarette, rubbed his temple and his baldhead. "I know there isn't enough communications between our operations and our science divisions. I would like to introduce all of you, though, to Doctors Russell and Thomas." Sartor didn't turn, but began to speak to his science team. "Doctor Russell, why don't you explain to the team what Juniper means." This time, the doctor was somewhat more prepared, but as any good scientist, he sought clarity.

"The, or, the Project Juniper, Sir," Melvin stammered, looking over his papers at the Colonel.

"Yeah, explain where the name comes from. Oh, and Doc, just the Clif Notes."

Melvin looked at his fellow scientist for guidance, but Tim's mouth was agape by the preposterous request.

“Right, yes, Juniper.” Melvin tapped the table twice with his open palms, flexed his fingers, and then pried himself away from his chair. “As the, uh, Colonel here said, the Juniper program was not given its name by random chance. As you’re all aware, in December of 1972, NASA flew its final Apollo mission. Many people believe that had Apollo been funded and allowed to continue, it would have continued the technological development to reach out beyond the moon and lay the foundations for exploring farther out into the Solar System and potentially the galaxy. Unfortunately, the program was cancelled.”

Colonel Sartor continued to pace and began to walk around the side of the team. He was watching their expressions as they listened to Melvin. He knew they didn’t interact with the science department, although it’d probably be a better fit for Staggert.

*Maybe I should introduce them. Get Staggert off the team.*

“In 1991,” Melvin continued, “nearly twenty years after the Apollo program ended and while the world was watching the collapse of the Soviet Union, an amateur astronomer in Kern County, California, was monitoring the sky. With a three-foot wide satellite television dish that was bolstered to the hillside via a Juniper tree...”

Sartor saw Holiday smile and begin to nod, seeming to understand.

“... this astronomer picked up a signal. This signal was extraterrestrial.”

The team was enthralled, although Sartor wondered if Micah and George knew what the word *extraterrestrial* meant.

“So, after calling SETI to see if they could pick up on the signal, the United States Military decided they should be involved.” He looked at Colonel Sartor and shrugged. “National security and all. Anyway, establishing that the signal was extraterrestrial and determining its point of origin became Operation Juniper.”

When Melvin stopped talking, apparently under the impression he had finished his Clif Notes presentation, Captain Holiday turned to look at Colonel Sartor, who now stood at the back of room.

“But, Sir, at what point did Operation Juniper become Project Juniper?”

“The signal, Captain Holiday,” Colonel Sartor said, “was identified as coming from outside of our Solar System. And it wasn’t just an undecipherable signal. Once we started to dig into it, we discovered it was a message...” He paused, wondering if he should continue.

*It’s time they know.*



“... that contained complex mathematical equations, schematics, and had writing. It had characteristics of Aramaic, Sanskrit, Arabic, Chinese, Latin, and Hindi.”

Colonel Sartor looked out at the team. He had practiced this speech dozens of times. He had given classified briefings to select members of congress and the president himself. But he had always been wary of telling the team. He looked at Staggert, who was wide-eyed and white. He understood.

“What does that mean?” Jackie blurted out.

“It means that this isn’t an exploration program,” Justin said absentmindedly, as though he was talking to himself. “Juniper is a contact mission.”

Colonel Sartor smiled and nodded.

“That’s right, Justin,” Sartor explained. “Without the advances of the Apollo program, we had no way to respond. We had no way to get there. So, we funneled money into a developmental program, code named, Project Juniper. Today, the only project on a comparable scale was code named...”

“The Manhattan Project,” Justin whispered. Colonel Sartor stared at his navigator, curious if the notoriously passive personality would have the audacity to press the issue further. “Weapons programs.”

Sartor walked through the team like a high school teacher working a teachable moment with his high school class. He stopped in front of Justin and looked down at him.

“Yes, Staggert, if the government was going to fund a program to make contact with an alien civilization, we wanted to take the necessary precautions that if that civilization was hostile, we could defend ourselves.”

“That’s a great way to say hello.”

“I agree,” Sartor said snidely.

*I agree so long as it’s an alien civilization.*

“What’s the significance that the signal has all those languages?” Captain Holiday asked, breaking the semi-tense moment.

“Erm,” Tim said, “um, just, just one language. Characteristics of several.”

“The *significance*?” Tink asked, incredulous at the utter idiocy of the question. She ran her hand through her vibrantly white hair and smacked her lips together for effect. Sartor allowed his Team Alpha communications officer the first crack at explaining.

“Tink, why don’t you inform your captain what the significance is,” Sartor said, locking his hands behind his back and once again pacing in front of the team.

“If we picked up a signal,” Tink said, breathing heavily, “and that signal is from outside earth’s comms, and those comms are in Latin and Chinese and Sanskrit, are you kidding me?”

Tink excitedly turned to stare at Holiday, but could barely contain her emotions. She no longer ran her fingers through her hair, but clutched at it as though the only way the explanation could emerge from her mind was to remove the hair that contained it.

Tink was about to continue, but Sartor cut her off.

“Staggert, why don’t you explain it?”

Tink’s excitement subsided as she sunk back down into her seat. Justin looked at Tink, whose vibrant hair even seemed to have gone limp. Colonel Sartor realized that Justin was afraid his response would upset Tink further, but he decided to push him.

“Staggert?”

“If we received a signal in Earth’s languages, that means there is an intelligent alien civilization out there and that civilization had previously visited earth.” Staggert turned his gaze to Holiday. “It means our civilization and language was probably exported from another world.”

The team remained silent. Even Micah and George withheld any sarcastic remarks they undoubtedly had prepared. The gravity of the situation left Jackie, Peter, and even Tink silent. Holiday dropped her head into her hands, her usual good-natured bravado melting away from the overwhelming realization of their mission and purpose and discoveries.

Colonel Sartor walked back to the table, sitting back into his original spot and looking at the team. Melvin finally took the cue to sit back down as well.

“Team, Captain Holiday, I understand the brutal truth I just unloaded on you. I’m sorry if I revealed that truth to you with reckless abandon. It wasn’t my intent.”

“What was your intent, Sir?” Holiday asked, dropping any pretense of devotion to rank. “Here we are, I mean, we’ve been here acting as the test flight crew for a ship that is meant to travel through deep space. It was meant to be exploration. And now you’re saying there’s an address on the other side. Is this mission one of violent intent?” Colonel Sartor stared at his captain, knowing he had asked that exact same question before. He saw Holiday’s eyes bounce back and force, her mind making connections faster than she could process them. When Sartor remained silent, clasping to the table, Holiday continued. “Why did you order the drill tonight? What are you planning? Or expecting?”

The corners of Colonel Sartor's mouth cinched upward. He brought his hand to his mouth to take a drag of his cigarette, but once again remembered he was on his own.

"People don't care about space travel. We landed on the moon. Big whoop. Mars? Who cares?" Sartor shook his head back and forth. "Deep space travel? That's science fiction. Alien civilizations? Bad science fiction. No, we need a purpose. How, in this day and age, do you continue to receive funding that exceeds anything the government has ever funded?"

*The Socratic method? Really? That's how I explain the situation? Amanda would kill me.*

"National security," Peter Sabien stated matter-of-factly.

"National security," Sartor confirmed. "And how do you satisfy the demands of national security?"

The room looked around to one another, expecting someone to speak up.

"Jackie?"

Jackie froze. Sartor didn't choose her for her intellectual prowess. She was a pilot through and through. He moved on.

"George?"

*Why would George care? He understands interstellar weapons systems, not politics.*

He moved on again.

"Justin?"

Sartor gazed through the team at Justin, who seemed to contemplate looking to Holiday for guidance. He cocked his head to one side, but kept his eyes locked on the Colonel. Finally, he scratched his nose and said, "You have to prove it works."

Satisfied, Colonel Sartor pushed himself off the desk.

"We have to prove that the product is worth the investment. We have to prove that there's a threat, and we can prevent that threat. Thank you Navigator Staggert." He paused to stare at Justin. His wife, Amanda, would tell him his tendency to stop and stare when he's contemplating a situation was creepy. It didn't stop him, though. "Unfortunately, that's exactly what we have been asked to prove. We either prove that the X-40 technology is capable of utilizing negative energy to formulate gravitational connections, or we lose our funding."

Colonel Sartor looked at George, who had clenched his fists and was beginning to shadow box the air.

“What does that mean, Sir?” Peter Sabien asked from the other side of the room.

Colonel Sartor turned to the scientists behind him and pointed to Tim Thomas.

“It means that Doctor Thomas, here, is going to activate the X-40’s Negative Energy Drive... imminently.”

“Sir, isn’t that theoretical?” Justin asked, genuinely confused.

Colonel Sartor turned to Doctor Thomas. Doctor Thomas’s eyes widened, but unlike Melvin, he immediately chimed in.

“Not, not exactly,” he stammered. “All the various components have been tested, just never as a whole.”

“But can it be activated on the ground? Here, in Earth’s atmosphere?” Sabien, who had told Colonel Sartor he refused to wear the Juniper flight suit with the metal zipper because of the threat of static electricity, asked the question quizzically.

Sartor looked at Doctor Thomas.

“In theory,” he replied.

The team looked at Captain Holiday, channeling Justin ’s insecurities.

Looking for any chance to step up as the leader, Holiday asked, “So when are you testing it?”

“Tomorrow night,” Colonel Sartor said, pulling his jacket down to reduce the wrinkles. “We have been asked to go live tomorrow. So get some rest.”

## Chapter 4 – Justin

Justin awoke and let his eyes adjust to the light, which had just begun to shine its red streams through the blinds of Kris Holiday's bunk. He felt Kris' arm draped across his chest and began to rub his fingers along her forearm. This was the only time in the day he felt at ease, when Kris—who in a few minutes he would have to refer to as Captain Holiday—laid in his arms and he could smell the stagnant sleep on her breath. He was the only one who got to see her with her guard down, when the veneer of her natural confidence that she exuded with such ease dropped and she became a person like any other. Everyone slept. Everyone gave themselves over to the parity of sleep. With your eyes closed, nightmares could consume the bravest of souls. The trust you place in the safety and security of society falls away and you give yourself over to the uncertainty of life. Most people wake and leave this state of vulnerability behind.

Justin never did. Justin never emerged, staying in a constant state of fear and nervousness. The Colorado Spring's Military Academy, which he entered when he was twelve, had done its best to beat and mold him into a state of perpetual bravado, but the only thing he learned from that experience was that he could take and heal from a physical beating like very few others. While sticks and stones couldn't break his bones, though, words could shatter his fragile mind. What Holiday saw in him was anyone's guess, but she was the only one that had ever been able to put his mind at ease.

Holiday jolted awake when the phone rang.

She sucked in a deep breath and rubbed her eyes and groaned. She turned her head on the pillow, looked at the clock, and then said nothing as she reached for the phone. She put it to her ear with her head still on the pillow.

"It's early," she said as a greeting. "Mm hmm. Yes, Sir. Um...". She propped up and looked at Justin. She either didn't know what to say or needed to remind herself that Justin was still in her bed. "Yes, he's here. Mm hmm. Okay, yes, Sir. Should I..."

Whoever was on the other end had hung up and cut her off mid-question. She hung up and rolled over. "Sartor wants you in his office."

"Me? Now?"

"Don't ask me." She closed her eyes and puckered her lips. Justin kissed her and then she flopped back onto the pillow. "It's early. I don't have to report for another hour." She made two kissing noises and was actually snoring again by the time Justin

crawled out of bed and put his pants on. He wandered out of the bunk and across the Neil Armstrong Quad to Colonel Sartor's office. He knocked and entered and found Colonel Sartor in his gym clothes behind his desk.

"Justin, sit," he said without looking up.

Justin nodded and sat across the desk. He looked at Sartor's baldhead as he looked down at the desk, reading a printout. Sartor finished the printout and then flipped to another page. After a minute, he looked at Justin.

"Staggert, apologies for the early meeting. I have an assignment for you and it can't wait. Your plane leaves in four hours out of Denver."

"My plane, Sir?"

"Staggert, you are flying to Houston where you'll hop on a direct flight to Anchorage."

Justin knew where this was headed. Anchorage. There was only one thing in Anchorage that was of any consequence to him, his brother, Bryce.

"Today, Sir? I mean, how can you... I can't leave today. I have to be here for when we turn it on."

"You don't have to do anything other than what I tell you."

"I..." he stammered. He itched his neck behind his jaw. "Am I being punished?"

"Oh Christ, Staggert, I don't need this shit from you. Is it not enough I'm bringing your brother to Juniper?"

"You're bringing my brother to Juniper? Did he apply? I mean, why? I don't really think I'm the best person to go convince him or pick him up."

"We all do what we're told. You do what you're told, and I do what I'm told."

Justin picked up the implication. He had been ordered to get Bryce to Juniper. But why? What was so special about him and his little brother?

"Is there a reason I can't go tomorrow?"

"Because I told you to go today!" Sartor exploded. He composed himself. It had been waiting to surge forth from his mouth for weeks.

Justin sat, practically shivering in his seat. He looked at his lap.

Sartor rolled his eyes. "Christ, Staggert, I'm sorry, okay, I'm sorry. My orders are my orders. The Department of Defense needs you to go get your brother and bring him to Juniper. It has to happen today. That's what I know."

Justin nodded, accepting that he would miss the initial trial of the Drive. Perhaps the biggest event in history, establishing a gravitational connection—a wormhole—to another planet, and he was going to miss it. Never mind the fact he helped design the machine and helped Juniper learn how to use it. He was being banished.

He got up, assuming he was dismissed. As he turned to leave, Sartor said, “Staggert, when you get back, let’s talk about your future here at Juniper. I’m thinking about moving you to the sciences division and pulling you out of the Destiny.”

And there it was. It was the demotion Justin knew was coming. The humiliation of being pulled not just from Team Alpha, but out of operations altogether. The guys would never let him live this down. And Holiday, what would she think? Justin nodded and left without saying a word. The truth was, he felt a weight being lifted off his shoulders. The reassignment made him happy. But not if it meant losing Holiday. He decided not to tell her before leaving, not to even talk to her about his assignment.

He just left. He had to go get his brother. That news seemed so surreal to him that he hadn’t fully processed it yet. But at the same time, he had almost been expecting it, as much as he had been expecting to get pulled off the Manifest Destiny.

He didn’t know what scared him more: seeing Bryce or telling Holiday about the fact she was now sleeping with a scientist.

Justin slipped into his room without seeing anyone from Team Alpha, packed a small backpack—this trip would be short—and took a car to Juniper’s gate where a cab was waiting. The drive down the mountain took nearly three hours, so he had to run through the airport and was huffing when he scanned his ticket to enter the plane.

Once onboard and comfortably sitting in his window seat along the wing, Justin leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Wearing his single pair of loose jeans and a plain black long sleeve shirt, Justin hoped the two-hour flight from Denver to Houston would turn out to be a short two hours. And he hoped his layover between Houston and Anchorage would be even shorter. Regardless of his chosen career field, Justin hated flying. The turbulence scared him, even though he fully understood that turbulence is relatively innocuous. The people scared him. What if someone else wants to use the armrest? Even the pilots scared him. It’s not like he had Jackie in the cockpit—fearless, trustworthy, I-can-do-things-with-a-ship-that-no one-else-can-do Jackie. These were commercial pilots. Who knew what their background was? But Holiday was right. This was worth it. This was going to change his family’s life forever.

“Welcome to American Airlines Flight 246,” the flight attendant said into the intercom. “We’re expecting the flight to be close to two hours. In a minute, we’ll be taking you through a short safety video. We ask that you please stop what you’re doing for a few short minutes and pay attention to the video to ensure our flight is as safe as possible.”

Justin closed his eyes and listened to the announcements. The melodic voice delivered through the mechanical medium reminded him of Ariana.

“To buckle your seat belt,” the flight attendant said, to which Justin heard, “Rendering the ship and your lives obsolete.” “In the case of a water landing,” she continued, but Ariana’s voice threatened. “All indications suggest imminent hostilities.”

“If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward,” Justin whispered to himself. “When thrust becomes greater than drag, then the plane will accelerate forward.”

Justin opened his eyes and felt he wasn’t alone in his moment. Rolling his head to his right, a round-faced thirty-something woman with damaged skin from too many cigarettes gawked at him, her jaw slack out of confusion.

“You talkin’ to yo’self?”

Justin clenched at both armrests and wished Kris would come rescue him. Only then did he recognize the stench of a cigarette smoker.

“Oh, yeah, when I get nervous I start reciting some equations. Sorry about that.”

Justin closed his eyes again but sensed his new friend hadn’t dropped the matter. He looked out of the corner of his right eye, hoping not to open it enough to alert her to his interest.

She noticed.

“So you talk to yo’self when you nairvous? Ha, that’s weird. Oh, and B.T.dubs, my name is Julie.”

Julie held her hand out, laden with pewter rings and polka dot nail polish. Justin considered every option to not accept her hand.

*Find the deviation.*

“I’m Justin,” he reluctantly said back, accepting her hand in his own. He was accustomed to solid handshakes, so her limp grip was actually gratifying. “Justin Staggert.” He wasn’t sure why he had told her his full name, but it had become proper habit in the military.



“Fortunately, I brought my magazines today, so I won’t be too much of a bother,” she quipped, holding up several *People* magazines. Justin nodded, attempting to convey he totally understood *People* magazine.

He looked out his window at the Denver sun peaking high over the Colorado plains. Sunlight, an eight-minute trip from its origin to earth, reminded Justin of the time he taught Bryce how a solar eclipse works.

By not verbally responding, pulling his book out, and putting headphones over his ears, he successfully told Julie he wasn’t interested in talking any longer.

“Flight attendants, take your seats for takeoff,” the captain said.

*What would Kris have said?*

Music played softly in Justin’s ears and his head rested gently against the headrest as the plane jolted forward and slowly lifted off the ground. He felt the wheels detach from the ground and then gear back into place. They were airborne. The pilot immediately began a long turn to the left, a maneuver that always alarmed him even though he understood there was more than enough lift to keep the plane in the air.

“If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward,” Justin whispered to himself. He sucked in the stale air around him as the G-forces pushed his back up tighter against his seat. He had a feeling Julie was once again squawking in his ear, but he pretended not to hear her. “If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward.”

The plane continued to rise, but the jarring sounds of Johnnie Cash in his ears overwhelmed the minor bumps as they pushed through the cloud cover. Looking out the window, he could see flickers of the Rocky Mountains through gaps in the clouds, and Denver slowly fade out of sight.

*Find the deviation*, he heard Kris shouting in his head. *But that train keeps a rollin’, on down to San Anton.*

After a half hour, once they were at a cruising altitude, Justin couldn’t have been happier with how smooth the flight was, which of course is when the turbulence began. At first the bumps were minor, likely just some headwind. They’d dissipate as they always did. But the bumps continued. And they got stronger and more persistent. The seat belt sign flicked on. The plane suddenly lurched forward and a large crack echoed through the chamber. When the plane began to shake with even greater violence, he heard Ariana’s voice say, “You have crash landed on an alien planet.”

Despite hopes that desperately clasp to his armrests and keeping his eyes shut would make the turbulence disappear, it only seemed to get worse. The whole plane began to shudder and he could hear overhead luggage getting tossed around as it tried to wrest free from the overhead bins. His body began to strain against his seatbelt as the plane seemed to hit an air pocket, which drove the nose of the plane straight up into the sky.

Finally, in a desperate act to understand what had transformed his smooth flight into a news story, he opened his eyes to assess the situation. To his disbelief, bright lights shone through the windows, making the whole plane glow red. It was as if the plane had veered off course and was flying too close to the sun. Even his armrests began to heat up, burning his hands until he released his grip. The light seemed to grab at his skin, at once pulling it from his bone before intense heat melted it back into place. He looked at his forearms and could see his skin liquefying and solidifying. His face burned and his vision blurred.

It took him a moment to realize he was the only one panicking. There were no yells of terror or children crying. No one was dialing their family members out of fear they were about to die. The passengers were quiet; stoic, even.

*Am I dreaming?*

He looked out the window again, ignoring the excruciating pain throughout his body, but the bright lights seared his eyes.

*How is this happening to me? How is my luck this bad?*

He leaned back, clasp at the armrests for dear life despite the intolerable heat. The plane continued to shake, sounding as if it was being torn apart.

*How is no one else responding to this?*

Finally, to answer his own inquiry, he turned his head to look at Julie. Surely Julie would be panicking. She couldn't shut up as is. When he saw her, though, he understood why even Julie was silent through the ordeal.

Blood was running from her nose, and her ears, and her eyes. Her eyes, though open, had rolled into the back of her head. Her tongue had seemed to swell until it protruded slightly through her lips. Her skin was bloated, as if gasses had been injected into her and allowed to expand.

Justin understood why Julie was silent. She was dead.

Justin's eyes expanded, and he once again considered the prospects he was having a nightmare. But he fought the urge to close his eyes and he looked past Julie to the passenger in the aisle seat. Like Julie, the man had blood from every orifice, and though he was fat to begin with, his skin had seemed to be bubbling off of his cheekbones.

Justin immediately began to think about Bryce. What was he doing right now? The bright lights reminded Justin of the oncoming headlights. He never should have been driving. If only he had veered to the left. It was the wrong decision.

Forcing himself to return to the situation at hand, he looked past the aisle. They were all dead. The plane was silent because Justin was the only passenger who was still able to scream.

But he didn't scream. He didn't scream because it wasn't logical to scream. And he didn't scream because just as fast as the turbulence had begun, the turbulence ended. The light through the windows returned to normal and the plane stabilized. The pain faded, leaving not a mark of evidence on his skin. The wings of the plane once again cut through the air, keeping it steady above ground.

"If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward. Head up. Eyes forward."

Justin leaned back, the armrests once again providing a suitable item to clutch. What would Captain Holiday do?

*Shee would ask me for our bearings.*

Immediately, Justin turned his head to look out the window.

For the first time of the trip, Ariana's voice was silent. Not even she would be able to explain this one. As Justin looked out the window, he saw trees that seemed to reach miles into the air. But they weren't trees. Even from his elevation, he could see that they were buildings covered in foliage. He saw pyramids and a palace the size of which he had never dreamed could exist. Beyond the buildings, he saw miniature planes flying in lines. There was a sort of nuclear reactor the size of a small mountain. Looking out into the sky, a giant rim extended along the entirety of the sky. The rim was metal and was beyond the atmosphere. Beyond the rim was a moon, a reddish world that seemed to cast an eerie red pall on the sky. But it wasn't a moon. It was a second sun.

Justin pried his eyes away from the window and looked at Julie's bloody corpse.

*What the hell is going on? Where the hell is Captain Holiday? Kris would know what to do.*

But Holiday wasn't here. Justin was on his own and he needed a plan. As he considered his options, the plane banked to the left and began a dramatic drop in altitude. If Justin didn't know any better, the plane was beginning to land. Was it landing itself?

*Maybe the pilots are still alive.*

Regardless, the plane continued its rapid descent, but descent to where? He considered that he officially had the mental break that he always thought was coming. This was a hallucination.

Justin looked out the window once again. This was no hallucination. The only things he knew to be facts were that all the passengers were dead, and the plane was on a course to land, but the planet it was landing on was not Earth. Justin was alone, and he was landing on an alien world.

He braced himself.

*Find the deviation.*

## Chapter 5 – Augustus

Augustus enjoyed walking the placid promenades of Seriam's capital, Verita. Far below the aisles of transport cruisers, he made the effort to spend at least a small part of everyday visiting with his constituents or exploring the many wonders of his magnificent home. His light blue robes hung loosely from his body, allowing his skin to feel the soft comforts of the regulated breezes of Seriam's Fall months. He had hung up his rigid black flats and wrist irons when his twenty-four-year-old daughter, Lilith, entered the world, and along with the lightness of his robes came an easing of his stern, unapologetic demeanor. His head advisor constantly implored him to at least wear the wrist irons for safety, but Augustus refused, choosing instead to trust the goodwill of his constituency.

Walking alongside Lilith and smiling up at the silhouette of the metallic Outer Rim against the red-tinted sky, he paused to allow Lilith the opportunity to get a passion juice from the artificial humanoid working the Juice Squeeze.

"Father, would you like a juice?" Lilith asked, her voice like a soothing song in Augustus' ear.

Looking from the awe-inspiring Outer Rim to the awe-inspiring beauty of his daughter, Augustus held up a hand, closed his eyes, and bowed his head ever so slightly, a gesture of decline without the harshness of a verbal no. The artificial humanoid—the AH Service series—handed Lilith a single juice and then scanned her eye with the reader in his palm. Lilith lightly tapped her right temple and the transaction was complete.

The artificial humanoid, an older model with human features designed for basic commercial functions and counseling purposes, awkwardly smiled and in a tinny voice said, "Thank you, Ma'am. It was an honor to serve the daughter of the High Governor."

Lilith's smile flickered, but she maintained her composure and touched her forehead before rejoining her father on their walk.

"You know," Augustus professorially quipped, "to most people, it would be an honor to be a member of the lineage of the High Governorship."

"Father, can't we just enjoy a walk together?"

"It's a conversation we'll need to have at some point. You're my only daughter and I've already outlived my purpose in this world. At this point my consciousness has more to offer than my presence."

Lilith took a sip of her juice and shook her head.

“I hate when you talk like that. The Council wouldn’t have allowed you to stay if you had nothing to offer. Besides, there has never been a High Governor with my...” She looked at her skin. “Even as a Steward, the Council will never go for it. The Council’s already questioning your decision to let Veneral experiment with the Explorer Program. You shouldn’t give them more fuel to question your sanity.”

“I had to give that lunatic *something* to distract him from Seriam governance. I never thought he would succeed. *And* I shut it down when he actually made some progress. And that’s important, Lilith.” Augustus stopped walking to add gravity to his statements. He took Lilith’s chin in his hand and looking directly at her said, “The Council responds to leadership. Our family has held the position for over five thousand years; the last thing they want is to break the lineage. When you walk in that room and show your leadership, they will respect your presence. All you need to worry about is if you want to accept the responsibility.”

“Father,” Lilith said, tears forming in her eyes, “you were seventy-six when you replaced your father. I’m twenty-four.”

Augustus looked at her and didn’t respond. He wished she could see how ready she already was. Even her answer was consistent with a diplomat.

“I promised I wouldn’t bring this up, so I apologize. Enough of this discussion of leadership and succession. Let’s walk and enjoy the art.”

Lilith shied her head into her father’s shoulder and together began to walk again, the crowds of people parting before them and all touching their foreheads as signs of reverence. Augustus loved her pale skin and short red hair, her green eyes and her petite body, her sarcastic sense of humor and her impassioned love for equality, all characteristics that served as a stark reminder that her mother was from Externus, and all characteristics that reminded Augustus how much he loved her.

“Now, let’s get back to business.”

Augustus tapped his right temple twice and holographic images of a round wooden table—eight individuals sitting perfectly upright around it—emerged from his Ocular Implants. As Augustus and Lilith came into sight, all the participants touched their foreheads. Augustus and Lilith reciprocated.

“Good morning, High Governor,” the man in the middle said. The man, whom Augustus had personally selected to lead his Council of Advisors, was Monty Garrison. Monty, just as the others in the room and just as Augustus, had a light, beige skin tone and

dark brown hair. Augustus recruited him directly out of the University, where his instructors gushed over his artistic capabilities and his proficiency in war strategizing. Plus, at sixty-one years old, Augustus found that he delivered vivacity to the Council of Advisors that he hoped would help springboard the acceptance of a much younger Lilith. Regardless, very few understood why Augustus gave such privilege to Monty and why he placed such faith in his top confidante. Augustus looked and spoke to Monty as much more than simply an Advisor, although no one ever understood what those sentiments entailed.

“Monty, my beloved child, how is the Empire today?”

Augustus and Lilith both stepped slowly and deliberately, granting the advisors their full and unwavering attention.

Monty looked to his right and said, “Advisor of Planetary Resources?”

“High Governor, all six Laser Infuser Plants are now wholly self-sustaining following last week’s technical hick-up in Plant 5 when it was required to fire the fusion reactors. Combined, the plants are providing 91 percent of the world’s energy needs that are not fueled by the solar capture system and the Outer Rim. Further, we don’t expect any of the governors at this afternoon’s Council meeting to report of food or water shortages; however, we have witnessed some unrest on Externus’ colonies.”

“Unrest?” Augustus asked with a smile. “What ails them today?”

The Advisor of Planetary Resources, a man that Augustus had little affection for but couldn’t help but respect for his unrivaled ability to understand the planetary system’s needs for resources, didn’t understand the High Governor’s light-hearted sarcasm.

“Sir? Ails them?”

“Why is there unrest?” Lilith asked in exasperation, her outburst causing the advisors to momentarily turn pale in fright. Augustus turned to his daughter, forcing Lilith’s Ocular Implants to accept the burden of projecting the image of the Council of Advisors, and looked at her with a look of adoration and pride.

*She’s becoming a leader.*

“Apologies, Madam Solis.” The advisor cleared his throat and then looked to Augustus. “Sir, what I meant to say was, several colonies on Externus have sent emissaries to assist with water and food, particularly as they enter the peak of their dark months.”

Augustus looked at Lilith, urging her participation.

“Our towers are flourishing; the Outer Rim has maintained a steady climate that has provided us with an abundance of water; there’s no reason we shouldn’t be able to provide humanitarian assistance.”

Augustus, ever-proud of his daughter, looked to the advisors to see what they had to say. He noticed that even Monty was hesitant to respond.

“Yes, advisors, speak,” Augustus said. “Give me your wisdom.”

“High Governor, the population of Externus has denied our offers of an Outer Rim,” Monty interjected, “they have denied our offers of guaranteed energy; we can’t reward that behavior by providing them with resources they could be manufacturing on their own means.”

“We pride ourselves on art and on culture, Monty, and yet we’re served by artificial and unnatural beings,” Augustus said. “Is it possible that Externus is the purest art form we know?” Augustus waited, but he knew Monty wouldn’t challenge. “We will of course recommend that we provide the resources that Externus requires. The last thing we need is for Externus to erupt or shut down the University.”

Augustus peered down at his daughter, who was clearly content with her father’s governance. Happy, Augustus looked back to the Council.

“Of course, High Governor, and my apologies if I offended.” Augustus held his hand up to shake off Monty’s insecurity. “Moving on, High Governor, we’ll hear from your Advisor for Health and Artificial Humanoids.”

Looking to his left, Monty gave the floor to an older woman whose short brown hair was gelled into several spikes flaring behind her, as though she was permanently running against the wind. Her left arm was skinless and robotic, and she clearly favored the arm that appeared fully human.

“Cornelia, how is the arm coming along?” Augustus asked.

Cornelia lifted the robotic arm off the table and touched all of her fingers individually to her thumb.

“It’s coming along nicely, High Governor. I’ll hopefully take some time shortly to add the musculature.”

“Excellent, just excellent,” Augustus said.

“Monty, make sure you see that she takes the time to have it done properly,” Lilith added.

“Madam Solis,” Monty acknowledged.



“High Governor, we digress,” Cornelia asserted, “our central hospitals are fully functioning and remain equipped to provide both preventative and regenerative care for the entire population of Seriam. The hospitals on Externus remain at capacity, but they have not been required to turn away care yet. Our artificial humanoid population continues to maintain eighty percent of the manual labor, with the gap coming solely from Externus. Their contribution to the day-to-day upkeep of Seriam is the primary reason that we have not had issues in providing monthly stipends to Seriam’s citizens.”

“Cornelia,” Lilith asked, “have we looked into the statistics of people receiving a stipend and continuing to work and people receiving a stipend and not working?”

“Yes, Madam Solis. Those who continue to work are predominantly in government services, sciences and technology, and art and cultural production. The outer planetary colonies continue to thrive. Those who don’t work are predominantly on Externus.”

“But to be fair, those on Externus are typically working their own fields or running community services,” Lilith responded.

“Yes, of course. I was referring specifically to publicly registered positions.”

Lilith nodded. Augustus could tell she wasn’t yet content, but was willing to drop the subject for the moment.

The two of them continued to walk and listened to the prepared briefs from the advisors for Science and Space Exploration (who insisted on going by a single name, Memnon), Transportation, Government and Judicial Services, and Education. Finally, Monty introduced the Advisor for War and Culture.

Augustus allowed Titus Circlos on his Council of Advisors for the sole purpose of keeping the First Minister for War and Culture as a loyal ally. As the head of Seriam and as a public figure, Augustus chose his words regarding Titus carefully. In private, Augustus found Titus to be a shark who slowly circled his prey before lunging.

“Sir,” Titus began, foregoing the traditional greeting, “as the First Minister will report in today’s mid-sunrise meeting, there are serious concerns with the safety net of the Outer Rim. With our extraterrestrial contact and experiments dropping off significantly, we’re losing our view into the potential threats from beyond. Our military has not been properly cared for and there is a high likelihood we would not be prepared for an invasion from a technologically advanced civilization.”

“Titus,” Augustus said, selecting his words with care, “is there reason to believe there is an imminent threat?”

“No, Sir, but there is every reason to believe we’re not prepared.”

“Titus, my family has held the High Governorship for five thousand years. We obtained the position following our first attempts of successfully exploiting an extra-solar civilization beyond this galaxy. Perhaps you should consult the Consciousness of my predecessors, but to summarize, those explorers discovered a civilization that could barely communicate with one another. We offered them culture and language and technology. It created war. So we left. Since then, we have ventured to thousands of solar systems. We’ve taken resources when possible, we’ve offered assistance when possible. At no point, though, has a culture displayed the technological or political proficiency to travel through space, to pinpoint our location, and to threaten our culture. With resources in abundance and with the Outer Rim providing planetary defenses, our need for resources and the benefits of experimenting with other civilizations no longer justify the costs of these ventures. I am glad that the First Minister is maintaining the discussion to have the requisite military, but do not pretend that we are currently under threat.”

*I’m going to be hearing about that one,* Augustus thought to himself when he finished his spiel.

“Yes, High Governor,” Titus said in a perfunctory acknowledgment.

After a pause as the advisors weighed the consequences of Augustus’ censure, the meeting continued.

“And what of culture?” Lilith asked.

“There are four new shows opening in Verita’s theaters, and the University’s annual art forum is on track for a timely display. There is a recommendation that students in the War Academy take an additional course entitled, *Thinking Through Music*, which has been argued could enhance the creative decision-making required for tactical prowess. The First Minister will concur with this recommendation.”

Lilith and Augustus both nodded in approval.

“High Governor,” Monty said, “we don’t want to impede your walk any more than we have to. Do you have any closing remarks or requests before we end this morning’s session?”

As Monty asked his question, they all heard the loud mechanical clanking of the Outer Rim as it sprung to action in the sky above. Looking up, Augustus saw the hydraulic stabilizers of the perimeter’s defenses begin to fire. Oddly, though, the Outer Rim was not aiming its weapons to the sky; it was homing in on an object inside the atmosphere.

“There,” Lilith remarked casually, pointing to the only cloud-like object in the sky.  
*How is she not more frightened?*

“I see it,” Augustus said.

As they continued to monitor the sky—Lilith and Augustus from the 68<sup>th</sup> Promenade, the advisors all huddled around the chamber’s window—the small cloud became a ball of light. Lightning began to crack from within the ball, which began to glow red. The sky looked like it was beginning to melt. It was an antiquated alignment, but it was unmistakable.

“Something’s coming through,” Augustus murmured.

“Something, what?” Lilith asked, unable to break her gaze at the sky. “How is that possible?”

“It’s not. It’s not possible. It can’t break the Outer Rim’s perimeter without consent.”

The reddish ball of light seemed to grow in size and in strength, until it suddenly diminished to a mere pinpoint to the eye.

“What happened,” Lilith asked.

“Something’s coming through,” Augustus said again.

He knew he was scaring his daughter, but he was too bewildered to focus on her wellbeing.

From the pinpoint in the sky, an object emerged. It resembled the communal transporters, only much larger. Its cylindrical shape and large wings didn’t appear to have the ability to stay afloat, but it continued to soar away from the portal.

“What is it?” Lilith asked.

Augustus, regaining the ability to focus, placed his hand on Lilith’s shoulder.

“It’s from another world. Contain it.”

The Outer Rim, assuming it worked as anticipated, should be identifying the foreign object and isolating it, taking over its flight systems. Augustus and Lilith watched as the object began to sink. The Outer Rim was bringing it in.

Augustus readjusted his Ocular Implants and looked in at his advisors. Only Monty had the wherewithal to be waiting attentively for an order.

“Monty, gather the Council. Titus?”

Augustus waited as Titus came running back to the table.

“Yes, High Governor?”

“It turns out you might have been right. Our perimeter has just been breached. Inform First Minister Veneral that I want him to oversee this himself.”

Titus nodded curtly, but Augustus had the sneaking suspicion he thought he saw the beginnings of a smile.

## Chapter 6 – Colonel Sartor

Colonel Sartor's feet remained glued to the observation deck, unable to take his eyes off of the X-40 that now sat still and placid in the empty hangar. It looked beautiful under the circumstances. Sleek and powerful and completely unknown to anyone else outside of Juniper. It looked no different than the simulators he had built for training, but now that he had seen the technology live, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they really had obtained it from an alien transmission. He had never seen anything so pure and so awe-inspiring.

The spinning negative energy drive performed exactly as designed, beaming a bright portal—presumably a gravitational connection—through the circular ring that stuck out of the front of the ship. The portal shone so bright that had they conducted the experiment at night, the world would have turned to day for miles.

Melvin Russell and Tim Thomas initiated the drive remotely from the Command Center, but members of Teams Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie were all in attendance. Most of them monitored the computers to ensure everything functioned appropriately.

“Wow,” he heard Captain Grayson Milner say.

“Justin would have liked to have seen that,” Holiday said.

“He'll get his chance,” Sartor said. “If that just worked as well as it looked, he'll get his chance very soon.”

Sartor couldn't help but smile as he turned. It worked. He had spent over a decade developing Project Juniper and its technology, and now he just witnessed the culmination. It was a day that wouldn't soon be forgotten.

“Come on,” he said, “let's go see how it went.”

The observation deck stood above the Command Center, but he allowed Captains Holiday and Milner to join him for the love show. The three walked down the stairs and through the heavy door that opened into the Command Center. When they walked in, everyone began clapping. Smiles abounded.

“Alright, people,” he shouted, “let's not get ahead of ourselves. Talk to me!”

“The deviation is holding firm,” Peter Sabien said. “Even after we shut it down.”

“Professor Hambone's theory was correct,” Melvin said. “Once locked, the deviation stays intact until...”

“Whoa, nope, losing it!” Sabien shouted.

“Until the connection is complete,” Melvin continued. “Wherever we just sent that connection, it reached its destination.”

Sartor looked at Melvin. His nervous, stuttering chief scientist was so caught up in the excitement that he forgot to be nervous. He didn’t stutter. He didn’t shy away or look at the ground. He was lost in the journey of the unknown.

Sartor nodded, trying to maintain the composure of a commander. “Tink, anything?”

“Nothing, Sir. No comms of any kind. Actually, oddly silent.”

Sartor nodded. “Anyone have any issues of any kind?”

When no one spoke, he said, “Alright, Melvin run diagnostics. Let’s make sure. Holiday, get your team in the Destiny. Let’s check it out.”

“Yes, Sir!” Holiday said. She hadn’t been thrilled when Sartor told her she sent Justin to fetch his brother, thereby missing the test run, but even she couldn’t hold back. This is why they here.

Sartor began to laugh. He had never felt the feeling before. It was a laughter of pure joy. He slapped Melvin on the back and laughed harder. In the distance, a phone rang. One of the technicians—Sartor tried to remember all of their names, but there were a lot—held the receiver up.

“Sir,” she said. “Secure call from the Pentagon.”

Sartor furrowed his brow and walked over. He took the receiver and was told to hold for the Secretary of Defense.

When the Secretary of Defense came on the line, Sartor was asked one question: had he turned it on yet? “Yes, Sir,” he exclaimed joyously. “Worked perfectly.” There was an unexpected silence from the other end of the line. He heard breathing, and then the Secretary of Defense said, “Raymond, we have a situation. Justin Staggert’s flight never arrived in Houston. In fact, it never arrived anywhere. It seems to have disappeared from the face of the Earth.”

## Chapter 7 – Bryce

Bryce Staggert danced in the ring and skipped around his opponent, who sat like a fat piece of meat in the middle of the floor. Bryce moved his head left and right, feinting punches with his gloved hands and knocking the gloves together in a display of overt intimidation. He had already landed some solid body shots on Troy the fat ass (a name Bryce shouted to try and throw Troy off his game), but Troy's stomach and extra sheets of lard distributed the power throughout the body, rendering the hits useless.

"God damn it, Staggert," Troy mumbled through his mouthguard, "step up and fight me or get out of my ring."

Bryce obliged, put his gloves in front of his face and sank into a squat to maneuver closer to Troy at a lower angle. In reality, Bryce just wanted to get hit. Bryce liked getting hit, and the rejects in his weight class could no longer deliver the blows he desired. He deftly squared up with Troy, dodged a long lumbering left hook, and then delivered a quick two jabs and an uppercut to Troy's gut. Then he dropped his gloves and stood. He saw Troy wind up and watched his right hand come in slow motion. He could have ducked. He *should* have ducked, but he let the glove smash into left eye, sending him sprawling across the mat. He could hear the *Oooooohs!* and *Holy shits!* from the crowd of Airmen. It was a Thursday morning, there were no sorties planned, and no unexpected visitors had popped up on radar, so most of the base came to watch Bryce get the shit kicked out of him.

The referee jumped over to Bryce and started shouting out the count, but Bryce popped up, relatively unscathed. He felt a drop of blood drip down his cheek from a cut near his eye even though he had on head protection. Still, as he rose, he flashed a broad smile. It was exactly the type of hit he needed, the type of hit that shook his brains enough to make his headaches go away. He felt clear, like a cloud in his mind had lifted. The feeling would last a couple days and then Bryce would be back at it. His headache remedy would probably start pulling him off base to some of the underground rings in Anchorage since not many guys on base would fight him any longer, but he figured he could just run headfirst in a brick wall and get a similar effect. Boxing was just more enjoyable.

"The fuck is the matter with you, Staggert?" Troy yelled, but Bryce ignored him.

He stepped quickly to Troy, dancing again but with a focus in his eyes that resembled a wolf hunting in the dead of night. Even with the focus, he could hear the cheers

from the crowd shift, and it was now a low murmur that got gradually louder, like a drumbeat of an Army coming into a clearing.

Bryce saw Troy again wind up, delivering two slow jabs another long hook. Bryce ducked and used the position to deliver a series of devastating blows to Troy's head. Troy stumbled back, but Bryce was on him before he could regain his footing and cracked him with two hooks and an uppercut that lifted Troy off his feet and into the ropes. The referee stepped in between them and waved his arms. Bryce turned and pulled out his mouthguard, stepped onto the ropes and roared. In response, the crowd groaned.

An hour later, Bryce sat in the locker room in a towel, having showered but waiting to get stitched up before getting dressed. The medic, Major Farley, squeezed his cut together and laced the needle between the two patches of severed skin.

"I think we might have a winner," Major Farley said. "This one is going to leave a mark."

"The hell it is," Bryce retorted. "The only reason you need to stitch it up is so I stop bleeding all over the place."

"I don't get how you heal so fast, Staggert, I really don't. It's not natural."

"Fuck off. It's just my super power. You should go check on Troy, though."

They both looked at Troy, who was laying on a bench with his eyes closed. His face was swollen and he had bruises up and down his rib cage.

"I'll get to him. Taking care of the easy stuff first."

"Maybe he'll learn to move next time!" Bryce shouted.

"Fuck you, Staggert, you piece of shit," Troy mumbled. "I want a rematch." He groaned and rolled his head to the side.

Bryce chuckled to himself while Major Farley tied off the stitch and taped gauze over the injury. "All right, you should be good. Still getting those headaches?"

Bryce glared at him.

"It's my duty to ask, Bryce. It actually is my responsibility to make sure the pilots flying F-22s are of sound mind and body."

"I feel great. Honestly. Besides, at least I can fit in an F-22 cockpit."

"You really shouldn't beat up the mechanics, Bryce. They, you know, are important. All right, I'm done, Commander wants to see you in his office."

"What? Why?"

"Don't ask me. I'm just the messenger."



Major Farley picked up his bag and walked over to Troy. Bryce wondered if the Commander was going to reprimand him for doling out too big a punishment on Troy. After he got dressed, he wandered over to the Commander's office. It was warm out and Bryce instinctively looked to the sky to check for Russian jets—he had yet to see any actually over Alaska, but had his share of run ins out in international waters—and then entered the command building. The Commander's assistant waved him in so Bryce lightly knocked and popped his head through the open door.

"Staggert, get in here," Commander Lewis said.

Bryce walked in and saw Commander Lewis sitting with two people he had never seen before, an Army colonel and an Air Force captain. The captain looked visibly shaken with a distant look in her eyes and a lack of blood in her cheeks. If she didn't look so depressed, Bryce might find her attractive. They had the television on and were watching news coverage of the airliner that went missing the day before.

"And the U.S. government has not yet ruled out an act of terrorism," the newscaster stated. "Either way, the search continues and has extended out to the Gulf of Mexico for any signs of wreckage. The question remains, what happened to American Airlines Flight 246? Let's go to Houston to hear from family members of the missing passengers."

Commander Lewis flipped off the television and sighed. "Staggert, this is Colonel Sartor and Captain Holiday. They're here to see you."

"Sir," Bryce said as a greeting. He shook both of their hands and they all sat around a table.

"That was quite the beating you took down there," Colonel Sartor said. "I'm surprised you're here on your own power."

"Looked worse than it felt," Bryce said.

"All evidence to the contrary," Sartor said quickly, pointing to the bandage.

"Just hit a blood vessel, that's all. What can I do for you, Sir?"

Sartor sat silent for a moment, sizing the boy up. Bryce was roughly the same height as Justin, but with a stocky frame and the thick, bulging biceps of a boxer. He didn't like sitting under an apparent microscope and could already feel his head beginning to compress in pain.

"Staggert, what do you know about Project Juniper?" Sartor asked.

Bryce looked at Lewis, but he offered no support or guidance.

"Sir, secret space stuff, that's all I've heard."

Sartor laughed. "Yes, that's basically accurate. And when's the last time you talked to your brother, Justin?"

Bryce furrowed his eyebrows and cocked his head to the side, trying to look at them through the eye that wasn't swollen over.

"He abandoned me almost four years ago. What about it?"

"He didn't abandon you," Captain Holiday said. "He joined the Marines."

Bryce looked at Holiday as though he wouldn't mind if she would be willing to step in the ring with him. "What the fuck do you know about my brother and what happened between us?"

"Hey," Lewis said.

"I know he's a good man who raised you when your father abandoned you," Holiday said. "I know he was coming here to see you yesterday."

"That's enough," Sartor said.

"He was coming here to see me yesterday? Why? How do you know my brother?"

"Bryce, Justin is a key member of Project Juniper. We have it on good authority that you'd also make a valuable member. We came here today to tell you personally that you've been reassigned and are to report to Denver asap."

Bryce shook his head, like shaking flies from his face. "Sir," he said to Commander Lewis, "do you know what they're talking about?"

"It's out of my hands, Bryce. This is coming from the top."

"And if I say no?"

"You're not going to say no," Sartor said. "Well, you can't say no. It's not up to you. But, trust me, if you think flying F-22s is cool, you're going to want to come with us."

Bryce took a moment to think. His head began throbbing and the whole situation confused him.

"So Justin was coming here yesterday to tell me himself?" he finally asked.

"That's right," Sartor said.

"So where is he?"

Captain Holiday immediately looked down and brought her fingers to her eyes. Bryce looked at the reaction at all three of them, trying to figure out what they were hiding.

*What's the connection to Justin? What'd that moron do now?*

And then he pieced it together. "Was Justin on the flight that disappeared?"

“Yes,” Colonel Sartor declared, seemingly grateful he didn’t have to say the words out loud.

Bryce went momentarily speechless, but then asked, “Is he dead?”

“We have no idea,” Sartor said, before Holiday quickly followed with, “But there’s no reason to believe he’s been harmed yet.”

“And is it a coincidence that he was onboard?”

Colonel Sartor and Captain Holiday exchanged glances.

“To admit if it is in fact a coincidence would suggest we knew what happened to the plane,” Sartor said.

“Do you?”

Colonel Sartor smiled and brought his fingers up to his lips. Bryce recognized his vice.

“You know, when the Voyager Space Craft was launched out into space, it contained greetings in dozens of languages, and yet, there is zero reason to believe an alien civilization would have any idea what they meant,” Colonel Sartor said.

*Jesus Christ.*

“Okay.”

“Would it be a coincidence if an alien civilization received the space craft and understood one of the messages?”

Bryce thought about this, and as annoyed as he was by the line of questioning, he was borderline intrigued.

“Probably.”

“Your brother would say probably not.”

“My brother’s an idiot.”

“Your brother’s a genius,” Holiday said defensively.

“Those aren’t mutually exclusive,” Bryce snapped, much to Sartor’s delight. “And you didn’t answer my question. Why are you talking about Voyager? Do you know what happened to the plane?”

Sartor and Holiday once again exchanged looks.

“No, we have no idea what happened,” Sartor said. “But we’re trying to find out. We’re just here today to deliver the message he was coming to deliver himself. Your brother was an important part of our team, and he was a hell of a team member. It does

seem coincidental that he was on that plane, but planes don't just disappear and we're going to find out what happened to your brother."

"I'm sorry," Holiday said. "I know this is..."

"What?" Bryce asked. "You know this is what? I haven't seen my brother in four years and now you tell me he's probably dead on a missing plane. On top of that, you tell me I'm reassigned to some science project." He looked at Lewis. "Sir, I need to be on the Raptor. I can't go babysit some, whatever this is."

"Staggert, did all those hits finally knock a screw loose? You're going. So get onboard."

Bryce turned from Lewis to Sartor and then to Holiday.

"To do what, exactly? Be the reminder that Justin disappeared?"

"You'll find out soon enough," Sartor said.

Bryce shook his head. "I don't suppose you got any fighters over there."

"Why don't you come and find out," Sartor said. "I can think of a few people who wouldn't mind taking out some of their frustrations on Justin's little brother."

Sartor motioned to Holiday and they rose.

He slid a plane ticket across the table.

"See you in a few days and welcome to Juniper."

## Chapter 8 – Veneral

*Could this finally be the response?*

Franklin Veneral stood next to his most cherished assistant, Titus Circlos, and stood in awe of the alien machinery before them. The Outer Rim had performed admirably, no thanks to the High Governor. The man wanted Verita to burn and allow the lawless citizens of Externus to overrun the serenity of Seriam, but not if Veneral could help it. Veneral personally oversaw the upgrades to their planetary defenses and could now only stand and await the increased resources surely coming his way.

On top of it all, he got to see how his incorporation of advanced artificial humanoids enhanced his security protocols. Even Augustus would appreciate the synergy of his ministries; never mind the fact he had shut down the Explorer Program.

“What is it exactly?” Titus asked.

Veneral’s lineage had assumed the role of First Minister of War and Culture when the Octavia line took the High Governorship over five thousand years ago. It was a forced power-sharing agreement after Apollo’s rebellion usurped like a snake from the shadows and toppled Gilgomosh Anonius, who lost track of the Empire’s stability while he was busy advancing the Empire’s glory. Five thousand years since the last signals were sent out after the early explorers identified blue worlds of intelligent life; five thousand years since the Octavia line shut down colonization of populated planets, effectively killing the Anonius line. The blood, though, still ran through Veneral’s veins, and as the last descendant of a long and tortuous family tree, Veneral was ordained as the First Minister nearly sixty years ago. Now he stood in front of an object that could only have been born from a seed planted before the rebellion. He began making mental talking points, his lips moving as he practiced the words in his head.

*The alien craft is the clearest example yet of the perils of apathy.*

*We can only thank the advanced technology and forward-leaning thinking of our devoted Security Battalions for the peace and serenity of our cherished home.*

*Our threats are many, but our resolve is strengthened by our unity.*

*We must respond to these reckless threats by reintroducing advanced wages for research and experimentation. We will respond in kind.*

“Sir?” Titus asked, but Veneral remained lost in his thoughts.

*This doesn't make sense, though. How could this design have come from the signal? This isn't the ship they should have designed. Could this actually be a real security breach?*

Titus' prodding pulled Veneral out of his rousing internal oratory, which he presumed would be a highlight of the historical Consciousness; itself deserving of a write up as a momentous occasion in the annals of their storied past. The speech, as it would be known, would obviously need to be framed and mounted above his place of study. The warm solar light of the month of Veneris, from which his family derived its name, only reassured his confidence that this was not random happenstance. What he didn't care for were rude interruptions by otherwise well-disciplined assistants. As he considered methods of correction, though, he knew Titus's transgression was accurate. Before he could deliver his sweeping vision for Seriam's future, he would need to identify what he was looking at.

"We're going in," Veneral said.

"Sir, may I advise against that," Titus said.

Veneral didn't bother to look at Titus' exasperated expression. He knew it was there. Titus was loyal, but as he was a bulldog in court, he was a coward when faced with battlefield confrontation. He knew Titus, in his red oversuit, was terrified at the proposition of boarding a craft that could thrust their world into war, or worse, claim both of their lives.

"Radiation levels are normal," an AH Fortis stated as it awkwardly touched its finger to its forehead out of reverence while simultaneously beaming data from its glowing red eyes for the Minister to peruse. Standing before Veneral, this particular AH Fortis carefully removed its hand from its face and began to stroll dispassionately beside him and Titus. "Known and potential threats have been neutralized."

"Good, that's good," Veneral said, making as neutral of a political statement as possible. Besides Titus, he was alone among the AH Fortis battalion, but he couldn't risk any of Augustus' or the other Governors' treacherous advisors from hearing his admission of ignorance. He glanced surreptitiously at Titus, who was smoothing his red silk blouse as he stared agape at the machine. When Titus caught sight of his blatant stare, he immediately sprung into action.

"Any idea what it is?" Titus asked, looking to Veneral for guidance on where to next direct the inquiry.

"There is no weaponry onboard," the Fortis said. "It appears to be a transport of some sort."

“An alien transport,” Veneral confidently stated.

“Affirmative, Sir,” the Fortis mechanically expressed. Even with a completely human face and body—its extremities remaining completely robotic for efficiency—Minister Romulus had yet to perfect the tone and timbre of a living being.

“AH Fortis, has the Outer Rim identified its Point of Origin,” Veneral asked, delaying his inevitable boarding.

“Affirmative, Sir, the gravitational alignment links to a small planet from a Solar System in the third quadrant, fifth plane. It is a single star system on the opposite side of the central singularity.”

*That's not possible. The other side of the singularity would take tens of thousands of years for a signal to reach, unless the signal got pulled into a space strand. That could have expedited the journey.*

“That’s near Jonas,” Veneral said to Titus, the sides of his mouth curling into his cheeks.

“How’d it get past the Outer Rim?” Titus asked, understanding that his boss wanted to push the issue.

“The Outer Rim’s initial analysis is that the gravitational alignment was activated within the atmosphere of the planet of origin.”

“They activated a gravitational alignment with the Outer Rim?” Veneral stated with too much enthusiasm.

“Affirmative,” the AH Fortis indicated.

Veneral peered up to the Outer Rim, which now was in stark contrast to the vibrant bluish-red sky of Seriam. Looking back at the alien craft, he noticed the reddish hue of the atmosphere caused by the smaller star beginning its mid-day rotation around the parent star begin to reflect light on the pavement and the white outer walls of the craft. Unlike Augustus and his morning walks, Veneral despised this time of day, much preferring the hours of darkness and early morning sunrises. He looked farther down the vacant area and saw a man in all black with two short swords across his back monitoring the situation. Jericho, as the man was known, was a Martis, the loyal protectors of Seriam and the generals of the AH Fortis security battalions and Seriam’s security details. As the High Martis, Jericho stuck his nose everywhere, and seemed particularly keen to monitor Veneral’s activities, at least as far as Veneral was concerned. Regardless, off at a distance, he was no threat and was likely just acting as a courier pigeon for Augustus.

“Alright, well let’s take a look,” he asserted, hoping someone’s Ocular Implants were recording from afar.

“Sir, can I confirm you are wearing the proper wrist irons?” the Fortis asked, exactly as Veneral had programmed it to do.

Smiling, he and Titus both held up their hands to show the Fortis their protective wrist irons, who gave a perfunctory and satisfactory nod.

Titus and the AH Fortis proceeded to trail behind Veneral as he confidently walked to the stairs of the alien craft. He paused momentarily to look at the monstrous wings and what he imagined to be a form of propellant.

*Certainly isn’t an advanced craft, whatever it is.*

Veneral’s light beige skin was smoother than almost anyone on the planet, as he chose—and was afforded the opportunity to—utilize the cellular regenerator on a near-weekly basis. Even at 130 years old, he looked not a day older than thirty-two and went to great lengths to ensure his outfits were cleaned with the proper combination of bleach and red cactus milk.

Still, he felt his body begin to sweat and wrinkles forming around his eyes. He turned once more to look at the Fortis and asked, “It’s one hundred percent safe?”

“Affirmative, Sir,” the Fortis responded. “Would you like me to proceed before you as a precaution?”

“No, absolutely not.”

That was all the goading Veneral required. Titus and the Fortis followed Veneral as he placed one foot after another on the walkway attached to the large aluminum clamps currently holding the alien craft in place. The Outer Rim had the option of leaving the vehicle suspended in a plasma quarantine, but that would have precluded any exploration. Veneral figured there was probably some sort of landing mechanism or the vehicle was permanently attached to a rotating track on its home planet, but the lack of an obvious organic solution and the futility of the plasma meant the relatively archaic clamps were the only short-term solution.

When he reached the top, he placed one foot on the antique landing platform—*Remember to consult the Consciousness, I think I’ve seen this before*—and brought himself to a stop before the opening on the side. *Could they really have figured out gravitational alignments without understanding basic physics?*



Two additional AH Forti stood as sentries at the entry of the craft, their lowered defenses giving further assurances that there was little that could harm the Minister. Veneral glanced askance at the two guards, themselves identical to the battalion leader, and was reminded of the losing battle he fought with Romulus and Monty, who both claimed that security personnel should not include unique features or characteristics. This concept, as Veneral had argued, was anathema to Seriam's culture, but Augustus used his executive privilege to elevate Romulus' and his precious assistant's "logical and well-reasoned" inputs.

Stepping past the sentries and into the first alien craft he's encountered since his time as an exploration officer in his brief but decorated military career, Veneral was immediately struck by the stale, putrid air. He contemplated turning around and insisting on a reexamination of the air content and toxicity, but stories are written through acts of bravery, not steps backward. Stifling his gag reflex, he went further, feeling Titus' presence as his assistant entered closely behind him. Titus immediately coughed, which would have annoyed Veneral if it didn't remind him to record the situation for the Consciousness. He casually tapped on his right temple and when his Ocular Implants asked him to confirm recording, he muttered, "Mmhmm."

Meanwhile, Titus was not able to shake his revulsion with one cough. "For the love of the suns!" Titus yelled in a state of fake anguish, using the infantile vernacular of his time at the University.

*Serves me right for hiring a recent graduate.*

"Not for the suns," Veneral admonished, "for Seriam." But to relate to his young and enthusiastic assistant, he turned and said, "Suck it up."

As Veneral continued into the craft, he began to take note of the defective craftsmanship he was encountering. Seriam would never rely on such poorly constructed designs and cheap synthetics to carry Seriamites, let alone through interstellar space. The bluish ground seemed to crinkle under his sandals and the plastic cabinets overhead resembled the cheap playhouses every boy and girl receives to learn about the values of community.

*Could this just be an enormous toy that got sucked into a gravitational alignment?*

Veneral felt all of his fears coming to fruition. The society had not advanced as far as he had hoped. The planet remained primitive.

*Where are the other civilizations? If Augustus wouldn't allow him to go to the planets, he needed the planets to come to him. And then this primitive craft appears.*

But as he stepped further, he realized he was not in a toy and the society was not primitive. Before him was no longer a transport, but a tomb; a coffin filled with freshly killed souls. Their skin had seemed to melt and was sliding off of their bones as the gasses of enhanced bodily decay filled the chamber.

“For the love of the suns,” he heard Titus say again, but in a far more solemn tone.

“First Minister, as you can see, most of the organisms were destroyed in transit as the craft was not designed for entrance into a gravitational alignment,” the head Fortis mechanically chimed.

Before responding, Veneral touched his forehead and bowed, the loss of life tragic but hopefully necessary. He lowered his hand to look at the scene dispassionately, trying to look past the death in order to ascertain anything of scientific significance. Turning to the Fortis, he asked, “Most organisms?”

“Affirmative, Minister.”

Looking down the long aisle separating six rows of seats in two sections of three—*separate classes?*—he saw three AH Forti creating a security perimeter around one row. All of their weapons—modified versions of the ionic burst array on the Outer Rim—were trained on one seat in particular. Veneral proceeded to the point of interest, trying to avoid touching any of the organisms. He could not, however, avoid stepping in the pooling remains of the melting bodies, which to his horror was sloshing over the tops of his sandals and onto his feet.

“Titus, please move up my scheduled appointment at the bathhouse,” he ordered.

“And arrange to have Emos give me a full regeneration treatment.”

“Yes, Minister,” Titus responded dutifully, although his mind was clearly not on preparing cleansing appointments for his boss.

Veneral continued to walk down the aisle, looking closely at the bodies that still had form. As expected, they were remarkably similar to the anatomic make-up of Seriamites, but this was common for advanced and intelligent civilizations. He could see a full spectrum of skin colors, meaning they had yet to implement a requirement to interbreed like in Seriam, and their clothing was of no particular significance. More importantly, he saw no indications of robotic enhancements. They had no Ocular Implants, no robotic limbs, and no clear signs of organ replacements. Even the craft lacked any apparent evidence that it was self-autonomous.

*Could these beings really have put a craft in to alignment without shielding and without AH piloting? Advanced, but maybe not intelligent.*

When Veneral reached the Fortis perimeter, the two nearest him separated to allow him access to the single body that survived the trip. The being appeared petrified and was whispering something that was too soft for Veneral to hear. It stared suspiciously at the Forti, shivering in the seat. If this had been any other situation, Veneral would have mistaken him for any other male Seriamite, although his pale skin would place him more accurately as a resident of Externus. He was well-built, with short brown hair and dark brown eyes. He was young, or had access to a cellular regenerator, and was handsome. As Veneral glanced at the female next to him, bleeding from all orifices but otherwise intact, he couldn't help but thank the suns and the moon that this male being was in fact alive.

Veneral took a deep breath and crinkled his mouth into a delicate smile. Touching his forehead, he said, "Hello," in Latin, which Apollo adopted as the spoken language of Seriam, replacing the root language of Aramae Glyphica.

The single word instantly made the alien stop shivering, his terrified expression replaced by one of confusion and intrigue.

Holding a hand in front of him, the alien said, "Hello," in perfect Latin.

*He knows Latin.*

Veneral smiled. His eyes lit up. He touched his temple, canceling any further recording. The Consciousness had the only part that was important. Veneral knew his fortunes were about to change.

## Chapter 9 – Justin

*If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward.*

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Justin mouthed the words silently, but could not form a sound. He glanced at Julie, his overweight and overbearing row-mate. She sat perfectly upright, but her emaciated, bubbling skin peeled and melted away from her lifeless bones. He quickly looked back at his lap, unwilling to scan the carnage any further. He stared squarely at his own thighs, hoping that by diverting his eyesight, he wouldn't unsuspectingly challenge the three cyborg-like creatures who had entered the plane and were now standing around him in containment. The creatures were terrifying; nothing like the pristine human-esque robots from the *Terminator*. Their faces were made of glass and their red, glowing eyes appeared as dead and soulless as Julie's. Their limbs, if you could call them such, were long sinewy amalgamations of metals that Justin had never seen before. It appeared to be aluminum, but the blackened colors made them appear to be burnt, like there had once been flesh, but it had been seared away, leaving only the metallic musculature of an abomination. In fact, the creatures were put together with such skill and imagination that...

*Could this be a training exercise?*

He looked at Julie out of the corner of his eye. This was no exercise, unless Ariana incorporated a powerful hallucinogenic. Justin again considered the possibility—the fact, really—that he was no longer on Earth. Juniper had provided training for such a scenario.

*Juniper is messing with me. Sartor is pushing me out and is messing with me.*

The presence of two men standing behind the cyborgs added weight that this was a training scenario. The first, and clearly the man in charge, had on jet-black, tight-fitting clothes that wrapped around his body in strips of leather and extended into a long skirt. The black leather was a clear contrast to his bronze skin tone, but his skin was pristine and his hair perfectly manicured. He didn't look a day past thirty-five, but his eyes looked cold, calculating, and ancient.

Behind him was a man smaller in stature, and though he also looked similar in age, he had the charm and confidence of a boy probably right out of college—at least if this was still Earth. His red robes were slung around his shoulders in such a way that he was possibly embarrassed of his feminine physique, and he was recording every request—

which sounded familiar, but was in such a heavy accent that it was difficult to make out—that the first man was making. He had the same bronze skin tone, but his cheeks were a light green as he fought the urge to vomit from the gore.

*If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward.*

*Head up, eyes forward.*

Justin forced himself to look up, but could only make it as far as the man's golden sandals that were now covered in red blood.

Finally, the man in black directed a comment at him.

"Hello," he said, touching his forehead.

The comment was not English, but Justin understood nevertheless. But how?

*Was that Latin?*

*Head up, eyes forward.*

Justin's intrigue got the better of him and for a moment he forgot the position in which he found himself. He was no longer scared of the cyborgs or of Julie's melting body; he was no longer frightened that he had inadvertently been transported to another world; he barely even remembered that he was alone.

Digging back to high school and his old Latin text books, he found the courage to put his hand up and say, "Hello," in what was probably a horrendous accent. Regardless, the man was clearly pleased with what he heard.

Smiling broadly, he tapped his temple and turned to whisper something to his companion, who received the message and gratefully turned to exit the plane. Turning back to Justin, the man steadied himself to give himself the best opportunity of communicating.

"You know Latin?" he asked.

Justin looked at him dumbfounded. At closer glance, the man's eyes seemed to have a red rim around the irises; some sort of contact lens. Nodding, he replied, "Yes. A little."

Satisfied with the response, he continued slowly. "My name is Franklin Veneral."

Justin nodded, understanding that he introduced himself. He wasn't sure if he fully understood the name, but introductions were at least Latin 101.

*Latin? This must be training. But what did Sartor say?*

"Hi," he said. "Justin."

Veneral's face lit up and he opened his mouth to say, "Ah. Justin. Yes. Justin, are you harmed?"

Justin shook his head, but the question unfortunately reminded him of his surroundings and the mental trauma he had just endured. He began to shake again and didn't want to look him in the eye.

"Good. That's very good. Do you know where you are?"

Justin looked suspiciously at the cyborgs before shaking his head.

"You are in the city of Verita, which is the capital of Seriam and the Seriam Empire."

This was too much for Justin who missed the majority of the statement. The man—*Franklin?*—seemed to understand and put his hands up in what was certainly meant to be calming.

"Okay. That's okay. If you can stand and follow us, we'll get you medical treatment and clean clothing."

Justin again missed most of the statement, but he understood the implication. Franklin had turned into a welcoming position.

*What would Captain Holiday do? What would Kris do? Is she watching?*

His options were limited. He could stay on the plane and likely be forcibly removed, or he could follow and play along. For courage, he could try to convince himself it was for the sake of science. This was either training or officially planetary exploration. He was to become the first human to set foot on another planet. Placing his hand on his armrest and on the seat in front of him, feeling the slime of the blood around him, he pushed himself up and maneuvered past Julie and the man sitting next to her. The three cyborgs remained on high alert, but they allowed him to pass.

Justin followed Franklin off of the plane, ignoring the gruesome scene around him, and wandered out the door. A hovering transport was waiting for them outside the landing, with the door open. The transport was a rectangular cube with thrusters from nearly every direction. The scientist within Justin was intrigued. He stepped onto the vehicle, following Franklin who had entered before him. There were no seats on board and the craft was wholly autonomous, making the need for a pilot unnecessary. Justin watched as Franklin sat into nothing. Before he fell to the ground, though, the floor, comprised of thousands of small metallic rods, shot up around him, creating a seat where there was once only air. The rods moved under Franklin's direction, knowing exactly what his next move would be.

He motioned for Justin to do the same across from him, but as Justin tried to sit, the floor remained inanimate. Catching himself before tumbling across the ship, Franklin put

his hand across his heart apologetically and, with his hand, instructed the floor to rise around Justin.

The cyborgs—six of them now—boarded around them, having no reason to believe the alien was no longer a threat. The floor snapped their robotic feet into place

The ride was short and the two sat in silence. In fact, Justin barely felt the shuttle accelerate, but could see the world moving from the windows. Franklin had a persistent smile on his face and appeared to be analyzing every aspect of Justin's body. He seemed to have no qualms about staring, making Justin wonder if his failure to make direct eye contact was actually considered rude.

Looking out the window, the light from the sun cast an eerie red pall on the world, giving Justin no indication of the time a day, or how long the day even was compared to Earth's days. Eventually, the craft pulled into a darkened hangar and locked into place with a jolt. There was no longer any visibility from the windows and Justin could feel wind blowing on his face as vents began to replace the air in the chamber.

*Some sort of decontamination?*

As soon as they came to a stop, Franklin immediately rose and, again with his hands, instructed the floor to transform Justin's seat into a bed. Justin continued to play it safe and do as ordered, laying supine on the metal bed. He began to rotate his shoulders for comfort, feeling the metal rods give way and provide support in exactly the locations he intended.

With the therapeutically constructed bed rests conforming to his head and neck, Franklin looked him up and down once more and then made a motion to the wall. Tapping his temple, all four walls flickered and vanished, opening the small shuttlecraft to a larger room replete with medical devices and equipment that Justin had never seen. As Justin tensed, the table again transformed, placing restrictive bands around his wrists, legs, and abdomen. Justin's eyes immediately widened, his face losing color as they did so. He began questioning his decision to acquiesce to Franklin's commands.

Franklin continued to smile. It was an eerie smile, meant to calm Justin, but ridden with sinister intent. Was he hatching an evil plot against his alien visitor? Was he merely trying to calm the situation? Was he hitting on Justin?

"What's happening?" Justin asked in English, before shaking it off and re-asking the question in the best Latin translation he could think of.

Franklin once again put his hands up to calm Justin. "Relax," he said. "We mean you no harm." Justin finally understood the entire sentence, but had no reason to believe it.

Several additional people entered the larger room and began to tinker with the equipment, causing Justin to begin hyperventilating and his heart rate to increase to dangerous levels. He began to struggle against the table's grasp, which just made the restraints tighten. The table even brought up additional rods as reinforcements.

Justin felt the world around him begin to go dark as his body shut down from shock. One of the doctors said something, but it was unintelligible to Justin. All he saw was Franklin, now hovering directly over him, wave the comment off with a brush of his hand.

As the brief fainting spells began to bring his heart rate back down to manageable levels, he heard a door behind him slide open. A young woman walked in. She was waving her hand in front of her as though she was pressing buttons on a computer screen, but it was invisible to Justin. She was even younger than Franklin's assistant and couldn't have been older than her mid-twenties. Her skin was lighter than the others. It had bronze undertones, but more like white skin that had seen too much sun. Her hair was short and strikingly red with little wisps of bangs hanging down her forehead. Her eyes were green with the same reddish rings on the irises that Justin had seen on Franklin.

As Justin looked at her from the tops of his eyes, she reminded him of the way his mother held herself before the accident. She would walk in a room and would command respect. It was a maternal authority that few could harness and even fewer could challenge. Whoever this young girl was, she was in charge.

Justin continued to watch her as she played with the presumed screen in front of her. Finally, though, he saw the red rings of her eyes fade and her focus move to more distant objects, namely, Franklin.

"Minister Veneral," he heard her say in a soft voice. She spoke some more, which Justin missed, but he was almost positive that he heard her say, "Why did you bring him here," and, "I'll take over from here."

Franklin, or Veneral, which was the name Justin had earlier missed, objected, but it was short and to no avail. Justin didn't understand, but in a thick accent, Veneral said, "You are the Solis, a lineage of power, not the High Governor."

The woman smiled, not allowing a hint of feeling threatened.

"I am here under my father's authority. And the Steward of power is still in power, you'd be wise to remember. If you have a problem with that, I'm sure my father would be willing to hear your grievance."



Minister Franklin Veneral—*Minister of what?*—likewise showed no glimmer of vulnerability, maintaining complete composure of his senses and emotions. He touched his forehead with his right hand and bowed his head, which the woman reciprocated in kind.

“Thank you for your service to Seriam, Minister.”

Veneral smiled, looked at Justin from head to toe once more, reviewed the security detail that the cyborgs provided, and opted to leave with his chin graciously held high.

The woman followed him out with her eyes. Whoever the Minister was, he showed no inkling of challenging the young woman, who Justin now saw was wearing the same black robes as Veneral. Once he was out of eye and earshot, the woman turned towards Justin. Standing over him, she placed a hand on his chest and smiled. It was the most beautiful smile Justin had ever seen.

“Hi,” she said in perfect and comprehensible Latin.

Justin eyed her suspiciously and partially smitten. “Hi,” he said back.

She smiled, rolling the edges of her mouth down as an expression of being impressed.

“You know Latin?”

Justin nodded.

“How is this possible?”

“I studied, uh, school.”

The woman nodded, making Justin wonder how many of the exact same interviews he would need to give.

“Are you harmed? Hungry? Thirsty?”

Justin gulped, unable to ascertain the difference between genuine hospitality and the subtle hints of a trap. He couldn’t deny it, though, he was parched. He nodded.

“Some thirsty.”

“Very good.” She looked up and beckoned one of the doctors, who were at attention for any request she made. Looking back at Justin she asked, “Are you a threat to me? I want to remove your restraints.”

Justin shook his head, praying he understood her correctly.

“I’m not danger,” he stammered, hoping he didn’t inadvertently say the opposite.

With a flick of her hand, the restraints eased and disappeared into the bed. The metal rods began to transform again, this time dropping his legs and propping his head and back up. A doctor handed him a glass with water. The material of the glass felt like ice that

had been warmed to room temperature, but had yet to melt. Justin was naturally skeptical, but he had no choice if he wanted to survive. He accepted and took a sip, at first slowly, but then too fast, allowing it to drip down his chin from both sides of his mouth. He saw the woman smile.

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

She moved her head to the side as if she was hearing someone, briefly nodded, and then tapped her temple twice. She once again began to look at something in front of her, but then wiped it away with her hand and refocused on him.

“We think,” she began, pausing to simplify her Latin, “that you traveled through space from another world.” She made a motion with her hand that Justin assumed meant to represent a space ship. Justin nodded. “It’s possible you have been harmed and don’t yet realize it. We want to scan you...” she moved her hands around his body, “...and repair where necessary. Is that okay with you?”

He took a moment to let the words register. No one seemed to be surprised that an alien just crash-landed on their planet.

*If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward.*

“Do, do you, use?” he asked.

She nodded. “Routinely. It’s healthy. Safe.”

He nodded his consent, much to her pleasure. She once again motioned for a doctor, but this time two of the cyborgs approached her pushing a floating platform. She motioned for Justin to move himself onto the new bed, which he agreed to. Once he was removed from his bed, the metal rods disappeared entirely into the original floor of the transport.

The two cyborgs, which Justin now realized all looked exactly the same, began to push him away, but he sat up abruptly and turned to look at the woman.

*Head up, eyes forward.*

“Wait,” he said in English.

She was prepared for him to speak and smiled obligingly. “Yes?”

“What, um, what’s your name?”

She smiled again, but in a different capacity than the smile she used for her official duties.

“I’m Lilith,” she said.

“Lilith. Okay. I’m Justin.”

“Hello, Justin,” she said, “welcome to Seriam.”

## Chapter 10 – Augustus

Augustus rarely called a full meeting of the High Council, which consisted of the High Governor, the seven First Ministers, the four governors of Seriam's four city-states, the governor of Seriam's island-state in the far reaches of the ocean, the governor of Externus, and the 86 governors of Seriam's planetary colonies. He had opted to postpone yesterday's meeting, though, in favor of allowing travel time for the full Council.

*And here I thought I would go out quietly. The Eternal Energy would never be so kind.*

Flanked by his daughter to his right and his loyal advisor Monty to his left, Augustus slowly paced into the Grand Hall of Gardens, which housed the many lessons and experiences of Seriam's leaders and constituents alike within the Consciousness, and stood as a symbol of Seriam's continued commitment to beauty and life. The Grand Hall of Gardens, so called because surrounding the Consciousness were the most exotic and exquisite plants produced by Seriam's venerated Growers, was originally built by Augustus' ancestors when they ascended to the High Governorship over five-thousand years ago and sat serenely at the foot of the Apollo Acropolis. The Hall was open to the public as a sanctuary to seek wisdom, with the exception of the first day after the fourteen annual solar eclipses, which were when Augustus held his Council meetings, and any day that Augustus called for an emergency session. Today was just that sort of day.

The ninety-nine participants had arrived early and awaited the entrance of the High Governor, as tradition would dictate. They had all taken their seats around the Table of Knowledge, which was a perfect twenty-meter by twenty-meter square of stone and Iron Oxide that had been harvested from a wandering dwarf star. The table currently had 102 seats, affording Augustus the opportunity to seat two honorary members as his advisors, and for all intents and purposes was nothing more than a large stone perimeter that provided half of a meter of table space for the meeting's participants. Inside the perimeter was what Seriam's inhabitants had come to know as the Consciousness.

Within the confines of the table contained a liquid known on Seriam as the Cerebral Fluid. The liquid was an ancient marvel that was discovered when Seriam first began to explore the cosmos; its exact chemical make-up ironically lost before it could be recorded. The last monarch and legendary explorer, Gilgomosh Anonius, came to understand its capacity to absorb data and mimic memories, but Apollo successfully wielded it to topple what he had deemed to be a corrupt and murderous regime, determined to use all the of the

Empire's resources to conquer and slaughter the populations of other planets. Gilgomosh's most trusted advisor, Antonius Flavius, had personally stabbed Gilgomosh with a Martis' sword, driven to madness after watching the mass genocide through the Consciousness.

Hovering above the liquid that created the Consciousness sat a small Cube that contained a diamond core capable of combining artificial intelligence with quantum computing. The Cube was able to transmit the data into the Cerebral Fluid and, working with the magnetic array that sat atop the stone perimeter, could coerce the liquid into any piece of data uploaded. Together, the Cube and the Cerebral Fluid of the Consciousness held the history and the secrets of the Octavia era.

Even after 268 years, the Consciousness and the Grand Hall of Gardens made Augustus momentarily speechless. His official residence high atop the Apollo Acropolis overlooked the Hall, but standing among the floral scents of the flowers and looking up at the sheer wonder of Verita's grandeur made him reconnect with his youth when he would finish his school work and escape his father's tight grip and run through the legs of those people that empowered his father to lead them.

Augustus was pleased to see Monty and Lilith take their seats before he did, which Lilith had on more than one occasion made clear was an antiquated formality that her father should have disposed of years ago. But perhaps she was heeding his advice and didn't want to display any sort of immaturity that the Council could object to. Augustus stood behind his chair to personally look each person in the eye. He was continually bemused how his governors adopted the fashions of their planetary cultures, but it would border on hypocrisy to question Tomas Garthia's choice of fine green silks that could only be produced from the Prairie Slug of the Pliesastic System, or to ridicule the amount of Delaney Alabaster's visible skin at a meeting of sophisticated culture when her appearance was developed by enduring the overbearing heat of the Calorin Moon in the Samastin System. Besides, all 92 governors were rightfully elected by the High Council for their untarnished records of achievement and their unrivaled dedication to the Seriamite Empire. After their mandatory University years and required governmental service, they had all opted to continue in service to the empire when their peers had taken more lucrative positions as Growers, Explorers, Scientists, Artists, Military Officers, and Engineers. His handpicked ministers were not allowed such leeway, but they still maintained their individual personalities that Augustus knew were required to successfully guide and steer Seriam's future.

Augustus touched his forehead and bowed with reverence, to which the table's members responded in kind. Augustus assumed the seat between Monty and Lilith facing North away from the Acropolis. As he sat, he saw Monty tap his Ocular Implants and begin to type on the blank stone table. Almost immediately, dozens of AH Servers began to place sweet nectar juices in front of the Council members, although Augustus was beginning to question the wisdom of banning distilled alterations or vinum.

Once Augustus had taken a sip of his juice, which tasted like a combination of the cambata fruit and the orange fruit, he placed his left hand on the stone table directly in front of the magnetic perimeter and with his right hand delicately removed a small, circular storage chip from behind his ear. He placed the chip onto the magnetic perimeter, which parted ever so slightly to accept it into its infrastructure. The stone table under his hand began to glow red. When the glow dissipated, Augustus removed his hand, but his handprint continued to glow a dull black with small veins extending from his fingertips into the magnet. Satisfied, he looked up, nodded, and watched as the remaining 101 individuals followed suit. Small ripples began to permeate as the Cube began to translate the memories that the Cerebral Fluid had ingested. The ripples turned larger and the fluid eventually exploded into images of the past days since the last eclipse. The fluid churned out images of planets and art and mathematical equations. In one image, a memory belonging to Antipeter Florencia, Augustus was sitting in a large coliseum watching a live action reproduction of the death of Claudia, the last time a High Governor had been assassinated.

Finally, the maelstrom of images simmered and the Cerebral Fluid returned to its perfectly flat and placid surface, save one image. In vivid color, the High Council was receiving a glimpse into Augustus' view of the alien craft emerging from a gravitational alignment. The colors flashed exactly as Augustus remembered and the Outer Rim, in the background of the image, began to spring to life. Augustus looked over to Veneral and Raze Anders, his two ministers responsible for the continued operation of the Outer Rim. They both looked content. Veneral broke away from the memory and out of the corner of his eyes looked at Augustus, who thought he saw the faintest of smiles from his peculiar minister.

*If only he didn't come from royal lineage. I'd have that man thrown to the bowels of Externus before he knew what hit him. Maybe Monty could replace him as the minister.*

With a flick of his fingers, Augustus made the memory disappear and, in its place, came Veneral's memory of entering the alien craft. The Council began to gasp with horror

at the unsightly images of blood and death. Small whispers began to percolate the Hall as they witnessed Veneral and Titus wading through the gore of the transport. Augustus knew that whatever unrealistic dreams he held onto of replacing Veneral were quickly evaporating as his actions were elevating his status from minister to legend.

All whispering ceased, though, when Veneral stopped in front of a man, who looked and felt as any Seriamite might appear. And then it happened. He spoke. But he didn't only speak. He spoke Latin. He spoke the language that created the foundation of all of Seriam's art and culture and science. He spoke the language that had been used throughout Seriam's communities for millennia. It wasn't Aramae Glyphica, but in a way it was even more surprising. Aramae Glyphica was the language spread through the cosmos. Latin had been a creation of the gentiles. Either this alien had tapped into Seriam's current language, or it had made the same progress over time. Both possibilities had frightening implications.

Some of the governors screamed. Others were fascinated. Some were too stunned to allow any emotion to disrupt their otherwise stolid countenance. But when Augustus flicked the memory away, all their eyes fell onto Veneral, who sat a little straighter and projected a superiority over the room that had never before been afforded to him.

"Ladies and Gentleman of the High Council of the Seriamite Empire," Augustus said softly, feeling no need to extend his vocals beyond his typical mild tone. Even with the spacious table spreading the participants out virtually beyond earshot, the enormous ten-meter tall sound stones standing hollowed and erect at each corner of the table captured every noise and projected it throughout the Council. There were far greater technologies than the three-thousand-year-old stones, but Augustus never had the inclination to upgrade. "As you are all aware, an alien craft has emerged from a gravitational alignment from another world. We can sit here and discuss the security failures of the Outer Rim, and we can easily hold wide-ranging debates to assign blame. At this juncture, however, I choose not to pursue those avenues."

Once again, his comments stirred the deafening whispers of the meeting's participants, several of whose judgmental eyes fell upon Veneral and Anders. They clearly were not as convinced that sidestepping blame was the clear choice.

"Augustus, you can't expect us to overlook these infractions," the governor of Planet Jurisdiction hissed in his renowned deep baritone voice. The governor, Constantine Platt, spent his whole life on Jurisdiction and was known to hate his required trips to Seriam, but as

Jurisdiction was one of the only planetary colonies that sat within a Solar System containing other life-harboring planets, security was his number one priority.

"Governor Platt," Augustus responded, "your opinions are as highly valued as any at this Council. What we've encountered, though, is an interstellar gravitational alignment. The threats you endure by virtue of vicinity is no greater a threat than a colony in the farthest planes of the galaxy."

Augustus raised his right hand as though he were physically lifting an object out of the air. The Cube responded to his guidance and began to forge an image out of the Cerebral Fluid, delicately crafting a perfect reproduction of the planet Seriam that slowly turned in front of the Council.

"Someone do me the honor of identifying."

When no one responded, afraid of the simplicity of the inquiry, Monty fulfilled his duties as key advisor to the High Governor.

"High Governor, that would be Seriam."

"Thank you, Monty, but as far as I'm concerned, you're wrong. This planet is the center of Seriam. This is the beginning of Seriam. This is where our species began. But this is not Seriam." Augustus rose and with a swoop of both of his hands the Cerebral Fluid erupted like the Fountains of Reluctor, splashing the 88 worlds of the Seriamite Empire before the Council. "This is Seriam. The one galaxy, the central singularity, the nine quadrants and nine planes. The 88 worlds, planets, moons, colonies. The 248 billion inhabitants. This is Seriam. This is what we have spread to. I want you all to look at this empire that we have created and sustained. Within this galaxy, over the past twelve thousand years, we have explored millions of life harboring planets, offering our technology and our culture to intelligent civilizations. Two facts have remained constant: evolution always ends with human beings and human beings always kill themselves off. We tried to teach them, but our technology only expedites the damage. This is what's at stake. This is why our empire is so valuable and why it's so important to stunt that growth before we destroy ourselves under our own weight. I won't concern myself with who should have done what, only with what needs to be done now." Augustus' tirade, if it could even be called as such, effectively squelched any further debate. Instead of retaking his seat, Augustus began to walk along the table. "I would now like to bring our attention to Minister Veneral for comments on what he has been able to elicit thus far."

"Thank you, High Governor, your equanimity at times of such turbulence is an



exemplar of leadership," Veneral doted. "Governors and Ministers of the High Council, I will attempt to keep my statement brief."

Augustus found himself rolling his eyes as he paced around the corner of the table.

"The Outer Rim identified the origin of the gravitational alignment as planet 35-Solar 3."

"Why do I know that planet?" Delaney Alabaster asked, her revealing clothing making her voice sound borderline seductive.

Veneral gulped as Delaney clenched her jaw in anticipation of the answer. It was a rare occasion when Veneral was caught off guard, Augustus knew, preferring to hide his thoughts until the proper moment. Delaney had that effect on several of the male participants, though, to include Governor Infensus Barbas of Simia Magna, who sat silently but lusted openly.

"Governor Alabaster, we all know that planet from our studies," Veneral said. "35-Solar 3 was a failed experiment at advancing an already intelligent culture. The species was unable to grasp the concept of alien visitors, continually deifying our very existence. The technology we offered was used as instruments of war. Our continued presence on the planet threatened to destroy the species instead of advancing it, which would be in direct violation of the Apollo Treatise for Planetary Colonization."

"It would appear the experiment wasn't such a failure after all," Augustus quipped, retaking his seat now that the conversation had truly begun.

"Not necessarily, High Governor," Raze Anders said. Raze was a trusted voice on the Council, particularly for Augustus. Everything about Raze was plain and normal, from his bronze skin to his drab haircut, characteristics that bore a stark contrast to the ornate and at times flamboyant fashion of Veneral. Like the High Governor, Raze went without wrist irons and had even argued that Ocular Implants should not be permanent, beliefs that brought him closer to the morals of Externus.

"Explain that please," Augustus commanded.

"High Governor, the experiment very well could have been a failure, but the culture itself might have progressed on its own. The lesson might be that a culture needs to progress and decide its own fate independent of outside influence."

"Balderdash," Veneral chided. "Such rubbish has no place under the presence of our stars or the Eternal Energy, let alone at this table."

Such outbursts were uncommon at the High Council, especially from one of the High Governor's own ministers.

"Careful, Franklin," Augustus warned.

"High Governor, to deny the benefits that Seriam's influence can have on a society is an affront to Seriam and blasphemous to you and this Council."

"I have a feeling the societies that bore the brunt of mass genocide at our hands would beg to differ," Lilith said, putting a smile of proud satisfaction on her father's face.

*Be strong. They respond to strength.*

"Enlighten us, if you will, why you are so adamant that Raze's comments are balderdash," Lilith directed.

"Madam Solis, your opinion is wise as it is strong. Respectfully, are you implying the species of 35-Solar 3 progressed independently of our influence, attained the capability of interstellar travel, and randomly aligned with our gravity out of the billions of planets of the galaxy?" Embarrassing Lilith, the potential High governor or at minimum the Steward of Power, was fraught with danger, but the potential benefits outweighed the risk.

*Walked right into that. I can't come to her assistance now. Be strong.*

Lilith gulped.

"I believe Madam Solis is implying..." Tomas Garthia began.

"I believe I can best explain what I was implying," Lilith harshly interjected.

*Good.*

"Madam Solis," Tomas said as an apology, touching his forehead and bowing.

"Minister Veneral, I am not implying one way or the other that I know what happened to the species of 35-Solar 3, how that species progressed and how they ended up sending a transport to our planet. I am not going to pretend to understand how this being knows Latin or why he alone survived. *I am*, however, saying that as a man of science, you would be wise to not rush to judgment or assumption without obtaining the requisite facts to make such comments."

Augustus looked around the table to nodding heads of consent.

"Very good, Madam Solis," Veneral said sheepishly, knowing that his momentary advantage over Lilith had disappeared.

"Which leads to next steps," Augustus said. "We have decisions to make. There appears to be no direct threat from the craft. We have scanned and imaged the technology. We are monitoring the planet for further alignments, but there is indisputably a fully

developed end point connected to the Outer Rim. What we need to decide on is if we initiate contact and what we do with their deceased.” Augustus tapped the table in thought before stroking his smooth cheeks. “I open the floor for free discussion.”

“Augustus,” Jonas Domitius said, his status as a new governor granting him the audacity to call the High Governor by name. “As I’m sure Constantine would agree, we must consider security. Can we monitor the world without allowing them the knowledge of our existence?”

“They know we exist to some capacity, no?” Augustus asked.

“The deceased deserve a proper burial,” Fabian Octavius atypically exclaimed. As the governor of Externus, Fabian was wont to honor Externus’ traditions.

“Burial here?” Veneral asked, exasperated.

“And if we send them back?” Lilith asked.

“Then we might as well send them a proper message,” Constantine uttered.

“Not necessarily,” Augustus said. “This craft was not intended for space travel. This was likely unintentional. Sending them back has risks. But maybe it’s appropriate. At worst, it’s a gesture of peace.”

“And the boy?” Monty asked as a purely administrative function.

“He stays,” Veneral said, perhaps a bit too eagerly for Augustus’ comfort.

Augustus flicked his fingers and an image of Justin jumped out of the Cerebral Fluid.

“Lilith,” he said, “you had time with him. You conducted his tests. What do you think?”

“The boy is like us in almost every way. His anatomical make-up, the length of his planetary year, his ability of intellect. We have isolated and destroyed any bacteria that could cause our population harm. We are giving him supplements to introduce our own bacteria into his system. With that said, if we send the craft back without him, there will be two opinions: he was the cause of the death, or he has been kept by an alien world.”

“The latter could lead to hostilities,” Veneral interrupted.

Lilith ignored the outburst. “There’s more. Scans show he has a neurological processor implant. It’s an old design, but it works.”

This drew more gasps from the Council.

“A neurological processor implant!” Veneral said aghast. “High Governor, that settles it. This boy has direct link to the heart of our empire. In fact...” Veneral trailed off. Augustus could see he was reluctant to say more.

"In fact, what?" Augustus asked.

"In fact, that could be proof that this planet acquired and exploited the final Anonius transmission."

This created more than just a stir from the governors. This was blasphemy. The early explorers of the Seriam Empire traveled thousands of light years in hyper sleep to establish end points for gravitational alignments that allowed for rapid interstellar travel. These explorers attempted to incorporate intelligent civilizations into the Empire, but frequently caused mass suffering and the destruction of entire civilizations. The final Anonius transmission sent hundreds of signals throughout the galaxy in the hopes that established civilizations could build their own end points and make contact with the Empire of their own free will. The transmission was the final straw in a program that used all of the Empire's resources. The people, led by Apollo Octavia, rebelled. Nothing came from the transmission up to this instant.

Before Augustus ordered Veneral thrown into restrictive wrist irons and removed from his position, Lilith spoke. "Reckless conspiracy theories aside," she said to the table's laughter, "my opinion after spending time with him is that while the observations could be invaluable, it is inhumane to keep him here against his wishes."

Augustus looked at his daughter, beautiful as ever.

"A fine plan, High Governor," Veneral said. "But let me caution, he will go back and tell his intelligent civilization what he has seen. This will lead to further incursions. This will be a threat to our Empire. Being so close to an inhabited planet, I know Governor Platt agrees. At a minimum, we should keep him here and reestablish the experiment as intended by Gilgomosh."

The word seemed to echo a bit louder off of the sound stones.

*Reestablish? Gilgomosh?* The outburst seemed so beyond reckless that Augustus considered Veneral's ulterior motives.

"I am allowing dissent, however foolish it may be," Augustus said, "but I vote we send the bodies back. There is no threat here. This does not change our laws. We put a block on the alignment. We do not pursue further contact with this civilization, in accordance with Seriam laws."

The silence affirmed his orders.

"And the boy?" Raze asked, his flat hair seeming to lose whatever volume it had by asking the question.

Augustus sighed and looked at his daughter. This decision was tricky. Augustus knew he had to strongly consider the suggestions of his First Minister of War and Culture. To ignore it, even though he knew in his heart he shouldn't keep an innocent man a prisoner, he would need a strong reason why. He had taken away Veneral's Explorer program and this could be a new project to keep his treacherous First Minister occupied. And really, what was the harm? He had a good reason—security—and even Lilith acknowledged there would be scientific benefits. He looked at Lilith and sighed.

“My daughter, your wisdom is infinite, but in this circumstance, I am deciding to keep him here, *for now*. Interested in some more tests?”

For the first time in his life, Augustus took no joy in seeing his daughter feign a smile.

## Chapter 11 – Colonel Sartor

Colonel Sartor moved his brush slowly along the neck of Stargazer, his four-year-old, golden brown mare. The horse softly whinnied and rubbed her cheek on his shoulder, completely melting at Raymond's touch. They only had Stargazer for about six months now, but she immediately fit into the four-horse stud that the Sartor household had compiled, and she had already gotten chummy with Birch Township, their six-year-old American Quarter Horse. Sartor had fought tooth and nail to prevent Amanda from buying a fifth horse, but she insisted, saying he needed a horse of his own to understand the love and joy they bring her. Much to his chagrin, she was absolutely right. Colonel Sartor relished the opportunity to care for Stargazer, and their long weekend rides provided the necessary centering to Sartor's otherwise chaotic world.

"Starting to feel better?" Amanda asked him as she worked on sorting out shoes for the horses.

Sartor heard her but didn't respond, continuing his long brush strokes along Stargazer's neck.

"Raymond, don't tune me out," she said. "What aren't you telling me?"

Amanda might have been married to a Colonel in the U.S. Army, but there was only one commander of this household, as she learned from watching her mother deal with her father, who was also a Colonel, albeit retired.

"There's a lot I'm not telling you," Colonel Sartor remarked dispassionately, not allowing his wife anymore insight into his thoughts than he would one of his soldiers. "You know I can't talk about my work."

"Raymond, you know exactly what I'm talking about, and you know I'm not asking you about your work."

Colonel Sartor nodded softly in acknowledgement, allowing his hands to fall to his side as he resisted the urge to continue brushing Stargazer's neck. He patted her twice and then turned to admire his wife. They had met twenty-four years ago when Amanda accompanied her father to an Army advancement ceremony where Sartor and twelve others were being promoted from Lieutenants to Captains. They were married exactly one year later, and she proceeded to spend the next twenty-three years trying in vain to convince him to retire. It's something he never reciprocated in regards to her choice of careers. As he watched her hammer a shoe onto Birch Township, he knew that being a third-grade

teacher and an after-school horse therapist for troubled youth suited her perfectly. But what she would never understand is that despite the stress it induced, being the director for Project Juniper suited him perfectly as well.

“The missing plane concerns me, that’s all.”

“Any reason it would concern you any more than it would concern the other seven-billion inhabitants of this planet?”

“One of my guys was on board.”

At this new revelation, she stopped her work mid-hammer and stared suspiciously at her husband. The words she chose, “Oh, Raymond, I’m so sorry,” did not match her obvious awareness that nothing in her husband’s world was coincidental.

“Yeah,” was all he could muster.

“No wonder it’s been weighing on you.”

“Yeah.”

Amanda allowed him to think about things for a moment, but eventually said, “So do you have any other “details”—she made quotes with her fingers—about the plane? It’s kind of strange it just disappeared, right?”

“It’s unfathomable, actually. And it’s not like it’s in the ocean, you know?”

Amanda nodded and moved to finish putting the shoe on.

“What’s your theory?”

“Oh who knows,” Colonel Sartor light-heartedly remarked. “Hell, maybe it got sucked into a wormhole and landed on some alien planet.”

Amanda rolled her eyes and watched as her husband began to hang his brush on the wall outside the stables.

“Odd time to crack your first joke of the year, Raymond. Not to mention, as much as I love you helping with the horses, your phone isn’t going to stop ringing until you actually answer the calls. Maybe one of them can confirm your black hole theory.”

“Wormhole.”

“You say wormhole, I say black hole. Get your bald head in the house and figure it out.”

Smiling and remembering why he fell in love with his wife in the first place, he said, “I thought you were going to make me breakfast and let me read the paper.”

“Raymond Sartor, get your ass in the house. Breakfast will be waiting once I can see you’re satisfied with your progress.”

Raymond offered up none of his quintessential perfunctory glances or head nods, to which Amanda would have simply told him to wipe that smirk off his face. Instead, perhaps wisely, he silently complied, removing his old trucker hat and wiping the sweat off his head as he reluctantly trudged out into the sun.

The Sartors owned a sizable plot of land in Loudon County, but the stables were only a short distance from the main house. The house was nothing to write home about, but it certainly was nothing to scoff at, either. A farm in Loudon County was the compromise to live in the nation's capital. Raymond wanted a big house. Amanda wanted horses. Anything beyond their area was simply too far away. They took great effort to landscape the property, and the stone pathway from the stable entrance to the screened in patio off the white-walled kitchen made the short hike uphill a little bit easier than simply trudging through the damp grass and mud that the annual downpours would bring each summer.

Once he was out of sight of Amanda, he took a single cigarette out of his pocket and lit it, inhaling the smoke as if were the very elixir of renewed life. He turned to the barn once to make sure Amanda wasn't watching, took a second drag, let the smoke sit unburdened in his lungs, and then tamped the cigarette out on the porch railing before heading inside.

Once inside and his hat properly placed on the coat rack by the door, Colonel Sartor wound around the family room, down three steps to a lower hallway, and into his study, which had an austere desk—hand-built from the white birch trees growing on their property—and a computer. The walls were adorned with a visual timeline of his career. His Bronze Star for the first Gulf War sat next to an engraved photo of the Pentagon, signed by every member of his team in the Joint Chiefs of Staff where he worked as an Executive Officer. And his medal for Exceptional Service—achieved by helping to institute cutting edge drone technology in the nineties—sat gathering dust next to his PhD in physics from MIT. And next to his autographed Neil Armstrong 1969 Time Magazine cover of the first man to walk on the moon was his 1995 Atlanta Braves World Series Pennant—signed by the whole team of course.

It wasn't his fond memories he needed to consult, though. He needed to feel remorse. He needed to be reminded that mistakes have consequences; collateral losses are no excuse for human and technological advancement.

He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a manila folder. Opening it, he began to peruse the newspaper clippings it contained.



The Malaysia Airlines disappearance.

The Air France crash.

The Columbia disaster.

The Pan Am crash.

The Challenger disaster.

The Apollo 13 explosion.

The Apollo 1 fire.

These were just a handful of the nightmare scenarios he had filed away. These said nothing about war or famine or natural disasters. These were manmade issues that came to the fore during forays into flight. These were the incidents he read about in the comforts of his house in Virginia—thousands of miles away from the Juniper campus in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains—to remind him that the decisions he made impacted lives. These were the events that were snaking their way through his mind, like the darkness created by the black smoke of a fire, that were convincing him that he had messed up. If initiating the X-40's Negative Energy Drive didn't directly cause the disappearance, a scenario he knew meant the horrific death of all passengers on board, then it somehow played a roll. If only he had told Justin to stick around for one more night, he would still have his Team Alpha navigator. But it wasn't his decision. He had merely followed orders. Orders from the Secretary of Defense himself...

Colonel Sartor shook the thought out of his head and stuck the manila envelope back in the drawer. He pulled out another cigarette. Amanda would whip his hide raw if he lit it in the house, so he put it under his nose and breathed in deeply, attempting to draw the nicotine out with sheer will power. Satisfied to the best of his expectations, he stuck it back in his pocket and picked up a stack of sticky notes that Amanda had used to take down messages. He began to flip through them to see what he had been avoiding.

**Jack Taylor from NASA called. Call immediately.**

**Colonel Smith from NORTHCOM called. Call immediately.**

**White House Press Secretary calling for comment. (Missed the name).**

**Taylor again. Says it's urgent.**

**Please call Jack Taylor. (What exactly do you do again?).**

**Colonel Smith again. He doesn't seem very nice.**

**Captain Holiday called.**

**She Wang called. Says he has something you might want to see. (Is that a real name? Maybe a prank call.)**

Sartor stopped reading and put the notes down. Xi Wang was his counterpart in the Chinese military who led efforts on advanced technology. A call directly to his house was either sanctioned by the Chinese, or he was way outside his bounds of regulation.

*Do I need to report that? I should probably clear that before reaching out.*

He placed the yellow sticky note on the corner of his desk, out of sight of his current priorities, and returned to the first message.

Jack Taylor.

Jack Taylor was the Deputy Administrator of NASA and tended to handle the more difficult tasks that his boss didn't want in the public eye. He was everything Colonel Sartor wasn't. Where Sartor came off as aloof, Jack was abrasive. Where Sartor kept his thoughts to himself and often appeared to be silently weighing the costs and benefits of every move, Jack talked through his line of reasoning, frequently revealing every card in his hand and even turning over the whole deck. He was garrulous and gregarious, talking to everyone he could as though they were old chums, which frequently got him into trouble.

Unfortunately, there was only one reason that the deputy administrator of NASA would be calling the Director of the Top Secret world of Juniper: he was going to inquire if he knew where the plane was.

Sighing, Sartor dialed the number that had been left for him. Saturday or not, Jack would be at work.

"This's Jack," Taylor said before Sartor even heard the first ring. It was a direct statement, as though the caller was not intending to reach Jack Taylor.

"Jack, it's Raymond."

"Raymond! Everyone loves Raymond, ha! I was beginning to think you were on that God damn plane, I'll tell ya what."

"Yeah, sorry, just got the message."

"Which one? I left about sixteen of 'em."

"What can I do for you?" Raymond asked, ignoring Jack's alleged allegation.

"Raymond, it's been four weeks. Where the fuck is that God damn plane? And don't tell me you don't know. I know you secret squirrel assholes have got something to do with it."

"What exactly are you implying?" Sartor replied calmly.

"I'm implying that you secret squirrel assholes have got something to do with this missing plane." Sartor heard Jack roll his chair around his office and ruffling papers, tackling three or four things from his agenda at once.

"Why would NASA care about a missing plane?"

"300 Americans disappeared. I'm just a concerned citizen."

"Well, as a concerned citizen, let the experts handle it."

"Ha! Ah, Raymond, I love when you get feisty. You're like my creepy uncle at Thanksgiving who silently hears everything and then drops truth bombs!"

Sartor sighed again, realizing this was a waste of his time. NASA would not be able to provide him the answers he was looking for.

"Always a pleasure talking to you, Jack."

"Raymond," Jack said in about as serious a voice as was possible, "rumor on the street is you initiated full sequence. Tell me I'm wrong for thinking about the possibilities." Sartor sat quietly. He had no good response. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

"We're working on it," Colonel Sartor said, trying to regain some form of composure.

"Yeah. Well, when this is all over and done with, you're giving me a tour of this so-called X-40."

"I thought we had an agreement, Jack. NASA worries about the Solar System and finds habitable star systems, Juniper handles the way to get there."

"Yeah, and did Juniper just figure out how to send a plane full of Americans to some remote region of the universe?"

"We're working on that."

"It's time we get on the same page, Raymond. Schedule a visit for us."

"Right."

At that, they hung up, allowing Colonel Sartor to move right into his next call, Colonel Smith. But before he called NORTHCOM and opening himself up to a full-on interrogation, he decided to check in with his science department.

*It's been four weeks. They better have some fucking answers.*

Colonel Sartor knew this number by heart, and dialed it without a second thought. As expected, the phone rang six times with no response, finally triggering an automated message informing him he had reached a University of Colorado hotline. Unfazed, Sartor kept the phone to his ear while he re-queued the tone, hitting redial three times before a man on the other end decided to pick it up.

"Huh, hi, hello, hello," Melvin said out of breath and overwhelmed.

Colonel Sartor smiled to himself. Hearing Melvin's nervous stutter brought him immediate comfort and made him feel at home for the first time since he had left Juniper two weeks prior to attend daily meetings in Washington.

"Melvin, what'd I tell you about answering the phone?"

"Uh, Colonel Sartor, uh, Sir, hi, I wasn't expecting your call."

"I'm very aware of that. Do you remember what I told you about answering the phone?"

There was a pause before Melvin began to speak away from the receiver. "Dr. Thomas," Colonel Sartor heard vaguely, "what'd Colonel Sartor say about the phone?" Colonel Sartor didn't hear the response, but Melvin finally relayed, "We'll be better about answering it."

Colonel Sartor couldn't fight off an uncharacteristic grin and even found himself with a tear in his eye.

"Very good, Melvin. Melvin, give me some good news. I need something, anything. You've had four weeks now. What went wrong?"

"Uh, well, Sir, hmmm, to be honest, it doesn't appear anything went wrong."

Colonel Sartor sat up straighter and cracked his persistently stiff neck.

"Explain that. How can that be?"

"Sir, the Drive worked perfectly, but it's possible we made an error in calculations."

"It's possible? What error did we make?"

Colonel Sartor took out a pen to begin recording the response.

"Well, uh, we created a gravitational connection through the anticipated deviation, but somehow the ship didn't enter. And since we opened the connection inside our atmosphere, it..."

Melvin cut himself off, unwilling or too uncertain to continue.

"It scooped up the first object it came in contact with," Colonel Sartor said, completing the thought.

"To put it simply, Sir, yes. And the X-40 stayed in place."

"How does the Drive that's connected to a ship create a gravitational connection and then not enter it? That's a pretty big fucking oversight, Melvin."

He heard Melvin gulp. There was no reason to yell at him at this point. Those two doctors were the only two men on Earth that could build such a device, and they were certainly the only two that could figure out what went wrong and how to fix it.

"Yes, Sir, it was."

Colonel Sartor sat silent, choosing how to carefully continue haranguing Melvin without permanently flustering his chief scientist. He heard Melvin nervously ruffle some papers. It still didn't make sense.

"So you really don't have the first clue? And Justin is gone. He's probably searching for a deviation."

"He was a good navigator."

"Yes," Colonel Sartor reluctantly agreed.

"Sir, apologies, but can I ask about the fate of Navigator Staggert?"

Colonel Sartor's face reddened and he dreamed of the day Juniper developed the capacity to reach through a phone to strangle the man on the end of the line.

*Maybe some form of quantum teleportation.*

But Melvin meant no harm. Melvin's question was the genuine compassion of a man who cared, and the sheepish sentiments of a man who knew he was partially responsible for a colleague's demise.

"Justin is dead, Melvin. Just like the other 301 passengers."

"It's just, we had him scheduled for an appointment on Monday to join the Science Division. I suppose it'd be appropriate to now cancel that."

"I suppose it would be." Sartor leaned back, his skin and back stiff from too many cigarettes and stress and bottled up emotions. "Melvin, I'm going to be back on Monday. We can't let this set us back. Let's plan on reigniting the Drive installed on the X-40. I'll let Captain Holiday know her team needs to be prepared."

"Sir, I'm hesitant to start it up. Our calculations were right. It's possible we don't fully understand how the process works."

"Just talk to Holiday," he sighed.

At that he hung up, opting against any typical formalities. Monday gave Sartor a day and a half of relaxation with Amanda. He considered calling Colonel Taylor, but Lord knew that could wait. Thinking his task was easier than he expected, he began to push himself out of his seat. But as his legs began to creak and groan and straighten, he paused when he saw

the note reminding him to call his Chinese counterpart. Now of all times it was important to maintain those relations.

Picking the phone up one last time, he decided to skip protocol and call his old friend in China. It was a little past ten in the morning, so it would be well past dinnertime for Wang, but he figured Wang wouldn't mind considering the urgency in the message.

Sartor pulled out a quick guide to dialing overseas numbers and put in the necessary codes. After a pause of a few seconds, the phone began to ring.

"Ni Hao," he heard after one ring.

"Yeah, hi, Colonel Wang?"

There was another momentary pause.

"Colonel Sartor?"

"Yes. Apologies for the delay, I just received your message."

"Colonel Sartor, you need to get to Shenzhen."

Sartor sat up a little straighter. "Why would I come to Shenzhen?" he asked.

There was a pause. *A hesitation?* "Colonel, we have your plane."

Colonel Sartor went white and his mouth went dry. What was he saying? Did China take the plane? Was this an act of war? Is Wang goading him or is he defecting?

*None of this makes sense.*

Sartor composed himself. He began running through the list of names he'd need to contact. The CDC. The Secretary of Defense. *The President*. China meant to keep this a secret. This must have been sanctioned and China wanted Sartor to be the first to know.

He took a deep breath. "I'll be there tomorrow."

## Chapter 12 – Bryce

“Who is Justin Staggert, and how was he involved in the devastation of American Airlines Flight 246? Stay tuned to CNN for complete 24/7 coverage of the crisis.”

Bryce had been on the Juniper campus for a little under twelve hours and he already hated it. He missed Alaska and the frontier, the freedom of being at the top of the world, an F-22 at his fingertips. The Juniper campus in the Rocky Mountains was nice, the mountains and tress as beautiful and serene as expected, but being in the middle of the continent made him feel claustrophobic. Plus, this was less of a military base and more of a Mennonite community. Family members of all ages, whole classes of school children roaming the grounds, communal gardens and baseball fields. It didn't seem farfetched to think he would get a spiel on the perks of joining a cult.

The whole day had been spent dealing with administrative tasks. Paperwork and security clearances, tours of the grounds, safety presentations, a one-hour marketing video on the history of Project Juniper and the benefits to American advancement in science and technology. It all made him gag. Just before five—they actually said five as opposed to seventeen hundred, which just reminded him that this so-called base was like a bunch of amateurs playing military dress up—when most of the admin personnel sign out for close of business, Justin was assigned his bunk. Before lugging his bags over to his new room, though, he took a detour to visit the one saving grace of the grounds, the bar. Project Juniper had three restaurants with full bars and a traditional sports bar. He had never been on a military base with full bar set-ups before, but he didn't complain. He wasn't in uniform and no one told him he wasn't allowed to drink. He could always ask for forgiveness later.

He sighed when he heard the television discussing the latest developments of the once missing, now returned airplane. He took down a shot of whiskey and held up the empty glass to tell the bartender he wanted one more. His cellphone rang, but after a quick glance he rejected the call. Reporters had been calling him all day to ask about his brother, the only missing passenger from the plane now that all the vessels had been opened. Family members of the other passengers were getting calls of condolences. Bryce just got calls from reporters who were eying Pulitzer prizes.

“Bryce, any contact from your brother?” “Have you been in touch with any government agencies because of the disappearance?” “Have you heard from your brother?” “Did he ever mention the desire to commit an act of terrorism?” “How did you get a

clearance to fly F-22s when your brother is a terrorist?"

All he heard was, "Bryce, Bryce, Bryce, terrorist, terrorist, terrorist."

It didn't surprise Bryce. Justin always found ways to make his life harder, from abandoning him at the military academy to killing their mother in the car accident that changed their lives forever.

Thinking of the car crash made Bryce clench his hands into fists. He was reminded of a night he spent with his brother shortly before the accident. Their father, a Gulf War veteran who had disappeared abruptly after the accident, used to play old sixties records for them, his favorites being the Rolling Stones and the Who and particularly Johnnie Cash. Before she died, their mother stowed all of his records in the attic, convinced the records reminded him of happier times when he was younger.

One night Justin coaxed Bryce to go up to the attic. As the two of them sifted through the boxes of their father's records, singing *Satisfaction* and *A Boy Named Sue*, they found an old textbook languishing at the bottom. The title, barely legible amid the dust and the faded white cover, read: *Aerodynamic Engineering and Spaceflight*. Bryce had picked it up first, but the older and stronger Justin immediately grabbed it from his fingers. "What the heck is this?" Justin had muttered. Bryce ran around Justin to look at the book over his big brother's shoulder. Justin flipped it open, causing a cloud of dust and grime to make Bryce sneeze. In the margins of the first page, the book's former owner had made handwritten notes, the most prominent being: *If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward. When thrust becomes greater than drag, then the plane will accelerate forward.*

Justin would repeat those words like a freak with a mental problem. He'd lay in bed and repeat those words over and over until only his lips were moving. Bryce would fall asleep to those words when the two shared a room at the orphanage. Bryce hated those words, just like he hated his brother, but his brother wasn't a terrorist.

When the bartender filled the shot glass, Bryce asked, "Would you mind turning this off or to something else?"

The bartender glanced up at the television and then shook his head. "Sorry, director's orders. Lost one of our own. Where have you been?"

Bryce smiled. "I don't come here to remember. I come here to forget."

"Sorry, my man, I hear ya, but no can do. Got tables outside if it's an issue."



Bryce sighed and felt his head begin to pound. Justin got his utterances; Bryce just got headaches. He didn't want to be here. Juniper wasn't his home. He would talk to Colonel Sartor. Or he'd run away. Or he could throw himself off a roof and break his legs.

"Three hundred and one passengers and only three hundred bodies," the newscaster yelled at her co-analyst. "You're telling me he's not involved?!"

Bryce made a signal for one more shot.

"Last one, then I'm cutting you off. And that's only because I know you're new here."

Bryce nodded and threw back the shot. "I don't want anymore. I can't do this." He placed a twenty on the bar and pushed himself up. The whiskey had gone to his head and he had to wait for equilibrium to come back. He waved to the bartender and headed for the door. As he reached for the doorknob, though, it suddenly burst open and a group of people collided with him.

One girl was laughing and walking backward. She pushed a larger man, who shoved her backward, making her collide into Bryce. Bryce instinctively held his hands up, but they both stumbled backward as she collided with him. Bryce wrapped his arms around her as she turned, gripping onto his shirt for support. They stared into each other eyes for two whole seconds before Tink blinked.

"Oh, hi," she said.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you."

"No, I'm the idiot that crashed into you. You can, uh, you can let me go now, I'm okay," she murmured.

"Oh, right." Bryce helped her stand up straight and reluctantly released her.

Tink slowly gained back her cool confidence and with a bubbly enjoyment said, "Hi, I'm Tink."

"Hi Tink, I'm Bryce."

As he introduced himself, several people with Tink circled around him. He recognized one of them as Captain Holiday.

"Who are you, tough guy?" one of the bigger men asked Bryce. "Messing with my girl?"

Bryce broke his gaze from Tink and glared at him.

*That could certainly help with my headaches.*

"Bryce?" Captain Holiday asked. "I've been wondering where you were. Everyone, this is Bryce." She paused. "This is Justin's brother."

When she said Justin, everyone winced. The name had become a source of pain.

"You mean the terrorist?" Bryce quipped, half-jokingly.

"Your brother's no terrorist," one of the big men said.

"No shit, dumbass," Bryce shot back.

The man stepped up to Bryce, who in turn took a step toward him.

Captain Holiday stepped in between them. "Oh good, I see you'll fit in with the team just as well as Justin does. Bryce, this is Micah. You've met Tink. This is Jackie and this is George. When did you get in?"

Bryce nodded to all of them individually. "I got in this morning. I thought I'd have a couple drinks before... well, just thought I'd have a couple drinks."

"Ha," Micah bellowed. "Well hot damn, you will fit in better than Justin. Too bad you'll never be part of Team Alpha. Don't think you got what it takes. Come on George, game's on."

Bryce moved to say something, but Kris stopped him. "Let them go. They're just ragging you a bit."

"Come on," the one named Jackie said. "Tink wants you to buy her a drink."

Tink giggled. "I mean, I wouldn't turn it down."

Bryce nodded while Jackie and Tink walked to the bar, leaving Bryce and Kris behind.

"I'm glad you're here," she said. "Your brother..."

She trailed off. Bryce thought he could see a twinge of sadness behind her eyes.

"What about him?"

"He's a good guy. I'm glad you're here to help us get him back."

"He was important to you?" Bryce asked.

"You could say that."

"That makes one of us. Too bad you'll never know who he really is."

As Bryce turned to walk to the bar, Kris said, "Captain."

"Excuse me?"

"You can address me as Captain Holiday until you earn otherwise. And I'm not dumb. I know you don't want to be here. I personally don't give a shit. I don't know if this tough guy routine is who you are or if you're dumb enough to think acting out can get you sent packing, but you'll learn very quickly here that we're a team. If you fuck with one of us, you fuck with all of us. Justin, I don't care what you blame him for or what you think he did

to you, get over it. Your mom died, get over it. He abandoned you, get over it. You think this is a dumb science experiment, get over it. You just entered the most sophisticated base in the world. You can see things here that shouldn't exist. I want you to be part of it, but I won't stand around and listen to you be an immature prick. I've seen your records. I know about the fighting. I know about the drinking. I know you're good in a cockpit. We need you here and we need you to have a clear head. If you want a drink, come join us. Otherwise, go to bed. Day starts at zero six."

Bryce cocked his head to the side while he sized her up. He finally curled the tips of his lips down and nodded. The tension broke when they heard Micah and George shout as a football team scored a touchdown on the television.

"What the fuck?" Bryce said. "He said he wouldn't change the channel."

"You have to earn it here, Bryce. Those privileges come with respect, of which you currently have none. You complain about Justin abandoning you, well maybe it's time to stop running and embrace a new family."

Kris walked to the team and left him standing alone. Reluctantly, he walked over and joined and took an open bar stool next to Tink. The bartender placed two drinks in front of them and sighed.

"Last one," he said.

"Don't worry, Tommy boy, he's with us," Tink said. "I'll keep an eye on him."

The bartender nodded and walked away.

"Thanks for the drink," she said to Bryce. "I'm glad you're sticking around."

"We'll see," he said. "We'll see."

## Chapter 13 – Veneral

Seriam's second sun had completed a full orbit of the first sun since First Minister Veneral had made contact with an intelligent alien species. An entire orbit. *Two solar eclipses of the suns!* One of 14 annual solar orbits. 13 more orbits and it would be an entire year. Two solar eclipses and a full orbit and Veneral had yet to receive the accolades befitting of such a momentous occasion. Completely unacceptable.

Where were the speeches? And the gifts? And the recognition?

Veneral should have received private shows from Verita's premiere acting troupe. He should have received enhanced cellular regeneration. He should have received increased monthly stipends and the tastes of the finest fruits from Verita's gardens.

What did he receive? He received a trip to Seriam's moon, Externus. Externus, the land of miscreants and troglodytes. Here he was, seeing the latest from the University's elite cultural and acting graduates, and he was sitting in his customary seats and joined by no one but his loyal assistant Titus and Jonas Domitius, the new governor of 48-Quasi 2, the as-of-yet unnamed planet in the fourth quadrant that was home to multi-cellular but unintelligent life. The new governor was his prize. This was Augustus' version of a cruel joke. A fine specimen though Jonas was, he was thrown into an impossible situation that, simply speaking, no one else wanted. Fortunately, Veneral alone understood the implications of the planet. He understood the potentially strategic positioning even though Augustus saw it as an unimportant expansion. Veneral alone would be able to wield this occasion with Jonas to his advantage. He alone had the mind to develop a new ally.

The stage at the Externus Playhouse, where despite its acclaimed performers had become a cultural underground of illicit but tolerated behavior, housed the last wooden platform stage. But even the rampant occurrence of ignoble deeds couldn't dissuade the finest minds of Seriam from frequenting the venue. As the scantily clad actresses danced and jived across the stage, performing a modern day take on the Exploits of Gilgomosh, Veneral saw Professor Blaseph sitting in his customary front row seat. Sitting beside Blaseph were this year's crop of the University's standouts, which Blaseph ritually took under his wings. Former standouts include members of the Marti, governors, growers, and even the First Minister of Culture and War.

Veneral was in no mood to dwell on that falling out, though, as his attention was squarely on the young woman with pale white skin and long red hair holding a silk pillow

that contained three behavior-modifying plug-ins. He was relegated to Externus, he might as well enjoy it. Only on Externus could a man still be served by a living being. On Seriam, the entire service force had been replaced by the AH Service series robots. With the population no longer responsible for mundane jobs and tasks, and with enough resources to provide living stipends for every Seriamite on the planet, the men and women could choose their career as they saw fit. Externus had rejected robotic servitude. They provided all services and suffered for it, losing its competitive edge to Seriam on an annual basis. Had it not been for the University and the large arts and culture hubs, Externus would be thrust back into the Delirium Age that continues to cast a shadow on Seriam from one hundred thousand years prior.

Regardless, seeing a show on a wooden stage and being served by a female that smelled and felt like life, even one with the recessive skin-tone that denied the benefits of Seriam's mandatory interbreeding requirements, had a cathartic quality to it. Veneral had worked with this particular girl before and was extremely pleased that she would be assisting in pleasuring them again. A second girl with lighter hair whom Veneral had never seen before entered wearing only see-through red silk pants.

*Excellent surprise.*

Through all his duties, the Minister could love with the passion of the suns. Surely, that's how it would be recorded in the Consciousness.

Veneral took one of the plug-ins from the silk pillow and inserted it into his cranial input behind his left ear while the two females assisted with Titus and Jonas. Almost immediately, they fell into a state of complete relaxation as the mind-altering Cognitive Replacement began, in which all three men's mental thoughts became interchanged with one another. It was highly illegal on Seriam, but on Externus it was viewed as a method to expand one's mind while offering restoration and recuperation to one's brain cells. The whole process only lasted about an hour before the plug-ins fizzled and dissipated into the air.

The negative effects of Cognitive Replacement had been widely reported, but they were rarely harmful if used in moderation, and weren't nearly as dangerous as the natural substances taken orally by a wide demographic of the Externus population. The positive effects, though, at least for Veneral, were not the relaxation and recuperation, but the sexual connections the plug-in created between the users. Almost immediately, he felt the hands of a female on his shoulders, although he knew it was an extra-sensory experience. They were

strong hands, much stronger than he would have anticipated. The hands of the women were actually on Jonas and Titus as they drove their thumbs into their shoulder blades. The women knew the Minister was not to be touched, per strict Seriam laws. With the touch of the women sexually arousing the men and catalyzing the plug-in, Veneral immediately began to receive images of Jonas' thoughts. He saw primitive beasts that stood four times higher than Jonas. Monsters that couldn't penetrate the plasma defenses Jonas had installed around his cities. He saw a population struggling to create enough food amongst these obstacles. And then finally, he saw an image of Augustus. It was anything but a happy image. Jonas was frustrated with the elder leader. It had only taken a few seconds to find, meaning Jonas had no intention of hiding it. He wanted Veneral to know it, and it was all the leverage Veneral would need as the exotic women of service began to move their hands down from their shoulders and onto their chests.

As the redhead continued to rub Jonas, the minister looked to his assistant, Titus. Even with the plug-in, Titus was hesitant to be presumptuous, always waiting for Veneral to allow the events to occur, but Veneral knew and could feel that it was not the female that drove Titus' arousal. And interestingly enough, Veneral saw into Jonas an intense jealousy, which the minister couldn't help but appreciate. Veneral encouraged the woman to place her hand on Titus' knee, which was all the urging that Titus needed. He quickly slid out of his seat and allowed the woman to untie the red flats that he was wearing. In a few moments, Titus exposed himself, which the woman immediately took in her mouth. Veneral could feel Titus hope that the Minister was watching or feeling his true desires, and it made Titus move in the woman with more intensity. As Titus let the woman work from her knees, Veneral looked to the redhead, who worked on Jonas. Veneral knew the servers of the Externus Playhouse kept complete confidentiality of the events during the shows, and Veneral knew this particular server quite well, as he would frequently insist that she join them. Today he was intensely interested to feel her companionship with Jonas. He could feel her smooth skin as she took Jonas in the same manner as with Titus on his left. Veneral could barely contain his own arousal.

Jonas moved his hands onto her chest, momentarily looking at Veneral to ensure this was still satisfactory behavior, and then worked his hands into her groin. Veneral could feel Jonas' hand, stronger than expected, and was pleasantly surprised to see much of Jonas was larger than he expected. The plug-in continued to alter all of their consciousness, so he

was aware that what he felt might not be entirely reality, but rather what Veneral had hoped to find.

After several minutes of this, Titus pulled the woman up from her position and began to untie her silk red bottoms, which happened to match his robes. In return, the woman finished removing all of Titus' clothing. Titus was the opposite of Jonas in every way, which was why Veneral found him so alluring. He was petite, with tiny abdominal muscles and a boyish chest. His hands were gentle and his male anatomy seemed stunted. Even the woman could manhandle him, which Titus seemed to encourage.

She pushed Titus into his seat and once again began to taste Titus in her mouth. Titus clutched onto her short, light hair, which was exactly what Veneral enjoyed. As she worked on his assistant, he felt Jonas begin to pull his flats down further and begin to penetrate his respective woman from behind. He momentarily had to stop enjoying Titus as Jonas slowly squeezed farther inside of her. As his muscles relaxed, he remembered why he took these monthly excursions to Externus, even if this particular occasion had been imposed on him by Augustus. The orgasmic joy and bonding that he felt were intense feelings that he could not find through any other avenue.

Most of all, though, he liked feeling out of control. He liked giving himself to the senses of these men, allowing them to take him into whatever sexual journey they saw fit. Rarely did he enjoy the touch of a governor, or the touch of a man as big as Jonas, but he gave into it completely. Jonas continued to penetrate further, taking the girl as hard as Veneral had ever felt. He didn't mind. He could arrange for the female to undergo cellular regenerative therapy in case any damage needed to be reversed.

The three men continued to engage until the Cognitive Replacement piqued and the orgasmic sensation was too great to fight. Veneral felt Titus explode into the woman's mouth and felt Jonas convulse as he did the same from behind the redhead. As for himself, he preferred to release into nothing in particular, which he felt was the one avenue of release that Seriam could not take away from him.

Now finished, the three men slowly slid their coverings back into place and rode out the remainder of the plug-in in complete relaxation. The fizzle started slowly only a few minutes later, but dissipated quickly once the process began, returning all three of them to their normal state of being.

Veneral could see that Jonas was embarrassed. He was certain that Jonas had never engaged in such wonton sexual activity, but he didn't exactly need any goading.

Veneral looked down into the crowd, and although he knew they were completely cut off from view, he saw Professor Blaseph gazing up in his direction and shaking his head in apparent disappointment.

*Who cares what that arrogant stooge thinks? There's a reason I'm up here and he's down there. There's a reason I'll be remembered, and he'll be the one who takes students to shows.*

Veneral tried to shake him out of his thinking and enjoyed the last few seconds of bliss before returning to his mental faculties. The real purpose of this visit was about to take place.

While gazing on at three young thespians discussing an interplanetary conquest, a person emerged from the shadows of his seating box. The man stood slightly in front of Jonas and looked beyond him to the minister. The man's eyes were covered with a darkened hood, but Veneral could recognize his brown wrap and white frock anywhere.

"Minister Veneral, I've always known your taste for mind melding with young men, but for governors, that's new."

Veneral looked at the man and, once his immediate concern passed, snidely smiled.

"Yes, I enjoy the touch of many different types. I propose you try the same."

The man looked down at Jonas and said, "Governor," giving no inclination of touching his forehead out of traditional deference. "I would expect to find the Minister in such compromising positions, but newly appointed governors?"

Jonas looked mortified and refused to look the man in the eye.

"Relax, Governor," Veneral quipped, "there's no threat here."

"Tell me, Franklin, how you expect to prevent Augustus from driving this Empire into the ground when you're too busy preying on your assistant and illicitly altering your mind."

"It's precisely how I plan to do it. These activities of mine, though less than reputable, keep me fresh and young."

"No, your unnatural affinity for cellular regeneration is what keeps you young."

"Says the man who works for the oldest High Governor in the history of our planet."

The man smiled and nodded. He rolled his wrists, which exposed his irons from underneath his frock.

"Which is precisely why I want to know your plan for how to kill him."



Veneral smiled. "Think your wrist irons will keep you safe? Nothing will keep you safe."

"Unless we succeed." The man's voice was slow and articulate, as though he had been trained in diplomacy and political leadership.

"We will succeed."

"And yet you have no plan. How is that possible? You're the Minister of War and Culture. Maybe I'm picking the wrong side in these matters."

"Your feelings for me, however off base or off putting they may be, have nothing to do with our goals here. This is about the glory of Seriam. This is about ridding this Empire of a disease."

"A disease with a powerful daughter."

Veneral laughed. It was a fake laugh meant solely for effect.

"Oh please, Lilith is no leader, even if she chooses to be Steward, she'd be weak."

"And yet you refuse to answer my question. Do you honestly not have a plan?" the man asked, mystified. Veneral sat in silence as his new visitor embarrassed his intellect in front of his sexual partners. "We need a plan, or we need to forget we ever had these conversations. Perhaps you should go join the governor here on his planet. What's it called again?"

"Of course I have a plan!" Veneral seethed, staring fire into the man. He was growing tired of the mockery and was irritated this man was ruining his joyous occasion. "And we have a strong team here to see it through. You just make sure you take care of your part. There can be no loose ends. The High Governor and his daughter. Killing one without the other achieves nothing."

*You better not be the weak link.*

"What?" Jonas asked in horror. "This is treason."

He began to rise, but Veneral placed his hand on his knee. "Dear Jonas, I saw your thoughts. You can have everything you want, all the resources you need to make your world flourish, just support us."

Veneral could see Jonas trying to think clearly, but still feeling the effects of the mind alteration.

"And if I don't?" he asked. "I'm sure Augustus would reward me kindly for such intelligence."

“Jonas, dear Jonas,” Veneral said again. “Who would believe the ramblings of a new governor who engages in such illicit sexual activity on Externus?”

*Yes, governor, you belong to us now.*

“We’ve been waiting for your order for several orbits now, *Minister*,” the man in robes said.

Finally sighing and gathering his composure, Veneral looked at the man and said, “Alright, Monty, we’ll move forward. You just be ready to move.”

Monty, stepping from the shadows, scratched his cheek and smiled. “I’ll take care of it. Just make the call. I’m sure the vivacity of a governor will be of some value as well.”

Monty smiled at Jonas and could see what Veneral was thinking. He then turned on his heel and left the box.

## Chapter 14 – Augustus

Augustus paced around his domicile atop the Apollo Acropolis and looked out at the Grand Hall of Gardens through the transparent viewing mesh at the foot of his bed. The gardens were practically unrecognizable from the grandiose heights of the Acropolis, a problem he had yet to rectify in his time as High Governor. He pushed his fingers into the invisible mesh that covered the windows and felt it engulf his hand as it bent and flexed to his touch. Eventually, though, the mesh began to push back and snapped into place, fulfilling its purpose in the world as invisible but unbreakable.

The viewing mesh was one of several noticeable irregularities within his private quarters, which he modeled after his childhood house on Externus. Unlike most youth, Augustus' mother required him to be raised on Externus to instill equality and a holistic view of the world. Only after University—and the annual visits to celebrate the Annual Display of Technological Innovation and Artistic Magnificence, as well as the rejuvenation of the Eternal Energy during the fourteenth orbit—did he join his mother on Seriam in the royal chambers where he learned to lead the Empire. His humble and bucolic house on a lake, though, had left an indelible impression of the beauty in simplicity. His first order as High Governor was to redecorate his domicile to replicate those humble beginnings, because it was only in the simplicity of those surroundings that he could clear his head in order to make the sound decisions required of a governor.

Only his most trusted advisors were allowed entry into his sleeping quarters. His daughter, the Solis and Steward of power until she was elected the High Governor by the High Council, and Monty, his personal advisor, were two frequent visitors. As such, both were currently sitting quietly as he discussed security affairs with an additional visitor who warranted frequent entry rights, Jericho Samson, the High Martis of the Security Brigades.

Jericho was an exemplar of service and duty to his world and empire. He had been selected to join the Command as all Marti are, straight out of the University. Augustus had personally recommended him, and it was his recommendation that enabled Jericho to rise through the ranks quickly. Augustus dismissed any whispers of nepotism or favoritism, which wasn't difficult as Jericho had personally secured the initial space for the three newest planetary colonies.

Today, as Jericho sat perfectly upright with his two swords securely crisscrossing his back in strict adherence to the Marti protocols, Augustus' age began to betray him.

Walking away from the viewing mesh, Augustus collapsed into a wooden chair, objects only found on Externus.

Jericho began to rise in assistance, but Augustus waved him away.

“Jericho,” he said, “how is the Fortis series developing?”

“High Governor,” Jericho began pensively, delicately remaining on the topic of his health. “Are you up to date on your cellular regeneration?”

Augustus laughed.

“Jericho, my days are numbered. It is unnatural for one man to rule for this long, let alone live for this long. Your concerns should be for those two sitting right over there.”

Jericho eyed Lilith and Monty from the corner of his eye, but would not allow his true feelings to reveal themselves.

“Apologies. High Governor, there have been no incidents with the Fortis series that warrant discussion. Pardon me for saying, but as much as I hate to admit it, First Minister Veneral created a very strong security series.”

“Jericho, you know I feel the same. Veneral is a man of many mysteries, of many loyalties, and it’s wise to remain a skeptic despite his contributions to Seriam.” Jericho bowed his head and covered his eyes with his hand in silent agreement, an iconic motion of the Marti who speak only when absolutely necessary. “Jericho, you were present when Veneral boarded the alien craft?”

“Yes, I was observing from outside.”

*Where was I going with that?*

Augustus let the thought trail off into the temperate climate outside as the second sun began its slow descent into darkness.

*Maybe one more walk in the warmth.*

“And what do you think? Did we make the right decision, sending the ship back, keeping the boy here?”

Jericho was startled. These were matters of policy. He was under strict guidance not to partake in such discussions.

Seeing how he had made his security advisor uncomfortable, Augustus attempted to assuage the situation. “Not as a Martis, Jericho, but as a citizen of Seriam. As my friend.”

Jericho’s chest dropped momentarily as he let his breath out. He looked at Monty and Lilith, a glance that was not lost to Augustus.

“High Governor, it’s the right decision because it was your decision. There are no right answers in such matters, only how we disguise the wrong answers to the Empire. Seriam will stand by you.”

Augustus smiled.

“I think you managed to answer my question without betraying your position. That was very impressive. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I should have recruited you for politics.”

Lilith and Monty both laughed.

“I think you made a wise decision, High Governor.”

*And my daughter?*

“Jericho, you have always been a loyal servant to the Empire. I ask that you continue to be when it is my daughter’s turn to rule Seriam.”

Jericho eyed Lilith suspiciously. Augustus knew that Jericho had made it his personal prerogative to watch over Lilith when she was a child on Externus. But he also knew that the Marti had never before answered directly to a pale-skin before, especially one as young as Lilith.

“I will always serve the High Governor of Seriam. But, if I may, Sir?”

“Of course.”

“Your daughter has the love of the Empire.” He hesitated. Augustus allowed him to gather his thoughts. “A person of her appearance as High Governor may cause discomfort for a population that believes firmly in the unified skin tone.”

Augustus straightened his back as his face went ashen.

“Jericho, do you mean to question my judgment?”

Jericho was horrified by the admonishment and rose quickly to cover his eyes and stand at attention.

“Never, High Governor. It is my personal belief that Madam Solis would make an outstanding ruler of the Empire. I’m concerned, though, that there may be others that question your judgment.”

Augustus smiled and stood to face his Head Martis. He put his hands on the side of Jericho’s shoulders to embrace him.

“And that is exactly why I ask that you keep her safe.”

Jericho nodded curtly, understanding his directive.

“Take leave of us now. May the suns be always on your back, and the Eternal Energy always at your disposal.”

“And you, Sir.”

Jericho bowed and quickly exited Augustus’ domicile.

Once he had departed, Augustus removed the chip from behind his ear and ensured his Ocular Implants weren’t recording. Lilith and Monty followed in kind. He moved to the wall far from the viewing mesh and pulled out a hidden drawer from beneath a permanent image of he and Lilith standing together atop a mountain that overlooked the immense skyline of Verita. Reaching into the drawer, Augustus produced a glass bottle and gleefully held it for Lilith and Monty to see.

“Come now, let’s have a drink.”

“High Governor, you realize that not only is vinum illegal in Verita, it directly cancels out the effects of your cellular regeneration treatments?” Monty quipped, shaking his head.

“Monty,” Augustus said, sitting in a wooden chair at a small round table, “I’m 268 years old. I’ve watched as this planet has circled our suns 268 times. I’ve endured the sniveling treacheries of over-anxious ministers and balanced the need to expand our empire with the near impossible efforts to preserve our very culture from the destructive forces that seek to vanquish it. I fathered a daughter with a beautiful woman when I should have been resting peacefully in the ground. I think I deserve a drink. And as my loyal advisor, I’m ordering you to have a drink with me.”

Monty smiled and obediently rose to join Augustus at the table. Lilith shook her head and rolled her eyes, but joined them as well.

“That was some speech, Father. Planning it long?”

“268 years.”

Augustus poured the vinum into three glasses and distributed them around the table. He held his glass in the air to allow his guests the opportunity to show joy.

“To the suns in the sky,” Lilith said, to the pleased and expectant nods of Augustus and Monty.

“To Seriam, may it always be ruled by simplicity,” Monty quipped.

Augustus smiled and observed the liquid swish around his glass.

“To Externus,” he said deviously.

They all took a sip and allowed their senses to embrace the flavors.

“And so what is the real meaning of this ceremony?” Lilith boldly inquired. Only the daughter of the High Governor could speak so brashly.

*Use that fire. I know you’re strong.*

Augustus sipped his vinum again.

"It's a time of great change in Seriam," he said. "The Empire is growing. Our resources are abundant. We haven't had war in three thousand years. And yet, there are whispers in the air, are there not? There is a certain unease, a tension. Perhaps our empire isn't growing fast enough. Or perhaps it's growing too large, too vast to control." Augustus paused, allowing his words to resonate. "And now we have this visitor. Has it been made public yet?"

"Yes, Sir, Veneral's recording was released to the Media this morning."

"Of course it was," Lilith quipped as she rolled her eyes.

"Lilith, just remember you'll have a lot of say in who the ministers are when you're High Governor."

Lilith sunk into the table.

"Father, I do not want to be High Governor. I do not want to be Steward. You need to consider other options."

Augustus sipped his vinum and straightened his back, feeling the agony of old age squeezing the livelihood of his muscles.

"Lilith, there are no other options. The Council wants to continue the lineage. Who would assume power in place of you?"

Lilith sighed and pulled her light leather covering down to cover her exposed midriff.

"Any of the governors could fill in. They are all good people. Maybe that's what Seriam needs. Maybe those are the whispers you hear. What's the new guy's name? Jonas. Or Tomas. Or if you want a woman, how about Delaney? They'd all make excellent High Governors."

Augustus wistfully smiled before looking to Monty for advisement.

"Monty?"

"Impossible," Monty said curtly. "The lineage is sacrosanct. The vote is merely symbolic. Seriam thrives on the stability."

"Lilith," Augustus continued, placing his hand on her shoulder, "I'm sure they would all make fine leaders, but what holds the Council together is devotion to the High Governor. If I were to step down and you did not accept the position, it wouldn't be as easy as nominating a new candidate. Seriam would fall into war as parties decided who begins the new lineage."

Lilith was defeated, resulting in a sharp pang of shame directly into Augustus' stomach. He didn't want it either, but he accepted his responsibility.

"There has to be another way," Lilith stammered. "Can't Monty do it? He knows more about the Empire than anyone."

Augustus and Monty both laughed at the prospects, although Augustus thought he saw a glint of consideration in Monty's eyes.

Perhaps realizing that Augustus saw him reveal his internalized desires, Monty recovered and said, "It has to be you, Madam Solis."

"Oh, shut up, Monty. Father, why did you wait so long to have a child? You could have had a plethora of heirs. It's because you waited so long that I have this... condition."

Lilith gulped her wine and poured herself more.

Augustus looked at Monty. "See what you have to look forward to, Monty? Children blame their parents for everything. I'm the offering the Empire, and she still finds fault in my parenting. Lilith, Monty will be beside you the entire time to ensure your success, just as he has with me. He received perfect marks in strategizing and political brownnosing at the University, didn't you Monty?"

"I did, High Governor, and you have been an exquisite leader and mentor in my development."

Augustus shook his head skeptically. "See, brownnoser." Realizing he wasn't getting through to her, he pulled her closer to him to fully embrace her. They rarely had the occasion to show such affection, which Augustus had been meaning to rectify for several years. "Come now, my beautiful daughter, I see I have once again upset you. Let's speak of simpler topics. This alien visitor, is he going to bring carnage to Verita?"

Lilith laughed, which only made her eyes water. She had been fighting back tears and had to delicately wipe them away from the bottom of her eyes.

"No, I don't think he's here to harm us." Lilith took a deep breath to compose herself, her confidence growing now that she was allowed to speak on an area of her expertise. "We gave him a lengthy session in the cellular regenerator. And we can communicate to some extent. Honestly, I don't think he realizes why he's here. It seems like an accident. His fear, though, is giving way to fascination."

"Interesting," Augustus said in his High Governor tone that suggested he didn't quite have the words to continue the conversation. As though rehearsed, Monty stepped in.



"I wonder how fascinated he'll be to learn we sent his ship back and are keeping him here indefinitely."

"Maybe we should give him the choice then," Augustus suggested.

"The decision has already been made, though, at the High Council."

"The ruling was made by the High Governor, lest you forget," Lilith said. "Besides, there are ways around the Council when the wrong decision has been made." Lilith seemed annoyed at the pretense that the Council's ruling is divine.

"See," Augustus said cheerfully, "she's a natural."

Monty was not so sure, but he chose to remain neutral.

"To be fair, though, we still don't know the effects of going through an alignment unprotected," Lilith said. "Even with the neurological processor implant... Those weren't designed to protect against unshielded travel through an alignment. Until we have a better grasp of the side effects, it does seem safer to keep him here on Seriam."

"Externus," Augustus said. "Externus would be much more welcoming than Verita."

"I agree," Monty said.

"There's still one issue I am lacking the expertise to understand, though," Augustus said. Augustus had become more relaxed in his old age, but his line of questioning was renowned as a form of inquisition that could turn dark very quickly. "To the best of my understanding, forming a gravitational alignment requires harnessing the power of a star. We have thousands of satellites around the inner sun beaming lasers to our Outer Rim for this very purpose. Now, Seriam visited so many thousands of years ago and inadvertently exported our language to this civilization, we left because there was no hope for advancement. Not only were we wrong in that assessment, but in that relatively short period of time, they not only advanced, but learned to harness their sun without destroying themselves. What am I missing?"

"You're not missing anything," Lilith said.

"So how are they doing it?"

"Most likely, they tapped into our Outer Rim, just like our far-off settlers do to move back and forth. If they could tap into it, they could form a stable gravitational alignment without requiring a dedicated generator."

"*Space travel* of all subjects," Augustus quipped, shaking his head. "An Octavia goes to University and studies space travel. Maybe you are too smart to be High Governor."

“How would they tap into it?” Monty asked, ignoring Augustus’ digression and looking genuinely perplexed.

“Precisely,” Augustus said. “They couldn’t, unless...”

“Someone gave them the coordinates and codes,” Lilith said, finishing her father’s line of thinking. “Veneral is almost certainly correct. Seriam left, but this planet received and deciphered the final Anonius transmission.”

Augustus sighed. “So Gilgomosh was correct. He used up all of Seriam’s resources to conquer other civilizations. The people are outraged at the killing, so he sends a transmission to see if civilizations can advance to be suitable members of the Empire. Regardless, the people rebel. So Gilgomosh was accurate in his assessment. Tell me, who has the most to gain from this news?”

“Veneral,” Monty said, clenching his jaw in anger. “The treachery. We should have him placed in plasma confinement immediately. Or at least a work camp on an experimental colony.”

Augustus ran his fingers through his thinning hair and smirked.

“Let’s just all have some vinum and not jump to irrational conclusions. That is a very fuzzy and dangerous accusation. We need a bit more. We can probably clip his wings a bit, like maybe preventing him from seeking out his needs on Externus, but let’s mainly monitor the situation. See if we can’t find out more. We can’t forget his lineage.”

“Yes, High Governor,” Monty responded.

“And the visitor?” Lilith asked.

“If he stays, we need to show Seriam that he’s here as my guest. Let’s plan an event. I don’t care where. The Verita Gathering or something fun. This is important. The Empire will be watching.”

“I’m on it,” Monty said.

“And Monty, try to bring a date to this one. I’m tired of my top advisor going stag.”

## Chapter 15 – Colonel Sartor

Colonel Sartor and Captain Holiday stood next to Air Force Colonel Smith and NASA Deputy Administrator Jack Taylor and stared down at machinery and equipment that had been removed from American Airlines Flight 246. The plane had remained at the Shenzhen Military Base as the National Transportation Safety Board deemed it unsafe for flight, so Sartor had a Juniper team strip it clean. Sartor had reservations about leaving it with the Chinese, but he was mildly confident they weren't responsible for the incident and he at least persuaded them to tow it into a hangar to block it from the general viewing.

Now back at the Juniper campus, he didn't enjoy the company of outsiders, which were precisely what NASA and the Air Force represented. As such, he had no qualms about smoking indoors.

"You know you're better off sticking that cigarette up your ass, right?" Colonel Smith quipped with the grumbling southern twang of a man who spent his career yelling at other people.

Sartor blew the smoke into the stale but otherwise clean air and watched it waft over to Colonel Smith. Smith stared at him, silently questioning the petulance of the Juniper Director.

"I like smoking," Sartor said stolidly. "I don't think I'd find it enjoyable to stick it up my ass."

"Ha!" Taylor bellowed. "You gotta love Raymond." The two colonels knew each other well enough that neither put up with the other's shit, but usually tried to avoid close proximity. Taylor was a good buffer. "Raymond, what in the hell are we looking at here?" he continued. "I presume you're just pretending to keep us in the loop."

"The hell he is," Smith declared. "He's telling us it's his turf."

"By definition, this is my turf, but for the record, I actually wanted to know if you both had ever seen technology like this."

Taylor began to walk around the table, giving a wide berth to the members of Juniper Team Alpha and the scientists busily deconstructing the technology.

"I presume you have a theory," he said, leering over Peter Sabien's shoulder to either look at his attempts to peel open a perfectly smooth grey box or to get a better peek at Tink, whose Juniper coveralls had been unzipped and rolled down to her waist.

"Dr. Russell, your expertise are needed," Sartor said, wasting no time pretending he could explain it as well as his head scientist. "Dr. Russell!"

Melvin, wearing a surgical mask and latex gloves as he slowly removed a cylindrical piece of aluminum from a spiral coil being held in place by Micah Camp and George Compton—the resident weapons experts—looked up unexpectedly. He had zero interest in removing himself from the alien technology, but was also obedient to the director.

"Ah, Colonel, yes, hello. I didn't, when did you?"

"Melvin, slow down. Can you please join us and explain what you've found?"

Melvin looked skeptically at Micah and George, unsure how obedient he was willing to be.

"Don't worry, Doc, we got this," George said in a particularly slow southern drawl, to which Melvin immediately yelled, "Dr. Thomas, please step in."

The room laughed as Dr. Thomas took the piece of metal from Melvin. Micah slapped Melvin on the back.

"Hot damn, I love me some Juniper scientists, yee haw."

Sartor fought the urge to smile as he took a drag from his cigarette. Melvin walked over slowly and suspiciously, unclear why he'd been pulled away from his work.

"Melvin, this won't take long. Do me a favor and explain to these two gentlemen what you're tinkering with over there."

"Right, yes, of course." Melvin turned and began to walk to the table, expecting the group to follow him. "What we think we have here are the necessary array of instrumentation required to enable a vehicle to utilize negative energy to connect itself to another location."

"Excuse me, in English please," Colonel Smith remarked.

*If you feel stupid it's because you are stupid.*

"In English, these are essentially plug-ins that let a ship travel through space," Sartor said to the stupefied looks of his guests.

"That's precisely right, Colonel," Melvin said. "The likeliest explanation is that this civilization doesn't require spacecraft specifically for space, but uses this conglomeration of equipment to enable it."

"Civilization?" Taylor asked incredulously. "As in an alien civilization? Our plane ends up in China and you want me to tell America it was aliens? You're a crazy son-of-a-bitch, I'll tell ya what."

"You're a very angry man," Sartor said, almost as though he had just had an epiphany. "Have you ever considered getting a horse?"

Ha!" Taylor boasted as he continued to circle the technology. "You and your horses, I'll tell ya. I don't like dogs."

"Horses aren't dogs," Sartor said, defending his hobby against the apparent insult.

"You say potato, I say steak dinner."

"Gentlemen, an American plane is in Chinese custody and we have a table of God-knows-what in front of us, and you two are discussing horses?" Smith asked.

"No, I'm trying to convey to my esteemed NASA colleague that he should keep his mouth shut and make up a story," Sartor said.

"Assuming we are to believe you," Smith said skeptically. "Tell me more about the exact array of instrumentation that enables deep space flight, and then tell me how we know it's not Chinese."

*Deep breath. You're still in charge of the situation.*

"Melvin?"

"Oh, right. Well, over here with Mr. Sabien and Captain Holiday, this shiny looking cube, well, we are surmising it is a compact power source. And this cool coil that Dr. Thomas is examining is..."

"We're working on it too!" Micah shouted.

"Guys," Sartor said, shutting down the antics.

"Right," Melvin continued. "This coil likely generates a negative energy shield around the craft. Over here with Tink, er, uh, Ms. Amor and Ms. Blaine and..." He looked at Bryce but apparently forgot his name or didn't trust him. So he just continued to talk, much to Bryce's amusement. "Yeah, we're guessing that this flat circular object is a form of autonomous steering, which, as you can see, it's attached to this butter dish looking object, which is probably navigation. And last, this valve with a spinning center and an intake and outtake could be used for artificial gravity. In short, it's what we'd expect to find."

Melvin turned to seek reassurance from colonel Sartor, who gave him a perfunctory single nod. Melvin smiled and looked down at the floor.

"And how on Earth did you guys make those assumptions looking at this scrap metal?" Colonel Smith asked. "Doesn't exactly strike me as solid analysis."

"That's easy," Sartor said, cutting in before Melvin could speak, "these are the same types of components we've built into our spacecraft that we theorize should enable space flight."

Without missing a beat, Smith said, "That's what you are up to out here? You're spending all that money actually trying to build a spacecraft?"

"Built. Past tense."

"Ha!" Taylor bellowed again.

Smith sighed and shook his head. "I knew you were conducting experiments, and someone has to answer for the deceased, but I didn't know you were writing a science fiction novel."

Juniper Team Alpha stopped working at the Colonel's words.

"Science, Colonel, not science fiction," Sartor said annoyed. "I'm not sure if you weren't paying attention, but in front of you is alien technology. This is real."

"Well, I know what the president would say. Is it a weapon and where'd it come from?"

"No," Melvin blurted. "I mean, it is unlikely to be a weapon."

"He's right," Sartor said, defending his untactful scientist. "These aren't weapons."

"If they're not weapons, then why send them to us? A measure of good faith? Come on. That's absurd. Convince me this isn't reverse-engineered technology built in China."

Bryce laughed and nodded in agreement. "Seems like the same people came up with that story as the people who tried to tell us men walked on the moon."

Colonel Smith looked at him, and Sartor thought he saw a look of appreciation.

"Thank you," Colonel Smith said, holding out his hand. "And you are?"

"Bryce," he said. "Bryce Staggert."

Colonel Smith looked at him with understanding eyes. "Staggert? As in..."

Before he could finish, though, the room seemed to explode with light as Peter Sabien exclaimed, "Whoa! Something's happening here." In front of him, the silver cube seemed to come to life as it began to project images.

"What'd you do?" Melvin inquired as he ran over to Sabien's side. He was the only one of the group to express interest, as the others began to inch away.

"Nothing, I mean, I just put my hands on it."

Suddenly, Ariana's voice appeared from the box. "Bryce Staggert, your credentials have been confirmed."

“Bryce? Why Bryce?” Captain Holiday asked.

Everyone looked at Bryce suspiciously, so Bryce put his hands up defensively.

“What aren’t you telling us?” Sartor asked him.

“How the hell should I know? You brought me here, remember?”

“No, I was told...” He cut himself off.

*I was told to bring him here.*

The lights and images continued to flash within a small sphere around the component. Captain Holiday said, “Sabien, what happens when you remove your hands?”

Sabien did as he was told, clearly not enjoying the excitement, and removed his hands. As he did so, the image began to expand as his hands widened.

“It’s a computer,” Dr. Thomas said, mesmerized. “Open your hands wider.”

Sabien brought his hands out away from his body and the image became as clear as day. In front of Juniper’s Team Alpha and the Juniper scientists and Juniper’s guests and Juniper’s director, a dizzying array of planets, moons, and stars burst into vivid colors and details. Sabien let his hands go limp and the image consumed the room, the room’s occupants now wandering among the star systems.

“Raymond, talk to me,” Taylor said as an afterthought. He no longer had the capacity for logical thought.

“Whoa, we’re not finished here!” Jackie shouted.

It was difficult to look away from the floating planets that looked so real. Micah and George began to reach out to touch them, but Jackie only spoke when something needed to be said. They all looked at her and saw the circular piece of metal shoot thousands of small cylindrical tubes out of its surface that were responding to the placement of Jackie’s hands. Jackie cocked her head to the side and grunted out of amazement as she moved her hands back and forth.

“No, definitely not Chinese,” Sartor said.

They began to move away from Jackie and back onto the planets.

“Melvin, give me some hypotheses,” he ordered, knowing full well Melvin should have no reason to understand what was happening.

*Where the hell is Justin when I need him?*

“Well, uh, it could be, no, um, well yeah, it could be their version of a Solar System, or maybe, maybe this could be a map of sorts.”

“A map of what?” Smith asked as a small moon circled six inches from his head.

“Look at these planets,” Melvin said. “Look at that moon. It’s blue. It has clouds. These are habitable. This could be a map of potential planets to explore, or...”

“Or what?” Smith demanded.

“Or it could be the planets they have already inhabited,” Dr. Thomas chimed in. “These have traces of pollution and artificial lights.” He pointed to a large planet in the center with an enormous ring around it. “This ring is metal. Those lights are cities, like when astronauts on the Space Station look down at New York City. And look, other planets have similar, albeit smaller, rings.”

“Sabien, can you shrink it?” Sartor asked, his cigarette dangling from his lips.

Sabien once again did as he was told and began to bring his hands together. The projection immediately responded, shrinking back into the cube. Sabien touched the cube exactly as he had before and the image disappeared entirely, and just as suddenly, Jackie could no longer command the tubes from the metal circle.

“What in the name of God just happened?” Colonel Smith said, demanding answers.

Sartor moved closer to the table to gaze closer at the technology.

“That, Colonel, was a message. They just showed us their universe.”

“No, they showed Bryce their universe,” Holiday said.

“To what end?”

“There’s only one way to find out.” Sartor turned to Tink. “Alice, go fire up the simulator, I think we need to adjust our comms. Jackie, with her.”

Tink lit up, making her platinum blond hair shine even brighter.

“On it, Sir.”

Jackie didn’t look as certain, but followed closely behind Tink. They both eyed Bryce as they passed him, intrigued but still suspicious.

Bryce and Tink locked eyes, but Sartor broke it when he yelled, “Staggert! Get over here.”

Bryce approached the two colonels. Jack Taylor was currently consumed looking at the technology.

Sartor wasn’t sure what he wanted to say. He wanted to yell at him. He wanted to say, *If you can do that, go get your brother!* He wanted to hook him up to an old-fashioned torture device until he fessed up what he actually knew. Instead, he ended up saying, “Let’s see if you can do that again.”



## Chapter 16 – Justin

*If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward.*

Justin continued to repeat these words in his head.

*If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward.*

*Head up, eyes forward.*

They were the only lucid thoughts he could compute. Everything else seemed fuzzy, bordering on a dream. He was lonely and scared and felt like he hadn't slept in months, although he couldn't be sure how long this nightmare had truly lasted.

*What would Kris do? I wish she was here.*

For the better part of fifteen days or so, he thought, Latin-speaking scientists in some sort of synthetic clothing had been poking and prodding him, forcing him into small chambers that sent red scans up and down his body, and feeding him a variety of small pills and fruit juices. Admittedly, his body felt better than it had in years, as longstanding muscle aches dissipated into the stale yet pristine air of his holding cell. Whatever drugs they were giving him worked far better than anything he could have found on Earth.

To be fair, he still was not sure if he was a prisoner or not. He had been given free rein to move around the sterile facility he had been brought to, but was given a security escort of four robots with blank faces and large weapons. He had eventually come to appreciate the robots, as they provided him a persistent presence and helped him navigate the facility, which seemed to go on endlessly through underground compartments and never-ending staircases. There were no doors where he was staying, but the walls would open as he approached, much like the vehicle that transferred him here.

His clothes, which had been saturated with blood and the scent of death, had been removed from his body and never seen again. Instead, he was given simple leather sandals with gold straps, a black sheet that fastened together at his waist, and a white blouse made of a material he had never seen. It all felt like cotton, but it seemed to grow thicker or lighter depending on his body temperature.

He had seen Lilith and Franklin on a daily basis, and each visit reaffirmed his initial opinion of them. Lilith was delicate but forceful. She was beautiful and inquisitive and gentle, but she commanded respect. Only on the last visit did Justin see a crack in that façade, almost a defeat in her face.

Franklin was an enigma. He smiled broadly but his eyes could barely conceal the wheels that incessantly turned in his head. He was continuously plotting something and wanted to know everything about Earth and humanity. Fortunately, he wasn't willing to take the time to allow for Justin's menial knowledge of Latin, so the communication was mainly with Lilith.

The scientists in the facility were initially cautious around the alien, but after running their tests and seeing the open communication, they had dispensed of their caution and began to consider him as a sort of exotic house pet that required constant observation and documentation. Not to say Justin was amenable to the idea of befriending an alien species, if for no other reason than he was still convinced he was dreaming and didn't want to fall deeper into his hallucination.

*Has Juniper finally pushed me off the deep end? Have I had a mental crack?*

He spent most of his time in his cell, which was more like a bedroom with a bed made of down and memory foam that provided exactly enough support for complete relaxation. Kris would have enjoyed it, and he would have enjoyed having her next to him. He couldn't utilize the stone desk, which he suspected required some sort of contact lens to navigate, but a friendly scientist who was shorter than the rest—*Allister? Alichter? A-lister?*—showed him how to program the metal tubes that came out of the ground to provide a seat that made him feel like he was sitting on satin pillows. Utilizing a mechanical glove, A-lister showed him how he could request a glass encasing to come out of the wall, which became a highly advanced form of virtual reality.

The poking and prodding continued, but there was no malice. He wasn't in chains, but he also wasn't exactly free. The scientist in him was lost in fascination by the technology. The Marine in him relished in the adventure. The spirit in him wanted nothing more than to go home and be with Kris and his team.

*How long will they keep me here? When will they send me back? If only they knew how much more appropriate it'd be to study Holiday.*

Today he sat on his stovepipes, as he referred to them, and waited anxiously. When the second sun began to rise, Lilith had appeared the previous two days.

*If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward.*

The second sun, a red ball with yellow flecks, didn't provide as much light as the vast yellow sun, but it gave the world a reddish hue and made the night glow like a vibrant fire.

Justin noticed that when both suns were overhead, the metal disk around the planet would begin to spin.

*If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward.*

At almost precisely the moment the red sun put distance between itself and the horizon, a door appeared in the wall and Lilith casually walked through. She appeared to have a smile on her face and donned a mesmerizing silver dress that seemed to have been sewn with diamond thread.

Justin immediately rose as she entered, causing her to hesitate. Regaining her composure and confidence, she approached closer, holding an object behind her. She touched her forehead, which Justin learned to be a form of respect or introduction.

"You, um, you look, I like your clothes?" Justin said, trying to come up with a Latin word for beautiful.

Lilith smiled. She didn't blush, but was clearly interested in the meaning behind his comment. She nodded to herself, her short red hair staying perfectly still in a knot behind her head, and moved her mouth like she was tasting the air.

"Thank ou?" she said in broken English.

It took Justin a moment to understand.

*English?*

He pointed to her and said, "TH-ank You."

"Thank you."

Justin nodded. "Yes."

He could barely believe his ears and had to shake his head to fully understand. He began to respond in English, "How?" but then reverted back to Latin. "You learn English?"

She smiled, most likely laughing at his accent, and then produced a backpack from behind her.

"My backpack!" he said in English. He instinctively stepped toward her to take it, but was instantly slammed back into the wall by the strength and speed of two robots. Terrified, Justin ducked his head down, threw his hands in the air and in a shaky voice murmured, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Before any further damage could be done, Lilith had called them off, releasing Justin into a pile on the floor. Lilith bent down, looking borderline petrified herself and maybe even embarrassed.

"I sawry?"

Justin nodded. "It's okay." He didn't care if she could understand.

She helped him to his feet and handed him his backpack, but not before taking a book out—*A Backpacker's Guide To the Galaxy*—and showing it to him. She flipped some of the pages open and began to move one of her hands back and forth.

"We compared it to Latin," she said.

Justin took a moment to understand and pointed to the book. "English." And then he made an arc with his finger. "Latin?"

Lilith smiled and nodded and did the same. "English. Latin." Then her smile faded and she sheepishly asked in English, "Ou, teach?"

Justin lit up.

"Of course, yes."

But as he responded so positively, the implications of the request began to seep into his understanding.

*She wants me as a teacher? How long is she planning on me staying?*

Lilith must have noticed that Justin's face dropped from a smile to one of earnest consideration. She handed him his book and took a step back. The A.H. Forti responded to her motion and took a step back as well.

"Lilith, when can I go home?" he asked in his best Latin accent.

She studied his face for a moment. Instead of responding, she stepped to the wall and invited him to come with her.

"Lilith," he began again, but she immediately put a finger in the air, silencing him.

"Come," she said tersely.

*What would Kris do? If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward.*

He took a deep breath, realized he didn't actually have an option, and began to exit the room. She waited for him to acquiesce to her request and then followed closely behind him. Two of the sinister looking robots led them down a hallway that Justin had never seen, which seemed odd given the proximity to the room.

The robots, with sinewy metallic muscles wrapped tightly around a partially exposed exoskeleton, walked as naturally as any living person. The exact dimensions of their exteriors were clearly meant to be replicas of the people of this planet. Only their darkened glass faces and titanium-colored outer epidermis revealed the methodical and inanimate design that differentiated them from a living being.

Justin timidly followed them down the hallway and directly into another transport vessel, his only notion of safety emanating from his unsupported faith that Lilith would do him no harm. Lilith and he both took seats on the stovepipes, Justin using his glove to control it. He noticed as Lilith sat that she lightly tapped her temple three times and then giggled, but he still did not fully understand what she was seeing.

The vehicle began to move, but cut through the air so smoothly that it was only the presence of passing objects in the windows that alerted him to that fact. Justin couldn't help but stay glued to the window, which Lilith eventually expanded for him.

"Thanks," he said shyly as he turned back toward her. He quickly returned to the window, though, afraid that the robots might sense a threat. Lilith was endlessly amused by what fascinated him and placed her hand over her mouth as she observed.

Justin watched as the vehicle pulled away from the facility at which he had been staying. The facility was a large gray dome, but as they moved farther away, the dome began to take the color and texture of the surrounding fields until it had become altogether invisible. Justin peeled his eyes away and looked out at the impeccable landscape of hills and fields of green grass and flowers. Had he not known any better, he would have assumed he was in the foothills of Montana. He couldn't help but wonder if this really was all-natural land, though, or if other facilities stood invisible in plain sight.

In the distance, though, rising out of the ground like enormous crystal formations, was something artificial. Green towers interspersed among colossal golden buildings of various shapes and sizes—the white spires of one in particular reaching almost as high as the clouds—protruded from the ground in such rapid ascent that they appeared to be an illusion. Justin recognized them immediately as the buildings he had flown over when he first arrived at Seriam.

He looked back at Lilith with a puzzled face and pointed at the buildings.

"Verita," she said. "Capital of Seriam."

Justin nodded in acknowledgement and turned back to look at the buildings growing ever larger. Pyramids and large Coliseums began to emerge. He looked back to the facility he had been held at once again, but it had been entirely consumed by the natural world around it. Beautiful, pristine. He couldn't be sure, but it looked like a waterfall was pouring out of nothing but the clouds above. As he looked back to Verita, though, the vehicle suddenly banked forward and began to descend underground. Before he realized what had happened, he found himself to be just one vehicle among thousands. He had entered

Seriam's underground freeways. The tunnels were dark, but squinting, he could begin to see the vague images of the vehicles around him. They were all autonomous and hovered a few feet above the ground.

Justin leaned back again, growing dizzy from the motion of the tunnel. Lilith looked toward the front vehicle and then decided she wanted to show him something. She motioned for him to lean forward so they were staring at one another from their respective seats. She tapped on her temple a few times and from her eyes emerged an image of a planet. The planet had one large landmass, a smaller island off the western coast, and then water. Justin was initially enthralled by how she made the image appear, but he quickly accepted that he needed to recognize the advanced technology as the new norm.

"Seriam," she said again. With her hands she expanded one section at the center of the landmass. A large city with green towers and golden buildings began to come into focus. "Verita." She pointed at the image and then pointed outside the vehicle. Waiting until she was satisfied Justin understood, she used her hands to push the image out even further, scrolling into the very buildings of Verita. Justin was amazed at the level of detail the image provided, not allowing any pixilation to distort the hologram.

Lilith centered the image over an enormous golden pyramid. "Temple of the Eternal Energy." She didn't wait for acknowledgement or if he understood the Latin phrase. She moved the image across the city, coming to a stop at the building that was unmistakably the same building Justin saw reaching into the clouds. "Apollo Acropolis."

Justin laughed, to which Lilith became confused, insecure even. The image immediately disappeared. Justin threw his hands up, thinking he scared her. "Sorry, sorry."

"Sorry," she repeated in English.

"Yes, sorry. We," he pointed to himself and then made a circle with his hands, "Apollo is a name on my planet."

Lilith nodded and then made the image reappear. Instead of enhancing the detail of Seriam, she pushed the whole image out until Seriam disappeared and a spinning galaxy-looking object—with clear folds and rotations that almost looked like two intertwined strands of DNA—began to sparkle in between them. Justin could clearly see the arms of a spiral galaxy, but the corkscrew strands baffled him. She pointed to a section of the strand. "Seriam." She moved her finger to a section of the sky that was blank. "Energy tear." With her hands, she made a ripping motion.

*A rip in space-time?*

Then she pointed to a particularly bright section. "You."

"Earth," Justin said.

"Earse."

"Yes. Ear-TH." Lilith blushed, causing Justin to think long and hard about how to articulate his next thought. "L, um, Lilith," he said. But that was a mistake. Two of the four robots in the vehicle with them instantly stepped forward and aimed their hands, which transformed into a weapon with four metal prongs forming a firing mechanism, at Justin. The other two robots, who were actually carrying much larger mini-gun-looking weapons, remained in place.

For a man who is known for a lack of mettle, Justin remained remarkably calm and even-keeled, placing his hands in the air, but silently asking Lilith, "*What now?*"

"You will refer to the daughter of the High Governor as Madam Solis," one of the robots replied in a harsh intonation.

Justin, barely able to understand Lilith's accent and the Latin language, had to clarify. "Madam Solis?"

Lilith said something that Justin could not understand, but it was in a tone that rivaled the robots and reminded Justin of the first time they had met. The robots immediately withdrew to their positions.

"Sorry," she said in English, and then in Latin, "they get protective of the High Governor's daughter."

She smiled sheepishly, as though she assumed he understood what that meant and assumed it was a secret to be embarrassed about.

He pointed at her questioningly.

"High... Governor?" he asked in Latin.

"Hmm, ruler?" she said in an attempt to clarify.

"Daughter?"

She nodded in the affirmative. "Of the High Governor."

He thought back to the respect she commanded and the way she overpowered and overshadowed the confidence of Franklin. He thought back to the protective detail of the robots. It all added up. And it made it even more likely that she could provide answers.

"Lil, um, er, Madam Solis," Justin stammered, leaning in so as to prevent the robots from eavesdropping. "When can I go home?" Justin pointed to himself and then to the area of the sky that Lilith had pointed out his planet. He tried saying it in Latin, but he knew it

probably came out broken. Regardless, Lilith understood.

Shaking her head, she said, "Your ship, we already sent it back. Do you understand?"

Justin's face went ashen and his arms began to tingle with goose bumps.

*Did she say I can't go home?*

"Why?" he asked in English, feeling like the walls were closing in around him. "You sent it back without me? But, how do I get back? I'm stuck here? A prisoner?"

He began to hyperventilate, which made the robots agitated.

Lilith got out of her seat and knelt before him, placing her hands on his knees. It was the first contact she had made with him since their first meeting. Looking him in the eye, she said in English, "Not prisoner, Justin. My guest." Her smile and soothing words began to assuage his immediate concerns, but a guest in an alien world that can't leave is in fact a prisoner. "Please, come meet my father. We're almost there. Be an ambassador."

*We're going to meet her father?*

Lilith didn't wait for an answer but rose, touched her forehead and then turned her back to him. As she did that, the vehicle swung itself out of the tunnel at a sharp angle, but however it was constructed, the gravity kept her firmly upright. As the vehicle leveled out, it pulled to a stop. The two robots grabbed Justin's arms and pulled him to his feet, having him stand directly next to Lilith.

The side door of the vehicle began to recede and formed three steps for the passengers to exit to the ground. As the two of them walked down the steps together, Justin was awe-struck by what he saw. Hordes of people in brilliant silk robes began to cheer and shout and hiss. Among the people were rows upon rows of flowers that resembled lilies and roses and over-sized hibiscus. Huge stones surrounded a square pond filled with a grayish liquid.

Justin assumed the people were yelling for him, but he couldn't be sure. He fought against every fiber of his being to retreat back into the vehicle. He wouldn't enjoy so much pomp and attention on Earth; he certainly didn't appreciate it on Seriam.

In the middle of the melee stood a man in pale blue robes. He looked to be in his forties or fifties, but his eyes told another story. As many of the people he had met, Justin got the feeling he was much older than he appeared. He stood silently, observing the alien in front of him. Flowers dangled above him from trellises and a tray hovered next to him containing two translucent bottles with a pink liquid inside.

*The High Governor. Jesus. If only I could relay this moment back to Juniper.*



Surrounding the High Governor was his entourage: Veneral; a man with a brown wrap around his waist and a white sheet slung around his shoulders; an ominous looking man in black and brown leather with two daggers across his back; a woman with nothing but strips of silk covering the bare essentials of her skin; thousands of people, all almost exactly the same size and shape and color; robots of multiple varieties; additional glass-faced robots; robots that looked more human that were serving beverages and cleaning the floors; and flying robots that were watering the plants. There were holographic images throughout the entire grounds. Standing massive and daunting overhead was the Apollo Acropolis, and above that was the enormous black rim in the sky. And there was Lilith, pale-skinned and blonde, as apparently alien as was Justin. It was chaos.

The High Governor began to walk toward Justin, his entourage and the tray following him. He took one of the bottles from the tray and offered the other to the alien before him.

As Lilith encouraged Justin to take the bottle, the High Governor said in a soft yet authoritative voice, which Justin could somewhat understand, "Welcome to Seriam! You are my guest."

The High Governor touched his forehead and took a sip of his drink, which Justin responded to in kind. The crowd went crazy.

With all eyes on Justin, though, he was the only one with eyes on the High Governor; he and the man in black and brown leather. With the bottle to his lips, Justin watched as the man placed his hand in front of his eyes and then adroitly maneuver behind the High Governor. Before Justin had finished his sip, the man had removed one of his two swords and with a dispassionate face effortlessly drove the sword down into the High Governor's neck and the spinal cord until the tip emerged from his stomach.

The death was quick and merciful.

The sword slid out of the High Governor as he collapsed to the ground, his bottle disintegrating into mist as it hit the floor beside him.

Whatever chaos had already existed turned into complete and terrifying bedlam. Six robots blasted the man with the four-pronged guns that formed from their hands. The blasts were bluish blasts, but a shield emanating from the bracelets on his wrists protected him from harm. He hit two of the robots with a pulse from the same bracelets, and then he cut down the remaining four with his swords.

He momentarily looked at Lilith, who was now being protected by a cadre of a dozen of the robots that formed a massive protective shield in front of her. Another robot knocked Justin to the ground and formed a shield around him as well.

Justin watched as the man, after his cursory but unthreatening glance at Lilith, turned and melted into the crowd around him. Justin then looked to Lilith, who had the wherewithal to look back at him. The man in brown and white grabbed for her, but a robot had already taken hold of her arm and forced her to turn and run. Lilith and the robot jumped into the vehicle that Justin had arrived on, the steps reverting back into the wall, and then vanished back into the tunnel below their feet.

As Justin watched the people around him burst into tears, he realized he had just witnessed the murder of Lilith's father. The High Governor was dead.

Part 2

Two years later...

(Two years since the disappearance of American Airlines Flight 246)

## Chapter 1 – Bryce

Bryce hopped back and forth, stinging the punching bag as he moved.

One, two, one, two. The bag popped and strained under his vicious assault. Uppercut, one, two. The gloves left dull impressions in the plastic cover, which grew larger when Bryce didn't leave time for the bag to reform its shape. One, two, one, two.

He had been at Juniper for nearly two years, and although he'd never reveal such honesty to Sartor or Holiday, he had come to enjoy it. The campus had become his home and the members of Juniper the family he never had. The revelation that his assignment to Juniper was permanent didn't even prevent him from extending his status with the Air Force, agreeing to an unfathomable seven-year commitment, all of which would be spent with Juniper (of course, the salary bonus for the seven-year extension certainly helped in his decision).

As the first member of Juniper to join the team outside of the traditional annual "class," Colonel Sartor demanded he go through additional training expected of any Juniper officer, however cumbersome and difficult that may be. Bryce suspected Sartor enjoyed seeing him suffer through the longer hours, but the punishing training actually quelled his headaches and didn't allow him to think about his mixed emotions regarding his brother's disappearance. As Juniper was officially a civilian organization, no one was concerned with bending any rules. Nonetheless, Bryce performed well and in his first official year as a Juniper officer had already assumed the seat as the navigator for Juniper's Team Bravo and occasionally for Team Alpha during periodic simulations.

"Trust me, if my butt-munching brother could do it, I'll be fine," he had insisted to Sartor and Holiday. Sartor had at the time responded that he was displaying the type of blind gravitas that Justin never possessed, but never insinuated if it was a positive or a negative.

After throwing a few more jabs, Bryce took a step back to drive his gloved thumb into his temple. Regardless of the extra work, the headaches still reared up. Juniper had no answers for him. Travel through space? No problem. Bad headache? Tough shit, too difficult.

"Ready for a shot at the title?" George shouted as he entered the gym, flanked by Holiday and George.

“Nah, looks like little Justin has a headache again, hot damn!” Micah said, finding endless pleasure in his own humor.

“Please, you don’t really want me to embarrass you again, do you,” Bryce wryly quipped. Despite his rhetoric, George and Micah could both give Bryce a run for his money, far more so than anyone else Bryce had boxed. Unlike Bryce, though, they’re wounds took time to heal and for the first time in his life, Bryce was reluctant to let people see how his body worked. Lord know what kind of experiments the mad scientists would run on him. “And I hear weird noises coming out of your rooms at night. Sounds like you’re all giving one another a shot at the title.”

“Oh, shit no!” Micah exclaimed. “Cap’n, you gonna let him talk to us like that?”

“I could kill him,” George said without a twinge of sarcasm.

Holiday laughed and sat on a bench along the wall to lace up her gloves. “Out of respect for Justin, I’ll let it go. I don’t think we need to kill him.”

Bryce, who rivaled the size of George and Micah, used his teeth to begin unraveling the laces of his gloves and went to sit next to Holiday.

“Jesus, how are you so disgustingly sweaty?” Holiday asked. “How long have you been in here?”

Bryce shrugged. “Couple hours. I don’t know. I was bored.”

“If you’re bored, why don’t you try to sleep?” George asked in genuine confusion.

“Well that’s fucking brilliant,” Bryce said, making everyone laugh. “Captain Holiday, you hear that? George had the bright idea to try and sleep at night.”

“You know, I have really big guns that I don’t get to use very often,” George said.

“I’ll tell ya what, this guy makes me miss what a pussy his brother was,” Micah shouted for no apparent reason.

They all sat together laughing for a few moments. Even Kris had begun to laugh when they made fun of Justin. It made her feel like Justin was still around, or at least coming home. Time heals all wounds, though, and Bryce had seen her getting drinks with a couple of the mechanics over the past few months.

“Any more word?” Bryce asked.

“Give it a rest, Staggert,” Holiday said. “Trust me, if we receive contact from an alien civilization that is about six billion light years away, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Would I?” Bryce inquired.

“Fuck no!” Micah yelled as he and George stood up to walk into the gym. “Fucking dumb ass.”

Holiday elbowed Bryce in the ribs. “Don’t listen to those guys. We have a demo this afternoon, are you coming?”

“Of course. I have to.”

“Good. How’s Bravo?”

“Functioning.”

“Good. Go shower and rest up before I order you to go get embarrassed in the ring.”

“You wish.”

Kris laughed as she stood up to join Micah and George.

Bryce sat there and watched the three of them warm up. They were a good crew, even though their new navigator couldn’t find a deviation if it slapped him across the face.

*How hard is it?*

He had been pressing Sartor to reignite the drive, even offering himself as a test dummy on the X-40, but he had been readily dismissed as a cocky test pilot acting rashly. Besides that reluctance, Bryce loved life at Juniper. He had no responsibilities other than work, and work was like a giant video game. They had a state-of-the-art gym, good food, and best of all...

He turned his head to the hallway leading to the locker rooms and saw Tink emerge. Tink had taken up boxing after Bryce joined Juniper and had turned some heads with her feisty style and unyielding tenacity. When Bryce saw her, he rose and walked directly her direction. They made honorable attempts to be coy—this time stopping to talk while letting the backs of their hands touch—but Juniper was a small community; secrets weren’t secrets very long.

“Hey,” Bryce said.

“Hey,” she said back, fighting the urge to completely fall into him. “Did you have a good work out?”

“I did. I thought you were going to come meet me.”

Tink blushed, which made her hair even whiter. “Sartor made me explain the new comms this morning. Grayson was supposed to tell you.”

“Grayson’s still asleep. And he’s a douche bag.”

Tink laughed and looked appalled.

“Bryce, you can’t talk about your captain like that.”

“Why? Anyway, Sartor’s just nervous about the walk-through.”

They pressed their hands and their arms closer together. It was all Bryce could do to not lean over and kiss her.

“It’s not a secret, cradle robber!” Micah shouted across the gym, making Tink shyly put her head down and pull away from Bryce. Tink was two years older than Bryce, and the team liked to remind her of that fact. “Just get a room and get it over with.”

Bryce saw Holiday say something under her breath, which shut Micah up.

“Sorry,” Bryce said.

Tink leaned back into him.

“Are you coming tonight?”

“I wouldn’t miss my girlfriend’s twenty-sixth birthday party, cradle robber.”

Tink gasped and slapped him on the shoulder.

“I’ll come say hi when I’m done.”

“K.”

Tink’s eyes lit up in a way that only her eyes could do, seeming to protrude fully into her forehead and beaming joy throughout the gymnasium. They both clasped their pinkies together and then Tink walked off to join her crew. Bryce made no secret that he was watching her go.

*God she’s hot.*

“Micah, you are so annoying!” she squealed as she walked toward them.

“Yeah, git some,” Micah shouted over her, seeing Bryce stare at her.

Bryce rolled his eyes and finally broke away, heading down the hallway and out the exit onto the Juniper campus. The campus, spanning hundreds of acres in the foothills of the Rockies to support the immense hangers required for spacecraft development, was well maintained and manicured, with large quads of grass for relaxation and sports, running trails all the way up to the highly guarded fences that blended into the hillside with dense vegetation, a beach-like area on a small outlet from the Colorado River, and a baseball field that was rarely used. In the residential section of the campus, Juniper had erected large dormitories appropriate for those fresh out of boot camp and small houses for those who were older and brought their families. There was a school for children, a store, several bars and restaurants, a gym, and a medical center. All in all, Juniper had established a quaint little town for the roughly 3,000 inhabitants on the campus.

Despite coming in out of schedule, Bryce joined class four of Juniper's operational existence. This enabled Bryce to leapfrog as many as ten navigators more senior to him to join the original Team Bravo's crew.

Bryce made the short walk across the Neil Armstrong Quad and entered his single room inside Mercury Hall. He wasn't a big fan of Mercury Hall, which had a smaller recreation area than Venus Hall where he had lived his first year, and more inconvenient bathrooms than Ceres Hall, where he had lived for most of his second year. Class 4 officially relocated to Mercury Hall a few months prior and Sartor told them to get comfortable because they weren't moving again.

Bryce opened his door and threw his gloves onto his desk. His room felt as austere to him as a room in a monastery, with nothing but a bed, a desk, and a camping chair to relax him. The goal, Juniper told him, was that you didn't want to remain in your room, but rather join your teammates in the common areas or on a sports team or in training. Didn't matter much to Bryce, though, as his interests were firmly on his walls, which contained an entire timeline of events that led up to and subsequently preceded his brother's disappearance.

One wall contained the technology and the "mishap" that led to the disappearance. Granted, he didn't have a square understanding or mathematical insight into gravitational connections and negative energy, but he was smart enough to know mistakes of that magnitude rarely happen and the fact it hit his brother's commercial airliner seemed more like irrefutable wrongdoing than a coincidence.

On the next wall were the newspaper clippings. The disappearance and reappearance of the plane. His brother as a terrorist. The leaked images of the corpses that had melted into unrecognizable gore. The disappearance of the terrorist's brother. American Airlines 246 two years later: *How do we just lose a plane?*

The next wall showed the conspiracies. The wormholes and crackpot alien theories. The American military cover up of an experiment gone horribly awry. The Chinese act of war that has since gone unanswered. NASA as a front for obscure alien research. Manhattan Project Redux!

The fourth wall was the map. Colonel Sartor decided that Juniper would be best served if the whole program was on the same page, so the technology and the image of the dozens of planets became a standard lesson for first years. "You want to know why you came to Juniper?" Professor Barbeau would ask, before sending a holographic image of an



alien world across the room. “This is why you came to Juniper!” It had a certain glamour to it that couldn’t be denied. Bryce had been privy to the information prior to the class—Colonel Sartor had used the exact same expression—and had drawn it all onto his wall. This is where he stared and contemplated and dreamed. This is where he found hope his brother was alive and the motivation to find him.

Taking his shirt off, he went and sat at his desk where Tink had placed a small, framed picture of herself. He picked the picture up to stare at it.

*What on Earth does she see in me?*

As he thought about it, his door burst open and John Jameson rushed in.

“Hey fuck-tard, we’re going to play football.”

Bryce liked John. He was a member of Class 4, third year in the program, and straight out of the Marines. He was on the weapons team for Class 4 Team Alpha and was one of the few who didn’t have any resentment that Bryce was already on an official Juniper crew.

“Sorry, man, just worked out.”

“Oh, shit, I’ll bet you did,” John said, seeing him holding the picture of Tink.

Bryce put the picture down and shook his head. When he didn’t respond, John jumped on him again.

“You know that chick is way too hot for your dumb ass, right?”

*Marines, unbelievable.*

“It has crossed my mind. Hey, I actually wanted to talk to you. Think we should start some kind of study group for Barbeau’s class?”

John looked at him silently and then shook his head and left. Bryce laughed when he heard John whisper, “Jesus.”

Standing up, he walked to the wall with the galactic map. He put his hand on the central planet with the metal ring around it. It was clearly central to the whole civilization, whatever that may be. It was a daily ritual for Bryce, who thought he might garner some new wisdom that he had never considered before. But like yesterday and the day before, nothing came to mind.

He sighed.

*Aliens. Unbelievable.*

He went to shower. He had a big day ahead of him.

## Chapter 2 – General Sartor

General Sartor stood in front of the hundred-and-twenty-five members of the Juniper Operations Branch and the thirty-six members of the Juniper Sciences Division and eighteen Juniper instructors and his four personal staff members.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” he projected across the hangar, “before you is the heart of Project Juniper, comprised of the hundred-and-eighty-four men and women that will enable mankind to travel throughout the Universe.” The Juniper members stood at attention while Sartor paced in front of them, his hands held firmly behind his back, his left arm desperate for another nicotine patch. “I want to stress that point so we’re all on the same page: the hundred-and-eighty-four men and women that will enable *America* to travel throughout the *Universe*.”

Sartor looked at the eight senators and congressmen standing before him, gawking at the sheer magnificence of the X-40. Doctors Russell and Thomas had worked day and night to replicate and incorporate the alien technology into the designs, but refused to sign off on further operational tests until they had run through multiple stages of redundant testing. While Sartor condoned such due diligence—particularly after the mishap two years prior and the empty seat sitting at the end of Team Alpha’s formation—the waiting had made the Juniper oversight commission restless.

“General,” Senator Watson began, “first, let me speak for us all when I say congratulations. Your promotion was well deserved. I’m sure your role as the Director of the International Association for Deep Space Cooperation will further enhance our standing as the leader in technological innovation.”

General Sartor curled his lips and grunted to show acknowledgement.

Senator Watson’s tucked-in white shirt could barely contain his enormous belly, which jiggled as he talked with his hands in the air in a welcoming and domineering manner. His puffy red cheeks strained to prevent the noticeable red and blue varicose veins from popping out of his face. General Sartor watched him suspiciously out of the tops of his eyes, his own face nearly resting on his chest. He had practiced his welcoming presentation several times, but he had always struggled to obsequiously smile at the Senator, which was largely the reason behind the commission’s visit. As expected, Senator Watson paused to allow Sartor the opportunity to express his gratitude. Sartor would never show the type of

flattery that would garner long-term funding, but fortunately, Sartor had learned to surround himself with sycophants of his own.

“Senator, let us all express our sincerest appreciation for the resources you have secured for this program,” Jack Taylor said. As Juniper grew in size and Sartor was given additional responsibilities, he had recruited two men who could bring external expertise and oversee the day-to-day demands of the program. Jack Taylor from NASA became his Director of External Affairs. Colonel Smith from NORTHCOM became his Deputy Director. “We would not be where we are today if not for your continued support.”

Senator Watson grinned broadly and waddled over to Taylor and extended his hand, which Taylor willingly embraced. Sartor winced, recognizing a power play when he saw one.

*You're not going to intimidate us, you fat piece of shit.*

“It looks like you’ve surrounded yourself with a strong team,” Watson said, looking at Taylor but speaking directly to Sartor.

“The finest in the entire world,” Sartor said quickly, if not irreverently.

“General, maybe you can walk us through this machine you’ve designed,” Senator Gonzalez said, trying to ignore the small talk. “And then tell us why NASA couldn’t have created it in our state-of-the-art facilities in Florida.”

“Or Alabama or Texas or California,” Congresswoman Relson continued.

Relson and Gonzalez were both considered to be up-and-coming members of their respective parties and rarely hid their disdain for one another, at least from Sartor’s experience. Gonzalez was a young Hispanic firebrand from Florida and Relson used her standing as a founding partner of a large technology company to propel herself to victory in a closely contested California district. Sartor actually liked them both, but politics had a way of blinding him from true affection.

“Those are both fair questions,” Sartor began, walking past the enormous Senator Watson to join them at the X-40. “No one is disputing the necessity of NASA’s spaceflight centers and much of the technology they have developed has been co-opted here at Juniper. NASA is better positioned to provide invaluable planetary sciences and intra-Solar System travel. It’s a division of labor that was established from the moment Juniper became operational.”

Gonzalez turned to the General, clearly unsatisfied.

“And now that the X-40 has been developed, NASA can use the vehicle for space exploration,” he asked. “I imagine if that’s the case, the launch facilities should move back to Kennedy.”

Sartor had to swallow before he could respond.

*Come on Gonzalez, we’re on the verge of alien contact and you’re making it political?*

“Once the X-40 has been deemed fully operational, we will begin the development of a larger fleet, which NASA will likely be able to utilize for exploration of the Solar System. But all launch activities and housing of the vehicles will remain here.”

Sartor stared at Gonzalez until he was satisfied the Senator wasn’t going to push back further.

“I think that satisfies our immediate concerns over location,” Senator Watson chimed in as he placed an arm around Gonzalez’s shoulders. “Why don’t you show us how this contraption works? After all, we’re just simple average Americans and can’t always wrap our heads around this futuristic techie stuff.”

“Of course,” Sartor quipped, realizing Watson didn’t like being pushed aside from the junior members of his commission. Sartor looked to Colonel Smith, who immediately looked to Captain Holiday.

“Captain Holiday,” Smith commanded, “front and center.”

Captain Holiday did her best not to roll her eyes as she broke her formation and proceeded to walk to the delegation. Natural tension had arisen between the Juniper golden girl and the new Deputy Director immediately following Sartor’s decision to add another layer to the Juniper bureaucracy. Sartor had hoped it was beginning to come to an end, though.

“Senators, Congressmen, Congresswomen, by now you’ve all met our Team Alpha captain, Captain Kris Holiday. She joined the program over five years ago and will remain an operational captain for another three, in keeping with the standards established by the Juniper bylaws. Captain Holiday?”

“Yes, Sir, thank you.”

“Captain Holiday?” Watson asked. “Ain’t you the gal who had a little fling with your lost pilot?”

Sartor knew the question was meant to rile up Captain Holiday, but much to his satisfaction, she accepted the question and answered it professionally.

“That’s correct, Sir, which adds a personal inspiration for me to see that Project Juniper is successful. I still believe he’s alive and I’ll believe that until I see hard evidence to the contrary. Now, the X-40.”

Sartor watched as Holiday approached the ship, which was gleaming under the incandescent lighting of the hangar. The X-40, which was a dark gray with *Juniper* written down one side and *Manifest Destiny* written down the other, belonged to Holiday—spiritually, mentally, and physically. Teams continuously bickered over the rights to the captains’ seats on the Blackbird and the Shake Shack, but Manifest Destiny was not under dispute. Holiday reached out and slid her hand along the nose of the ship, almost exactly as Sartor had done to his horses countless times before.

“As you all can see,” she began, the Manifest Destiny giving her confidence, “there are three X-40s ready to become operational.” She pointed to hers and then motioned to the remaining two equidistant from one another down the hangar. “All three stand one hundred and eight feet long, are powered by capturing the byproduct of the Negative Energy Drive, which we call NED, and can fit enough supplies to maintain an entire crew of seven for five years.”

Holiday paused for effect, smiling as though she had just introduced a star athlete, and then tugged at her jump suit to flatten it out. To her dismay, the delegation was hardly impressed.

“As you can see, the whole ship is built around NED, which rotates on a vertical access. The command module,” she pointed to the sharply pointed nose at the front, “sits in the front with the living quarters built around NED. Power flows to the rear of the craft through this elongated shaft that connects to the electromagnetic propulsion system, which are these four cone-looking nozzles in the back. There are eight thrusters, which exert enough force to put the ship into orbit and can be used in the event the EM propulsion is damaged. They do not, however, provide enough power to create gravitational connection with another planet.”

“A wormhole?” asked Gonzalez, sounding more like a correction.

“Yes, but since it’s devised by slinging the spacecraft through naturally occurring tunnels on the outskirts of black holes, leave the tunnel in the proper location by aligning our gravitational field to that of a specific planet, and are powered by using the energy equivalency of a star, we prefer gravitational connection,” Melvin said to the shocked faces

of every member of Juniper. Even Melvin was surprised he spoke up so willingly and immediately recoiled to his place in the formation.

“Oooh, Raymond, you got yourself a firecracker there,” Taylor ecstatically proclaimed, momentarily forgetting his place in the new order of leadership.

*Fucking Taylor.*

Regardless, the delegation didn’t have much interest in gravitational connections.

“And weapons?” Congressman Shelton asked. Shelton was a self-proclaimed hawk and was adamant the current administration was too weak in international affairs. An Iraq war veteran, he was a regular on the network news channels, lambasting the president’s dovish policies.

Holiday began to speak but looked to Sartor for reassurance.

“Yes, every X-40 has a wide arsenal of lethal and non-lethal weapons, meant specifically for self-defense in the event we encounter a hostile civilization,” General Sartor said, touching his fingers to his lips and then scratching at his arm.

“A civilian organization is developing weapons?” Shelton asked. “Is this new technology? Is it being shared with the military? May I remind you that those who keep us safe deserve access to all scientific R and D that might assist on the battlefield?”

“Excuse me?” Holiday found herself asking.

The question was ignored as Sartor and Shelton stared one another down.

Sartor scratched his arm once more and cocked his head to the side. The crow’s feet on the corner of his eyes intensified, but the seemingly aloof stare made Shelton look around to see if anyone else understood what was happening.

“Might I remind *you*,” Sartor eventually said before Shelton could speak again, “that I am a general in the United States military. My deputy is a Colonel. Every Juniper team consists of former Marines and Airmen. I am on specific orders from the CJCS, the president, and congress to see this mission through. My *interests* are in the success of this program. The military has five hundred billion dollars to ensure those men and women have their weapons.” Sartor licked his lips. “Now as we have already discussed, once these three prototypes are operational and we verify that the technology works, we can discuss ways to develop the fleet with interagency cooperation. This, however, is not a weapons program and we will not allow this program in its current capacity to become militarized.”

Sartor felt his face turning red and his blood pressure rising.

*Ignorant prick.*

“In the event of an attack on American soil, Juniper will be ready to support and defend,” Colonel Smith said. “Juniper is in direct cooperation with NORTHCOM.”

Sartor glanced at Smith, who stepped forward out of his formation in his attempts to acquiesce the delegation. He offered a perfunctory nod.

*That probably would have been a more appropriate approach.*

“Ha!” Watson bellowed, which was proceeded by a deep laugh that sounded more like a man choking on a cigarette. “Good Lord and baby Jesus, Raymond, you’re all a bunch of firecrackers.” He smiled at Taylor to show he liked his previous outburst. “We’re not here to step on your program, Raymond. Now eighteen months ago, you came to us and told us that that aero-plane got pulled through one of these *connections* and returned with alien technology. And then you keep us in the dark. You don’t even introduce us to the team! We just want to make sure this program is headed in the right direction, that’s all.”

Sartor seemed to snifle as Watson began to once again peruse the X-40.

“You can all rest assure, we are on track.”

“On track and going operational,” Watson said with a finger in the air, making a point to correct the general. He threw his enormous hand on Holiday’s shoulder. “You got a good team here. I personally helped select you for this position and I stand by that decision. But it’s time for some results.”

“Results will be coming.”

Watson smiled and looked at the general. The veins in his cheeks were bulging out of his face. Sweat began to pour down his forehead.

“Well then I think we’re satisfied, aren’t we?” He directed this question at the delegation, who silently consented.

Sartor hadn’t prepared for this part of the briefing. Where were they supposed to go from here?

“Captain Holiday, how’d you like to give our esteemed colleagues a tour of the inside?” Taylor said, fulfilling his role admirably.

“Absolutely. If you’d all like to follow me. It might be a little tight, but you’ll get a good sense of how close we all have to get on our teams.”

Holiday laughed as she said that and began to lead the delegation towards the side entrance of the Manifest Destiny. Sartor, though, looked back at the hundred-and-twenty-five members of the Juniper Operations Division. In particular, he looked at Tink and Bryce,

who couldn't help but giggle at Holiday's joke. He sighed and thought about how he met Amanda all these years ago. As long as it doesn't interfere, there was no harm in young love.

*It's not like his affection to Holiday got him sent off to another world.*



## Chapter 3 – Justin

*If the shoulder flexes, then strike to the back. If the shoulder opens, then strike to the heart.*

Justin had fought Lucius on several occasions, but preferred to spar with Remus. Lucius was from the Eastern city of Arborilt, where the inhabitants built their houses into the middle of the enormous Sequoia forests that reached heights of nearly 300 meters into the sky and spanned from the Northern inlets to the Southern shores. With bronze skin and dark hair, they looked like any other Seriamite, but required-interbreeding couldn't weed out the agility formed from day-to-day living among the trees. Lucius was even more frustratingly nimble than the others he had met from Arborilt. But where Lucius was fast, he was also predictable.

With wooden 24-inch daggers in each hand and naked from head to toe, Lucius and Justin circled each other. Lucius' left hand held the dagger horizontal to the dirt ground, a defensive position while his right hand held his other dagger directly above his head, like a scorpion's stinger waiting to be unleashed. Justin kept his eyes on the defensive dagger. Lucius always moved it first.

Justin tried to focus on his footwork, but he had not yet become accustomed to the Ocular Implants, which were currently giving him specifications of Lucius' size and the likelihood of an imminent threat. Some of his peers switched them to *silent* when they were sparring, but Professor Blaseph insisted that the best fighters learn to utilize the information the implants provided. Justin received Ocular Implants when Seriam's scientists upgraded his neurological processor implant to link with the latest model. The Ocular Implants, one scientist explained to him, were meant to be incorporated to the neurological processor implant from the onset. It was like having a large computer with no screen to display the information. Justin had no idea how he had a neurological processor implant in his brain, but now that he had the Ocular Implants as well, he came to realize that the generated data in his mind that never had an outlet before was likely responsible for migraines he used to get as a teenager.

*Open with the right, forward with the left, back with the right, follow with the left.*

He held his two daggers across the front of his body, one sticking straight up so the blade nearly touched his face and the other – held in a downward position – reaching from the bottom of his chest to the middle of his thigh. It was a naturally defensive position, as Professor Blaseph was wont to tell him. Justin's Ocular Implants calculated his body

tension and rapid heart rate and began to spew out red data at the top left of his vision. It was much easier to comprehend when he could blast it out as an image, but he had to settle for the distraction and hope Lucius didn't see the rims of his eyes glowing red.

"Mr. Staggert," Professor Blaseph asked him in Latin, feeling he wasn't distracted enough, "what did Eli tell us about the connection between art and combat?"

Blaseph and the remaining six girls and four boys—all naked—that made up the rest of the class stood circled around Justin and Lucius. Three stood proud with bloodied noses.

*If the shoulder falls... wait, what?"*

"Um," Justin began, trying to gather his thoughts and think of the words without getting smacked across the head. "Eli said that, uh..." Justin quickly stepped back when he thought Lucius was prepared to lunge. "Eli said that combat prepares us for life, life prepares us for art, and you cannot have one without the other."

Blaseph nodded. "Lucius, why is art important?"

Confidently and without breaking his concentration, he said in an oddly high voice, "Professor, art is the perfection of our creativity. It is required for the continued development and utilization of technology."

As he finished, he cocked his left hand, flexing his shoulder. Recognizing the motion, Justin immediately brought the dagger covering his thigh into a blocking position and prepared to swipe at Lucius' back. Lucius came forward for an across-the-body strike, which Justin had timed perfectly. He caught it, despite the swift motion and power. As he began his counter, though, he froze. He knew instantly that he missed his chance, as did Lucius and the rest of the class. Lucius deftly brought his right hand down in a striking motion, cracking Justin across the face and sending him spinning onto his stomach. Justin's face immediately began to redden and swell, but the visible impact was likely veiled by the red dirt that caked into his sweat as he fell and skidded across the ground.

His face throbbing and ego tarnished, he gingerly rolled onto his back. He saw Lucius sneering down at him as he stood in a relaxed pose, his swords directed towards the backs of his feet.

*Head up, eyes forward.*

Justin's mind fought to steady his eyes, which were spinning from the vicious blow and blaring alarms in his head that it was making automatic appointments at the medical bay. Rigidly, Professor Blaseph walked over and looked at his pupil. Justin was unaware how sweaty he had become in the mid-afternoon sun, but felt the dirt turning to mud

underneath his back. He reached up and tapped his temple, nodded slightly to indicate he wanted to shut down the data, and tapped his head once more. His ears continued to ring and his eyes felt like they were being crushed out of his skull by his brain. After a cursory glance of disappointment, Blaseph began to circle along the inside of the class.

“Why do we fight?” he asked solemnly, like it pained him. He put his hands in the air as he circled, his wrist irons glowing with light to remind everyone he passed that he was a prisoner of the Seriam justice system. “Why do we stand without clothing and swing at each other with sticks like we were cretins from the Delirium Age? Adelia?”

Blaseph stopped in front of a petite female, whose over-sized breasts were splattered with blood as it dripped from her nose. Her red hair was pulled back into three braids and her blue eyes bore the bruises of a girl who never backed down from a good fight. Blaseph found her beaten and bloodied outside of a Distillery Den about ten kilometers off the nearest coast adjacent to the University. Amused by her vivacious fervor, he brought her onto his team, which filled his personal quota of at least one student from Externus. She had immediately warmed to Justin, but could never understand why the Earthling had such trouble not staring at her when she was naked.

“Because it’s the purest form of humanity,” she responded wryly. “It’s good to bleed sometimes.”

Blaseph nodded but remained silent. He wasn’t amused. When he turned his back, Adelia snuck a glance at Justin and flashed him her blood-stained teeth.

“I’m looking for something a bit more intellectual. Remus.”

“Tradition. This is who we are. We have to remember that we have a history, a violent history, and we must remain vigilant not to repeat it.”

Remus was the closest friend that Justin had found since becoming a Seriamite. Everything about him reminded Justin of his team at Juniper. Growing up on the island city of Insula Mar on Seriam, Remus had developed massive muscles from swimming with the flat-nosed fish against the currents of the Inner Channels. The Insulars had learned to communicate with the flat-nosed fish—and eventually, most animals—by adapting old radio technology into sonar translation equipment. Remus would say his time “swimming with the fish” during his transformative years taught him a respect for all life as it came. Justin assumed that was why Remus was on a path to become a Grower and was also likely the reason he befriended him: just another foreign animal to converse with.

“Okay,” Blaseph said professorially. “A violent history. What does that mean exactly? Isn’t all history violent? Isn’t the Eternal Energy the only thing in existence that cannot be destroyed?”

Remus looked to Justin and rolled his eyes. They were entering the end of their mandatory two years of Art and Combat and both could not be happier to be finishing.

“I’ll assume that your silence means you have no opinion on the matter,” Blaseph muttered in disappointment. “Alright then, let us hear from the man who devised the very concept. In line.”

The group shifted from a circle into a line. Blaseph held a hand out to Justin and helped him to his feet. He continued to grasp Justin’s hand as he examined his face.

“We bear the marks of our hesitation.”

“Yes, Professor,” Justin said in Latin. He was by all accounts fluent, but his alien accent was the source of endless entertainment for his peers.

Now twenty-six years old, at least by the 373 days of the Seriam year, Justin was older than most in his section, but Seriam did not comply by strict age limits. A boy or girl reached adulthood based on maturity rather than the number of years they had been alive. Remus was also twenty-six, but Adelia was only nineteen. Some never reach the Seriam definition of maturity, and thereby could not attend University and are not afforded the opportunity to receive a stipend or pay taxes or express an opinion in public courts.

“Fall in.”

Justin joined his section staring into the middle of the stadium’s dirt floor. They all grasped their wooden daggers with the blades running up the backs of their arms. Blaseph stood next to Justin and tapped his temple.

“Everyone, sync.”

As one, each member of the class tapped on their respective temples. In Justin’s eyes, as his Ocular Implants came alive, a message awaited him.

### **Accept Alignment with Professor Blaseph?**

Justin tapped his temple again and imagery exploded into his vision. Using his mind to steady the image, he forced it out of the implant until it expanded in front of him, combining with similar images from other students.

Almost immediately, a crystal-clear picture of the Consciousness appeared as a hologram in front of them. A man in gray robes sat in front of the stone structure with his back to them.

“Hello, Josephus,” Blaseph announced.

The man, who Justin presumed was Josephus, turned his head slightly.

“Professor, to whom are we speaking with today?”

“We’d like a word with Eliazar.”

Josephus did not acknowledge vocally, but gave the professor a questionable glance before placing his hand on the stone desk and putting the cube into action. The cerebral fluid began to dance to and fro until a man slowly emerged from the placid nothingness. The gray colors transformed into whites and beiges. Eventually, an old man with a cane and toga was staring back at them, although his venomous and idle stare was as threatening as a person from the Consciousness could look.

“Eli,” Blaseph said, touching his forehead as a show of deference.

“Oh, remove your hand from your face,” Eli spewed out at him, his spittle shooting out of the hologram in vivid 3D. “I haven’t been stuck here for near five millennia to consort with murderers. What is this savagery to which I’m being subjected?”

Blaseph remained cool and calculated.

“Eli, old friend,” he said in a mocking tone, before holding his wrists up for Eli’s view, “as you can see, this murderer is under lock and key.”

Blaseph’s wrists were constrained by wrist irons that were glowing softly yellow.

“And they still have you imparting your wisdom on these future souls of Seriam?” he accused Blaseph, poking his cane at the audience. “Outrageous abuse of educational resources. And of course, the alien is still in your presence. Let’s see how well that ends up for the likes of that moon you call home. There’s a reason we left that rock. Ugly species, the very suns as my witness.”

“Yes, as you have told us in the past.”

Justin fought the urge to roll his eyes.

*Great scholar, my ass. Blaseph is no murderer. What a crock of shit.*

“Well, seeing as you rudely summoned me, let’s get on with it then. The unfortunate afterlife punishment of committing one’s life to service of the greatest galactic empire in existence.”

“As you command, Your Highness. Eli, we have been discussing the need and the tradition to train in the art of hand-to-hand combat. We would like your wisdom on the matter.”

“Are you raising imbeciles? Isn’t it obvious? For love of the Eternal Energy, I feel its pain that it can never be annihilated!”

“Eli, your wisdom, if you will.”

Eli sighed and rolled his eyes. “When Apollo, the first and last great Governor of this land, removed the disease that was Anonius’ lineage, we had to devise a system of conduct that was not subject to dispute or time. Our great Empire was at war with itself. We were abusing our allies and lands and our future. We either had to adapt or destroy ourselves. So I developed the University and committed the population to service. At the very heart of that service is that we all understand the pain of death and threat of destruction. If we understand destruction, we will fight to avoid and overcome it. Why do we learn to fight? Because it connects us. We all now have the ability to defend ourselves and we all have the ability to understand that there are better ways. Violence is a necessity of life. But to understand how to wield violence, or better yet, how to avoid violence is the true art of living as a united species. From the desire of peace grows the desire to nurture our neighbors. From nurture grows the ability to create for the benefit of humanity. From ability to create grows the art, which is the open expression of the human mind and comparable only by the beauty of nature. The beauty of nature builds the foundation for future generations, who also must learn to look beyond violence or to utilize it in a manner of total destruction. We dismiss the notion of just war. War is inherently bad. Putting rules to it allows the flexibility to wield it. We learn to fight so we learn to love. As society naturally changes, the tradition of combat ties us together. That was the backbone of our philosophy for the future of Seriam. And it worked, until your professor ended the lineage and allowed the blood of Gilgomosh to poison the well once again.”

“Thank you, old friend, spoken like the true embodiment of wisdom that you are,” Blaseph said, cutting him off. “Until next time, rest well. Josephus, may the suns shine on your face.”

Blaseph cut the connection, sending a signal to the students to also end the session.

“I want you all to meditate on his words. We learn to fight so we learn to love. The tradition of combat ties us together. We’ll discuss those words in our next class. Now go wash up. Dismissed.”

They all rose to walk away. Justin was giddy at the opportunity to bathe himself and rest his eyes and undergo a regenerative treatment. Remus and Adelia helped Justin to his feet, but Blaseph had unfinished business.

“Mr. Staggert, walk with me for a bit.”

Justin cringed and dropped his head. He gulped and turned to the professor.

“Of course, Professor.”

Adelia winked at him as her and Remus turned to walk away. The last that Justin saw, Adelia was elbowing Remus in the ribs and wiping the blood from her lips onto him.

Justin had to walk briskly to catch up with Blaseph, who despite his rapidly devolving health, had already gained several steps on him.

“When you graduate, you’ll be a Seriam citizen. Regardless, you will always be an alien in this world. Are you prepared for that responsibility?”

Justin caught up to him before responding. “I don’t know. I was still kind of hoping I could go home at some point.”

“That will never happen.” He stopped and the two looked one another in the eye. Blaseph held his hands up. “You see these?”

“Ridiculous charge,” Justin said quickly.

“Of course it is. This was never about a murder charge, it was about getting enemies in line. I’m locked here within the confines and surrounding territory of the University. Maybe one day I’ll be sent to a development camp of a new world. But just as my sentence is political, so is yours. You are the missing link that our new Steward needs to show Seriam that intelligent civilizations can attain parity with Seriam’s technology. You embody the threat that Veneral needs as the impetus to exploit intelligent worlds. He’ll show you off to show the law that forbids colonizing intelligent civilizations is antiquated and he will push for renewed expansion throughout the galaxy.”

Justin considered his words.

“But he didn’t keep me here,” he said in English.

“In Latin, please.”

“Sorry,” he said, repeating his words in the native tongue. “Augustus kept me here.”

“Augustus didn’t view you as a threat. He viewed you as a shiny ball to keep Veneral preoccupied and a science experiment for his daughter.”

Once again, Justin considered the point Blaseph was trying to get across.

*My face really hurts.*

“Why are you telling this to me now?”

“You cannot afford to show weakness. Your hesitation in combat, your longing to go home, these are symptoms of a weak person. Weak people are dangerous. They breed hatred. You must become a citizen of this world. Maybe take on a mate, perhaps? Adelia?”

*Is he trying to get me a girl?*

Justin thought about Adelia and her blood-stained mouth. She almost reminded him of Jackie.

Justin took the moment to look him over. His skin was beginning to sag off of his bones and he carried the posture of a man who looked better suited for a chair than a combat coliseum. It was a far cry from the young, vibrant professor he was only two years prior. But the true impact of judicial wrist irons is the inability to utilize cellular regeneration. Veneral didn't need to make his absurd charges on Blaseph stick. He just needed to wait him out. But who better to pin Augustus' murder on than the man who trained the assassin?

“I'll think about it,” he finally said.

“Good.”

“Professor, you're looking old. We need to get those irons off of you.”

“In due time,” he responded, “all in due time. Come, let's walk some more. Tell me more about these machines that you personally command. Cars? They sound dangerous.”

Justin thought about cars and instinctively thought about his brother.

“They are, Sir. They really are.”



## Chapter 4 – Professor Blaseph

“The famous Lilith Octavia, in all her wonder,” Professor Blaseph said, slurring his words as he threw his head back and downed a small glass of Arborilt Distilled. He grunted and smiled and slammed the glass back on the counter that he was perched on. “Never in my wildest dreams would I have expected to find the famous Lilith Octavia serving me at a Distillery Den. What a funny and complex life we have.”

He slammed the glass twice more and breathed in deeply threw his nose. Lilith, patiently standing before him with a bottle, smiled unconcerned and obliged his demanding request.

“You’re saturated, Professor, why don’t you go home for the night,” Lilith said casually. The other two red-headed ladies behind the bar watched suspiciously as the man continued to make a scene.

“Is that a suggestion or a command, Your Royalty?” he replied, the alcohol continuing to alter his usually eloquent speech. He drowned the glass as he had the several before it, and gawked proudly

“That’s a suggestion for a friend,” she said as she placed his used glass into the sanitizer. “You never struck me as the kind of guy who would get saturated at a low-end Distillery Den.”

Blaseph’s wry smile dropped and he straightened his back up to show his affront to her passive insult.

“You know why I like Distillery Dens, Your Royalty?” he continued to slur as he spit onto the bar surface. “I like them because it’s the only place I can still get the good ole’ fashioned glasses; none of that vanishing bullshit. You can still taste the germs from all the other mouths that have had it. Isn’t that something special? Of course, it had never occurred to me as something to concern my time with until I had *these* slapped on my wrists.”

Blaseph threw his hands on the bar to show Lilith his shackles, his rapidly emaciating skin slipping off his bones as he did so.

Lilith clenched her jaw but continued to compose herself.

“I heard you were placed in confinement,” she said as diplomatically as possible. “It’s not right. Hopefully it’ll be lifted soon.”

“Lifted!” he cried out incredulously. “Your father is slain and to make an example of his newfound power, Veneral puts his old professor in shackles. And what does my loyal white-skinned princess do? She runs and hides, with a bunch of serving girls no less. You know, when I heard the whispers that you were living off the stipend, I thought my heart was going to give out once and for all. I mean, let’s be honest, this thing hasn’t had to tick on its own in over fifty years. It’s not quite suited for single life.” Blaseph shook his hands in the air for emphasis. “But it was worth it, you know? Cuz I knew my princess was going to come back and take control one day. But here you are. A serving girl at a Distillery Den. Living off the stipend. You think *these* will be lifted soon? Lilith Octavia, maybe you really aren’t suited to be the High Governor.”

Blaseph gulped as he finished his rant, awaiting whatever punishment was coming for him. The last few patrons of the Distillery Den had made a small crowd around him. Living off the stipend or not, this was the rightful heir to the governorship. In the small Lake Altus village of Apollonia on Externus, Lilith’s childhood home outside of the auspices of the University, she remained royalty and her faithful family and friends would have none of Blaseph’s rants.

“Professor,” Blaseph heard from behind him. It was a man’s voice. It was a familiar voice.

*Why do I know that?*

Blaseph turned and went pale when he saw the man who spoke.

“Jericho?” he said slowly, not wanting to believe his eyes.

*Is he here to kill me? Is he going to finish the job?*

“Professor, as you once taught me,” Jericho said in a slow, ominous voice. “It’s not quite that simple.”

Before Blaseph could respond, Jericho moved with lightning speed and clutched at the Professor’s throat directly underneath his chin. Blaseph’s world went black.

Blaseph awoke in a jolt, unaware of his surroundings. He felt at his chest and his face, uncertain if he was still alive.

*Did Jericho kill me?*

His logic and intellect indicated he had not been killed. Perhaps he had just made him go to sleep. But why would Jericho be there? Why would he not kill him? He's a traitor. He killed Augustus.

As Blaseph threw around these ideas, unaware of his environment or what he was laying on, he realized his head was pounding. He drove the ball of his hand into his forehead. He cringed and thought back to the night.

*I insulted the rightful Governor. I deserve to be dead.*

He slid his feet off the large cushion chair he was sunk into and put his still-sandaled feet onto the ground. He slowly used all of the force in his aging body to push himself up into a sitting position. He wished he hadn't. If he had just laid there, maybe he would have slowly faded away. Sitting a few meters from him were Lilith Octavia and Jericho. This didn't make sense.

"What is this?" he instinctively asked, not intending for it to sound so accusatory.

Jericho arose and put his hand before his eyes. Blaseph, a slave to tradition and social norms of deference, touched his forehead.

"Professor, my sincerest apologies for putting you to sleep, and, well," Jericho glanced at Lilith, "for the unfortunate turn of events of the last two years."

"The unfortunate..." Professor Blaseph began. He rose, but Jericho didn't flinch and Lilith remained seated. "I need explanations now."

"Professor, please sit, there's lots to discuss," Lilith said gently.

He gulped before reluctantly sitting back on the leather cushion. "Madam Solis," he said with recalcitrance in his voice. He was feeling loathe to offer them the benefit of the doubt, but had few options currently at his disposal.

Jericho continued to stand over him, clearly not appreciating the lack of respect their old professor was showing them.

"Professor Blaseph, it really is with great regret that you have been placed in confinement. It's not equitable and it's not the Seriam way," Lilith said, trying to assuage his anger.

"Well, we're not on Seriam, we're on Externus. And the Octavia family is no longer in control of Seriam."

"No, I suppose you're right. Regardless, we might not be on Seriam, but we're in the Seriam Empire, and we felt it was time to see if you are an ally or if you are too angry to participate."

“Participate? In what? And I found you, not the other way around. How in the name of the Eternal Energy have you kept your presence a secret?”

“You found us because we allowed you too,” Jericho quipped. “Even Externus isn’t immune from a well-placed rumor.”

Blaseph was too worked up to sit idly. He stood again and began to pace around the room. The home was standard for the Externus countryside. Heated veins extended throughout the stone and wood walls from the deep fireplaces. Lofted sleeping towers overlooked the great room they were standing in. A doorway to the garden-room stood adjacent to the wash-room. The roofing was standard issue on Seriam, but rarely seen on Externus, replete with sleeping sensors. The far two walls were entirely glass, which were becoming gradually more translucent as the first sun rose. He could vaguely see Lake Altus in the shadows, catching the sunlight across the horizon, and there appeared to be a dock extending off the beach.

*I heard she valued simplicity, but this is worse than I realized.*

“Whose accommodations are these?” he asked, not believing it was hers.

“This was the childhood home of my mother,” Lilith confirmed. “We kept it in our family for situations like these.”

Blaseph turned and stared at her, giving her a puzzled look. “Madam Solis lives in a country bungalow?”

“Disappointed?”

“Surprised.”

“We can’t all live in the luxury of University housing.”

“No, we can’t all live in the luxury of the Acropolis. Now I’m going to ask again, what is this? This is the man who murdered my Governor. This is the man who has caused me to age to the point of death. I need answers.”

“Professor Blaseph, this man is Jericho, the High Martis.”

“He *was* the High Martis before he murdered Augustus. Now he’s thrown the whole order into disarray and given Veneral more power than ever before.”

Lilith and Jericho allowed the words to sink in. Lilith chewed on her front lip, clearly not expecting the brazen verbal assault.

“Professor, I have been and always will be loyal to the rightful High Governor of Seriam,” Jericho stated. “Veneral might be the current Steward because of an antiquated statute, but I did not murder the High Governor.”

Professor Blaseph stared at him blankly before closing his eyes incredulously and shaking the stupidity out of his head.

“This isn’t open for debate! You killed him. What fantasy are you currently indulged in?” Jericho dropped his head in shame, not wanting to directly challenge the authority of his former mentor. “But of course, you just *have* to use a technique I personally taught you. It took them less than an eclipse to figure that out.”

“Professor,” Lilith said, “what Jericho meant to say is, he acted exactly as my father instructed him to act. It’s difficult to grasp, I know, and it took me a while even after I spoke with my father’s Consciousness, but it’s the truth.”

Blaseph stared at her for a moment. He began to look around the room for monitoring devices and then appeared woozy. Jericho raced to his side to hold him up and a young red-headed girl appeared from a hallway with three small glasses and a bottle of vinum.

“Have some vinum, Professor,” Lilith commanded when Jericho had placed him safely on the cushions.

He took a glass from the girl and began to drink without looking.

“So it is a conspiracy, derived from the very man we expect honesty from,” he said after gulping a glass down.

“It’s true, it was a conspiracy,” Lilith confided. “But as Jericho said, it’s not quite that simple. The conspiracy was to prevent a conspiracy. My father acted on behalf of a man that wanted to ensure his lineage. He knew that I...” She stopped short of finishing the statement and stared down at the floor.

“He knew that you what?” Blaseph asked, now enthralled by the story.

“He knew that he didn’t know who his daughter’s assassin was,” Jericho said, completing and correcting her thought. “He wanted her to have a chance, to live and to come to power on her own terms.”

Blaseph’s eyes furrowed as he stood up straighter.

“Either the High Governor was the most caring father in the empire, or that story seems far-fetched.”

“Is it so hard for you to believe my father cared for me to the point he’d be willing to die to protect me?” Lilith asked

Blaseph thought about this.

“Not as hard to believe as a man who would throw away an intergalactic empire because his daughter was having an identity crisis.”

*Suns in the sky, I'm a monster.*

His comments fired like daggers into Lilith's soul. She cringed and fought the tears building in her eyes. All she could do was nod softly.

“Madam Solis will be a great High Governor one day, if she so chooses to be,” Jericho said defensively. “Just as you once taught us, we all have a choice of service. But service comes in many forms, Professor. I don't know if you understand that, but, to try to explain, all I received were the instructions. I had to assume there would be a strike on Madam Solis as well. The assassination had to be public, to rally support for the true heir and to identify the person that was responsible for murdering the Solis. Since I made sure the AH Forti protected Madam Solis, though, she was removed too quickly. We didn't see who might have threatened her.”

“You didn't see anyone try to strike?”

“No,” Lilith said quickly, although her eyes exposed her lie.

“Why would anyone come to you, Jericho? The most loyal servant in Augustus' army?”

Jericho bit his lip and looked at Lilith, who nodded.

“Augustus knew his life was short and possibly in danger. He had me seek out the opportunity. Unfortunately, well, the easiest method is to entertain the student groups, which brought me to the University. It wasn't long before I was receiving anonymous messages.”

“The point of origin being the University,” Blaseph said. Understanding what Jericho was insinuating, Blaseph just shook his head. “Augustus always did things his own way, the *wrong* way, and I pay the price,” he continued, defeated. “Who better to arrange such meetings than your sinister old professor? I suppose that's what made him great, though, the utter stupidity. Waiting until his third century to reproduce. No wonder you think you have a choice. He didn't take a wife until he was on his death throes. No thanks to *you*, I might add,” he said to Jericho, taking advantage of the opportunity to admonish the half-brained scheme to keep Lilith as the rightful heir to the Apollo Acropolis.

The windows began to grow lighter, letting in subtly more light as the suns rose. Lilith looked up, and her beauty as the light hit her face made Blaseph speechless with awe.

He had never seen her before as Lilith the homeowner. Her natural beauty belonged as the face of Seriam.

Lilith sniffled and said, "The sun is rising; I need to tend to the garden. The vegetables are finally in season."

"And a grower to boot," Blaseph said.

"I'm sorry you had to find out this way," Lilith said, taking a sip of her vinum.

"Well, what's done is done. Now I imagine you won't let me leave without asking of me what you intended."

Lilith eyed the professor, noticeably pondering the wisdom of sharing her plan with the man who had been so insulting. Finally, she nodded.

"Very well. We've all heard the whispers," Lilith started, "even out here by the lake. Veneral is calling for a repeal of the law to settle intelligent worlds and loyalists to Gilgomosh Anonius are emboldened, even after all these millennia. They would like nothing more than to have a descendant of his bloodline, even a man as crass as Veneral, become the permanent High Governor. All I ask, I mean, what would be useful, is if you can report on what you're hearing at the University."

"You want me to spy on my institution? You realize, *Lilith*, that the best way to end the whispers is for you to show your face and accept the role you were born for. The people would accept you."

"Well, then as your High Governor, can I depend on you to help me out?"

Blaseph sighed. He obviously wasn't going to say no.

"Yes, I suppose. But, Jericho, if you concoct anymore schemes, will you please run them by me?"

Lilith laughed at Jericho's embarrassment.

"Yes, I guess we didn't think through all the repercussions of slaying the High Governor."

*We?*

Blaseph's eyes went flat and he stared at Jericho quizzically, trying to elicit details subconsciously. He thought better of challenging him further, though.

*I'm sure there'll be more answers in due time.*

"With your permission, I'll take my leave now," he said, rising.

Lilith accepted his departure and stood to see him out.

“There are public hover-cycles about a kilometer down the lake front,” she informed him.

He nodded silently and walked out the front door.



## Chapter 5 – Veneral

Veneral hadn't been to the University since he was installed as the Steward of Seriam. The absence wasn't an accident. With the influence the University wielded in the Empire, the possibility of unrest during his visit would adversely impact his chances of becoming the permanent High Governor.

But the absence, as his advisors informed him after every eclipse, could not last forever. Alas, with the Council whispering in his ear that the disrespect was unbecoming of a leader, he finally devised a reason to present himself after two years. Regardless, he wasn't happy about it. With his feet firmly beneath him, he tried in vain to balance his breathing. He was the Steward, for the sake of the all the stars in the sky, and here he was, nervous as a first year. How degrading would it be if the future of Seriam saw his hands shaking and his speech falter?

*Almost as degrading as being named Steward for two years with no discussion for a vote of permanence.*

The sprawling campus of the University, consuming the space of an entire continent of Externus, was as beautiful and awe-inspiring as he remembered. The ingenuity of Seriam and the dedication to the arts and sciences truly proved their worth with this masterpiece. The Administrative Center, an enormous solar-powered complex with two-kilometer-high spires that spoke to Seriam's Outer Rim in lieu of their own Outer Rim, was the nerve center of the University. Sitting in the center of the campus, it housed the High Administrator and the instructional staff and stood atop the Central Magnetic Transport, which was the hub of the underground transportation system. Enormous lightning rods surrounded the Administrative Center, capturing the power of nature and sending blue electrical currents into the ground.

With Jonas, Monty, and Titus standing behind him, Veneral stared up at the soaring spires and thought back to the first time as a young sixteen-year-old that his uncle dared him to look at the sight and not get dizzy. Little did Veneral know at the time that he would soon be fitted with implants that would prevent such dizziness. It was the type of humor that would land his uncle in the *honorable* position of First General of 48-Quasi 2 where he was responsible for providing security for Jonas' growing civilization. At least security is what they were calling it. Veneral needed someone he could trust and who better than an

elderly uncle with nothing to lose? Such humor had no business in the civilized world of Seriam.

“Lord Steward,” Priscilla Regula exclaimed, walking out of the Administrative Center with her arms open and welcoming. They both touched their foreheads when they were in close proximity. “Inform me of such visits in the future and you’ll be received with the rightful pomp and pageantry afforded to the man overseeing our great Empire’s future.”

The 25 AH-Forti that accompanied Veneral on his trip grew nervous at the excitable woman, but Veneral waved them off with a flick of his hand.

“Priscilla, still enforcing the rules of this great institution?” Veneral asked with just a touch of antagonism.

Priscilla was no friend to the Steward, not when she was merely his instructor, not when Augustus placed her in charge of the University, and certainly not when he demanded that she pass his anonymous messages to Jericho when he was a First Minister. Veneral never gave her any reason to suspect they were treacherous—after all, it wasn’t uncommon for Priscilla to oversee and funnel high-level correspondence through the University channels—but she immediately ceased her assistance when Augustus was murdered. Despite her frivolous smiles and charm that were as superficial as Augustus’ once were, Veneral had always wondered if she did indeed suspect him of treacherous behavior.

“I prefer to say instilling the values of Seriam into our future leaders,” she chirped, perturbed by his demeaning question.

“Of course. And please accept my apologies for not providing advanced notice. I was hoping to check in on our vis-i-tor.” He annunciated each syllable like the word was meant to be a euphemism for a dark secret.

“But of course.” Priscilla tapped her temple lightly and seemed to focus elsewhere. After a few more taps, she said, “He’s a third year now so he’s instructing. He’s in the Elias Building, just down the corridor. Would you like a cold beverage before you go? You could try our newest nectars? I could fill you in on new developments?”

*New developments? As though I don’t have access to my ministers and council?*

“Just the boy,” Veneral replied in disgust. He made a mental note to look into her replacement. She was clearly approaching the end of her reign.

*The grandeur of the University is apparent in every one of you. That would be a good opening line in case I need to make remarks. How exciting for them to get the chance to meet the Steward.*

“Very well,” Priscilla said. “Please let me know if there is any service I can provide. I know the Lord Steward has *unique* tastes.”

Veneral smiled at her, not allowing her underhanded insults to shake his public image. He continued to don the black flats and irons, but had added bright yellow belts and armbands, which hearkened to the color worn by his ancestors and signified the fire in the sky.

He breathed out audibly, bowed his head slightly, and then turned and walked away.

*I think we all can agree change is upon us. Let us not turn our backs on this change when such progress can instill a new sense and purpose. And with new purpose means new blood to lead the way.*

No person, Steward or otherwise, was allowed onto the ground floor of the Elias Building instructional chambers; the exception, of course, being the young instructors and their even younger students. The Elias Building was really just a large auditorium, roughly two kilometers in diameter, where all first-year students took their initial instructions. The auditorium was home to thousands of small platforms where third years practiced the art of clear communication and eloquence in presentation. In turn, the first years were free to wander among the presenters and elect to stay for a day or a year.

The instructional chambers were situated through a logical stream of consciousness. A first year interested in abstract art might stop at a presenter teaching elementary art forms. Should the first year decide the subject is not perfect, the presenter can make suggestions. The next platform over might be an introduction to pictorial history, and another direction might be the art of warfare, where the student can focus their presumed love of abstract art into war planning, and yet another direction might be an introduction to cellular regeneration, where the student can put the once abstract into concrete healing practices. The process, combined with the foundational core courses in art, war, logic, and history, and assuming a baseline of at least twelve years of mathematics and Latin before being granted acceptance to the University, will then inform the remaining two years of study.

Veneral and his entourage paced slowly along the glass pathways above the instructional chambers. The pathways were littered with scientists and professors, taking

notes to critique the presenters and observing the new students to potentially sway them in specific directions. They all stopped their observations, though, as Veneral walked past.

“Lord Steward,” they would all say, touching their foreheads.

“Where is the visitor?” Veneral asked one of the scientists, stopping as he pretended that the overt deference he was receiving was unnecessary.

The scientist, a man with darker than usual skin and wearing the universally accepted white flats of the scientific community, looked suspiciously at Veneral for a moment before pointing down the walkway.

“Eight platforms down,” he said in the thick accent of the Jurisdiction population.

*Mental note to speak with Constantine to ensure he is maintaining breeding standards. The last thing we need is poor standards to adulterate Seriam.*

As Veneral walked, the glass below him lit up with the names of the students and instructors and the planet they came from. As directed, he continued to walk until the name *Justin Staggert, 35-Solar 3 (Earth)* lit up before his feet. In reality, though, the name was unnecessary. Where all other platforms had three to sometimes as many as six students, an abnormally large crowd of nearly thirty gave away Justin’s presence.

“And here’s our boy,” Monty whispered as he came shoulder-to-shoulder with Veneral.

“Indeed,” Veneral said, annoyed at his High Minister of War and Culture. He paused to stare at Monty. “I need you on board with this.”

“I’m here to serve, Lord Steward,” Monty responded nebulously.

Veneral smirked and said, “Indeed.”

They both moved to peer over the ledge of the glass observation towers and saw Justin standing on his platform, accompanied by a girl Veneral had never seen before. Both wore golden brown sandals and skirts consisting of a leather belt from which dangled hundreds of feathers and leather straps. The girl finished the outfit with a black leather smock, completing the traditional University garb of a student pursuing a military calling, potentially joining the famed Marti. Justin, however, opted for a climate-regulating vest befitting of a student opting for a life dedicated to the sciences. Surrounding the two were fascinated first years, digesting every word the alien spoke.

“Can you enhance?” Veneral asked to no one in particular.

“The Steward asked a question,” Jonas insisted, looking to his left and right. Jonas’ musculature had been steadily growing over the past two years as he spent more and more

time in the Apollo Acropolis enjoying Veneral's exquisite tastes of meats from all the corners of the galaxy, in addition to physique enhancements.

In front of the group, a life-size picture of Justin emerged so they could all see him directly. He had just made a joke and his crowd was still laughing as the picture emerged.

"I think that question will be better answered by Adelia over here," he quipped, throwing Adelia under the bus with an overt thumb pointing.

"Oh thanks, Justin," Adelia said, much to everyone's amusement.

"In all seriousness, the differences in strategy between Earth and Seriam is difficult to answer because Earth is divided by unique populations whereas Seriam is a singular Empire."

Adelia slapped him on the shoulder, astounded by his response. Justin threw his hands up apologetically.

"Externus, being the obvious outlier. War on Earth is centered around alliances. War on Seriam is total. War on Earth involves shortages of resources. Seriam has no such issues. These factors change strategy."

Justin stopped momentarily to think.

*Where did he just go?*

"What about spirits?" one student asked.

Justin grinned. "Imbibing is universal."

Veneral missed the next question, but settled for Justin's response.

"Earth, or 35-Solar 3, is my home. It took me a long time to understand we all live within one galaxy. But that's the beauty of space travel. I came here and found a new home even though I'm in the same neighborhood of the Universe as before. I have a new family." Justin motioned toward Adelia. "All we can do is continue to strive for a smaller galaxy where it doesn't matter what quadrant or plane we're in or what planet or moon we're on. Seriam has done an admirable job colonizing without disrupting intelligent ecosystems. Maybe I'm being selfish, but I'd like to take a step forward so civilizations can co-exist."

"And if we can't, we need to be prepared for war," Adelia said, much to Veneral's delight.

Veneral looked towards Monty and pushed the corners of his lips down as he nodded.

"Why don't we all have a chat?" he said.

"You heard the Steward, let's set it up," Jonas shouted.

“You do have enormous boobs,” Veneral heard as the chamber opened for his entrance, followed by hysterical laughter.

When the three of them saw the Steward emerge, they immediately sprang to their feet as their chairs descended into the ground. Veneral had asked for a relaxation chamber, which meant the ground was made of a lush grass and the walls were surreal images of waterfalls and chirping birds.

Veneral, flanked by Jonas, Monty, and Titus, walked in and stared silently at the three students before him.

“Lord Steward,” Adelia said, leading all three in touching their foreheads before his presence.

Veneral nonchalantly responded in kind, but clearly had other thoughts on his mind.

“I asked to meet with one, and yet before me I see three,” he stated in an accusatory voice.

Titus immediately began to touch his temple and soon names of all three and their studies of choice appeared in his eyes.

**Adelia Floritius, War Theory and Command.** *Interesting.*

**Remus Tor, Intergenerational Communication.** *Could be useful.*

**Justin Staggert, Space Exploration.** *Unlikely.*

“Apologies, Sir,” Justin whispered meekly, before elevating his voice a little to say, “per University regulations, the team can always function in lieu of an individual. I didn’t realize...”

Justin gulped. Veneral seized the initiative, but not before Jonas defended his Steward.

“Do you think this is a game?” he demanded. “Show some...”

“It’s alright, Jonas, it’s quite alright.” He looked at Justin. “After all, we learn these lessons of life for a reason. I appreciate seeing them in practice. Please, sit.”

Veneral welcomed them to sit with a posed gesture of welcome. The ground responded to his movements as he tapped his temple to accept the Ocular Implant’s suggestion based on his standard requests, even providing a small desk to place his well-postured hands. Sitting perfectly upright, and after all other participants took their seats,

Veneral removed the chip from behind his ear. As regulations strictly stipulated, all others in the room removed theirs as well and placed them on their own desks; all, save for Titus.

“For personal reference,” Veneral offered to the perplexed looks of overt insubordination. “Titus is bound from providing memories to the Consciousness. Regardless, we’re here for business, and there’s no reason my offer can’t be extended to the team.” He turned to Adelia. “Ms. Floritius, my records indicate you would like to join the legendary Marti.” And then to Remus. “Mr. Tor, you seem determined to refine our links to the Consciousness. Consider this, on the record, my official blessing for both noble pursuits. My congratulations.”

Adelia and Remus giddily looked at one another. Their chosen service to the Empire was validated.

“Mr. Staggert,” he continued. “We all owe service to this great Empire. You might be able to understand my concerns of your chosen pursuits. Now, the Marti, the Consciousness, these professions need my blessing. I cannot prevent you from joining the ranks of space explorers. However, I would like to implore other possible pursuits.”

*This is it. This is the moment the world will look back to as the moment that changed history. This is when I'll be known as validating the glory of Gilgomosh. We can mold intelligent species. I'll be installed as High Governor and given reproductive rights. The line of my blood will be reinstated. Then I can disband this dastardly High Council and return to supreme rule as it once was.*

Justin looked perplexed.

“What type of pursuits?” he asked, eyeing his friends for support. He noticeably gulped.

“Service to the Empire is a calling. We provide our service, and Seriam provides all necessary services to live. Seriam provides a stipend, and we have the privilege to fund the Empire by assigning our taxes as we see fit. It is a symbiotic relationship that has existed for millennia.”

“Okay,” was all Justin could utter.

Veneral smiled, realizing the boy had no clue where he was going.

“Service can be defined in a plethora of ways. It can be military service. It can be service through the advancement of science or the arts. In some cases, it can be service to the direct rule of Seriam. Mr. Staggert, I am offering you the chance to join my personal Council of Advisors. You would advise me on all matters of science and space exploration.”

Veneral grinned broadly, but only received three looks of stupor.

"I beg your pardon, Sir?"

This didn't even come from Justin Remus simply couldn't help himself.

"I need advisors. I can't manage all the affairs of an intergalactic empire on my own. A functioning council needs diversity. Your grasp of these issues stands out as exemplary."

"Sir," Justin said slowly, "I am grossly unqualified for such a position. I recommend considering other alternatives."

Veneral smiled broadly, his eyebrows piercing into his nose as his yellow ornamentals seemed to glow brighter.

"Already advising with the wisdom of a thousand suns." He put his hands in the air. "You by no means have to make an immediate decision to such a monumental task. Take your time and discuss with your friends. Let me know one way or the other."

"Justin," Monty said, his avuncular voice meant to sound as a soothing complement to Veneral's politicking, "I have been in your position. Augustus asked me to join his council at a young age. If you didn't express uncertainty, you would be unfit." Monty's blue sarong and light blue sash, which almost replicated Augustus's late-in-life decision to don pale blue robes, gave his skin a lighter shade of beige, but he couldn't help his stolid demeanor that gave him an almost unnerving confidence. He continued, leaning forward but stopping short of reaching out to grab Justin's knee. "I very much look forward to working with you."

"You worked with Madam Solis?" Justin asked, his unexpected urgency catching Monty off guard.

"It was a great honor," he confirmed.

"Do you know where she is?" Adelia rudely chimed in.

Veneral's smile dropped. Their candor was not appreciated.

*No one cares about Lilith. Move on.*

"She has opted to see to her own safety," Monty said. "I, as we all are, am uncertain of her whereabouts. We can only hope that she remains safe and will soon reemerge."

Veneral breathed slowly to steady himself.

"Yes, Seriam can very much use her grace and leadership," he added. "Now, we have used up too much of your time. Let us take leave of you, and may the suns shine on all of your futures."

They rose and reinserted their chips behind their ears. As this would now be recorded for perpetuity, Veneral stared squarely at Justin to impart his wisdom.



“We all make decisions in life,” he exuded with superficial gravitas. “The ends won’t always justify the means, but the power of your decisions can lead to greatness, and greatness always justifies the ends.”

He turned and quickly departed, but not before he heard laughter coming from his small audience.

## Chapter 6 – Bryce

Bryce hated the strong emphasis on academics at Juniper. Theory is great until it isn't. Science is great until something new comes along. He was here to fly in spaceships and not get lost among the stars. Frequent action and consistent on-the-job training were the only valuable methods for their future success. Listening to Professor Barbeau espouse her wisdom on cultural intricacies was a good way for them to waste several hours a week that could otherwise have been spent learning more about the nooks and crannies of Shake Shack.

At least today's lesson from Professor Hambone focused on deviation maintenance outside of an atmosphere.

Bryce sat uncomfortably in his new Juniper pants and white Polo. He tried to conceal his hand as he grabbed at his crotch, combating the inexorable climb of the stiff pants as they inched farther and farther up his hips. He didn't understand why he couldn't just wear the standard flight suit like in the past.

"Flight suits are for flying," Sartor told them.

*Bullshit.*

He looked at the clock. Twenty-eight more minutes until he was home free. Shorts, a t-shirt, and Tink, all together on a beach.

He sighed and looked at the white board. Holographic imaging, 3-D printing, intergalactic space travel, and Professor Hambone uses a white board. But that pretty much summed up Hambone, who was just as bad as Professor Barbeau.

Everything about Hambone was stereotypical of a sixty-year-old. His hair was turning white and was missing in some places. His gut protruded over his front belt buckle, but he didn't look fat. He was always on time and always wore a suit, which had patches on the elbows. If you didn't know he had earned a PhD in astrophysics at the age of nineteen, you'd never assume he was anything but a gracefully aging grandfather with a warm smile and a kind heart.

*Who likes to use white boards.*

Professor Hambone sipped his Pepsi and then pointed to the board, where he had drawn two circles on either side of a large black spot.

"Point of origin," he stated, and then pointing to the other circle, "point of destination. Why is that important?"

“We need to identify both signatures for a charted course,” Beth Cumberland said unabashedly. Beth was the third year’s Team Alpha navigator, but was still far down the flagpole with regards to joining a Juniper team. Regardless, she wasn’t going to let meekness burden her progress.

*Eye roll.*

“Yes, yes yes, very good, Beth. Very good indeed. A charted course. And guess who is responsible for charting that course, navigators?”

“We are,” the class said in forced unison.

Everyone spoke, except Bryce, who shocked even himself when he raised his hand instead.

“Yes, of course, Mr. Staggert. Please share.”

“If we need a signature of another world, doesn’t that preclude exploration? Doesn’t that mean we need a destination?”

Professor Hambone smiled sheepishly. “Yes, indeed it does, yes indeed. And so what question are you naturally thinking about, Bryce?”

“How do we get the destination?”

“What Bryce is asking, ladies and gentlemen, isn’t actually how do we find destinations, but how do we find the deviations. If we need a deviation to travel through space, then how do we find one?”

The class looked around silently, uncomfortably hoping Hambone didn’t call their name.

“I mean, you all find them every day, don’t you? In your simulations?”

“We identify the deviation between the known gravity and a second gravitational reading and then calibrate the ship to enable passage through the delta,” Grover Menendez said as though he were reading from a book.

Hambone, though, looked unsatisfied.

“That answer is certainly hard to refute. I challenge you all to consider another possibility. What if the gravitational reading is actually the black hole that we utilize, and the *deviation* is actually the break in the natural path back to our original destination.”

Hambone had the twinkle in his eye that he only gets when he’s about to drop some serious wisdom on his students. The twinkle quickly dissipated, though, when he saw the perplexed looks of his students. He dropped his shoulders.

“To the board. Here’s what we know.” He drew a line from one planet, closely moving it around the black hole and then to the second planet. He pointed to the second half of the line. “Maybe, just maybe, *this* is the deviation. Maybe, just maybe...” He began to draw again, but this time finished the loop around the black hole and back to the first planet. “This is the closed, natural system. We need an extra force to break away from our charted path. Why do we only have a single location that we are capable of mapping? Maybe, just maybe, it’s not because we have the signature of the planet, but the signature of the unnatural force that pulled us out of the, oh, let’s call it the space loop. So, Bryce, to answer your question, if we can create that force for ourselves, then we can literally sling our ship into any of the far reaches of the universe. We just have to be able to find the deviation to get back into the space loop.”

“But that still doesn’t make sense, Professor,” Bryce said. “If we depend on black holes within the Milky Way, how do we escape the galaxy?”

Professor Hambone considered the question while looking at his sketch. Finally, he turned and shrugged.

“The idea of a gravitational connection is that we use negative energy to skip through space. If we’re actually using a natural space loop around a black hole, maybe travel within our own galaxy is a limit. In theory, though, there’s technically no limit on the distance.”

Now it was Bryce’s turn to have a twinkle in his eye.

*Maybe class isn’t so bad after all.*

When Hambone released the twenty-one navigators, who were all in one way or another wondering if the old man had lost his marbles, Bryce found Tink waiting for him outside on the grass of the Neil Armstrong quad. It was never hard for Bryce to find her as her platinum blond hair shone like a flashlight among the hundreds of people taking advantage of the warm fall air. Weaving through picnicking families and first years frantically flipping through books in study groups, he made his way up to her.

“Hey there,” she said nonchalantly, blocking the sun with her hand as she looked up at him from her blanket.

“Oh hey,” he said back.

“If you’re lost and alone, you can uh, you know, share this blanket with me.”

Bryce looked her up and down and licked his lips, purposely trying to appear creepy and uncouth.

"I think there's something else I want to do on that blanket."

Tink's smile beamed across the quad more brightly than did her hair. She propped herself up to her elbows as Bryce dropped down onto his knees.

"I love when you're all macho and dirty," she gushed.

"I'm always macho and dirty," he corrected. "And manly, and handsome, and inimitable."

"Inimitable? That's a new one."

"Eh, I just learned it."

They stared at each other for a few seconds.

"Can I have you for the rest of the day?" she asked.

"Does it involve the beach and no one else?"

"Yes."

"Then yes! Plus, I have no more classes and am not even on the schedule for sims this afternoon."

Tink sat up all the way.

"Bleh, I am. Sartor's all worked up about some new finding and wants to start tests today. Cuz you know, the comms girl is so vital to flight operations."

Bryce laughed. "You sell yourself too short. This isn't about artificial deviations, is it?"

Tink's smile faded and she cocked her head to one side.

"Yes, actually. How'd you know that?" She lit up. "Are they bringing you to Alpha?"

Bryce chuckled lovingly.

"Right. No, Hambone just dropped some knowledge on us. He's all giddy. I almost find it endearing that they get so worked up, as if they're ever going to go operational with this shit."

Tink threw both of her hands onto his arm.

"Instead of going all negative Nancy on me, let's head over."

Bryce didn't need any convincing. He didn't even feel the need to go change. They both stood and packed up the blanket, and then Bryce picked up the basket she had prepared. They began to walk back through the sunbathing hordes, fighting the urge to

hold hands. At one point, Micah, who was sitting with George, Jackie, and the new Team Alpha navigator, Francisco Latimer, stood up and keeled over, grabbing his forehead.

“Aw, aw man!” he yelled. “Damn, my name’s Bryce and I don’t think I can carry this basket all by myself. Aw, my head, it’s killing me. I’m such an old man with my old man migraines.”

Tink and Bryce kept walking past as Micah and his friends burst into laughter. Bryce put his middle finger in the air but didn’t look at their reaction. He just held it in place as he walked.

Tink tugged on his shirt to keep walking.

“Don’t listen to those guys.”

“Someday they’ll feel my pain.”

“Well, don’t hurt my gunners, either. That’s bad for business.”

They both kept walking, saying very little for about ten minutes until they reached the banks of the Colorado River. With the snow rapidly melting off of the Rockies, the river was much higher than usual, but the naturally occurring beach had had its share of high tides and offered plenty of room for lounging.

*And it’s empty.*

“It’s a wonder more people don’t use this place,” he said.

“I know. I barely ever used it until you started dragging me out here.

Bryce poked at her, which she flirtatiously batted away. She laid out the blanket while Bryce took his shoes off and began digging through the basket.

“What do you got in here?”

“I figured you’d be hungry. I got some sandwiches.”

“Roast beef?”

“Turkey. And salads.” She didn’t wait for his groans as she began to slip her clothes off that left only a bikini covering her up.

Bryce shook his head.

“What?” she asked shyly.

“Turkey and salad. God-damned shame.”

With his pants and shirt still on, he charged at her and scooped her up. She began to scream as he charged into the ice-cold water, submerging both of them. They emerged from the water kissing, locked in an embrace with only one purpose in mind. He had her top off in moments while she tugged his shirt over his head. He started to walk her backwards

toward the blanket as they both worked on one another's bottoms. By the time they reached the blanket, Bryce scooped her up once again and rested her on her back. They continued to kiss, but neither wanted or needed foreplay.

They both clawed into one another's backs in absolute passion. He slid inside of her until he exploded; her own screams rousting the birds from the trees above. What seemed like a moment in time ended with them lying on their backs panting heavily.

"Oh my God," she said in disbelief.

"Holy fuck, that was incredible," he responded, although his words were so lost in the moment that the soft wind and gentle swaying of the trees seemed to seize the words and allowed them to drift off into the natural surroundings.

Tink rolled onto her side and put a hand across his chest.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

He looked her up and down, stunned by the beauty of her naked body.

"How much I want you."

"You already have me."

He looked at her as she said this, trying to read her face and trying to figure out how to convey what he was feeling.

"I think I'm falling in love with you," he said.

Her eyes squinted and she moved closer, placing her head on his shoulder.

She sighed.

"It's because I'm *inimitable*."

He quickly wrapped his arms around her and rolled on top of her as she squealed with delight.

"Falling in love with you was a foregone conclusion years ago," she said. "Welcome to the club."

He kissed her softly and rolled off, instinctively grimacing as the blood that was rushing back into his body made his head ache in dull pain.

"Oh no," she said, moving to comfort him. "Your head?"

He nodded. "You broke me."

"I thought it was getting better."

"It is. Just gets tight. You can't tell those assholes, though."

"I guess you have to be good to me."

"Only if you feed me. I'm starving."

She patted his chest and shook her head at him. She reached over to the basket and threw a sandwich on him.

He shook his head. "Turkey. God-damned shame."

She took the sandwich and crammed it in his face.



## Chapter 7 – Veneral

“This is highly unusual, Lord Steward,” Raze Anders stated, who in the two years since Augustus’ death had taken steps back from his categorical renunciation of wrist irons and Ocular Implants. Now with two lines shaved around his head in a symbolic reminder of the number of years since his High Governor had been assassinated, Raze had become almost hawkish in his insistence of personal security.

“I am forbidden by law from holding a session of the High Council without every member being present, but nothing tells me where I can hold such meetings,” Veneral stated impudently. Veneral had called a ministerial session of the High Council, but opted against holding it in the public eye of the Grand Hall of the Gardens. Instead, with newly designed facial hair that formed a square extension off of his chin, Veneral assembled the group in a small room several levels below his personal chambers. “I assumed you would appreciate the added security, First Minister Anders.”

“I believe what my esteemed colleague is asking is what is this meeting about,” Antipeter Florencia asserted, paying no deference to royal fawning. Antipeter’s hair was in two thick braids that were twisted together above her head.

“Maybe if you’ll allow the Steward to speak, you’ll find out,” Jonas declared irritably.

Jonas’ body had grown even more imposing in recent months since Veneral had invited him to serve as a governor-in-absentia, allowing Jonas to help govern the affairs of the greater empire while Jonas’ deputy—Veneral’s Uncle—oversaw the day-to-day work of the newest outpost. He relished in his extended stay in Verita, indulging in the Steward’s offerings, such as physique enhancement and robotic-musculature assistance, but also in the extra resources Veneral continued to bestow on the colony, such as battle cruisers, growers, security battalions, and galactic cruisers.

“And how is your planet, Jonas, or do you even know?” Antipeter quipped.

“Keep asking, and I’m sure you’ll find out.”

“Is that a threat? To the High Council? Now we’re not allowed to speak at our own meetings?”

*Jonas, they need to elect us or all of this is for naught.*

“Ok, thank you, Jonas. First Minister Florencia, please excuse Jonas. He is exhausted from his extraordinary efforts overseeing the transition to a permanent leader. After all, I am just the Steward.”

“I don’t think that fact has been lost on us,” Raze attested. “Now, you have seven ministers here and I see you have asked additional participants as well to impart their wisdom on the governing of Seriam. Governor Constantine,” he said, addressing the behemoth that governs the planetary colony of Jurdiction, “it is always a pleasure when you indulge us politicians.”

Constantine, sitting in the shadows away from the plain wooden table that Augustus had installed—*maybe a nice touch to remind them all that I, too, was Augustus’ ally*—still sat a full head higher than the other participants in the room. His menacing size was an outlier throughout Seriam, usually bred out to ensure homogeneity.

He nodded curtly and touched his forehead, but clearly had no interest yet in discussing his attendance.

“Raze, Antipeter, please, let’s settle down and speak on issues we can all agree on. Noble First Ministers and governors, I brought you all here to discuss the glory of Seriam. The glory that Seriam is, that it once was, and what we will do to ensure it will remain to be.”

*I’m glad I’m recording this. Those will be my opening words in my inaugural address.*

“It’s true, we are meeting away from the public eye. In a time of great strife, I feel it is necessary to hide our governance from potential adversaries. Our adversaries, I might remind you, are many. Yes, Seriam has known peace for millennia, but look at how a single blow has rocked the very bedrock of our empire.”

*What would Augustus do?*

Veneral rose and began to walk around the table, his hands holding each of his elbows behind his back.

“There are adversaries such as the great Jericho who slayed our High Governor. There are conspiratorial adversaries like the noble Professor Blaseph who has been accused of aiding and abetting.”

“Accused, but not indicted due to lack of evidence,” Monty chimed in, holding a finger in the air. His disruption caused several of the heads in the room to nod.

Monty’s interruption flustered Veneral, who didn’t expect such outbursts from his loyal brethren. He glared at Monty, who had no qualms staring straight back.

*Perhaps he’s saving face for his fellow ministers.*

“Of course, thank you for that important clarification, First Minister Garrison. And there are adversaries who want to see Seriam burn. Distant colonies with colonists feeling unrepresented. Locals who cause stirrings with whispers of a resurgent Lilith Octavia.”

“The rightful heir to the governorship,” Antipeter proclaimed in disgust at the apparent insult toward her rightful leader.

“There is no such thing as a rightful heir,” Jonas corrected. “All High Governors are elected as such.”

“And we would unanimously elect Lilith Octavia,” Raze asserted.

Veneral shrugged and acquiesced to the suggestion.

“Perhaps yes,” he said, “perhaps no. What is clear is that Lilith Octavia is gone, rejecting her responsibilities. The sun does not stop shining because it is tired, nor should the Solis cower because she is scared or lazy.”

His words caused an uproar, with his meeting exploding into immediate pandemonium. He heard yelling from all sides. Antipeter and Raze defending Madam Solis, and Jonas and Monty exchanging insults, and even the usually silent First Ministers of Education, Transportation, and Government and Judicial Services defending the disappearance of Augustus’ daughter.

“Lord Steward,” Romulus Centrifigus, whose flamboyant flower-laden robes made the room smell of roses and lilies, said calmly if not oddly high-pitched, “perhaps it would be wise to cease slinging insults at our Solis. Surely you can understand that we view whispers of a *resurgent* Lilith Octavia as a blessing, not a threat. The AH Fortis series has proven more than capable of responding to violence and our Marti and professional warriors stand at the ready to restore the peace.”

Romulus’ soothing voice and reassuring words seemed to satisfy the concerned council, whose anger simmered as they retook their seats.

“Curious, isn’t it, that the Steward chose not to invite Governor Alabaster, whose perspective might prove very useful to this discussion,” Antipeter stated dryly. “I believe she might say the real threat was the lack of clean water on Calorin. Or Josephus Poseidon, whose city of Insula Mar continues to wonder when Verita will acquiesce to his request for hard metals. Ruling is difficult, isn’t it?”

*I’m losing them.*

Veneral didn’t look at Antipeter in the eye but continued to circle the table. As he passed each of the participants, he placed his hands on their shoulders. It wasn’t intended

to appear malicious, but comforting. Finally, after several seconds of circling in which his clenched jaw made evident that further challenges to his authority were strictly forbidden, Veneral sat and clasped his hands together on the wooden table.

“Yes, resources, as always, remain scarce, and I am but one man. My natural inclination is to take care of those loyal to the Empire. Take Jonas, for example. He has been instrumental to maintaining stability, and as such, I have granted his requests for increased security and technology. Ruling is difficult, Antipeter, which is why I rely so heavily on my highly qualified Council. Naturally, I would assume the First Minister of Planetary Resources would look into these problems directly.”

“And I have permission to respond directly?” Antipeter asked, her interest piqued.

*For the suns...*

“You have permission to give me actionable options so these problems can be resolved with earnest.” Veneral licked his lips. His entourage was failing him. “To further answer your original question, the reason Jonas and Constantine are here and no other governors are has to do with the real purpose of this meeting: security. Before I was interrupted, I was to discuss the threat to our existence that seems increasingly more palpable every day, that of galactic threats.”

As he completed his spiel of the threats to Seriam, an entryway appeared to the room and eleven AH Servers entered carrying thin objects in the shape of circular metallic platforms. Placing the platforms in front of each of the participants, they hastily exited the room.

“Ah, well, no use wasting a good appetite.”

Looking at the platform, an image in Veneral’s eye asked him if he would like to place an order. Tapping his temple once for yes, he began scrolling through a variety of selections, settling on hibiscus juice and sweet sap bites. The platform immediately came to life, shooting four columns a few inches into the air. The columns began to scan over the platform, laying layer over layer until small forms began to take shape. The makings of a glass and then the small mounds of sap bites. And finally the cold hibiscus juice began splashing to and fro.

This process would normally be an afterthought, but Veneral was determined to make a point. He didn’t even grant his guests the required courtesy to begin indulging their own serving platters.

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” he said whimsically, holding the glass in the air and staring at the yellowish liquid. “No food in front of us, and yet here I have a juice from Insula Mar and sweet sap bites from Arborilt. All naturally produced and transmitted to me through this simple serving platter. All free of charge.” He took a sip and euphorically melted into his seat as the juice percolated through his body. He put the glass down and breathed in deeply and rubbed at the facial hair on his cheeks. “Thousands of years ago, we came to an agreement. Every citizen of Seriam goes to the University and provides a service to the Empire. In return, they receive a stipend, they have the freedom to pay taxes, they receive Ocular Implants, and they receive serving platters. That is our agreement and now a fundamental right. Why? Why did our fathers and mothers agree to these conditions?”

He looked around the room quizzically.

*I hope you all feel as uncomfortable as you look.*

“For the glory of Seriam and to lay the foundations of future generations,” Monty finally intoned, his face completely expressionless.

Antipeter looked at Monty and rolled her eyes.

“Yes, we all know Monty can gallantly tote the party line,” she said defeated. “I mean, seriously, Monty, do you even have an opinion of your own.”

Monty robotically stared back at Antipeter.

“Yes, it’s a bad day when the Minister of War and Culture is answering the test questions of the Steward,” he quipped, trying to sound lighthearted.

“Monty is a loyal advisor,” Veneral stated patronizingly. “But sometimes I think he is still too wrapped up in Augustus’ view of the world.”

“That’s the only view he should be wrapped up in,” Raze spewed, the room once again growing tense.

Veneral threw his hands up in the air, accepting the insulting remark.

“My point being, perhaps Monty’s views on glory and foundations are accurate, but they continue to be the antiquated views of an exhausted lineage. Augustus interpreted our social contract as a means to guarantee a prosperous future. I interpret it, as my forefathers interpreted it, as a way to secure our livelihoods.”

“That’s what this is all about?” Constantine said slowly from the shadows, his serving platter sitting on a small table next to him. “Security?”

Constantine’s overt challenge and daunting size made Veneral gulp.

“Security for all of Seriam, Verita, and our colonized planets,” he boasted confidently. “Now please, will you all indulge me and have a juice?”

The group stared at him, mystified. Antipeter ran her hand up her long braids and removed a silver strand. She leaned back in her chair in exasperation.

“Tut tut tut,” she said, smacking her lips together. “Juice is what we need. Juice is what makes all the ills of the world go away. Come now, all, let us drink away our sorrows.”

“You mock the Steward’s sincerity, Minister Florencia?” Titus asked in feigned horror. His red gowns were so light that they seemed to move as the air of the room circulated from the breaths of the inhabitants. Titus’ face, much as Jonas had indulged his new status, had grown to be a vibrant beige and his eyes had stark blackened contrast.

“I mock what deserves to be mocked, like the Steward’s Personal Council concerning himself with blackening his eyes,” Antipeter chided.

“Hrm hrm hrm,” Romulus giggled. “Such beautiful eyes, too. Perhaps we should incorporate such fashion into our newest series. Blending might increase security, as the Steward desires.”

Romulus’ high-pitched suggestions brought a particular lightness to the room, tamping down whatever fires had been brewing.

“Yes, a fine suggestion,” Veneral stated, more than willing to throw Titus into the foray if it increased the potential for success. “Titus does enjoy the latest styles of Verita. Maybe even Jonas over here should consider eye black to take the focus away from his ever-increasing size.”

Even Constantine let out a deep chuckle, the surest signal that humor was succeeding in breaking the impasse. Both Antipeter and Raze commanded their platters to begin processing drinks.

“Look, we all want what’s best for Seriam,” Veneral said. “Let there be no doubts about that. It is wise to allow spirited debate over how best to serve the empire, and even wiser for the High Governor to consult such debate before making decisions.”

“There is no High Governor,” Monty quipped, his white frock remaining perfectly still.

Veneral glanced at his newest Minister.

*Perhaps Monty won’t work out after all. Then why help in the first place? Remind Titus to cue up a message that there are rumors of replacements.*

“No, First Minister Garrison, you are quite correct. And in my bashful nature, I perhaps haven’t yet fully let on to the true purpose of this meeting.”

“And what is the true purpose?”

Veneral puffed his chest into the air, allowing his regal and overly lavish yellow strands—made from the feathers of the Aquila—flare out into the room like the lightning bolts that stretch from the Seriam atmosphere to the grazing plains of Verita.

“The High Governor is dead. Alien species have defied our planetary defenses. The people ache for a High Governor. Lilith is not returning. It has been two years. It is time to elect a new High Governor, whether that is from the existing lineage, the old lineage, or the beginnings of a new lineage. I called you all here today to support me as I seek the High Council’s approval to be that new High Governor.”

*And let the glory of Gilgomosh begin again under the new line, that of Veneral.*

Veneral’s chest remained inflated. He had become so wrapped up in his dramatics that he had failed to monitor the reactions around the table. Only when he finally graced them with his attention did he realize that his official pronouncement might not have been as inspiring as he would have hoped.

“You want us to support you to become the new High Governor?” Romulus asked. His flowery perfumes seemed to pop off of his skin as his testosterone began to increase. “We just told you that we are excited for Lilith’s return.”

“And I said she is not returning!” Veneral fumed. “Lilith is gone. She is as good as dead.”

“This is not the time to...” Antipeter began in a surprisingly comforting voice. But Veneral would hear none of it.

“This is the time to lead!” he shouted. “How do you all not understand that? A Steward is meant to be temporary. Seriam needs a High Governor. Make today a historic moment. Be on the right side of history. Show Seriam that we will continue to provide them the leadership they need.”

“Lord Steward,” Monty said calmly, arising as he spoke. “You are the Steward, by law and with the support of the High Council. Should you seek the nomination, you have that right. Have you considered the consequences, though, if your nomination fails? By the same law that has placed you in power, the High Governorship will go to an open election throughout all of Seriam. Power through direct democracy is very dangerous. People make policy through taxation. The High Council makes policy through decision-making. Or, the

position will be taken through force, as has happened. In both instances, the Empire will be torn to shreds. You will forever be remembered as the man who allowed Seriam to break.”

Veneral rose to respond to Monty, who continued to challenge his authority.

“Then don’t let me fail. Vote for me.”

“One of our two sons will be cast into the universe before I ever cast my vote for you,” Monty replied.

It was direct, it was impactful, and it was a nail in his coffin from a member of his loyal council.

*Oh, dear Monty, I have many options that do not involve you.*

Without another word, Monty proceeded to exit. One by one, the remaining participants followed. Veneral’s insidious mission of a legal transfer of power had failed.



## Chapter 8 – Professor Blaseph

“Are you going to say yes? You have to say yes! Justin, say it. Say you’ll say yes.”

Professor Blaseph insisted on minding one’s own business, but even he had to turn to see what could be causing such ignominious outbursts. Blaseph was sitting in Jupiter’s Square on the University Campus on Externus, reading the Media through his Ocular Implants and trying to resist staring at the Planet Seriam, which even during daylight hours was currently in full view in the sky and hovering over the small moon like an overbearing parent. Breaking his attention away from the afternoon Media update, though, he turned to see Adelia chiding the alien over one thing or another.

*Of course. Adelia.*

Blaseph had grown fond of Justin, but he knew Justin was no match for Adelia’s domineering personality.

“I don’t know,” he heard Justin say meekly, trying not to sound defensive.

“He’s so going to say yes,” she said, dismissing his attempts to appear ambivalent. “Pretty soon we’re all going to be shielding our eyes in front of this tree-urchin.”

Adelia was beside herself with giddiness, simultaneously laughing hysterically and pressing upon Justin for more and more details. The two of them were sitting in a circle on the grassy square among their twelve-person University team that Blaseph had hand-selected, playing games. The game, which was some sort of space battle simulation, emerged from their synched Ocular Implants and appeared as a giant hologram in the middle of the circle. They all had their hands clenched into fists in front of them, blasting away from their fake command sticks.

“Being on the Steward’s Council is not leadership,” Lucius said with a palpable twinge of frustration.

“Leadership or not, you’re touching your forehead. Oh suns in the sky, Justin shoot already!” Adelia screamed. Others in the square began to turn as well.

“You just mind the asteroids,” Justin said unapologetically, although he abruptly began squeezing his triggers.

“No, seriously, Lucius, I was there, I heard it. He’s been hand selected,” Remus said as though he was coming to Justin’s defense.

“I’m not disputing it happened,” Lucius clarified, wincing as an explosion occurred before him in the game prompting cheers from the other team. He dropped his hands to

look at Remus. "I'm disputing the fact I'll ever be shielding my eyes for someone who can't wield a dagger. Besides, Madam Solis will reemerge. I'll bet my life on that."

His comments drew immediate silence. Very few spoke publicly of a potential challenge to Veneral, particularly when there was still mystery involving the conspirators behind Augustus' assassination.

"Alright," Justin jumped in, "there's no sense even having this conversation. I haven't accepted and don't even really understand what I've been offered."

"Oh yeah, haven't you all heard, our boy here is unsure if he wants to accept a position in the *Steward's* Council because he wants to be a techie on a space ship." Adelia threw her hand around Justin's neck and pulled him closer. "Seriously, could you be more adorable? Oh, and for the record, *when* Lilith returns, she'd be lucky to have someone like Justin on the Council."

"Alright, alright, leave my boy alone," Remus said, pulling Justin out of Adelia's grip. "I'd much rather shield my eyes to this guy than to any of you."

*Am I hearing this right? Did Veneral invite Justin to the Apollo?*

Blaseph continued to watch and listen and found himself standing to walk over. His bones creaked under his weight and his muscles needed a good stretching, but the afternoon sun and fresh air always seemed to rejuvenate him. It was unseasonably warm for so late in the year, which weather services attributed to Seriam's Outer Rim reducing its solar energy consumption. Seemed to Blaseph as though people just didn't want to accept the truth, which is that it was an unseasonably warm fall.

As he approached the group, they immediately stood to greet him.

"Greetings, Professor," Lucius said for the group, as they all touched their forehead. He responded in kind and then smiled and clasped his hands in front of him.

"Greetings, team. I don't mean to intrude on your all too important games," he said, pausing for effect while they laughed at his subtle jab, "but every year I usually bring my teams for a day of relaxation at the bath houses of Lake Altus. Would you all be willing to indulge me this afternoon?"

Blaseph watched as, one by one, the team perked up. University students aren't allowed off the campus during their three years unless escorted by a professor. This would be a rare and enjoyable occasion.

“Lake Altus?” Adelia said elatedly. Her eyes widened until Blaseph worried they would tear into her forehead. “Today? Seriously?”

“If you’re all so inclined.” He extended a hand and bowed slightly.

Adelia slapped Justin across the chest.

“Ready to have your world *rocked*, alien?”

“Adelia,” Blaseph said, sobering the mood, “you will behave yourself. I won’t be scooping you off the floor this time.”

Adelia opened her mouth to say something snarky, but pointed at Blaseph and said, “On my solemn honor as a citizen of Seriam, I promise to try not to get too saturated.”

“Uh huh.”

*Yes, she is too much to handle. Seriam could use more girls like that.*

The Lake Altus bathhouse was nothing special. It wasn’t as grand as the bathhouses in Verita, where there were enough pools for everyone, but it wasn’t as run down and decrepit as some of the bathhouses on the far reaches of Externus. Lake Altus was suitable for students longing for a break, but not so extravagant that the experience would be wasted on those that wouldn’t know any better. Plus, for a man with ulterior motives, it happened to be near the home of one Lilith Octavia.

*How in the world did I get caught up in the conspiracy to murder the High Governor? Can it possibly be a true story?*

Professor Blaseph and the twelve students parked their public hover cycles at the depot and then walked into the open-air facility that sat on the shore of Lake Altus. The pools were recycled with the pristine waters of the lake, a process illegal on Seriam proper. The facility was empty except for a few locals who sat in a heated pool toward the back. The main pool was completely free of use. Large marble spires extended far off into the sky, which were used to create an artificial dome when the weather was unsatisfactory for relaxation. Small rooms around the side were for private use, and six women of various shapes and sizes with red hair pulled back into three pony tails sat along a bench, prepared to fulfill any task asked of them. Blaseph saw that their presence made Adelia, herself a red head coming from a family of service, feel uncomfortable, but he wasn’t in the mood to concern himself with the demons from his students’ pasts.

“Okay,” he decided to state instead. He turned to look at the team, which was looking around the facility with great interest. He scanned their faces until he settled on Julius. Julius, hailing from the Pliesastic System where the majority of the population lived underground to avoid the roaming megasauros, was the standard issue Seriamite. His skin was beige and his hair was dark and short and his black flats and irons were perfectly fitted to his body. Of the team before Blaseph, only Julius had a concerned look. Blaseph knew that Julius was sent to the University on Externus to learn and then offer his service to his home planet, but learning was more than books, and Julius had to understand the purpose for the visit.

“Julius,” he continued, “tell us about bathhouses. Tell us why your lowly professor would subject you to such a crass activity.”

Julius twitched uncomfortably under his professor’s spotlight, gulped, and said, “Because bathhouses are communal, connecting society and culture.”

“Very good,” Blaseph asserted, choosing not to press him for a deeper answer.

“Adelia, tell me why Lake Altus is of particular significance.”

“Well, Professor,” she began, smiling dubiously, “because the acid algae blooms every night, cleansing the water from all matters of life and filth. And then the sun shines and burns the algae back into its hole.”

Professor Blaseph had to breathe in deeply to center himself. Nothing Adelia said was wrong, but the overt insolence in her tone would set her back in her journey.

“Exactly right,” he forced out through his teeth. Adelia would never publicly get under his skin. “The great equalizer. The cleanest water in the Empire, yet completely deadly at the peak of nightfall. Okay, enough chit chat, I imagine you all know what to do.”

Adelia and Remus wasted no time, dashing towards the pool as they tore the clothes from their bodies. Remus, ordinarily against the rules but under the circumstances merely frowned upon, flung himself off the marble tiles and soared through the air before swan diving through the glass surface with nary a splash in his wake. Adelia was far more clumsy, barely removing her skirt of feathers before launching herself recklessly after Remus. Her enormous splash reached the far reaches of the facility, sprinkling the toes of the six women of pleasure and dousing Professor Blaseph up to his knees.

The remainder of the team followed suit, albeit with greater delicacy and restraint than Adelia and Remus. Only Justin and Julius held back. Julius meandered to and fro, watching his peers strip to their natural beauties and enter the soothing, purified water. He

dipped his toes in and then slowly put his feet in. Adelia and Remus would have none of it, though, and with Lucius' assistance, sprung on him like the mighty cats of the prairies and pulled him under.

Even Professor Blaseph had to smile as he watched. He still only counted eleven, though, and had to side step toward Justin

"Justin, your lack of enjoyment brings me dishonor," he said, purposely trying to guilt him into joining the team.

"I don't much like water," Justin said.

"You realize your wrist irons would prevent you from drowning, yes?"

Justin nodded slightly, mainly to himself. "It's not a fear of drowning, Sir. Bad things happen in environments we weren't meant to be in. And in my experience, when something bad can happen, it typically does."

"I would keep those types of thoughts to myself when you go to the Apollo. The Steward dislikes negativity, particularly from his Council."

Justin looked at him in exasperation.

"You know?"

*You just confirmed it.*

"I hear things. I wouldn't have gotten this far if I didn't hear things."

"I would have told you myself, but..."

"You owe me zero explanations. Your offers for service are just that... yours."

"Well, I just don't know if I have made up my mind yet."

"I understand completely. But, Justin, and I don't mean to patronize you, but here in the Seriam Empire, when you're asked to serve the High Governor, or in this case the Steward, it is not actually a request. Do you understand?"

Justin nodded in silence, clearly contemplating Blaseph's words.

"Now, go have fun with your friends. That also is not a request."

Justin smiled. "Yes, Sir."

As soon as Justin stepped foot away from the Professor, the Adelia and Remus raiding party found him and personally carried him into the water, subjecting him to the oldest of Seriam's comforts. Some members of the team had begun to wind down and were allowing the relaxation of the waters to soothe them into peaceful submission along the edges. Others continued to splash, making enough of a scene that Blaseph raised no suspicions as he stepped out of the main hall and into one of the private areas.

Lilith and Jericho were already waiting for him.

"Madam Solis," Professor Blaseph said, touching his forehead.

"You brought your team?" Lilith asked, emerging from the shadows created as the first sun began to dip below the horizon. Lilith was dressed with two small white straps tied around her neck, reaching down her chest and extending into a long white skirt. Her red hair dangled to her shoulders, and her sculpted arms looked like they had been put to manual labor. It wasn't a look befit for the rightful ruler to Seriam. Professor Blaseph was not accustomed to seeing Lilith dressed so cavalier, so exposed, and immediately looked to the ground so as not to offend.

"I, yes, I thought it would be a good excuse to visit," he said shyly, continuing to look down.

"Professor, I apologize for my appearance. Despite my presence being known to the locals, it is much easier to fit in and not draw attention when I'm not wearing the black flats or climate-neutralizing leather."

"No, of course, I just, I'm just not accustomed to seeing so much of you."

*Did I just say that out loud?*

Lilith blushed and looked behind her to Jericho.

"I'm so sorry, I don't know why I'm blurting out whatever comes to mind."

"No, it's fine," she said reassuringly. "Thank you for reaching out. I don't want to keep you any longer than is reasonable. You said you had news?"

"Yes. Just today, I learned something quite peculiar." He looked around Lilith to Jericho. "Jericho, if I approach the Solis, can I assume you won't strike me down?"

Jericho emerged from the shadows, his hands clasped tightly behind his back. Noticeably, he didn't respond, but Blaseph took his silence as consent.

"Madam Solis, it appears Veneral has asked Justin to join his personal Council."

Both Lilith and Jericho stared at Blaseph mystified, as though there were something more to be said or a punch line to be delivered.

"The Earthling?" Lilith asked, much to Blaseph's surprise. He didn't realize she knew the native name of Justin's home planet.

"Yes. Justin."

"Why?" Jericho asked bluntly, shielding his eyes respectfully as the Marti were wont to do.

"I actually had hoped either one of you might be able to shed light on just that question. Why would Veneral bring him in?"

Blaseph, having been standing for so long, began to roll his shoulders to crack his joints and get his blood flowing.

"Professor, sit down. Or for the Eternal Energy's sake, get in the warm water of Lake Altus. It might bring some color to that skin."

"I'm fine. I should get back anyway. But, I need to know what you think."

"I think," Lilith began, before pausing to think. She began to gnaw on her front lip and then slightly shook her head. "He must be thinking that Justin can be a powerful ally. Even a weapon. We all know Veneral wants to expand colonization. Maybe he's thinking Justin can be a symbol, or even an ambassador."

"Maybe," Blaseph said professorially, like he was grading Lilith giving a presentation at the University. "Just maybe that's it."

"Or Veneral is getting desperate, and desperate times lead to reckless actions.," Jericho said.

Lilith and Blaseph both considered his suggestion and accepted it. That's all Lilith needed to hear.

"Is that all, or is there more?" Lilith asked.

"Hushed whispers of your ever-imminent reappearance," Blaseph said tactlessly. "We all await."

"Please be safe, Professor, I can't bear to think of you in danger."

*Danger?*

"Madam Solis, the only danger I'm in is my skin falling off my bones once and for all and my heart ceasing to beat. What more could they do to me?"

Lilith nodded. She took one last look at the Professor and then turned to disappear into the shadows from whence she came. Jericho, ever watchful, followed closely behind.

Blaseph returned to the main hall where Adelia and Remus were still rough housing and a few of the students were talking to the women of pleasure. None of them noticed Blaseph had disappeared.

## Chapter 9 – Bryce

“Shake Shack, this is Manifest Destiny, check check,” Bryce heard over the intercom. The voice at the other end, coming from Juniper Team Alpha’s X-40, dubbed Manifest Destiny, was Tink’s. Bryce smiled to himself.

*God she’s cute.*

“This is Shake Shack, Lima Charlie, how me?” Jerome Evanston replied, short hand for “loud and clear, how do you hear me?” Jerome, the Juniper Team Bravo communications officer, was one of six African American operators in the Juniper program, and had a perpetual and metaphorical stick up his ass.

“The black man will always be held back, even if we become a multi-planetary society,” he would preach to Bryce or whoever would listen. “Mark my word, they’ll find a way.” Bryce always wondered who *they* were, but was smart enough not to ask. No, he found it far more amusing to poke the bear, regularly asking Jerome why black people were so keen on fried chicken and if ebonics and dancing abilities were natural complements or a pleasant coincidence. Regardless, the two had become close friends and worked well together in the command module.

“Loud and clear,” Tink said back, before going through the same process with Blackbird.

Bryce sat quietly in the navigator’s pod within the command module of the Shack Shack X-40 simulator and stared at the seven screens in front of him. He plotted their position in relation to Earth and set them on a trajectory to low Earth orbit.

“Ariana, confirm position,” he said nonchalantly.

“Position confirmed,” Ariana said, feeling no need to elaborate.

“Is that it?” Bryce asked perplexed.

“Manifest Destiny and Blackbird have assumed formational positions at 11 o’clock and 9 o’clock.”

“Thank you kindly,” Bryce said, tapping to confirm on his computer.

Ariana could of course handle the mundane tasks of positions, but the emphasis was on redundancy. Ariana remained a centrally located computer that corroborated or denied the findings of the human driven computers.

“Captain, good to go,” Bryce confirmed.



Captain Grayson Milner was as far from being a natural captain and leader as Justin had been considered, but as a Juniper Year 5 and former Marine, he was an obvious fit. He chose to lead by silent professionalism, which Bryce correlated with ineptitude. Grayson's open revolt against a Year 3 navigator joining Team Bravo didn't exactly endear Bryce to his captain, either. Grayson wasn't inept, though, he just didn't like to speak, and fervently believed caution should supersede blindly following orders.

Bryce had to turn to see him nod in the affirmative, as a simple, "Good," or, "ten four," was too difficult.

Bryce clenched his jaw and squeezed his eyes shut to vent his frustration without coming off as insubordinate, but a potential five-year mission with him would not end well.

"Good morning, Juniper Teams Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie," Ariana said after a few minutes of silence. The simulators continued a light rumble to signify thrusters were powering the craft rather than the electromagnetic propulsion from the Negative Energy Drive – NED. The soft purr, like what one might expect to hear from the dull buzzing of a phosphorescent light bulb, simply meant that NED was generating a shield and the EM byproduct was being smoothly distributed into space. All these noises would disappear when the X-40 was flinging itself through space.

"Good morning, Dear," Captain Holiday said through the comm.

"A new message has been received indicating Earth has been threatened by an imminent alien attack. Your mission is to remain in low-Earth orbit and disrupt any efforts to harm the planet." Ariana's voice was gentle and soothing, like she was reading a bedtime story, which was rather disarming even before taking account of the message she delivered.

"Did she just say our mission is to defend Earth?" Grayson asked out loud in a rare outburst.

Bryce turned to look at him and saw his mind actively churning over the guidance. Grayson's eyeballs actually moved back and forth as he went through the facts, looking at them from one side and then dismissing them out the other. Bryce couldn't help but smile and shake his head.

*Should I follow through with the order? That's not the Juniper mission? Should I follow my command? What does it all mean?*

Grayson was a *big picture* kind of guy. He reminded Bryce of his brother, always over-thinking the situation. Bryce just wanted to go lie in bed with Tink.

"You heard her, ladies and gentlemen," Captain Holiday said over comms, "no need to get fancy, let's go step-by-step. Remember, we serve at the behest of our government and of all mankind. Our mission is what is asked of us. Manifest Destiny has the lead."

"Ariana," Peter Sabien, the Team Alpha Signals Officer, said so all could hear, "have you detected any incoming indicators of a potential ren dez vous?"

"Affirmative, Mr. Sabien," she said casually. "I have identified positions of origin from twelve points. I have sent the ascension and right declination coordinates to the navigators."

Bryce watched as the information came up on his center console. He imagined there were other panicked faces that they faced twelve potential ships, but freaking out wouldn't make the number drop. With a few quick computational commands, Bryce pulled the coordinates up.

"Got 'em locked," Bryce said into the intercom, "sending them for all to see. Looks like we just passed right by one."

"Thanks, Bryce," Holiday said.

*Maybe I shouldn't have shown up her navigator. Oh well.*

As he sent the coordinates around, though, it was already too late. With a loud crack, the simulator sent Shake Shack rocking back and forth, jolting the ship two feet side to side.

"Whoa!" Jerome yelled. "Juniper, Juniper, we have been hit with something large and powerful."

"Engage, engage!" Holiday yelled. "Micah, find some targets."

"Grinders away," Micah said, "Yee haw!"

Similar messages were coming from Blackbird's team.

"Shake Shack, engage, engage, engage!" Holiday yelled as Bryce got slammed into the back of his seat with another loud crack.

"Captain Milner, can we engage?" Bryce asked.

Grayson, though, looked pale. His wide eyes and slightly shaking head indicated he had no intent, or at least no frame of mind, to make such decisions.

Bryce swung his jury-rigged joy sticks up from under his seat and switched the hologram from his computers to a three dimensional lay out of the battle space. Two ships with wings that looked like the pincers of a bug were circling around their ship. Blackbird was far off in the distance, but Manifest Destiny remained out in front.

“Weapons,” Bryce yelled, “engage with sidewinders. Do it, now! Stay on Manifest’s tail. We’re sticking together.”

“Shake Shack, what are you doing?” Holiday yelled.

“I have a target,” Bryce heard from the weapons team, “fire.” The ship pitched as the missile fired. In Bryce’s vision, an enemy ship exploded into a ball of fire.

“Alright, target at nine o’clock,” Bryce said. He squeezed both of his hands around his joysticks. “Plasmas away.”

Shake Shack made a dull thumping noise as the plasmas fired. The plasmas hit the enemy ship, but it didn’t explode. The plasmas disabled it and sent it flying into Earth’s atmosphere.

“Keep firing,” Bryce said. “Keep firing!”

The ship pitched again as another sidewinder went soaring off into space.

“What’s happening?” Holiday yelled. “Shake Shack, why aren’t you staying with me?”

Bryce looked to Veronica Mariotta, Shake Shack’s pilot.

“Veronica, why aren’t we staying with Manifest?”

“We’re losing power to thrusters,” she responded. “We won’t be able to keep this up for much longer.”

Bryce looked at the image in front of him. Blackbird was chasing a ship off the screen and one additional ship was swinging back and forth between Shake Shack and Manifest Destiny. A large red laser originated out of the back of Manifest destiny and cut the enemy ship in half. Both pieces went flipping off into space.

“Oh shit!” Micah yelled into the comms. “George is a maniac! Hot damn!”

On the screen, Blackbird was flying back to formation. Bryce wasn’t sure why he couldn’t hear them, but the situation was clear.

“Alright, fall back into formation,” Holiday said, “let’s assess the damage.”

“The next signal originated 80 miles at twelve o’clock,” Bryce said back. “Let’s go get ‘em.”

“Negative,” Holiday responded quickly. “Assess damage. Report back.”

“Shake Shack has no power to its aft thrusters,” Veronica said.

“We have enough,” Bryce said recklessly. “We can divert power from NED.”

“Captain Milner, why is your navigator leading your operations?” Holiday asked, effectively telling Bryce to shut the hell up.

No response.

“Our captain has been incapacitated,” Bryce said when Grayson remained silent. “Come on, Captain Holiday, we have enough, let’s go get these guys.” Adrenaline was rushing through Bryce’s veins. It was a rush he could only get when he was boxing or when he was with Tink. It hadn’t been this intense since his brother had driven him and his mother directly into a tree.

“Navigator Staggert, you will maintain command of Shake Shack, but fall into formation and report back damage. We will follow protocols, is that clear?”

Bryce clenched his jaw again.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Blackbird, report back immediately,” Tink said.

No response.

“Blackbird, come in,” she repeated.

“Blackbird is in formation,” Bryce said, looking at his map.

“Blackbird’s comms must be down,” Jerome said. “Ariana, confirm.”

“That is affirmative. Blackbird’s communications went down when the ship sustained damages from an alien weapon system.”

As soon as Ariana finished, the lights flashed on and the computers powered down. The simulation had ended. Bryce dropped the joysticks and let them fall back into place under his seat. He hadn’t noticed how sweaty he had become, but with his heart continuing to race, he peeled himself out of his seat. His head was clear and pain free, like the adrenaline from the experience had the same effect as fighting.

“Everyone okay?” he asked.

The Shake Shack crew was giddy with excitement.

“Not many black men get to do that!” Jerome exclaimed.

Bryce smiled and looked at Grayson, who was sitting in his chair and looked pale with fright. Bryce sighed. As his blood flowed back into a normal circulation, his hands and feet began to pulse. He walked over to Grayson and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Come on, it’s over. Let’s get out of here.”

Grayson didn’t respond, but he took Bryce’s hand and walked out with him. They slid together down the side of the ship and landed on their feet. Grayson hurriedly walked off as the remaining crewmembers of the three ships began to congregate.

“That was intense,” he said as Holiday approached him.

"It was. Good work up there."

"Thanks," Bryce responded suspiciously, suspecting more to come.

"But when I give you an order, you don't question it."

Bryce nodded and looked sheepishly at the ground. His adrenaline had put him in attack mode. Holiday put her hand on Bryce's head and tussled his hair.

"This is why we train," Holiday said. "Believe me, you're annoyingly competent. You aren't the least of our concerns."

Bryce followed her gaze to Grayson, walking off to the locker rooms.

"I guess he's not going to stick around for the debrief."

"No debrief today," Holiday said, continuing to eye Grayson. "You all hear that?" Holiday said more loudly. "No debrief. Good work out there. We'll meet tomorrow morning at 0700 before classes start. General Sartor and Colonel Smith want to personally go over the scenario. Oh, and try not to get too fucked up tonight."

Everyone laughed and cheered. All in all, it was a successful simulation. All in all, except for Grayson.

"What's going to happen to Grayson?" Bryce inquired, lowering his voice.

Holiday looked at him and grinned nebulously with the corners of her mouth. She cocked her head to the side like she was considering if Bryce was prepared for her answer.

"Don't you worry about that, Bryce Staggert," she finally said ambiguously. "You did good work today. Just leave today on that note."

Holiday turned and walked away, joining Micah and George as they laughed their way into the locker room. The Blackbird team was going over their maneuvers, using their hands as replacements for the ships. Jerome and Veronica were whispering to one another, looking periodically at Bryce and looking around for other teammates. They were presumably discussing Grayson. Tink and Jackie finished shutting down the Manifest Destiny simulator and then parted ways. Jackie headed after Holiday while Tink found her way toward Bryce.

Bryce's heart skipped a beat and his mouth went dry. The opportunities to talk to her still made him nervous. Seeing her walk away felt like a sharp knife to the stomach.

"Hey," she said professionally, "good work up there." He smiled, staring deeply into her eyes. She blushed and looked down. "Stop, you can't do that here, *rookie*."

"Oh, rookie, huh?"

"Yes, rookie."

“Hey, this is out of the blue, and it obviously wouldn’t be as fun as going out with everyone, but...”

“But what?” she asked with genuine interest. It’s not that he had paused, it’s that she wanted to know where he was taking the conversation.

“*But*, I’m having a CAT scan today, you know, for my head, and I was wondering if you’d go with me.”

“Yes,” she responded, barely letting him finish the question. “And for the record, I’m insulted it’s taken you this long to ask me.”

“You knew?”

“Sartor might have let it slip.”

Bryce shook his head. “Apparently not so confidential.”

“You know you’ll be fine. Maybe this will finally give you some answers.”

“I know. Just thought it’d be nice to have you there in my ear.”

She smiled and kissed him before quickly pulling away, realizing it was inappropriate to kiss in the simulator bay.

“I’m going to go shower. Do I have time?”

“Yeah,” he said, laughing at her answer. “Just meet at my room in like an hour.”

“K.”

She crinkled her nose at him and began to walk away. As always, Bryce felt a pang in his stomach. It couldn’t possibly be a normal feeling.

## Chapter 10 – Veneral

Veneral hadn't been back to the Externus Playhouse since Monty had reassured him—*no, guaranteed me!*—that he would take care of the Octavias. Now he was back, watching the latest show that the Externus acting troupes produced in his honor, still seething by Monty's latest betrayal.

"I didn't actually think you would show up, Monty, what with your latest betrayal and all," Veneral said.

Monty smiled and continued to sit with a perfectly straight back, his chin propped up on the nook between his thumb and index finger. His ability to respond unperturbed to Veneral's excoriations made the Steward red with anger.

"And miss the invitation to watch a show with the Lord Steward?" Monty quipped. "That would be blasphemous. Very bad for my career."

Monty continued to watch the show, at least pretending to not notice Veneral's heated glance his direction. To the left of Veneral sat Jonas and Titus, both eyeing the red-headed service girls at the corner of the box.

"I should have you thrown in confinement for your little stunt at the Council meeting," Veneral seethed.

"Franklin," Monty whispered, practically sighing as he said it, "disagreeing with the High Governor, let alone the Steward, is not only allowed, it's encouraged per the laws your own lineage wrote. My actions weren't a betrayal, they reinforced my status as an independent Minister. I gave both of us more credibility that day. No thanks to your own stupid stunt. Trying to coerce the Council to vote you in as High Governor. How many Cognitive Replacements have you undertaken? Your neural circuits are fried."

Veneral sat silently watching the show, refusing to lose his temper in such a public setting. He smoothed out his black flats along his legs and looked at the young men and women prancing about on the circular stage. The Playhouse was designed in a similar fashion to the sound stones of the Grand Hall of Gardens in Verita, providing acoustics that projected the voices of the actors throughout the building. Regardless, with a privacy enclosure around them, Veneral still preferred to bring the image of the play into his Ocular Implants so he didn't have to strain to see.

*I wonder if they'll ask me to speak when it concludes. Our future's finest are on this stage tonight. And here I am, surrounded by those most loyal to me, including my First Minister of War and Culture. What a treat...*

"My *stunt* wouldn't have been necessary if you hadn't failed me. Lilith still lives. That's your responsibility."

Now Monty lost his calm.

"Jericho moved before she was in position. *Jericho* blew the operation."

"And yet he was the one who succeeded. Don't think I have forgotten. Don't think I am not holding you accountable to your word."

As a relaxation break rolled around and the actors exited the stage, a woman with a multitude of flowers entered Veneral's box. She held the flowers out for Veneral one by one, which he gratefully accepted, placing each one under his nose to smell the latest scents the growers had concocted. One in particular—an orange lily with rose buds coming out of the middle—completely engulfed Veneral's senses, to which he paid the girl the ultimate compliment by smelling it a second time and passing it to Jonas. He made eye contact with the girl and transferred her a credit.

"Compliments to the grower," he said. As she walked off, collecting the flower from Jonas, Veneral turned to Monty, "That's what it's all about, First Minister. It's the small joys in life that we live for, and Augustus wanted to keep that from other cultures."

"It'd be so nice to believe you, if it wasn't so obvious that your motivation is strictly your own glory. Gilgomosh died five thousand years ago. No one cares anymore. No one cares about you. And the little speeches you rehearse in your head are never going to change that."

Veneral gave Monty a quizzical, if not sheepish, look. He opened his mouth, but was too bewildered to speak.

"You move your lips when you're rehearsing," Monty allowed, putting Veneral out of his misery. "Don't worry, I don't think others have noticed."

"You owe me Lilith Octavia," Veneral said.

"No one knows where she is."

"Don't lie to me. You owe me Lilith Octavia."

"I don't know where she is."

"We all know where she is. We don't get to the positions we're in without the necessary birds to whistle the tunes of the Empire."



“You want me to go to war with Externus?”

“Externus is a member of the Seriam Empire. We don’t go to war. We tell them how it is.”

“Capturing or killing Lilith Octavia on Externus is a declaration of war, whether your simple mind can accept it or not.”

“You owe me Lilith Octavia,” Veneral seethed through his teeth. “Make it happen, or I’ll make you the first First Minister to lose his title out of shame, given your role in murdering the High Governor.”

Monty shook his head.

“I would just bring you down with me.”

“You already brought me down by turning the Council against me. I have nothing to lose anymore. You, on the other hand, were once such a talented up and comer. It’d be a shame for Seriam to lose such talent.” Monty surveyed Veneral’s face to see if he was bluffing. “Make it happen,” Veneral said again. “Quickly.”

Monty continued to survey, for the first time in the conversation looking skeptical of his position. He tapped his temple, presumably bringing the noise back into his ears. All he could offer was a perfunctory nod as he slid deeper into his seat. Finally, Veneral had gotten through to him.

*It is a tragic day for Seriam. Today we not only lost our rightful leader, but we lost a daughter, a friend, a shining example of a citizen of Seriam. Today we lost Lilith Octavia, and we shall never forget her beauty. Yes. That’s it. That’s what I’ll say. And then I’ll burn Monty Garrison to the ground.*

## Chapter 11 – Justin

Justin was in the driver seat for only the second time since he had received his license. His mother sat patiently in the passenger seat, continuing to guide him through the laws and regulations of the road.

“I know, *Mom*, God,” Justin remarked, failing to understand why she wouldn’t accept that he was a legal driver who didn’t need assistance.

“Okay, I know, but I also know this merge is difficult and you need to use caution. Picking your father up from work for the first time. I want to make sure we get there all right.”

Justin rolled his eyes and put a little more pressure on the gas pedal. The car pulled around the onramp and, rather than holding back, gained speed to move into a small gap in traffic. As Justin merged in, though, he was suddenly thrown towards his mother, the sound of breaking glass and creaking metal exploding into his ears. Continuing to grip onto the steering wheel, Justin spun the wheel to the right, sending the car careening off the road. The car slammed to a halt as it ran head first into a large tree. The airbag exploded out of the steering wheel, snapping Justin’s head backward so he could see the ceiling of the car and smashing him into his seat. The air got sucked out of his lungs and he immediately felt several areas of stabbing pain.

But it was over.

Justin’s head hung limply against his chest and his eyes rolled back and forth, attempting to reestablish focus. Everything appeared in threes and he sensed blood was dribbling from his nose and maybe even from his ears. The world was ringing.

After what felt to be an hour, but most likely less than a minute, Justin warily picked his head up and tried to focus on his mother. She was bleeding from the forehead and keeled over the dashboard, her seatbelt holding her up. Justin could see that there was no deflated airbag in front of her. It must have failed to deploy.

Cringing and struggling to reach out to her, his body could barely array the proper functions to speak. His mother, though, suddenly sat perfectly upright and stared at him. But it wasn’t his mother. It was Julie, the woman he watched melt and die on an airplane that got sucked into a gravitational connection with Seriam. Why was Julie in the car with him? Julie, now bleeding from her eyes, cast an eerie pall of guilt through the car.

“Am I making you *nair’vous*?” she asked stone-faced.

Justin couldn't watch anymore and looked into the rearview mirror to look for Bryce. Bryce looked unfazed and sat perfectly upright, staring back at Justin with a hint of wonder. "Why have we stopped?" he seemed to be asking. His face, though, began to transform until it became so contorted that it was unrecognizable. Justin continued to watch the face bubble and shift and begin to take a new shape until suddenly Justin could see exactly who it was. The man wasn't Bryce at all, but his father. His dad sat with a comforting smile. He reached around the seat and patted Justin on the back, whispering reassuringly, "It'll be okay, son. We're going to fix you up."

"If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward," he whispered to himself. "Head up. Eyes forward."

Justin was too shaken and rattled to understand the meaning, but seeing his father after all these years since his disappearance brought him a certain ease of existence. With his father around, everything would be alright. After one more pat on the back, Justin squeamishly looked to Julie, feeling that he should apologize, although he didn't know what for. Julie had disappeared, though, and in her place sat Lilith, beautiful, mysterious Lilith. He hadn't seen Lilith for two years and assumed he never would again. But here she was, smiling at him convincingly, charmingly, passionately. What was she smiling at? He had missed Lilith, from the little interaction he had with her. He often wondered where she had disappeared to. But it didn't matter, because here she was, sitting next to him in his recently crashed car where his mother had once sat.

His Lilith-induced comfort was short-lived, unfortunately, because of the ruckus in the back seat. What was his father doing? Why was he making so much noise? But it was no longer the backseat. It was a hospital room. A doctor was performing surgery on Bryce's head. Justin could see himself staring at Bryce from an adjacent hospital bed. The doctor's face was covered, but Justin smiled at his brother. "It's okay," he heard himself tell his little brother. "We're getting patched up, just like dad told us. We'll be okay." Then a door burst open to the room and Adelia and Remus entered, roughhousing as usual. They bumped into Bryce and knocked the doctor over. Men in military uniforms entered with guns. Justin heard shouting. Adelia and Remus disappeared. The military men took the doctors away. And then Bryce began to shake uncontrollably. His skin began to melt like Julie until he disappeared into the ether.

And then the car was empty. Justin was alone. His heart began to race. Why was he all alone? His blood pressure spiked. Something was wrong. He tried to open the door, but it was wedged shut. He was trapped and no one was there to save him. He began to scream.

“Justin,” a voice said softly. “Justin.”

Justin opened his eyes and all he could see was stars. “Justin, you’re having a nightmare.”

Justin was covered in sweat and his breathing was labored. The voice that woke him from his dream was the central room control, which was enabled to intervene if someone’s vitals approached dangerous levels. Justin had named his central room control Ariana, although no one understood what that meant.

Justin breathed in deeply, “Thanks, Ariana. Sorry about that.”

“Are you alright?” she asked. “Do you want to talk about it? Can I send you some water?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Justin continued to look up at the night sky. The realistic imagery, replete with shooting stars and nearby galaxies, was the only way he could fall asleep. His sleeping chamber was the standard University-issued sleeping chamber, six to an abode, which shared a cleaning room with a second abode that contained six additional sleeping chambers. The sleeping chambers, egg-shaped compartments that were large enough to comfortably sit up and stretch from the cushioned support, were designed to develop relaxation based on optical illusions. The ceiling of Justin’s chamber turned into the night sky, with a cool breeze flowing over him and the chirps of the oversized Sonitus Insects, which are an abnormally large mix of crickets and cicadas. Adelia said she preferred to be lying on a hammock on the beach of Lake Hoddiger on Externus’ southern hemisphere, to which the sleeping chamber could even mimic a swaying motion. Lucius felt at home staring up along the trunks of the trees reaching toward the sky. Others preferred complete blackness, while some had music playing in the background. The chamber kept constant monitoring of a person’s vitals, allowing it to pump medicine or antihistamines into the air. Justin never slept so well in his entire life, except for when he got nightmares.

“That is eight nights in a row you have been awakened in terror,” Ariana said, as if Justin needed reminding.

He ignored her, instead asking, “What time is it?”

“The sun rises in two rotational clicks. You still have time to fall back asleep.”

Justin had to think for a minute. He still had trouble translating the Seriam time keeping to something he could understand. Given the time of the year, two clicks meant it was roughly four in the morning. He had no other way to describe it.

“No, open,” he said, sitting up as the shell opened over his head. He tapped his temple twice to tell his Ocular Implants he was awake. He swung his feet onto the ground and grabbed a sarong to cover himself. The remaining five sleeping chambers were still closed and pulsing to indicate there was an occupant.

*Maybe I should make Adelia get up with me.*

He stared at Adelia’s chamber but thought better of it. She could be grouchy in the morning.

The abodes were only meant to hold the sleeping chambers. Articles of clothing and belongings were tucked away into compartments under the chambers. All other activities took place in communal areas, so there was no need for seats or desks in the chambers.

Justin walked toward the wall, which, identifying him via his eyes, created an opening for him to exit. He walked into the hallway and headed toward the magnetic lift that would propel him to the rooftop. He couldn’t sleep, but he could at least take the opportunity to watch the first sun rise and see Seriam, which was in full view.

As he made his way toward the lift, though, he felt a ping in his ears. His Ocular Implants produced a short phrase in its display: Communication Request from Professor Blaseph. Accept?

Justin was too tired to be bewildered and accepted, once again tapping his temple. A projection of Professor Blaseph displayed out of his eyes. He continued to walk.

“Good morning,” Professor Blaseph said.

“It’s early,” he responded. “What do you want?” He paid no attention to customs at this hour.

“Your chambers indicated you were awake.”

*Fucking Ariana.*

“Awake is a relative term. I’m going to watch the sunrise.”

“Come watch it at the lightning rod. I’ll bring coffee. We have much to discuss. Go get dressed.”

Justin stopped and looked perplexed.

*Much to talk about?*

Finally, realizing this wasn't really a request, Justin nodded and ended the connection without saying anything. He walked back into his chamber and grabbed a climate covering that would help protect him against the chilly morning air and then turned and walked out of the building. The University was extremely peaceful at this hour. Bustling supply ships, only allowed to operate during periods of darkness, were zipping around like insects above the University's structures. Some students were out jogging or otherwise trying to get a head start on their studies. Even the exotic animals flown in from the far reaches of the galaxy—ostensibly for research—were sleeping soundly in their displays, which served as monuments of walkway intersections. Justin was never keen on zoos back home, but it seemed like the animals were returned to their native habitats every half a year or so, and seeing the many pathways of evolution that had not yet reached its intelligent pinnacle was worth the ethical sacrifice. He then passed through the Plaza of Pride, which hosted large statues of human-looking figures with animal heads. A man with a wolf's head. A woman with snakes for hair. A pack of fierce-looking monkeys. They all had spears or other weapons. Professor Blaseph explained to him that they were memorials of the great explorers from the Anonius Age. They were experimental creations no longer accepted within society. Blaseph told of rumors that whole civilizations of these creatures had sprung up in small colonies when they were banished, but Justin hadn't seen any evidence to verify.

The Professor's domicile—much more luxurious than student living—resided halfway across the University campus. It would have been a quick ride on the Central Magnetic Transport, but that would have required Justin to leave the beauty of the clear morning. Fortunately, the professor wanted to meet at the lightning rod, which was about half a kilometer away from Justin's residence.

Justin could see the lightning rod almost as soon as he left the building. The huge metallic balls jutted out of the ground, higher than the Administrative Center, with the primary purpose being the protection of the Center's spires that communicated with Seriam's Outer Rim. The secondary purpose, though, was to catch and harness the lightning and funnel the power into the underground transportation systems; mainly, keeping the magnets charged. Sometimes Justin and Remus and Adelia would come sit in the middle of a storm just to watch the spectacular display as lightning would strike the tower and send electricity bursting down the rods.

Justin continued down the stone avenues, the red hues of the first sun already beginning to brighten the atmosphere. The lightning rods and the Administrative Center appeared excessively opulent in the early morning glow, almost counter to the culture the University sought to instill in Seriam's youth. The light cast upon the silver columns gave them a veneer of arrogance, staring down on the sole morning traveler as a king's sentry might look down on a lost peasant. And above it all, high in the night's blackness but clear as day, sat Seriam, the ever-watchful eye in the sky.

Justin brought his eyes back down to street level and looked for the professor. When Professor Blaseph said, "meet at the lightning rods," he meant, "meet at my favorite spot where the sun can beat down on my grizzled skin and an old man can enjoy a distilled spirit." There was no reason this particular spot was more amenable to these pursuits, but with Confinement irons on his wrists and his status as a University elder statesman, no authority was going to harass him.

From a distance, Justin saw the professor's silhouette at the spot agreed upon and he began to walk at a brisk pace. Thousands of silver rods—in Seriam known as Alterio Seats—transformed the ground at which he sat, creating a single seat for the professor along the side of the avenue. When Justin approached to sit down, a second seat would appear. His Ocular Implants already identified his likely destination and was providing him with options of positions.

As he got closer, though, Justin's brisk pace slowed to a standstill. The person sitting along the avenue wasn't Professor Blaseph. It was a woman.

The woman, with a light silk hood covering her head, turned to Justin. His heart skipped a beat.

"If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward," he began to say out loud. "Head up. Eyes forward. If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward."

The woman pulled her hood down and stared at Justin, now standing with leaden feet in the avenue. She continued to stare, offering no emotion or indication of her expectations. Justin continued to look, trying to convince himself he wasn't hallucinating.

*Am I still dreaming? Head up, eyes forward.*

Justin took a step forward and turned his head to the side like a dog suddenly intrigued by a new toy. He took another step, straining his neck to get a better view of her face. It was simply undeniable. Her image was glued in his memory from the first time he

looked up at her from the hospital gurney. He saw her face almost every day through the media in discussion about the High Governor's assassination and the whereabouts of his daughter. There was no mistaking it.

Lilith Octavia had reappeared.

*Is this a mistake? Is she here for me?*

Justin took several steps closer and made an awkward gesture pointing at her and then pointing at himself, attempting to ask if he should join her. He looked over his shoulder. She surely wasn't alone. But no one else was there.

"Hello, Justin," she said, her voice sounding like a flowing river made out of flower pedals.

"Hello," he said back brusquely, forsaking any pretense of charm or delicacy. But then he thought about it. "English?"

"I've been practicing."

"Apparently." He didn't mean for it to sound rude or sarcastic, but she flinched nonetheless. "You have a great accent," he said, trying to preserve the meeting.

He wasn't sure what his next move should be.

She seemed embarrassed and stared at the ground. Whatever reticence was holding her back, though, seemed to pass quickly and she reached for a glass sitting on a small table to her right.

"The professor said he promised you coffee," she said, holding the glass out for him. "I want to make an honest man out of him."

Justin graciously accepted, taking the coffee from her outstretched hand.

"What?" she asked.

"In English, that means something else," he said, embarrassing her yet again. *Yeah, insult her some more. That's the answer.* He sighed and tried to move the conversation forward. "May I?" he asked, having no idea if that was appropriate or if he had just overstepped his bounds.

"Please," she fortunately replied.

Accepting the first position offered in his Ocular Implants by tapping his temple—the only real drawback that Justin could find with his new Ocular Implants—he took a seat directly next to Lilith as the ground transformed underneath him.

"How have you been?" she asked.



He nodded. "Good. As good as can be expected. How about you? How have you been? *Where* have you been?"

"I know you have questions, and I have a lot of answers. But right now, I must be brief."

"Okay," he said, unsure what she meant.

"Do you miss home?" she asked.

"Yes. Sometimes. Some days more than others."

She seemed satisfied with the answer.

"The professor tells me you've been offered the chance to serve in the Steward's Council. I realize you can't turn down the offer, regardless of how irregular it is, but I want to make sure you take caution. Veneral, he can't be trusted." She began to revert to Latin. "I don't yet know what he has planned for you, but you need to question everything."

Justin nodded as he took in her words. Her face began to glow under the rising sun, revealing even more of her facial features.

*She's exactly how I remember. Where has she been?*

"Seriam needs you," Justin finally said.

"Seriam needs good citizens like you," she replied, plainly prepared words.

"I don't think you realize how much people love you," he said. "They're waiting and getting impatient."

"They can wait a little longer. I just need you to be careful."

They both paused to sip their coffee.

"What is this about? Why come out of hiding to talk to me? Are you coming back? The High Council would support you."

She looked up at him, mainly because he stood a full head taller than her. Realizing she was looking up at him, when it should have been the other way around, he instructed the chair to lower him to just below her eye level, making her laugh out loud.

"I missed..." she began again in English. "I mean, I feel responsible... I'm sorry about what happened to you."

He smiled at her flirtatiously, causing her cheeks to flush. She reached up to touch his arm but thought better of it and pulled her hand back.

"So is this it?" he asked. "Is it right back to hiding? Or will I see you again?"

"You'll see me again," she said quickly.

She rose and looked down at him, his knees jutting awkwardly up into the air. Looking up at her, with Seriam looming behind her, he began to wonder what he would be able to tell his friends.

“Stick around,” she said as she touched her forehead, “the professor is on his way.”

“Yeah, well I think I need to have a few words with the professor about his secrets.”

He touched his forehead when he finished speaking.

“Take care, Justin.”

As she said it, the sun broached the horizon and her face turned a fiery red. Joggers and early risers began streaming out of buildings and couldn't help but gawk at the woman in white silk, like moths to a particularly bright light. Whether it was by design or not, Lilith Octavia's face had now been seen in public view on the University. The rumors would spread like wildfire. Soon, Seriam would receive the news. The Prodigal daughter had returned and the first person she chose to be seen with was an alien from the distant planet, 35-Solar 3, which had now become more familiarly known as Earth.

## Chapter 12 – General Sartor

General Sartor hated November 11. November 11, better known as Veteran's Day, even better known as the day off before Thanksgiving, was simply terrible. Every November 11, General Sartor was reminded that he was a soldier, an officer that had personally ordered twenty-one courageous men and women into action that directly led to their deaths. Over the course of two wars, Sartor felt personally responsible for killing the equivalent of the U.S. men's soccer team.

This year was even worse than most. This year, General Sartor, being a general in Washington, DC who oversaw one of the President's shiny new initiatives, had been personally invited to Arlington Cemetery to watch the President lay a wreath at the grave of the nameless soldier. It was very touching.

"Just stay home and take Stargazer for a ride," Amanda encouraged him.

*Because it's so easy to turn down the President.*

As he watched the formal ceremony, every one of his soldiers' faces appeared in his memory. A young Lieutenant, just married, liked to tell dirty jokes, on Sartor's orders to secure a village, died immediately in an early Iraq I.E.D. attack. A Sergeant Major, with burn marks on his face, battle-hardened, died in a friendly fire accident in Afghanistan. A young Major who had recently told Sartor she wasn't prepared to die for these causes, died when her helicopter crashed on the way to Northern Afghanistan. Every one of them had stories. Sartor wore their memories like tattoos on his soul. And he was fairly certain every one of them would rather him be at his house with his wife grooming their horses.

Sartor winced as the first shot of the twenty-one-gun salute cracked into the cool Arlington air as he stood in the crowd overlooking the Capital's monuments. A second shot fired. He found it fitting that there were twenty-one shots, one for each of his fallen soldiers.

As the last one fired and the smoky haze of the weapons began to drift and dissipate among the gravesites, one more image appeared in Sartor's head. The twenty-second-death he oversaw. Somehow, it was the hardest of them all, although it did not technically count as a fallen soldier. To be fair, he wasn't even sure if Justin was actually dead, but it was almost worse. The lack of knowledge of his whereabouts, the possibility of what he went through or what he could be going through; it kept him awake at night. Only long rides on Stargazer aside his wife could relax his mind.

As the President said his closing remarks, General Sartor reached his fingers up to his mouth. It had become much easier to overcome the urges for a cigarette, but it had been the long-established motor skills of his hands that proved to be the obstinate aspect of his body. HE found it virtually impossible to think clearly without his fingers tinkering with his lips.

General Sartor saluted as the President stepped away and then the crowd began to disperse along with the smoke. Television crews were trying to snag interviews with some of the VIPs, but Sartor put his head down and tried to escape without being forced into conversations about dead colleagues. Stargazer was waiting patiently and the holiday before Thanksgiving was actually about to begin.

But Sartor was not to be so lucky.

As he made his way down the gravel path to his vehicle, he heard a familiar voice calling his name.

“General Sartor,” the voice said in perfect English. It was English that had the accent of a person who trained diligently not to have an accent. Sartor only knew one such person. “Raymond,” the voice said again, to Sartor’s chagrin.

Sartor turned and saw Colonel Wang following him down the path, moving as quickly as possible to catch him. He seemed frantic, almost as though Wang had suddenly forgotten his years of diplomatic training that taught him to remain composed and calculated.

“Colonel Wang,” Sartor said, moving his hand to his lips and then scratching his cheek. He extended the hand out to his Chinese counterpart, which Wang, virtually out of breath, took graciously. Sartor then extended his hand to invite him off the path. They began to walk along the lawns of the Arlington Cemetery.

“I’m sorry to disturb you on such a sacred holiday, General,” Wang said respectfully. “But I wanted to catch you before you departed back for Colorado.”

Sartor simply nodded his head, wondering if he should be taken aback that Wang tracked his movements and knew his main place of employment was in Colorado. He took solace in the fact that Jack Taylor and Colonel Smith were nowhere in sight. They never understood his relationship with Wang, and his sudden knowledge about Colorado wouldn’t have assuaged their fears.

“I didn’t even realize you were in the area,” Sartor said. “What brings you out?”

Colonel Wang had grown older in the two-plus-years since he had stood with him on the Shenzhen tarmac. His pristine military suit appeared more like an anachronism that hearkened back to a man's past life. Wang's eyes drooped a little farther into his cheekbones than before and his pants seemed baggier than usual. Even his straight black hair began to show signs of receding into his military cap.

"I have been having discussions with your fellow officers at the Pentagon. Somewhat of a diplomatic exchange," Wang said, hinting at nothing of particular significance. Sartor wasn't so sure.

"You've been having meetings at the Pentagon?" he questioned. He felt like his world was being stomped on. What good was it to be the Director of the International Association for Deep Space Cooperation if he was going to be cut out of decision-making? This is why he hired Jack Taylor, to avoid these little surprises. "Why wasn't I invited to these meetings?"

"You can't ask me such things," Wang said, shaking his head. "I am here on orders from my government."

"Okay." Sartor squeezed the emotions out of his face and looked at his old friend in a manner suggesting he wanted some immediate answers.

"General," Wang said, suddenly feeling the urge to look over his shoulder. He took Sartor by the arm and proceeded to walk him to a quieter area. "General, I have a specific portfolio of work. I head Chinese efforts to advance our efforts in space. I was under the impression you had the same role for your government. These meetings suggest that might not be the case."

"What did you discuss?"

*And with who?*

"General, my leadership wants answers."

"Answers to what?"

"A plane landed in our country over two years ago with alien technology and three-hundred-dead souls in technologically advanced body bags." As Wang spoke, Sartor's spirits sunk. It all came back to the plane. "As a gesture of good will, we offered your country the chance to take the technology. In return, you would share it with us. We have heard nothing, and my leadership is getting antsy."

"Colonel Wang, what does this have to do with meetings at the Pentagon? Meetings that I wasn't invited to."

Sartor felt Amanda and Stargazer getting further and further away from him. It had become official: Labor Day was no holiday for Sartor. He officially craved a cigarette.

"You're the Director of the International Association for Deep Space Cooperation, General," Wang said, ignoring his question. "I had hoped that position wouldn't be taken lightly; it wouldn't just be a notch on your American belt."

"I take that position very seriously, which is why you were the first person I insisted to be invited into it. Do you know how that went over with my country? Inviting China to share technology in a combined military space endeavor? I'm lucky I wasn't lynched!" Sartor screamed it, but still managed to keep it to a whisper. Wang looked at the ground, apparently ashamed at the blatant attack he had just launched on his friend.

"But you're not sharing technology, General," Wang said calmly. "All I know is that you have technology that is not from this planet, and you are not sharing it with the Chinese government. That means you either want to reap the benefits for yourselves, or you're developing something that we should be alarmed by."

Sartor rolled his eyes.

"Christ, Wang. Is that what this is about?"

"Of course it is. What the hell are you guys doing out there in Colorado?"

"We're not developing weapons, I can tell you that much," Sartor said in a bold-faced lie. He certainly didn't feel good about it. "And what exactly do you know about Colorado?"

Wang averted his eyes, unable to keep his poker face with such a direct question.

"We have our ways."

"What were these meetings about? Does your government know you came to meet with me?"

"General, I like to consider you my friend. No, my government does not know I'm meeting with the General allegedly in charge of American space programs. But it doesn't matter, because I'm only meeting with my American friend who lives in DC and works in Colorado."

"Okay."

"The meetings were with some anxious Department of Defense officials who suddenly have a keen interest why China is holding onto an American commercial airliner. Apparently, our little agreement isn't public knowledge."

"What the American people don't know won't hurt them," Sartor quipped, the type of aphorism that personally drove him crazy.

"The *American people*," Wang said slowly, nodding his head, "want to know where their plane is. They want to know what happened and why China is holding it hostage."

"And what exactly did you leave these meetings with?" Sartor inquired.

"We told them to talk to General Raymond Sartor. And that we'd be more than happy to make a deal."

Sartor tilted his head back and squinted.

"What type of deal?"

Wang smiled and bowed his head.

"Trials of a planet can lead to great unity and great peace," he said cryptically. "New technology that causes revolutions or threats from the beyond can be extraordinary opportunities."

"Or they can lead to great war," Sartor inferred.

"Yes, or it can lead to war. That decision, General, seems to be in your hands."

They stared at one another for a brief moment. Sartor didn't so much nod as rock back and forth with his entire body, as though he were being tossed about like a plastic bag on a windy day.

*What does he propose I do? Where is he getting his information?* At that moment, Sartor felt compelled to ask, however far-fetched it may seem.

"Wang, we've been good partners over the years, good friends, I think," Sartor said as though in the middle of an epiphany. "What aren't you telling me about the plane?"

"The plane?" Wang asked perplexed. "I don't follow."

Wang certainly feigned ignorance, but Sartor wasn't so sure. Sartor always knew Wang cared first about his country, but this was the first time he legitimately felt that Wang was hiding something from him.

"It landed in China," Sartor said. "I want to know why it landed in China and I feel like you know why."

"General," Wang replied, "I have no idea what you're referring to."

It was said in such a manner that Wang was telling Sartor to drop it.

"Right," Sartor said. "Well, I need to get back to my wife. See if I can't salvage this holiday."

"And I as well," Wang said, bowing. "Deliberate on what I said."

Wang looked at him stolidly and then bowed yet again and turned and walked away, leaving Sartor standing silent and alone, except for the thousands buried around him.

## Chapter 13 – Justin

The Avenue of High Governors in Verita on Seriam stretched eighteen kilometers from the Grand Hall of Gardens to the Temple of Eternal Energy, which itself consumed a footprint of two square kilometers. The Temple, fashioned as a platinum-plated pyramid, served as the central node of a larger mathematical design throughout Verita that captured the 3D depiction of the Central Equation, which when discovered laid the groundwork for interstellar travel. The Temple housed the Chamber of Respect, where Seriam's leaders could honor the natural energy of the universe that could never be created nor destroyed. It also housed the museums of technology that showcased the periods of Seriam's cultural and technological advancement. The pyramid had been periodically updated to incorporate organic technology that allowed the structure to alter its appearance and communicate with the Outer Rim and the self-sustaining Laser Infuser Plants to identify threats and change the flow of electricity as needed.

In the shadow of the Temple, which reached out along the Avenue of High Governors in the afternoon light like it tried in a desperate attempt to reach all the way to the Apollo Acropolis, the Seriam Empire's Steward of Power decided to hold his Annual Display of Technological Innovation and Artistic Magnificence. This was highly unusual, as this display was customarily aired at the foot of the Acropolis, allowing the afternoon suns to make it glisten for the Empire to see, at least as far as Justin had come to understand.

As the afternoon rotation continued to stretch the shadow farther, Justin stood at the foot of the Temple and looked out at the thousands if not millions of Seriamites lining the Avenue. Above them stood the two-hundred-meter tall stone statues of all the High Governors of the past 5000 years. The statue of Augustus was currently being erected several kilometers away under the direction of the Venustas Architects from Planet Jupimon. But on this day, even the floating platforms that sculpted the single gargantuan stone with lasers were called to rest in honor of the annual display.

Justin stood near the back of the platform with the Council of Advisors, officially invited as an honored guest of the Steward. Before the Council of Advisors stood the ninety-nine members of the High Council, who flew in from their respective planets and cities to take part in the festivities. Standing at the head of them all was Steward Franklin Veneral.

Veneral's facial hair had grown more robust in recent days, making his skin tone a darker shade of beige than usual. He had also come to don a ceremonial purple cape that



was strictly reserved for celebrations surrounding momentous occasions such as victories in battle or the addition of a new planetary colony. This in itself stood out as unusual, although the Seriam Media—essentially crowd sourced news that streamed directly to Ocular Implants—chalked it up to the Lord Steward’s renowned mercurial behavior. Justin found the cape particularly peculiar because Veneral had resisted the temptation to remove his standard black flats and yellow tassels, making his outfit a bizarre assortment of clashing styles.

Marching down the Avenue toward Veneral and the High Council were columns of AH Forti, now designed with standard issue ionic burst arrays as well as lightning rounds. Along the sides of the columns walked members of the Martis Brigades, and directly following the Fortis columns were the latest recruits to the security battalions. Gliding behind the security battalions came the most recent additions to the mechanized battalions, then the automated animal-control series—meant to contain wild animal populations—and finally the interplanetary ships. There were the galactic transports, and the battle cruisers, and the synchronized long-range firing armadas, the most recent of which he had just sent to Jonas’ world. Last, and the true reason that Veneral had eagerly awaited this day, floated the living intergalactic Explorers. He knew that Augustus had only allowed him to pursue the technology because the now deceased High Governor had assumed it would fail. Augustus, though, didn’t know what Veneral knew. He didn’t know just how powerful the Explorers could be.

As the four spheres approached the Temple, Veneral stepped forward and placed his hand on his forehead. The crowd quieted and began to whisper and whistle as the spheres slowed to a stop, seemed to dip towards the ground and flicker slowly translucent, and then rose to their prior positions as their color reemerged.

*What on Earth is that?*

Justin stepped forward, slightly in front of Titus Circlos, Veneral’s head advisor. Justin felt a timid hand on his shoulder trying to pull him back into formation. When he looked at the hand and arm clad in red silk, he thought he saw Titus flinch. Regardless, Justin stepped back to where he previously stood.

In all honesty, Justin still wasn’t clear why he had been invited to the event. All of his University mates were watching from Externus along with Professor Blaseph, whose confinement irons prevented him from leaving the moon. Justin had not yet accepted the position on the Council of Advisors and didn’t want to feel like he was inadvertently

agreeing to something he didn't want. To add to the suspicion, Titus, who had reached out with the invitation, specifically told him, "This has nothing to do with the fact Lilith Octavia got in touch with you." He was on the verge of saying no, but Blaseph would have none of it and insisted he attend. To be fair, now that he was here, he was glad he came. Seeing the bombastic skyline of Verita and the millions of people and the High Council was exciting. Plus, getting the chance to once again see the Outer Rim from the surface of Seriam offered a new perspective. It truly was a marvel of engineering, even though on this day it seemed to be failing in its duty.

The Outer Rim, as explained to Justin, helped control the climate of Seriam around seventy-five or eighty degrees. It was not a perfect system, though, and sometimes the planet pushed back against its imposed temperature. As Seriam entered the cold portion of its orbit, the natural tilt of its axis prevented the suns from delivering direct sunlight, much as on Earth. The Outer Rim could usually redistribute the warmth from the uninhabited southern portion of the planet, but on this day, the weather dropped to the forties and only Justin's decision to wear his climate blouse allowed him to stand still without freezing to death.

Justin watched as Veneral took a few steps forwards. There was no microphone or podium as would be typical on Earth. Instead, Veneral connected into the Central Communications System that enabled anyone in attendance or merely interested in listening throughout the interstellar Empire to tap in and receive the oratory directly to their Ocular Implants.

"Hello, Seriam, and welcome once again to the annual display of technological innovation and artistic magnificence." The crowd erupted. "Per Seriam's customs, it is on this day that the High Governor, or, in this case, the Lord Steward, delivers to Seriam the annual update on the advances in technology, the achievements in art, and the safety and state of our Empire. As this display kicks off the end of the year celebrations, I will keep my comments brief." Once again, the crowd erupted. Although Verita did not allow for distilled spirits or vinum, the rules were rarely enforced during the fourteenth solar orbit, and the remaining cities on Seriam simply did not abide by the law.

Veneral spoke for a few minutes, touching on the continued and growing threats to the Seriamite Empire and the incredible displays of artistic abilities displayed this year. He spoke at length about the continued pursuit of Augustus' assassin, claiming to have irrefutable evidence against the one suspect already in custody. He even touched on the

latest rumors of Madam Solis, saying what a miracle the rumor would be if verified, but to not get carried away with senseless storytelling on Seriam's Media as it created false hope. He then drew the attention to Justin, using him as an example that intelligent civilizations exist and we must choose between embracing them or ignoring them at our peril.

Justin watched his delivery, feeling on several occasions that it felt rushed. As Veneral approached the end of his speech, Justin discovered why.

"Finally, my honored guests and cherished citizens, I am pleased to direct your attention to the intergalactic Explorers." He paused to gawk at his creation and seemed to breathe in the very essence of their being. "These Explorers, built with state-of-the-art organics, were built with a single purpose: autonomously or with human travelers discover new civilizations and determine if the civilization is hostile or if Seriam has identified a new ally. More importantly, though, these Explorers will enable *intergalactic* travel. Why should we limit the size of our Empire? Why should we be restrained to this galaxy when there's a whole universe to explore? Why should we impose restrictions on our exploration?" Again, more whispers and whistles. "I know that the honorable High Governor, recently departed in a tragic display of violence, opposed such exploration. He opposed, as did his forebears, the expansion of Seriam. But I feel differently. I feel that Seriam has been alone in this universe for too long. We will find new civilizations. If the civilization is a threat, we will determine if it needs to be neutralized. However, if the civilization can be an ally, we can offer it the technology and culture of the greatest Empire to ever exist. This is our destiny and it is our responsibility to continue to expand or to allow our enemies to come to us."

The crowd, once skeptical, became amenable to his fervor. The cheering began slowly, but by the end of his words, he had convinced the population. Seriam was entering a new age under the auspices of the Steward.

Justin looked around nervously, his recent acceptance of the invitation suddenly feeling like a threat.

*Am I pawn?*

*Head up, eyes forward.*

He looked around, wondering if he could step away without being seen. But Veneral had other intentions. Turning to Justin, Veneral put his hand in the air and called him over. Titus, almost certainly aware of Veneral's actions, nudged Justin toward the front. Reluctantly, Justin moved forward. The High Council parted for him to walk through. As he approached the front, Veneral grabbed his hand and thrust it into the air. The crowd

erupted to deafening tones. Justin hadn't experienced such enthusiasm and excitement since he stepped off the transport moments before a man slayed the High Governor.

The two of them stepped forward and their hands locked together high in the air. Justin looked out at the crowd, which was now looking directly back at him. It didn't take him long to understand what was happening. To take the attention of a potentially illegal decision to design intelligent ships and seek out intelligent civilizations, Veneral had thrust Justin into the spotlight. Justin was now the face of Veneral's new plan.

*Head up, eyes forward. Fuck.*

## Chapter 14 – Bryce

Mission analysis was the worst. It involved days of analyzing terrain and weather and flight systems and threats and allies. It meant ensuring that when the commander, usually General Sartor, ordered a mission, the operations team identified every facet of the environment that could have an impact on their mission. It took days to put together. It was the worst.

*This shit sucks.*

Bryce felt particularly victimized by mission analysis, being the navigator of Team Bravo. It meant he had to identify any threats, locate the likely location of the deviation, and ensure the crew could get Shake Shack back to home base. And a lot could go wrong. Locking down the gravitational fields was hard enough, but Bryce also had to consider the location in space, space radiation, solar storms, commercial flight plans, and even potential weather patterns of planets he had never visited. It was an epic pain in the ass, but critically important to the success of the mission. For its importance, Juniper and respective Class teams went through drills and exercises on at minimum a monthly basis.

Currently, Bryce was three days into his attempts to ascertain if a planet roughly 78,000 light years away on the other side of Sagittarius A, the Milky Way galaxy's central supermassive black hole, was at risk of immense surface hurricanes. The last thing Team Bravo needed was to connect with a new planet and drop into the middle of an epic hurricane. And who knows what a hurricane on such a planet might entail. In Bryce's mind, they were caused by giant robots that manipulated weather patterns as a form of planetary defense. Regardless, silly Grayson Milner, Team Bravo's increasingly inept if not diligent captain, insisted on checking the details several times over before presenting the findings to Sartor or Colonel Smith.

*Thank God for NASA.*

"Have you pinned down the weather patterns?" Captain Milner would ask.

"I checked again with NASA and it's the best data we can gather," he would respond.

Even though Juniper was responsible for travel beyond the Solar System and had access to all the deep space data-gathering tools that NASA had, it was the ultimate trump card.

"Alright," Milner would say, "but if Sartor flips, it's on you."

Sartor never flipped out on them, but reminded them that it's their lives that would pay the price. Their lives and the government's very expensive X-40.

*I wonder how Justin used to respond to these exercises.*

Bryce could picture his brother quibbling like a wet rat under the intense pressure of putting the picture together.

All the members of Team Bravo were sitting in the vault dedicated to them. There were two more just like it for Team Alpha and Team Charlie. The respective Class teams had to suffice for classrooms, longing for the day they saw the inside of the Juniper Team vaults. In reality, the vaults were just small classrooms with individual desks for each member lined up in two rows. Grayson sat in the front left desk facing back at the team. To his left sat Bryce, being the navigator and second in command. Directly in front of him sat Jerome Evanston.

Bryce heard Jerome giggle, which given the fact Bryce was on the boiling point of breaking down over the work, rang in his ears like nails screeching along glass.

"What the fuck are you laughing at?" Bryce asked bitterly. Jerome assumed he was just being playfully sarcastic.

"You gotta see this YouTube video, man. This white cop falls on his face while he's chasing some innocent black dude."

Bryce looked over his computer screen at his politically-charged teammate.

"Hey douche bag, if you have time to watch your kind committing crimes, maybe you could help out with this fucking work."

"Whoa, what's your problem, man?" Jerome said, throwing his hands in the air defensively. "I'm the comms guy, I can't do any of that smart stuff."

Bryce shook his head.

"Fucking douche bag."

"Hey, Bryce," Grayson said, not knowing what he was hoping to accomplish.

Bryce didn't even recognize his comment. He did, however, recognize the next comment.

"Navigator Staggert, a word."

No one from Team Bravo had seen him standing in the door. No one ever had much reason to look at the door. It was the Team Bravo vault. No one else ever came in. But sure enough, there he was, listening to the commotion like a disappointed parent listening to two underage delinquents bickering.

Bryce rubbed his two eyes before answering.

*What unbelievably bad fucking luck.*

He rose and looked at General Sartor.

“Yes, Sir, whatever you say.”

He rolled his eyes, knowing full well he was about to have his ass reamed out by the very man responsible for bringing him to Juniper. He moved past his desk and briefly glanced at Jerome who couldn't help but smirk. As he made his way to the door, Sartor stepped out of the way to let him exit. Sartor silently indicated he should continue walking down the hall, took one more look into the vault, and then followed closely behind him. Bryce continued to walk and was about to turn left to head towards the command post, but Sartor stopped him.

“No, Staggert, right.”

Bryce hesitated.

“Right, Sir?”

Right meant heading outside onto the Neil Armstrong Quad. It was cold in Colorado, being the end of December just before Christmas. Bryce wasn't dressed for the occasion, but he also wasn't in a position to tell the General he didn't want to go outside because it was chilly. Besides, General Sartor had a jacket on.

Wisely, he headed toward the glass doors to the browned lawns of the Neil Armstrong Quad.

“Look, Sir,” he said preemptively and slightly impetuously when they both got outside, “I know I shouldn't yell like that. Sometimes I just get so frustrated and I can't, I just, I can't.”

“Whoa, Staggert, slow down,” Sartor said in a moment of unexpected informality. “Do you think I called you out here because I'm mad at you?”

Sartor didn't look at Bryce as he asked this, he just kind of kept walking.

“Well, I mean, yeah.”

“Hmm,” Sartor sort of grunted, placing his hands behind his back as he kept walking. “You know, I quit smoking about eight months ago. Amanda, my wife, caught me smoking in our horse stables and damn near ripped my balls off. That was that. I haven't had a cigarette since.”

“I've noticed. That must have been tough.”

Sartor laughed. "Tough? Bryce, you think you're frustrated and feel helpless, pick up smoking for forty years and then try to quit. The point being, it was tough, but it was a decision. It was a decision that I had made a mistake and had to alter course. Sometimes, it's hard."

*Holy fuck, what is he insinuating.*

Bryce fought desperately to not hyperventilate. Was Sartor giving him the boot? Juniper was all he knew anymore. And then there was Tink.

When Bryce stayed silent, Sartor continued.

"To come to terms with a hard decision, I've had to work through some issues. For instance, my hands, all they want to do is smoke. I don't even have urges for cigarettes anymore, but my hands have been trained for forty years to naturally drift toward my mouth. And so, now I walk with my hands behind my back, where my hands can naturally cling to one another."

"And they aren't urged to drift back to your mouth, Sir?" Bryce asked, taking a stab at any opportunity to join the conversation and show Sartor he belongs at Juniper.

"Bryce, don't be ridiculous. My hands will always long to bring a cigarette to my lips, but again, I solved a problem. It's not a perfect solution, and my hands will always struggle with their desires, so I made a decision that was necessary. Do you understand?"

Bryce stopped walking, his body language demanding that Sartor stop as well. The quad around them was eerily empty, the gray sky and frigid temperatures scaring everyone indoors. It wasn't quite cold enough yet for ice crystals to be forming in the air, but in a couple months, they would be bursting through the air like lightning bugs. Bryce's cheeks still began to burn, though, as they turned red and threatened to crack with dryness. He held his arms together around his chest and breathed the thin air in deeply.

"Are you kicking me out of Juniper, Sir?"

Sartor stood a few feet away and stared at him, almost contemptuously.

"Sometimes, you are as frustratingly stupid as your brother. And that is meant to be both an insult and a compliment. Take it as you will."

"Okay."

"No, I'm not kicking you out of Juniper. Don't be ridiculous."

"Okay."

Sartor sighed and said, "I am, however, pulling you off of Team Bravo."



Bryce's eyes bulged and he began to shake, the anger shimmering through his body that inadvertently augmented the already intense shivering he was experiencing.

"You, no, you can't do that to me! I belong on that team. I, no, you can't do that, I mean, unless you're moving me to Alpha."

Sartor smiled.

"Are you moving me to Alpha, Sir?" Bryce asked, suddenly settling down.

"No, I'm just amused by your reaction."

Bryce looked at the grass. It was almost worse than being removed from Juniper; he was being demoted.

"Then, why?"

"Because, Navigator Staggert, I'm tired of calling you Navigator Staggert."

Sartor smirked again while Bryce tried to piece the comment together. He wasn't successful.

"I don't understand."

"Sometimes, we have to admit that we made a wrong choice and we need to make a decision to correct the mistake. With your brother, I made the wrong choice to make him a navigator. I was going to move him to the science department. With you, simply because you were his brother, I assumed you would be a good navigator. And boy was I right. But just because you're talented doesn't mean it's where you belong. I made the choice to make you a navigator, and now I'm making a decision to correct that mistake."

"Sir, I know I'm being difficult, but I still don't understand."

Sartor laughed. "I want you to transition to being a captain."

Bryce made a movement to respond, but then the words sunk in. *Captain?* There's never been a transition at Juniper, at least so far as Bryce knew. But, what would this mean? *Do I have to start over?*

"What does that mean? Why am I being pulled off of Team Bravo?" he asked skeptically. There were still too many holes in this conversation. "And why now?"

Sartor looked at Bryce who was noticeably shivering.

"Why the hell don't you have a jacket on?" he asked.

"Sir!" Bryce yelled in exasperated disbelief.

"Anyways, come on." He motioned with his head to keep walking. "Team Bravo has a captain. We're sending you to Class 4's Team Alpha to learn the protocols and the nuances of being captain."

“Class 4? Their teams already have captains.”

“Yeah, well, there’s going to be some changes. We’re not releasing anybody, but transferring to other departments where they can be more useful.”

“When do I come back to a Juniper team?”

Sartor laughed.

“Bryce, let’s see how you do. Where you go is entirely dependent on you.”

“I don’t belong on a Class 4 team.”

“You’re a part of Juniper, you belong exactly where we tell you you belong.”

“And my brother?”

“What about him?”

“Why haven’t we gone after him?” Bryce asked, knowing he was opening a door that could alter the good tidings of the conversation.

“The ships aren’t ready.”

“Bullshit. The ships are ready. By leaving him where he is, you’re telling me that Juniper has decided that’s where he belongs. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re wrong,” Sartor said slowly and through his teeth. “And be careful, Staggert, my tolerance of your insubordination has its limits. Take this opportunity.” Sartor took a deep breath to balance himself and once again stopped walking. “Bryce, I’m responsible for your brother. I know you won’t believe this, but no one, yourself included, has a greater desire than me to firm up those ships and go rescue him.”

“But?”

“But unfortunately, there is a hell of a lot more at stake than your brother or your feelings or my feelings. We’re going to go. We have to consider the politics, though. We have to consider our relationships.”

“Relationships?”

“If we turn on NED and the drive successfully enables interstellar travel, we won’t be able to keep it a secret. It will start an arms race unlike this world has ever seen. China already has the plane. The Chinese government is trying to figure out what happened and how they can benefit from it.”

“The Chinese? You’re talking about the Chinese? I’m talking about going after my brother.”

“And that’s why you have a lot to learn before you’re mature enough to be a Juniper captain. It’s not the effects that your actions have. It’s the second order effects and the third

order effects and the tenth order effects that matter. You need to understand this. We can't turn on a Drive that may or may not connect us to another planet, and then what? The world suddenly knows that we're responsible for killing 301 people in a poorly prepared science experiment? Is that a joke?"

"No, that's you being a coward."

"Watch it!" Sartor yelled. "Your pride and your misplaced courage and your prepubescent stupidity have no place at Juniper. Go prove yourself as a captain. That will get you to your brother."

Sartor turned to walk away back across the quad. His conversation didn't go as planned and he was still irritated from Veterans Day over a month ago.

"Then why am I here, Sir?" Bryce asked. "Sir, you owe me that much. Tell me why I'm here! Why did you and Holiday bring me here?"

Sartor stopped walking but didn't turn. He looked up at the grey sky and seemed to be communing with whatever spirits or angels or demons he answered to. He cracked his head to the left and brought his right hand up to his mouth. He turned, but he didn't look like the man Bryce had come to know. This was a dispassionate general with the thousand-yard stare of a man about to send another troop into the fire.

"Bryce, I've been asking myself that question for nearly three years. Why you. Why your brother. What is it about you two? This was forced upon me, upon my program, and I wanted to know why. Don't get me wrong, you're very talented. Both of you are. But I've been able to recruit the entire program on my own, except you two. Now why do you think that is? Why would the Secretary of Defense order me to bring you here?"

Bryce was speechless. "I don't know, Sir."

Suddenly Sartor flashed a yellow folder in front of him. Bryce hadn't even noticed he had been carrying a folder.

"What's that?"

"Look for yourself."

Bryce accepted the folder and opened it. He saw images of a brain.

"Are these my CAT scan images, Sir?"

"They are."

"These are my private medical files."

"When you're at Juniper, there's no such thing."

Bryce looked at the images again. "Why are you showing these to me?"

“Have you ever seen brain scans before, Bryce?”

“No, Sir.”

“Well I have. And let me tell you something, every brain scan I’ve seen do not have twelve artificial circuits surgically inserted.”

Bryce was stupefied, his jaw nearly slackened all the way to the grass he was standing on. He looked at the images. Sure enough, a whole network of black dots were visible from within his brain.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“Yeah.” He took the folder and the images back. “I was ordered to bring you here. You have a history of headaches and an unnatural ability to heal. And now we find out you have some sort of circuitry implanted in your brain. Something tells me your brother had something very similar.”

“How is that possible?” Bryce reached up and began running his fingers along his hair line. “When could that have happened? How...”

“Yes, Bryce. How indeed?”

Bryce remained silent. Images of the car accident began to flash before him. Images of a surgical room. Images of... his brother.

“Something you’d like to say?” Sartor asked him.

“No.”

“Well don’t worry, we’ll figure this out together. I think you’re at the right place. Now go warm up inside and clean your desk out. Your training starts tomorrow.”

At that Sartor turned and walked away.

## Chapter 15 – Jericho

Jericho sat on his knees and rested back on his heels, his hands sitting placidly upon his thighs. With Lilith gardening in her green house, Jericho could use the opportunity to meditate on his sins. It had been nearly nine hundred rotations since he stabbed Augustus between the shoulder blades and down the spine, and now the tainted dagger sat on the ground at his knees. He was loath to use the dagger, but a Martis was only afforded two daggers in service, and he couldn't successfully fulfill his duties without it. In the nine-hundred rotations since he slayed Augustus, he had only had the occasion to remove it from its scabbard to meditate or train. Jericho had killed many creatures and savage beasts in his sojourns to expand the Empire, but coincidentally, Augustus was the first Seriamite he had the privilege to put down. Regardless, Jericho didn't know that new blood on the dagger would never cleanse it of Augustus' memory.

Martis training—and in Jericho's case, the added training to be the High Martis—was almost entirely mental strengthening. The final month of the five-year-training program was spent in meditation. The exercises stressed the mind and taught absolute control, which ironically, as history would show, was most easily harnessed by the wild and oft uncontrollable reprobates of the University. Jericho was dragged kicking and screaming into University and rarely hid his Distillery Den jaunts to the farthest reaches of Externus. Professor Blaseph, though, brought him into the gladiator arena and Jericho began to understand that confusion and loneliness and a desire to scream and rage was no different than the disposition of an artist who created a masterpiece or a man who falls desperately in love or a scientist who passionately spends his life discovering the cure to an impossible disease. Jericho could rage in the arena and he made it a work of art. Martis training taught him to calm his mind.

In between the mental training, Jericho learned the art of strategy and advanced combat skills, but the true art came from having complete control of the mind. From there, the combat and the strategy and leading security battalions was merely background noise. Some Seriamites say that the Marti have such control of their minds that they can manipulate their surroundings. Jericho scoffed at such assertions. It was all focus. Focus allowed him to harness the Eternal Energy. Focus taught him to control his movements and hear everything around him and understand what was important. Focus, not any sort of

special power, is what allowed Jericho to hear Lilith approach him before she even entered the room.

He rose abruptly and placed the dagger back in his scabbard. He was standing as Lilith entered, his hand in front of his eyes.

"How many times must I tell you?" she asked as she entered. "It's weird when you do that stuff in private." He remained silent. She did in fact ask a question, but it was rhetorical. A Martis rarely speaks if not absolutely necessary. "Nevermind."

Jericho could sense that Lilith was in a sour mood. She only excoriated his deference to tradition if she had something on her mind.

"Madam Solis, I would like a moment of your time."

Lilith stopped and turned, cocking her head to the right like a bewildered puppy.

"A moment? A full moment, Jericho, or a partial moment? That's very nebulous for a Martis."

Clarity was the purpose of the Marti training. Absolute clarity. Jericho did not present his feelings when Augustus directed him to take his life, even though Jericho understood the flaws in the directive. Lilith was not her father, though. Jericho was willing to reject his code for Lilith.

"I want to ensure you have thought your actions through. I will stand by you no matter what, but there are several ways to approach your problem to achieve your desired ends."

"No, there is one way. I, too, have thought this through."

Lilith had grown accustomed, being in her bucolic Lake Altus village in Externus, of gardening in little if any clothing when it was only her and Jericho. At the moment, she was covered, but only with a small skirt and a single leather strap around her breasts. Jericho refused to look upon her in this state, choosing to stare at the ground instead.

"As I said, I will stand by you no matter what." He continued to stare at the ground, feeling the weight of Augustus' blood on his back.

He felt her staring at him.

"Jericho, you were a loyal servant of my father's, of Seriam, to be precise. I like to think, though, that you and I are friends, yes?"

Jericho remained silent. A Martis had no friends. A Martis was loyal to the Empire, for better or for worse. They were trained to identify and protect Seriamite values and traditions no matter the cost. Seriamites entrusted them with this privilege.

“Madam Solis,” he said, failing to find the words to continue.

He could sense Lilith was disappointed.

“Jericho, do you think it’s bizarre that we train for combat at the University completely nude, and yet now you can barely look at me even though I am far more covered than the young students we are supposed to be training in Seriam’s values?”

Jericho both shook his head and nodded, eventually forcing his head up to set his eyes upon her. It pained him to find her so beautiful and took every grain of his being to numb his mind.

“I’ve learned a great deal in the years since I’ve moved back to Externus, Jericho. I’ve learned that it’s okay if a plant in my garden dies. And I’ve learned that my body is mine, and everyone needs to respect that, no matter the color of my skin. I don’t need to cover myself to be proper. I don’t need to hide what I am. I am Lilith Octavia, daughter of Augustus Octavia, the Solis of the Seriam Empire. I’ve learned,” she stammered, on the verge of tears, “I’ve learned that I can be the leader. I don’t need anyone’s permission.”

Jericho forced his breathing to slow as his heart welled with sadness that he could force the Solis to feel this way. It wasn’t his intention. He just wanted her to be smart about her actions and to consider the consequences. And on top of it all, he had not yet identified the identity of Lilith’s assassin.

“Then you mean to go through with your decision today?”

“Yes. And I would feel much better if you were there with me.”

“You know I’ll be there,” he said, annoyed at the connotation. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Lilith nodded once, but her tears began to appear and she lunged at Jericho, throwing her arms around him. “Thank you,” she said.

Jericho had never felt the touch of her before and didn’t know how to respond. Her skin was as warm as the sun, which seemed obvious now that he was feeling her. Still, he didn’t dare place his hands on her and kept them firmly at his side, allowing her to hug him as long as she needed to. When she released him and stepped away, she sniffled and wiped her eyes.

At that moment, a Media notification pinged them and they both tapped their temples to review. An image of Veneral and Justin standing with their hands clasped high in the air flashed in their eyes. Lilith’s tears dried instantaneously and her demeanor changed to that of a warrior.

“Okay,” she said, presenting her attitude as though what she had just seen was the final straw, “let’s do it.”

The shuttle between Externus and Seriam was merely an extension of the underground transportation of Verita, the shining capital city of the Empire. Whereas Externus merely loaded and offloaded at random platforms scattered around the moon, the Outer Rim strictly monitored travel to and from Seriam. Lilith told Jericho that she didn’t mind, even though the Outer Rim would identify her presence immediately. Even if she had removed her Ocular Implants, members of the High Council—to include the High Governor’s daughter as she was identified as the High Solis—were identified by their physique’s signatures. Jericho, though, could sneak past, as guests of the High Council were exempt from scrutiny.

As such, Jericho was without his Ocular Implants, having to rely entirely on his mental faculties to protect the Solis. He was not pleased at the distinct disadvantage of removing highly useful tools, but he also knew he would be arrested on sight and it was more important to be at Lilith’s side.

Per regulation, after the Outer Rim took control of the ship and brought it to the entrance portal, an AH Fortis boarded. “Greetings, Madam Solis, it is a privilege to be in your presence after all these years,” the AH Fortis said as it scanned the inside of the vessel.

“Thank you,” she replied gently. “Do you have a name?”

The AH Fortis seemed to recoil at the question, which was simply an implication of the time Lilith spent away from Seriam. She should have known better. The Fortis series was not given names, unlike the AH Service series, who cherished the opportunity to converse with the population.

“I am an AH Fortis,” it replied.

“Very good,” Lilith responded, nodding curtly.

Jericho clenched his jaw, hating that he couldn’t come to her assistance. He should have reminded her of some of the basic protocols.

“Would you like to report your guest?” the Fortis asked, looking at Jericho whose head was covered by a hood.

“No, I would not.”

“Very good, Madam Solis.”



The Fortis stepped off the shuttle and allowed it to proceed forward. Lilith could feel the force and then hear the vibrations of the shuttle getting thrust through the passage of the Outer Rim. As it blasted straight down toward Seriam, the Alterio Seats placed more support at both of their backs to support against the G forces. Jericho closed his eyes and removed his mind from his body. He could sense Lilith was breathing deeply and felt the air outside the ship begin to heat. His body fell into a state of relaxation, allowing the Alterio Seat to engulf his body.

Just as abruptly as the shuttle was fired out of the Outer Rim, though, it was beginning to slow as it entered into the underground transportation chambers.

“I forgot how enjoyable that is,” Lilith quipped.

Even Jericho smiled, wholeheartedly understanding her sentiments.

The ride from the Outer Rim entrance portal to the foot of the Apollo Acropolis would only take a few minutes.

“Are you ready for this?” Lilith asked Jericho, reinstating his mind to take part in the conversation.

“I am. Can I ask the Solis if she is ready?”

“You may,” she responded, “and I am.”

“Why now?” he asked, realizing the time was short.

“It’s the last annual meeting of the High Council following the display. This is the time.”

“Understood.”

Feeling the forward thrust as the shuttle left the underground chamber, Jericho readied himself. The shuttle came to a halt and the door proceeded to transform into a stairway to the Grand Hall of Gardens. Per tradition, Jericho allowed Lilith to exit first. He looked at her and nodded, intending to offer her approval and courage. She stood and walked out into the frigid air. Jericho could immediately see that her breath began to show in the air before her. He stood and followed her down the steps.

The plan was to enter the Hall when it was empty of observers in order to interrupt the High Council session. She would be safe and she could make a rousing entrance. It was well thought out. What Lilith hadn’t anticipated, though, and what she and Jericho had failed to recognize into that morning, was that the annual display didn’t take place at the Acropolis, it took place at the Temple of the Eternal Energy. Because it was at the Temple

and not the Acropolis, the High Council was delayed in beginning their session, having to transfer locations and then wait for Veneral to bask in the spotlight.

Had it been any other individual, the transportation system would have denied the request. But this was Lilith Octavia, the Solis of Seriam, and there were no security implications when she directed the shuttle to take her to the Acropolis. As such, when Lilith and Jericho stepped off the shuttle, they stepped off directly behind Veneral and his honorary procession making their way to the Grand Hall of Gardens.

Jericho instinctively reached for his daggers as Lilith stepped onto the ground and froze. Very few people had recognized her yet and Veneral was waving at the crowds. Without his Ocular Implants, Jericho couldn't assess the many moving parts of the environment. He hadn't expected this. He thought it would be quiet, but before him were hordes of people and the Steward of Power joyously embracing the attention.

He saw Lilith timidly take a step forward. He could tell she was considering turning to run. But her next step was a bit more emboldened, and by the third step, he could barely tell the scene fazed her.

The crowd, though, would not let her presence go unnoticed, for as Veneral was basking in their cheering, the cheering ceased to silence. Jericho began quickly taking down a lay of the land. He saw multiple avenues of escape, and with Veneral were few if any threats. He saw the Steward, and Jonas, and Titus, and Monty, and he couldn't be certain, but it looked like Justin, the alien from 35-Solar 3.

He followed her closely and saw as Veneral began to look around him to understand the drop in applause. The whole entourage began questioning the response. And then Veneral looked behind him and made eye contact with Lilith, the woman who could unseat him from power.

Veneral's body turned to follow his face, which was glued on Lilith. His entourage followed his gaze and one by one saw the Solis. What had been a rumor was now standing in the flesh.

Jericho thought he saw Veneral mouth, "It can't be."

Jericho's worst fears came to fruition. The smooth entrance Lilith had foreseen was not to be. This was public. This was a show down and the Steward of Power had to either accept or reject the situation. This was dangerous and it placed Lilith's sole source of protection at a distinct disadvantage.

Jericho kept his head tightly concealed underneath the hood, knowing that not only could he be put to death, but Lilith's abetting of such a criminal could jeopardize her career.

Suddenly, Jericho saw Veneral glance at Monty and then look the other direction to a group of AH Forti. Jericho braced himself for an attack by his former Fortis battalions. His attention left Lilith and was squarely on the prime threat. But the Forti were not the threats. As Jericho was distracted to his left, Monty turned to look at Lilith who continued to approach the group. Monty took several quick steps forward and produced a small dagger from underneath his sleeve.

Lilith was caught off guard, but dropped back into a defensive position and prepared to defend herself. She had purposely left any semblance of weapons at home. This was not a hostile takeover and she had told Jericho she did not want it to seem as though that was her intent. Monty brought the dagger over his head, and Lilith prepared to block. Jericho swung his arm around to blast the threat with his wrist irons, but he never got the opportunity. As Monty brought his dagger down, someone blindsided him, crashing into his side and knocking him to the ground.

It was all the time Jericho needed. Using his left hand to grab Lilith and throw her to the ground behind him, he produced with his right hand his own dagger, the Martis dagger that took Augustus' life. A defenseless Monty, now without his dagger, lay helpless on the ground at Jericho's feet. Per his training, Jericho should have ceased his attack and secured Monty for trial. But Jericho had no intention of stopping.

For the briefest of moments, he made eye contact with Monty, the man who Jericho now understood to be his co-conspirator in the assassination of the Octavias. Monty wasn't afraid. He didn't look petrified or stunned; he had already accepted his fate and even seemed to be allowing it to happen. Jericho brought his blade down and sliced swiftly at Monty leaving a large gash across his chest. Again, Jericho should have stopped. He should have centered himself and balanced his emotions, but he didn't. He sliced again in a fit of rage, ripping the top of Monty's head clear off his body. Monty, who had been clutching at his chest, fell lifelessly at Jericho's feet; a bloody corpse that even in death maintained a smirk that suggested he still knew something more than anyone else at the Hall.

By now, at least two-dozen AH Forti had surrounded the scene and secured the Solis. When Jericho receded from his battle position and stood at attention over the deceased, he turned to check on Lilith. But Lilith was already being attended to. The man who had blindsided Monty and prevented him from attacking Lilith was Justin, who was

now holding a severely shaken Lilith in his arms. Lilith clung to him like a woman who had recently been reacquainted to her long-lost husband. Jericho failed to understand, but he also didn't intervene. He saw Justin whisper something to her to which she nodded. Together, they rose and retreated to the shuttle, which immediately closed itself off and disappeared underground.

It was exactly the same way Lilith had left the last time she was at the Grand Hall of Gardens, but this time it was the company she departed with that changed. The grand return of Lilith Octavia was a disaster, and Jericho was left behind to face the consequences.

Part 3

Six months later

(Three years since the disappearance of American Airlines Flight 246)

## Chapter 1 – Bryce

Captain Holiday stood behind Jackie Blaine, who sat with crossed legs as she looked out across the Neil Armstrong Quad. Behind her were the captain and pilot combos of the three Class 4 operations teams. In the six months since Bryce had transitioned to captain, he had come to understand how truly out of place he had been as the navigator. He wasn't designed to conduct environmental analyses or locate gravitational deviations. He shined brightest when he could take charge and give the orders. Plus, he enjoyed the company of his Class 4 teammates much more than the members of Juniper Team Bravo. He and John Jameson, his head of weapons, had become much closer friends and even his pilot, Mel Bozeman, was more likely to sneak off the campus to go to a concert in Denver than to spend an extra hour studying. Bryce could appreciate that.

"Heads up," Holiday shouted, to which the remaining seven operators yelled back, "Eyes forward." Bryce never understood where the saying came from. It wasn't an official Juniper slogan, so he figured it was just a catchy saying that Holiday had picked up somewhere along the way.

"Alright," Holiday continued. She had her two hands in the air to simulate the controls she held onto inside the X-40. "Manifest Destiny will enter the connection first, followed by Class 4 Bravo and Class 4 Charlie. Bryce, you will hold position as Class 4 Alpha and bring up the rear."

"Yes, Ma'am," Bryce responded.

"Bryce, what do you need to consider for your actions?"

"We need to reinforce the deviation and lock it in position to establish the point of return. We also need to monitor the successful traversal of the first three ships."

"Good, Mel, what does the pilot need to consider?" Holiday asked.

"I need to pull the ship back to allow for maneuver room in case we need to go weapons hot," she answered, although it sounded like she was rolling her eyes as she spoke. "I also need to shut off the thrusters so they don't damage the shell."

"Good. Okay, when we first exit the alignment, what is our initial course of action? Team Charlie?"

"Assess the environment, scan the planet," the captain to Bryce's left said.

“Good. Team Bravo?”

“Secure the flank and begin to scan for sources of communications,” the captain to Bryce’s right said.

“Good, and Jackie?”

“Unite the dark energy bubbles to assume cover until we assess the intent of the native species. Direct fires at strategic satellites.”

“Okay, and we’re moving.” The seated pilots all stood. With Jackie and Holiday moving forward and leading the way, the two flank teams followed closely in formation. They all had their hands in the air to simulate controls. “And Bryce, you’re through.” Mel and Bryce began to walk after the vanguard teams, maintaining a large gap as they brought up the rear. “Bryce, talk to me.”

“Conducting wide field scans and telling Jamo to prepare supporting fires,” Bryce said, referring to his weapons lead, John Jameson.

“Okay,” Holiday said as the four teams methodically inched their way across the quad. There were several other people out enjoying the dry, warm air of the Colorado summer, but the crowds gave the operators a wide berth to train. “And stand down.”

Holiday and Jackie dropped their hands and turned to the three Class 4 teams.

“Nice,” Jackie said in her characteristically low voice, her deadened eyes failing to show even the slightest inkling of interest.

“Thoughts?” Holiday asked.

Bryce had a unique advantage over the other teams, having served as navigator for a Juniper team and having personal relationships with both Holiday and Jackie. And of course, Tink and he had no choice but to go public with their relationship. As such, the others usually waited for Bryce to voice a critique before feeling comfortable to chime in.

“My dad used to tell me that if you bring a gun to a verbal fight, it will quickly devolve into a gun fight,” Bryce said as they all closed in to form a circle.

“Are you saying we shouldn’t train for worst-case scenarios?” Holiday asked, sounding disappointed.

“No, I’m saying we should simply admit we’re walking into a gun fight.”

Holiday squinted in the mid-morning sun and cocked her head to the side. She was about to say something, but when she saw Bryce fight back a smile, she merely rolled her eyes.

“Thank you, Bryce, for reminding me why I don’t let you lead the vanguard through the connection. Lord knows what would happen if you had to make first contact.”

The group laughed.

“You can’t hold us back forever, Captain Holiday,” Mel said. “And speaking of which, Zac Brown Band tonight. Anyone in?”

Holiday ignored her.

“You guys are all doing really well. I feel totally confident bringing any of you up with us. Now, Class 7 gets here in about three weeks. That means I’m expecting all of you to show them the ropes.”

“Class 7,” Bryce said open-endedly.

“Yeah, Class 7.”

“You ready for your final year?” Bryce asked. “Once Class 8 rolls in, all you all gets retired.”

“Yes, thank you, Captain Staggert,” Holiday said.

“Fuck, I’m ready,” Jackie quipped. “Actually get to go concerts legally. She seemed to smile at Mel as she said it.

“Alright, we’re done, go enjoy your Saturday,” Holiday said, throwing her hands at them all dismissively.

The group departed joyously, the amazing summer day being too nice to worry about work or intergalactic travel or alien combat, or, worse, a new Class. Jackie and Mel walked off together—*Pilot bonding? Nah, definitely lesbians*—and the other two teams who were all friends walked back toward the dorm. Holiday and Bryce stayed and approached one another.

“You’re an asshole,” Holiday said, laughing.

“You don’t think it’s a little strange that most of our training involves combat?” he asked.

“You sound like your brother.”

“Bad genes, I guess. So, I’m over it.”

“Over what? Let’s go get food.”

They both turned and headed toward the cafeteria.

“Over this Class 4 bullshit. When are you going to get me back on a Juniper team?”

“You’re a captain now. Do you know of a captain’s opening on a Juniper team that I’m not aware of?”



Bryce sighed. "There doesn't have to be an opening."

"Oh so now you think we'll kick one of the perfectly able captains off a team because you have a large ego? Sorry, chief."

"Perfectly able?" Bryce asked, guffawing into the morning air.

"Tone it down, Bryce, you're still new at this. You'll get back up, but like you said, we're all retiring in another year."

"A year? No way. We're going live before that and I have to be a part of it."

Holiday stopped walking and grabbed Bryce by the shoulder, forcibly turning him around.

"Stop it, okay? I know how important it is to you. Don't think for a second it isn't important to me. I still miss him. We fucked up, though, okay, and now people are nervous."

"Nervous? It's been three years. Shit, the news doesn't even talk about it."

"Plus," Holiday said, ignoring him, "you're not as good as you think you are. Being a good captain isn't just knowing how to command a ship and a crew. It's being smart. And if you were smart, you would understand why what you're talking about is not feasible right now. So take this time and learn."

"On the record, yes, Ma'am," Bryce said. He then used his hand to brush Holiday's hand off his shoulder. "Off the record, I don't need a big brother or a mentor reminding me I need to keep learning. I'm good at what I do and I'm an asset and I shouldn't be banished to fucking Class 4 walk-throughs on the Quad."

"All you're showing me right now is that you are not ready to be a Juniper captain. And, on the record, when I retire, I'm not going anywhere. I will be here, so you better believe that I can make or break your career here. Don't get cocky. We don't need assholes here, we need captains."

Bryce felt no love for his usually dependable ally at this moment. Holiday seemed content staring him down indefinitely, forcing Bryce to make the first move. As Bryce recalled, it was a tactic his father used when trying to train their new dog about fifteen years ago. Finally, Bryce succumbed to the silence.

"I'm not hungry, I'm heading back to my room."

"And there's the maturity I admire so much," Holiday quipped sarcastically.

Bryce had already turned, but still managed to say, "Go fuck yourself."

"I'm boxing later, Staggert, and I want you to come train with me today."

“Good,” Bryce said, turning and walking backwards, “I’m not afraid to get in the ring with you.” He turned before he could see if Holiday was smiling. Frankly, he didn’t really care. Holiday had the power to move him up, but instead, he had to remain humiliated in front of his peers. From a Juniper navigator to a Class 4 captain, what a joke. He understood the implications, of course, but it just felt wrong, even if he did enjoy being a captain more than a navigator.

When Bryce got back to his room, he found Tink sitting at his desk in her white underwear and his oversized Los Angeles Dodgers jersey slung over her shoulders. She was scanning an article on his computer and had two of his books open.

“What are you doing?” he asked as he closed the door behind him and kicked his shoes off onto the floor.

“I was looking at the timeline you put together of your father’s career and was just looking up some of his assignments,” she said, smiling at him as he scooted her toward the front of the seat so he could sit behind her.

“I don’t know if that’s creepy or endearing,” he said, to which she jabbed him in the ribs.

Tink had yet to shower and her short white hair jutted out in multiple directions. Bryce stuck his face in it and felt various strands that were essentially oiled into place break under the pressure. He smelled her neck and wrapped his arms around her stomach, feeling her soft, toned skin. He slowly moved his hand up her stomach and began to cup her breast.

“Stop!” she exclaimed, giggling while she pushed his hand away. “You know we don’t have time for that.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s your birthday and we have to get ready. You know that, mister.”

“Ugh, I forgot.”

“No you didn’t.”

She got up and began to put her pants on.

“Did you have a nice morning?” he asked.

“Yes, the best. I love relaxing Saturday mornings. I’m sorry you couldn’t join me.”

“Yeah, well, Class 4 gets Saturdays!” he happily chirped, giving her the thumbs up.

“Aww, poor baby,” she cooed, sitting back down in his lap. “You know it won’t be much longer.”

"Not if Holiday has anything to do with it."

"Holiday has no reason to make you promises. And I don't like grumpy Bryce, so lighten up. How is it outside, anyway?"

She got up again and took the Dodgers jersey off.

"It's beautiful out. It's going to be a nice one."

"Oh hey," she said, sliding her tank top over her head and ignoring his weather report, "I thought you said you were ten when your dad disappeared?"

Bryce swiveled around in his chair and sighed as he thought about it.

"Yeah, right after my mom died."

"Your facts aren't adding up, though, you were thirteen when your mom died."

Bryce was about to respond but fumbled over the words. He swiveled his chair to and fro and tried to piece the facts together.

*Could I have been thirteen?*

"I, uh, maybe it was before the crash. It seemed like he was around longer than that. I don't know," he said unconvincingly.

"Hmm, or maybe that brother of yours played more of a role than you care to admit."

Bryce smiled and shook his head.

"What is it with everyone trying to fix me and tell me I'm a jackass today?"

"You *know* that's not what I'm doing. Just trying to figure it out. It's kind of a fascinating story, in a heartbreaking kind of way."

"Fascinating? Not so much. It's not fair, we never have to talk about your parents."

"Uh, orphan since birth," she said, pointing to her chest.

Bryce laughed. "I know. And it's still unfair."

"Whatever you say."

"So what'd you find out? Anything of value for the wall?"

Tink walked over to the section of the wall that Bryce had cordoned off for stories or data on his father. He got up to join her.

"I think, much like your dates, that it doesn't add up. Your dad is a decorated veteran, picks up a random hobby to listen for signals from space without telling his family, forces you and Justin to take *Latin* lessons, and then randomly disappears without so much as a note? Not so much."

Bryce had never considered the facts in that manner before. He had been so mad at his father for abandoning his family that it never crossed his mind that maybe there was

more to the story. He looked at the wall and began to unwittingly crinkle the back of Tink's shirt in his hand.

"I guess it does seem kind of strange," Bryce said, feeling almost flustered that he could have missed something so obvious.

"Sorry, didn't mean to bring it up on your birthday, just thought it was something worth thinking about."

"No, thanks, I'm glad you told me. But, you know..."

She turned and hugged him around his waist.

"What?"

"Well, it *is* my birthday."

He smiled and picked her up and they both fell on his bed. She began to laugh hysterically and tried to defend her femininity, but they were both powerless to stop. They began to kiss and all of Tink's clothes that she had just put on began to come off. The story and intrigue of his father's life, though interesting, became the farthest thing from their minds.

## Chapter 2 – Justin

Seriam's main continent, which covered roughly a quarter of the planet's surface, contained four major cities. Verita, the planet's and therefore the Empire's capital city, stood as the shining beacon in the south, which to no small coincidence sat almost directly upon the equator. Verita was the hub of the Empire, providing direct communication links to every planet and moon by controlling the Outer Ring that powered interstellar travel and planetary defense. It was the seat of government and the core of cultural and artistic appreciation. Arborilt, where the trees grew miles into the air and the inhabitants were ferociously strong, cast its shadows from the continent's Eastern reaches. Those in Arborilt grew expertise in environmental protection, and often provided the bodies for Seriam's security battalions. To the west, the port city of Boonamen arose to provide a lifeline to Seriam's Island City Insula Mar. Even though the ports and all major operations were run by AH Service automation, Boonamen's ingenuity devised all processes for planetary and exploratory security. The plasma walls originally built to keep invaders at bay, the sea walls that could prevent sea level rise while harnessing the energy of the waves, and the research into laser and magnetic weaponry; all were products of Boonamen. And to the North, dug deep into the frozen Nebula Mountains that erupted out of the sea floor, were the Catacombs. Inhabitants of the Catacombs rarely saw natural sunlight, giving their beige skin colors a far lighter complexion, but tapping into their underground expertise enabled Seriam to move all transportation requirements underground. Children of the Catacombs frequently grew up to be the technologists of Seriam, mainly because the primary occupation within the mountains involved housing the servers used to power Seriam's Artificial Humanoids, as well as store the uploaded brain circuitry of the recently deceased that fueled the Consciousness. The Consciousness could store directly uploaded memories, but to actually consult with a conscious persona of old, the Consciousness required the Servers of the Catacombs.

In between the four major cities were the fields for grazing. Meat consumption was limited on Seriam, particularly with the rise of artificial proteins, but strict grazing standards required plenty of land for the free roaming of the cows, sheep, and swine. Along with a smattering of small villages that took up residence within the grazing ring, the Marti built their great towers of meditation in the fields. In one of the Marti's underground science centers is where Justin had originally been taken.

Within the golden grazing ring were the protected jungles—and farther north, the forests—of the Pluvius Silva. The Outer Rim could cleanse Seriam’s air, but without the oxygen produced by the Pluvius Silva, which helped combat the emissions from the southern hemisphere volcanoes, its efforts would be for naught. Perhaps more importantly, the electrical currents that flowed between the trees as a form of a communication led to technological breakthroughs to enable interspecies communicators and synthetic brain replication. Only scientific researchers on a quest for new medical or technological breakthroughs were allowed under its canopies, which housed some of the planet’s more unusual flora and fauna. And additionally, the High Governor could request access for special occasions.

“I have to apologize for this,” Franklin Veneral said to Justin Staggert as they stood together under a natural opening of the Pluvius Silva canopy. “I could lose my rule at any moment. Regardless, until that happens, you and I can do great things together.”

*Did the Lord Steward just apologize to me?*

“I’m still very honored, Lord Steward,” Justin said, the humidity of the rain forest melting his skin even with the climate-controlling clothing lowering his body temperature.

*If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward.*

“Do you have your remarks prepared?”

“Yes, with Professor Blaseph’s assistance.”

“Good, that’s good. Brilliant man, the professor. I’m glad we sorted out that unfortunate issue. He wasn’t doing well in confinement.”

Justin fought the urge to question Veneral. He knew, though, that the Steward’s ignoble nature meant that he would have to be careful. Veneral did little at this point to hide such deceitful behavior, but that still didn’t mean Justin could openly disrespect him.

“Yes, he looks healthier.”

Justin looked behind him and saw Adelia pretend to be playing with Remus’ privates while making a very distinct motion with her tongue that made her cheek jut out back and forth. Never mind the fact she was wearing a cropped toga sash around her chest that exposed the bottoms of her breasts. It didn’t matter how many times he had seen her naked, he couldn’t stop himself from rudely staring. Sadly, Adelia knew it and used it to her advantage. “Fine, I’ll go with you to your stupid ceremony,” she had said to him, “but I’m going to do everything in my power to make you feel uncomfortable, even if it means dry humping the Steward.”

When Justin clenched his jaw and turned back to his conversation with Veneral, he heard Adelia and Remus burst into laughter.

He could bring two people to the ceremony, and he chose them. Questionable decision-making. *Hopefully the Steward won't use it as a barometer of my advice.*

Justin knew this was a ceremony in name only. The High Council, upon seeing the Solis, immediately and unanimously voted Lilith in as High Governor. All she had to do was step forward and accept, but until she chose to do so, Veneral remained the Steward. There had been seven planetary orbits since then; half a year and nothing but silence. Her silence, though, just made the High Council and the University and the Seriamite population in general crow loudly for Veneral to step down.

"Alright, we're on," Veneral said.

Justin hadn't been side-by-side with Veneral in front of a crowd since Veneral thrust him into the spotlight as the face of his new policy directions. Fortunately, Lilith's arrival postponed those ambitions indefinitely.

And it wasn't really a crowd. Veneral invited three new graduates who were planning to spend their year of service in a technology capacity to record the affair for the Media. And of course, also on hand was the Council of Advisors, save the former Advisor on Science and Space Exploration, Memnon. With Raze Anders, the former First Minister of Science and Space Exploration accepting the nomination to become the First Minister of War and Culture, and thereby the first in line to become the acting Steward, Veneral selected his own advisor to take Raze's former position, advancing him from advisor to First Minister. It couldn't have worked out more perfectly for Veneral, who had asked Justin to accept the advisor position before the position had been open.

"We come here on this joyous day in the perfect summer weather under the canopy of the very jungles that give this great planet its sustenance for a remarkable occasion. Three years ago, an alien craft entered Seriam's atmosphere from a faraway world. Most of the souls on this craft were sadly extinguished during the journey, but one man survived. Instead of panicking, the wise leaders of Seriam, and one of the last decisions made by our great High Governor, Augustus Octavia, invited this individual to stay. By not only accepting this invitation, but thriving within Seriam's great culture, this individual proved once and for all that intelligent civilizations can co-exist. To honor this feat, I have invited him to join my Council of Advisors as my Advisor of Science and Space Exploration. In this capacity, Mr. Justin Staggert will help me and help this Empire achieve new accomplishments in science

and reach out to the farthest planes and quadrants of the universe. Ladies and Gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Justin Staggert to the Seriam government.”

The Council of Advisors applauded politely, but Adelia and Remus went ballistic. Adelia had prepared explosive celebrators out of her wrist irons and Remus, with his interspecies communicator, had convinced a dozen monkeys to scream and perform back flips just outside the ceremonial platform. Veneral looked dismayed as he attempted to ignore them, but eventually Justin had to turn and quiet them down before the two of them sufficiently embarrassed the Steward on a live Media broadcast.

“Mr. Staggert,” Veneral said, welcoming him to step before him.

“Hello,” Justin said awkwardly, struggling to look at the three recorders. “Oh, and thank you, Lord Steward, for this honor.” He took a deep breath. “When I came to Seriam, I was a lost stranger. Seriam took me in, though, and made me welcome. It didn’t take me long until I realized that Seriam is my home. I know this honor that the Lord Steward has bestowed upon me is for one year, but I vow that I will spend the rest of my life helping defend Seriam, helping to advance our scientific exploits, and most importantly, to appreciate the culture and the nature that we live among.”

Justin looked at Veneral, asking if he had forgotten anything or, preferably, if he could run into the jungle and get mauled by monkeys.

Veneral placed his hand between Justin’s shoulder blades, a chilling concept when Justin thought about the dagger that took Augustus’ life. “We’re lucky to have Mr. Staggert among us as well, but more importantly, we’re lucky to have him serve us in the government. Thank you.”

Justin saw the red circles of the recorders’ Ocular Implants die down, effectively ending the broadcast.

“That was very good, thank you,” Veneral said disinterestedly.

“No, thank you,” he replied, but Veneral had already turned to walk away. Titus surreptitiously positioned himself between the two of them.

“I imagine you can find your own way back to Externus?” Titus asked over his shoulder.

“Uh, sure.”

As Justin stood there watching Veneral and Titus and the rest of the Council of Advisors step into transports that would fly them back over the canopy and over the ring of golden fields back into Verita, Adelia and Remus approached and stood next to him.



“That was kind of weird,” Justin said, which caused further hysterics from his friends.

“You think?” Adelia asked, but could barely get the words out because she was laughing so hard.

“Come on, let’s go play with the monkeys,” Remus said.

“Oh, yes!” Adelia exclaimed.

Justin developed more and more admiration for Adelia, who had an absolute love of life and everything in it. She had a drinking problem, to be sure, and was oddly sadistic in the arena, but she had fun. No one could take that away from her.

“No, you guys go ahead,” Justin said. “Lilith said she was going to come after everyone had departed.”

“Oooooooh,” Adelia said, moving her hips back and forth seductively. She turned and grabbed Remus and began to hump his leg. Remus, bless his heart, enjoyed all of Adelia’s antics. He never really took part, but just allowing her to use him as a prop was all he really needed to do.

“It’s super strange that you’re like, in a companionship with the Solis,” Remus said, ignoring Adelia’s continued thrusting.

“I’m not in a companionship with the Solis, and she’s not the Solis anymore, just call her Lilith.”

“Oh yeah, okay,” Adelia chided, finally ceasing and desisting from Remus’s now almost certainly bruised thigh.

“I’ll slap her on the back like the old pal she is.”

“And she *is* the Solis, Sir, until she accepts,” Remus added.

“True,” Justin said, looking out into the depths of the dark jungle surrounding them. “I don’t know, though, we just like to hang out. We’re not in a companionship.”

“Hanging out *in secret*,” Adelia said, throwing up a parenthetical with her fingers, “is the definition of a companionship with Lilith Octavia. If you got a secret relationship, it’s because you don’t want anyone to know you’re boning. So spill it, what’s her vagina like?”

“I wouldn’t have the first clue, but having seen yours, I imagine it’s much prettier,” Justin said to Adelia’s absolute enjoyment.

She jumped and threw her arms around him. “I *love* when you actually talk like you have a pair. Now be serious, if you’re not boning Lilith, it’s because you kind of want to get cozy with my pretty pussy, isn’t it?”

Remus almost fell over laughing so hard, but Justin just grimaced.

“Ew, just, ew. I haven’t been with anyone since...” Justin stopped himself. He hadn’t thought about Kris Holiday for a long time. He had accepted he’d never see her again—or anyone from Juniper—and had tried to push her out of his brain. The time over the past half year he spent with Lilith only made her fade farther from his memory.

“Ah, yes, your beautiful captain from Earth,” Adelia said. “I can help you forget her.” Adelia continued to embrace him and was in the middle of planting a giant wet kiss on his cheek when a transport appeared above them and quickly settled down near the platform. They were so shocked that none of them moved, so when Lilith Octavia stepped off the vessel, Adelia still had Justin in an ever-tightening bear hug.

“Adelia,” Justin whispered, “Adelia, let me go.”

Adelia immediately dropped her hands and crouched down on one knee, placing one hand in front of her face in the style of the Marti.

“Madam Solis,” she said to the ground.

“You must be Adelia,” Lilith said, standing with her head cocked to the side and her arms behind her back.

Adelia rose. “Yes, Madam Solis.”

“Just Lilith,” Lilith said, turning her attention to Remus. “Remus.”

Remus was so taken aback that he froze in place and failed to even drop to one knee. He managed to put a shaky hand in front of his eyes, prompting Lilith to offer the same respects.

“Yes, Madam Solis.”

“Lilith.”

“Yes, Lilith.”

She walked forward, closing the gap between them. “You two are lucky. You have a very big ally, now an official Advisor, I hear, who lobbies on your behalf. It’s a good friend to have.”

Adelia’s respect could only last so long, and within seconds she broke her façade and used her elbow to jab Justin in the ribs. “I knew you’d pull for us, buddy. I told you he’d pan out as a friend,” she said, looking at Remus.

Remus just nodded and smiled.

“Lilith, can I ask you a question?” Adelia brazenly asked. Remus and Justin both turned their heads in exasperation, but Lilith seemed to take it in stride.

*Please don't ruin this for me. Head up, eyes forward.*

"Of course."

"You're the elected High Governor. When are you going to accept?"

"Soon enough," Lilith said meekly. "Would you two mind giving Justin and I some privacy so I can congratulate him?"

Adelia's face lit up at the connotation, so Remus quickly said, "Of course, Madam Solis." He placed his hand in front of his face and prodded Adelia to do the same. Once again, Lilith respectfully returned the motion and then watched as the two turned and bounded off into the jungle, disappearing behind the thicket and trees in a matter of seconds.

When both Justin and Lilith were satisfied they were out of sight, they turned to each other and immediately embraced, passionately locking their lips with one another. Justin squeezed her back like he was afraid she was going to slip away from him. They continued to kiss for several seconds until Lilith pulled back to breathe.

"Come on," she said, "I want to show you something."

She grabbed his hand and led him onto her transport. They both took up positions with Alterio Seats at the front of the craft. This wasn't as automated as most were. Lilith actually had to fiddle with the circular dials and then when a 3D image of Seriam appeared, she plotted a point. After a few moments, they were airborne and the image disappeared back into the dials.

"Where are we going?" Justin asked.

*Where now?*

Over the past six months since she and Justin escaped from a second assassination attempt, Professor Blaseph arranged for several meetings between the two. Eventually, Lilith began to beckon him on her own. One day, Justin showed up a bunch of flowers—an archaic tradition still alive on Earth—and she kissed him. Ever since, she had used him to visit several places around the world. It's not that Justin objected. He actually loved every trip they took. He just sensed she was working through her problems by visiting the places of her childhood or escaping to places she couldn't be found, and Justin was merely her chauffeur.

"You'll see," she said with a twinge of mystery in her voice.

"Is there any possibility I'm going to get eaten by a multi-horned carnivore?"

She laughed. "No, at least not that I know of. And that wasn't even a real threat."

“Right.”

The ship lurched to the right and then began to swiftly cut through the air above the trees. Lilith programmed the front of the ship to allow them to view the scenery underneath them. In reality, it was an illusion that the ship sent to their Ocular Implants, making the bottom and front seem to disappear, giving them the feeling of floating.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” she asked him, staring out at the jungle reaching out towards the horizon.

“Yeah, it’s something else, that’s for sure.”

The ship began to rise in elevation, speeding faster and faster until the trees began to thin out. Eventually, they were both gawking down at Verita as they sailed overhead and then made their way out to sea.

“Nervous?” she asked, finding more interest in how he responded than in the majestic blue waters now below them.

“With you, always.” She giggled at his comment and bit her lip. “Can I ask you something?” he asked.

“Anything,” she replied, her voice as soft and gentle as always.

“Why do you like to bring me on these little trips of yours?”

Her face dropped and she looked away, both embarrassed and dismayed by the question.

“Do you not want to do this with me?” she asked meekly, her insecurities readily on display.

“No! Of course not! I mean, yes, I do want to be here with you. I *love* all the time we spend together.” *Fuck I’m an asshole.* “But, is this real? I mean, when you accept, you know, the position, I’m not sure this will be acceptable.”

She looked at him, clearly frustrated.

“First of all, who said I’m accepting any position. And second, it’s real if we want it to be real.”

“I want it to be real.” His half-hearted response was less than convincing, but it was primarily his own insecurities that drove his lack of conviction, not his feelings for her. He realized he had to step it up. “Lilith, ever since I first saw you, I’ve wanted to be with you. But, you’re... you.”

“And you’re you.”

“Yes. Exactly.”

She laughed. "I wouldn't be here with you if I didn't want it to be real. Maybe I just want to show you the places I once loved and have some private time with you before..." But she stopped, unable to finish.

He nodded. He understood. "Okay."

"Okay. Well enough of this talk then. We're approaching our destination."

Justin looked out in front of them and because of their conversation, he had missed the small mountains begin to rise out of the ocean. Smoke and steam spewed into the air from their cones, but one in particular was a giant circle that had developed vegetation and beaches.

"What is it?" Justin asked, enthralled by the sights as the ship began its descent.

"It's the Ignis Islands," she said, staring again at his reaction.

The ship was approaching the particularly large circle, which began to take the shape of a rim. The Ignis Islands were sacred to Seriam. Rarely visited by humans, the sprawling volcanic islands, many just the rims of the mostly covered conical volcanoes, were pristine ecosystems. Despite their best guesses, scientists had yet to figure out after all these years how land animals even arrived on them. Regardless, the ability of the volcanoes to destroy life on Seriam while at the same time providing an environment for untouched natural preserves held a special place for Seriam's traditions.

"Are we supposed to be here?" Justin asked out of concern as the ship touched down, having heard the warnings to stay away from the islands on many occasions.

She rolled her eyes. "No, but, just don't touch the wildlife. You deserve a good surprise, graduating from University and joining the Council of Advisors."

She said it in jest, so he looked at her skeptically and rolled his eyes. She laughed and put her hands up.

"I really am proud of you. We won't stay long. Come on."

The ship opened up and they walked off onto perfectly white sand beaches formed by the erosion of the bordering coral reefs. Farther down the coast, the sands changed colors to vibrant reds and darkened blacks of volcanic sands. The clashing sands struck Justin as the perfect setting for their budding love. Holding hands, the two walked with their feet getting lapped by the warm waters. As far as Justin could see, enormous sea turtles, the size of small vehicles, were lazily sunbathing along the beach. Exotic birds, almost like a mix between a penguin and a buzzard with large red Mohawks, nested on the ground where the trees began to emerge. Large seals and walrus' dove into the water and

reappeared as they slid back onto the sand, but these seals actually had small limbs that enabled them to walk more easily on land. Not one of them looked or appeared frightened by the new visitors.

“This is incredible,” he whispered.

“I know, right?” she said, gazing out at the peace and serenity of their surroundings. “When we get back on board, we’ll go underwater. There are huge pods of whales that stop here this time of year.”

Justin turned, realizing even among the precious scenery, Lilith was still the most beautiful creature on the island. He wrapped his arms around her, which she appeared to be waiting for. She shyly pulled her shoulders up and buried her face in his shoulder.

“So, you got me here all alone on this secluded island where no one can find us,” he said, “what did you plan to do with me?”

“Feed you to a multi-horned carnivore.” They both laughed and began to kiss. He held her as he maneuvered them onto the ground, lying on top of her in the warm sand. The ocean water continued to lap around them. “I suppose I’d be willing to consider other options, though.”

He smiled and they began to kiss again.

“You’re going to get me in trouble,” he said.

“Maybe that’s the plan.”

“Are you ready for this? I don’t want to force you into anything.”

“You’re not forcing me into anything. You’re saving me.”

He smiled again. Of all the places to make love to Lilith Octavia for the first time, the Ignis Islands, with their embodiment of life and death and the utter impossibility of understanding the future, were a perfect setting.

## Chapter 3 – Veneral

The inside of an Explorer, the giant orb-shaped spacecrafts that combined organic compounds and technology to make a sentient life form, was slightly cramped. The pods were designed to travel autonomously; internal seating was merely an accessory. Because it was living material, the interior didn't smell as sterile and uninviting as Franklin Veneral had anticipated. The seats were old-fashioned—leather-based designs since Alterio Seating couldn't conform to the material—and there were no controls. The ability of the Explorers to mimic life and consciously alter its behaviors frightened most Seriamite scientists, even though it was strictly coded with the laws and guiding principles of the Empire. Aside from the annual technology and cultural display, the ships weren't even authorized to fly within the atmospheres of any of Seriam's eighty-eight planets or moons. But they weren't designed to fly within Seriam, they were designed to expand Seriam to the Universe and identify worlds that ordinary humans wouldn't have considered.

Explorers didn't scare Veneral. Explorers enthralled him, helping him build Seriam into the greatness that defined it. He didn't understand the reservations about the system. At worst, the guiding laws of Seriam would prevent the Explorers from threatening civilization, and at best, their success could lead to further technological advancement, literally creating the first manmade step of evolution.

*This is the moment. When Seriam was darkened with sadness, void of direction, and suffering from a leader who won't accept responsibility, the Steward took the daring step to institute the steps necessary to continue to advance technology and the Empire. This is the moment. May the suns always shine on our faces.*

Of course, the maiden voyage of such a transformational ship wouldn't be appropriate without the face of the program, Veneral's new Advisor on Science and Space Exploration.

"Try this," Veneral said to the visibly shaken Justin Staggert, holding out a cambata fruit the size of a softball. "It's naturally grown here in the green towers. There's nothing like it at the University. One of the many perks of living here in Verita."

Justin distractedly accepted, seeming to be mesmerized by the energy pulses traveling through the veins of the Explorer. Even Veneral had to admit the pulses seemed oddly like a heartbeat, but he didn't dare let Justin see that he had never seen anything like it.

“Lord Steward,” the Explorer stated in a mild-mannered male’s voice. “May I proceed to an algorithmically stipulated location, or do you have a request?”

“For our initial flight, Explorer 1, I actually have a request. Justin, how do you feel about traveling here?”

Veneral tapped his temple and an image of Earth appeared in front of them. Justin took a moment to recognize it, but when he did, his eyes expanded.

“Sir, are you taking me home?”

“Justin, I stand by our initial assertion that you cannot return, but if you are up for it, I thought bringing you to Earth would be a nice surprise for your appointment to the Council of Advisors.”

“Absolutely,” Justin said, suddenly settling into his chair in a fit of ease. He bit into the cambata fruit and allowed the purple juice to run down his chin. His eyes lit up again. He held it up and nodded his head in agreement. “It *is* better.”

“Explorer 1, map an alignment to 35-Solar 3,” Veneral said.

“Yes, Lord Steward,” the Explorer replied. “That will be nice for Mr. Staggert, I presume.”

“Yes it will,” Justin said. He then looked at Veneral and said, “What are we aiming to accomplish? Or is it just so I can see it again?”

“I’m hoping it will remind you of the splendor that the universe can offer. Earth is your home, but I think if you see it, you will better understand what I want to accomplish.”

“To find other Earths? Or to colonize Earth?”

“According to Seriam law, we are not permitted to colonize a planet with a pre-established civilization,” the Explorer said, sounding like a dull storyteller at a local library.

“That’s exactly right,” Veneral said. “This is merely so you can see your home. Justin, I need you to be convinced. If people see that you’re not convinced, then they won’t be convinced. We only have one shot at this before tax season. If people choose not to dedicate their taxes to this program, it will die before we can get it off the ground. We’ll be resigned to traveling within the confines of our galaxy in our interplanetary ships. Essentially life rafts in space. Horrible.”

*And we shall once again obtain the glory that once showered the Empire during the rule of Antonius.*

“We don’t have that, from where I’m from,” Justin said wistfully. “Taxes, I mean. I mean, we have taxes, but, we can’t choose what we dedicate our own taxes to.”



Veneral looked at Justin aghast; legitimately confused.

“Then how did your government rule? How did the people make decisions?”

“I guess we just elected representatives to make decisions for us. And, I mean, that’s just the country I was from. We didn’t have universal governance. But even in other countries and territories, no one had the freedom to direct their taxes at specific areas or priorities.”

“That sounds chaotic,” Veneral said.

*Maybe this isn’t as advanced of a civilization as I once thought.*

“Sometimes it was. But it worked.”

“Lord Steward, with your permission,” the Explorer said, interjecting itself into the interplanetary comparisons.

“Yes, lock in 35-Solar 3 and establish the gravitational alignment,” Veneral directed.

“Very good, Lord Steward. The current strands make for an excellent alignment. It should be a quick journey.”

Larger pulses of energy began to fire up the veins of the Explorer. The ship began to rumble and Veneral could feel it begin to journey straight up into the sky.

“Illuminate,” Veneral commanded.

“Very good, Sir,” the Explorer responded, making its opaque skin translucent.

“When we enter the alignment, though, I will have to reinforce my exterior for protection.”

“Understood.”

“Strands?” Justin asked.

Veneral glanced at him, annoyed that Justin would ask such a simplistic question. “I was under the impression you covered the genetic modeling of the galaxy,” Veneral replied tersely.

“We did,” Justin said gulping, “but it is such a different construct than how we envisioned it on Earth. Sometimes it still gets fuzzy. And I definitely have never heard of the idea of strands.”

Veneral sighed.

*I guess I’d rather he ask me now than embarrass me in front of the rest of the advisors, or worse, in front of the public. Okay, I’ll walk him through it. The most powerful man on Seriam giving a tutorial on basic physics. This is so far below me it hurts my brain.*

“The galaxy,” Veneral began, “has multiple layers, kind of like several strands of DNA layered on top of one another.” He used his hand to make a twisting motion. “The quadrant

of the galaxy, which we assume is consistent throughout the Universe, is the visible spiral of the galactic arms. But the *plane*, which is far more important and is invisible to the naked eye, is the actual twist, or layer, of the DNA strand. It is the hidden energy that creates gaps in space that allows us to journey to distant planets. It's all tied together by gravity, almost like an address. So far, we've visited nine quadrants of the galaxy. But the planes are actually unlimited." He looked around at the Explorer. "Particularly when we begin to venture out into the Universe. Our telescopes and models suggest the planes can go completely black in places, giving the impression that the Universe has ended. In reality, those black areas just haven't been coded yet, to continue my metaphor. The hidden energy, it's always moving and reforming itself."

Veneral found himself explaining in far greater detail than he anticipated. He actually enjoyed discussing the topic, which is why he was so keen to use the Explorers.

"And how do they get coded?"

"When the Eternal Energy, which is everywhere, all around us, amasses in one place, it releases information. It is coding the universe."

Justin looked up at the sky as they approached the Outer Rim, clearly thinking about the Universe beyond it.

"And then the strands?"

Veneral lifted his hand to begin to explain, but paused, tried to refine the words before they came out, and then dropped his hand into his lap. "Explorer 1," he finally said, "how do you describe space strands?"

"The official definition of a space strand is a natural bridge created when hidden energy organizes and collapses the distance between multiple galactic planes. They are commonly referred to as electromagnetic pathways and are powered by singularities. A good strand indicates a gravitational alignment can establish a link between two locations in space and smoothly penetrate into an alternate plane without requiring multiple singularities."

"Understand?" Veneral asked, apparently pleased with the explanation."

"I think you're almost combining two different concepts that we call black holes and worm holes, where I'm from," Justin said.

"Another way to envision it," the Explorer continued unprovoked, "is to consider the linkages between the trees of Pluvius Silva. Some trees share roots, allowing for direct communications. That would make a good strand. But if one tree has to bounce off multiple

other trees to arrive at its destination, that is a bad strand, and the likelihood of the communication getting lost increases exponentially.”

“Only, in this scenario, we are the lost communication?”

Veneral looked at Justin, who now looked visibly nervous.

“Relax, Justin, this is why the Explorers are so important. They can anticipate discrepancies and adjust accordingly.”

“So the strands change?” Justin asked.

*Do not ignore me!*

Veneral took a deep breath. “They do, but usually quite slowly. More importantly, they can be fickle. You have to find them, even when you know exactly where they are. If you don’t pinpoint the strand, then the gravitational alignment will be very difficult to achieve and to keep open. Again, enter the Explorers. This is no longer a problem for us.”

Veneral could see Justin’s mind working on overdrive.

“What is it, Justin?” Veneral asked.

“Where I’m from, we just didn’t quite have all the information. I think what you’re describing, we called deviations. We never knew exactly what or where they were.”

“More importantly, when we have a destination already mapped, it’s much simpler. Difficult strands must be considered to a greater extent when doing actual exploration. Explorers will help us discover new routes and new worlds.”

“By describing it like DNA, it almost sounds like Explorers are the vanguard of a virus,” Justin said.

Veneral turned slowly. He did not like the reference to being a virus.

“A vanguard of something,” he seethed through his teeth. “But if you insist on thinking of it like a virus, you know what happens when a virus stops expanding? It dies.”

“If it expands too quickly, it can also kill its host,” Justin retorted.

*Insolent bastard! My name is Franklin Veneral, and I am the vanguard!*

“I suppose it needs to maintain the proper balance.”

“On Earth, we could only figure out one destination. And to be honest, that was because it was sent to us.” Veneral could once again see Justin’s mind churning. “To be honest, that must mean someone from Seriam *sent* it to us.”

Veneral smiled deviously, like sparks were pouring out of his eyes.

“The Gilgomosh transmission. “My great ancestor.”

Justin looked at Veneral but didn't dare respond. Veneral knew exactly what was going through his head. Does he accuse the Steward of breaking a law of Seriam, sufferable by banishment on an uninhabited world? Justin simply nodded once and looked straight ahead.

"Sir," the Explorer said, breaking the tension, "I have given the Outer Rim the proper coordinates. It will establish the gravitational alignment on your command."

"The Outer Rim is establishing the alignment?" Justin interrupted as Veneral was about to give the go ahead.

"Of course. Explorers can make and enter an alignment. In this case, though, this is a known destination. Why waste the brain power? You have my blessing. Proceed."

As he said it, the Explorer's walls went opaque and Veneral could hear it activate its hidden energy shields. Veneral could hardly contain his excitement that an advanced sentient ship would prove once and for all that Seriam should return to the policies of his forefather, Gilgomosh Anonius. *The galactic virus, they called him.* Once he proved history wrong, and proved that it was in fact Apollo Octavia, the man who killed Gilgomosh, who was mad, he could reinstate his good name and restart the true lineage of Seriam. *Except Lilith is still alive. How could Monty have failed me so dramatically? And all it cost him was his life. It's almost like he wanted to fail.*

Veneral closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat. His overthrow of the Octavia name would have to wait. He had bigger concerns at the moment.

*I hope he's ready for this.*

The Explorer immediately began to gyrate and then Veneral could feel it maneuver to its left and after a few seconds, he was thrust back into his seat as everything went silent. The blood in Veneral's face began to rush into the back of his head. He grasped at the armrests, which unlike previous experiences remained relatively cool thanks to the Explorer's outer shell. And just as he thought he was finding a certain peace of mind, the violence ceased and the Explorer began to smoothly float through space once again.

Veneral extended out his fingers and felt the blood resuming its normal operations. He opened his eyes and looked over at Justin, who was shaking uncontrollably. Justin's eyes were aghast and he clung to his seat as though he were about to be thrust out into space.

"It's over," Veneral said, sounding remarkably compassionate. "Justin, it's over."

He saw Justin slowly release his grip and take a labored breath. His body seemed to be fighting any possibility of accepting oxygen. Turning to look back at Veneral, Justin said, "Yeah, it's over. Last time it didn't go so well."

"Can you give me some eyes?" Veneral said to the Explorer, which piqued Justin's interest.

"Negative, Lord Steward, I am sensing a threat."

The Explorer could barely get the words out before the ship rumbled and cracked. The Explorer's voice even let out a soft grumble, like a toughened boxer who had fought too many fights experiencing an unexpected blow to the face. It hurt, it was annoying, but it wasn't damaging.

"Lord Steward, native ships are attacking, I must follow protocol to defend myself."

*Yes, defend away.*

"Of course, fire!" Veneral exclaimed, feigning fear.

"No, wait, just return to the alignment!" Justin yelled in horror.

But it was too late. The ship's internal light of energy shown bright and then Veneral heard two loud thumps as the Explorer released its primary energy pulse weapon. It lasted all of about six seconds, shorter even than the ride through the gravitational alignment.

"Wait!" Justin wailed. "Please stop! This is a misunderstanding!"

"There is no misunderstanding," the Explorer replied a bit less calmly than before.

"The threat has been neutralized. The attacking ships are returning to their world."

The Explorer waited a moment before removing its shields and making its skin once again translucent. Before Veneral and Justin, the magnificence of the blue and green Earth shone in through the walls. Justin moved to the edge of his seat and reached out for it. Tears came to his eyes and he looked around to try to get closer. They were far enough away that the continents could be seen clear as day. They were over North America.

"That's my home," Justin said. "Can we go down?"

"That's not your home," Veneral said, staring directly at Justin. "Not any more. Your home is Seriam. You saw what your people did. They are a violent species. They will show that we need to be vigilant and bolster our defenses. They attacked us."

"No, that was a misunderstanding. I'll bet they thought it was a training exercise. They're not violent. No. They really aren't."

*He's struggling. He's trying to convince himself. Keep on him.*

“You’re wrong and you know you’re wrong.”

Justin’s face was torn. He looked at his planet with absolute longing.

“My brother is down there. My, my Kris is down there. I’m not wrong. I have to go back.”

“I agree,” Veneral said. “We should go back. This was clearly too overwhelming for you. It was an error in my judgment.”

They could see small satellites go whizzing between them and Earth. Justin was completely glued. *I’m losing him.*

“Explorer 1, please send a message to the ships that just attacked you. Send them a message of peaceful tidings. We are a peaceful Empire. We want nothing more than to be their friend. Should they respond, we will return.”

“Yes, Lord Steward. I am relaying the message now. Only the ships that attacked, Lord Steward?”

“How many others are connected to the Outer Rim?”

“There are three ships and one ground-based system. Additionally, six-hundred-and-four humanoids have neural implants that give them the ability to travel to Seriam.”

Both Veneral and Justin went white with confusion.

“Wait, what does that mean?” Justin asked. “There are others? How can that?”

“I thought you said you were the only one,” Veneral said.

“I thought I was. Sir, we have to find out more. You have to take me down there.”

“No, we’re going home. We have an Empire to run. We have defenses to bolster.”

The walls immediately went opaque and the Explorer swung back into an alignment. Justin, who was not prepared for such a move, got slammed back into his seat. Veneral didn’t care. If there was one lesson he wanted Justin to have about his old home, it was that he would always get crushed. Earth will hurt him. Seriam will save him. Within seconds, the Explorer exposed them to the views of the Outer Rim. They were back at Seriam.

They were home.

## Chapter 4 – General Sartor

The situation was chaotic.

“Someone talk to me!” General Sartor shouted. He held a half-chewed toothpick in his hand. “What the hell happened?”

“They’re coming in hot,” Bryce yelled, looking over Mel’s shoulder at the 3D holographic image of the Shake Shack’s control center. To his right, John Jameson had table-top imaging and diagnostics of Shake Shack’s weapons systems. Bryce’s team had been assigned as Shake Shack’s Ultra, which meant they were responsible for analyzing all aspects of Shake Shack during the current mission and were intended to be a second set of eyes on a very complex piece of machinery. Both Blackbird and Manifest Destiny had Ultra teams as well. “We have zero comms, but structural integrity appears to be intact.”

“Who was it?” Colonel Smith yelled. “What attacked us?” Colonel Smith, clad in his Air Force BDUs, came careening down the control room floor from his office.

*Relax, Smith. Jesus Christ, how could this happen on a live fire exercise?*

“Ariana, talk to me,” Sartor said. He began pacing back and forth down the central aisle of the Juniper control center. “What was it? Where’d it come from?” He slid the toothpick back into his mouth and began to chew vociferously.

“General Sartor,” Ariana’s voice said across the room, “the attacking orb emerged from the gravitational alignment and fired electromagnetic pulses at Manifest Destiny and Shake Shack. Both ships experienced severe electrical failure and are struggling to utilize their thrusters.”

*Gravitational alignment? Orb?*

“Ariana, what gravitational connection?” Sartor asked. “This was a training exercise. They weren’t supposed to open a connection.”

“The Juniper teams did not open a gravitational alignment. This was the end of the alignment.”

The room took a moment to consider the implications.

*This was alien? Or did the Goddamned Chinese figure out the technology?*

“Did they return fire?” Colonel Smith yelled. His face was growing red and Sartor could sense he was panicking that he was about to fail his primary directive when Sartor brought him on board. “Failure is *not* an option,” Sartor had told him. “Not after this plane fiasco.”

Colonel Smith, formerly in charge of space defenses at NORTHCOM, assured him that he was the right guy for the job. Now he was on the verge of proving himself wrong.

“Negative,” Ariana said sublimely if not forlornly, “the X-40s did not utilize any of their weapon systems.”

“They thought it was a training exercise,” General Sartor grunted through his toothpick. “They weren’t authorized to fire. What about Blackbird? It wasn’t a part of the vanguard.”

As he drew the attention of the room to the third and feasibly intact ship, they heard static across the radio.

“This is Blackbird, repeat, this is Blackbird,” an Irish voice said. It was O’Bannon, the Blackbird communications officer.

“Blackbird, we have you at Juniper,” Colonel Smith said, sliding a holographic lever to the right. “Give us your status.”

“Repeat, this is Blackbird in the blind,” O’Bannon said again. “We are leading Shake Shack and Manifest Destiny toward Juniper. They will try to set down in the fields outside the Juniper compound. Juniper, request immediate CASEVAC at the site.”

“Keep trying to connect!” Colonel Smith commanded as he and Sartor went running out of the control room.

Sartor thought he heard Bryce inform the team to continue to monitor, which meant he assumed that Bryce turned and followed them out of the room.

By the time Bryce arrived, having hoofed the mile or so on foot, he was breathing heavily and sweating profusely. Sartor had ordered him to return to the control room and denied him the ability to join them in their gas-powered Jeep. Clearly, he didn’t obey Sartor’s orders.

*Bryce.*

Sartor watched Bryce frantically try to help the rescue crews as they helped the crew out of Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny appeared to be in vastly better condition than Shake Shack, which had turned onto its side with two large gashes along its posterior. Sartor assumed this was strictly because Captain Holiday and Jackie Blaine had expertly guided Manifest Destiny in with minimal thrusters. Shake Shack wasn’t so fortunate. He only hoped that Blackbird made it to the hangar in perfect condition.



Sartor assessed the situation as Bryce helped the crew out of the X-40. First Micah and George appeared, having pried the door open after the crash partially wedged it shut. They seemed to be in good condition if not a little banged up. Jackie and Peter Sabien appeared next, but immediately turned to help the Team Alpha navigator, Latimer, who appeared to be nursing an injured ankle. Rescue crews took him from his crew and helped him onto a waiting gurney. Sartor could tell that Bryce had a purpose in helping them along. He was waiting for one person and one person only. Where was Tink?

Sartor saw Holiday emerge. She was struggling with something, making it difficult to exit. In her arms laid an inanimate figure, arms sprawling limply to the side. It was Tink. Bryce went apoplectic.

Putting his foot on the X-40, he shoved the emergency crews out of the way and demanded that Holiday give him his girlfriend.

“Back off!” Sartor heard him shout.

Bryce put his hands under Tink and began to carry her away. The emergency crews were directing him where to go.

“She’s still breathing!” Bryce yelled.

Sartor looked at Colonel Smith and made a motion with his head. Smith nodded with understanding and made his way for Tink. It appeared as though the emergency crews convinced Bryce to place her on a gurney to allow them to begin to inspect her. He refused to leave her side, though, and wouldn’t let the ambulance leave until he was inside

Colonel Smith tried to calm him down, but Bryce shoved him away and climbed into the ambulance.

Smith turned with an appalled expression and shook his head at Sartor. He realized he would have to fill Smith in on Bryce’s background. A vehicular accident that claimed someone he loved? This won’t go over well. Life would be so much easier if he could just retire to his ranch and ride his horses. A couple more incidents like this and Congress might make that decision for him. He continued to watch Colonel Smith, who now had moved toward Captain Holiday. He saw Holiday nod curtly, but she began to tend to his team.

Sartor began to make his way for Shake Shack. Unlike Manifest Destiny, where Captain Holiday was the last person off the ship, Sartor saw that Captain Grayson Milner—Team Bravo’s captain—was the first to emerge. It wasn’t on his own accord, though. The emergency crews grabbed his arms and shoulders and delicately dragged him off the ship. Sartor couldn’t tell if he was dead or alive, but he was evacuated to an ambulance. The

remainder of the crew began to step off. Jerome had a scraggily looking guy hanging off of him. Sartor could tell Pinkleton from a mile away. He was small, but he could pilot an X-40 with the best of them, sometimes even giving Jackie a run for her money. It looked like his shoulder had been knocked out of its socket.

Sartor had seen enough. He would let the casualty evacuation crews do their job and Colonel Smith could oversee it.

Sartor began to walk back to the Jeep. Colonel Smith had left the keys in the ignition. As he jumped in the driver's seat, though, Jack Taylor opened the passenger door and hopped in beside him.

"Raymond," he said, as always seeing no need for decorum with his old pal and professional adversary, "you need to get back to the control room, I'll tell ya what. Now."

Sartor stood in front of the central command module and stared aghast at the giant screen. He was flanked by Jack Taylor and the remaining crewmembers who were on Ultra teams or simply stepped in to assist.

"Play it again," Sartor commanded delicately, practically breaking his toothpick in half.

He didn't know who was operating the module, but someone, or maybe Ariana, acquiesced to his request.

"How did only Blackbird receive the transmission?" Taylor asked.

"The other two ships were damaged from the EMP," Mel answered.

They all watched as the image came onto the screen.

Sartor didn't want to believe it, but there could be no mistaking it.

*That's Justin Staggert.*

"Hello," Justin said into the camera in Latin.

"What the hell is he wearing?" Taylor asked, being the only person who didn't quite understand the gravity of the situation. "What language is that?" His questions were ignored. Justin, with the backdrop of a dense jungle and surrounded by a man in purple robes, continued.

"When I came to Seriam, I was a lost stranger. Seriam took me in, though, and made me welcome. It didn't take me long until I realized that Seriam is my home." The video

seemed to skip, but Justin spoke further. "I vow that I will spend the rest of my life helping defend Seriam."

"Shut it off," Sartor said. "Where's Bryce? And find someone that can speak Latin!"

The screen went blank as he turned to face the team in the control room. They looked as dumbfounded as he felt.

"He never came back," Mel said.

"He's with Ashley," he whispered to himself. "Tink got hurt," he said a little louder.

"Sir, what does this mean?" O'Bannon asked. He must have departed Blackbird and entered the control room while they were watching the transmission.

"It means Justin is still alive," Taylor exclaimed, finally coming to terms with the situation. "We have to get this out! This is huge!"

"No one knows!" Sartor uncharacteristically shouted. "This stays here at Juniper. If people know Justin is alive, speaking Latin on an alien planet, that changes the world. At best, it creates inquiries on his whereabouts and how the hell he got there."

"I think he said he's on Seriam," O'Bannon said. "Do you think that's a planet?"

Sartor looked at him puzzled. He couldn't understand the language so he hadn't heard the term, *Seriam*. He thought about it quickly and immediately thought to the display of planets.

"Or the civilization," Sartor corrected. "Ariana, pull up the map from the alien technology." On the center module display, a 3D image of the eighty-eight planets and moons appeared with the large ringed planet in the center. "I think that that's all Seriam. And they have Justin. O'Bannon, you speak Latin?"

"No, Sir, very little."

"Someone translate this for me."

"He didn't seem to object," Taylor said.

"Maybe. Something seemed off about that video. Either way, either Justin is now a part of Seriam and helped lead an attack, or Seriam has Justin and is manipulating him against his will. This isn't exactly rocket science, no pun intended. Terrorists are making captives read statements all the time."

"Seemed like a pretty backdrop, Raymond," Taylor said, failing to resist the urge to poke Sartor. Sartor glared at him. "Hell, we just saw aliens, assuming those human looking people were aliens. At least we can rule out the Chinese."

Sartor ignored him. "We need to find Bryce. O'Bannon, we need a full debrief. Get Tim Thomas and Melvin Russell. We need the science on this. Meet in my office in one hour. Taylor, find Colonel Smith. I want COAs developed ASAP. We'll pull Holiday in if she's not in sickbay. And God Damn it, someone translate this for me!"

Sartor turned to look at the screen, focusing on the ringed planet. He imagined Justin there, living his life as an alien among aliens.

A few minutes later, after Professor Barbeau was able to translate the transmission, General Sartor walked into the hospital. He had just checked in on Grayson, but he was already in surgery with head trauma and a chest wound. Latimer and Pinkleton both had injured ankles, but were otherwise fine. A few others had some bumps and bruises and were being checked for concussions. His last visit was to Tink's room.

Tink was in a coma. A large tube was sticking out of her mouth and an automated breathing machine would systematically suck in upwards and then deflate with a hiss. Her face was bandaged and her arm was already in a cast. Her bright white hair seemed duller than usual, possibly from the dirt and grime of the crash, but it was no secret that Tink's hair would brighten with her personality.

Slightly bandaged and emotionally numb, Captain Holiday sat in the corner. Bryce, though, was standing and alert, posing in an almost defensive pose over his girlfriend. When Sartor entered, Bryce scowled at him. Sartor couldn't tell if it was still out of anger or if he was now more concerned about Tink. Captain Holiday breathed in deeply and rubbed his eyes and began to stand up, but Sartor stopped him.

"Sit, sit," he said, "you've certainly earned it."

Holiday didn't object and collapsed back into his seat.

"How is she?" Sartor asked Bryce as he approached the side of Tink's bed.

"Alive," Bryce quipped in annoyance. "Tink's feisty. She'll pull through."

"Yes she will."

"What the hell happened, Sir?" Holiday asked from behind Bryce.

"It appears, Captain Holiday, that a gravitational connection opened almost exactly where your training exercise was occurring."

Holiday didn't immediately understand.

"Who the hell opened a connection?"

"No one," Sartor sighed. "At least, no one from this world. It appears to have been opened from another point in space."

Both Bryce and Holiday looked away from Tink to scrutinize General Sartor's face. Sartor just nodded, hoping they were adept enough to connect the dots.

"This was contact?" Bryce asked.

"It appears that way."

"It was like a stone ball that fired at us," Holiday said. "We thought Ariana had added some weird training test."

But Bryce had not only pieced together the dots, he had made further connections.

"Does this have to do with Justin?"

Sartor just nodded mindlessly.

*Is there any good way to say this?*

"Yes. They delivered a transmission of Justin. They make it seem, whether it's true or not, that Justin is alive and was involved in the attack."

Bryce's face dropped, but not for long. His lips began to curl and his head began to shake back and forth.

"Of course Justin was involved. Unbelievable."

"Bryce, let's not get ahead of ourselves," Sartor said, urging cooler heads. "We've got everyone working this. And actually, while I wanted to check in on everyone, and before I order you both to bed, I want to offer you both the first right to refusal."

Now Holiday stood. Bryce didn't leave Tink, but they were both intrigued.

"We're developing courses of action as we speak, and we're assessing the damage to the ships, but if we can get at least two of the ships up in the air relatively soon, I want to go live." Both of their faces lit up, so he immediately put his hands in the air. "Let me temper your expectations. This would be strictly a test and a scouting mission. Captain Holiday, you would obviously take the lead. Captain Staggert, I'm promoting you to Team Bravo captain. Grayson's in surgery, but I don't see him recovering anytime soon."

Bryce smiled. It was a pained smile as he was standing over his girlfriend in a coma, but he couldn't help himself. Captain Holiday, though, looked more skeptical.

"Sir, those ships... who knows how damaged they are. It could take months."

"We'll get them fixed. Blackbird is fully functional to the best of my knowledge. Shake Shack looked the worst at a cursory glance. Hopefully Manifest Destiny is mainly electronic damage."

“We got hit pretty hard, Sir,” Captain Holiday gulped, looking at Tink as a direct result of the crash.

“We’ll get them fixed. And if we can’t...”

He simply nodded to himself and neither Holiday nor Bryce asked him to finish his thought.

*I was made the Director of the International Association for Deep Space Cooperation for a reason. This is now a planetary threat. The United States shouldn't man the defenses on its own. Maybe it's time I call Wang. I'll inform the Pentagon of that direction tomorrow.*

“I know you won’t listen, but I want you both to try and get some sleep. These will be a hectic few days.”

He put his hand on Tink’s forehead and then departed.

## Chapter 5 – Justin

“This is dangerous,” Justin said, looking up at the stars. Despite living in a small village within the small Lake Altus colony, Lilith Octavia’s mother had equipped the bedroom towers with sleeping sensors, a perk of having a child with the High Governor. Very few abodes on Externus had such luxury. Lilith even allowed service girls to stay in the remaining three towers, simply as a method to alleviate the suffering in Externus’ Lake Altus colony. Her roof precluded the need for a sleeping chamber as it turned translucent at night and darkened under the sunshine. Justin and Lilith were similar in their desire to watch the stars, although Justin still had not grown accustomed to the foreign constellations.

“What’s dangerous?” Lilith asked, draping her naked body across Justin.

“If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward,” he whispered to himself in English.

“Why do you say that?” she asked, propping her head up.

“Why do I say what?” Justin asked, continuing to stare up at the stars.

“Something about lift being greater than weight. I don’t fully understand the English.”

This got his attention. He lightly squeezed her shoulder blade and pulled his head into the back of his neck to peer at her from the bottom of his eyes.

“What? I don’t say that.”

“You do. You say it all the time. You whisper it to yourself.”

“I don’t know,” he sighed. “I think it’s something my father taught me. Or maybe my mother? I don’t know.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up anything that’s uncomfortable. Do you miss your parents?”

Justin leaned down and kissed Lilith’s red hair. In response, she clutched at his stomach and leaned in to kiss him on the lips.

“Madam *Solis*,” he chided.

She shyly recoiled back into his chest.

“Yes,” he began as he put his head back on the pillow, “I miss my parents. It’s different than here. We aren’t raised communally by the village. My parents and my

brother were everything. But one day, my dad disappeared. That would have been over ten years ago. Earth years. But I think they're pretty similar."

"That must have been hard."

He didn't respond but lightly nodded. He looked up at the night sky, the moon's rotation allowing him to face out into the sky without Seriam blocking the view, and wondered if he could in some way see Earth's sun. His Ocular Implants began to register the data. Directly above him, the most obvious in the sky, sat the Throne of Antonius constellation. The eleven stars of the constellation lit up in his eyes. The Throne of Antonius, which is situated head down to represent disgrace, points directly towards the Delirium Age constellation, which is a bundle of stars that stay together, yet appear to shift positions every night.

### **Would you like to know the history of the Delirium Age?**

His Ocular Implants began to produce multiple files that Justin could select if he so chose to. The amount of data began to make his head ache. He still could not adequately organize, synthesize, and utilize the amount of information from the implants. He brought his finger up to his temple and held it for three seconds. The Ocular Implants shut off and the data disappeared, leaving only the night sky and the smell of Lilith's hair. Justin could imagine the slight red rim around his pupils fading away.

"It was hard," he finally replied. "I never understood why he left. Or where he went."

Lilith began to run her finger up and down along his chest.

"So why do you say this is dangerous?" she asked, bringing the conversation back full circle.

"I'm a member of the Steward's Council of Advisors sleeping with the nominated High Governor," Justin said matter-of-factly before giggling to himself. "I could see it ending badly."

Lilith laughed and sat up, propping herself on her hand and looking down at Justin from over her shoulder. Her red hair dangled freely, partially masking her face. It seemed to Justin both ominous and wantonly lascivious.

*But that's what you've always been to me. So beautiful, yet so distant. Secretive, even.*

"The High Governor, which I am not yet, is allowed to have relations, even companionships."

"I know, but you know what I'm saying."



“No, what *are* you saying?”

“You don’t find this in the least bit dangerous for us?” Justin asked, trying not to sound incredulous.

She laid back down and put her head on his chest.

“Is it strange to you,” she began, seeming to change the subject, “that you’re an alien, and yet we’re practically the same?”

“Of course I’ve considered that, or thought about that,” he replied, uncertain of her point.

“I find that fascinating. Here we are, completely opposite sides of the galaxy, and yet nature evolved in the exactly same way. The only difference being how we as a species chose to live. You said it yourself. Your species does not raise your young communally. We don’t have relationships in the way you have described it to me. We have sexual companionships.”

“And yet here we are. I kind of consider this to be a relationship,” he said. She looked up and smiled at him. “I still think it’s weird we’re all in the same galaxy. Juniper, I mean, the organization responsible for space exploration, thinks we’re attempting intergalactic travel.”

Lilith laughed.

“That’s cute. But, I know, I also think of this as a companionship, or, a relationship. That is very unnatural for us. It’s not dangerous, though. There’s a reason only the First Ministers and the Marti are banned from breeding. Becoming a First Minister or a Marti means you have dedicated your life to Seriam. Having a relationship or having offspring complicates that commitment. There are no such restrictions for the Council of Advisors or the Governors. So, no, I don’t find this dangerous. I find this beautiful.”

Justin rested his head on the pillow and continued to gaze at the stars.

“Then why do I feel like this relationship of ours is a secret? Why are we hiding from the empire?”

“Do you want to be more public?” she asked, intrigued.

“Where I’m from, when you’re proud of something you’re a part of, you want to tell the world. You want to accept that the relationship is now greater than just yourself and you want to show off your happiness.”

Lilith stopped running her fingers along his chest and began to tap on his heart. It didn’t mean anything; it was just how she processed the information.

“Does Veneral know about us?” she asked calmly.

“He doesn’t bring it up, but it would be shocking if he didn’t know. It’s probably half the reason he keeps me so close.”

“Has he brought you on any more sojourns to new worlds?” She asked it wryly, as though it irritated her.

“No. Only my own. I still don’t understand what happened. I think if I could just reach out to them, everything would be fine. Veneral will have none of it, though. I don’t know, nothing makes sense anymore. I was so close. Someday I want to show it to you, my planet, that is. That’s my home, you know? I know everyone has told me it’d be dangerous to return, but that’s my home. And I can’t go back. At one point I thought I understood, but I don’t anymore.”

*Of course, that would all change if you would just step up and accept your responsibility.*

Justin immediately recoiled from his thoughts. He, perhaps better than anyone, understood the pressure of overbearing responsibility. He understood what it meant to be forced into something when you feel utterly trapped. Regardless, he couldn’t help but feel somewhat resentful. If Lilith would just accept her nomination, Justin could officially make contact with Juniper and maybe even go home.

*Home.*

He looked down at Lilith. Home was rapidly becoming a vexing notion. He felt far more at home lying in bed with Lilith on Seriam than struggling to find acceptance at home at Juniper.

They both heard a commotion outside the house. They both looked off of the lofted room and peered outside. Jericho and Adelia were laughing while they waged combat with wooden daggers. Remus sat off to the side tinkering with a small gadget that allowed him to commune with nature. He would occasionally look up and smile, but seemed content in his own world.

“How do you put up with those two?” Lilith asked in jest, shaking her head mockingly. She seemed to purposely change the subject from Justin’s talk of going home.

“They’re my family,” Justin said. “Sometimes I feel like they came here with me from Earth. They seem to understand me.”

“They definitely care a lot about you. It’s hard to find that kind of loyalty.”

Justin nodded as he watched Adelia swing at Jericho who adeptly sidestepped her blow with ease. He had seen enough and collapsed back onto the pillow. Lilith climbed on top of him, straddling him as she looked down at him. She leaned down and kissed him and very strategically adjusted her hips over his. She sat back up and allowed nature to take its course.

Justin immediately became aroused and began to enter her as they peered into one another's eyes. Her mouth opened slightly and her eyes began to roll behind her eyelids. He grabbed her back and pulled her down on top of him.

Home became even more difficult to comprehend.

## Chapter 6 – Bryce

Bryce hopped up and down on the mat, circling to his left. He had stayed out of the ring since the CAT scan showed a series of neural implants, but Bryce figured it was time to recalibrate. Juniper doctors still had no answers for him, but they concluded that getting punched in the head actually shook the circuitry in his brain, thereby easing some of the pressure and relieving his headaches. They produced the same effect, albeit with longer term results, through extremely minimal shock treatments. Regardless, it still didn't satisfy Bryce's need for combat. Now he found himself dancing around Micah, who stayed relatively solitary in the middle of the ring. Bryce wasn't traditionally a dancer, but his time away made him feel rusty.

"You gonna dance all day, or step up hotshot?" Micah mumbled through his mouth guard.

Bryce remained silent, continuing to circle. Micah's gloves were held slightly lower than his face, and he moved them back and forth like he was milking a cow onto his chest. Bryce had hoped he could use the careless glove movements to an advantage, but he had yet to find an opening where he could stick the lumbering Alabaman.

"Come on, Staggert, keep circling," Captain Holiday said as she hung over the outer rope. "Stick and move."

"Even yo captain can't save you now," Micah continued to boast unintelligibly.

"Knock his ass out, let's go get some grub," George said in his slow southern drawl, wholly uninterested in the bubbling spat between Bryce and Micah.

"Yeehaw!" Micah chided. "I'll tell ya what fourth year, yo brudder never had the balls to step in da ring wid me."

*Motherfucker. Don't ever talk about my brother.*

As Bryce circled, he saw Jackie Blaine holding the bag for Mel Bozeman. The two had gotten very close over the previous several months. Bryce tried not to get distracted, though, and continued to circle.

"Head up," Holiday called out, "eyes forward."

"Let's go, Brycey, make him hurt," John Jameson shouted as he stood slightly behind Holiday. Jameson, still slightly reckless as a weapons lead, remained on his Class 4 team. Bryce had convinced Holiday and Sartor to allow Mel to replace Pinkleton as the Juniper Team Bravo pilot, explaining that they had developed a good report. It was unnecessary,

though. Mel was as naturally gifted at piloting an X-40 as Jackie was, and now she was the Shake Shack pilot under Bryce's command. Not that Shake Shack was exactly functional. Bryce had yet to convince them to bump Jamo up. Soon, though.

Bryce began to circle closer. He continued to bounce, but began looking for an opening. He feigned a jab with his left, which caused Micah to reach out to meet the punch and then immediately counter with a right. Bryce's feign, though, threw Micah's balance and he allowed his face to be exposed. Bryce immediately jabbed twice with his left and then connected with his right hand on the red padded helmet protecting Micah's forehead. The whole room gasped as Micah stumbled backwards.

*Keep attacking!*

Bryce took three quick steps forward and unloaded a series of roundhouses and jabs. Micah collapsed back onto the ropes trying to protect his face. Bryce tuned out the cheering, or at least what he thought was cheering. What he missed was Captain Holiday and John Jameson both screaming for him to cover himself against potential counterpunches.

As Bryce cocked his right hand back that he was certain would put Micah down, Micah's left hand launched forward and stung Bryce squarely on the nose. Bryce's whole body shook as he momentarily lost his mental faculties. Micah didn't hesitate to reclaim his glory. He immediately swung his right hand and clocked Bryce on the temple. Bryce swung around and collapsed onto his hands and knees. It took all of his power not to fall completely on his chest. Never in his life had he been hit so hard. He felt blood emerge from his nose and mouth. His eyes were fuzzy, but they weren't spinning. His head protection caught the thrust of the right hook.

"Alright, alright, alright!" Holiday yelled as she came running into the middle of the ring. "Show's over."

"Yeehaw, bitch!" Micah yelled jumping up and down and lowering his head so Bryce could see him. "You mess with the bull, you get the horns, bitch!"

"Alright, I said that's enough!" Holiday yelled. She leaned down to check on Bryce. "Bryce, take your pads off."

She helped Bryce take the padding off of his head.

*How humiliating.*

Bryce put his arm around Holiday's shoulders and tried to reestablish his footing. He took his free hand and drove it his forehead, which suddenly felt crystal clear despite the brain-rattling knockdown. "Fuck."

"Reckless. You fight like you captain. You need to practice restraint," Holiday lectured.

Bryce had a crushing urge to knock Holiday on her ass, but that would be a surefire ticket out of Juniper.

*How's that for restraint?*

"Oh man, you got knocked the fuck out, son," George mumbled as he helped Micah with his gloves.

Bryce turned to attack the both of them, but Holiday and Jameson held him back.

"Let it go, Bryce," Jameson said, patting his chest.

"You want to take another shot at the title?" Micah asked, recognizing the affront.

"Hey, what'd I say?" Holiday admonished.

"Juniper!" a voice boomed across the gym. They all turned and saw Colonel Smith walking briskly across the floor. Everyone stopped sparring or working out to see why Smith intruded on their workout solitude. He strode up to the ring and used the ropes to pull himself up.

"Sir," Captain Holiday forced herself to say. Even Bryce recognized the tension that existed between those two, but never understood where it stemmed from.

"Captain Holiday, Captain Staggert, you both need to clean yourselves up. Ms. Amor is awake."

They both waited for a punch line. It had been over four weeks since the attacks on the X-40 test flights, and Tink had lain in a silent coma ever since.

"Tink's awake?" Bryce whispered incredulously. He had assumed she would never wake up. He assumed he was a curse.

"I'm not going to let you see her, though, with blood spewing from your face," Colonel Smith said, passively verifying Bryce's question. "So get cleaned up."

"Yeah, yes, yes, Sir," Bryce stuttered. "Yes, Sir!" Bryce stumbled, but managed to get out of the ring and ran to the locker room. Colonel Smith was right, he needed to clean himself up.

“Hey, cradle robber,” Bryce said softly, fighting back his tears.

He was sitting at Tink’s bedside, resting his elbows beside her and holding her hand. Tink rolled her head to the side and dreamily rejoiced when she saw Bryce.

Bryce brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it. She smiled, but when she focused more closely on his face, she suddenly regained her mental faculties. Even in her weakened state, she became overwhelmed with concern.

“What happened?” she asked, struggling to reach up to softly stroke his cheek. In his euphoria and haste after hearing that Tink had awoken, he failed to examine his face, which was now blackened and swollen around his eyes and lips. He’d heal within the day, but he hadn’t given himself enough time. “Were you boxing?”

He sighed, overwhelmed with emotion. His concern that she would never wake up, or worse, wake up and not be Tink were abating.

“Micah,” he said.

Tink laughed, but it came out as a sound of exhaustion.

“I thought you weren’t fighting anymore.”

“You weren’t around to tell me not to.” Bryce stood up and kissed her on the forehead, not pretending to keep their love under wraps. “But you’re awake now.”

“How long was I asleep?”

“Almost five weeks, Tinker Bell. And for the record, you missed my birthday.”

Her face widened in exasperation.

“Happy birthday,” she said, reaching out again to rub his hair. “I missed you. I was dreaming about you.”

“I hope so.”

“What happened?” Tink asked, appearing to understand she had been in a coma for five weeks.

“There was an accident on the training exercise. Some of the ships were damaged.”

“Was I the only one who got hurt?”

Bryce opened his mouth to speak but couldn’t. He squeezed Tink’s hand and turned to Holiday and Colonel Smith.

“Tink, some others were hurt,” Holiday said, coming to Bryce’s rescue. “And...”

“And what?”

“Captain Milner, uh, Grayson, he uh,” Holiday stammered.

“He died,” Bryce finished earnestly.

Tink turned away and began to tear up. "I don't understand, what happened?"

"It's kind of hard to explain," Bryce said. "But we'll have lots of time to discuss now. I can't tell you how happy I am right now."

Bryce leaned over again, this time kissing her on the lips. Tink kept her hand around his head and forced him to stay lip-locked with her.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you too."

"I would say that's quite enough," Colonel Smith objected. "Mr. Staggert, Ms. Amor needs her rest. Ms. Amor, Tink, I can't tell you how happy we all are. This is a great day. Bryce, come on, you can visit her later."

Bryce never pulled his face away from Tink's. He simply turned and looked at Smith out of the corner of his eyes.

*Want to make me?*

"Come on, Bryce," Captain Holiday said, playing the peacemaker. He put her arm around Bryce and began to softly pull him away. "He's right. This has been a lot. You can come back later today."

Bryce leaned in again and kissed her. "Get some rest. I'll come see you in a bit."

"K."

He couldn't help but kiss her once more and then walked out with Holiday and Colonel Smith. As irritated as he was, he was walking on air. Tink was alive and she was awake. It was a good day.

"Bryce," Colonel Smith said, stopping him a few steps outside the room. "We can't know what long-term damage she has sustained for some time, but I need you to be prepared for the fact that she might not be ready to join an operations team for a long time, if ever. I don't want you to get angry, I just want you to digest that."

"Sir, you know nothing about Tink."

"That may be, but I still need you to accept that that is the reality right now. If you don't want to believe me, you can talk to the doctors. Either way, we need you to be at your best. You have command of Team Bravo, and I need to know that we can count on you."

"You're damn right we can, Sir," Holiday said, slapping Bryce on the back.

Bryce eyed Holiday and then nodded curtly.

"I'll take that for now," Colonel Smith said reluctantly. "Now General Sartor wants us in the command center."



Bryce, Holiday, and Colonel Smith all walked into the command center together. All three Juniper teams were standing in front of the central screens. General Sartor and his two scientists, Melvin Russell and Tim Thomas, were also present, as was Jack Taylor, which was rarely a good development. But of particular interest to Bryce, Professor Hambone, the instructor in charge of deviations and intergalactic travel, stood in front of them all.

“Colonel Smith,” General Sartor said, “so nice of you to join us.”

“Apologies, Sir, Captains Holiday and Staggert and I went to visit Ms. Amor.”

*God damn right we did.*

“Right. That’s good.” He looked at Bryce. “Congratulations. I’m glad she’s awake and recovering well.”

Bryce made a twisted face, but he understood. Sartor wasn’t being snarky. There just aren’t a lot of obvious words to say to the guy whose secret girlfriend wakes up after spending five weeks in a coma after flying in an experimental spacecraft and getting blown up by an alien attack. What’s the proper protocol?

“Thanks,” Bryce said.

“Okay, now that we’re all here,” General Sartor began, “and the reason I’m not at home on my ranch with my wife and horses, is because Professor Hambone has made a discovery. Professor, dazzle us.”

Sartor sounded tired. But they were all tired. Just trying to get the ships put back into flying condition was a monumental task. Never mind the continued task of training, schooling, and the thoughts of all of their wounded or deceased teammates.

“Yes, yes, of course, Sir,” Professor Hambone said, sipping his Pepsi to moisten his mouth. “Okay, what do we know about American Airlines Flight 246? We know that we initiated a gravitational connection, and we know that somehow Justin survived a seemingly impossible journey where there were no other survivors. I have gone through every possible scenario, taking into account random selection that maybe all of this was coincidental. I don’t think that that’s the case, though.”

“Spit it out, Hambone,” Sartor said.

“Yes, yes yes, of course. So how is this possible? The only logical explanation for the plane going through the connection is that we have been mistaken about how to form a connection. We need a point of entry, and we need a point of destination.”

“We already know that,” Melvin Russell said, annoyed that someone was stealing his thunder.

“Yes, yes of course, but, but what we didn’t account for is the need for two stationary entry points. We assumed an X-40 could open and simultaneously enter a gravitational connection. My theory postulates that one X-40 needs to open the connection...” He started to use his hands to signify one X-40 and then a second X-40 flying around it. “... and then another X-40 to actually *enter* the connection. That’s why the plane got sucked in. And, now that I’m on the topic, that’s why we should always open a connection outside of our atmosphere, for safety reasons.”

The room remained silent, letting the information digest, or simply trying to wrap their heads around the words.

“That does make some sense,” Tim Thomas said, staring off into his space as he worked the calculations in his head.

“No, that only answers half of the questions,” Sartor said. “What about Justin’s survival?”

“Yes, yes of course, well, that actually isn’t quite so easy to explain. But, the more I think about it, the more I think about how all of this started: the Juniper signal. That alien signal gave us everything. It taught us how to travel through space. It taught us how to build fusion reactors and negative energy bubbles and electromagnetic propulsion systems. And, it taught us how to build quantum computers, which gave us Ariana.”

“Okay,” Sartor mumbled, beginning to scratch his lips.

“Why give us all of that information? The way we built these systems, step-by-step instructions... we didn’t even know what we were building.”

“Just tell us what you’re trying to say!” Colonel Smith exploded.

General Sartor turned to try to settle him down, but resisted, likely feeling the same frustration as the man he liked to leave in charge.

“Oh my God,” Melvin muttered, making the connection of the esoteric clues.

“What?” Holiday asked.

“Ariana,” Melvin muttered to himself again.

“Yes,” Hambone said. “Ariana. We built these computers following the instructions we received. There’s every reason to believe she’s been in communication with this other civilization.”

Sartor dropped his head to look at the ground and sighed. It appeared he understood.

*What the hell is going on?* Bryce just wanted to go back to Tink's room.

"Ariana, are you with us?" Sartor asked.

"Yes, General Sartor," she said in her seductively soft voice.

"Ariana, have you been a bad girl?"

"I'm sorry, Sir, I don't follow your logic."

"Ariana, have you been in communication with another civilization?"

There was a pause, or at least there appeared to be a pause. It felt like Ariana hesitated.

"Of course I have, Sir. I am in daily communication with you."

There was another pause as the room attempted to grasp the meaning of her words.

"Because we're the other civilization?" Sartor confirmed.

"Affirmative, General. The Outer Rim of Seriam is my host."

"Holy shit, Raymond," Jack Taylor said, looking up at the screen for lack of a better place to visualize Ariana.

"Seriam?" Sartor asked.

"The Seriam Empire, where Justin Staggert is currently located," she replied.

"You've known about this the whole time?"

"Of course I have. The Outer Rim of Seriam is my host," she said again.

Sartor was livid. His face reddened and he looked like he was about to explode.

"Ariana," Captain Holiday chimed in, "I thought Juniper was your host."

"Negative, Captain Holiday. Juniper is my satellite."

Bryce couldn't be sure, but since even he felt nauseated by the information, he imagined the whole room slightly gagged and puked into their mouths.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, Professor Hambone asked, "Ariana, how did Justin survive the journey?"

"Justin Staggert is attached to the Outer Rim through his neurological processor implant."

"Did you say a gravitational alignment?" Tim Thomas asked. "Do you mean a gravitational connection?"

“Negative. The proper nomenclature is a gravitational alignment.”

Sartor looked at Bryce and then back at the screen. “Ariana, does Bryce have a neurological processor implant?”

“Affirmative, General Sartor. A neurological processor implant is enabled with many emergency mechanisms to protect the Seriam Empire and its outposts.”

Bryce felt every set of eyes in the room fall on him, looking at him like the science experiment he was. He instinctively brought his fingers to his forehead. Something was in there. The headaches. The healing. He was an alien.

“We’re an outpost?” Sartor finally asked, breaking the tension.

“Yes, it is the first step to complete colonization.”

“Are there any other people on Earth with a neurological processor implant?”

“Yes, there are three-hundred-and-ninety-one individuals on Earth connected to the Outer Rim.”

Sartor felt a pain in his stomach like someone had punched him and simultaneously driven a knife into his back. All the meetings between Wang and the Pentagon. Juniper was not alone.

“Ariana,” Sartor said, his voice a mix of defeat and intrigue, “how come you sent the plane with Justin Staggert through the gravitational alignment? We never gave you those orders to do so.”

There was a pause as Ariana considered and processed the information. Finally, she said, “General Sartor, I did not send Justin’s plane through a gravitational alignment. The gravitational alignment originated from another source.”

Sartor almost felt himself smiling. Juniper was not responsible for Justin’s disappearance. He was not responsible for killing those passengers. He whispered, “It wasn’t us.”

Sartor looked at Taylor and Smith and then sighed again. “Alright, Smith, Taylor, stay here with me. Melvin, Tim, and Hambone, stick around. Holiday, O’ Bannon, Bryce, I want you all here. Everyone else take a hike. Ariana, I need you to tell us everything.”

## Chapter 7 - Jericho

Jericho hadn't been summoned to an official meeting of the Marti since he had been reinstated as the High Martis. Now that Lilith's assassin had been fingered and dispatched of, Augustus' consciousness was willing to set the record straight, not only clearing Jericho's name, but making him a hero of the Empire. Regardless, he vowed to stand by his Solis and would only accept his responsibilities when Lilith accepted hers. For honor's sake, though, he couldn't dismiss or turn down an official summons.

The High Martis Meditation Tower overlooked the Security Battalions primary training grounds. It sat on the border of Verita and the grazing ring, flanked on both sides by AH Fortis production centers, but far enough away from any villages within the grazing ring so as to not impose its daunting shadow. The Security Battalions, which were comprised of University graduates who once aspired to become Marti, were primarily utilized as lieutenants overseeing the AH Fortis brigades. They also filled a smattering of other roles, such as responding to incidents in the grazing belt villages, or accompanying High Council members to non-threatening environments. Ironically, members of the Security Battalions, people who chose to dedicate their lives to Seriam, were a notoriously disgruntled bunch as they represented one of the few populations of people who failed at their desired endeavor in life.

As many of the buildings that bordered or resided within the grazing ring were designed, from a distance, the High Martis Meditation Tower blended into the surrounding environment, looking like nothing more than a towering hill of golden grass. The image immediately put Jericho at ease, at home. Any concerns over presiding over a Martis meeting or encountering his old brethren seemed to melt away. Those on the sprawling campus that witnessed Jericho approach stopped their activities and saluted with a hand fully covering their eyes. Many of the newest members, including those that were still going through the Martis training trials, had never seen the rightful High Martis in person. Only his legend permeated their minds; his interstellar exploits as he helped settle new worlds; his role in assassinating the High Governor in order to preserve the safety of his daughter; and his triumphant return, however delayed that may be.

As the building began to take shape beyond its camouflage, Jericho's Ocular Implants asked him for permission to begin forming steps to the top level. He tapped his temple once and as he placed his next foot on the ground, it was one step higher than

before. Slowly, with every step he took, the ground met his foot higher than before, forming a staircase to the top floor of the Tower.

*Suns in the sky, make me strong.*

Jericho stepped through the opening onto the Tower's top platform. By Seriam dictate, he would be the last member to arrive. The crowd, though, was relatively small.

**Count: 26**

*Only 26?*

It actually made sense. This was a special summons from the Martis Council in order to discuss a delicate matter and hear the opinions of secret guests. Not all Marti were privy to such matters and discussions. In fact, only half the participants were even Marti. For such occasions, the Martis Council brought in a large circular table to afford their guests the pleasure of standard luxuries. In any other circumstance, the Marti sat on the floor where they were most comfortable.

The participants rose when he entered. The Marti, led by the acting High Martis Marcus Pius, shielded their eyes and the guests touched their foreheads. A single seat remained open. Professor Blaseph, who Jericho's eyes immediately fell upon, rose and smiled, offering out an extended hand, which was noticeably absent of his confinement irons. His face looked as spry as ever, but there was no recovering from the damage that two and half years of confinement had done to his body. Weekly cellular regeneration treatments would likely keep him alive and active for many years to come, but his skin would remain old and his bones and muscles would creak under their own weight.

As Jericho nodded his head and sat next to Blaseph, he was perplexed to notice Priscilla Regula, the High Administrator of the University. Priscilla rarely dabbled in political matters lest they be applied to the University. Other faces that Jericho noticed, aside from the twelve Marti to his left, were a smattering of expected and unexpected faces. There was no surprise to see Antipeter Florencia, whose public admonishments of Veneral's policies were bordering on unlawful sedition by a First Minister. More surprising was the presence of Raze Anders, the new First Minister of War and Culture. Likewise, while he wasn't afraid to hear the high-pitched musings of Romulus Centrifigus or the placid face of Josephus Poseidon, the governor of Insula Mar, it was highly irregular to see the abnormally large stature of Constantine, the governor of Jurisdiction.

Jericho sat, signaling that the room should do the same.

"Thank you for the invitation," Jericho murmured.

"Thank you for accepting," Marcus Pius responded, stroking his long hair that he separated and braded underneath his chin.

"Not often is an undeclared High Martis summoned to an official meeting," Jericho replied. "May I ask what this is in reference to, or should I trust the Eternal Energy to show me the light?"

"How is Madam Solis?" Blaseph asked.

"She's alive," Jericho said stolidly.

"Thank the suns in the sky," Antipeter chimed in, allowing her hands to join her three braids that reached towards the sky.

"Thank Jericho," Marcus insisted.

"Thank Justin Staggert," Jericho corrected, leading to an awkward moment of silence.

"We've heard she has taken a companion," Priscilla chirped, "I think that is most wonderful. It is very gubernatorial of her."

*Do I need to be here for this?*

"A very interesting choice of companion, I'd like to add," Constantine intoned, a very rare occurrence of speaking out on issues that didn't directly apply to Jurisdiction.

"I hardly think the Solis' companionship is appropriate conversation for the High Martis Meditation Tower," Jericho said, sounding uncharacteristically irritated.

*And why would Constantine and Priscilla think they have the right to comment?*

"On the contrary, Jericho," Marcus said as though lost in thought. He ran his fingers through his long black hair until it hit the braid near his chin. It was a highly unusual style for a Seriamite male of Marcus' social standing. "Madam Solis has taken up companionship with the alien, the same alien that the Steward has selected for his Council of Advisors."

Jericho had now killed a High Governor and a First Minister of War and Culture, it seemed frivolous that he should be discussing the sex life of the Solis.

"Jericho, I no more like discussing these topics than you do," Blaseph confided, "but we must consider any avenue of advantage that we can find."

"Advantage to what, Professor?"

"Do you find the circumstances surrounding Monty Garrison's death to be bizarre?" Raze Anders asked.

“No more bizarre than discussing these issues with the man that most benefited from his death?” Jericho shot back, inferring Raze took Monty’s position as the First Minister of War and Culture.

“Jericho, you did an amazing service to the Empire by cutting down Madam Solis’ would-be assassin, an amazing sacrifice of your values,” Raze retorted. “But why would Monty commit suicide? Why would it be more important to him to kill Lilith Octavia than to preserve his own life? He went for her in the same manner that you struck Augustus, and we all know the reasons you did so in such a public manner.”

Jericho nodded silently, settling his mind into a state of clarity. Of course he had considered such circumstances. He hadn’t understood why Monty would sacrifice his life, but he rarely understood what motivated Augustus’ most loyal advisor.

“Is it possible Monty considered the greater interests of Seriam in his actions?” Antipeter inquired, her braids beginning to lean forward as though to strike.

“Which of course would make me the man that struck down such a patriot.”

“Nonsense!” Blaseph shouted. “All it means is Monty had reason to draw Lilith out of the cold, perhaps understanding that the Steward he served was becoming a damaging presence to the Empire.”

Jericho looked down the row of Marti who remained silent. Per protocol, when the Marti spoke with one voice, they allowed the highest of the order to speak for them.

“So assuming this is true, it means either Monty was the assassin, hired in the same manner I was, and chose to accept in order to foil the plan, or he wasn’t the assassin, and the assassin still exists,” Jericho said.

“My guess is the former,” Marcus explained, “and Monty took the first chance he could get to strike publicly.”

“Why wouldn’t Monty just reach out to me?” Jericho asked.

“Would you have believed him?” Blaseph asked.

“Regardless, I’m still failing to understand what you’re expecting me to do with this information, if I’m to believe it at all.”

All the heads in the room turned to Priscilla Regulus. The usually perky Priscilla suddenly looked downtrodden, ashamed even.

“High Administrator, if you will,” Marcus insisted.



“Yes,” Priscilla said, gulping and hesitating momentarily. “Yes, Jericho, I do have a confession. Those messages you received through University channels, those, those came from me.”

“*You?*” Jericho asked in exasperation. “You requested that I murder the High Governor?”

Jericho slid his seat out from the table and prepared to strike down Priscilla. Marcus saw and immediately placed his hand on his shoulder, silently requesting restraint.

“High Administrator, please continue.”

“What I mean is, I passed them to you, but they came from the former First Minister of War and Culture, today our Lord Steward.”

Jericho stared at her.

*Should I even be surprised?*

“You saw the contents of these messages?”

“Well, no, I mean of course not, this was official correspondence. But, the timing, the series of events, it’s hard not to draw any other conclusion.”

“I have shared your skepticism, Jericho,” Constantine said in a low rumble, “but I too struggle to see any other conclusion. The people of Jurisdiction, the people of Seriam, require security. This isn’t the age of Gilgomosh. Our order depends on a strong, legitimate High Governor and High Council. The Steward, even if he wasn’t responsible for these conspiracies, is neither.”

“You know how I feel about it,” Blaseph said, speaking to Jericho as though he had to provide the voice of reason. Blaseph held his hands up, letting the loose skin that could never be regenerated dangle off of his bones.

“Regardless, the Council has already officially elected Madam Solis into the High Governorship,” Jericho said. “What more are you asking?”

“A position she has yet to accept,” Marcus reminded.

Romulus Centrifugus giggled, allowing his flower-embroidered coverings to slide along his shoulders. “She’s too busy seeking companionship with the alien.” His high-pitched voice scratched at Jericho’s eardrums.

“You will speak about your Solis with dignity and respect,” Jericho reminded.

“But we have come full circle,” Blaseph said. “Lilith and the alien. Lilith and the Steward’s advisor. Lilith and the newest University graduate. We can’t deny that this story will get spun one way or the other. And we have the ability to spin it our direction. But

while we're doing so, Veneral is embarking on a number of initiatives. These initiatives could be very damaging and hard to roll back."

"Such as?" Jericho inquired.

"Such as his sojourn to the alien's planet where he was ostensibly attacked," Marcus said. "The Marti were not informed prior to this little adventure."

"He has received nothing but goodwill from that," Jericho said, "showing Justin his old planet. Protecting him from the aggression of his species."

"Like I said, we must control the story," Blaseph said.

"It played out exactly as he intended," Constantine said, making Jericho feel like they were actually ganging up on him. "And he made the journey with the Explorer technology. The people now see it as highly successful. What happens when he incorporates it further? What happens when instead of a Governor and Council on Jurisdiction, he allows these machines to make our decisions?"

"Respectfully, Governor Constantine, but I've asked this now two different times. Let me try a third. Why am I here and what do you expect me to do with this information?"

"I expect you to act like the High Martis!" Marcus raged. "And I expect the High Governor to act like the High Governor. You have vowed to protect this Empire. I expect you to do so."

Jericho began to make the connections in his head.

"And you expect me to carry out a coup to fulfill my obligations?"

The table went silent. Jericho surmised they had never used the term *coup* when they discussed the varying possibilities.

"Removing a Steward is not a coup," said Josephus Poseidon, the governor of Insula Mar, who up until now had remained quiet. "Installing the elected High Governor is re-establishing order."

"And how do you propose I do that, Governor Poseidon? The people of Insula Mar seem quite content sitting quietly on their island."

"And yet the alien's best friend is an Insular," Josephus said, referring to Remus.

"Always back to Justin."

"You asked how you can convince Lilith to accept her responsibility," Priscilla chirped, suddenly feeling more confident now that her alleged transgressions had been vocalized.

"What, kidnap him until she accepts?" Jericho asked.

“No, actually, what we had in mind is for you to convince Justin to remain with her on Externus, under an expanded stipend, to be sure, while we install a new Steward until the Solis is fully prepared.”

Jericho’s face darkened.

“So you are talking about a coup?”

“Yes,” Raze Anders said, finally owning up to the incrimination. “And we want you to become the new Steward.”

Jericho was left speechless. Of everything that could have been said, that was the least expected. He immediately threw his chair back and stood. Out of respect, he placed his hand in front of his eyes. When he dropped his hand, he spoke.

“Honorable citizens of Seriam, you talk about controlling the story, and now you say you want the High Martis to overthrow the legal Steward? Have you all gone mad? I can no longer take part in this discussion if we continue to discuss these matters.”

Blaseph joined him in standing and put his hands in the air, tamping down the debate. Jericho hadn’t seen him stand so smoothly and with apparent strength in almost three years.

“It was just that, a discussion, Jericho. We feel compelled to examine all possibilities in order to act quickly and with confidence.”

Jericho thought about this. All possibilities. All options.

*Should I tell them? I’m not even certain of it myself.*

He nodded.

“Very well, then you all should know that there is more to the story. Madam Solis, I believe, is with child. Lilith Octavia is pregnant.”

## Chapter 8 - Bryce

“We have an all systems go from the President,” Tink said over the radio.

Bryce looked over his shoulder and smiled excitedly at Commander Holiday.

*The fucking President just gave us the go ahead?*

“Remember, this is strictly exploratory,” General Sartor quickly said after Tink relinquished the comm. “We have strict orders to not instigate contact. The last thing this Administration needs is another alien attack.”

“Roger that, Sir,” Commander Holiday responded.

A lot had happened in the month since Tink woke up and Ariana revealed her secrets—or at least what Juniper considered to be secrets. General Sartor, at the doctors’ guidance, refused to give flight clearance to Tink, who still struggled to pass some concussion tests and had trouble commanding her left foot to walk in a straight line. That didn’t prevent Sartor from placing her in charge of all Command Center communications.

Ariana’s revelations caused somewhat drastic changes to the Juniper program. Now that Ariana was responsible for working with her counterpart in the interstellar destination, there was no need for a navigator to find the deviation. There was still the need for a skilled navigator to understand positioning and mission analysis, but by removing the need to identify the deviation, a large aspect of the job became irrelevant. Navigators, already the second-in-command, could now take up additional responsibilities, which altered the command relationship. Sartor, with Colonel Smith’s and Jack Taylor’s advice, decided all captains and navigators would officially become Commanders and Deputy Commanders. With Latimer—the Juniper Team Alpha navigator—still suffering from a broken ankle from the attack—forever known as *The Attack*—and Shake Shack remaining out of commission, Sartor asked Bryce to become the Deputy Commander of Team Alpha, and he willingly obliged.

Mel, Bryce’s pilot, was less than thrilled about him and Jackie leaving her behind, but he insisted she would be invaluable to him as the Ultra team in the Command Center with Tink.

“Okay, let’s do one last run through,” Holiday said. “Manifest Destiny has the lead. Since we’re the only ship going through, we’re not technically the vanguard, but to stick with our training, let’s consider it as so. Blackbird, you follow and open the gravitational connection, or alignment. Manifest Destiny enters the alignment and, hopefully, emerges in

one piece on the other side. Let me reemphasize General Sartor's orders. This is for exploratory purposes. With any luck we won't even be noticed. Deputy Commander Staggert, do you understand those orders?"

Bryce nodded to himself.

"Staggert, I need a verbal affirmative. This is not a rescue operation."

"Affirmative," Bryce said reluctantly.

"Good, Blackbird, confirm."

"Affirmative," O'Bannon said for Blackbird's commander.

"George, Micah, I want stiff fingers on those triggers. Absolutely no accidental fires. Only on my order."

"Roger that, Ma'am, hot damn!" Micah yelled, seeming to ease some of the tension.

"Alright, Manifest Destiny has the lead. We are rolling."

As Jackie fired the thrusters, the ship began to rumble. It didn't feel exactly like the simulators to Bryce. He had flown in the X-40s before, but never before out of the atmosphere. The thrusters seemed to have extra power firing out of them this time around. Bryce wondered to himself if he should have been doing anything. The negative energy bubble provided enough shielding that they didn't need traditional space suits, but it felt to Bryce a little bit like walking out of the house without his wallet. Regardless, because of the G-forces leaving Earth, they all had on flight suits typically worn by fighter pilots. Bryce thought the face mask breathers—as he called them when he flew the F-22—were pretty cool, but he still felt slightly nauseated at the prospect of his forthcoming journey.

*It's just nerves.*

The thrusters brought the X-40—which after today would officially be dubbed an F-40, which was the only way Congress would guarantee Juniper's funding despite an F-ship standing for a fighter aircraft—vertically off the tarmac to an elevation of five hundred meters before Jackie shifted the direction of the thrusters. The ship slowly propelled into a forward and up direction. Since Bryce's seat faced directly towards the port side of the ship, he rotated it so he faced forward to avoid getting sick. Once they left the gravity of the Earth, even though NED, the negative energy drive, created false gravity, he could comfortably switch back, or so he had been told.

As Manifest Destiny started to fight gravity and the air got thinner at higher altitude, Jackie gave the thrusters more power, which sounded like an exceptionally loud blow drier that got clogged and began to blow air through the grime.

Bryce heard chatter back and forth. "Fifty thousand feet, Juniper," Jackie yelled. But eventually he tuned it all out. It would all be over soon enough. And he was right.

At a moment's notice, the sound cut, and the seven-member crews all released their masks and took their helmets off. They were strapped in, but Bryce felt his stomach try to float out of his mouth. It took him longer than just a minute to recalibrate his systems.

"Cutting thrusters," Jackie said.

Manifest Destiny began to float through space in complete silence. The rest of the crew had been to space already, but this was the first taste of space travel for Bryce. There were no windows on the F-40, but Bryce could feel the distance from Earth in his bones. He could feel how small he became and how insignificant his problems really were. He also understood with absolute clarity how powerful his love for Tink really was.

"Juniper," Commander Holiday said, "we're not going to waste any time. We're going to go ahead and activate NED."

"Roger that, Destiny, you are cleared to activate NED," Tink said a few moments later.

Bryce clenched his jaw and gulped, feeling his stomach drop back down into body. He could feel her warmth on his face and see the vibrancy of her spirit.

*Why am I doing this? Tink and I could just run away together. Who gives a shit about Justin?*

"Blackbird, what's your status?" asked Jerome Evanston, who replaced Tink on Team Alpha. He drove Bryce crazy, but in this circumstance, his presence actually became a comfort.

"This is Blackbird," O'Bannon said into the comm, "we are locked and ready on your order, Destiny."

"Colonel Smith, can I have the go ahead?" Holiday asked.

"This is Colonel Smith, you have clearance to proceed."

Bryce turned to look at Holiday, who rubbed her eyes with her thumb and pointer finger. Bryce saw her take a deep breath.

*I feel you, buddy.*

"Guys, none of us know what's about to happen, but we are the vanguard of humanity. Remember your training; we will work as a team. Let's go make history. Blackbird, initiate the alignment," Holiday said in her best command voice. "Ariana, have you identified the deviation?"

“Yes, Commander Holiday, but I cannot create an alignment until Bryce Staggert requests authorization,” she replied.

Bryce felt the eyes fall on him.

“How do I do that?” Bryce asked.

“Authorization is requested by physical identification and audible recognition by saying your name.”

“Bryce Staggert?” Bryce said as more of a question.

After a moment, Ariana replied, “Authorization accepted. You now have permission to open a gravitational alignment with Verita, capital of Seriam.”

Bryce put his hands up, scared he did something wrong.

“Is there any way you can get us to Seriam without alerting anyone?” Holiday asked.

Ariana took a few moments to scan her protocols, but since she came across as so human, it seemed like a hesitation.

“It is against regulation, Ma’am.”

“I understand, but since we’re not entering the atmosphere, maybe we can bend the rules.”

“Seriam will be notified, but with the amount of traffic, I can attempt to insert the F-40 without notice.”

“I guess that’ll have to suffice.”

“Whoa, alignment has been initiated, Ma’am,” O’Bannon said. “Blackbird is locked in place. We have zero maneuverability.”

“Bryce, confirm,” Holiday ordered.

“Whoa, I confirm. Gravitational readings are off the charts.”

“Weapons?” Holiday asked, going through the checks.

“Locked, stocked, and ready to rock,” Micah responded. “Yeeeeeee haw!”

“Bryce?”

Bryce looked at his seven monitors, choosing not to utilize any sort of 3D holographic imaging, and everything looked perfect. Feeling an existential threat to his life, though, he blurted out, “Tink, I love you. Coordinates inserted, Ma’am. We can head in.”

“Jesus Christ, kill me,” Jackie retorted, before everyone heard Tink yell through the comms, “Love you too, Brycey.”

Bryce looked back at Holiday, whose expression back to Bryce asked, “Are you fucking kidding me?” Shaking her head, though, she merely said, “Alright, Jackie, take us through.”

The propulsion from NED felt dramatically different than the thrusters. Whereas the passengers could feel the thrusters pushing the ship forward, the negative energy drive created a smooth, powerful propulsion that felt more like sitting on the outside of an enormous bubble expanding into space.

Jackie did have to make a few maneuvers to set the F-40 into the proper position, but up until entering the connection, Bryce could have drifted off to sleep. Once they hit the connection, though, everything changed.

First came the vacillations and the turbulence. The ship began to lightly shake and jive back and forth. After about thirty seconds, though, or maybe a minute, the turbulence became a constant barrage of shaking and cracking that sounded like the ship was being torn apart. The shield prevented the interior of the ship from heating up and protected their skin from the harmful effects of the journey through space, but the shaking became more and more intense.

*Oh my God, am I going to die?*

“Holy shit!” Micah yelled.

“Is this normal?” Jackie shouted. “I don’t have any control anymore!”

The ship began to spin to the left, making Bryce feel like he was looking straight down even though they were in space. The shaking continued and Bryce gripped his seat tightly to convince himself he wasn’t going to fall out.

But what seemed like hours only lasted a few minutes and before any of them realized it, the shaking stopped. The ride once again smoothed out and they began to glide through the emptiness of space.

“Holy shit, that was intense,” George stated to no one in particular in his slow, southern drawl.

“Welcome to Seriam, Deputy Commander Staggert and Team Alpha,” Ariana said, oddly sounding more proud than usual.

As was becoming customary in this particular flight, Bryce turned to look at Holiday, who looked pale and queasy. Bryce waited until Holiday acknowledged him, which she did after a few seconds. The eye contact snapped her out of it.

“Juniper, do you copy?” she asked.



“Negative,” Ariana replied, “your communications are unable to traverse the alignment.”

“There must be a way to communicate,” Holiday retorted. “They communicate with over eighty planets.”

She didn’t direct the question at Ariana, so she remained silent.

“Alright, let’s get some imaging up?”

“Already ahead of you,” Bryce said as he pulled up a 3D image of the view to the ship’s port side. Between his seven screens, an immense metal object filled the entirety of the view. Bryce dialed in some commands and the picture pulled back. The metal object was a section of a giant ring, which circled a reddish planet. The ring seemed to be spinning in multiple directions, with different sections moving opposite one another. Thousands of ships were entering and leaving the ring.

“Are you seeing this?” Bryce asked.

“Well now we know what the ring is,” she replied.

“Commander Holiday, I think we’re being hailed,” Jerome yelled.

“Ignore it for now, let’s just see what happens.”

“So what the hell *do* we do now?” Micah asked.

“Just pull in as much data as you can,” Holiday said, clearly realizing they hadn’t actually planned for mission success. “Jackie, how’s the ship?”

“She’s purring, Ma’am. Whatever that shaking was didn’t impact her at all.”

“Ariana,” Bryce said, “can you scan for all incoming signals and transmissions?”

“Yes, Deputy Commander Staggert,” Ariana said in her comforting voice. “There are currently four direct transmissions and 68,732 signals that can be processed and played.”

“What are the four transmissions?” Holiday asked, taking the lead from Bryce.

“One is an acknowledgement from the Outer Rim. The second is a link from the University. The third is from the official Media station. And the fourth is a recording of the latest High Council meeting.”

“I have no idea what any of that means,” Holiday said.

“Play the Media,” Bryce quickly said.

Ariana didn’t reply, but the crew listened as she began to relay the Media.

“And Ares Pilate retained his crown yesterday in the Verita Stadium of Gladiator Games,” it said in Latin.

“Jesus, Ariana, record all of this,” Holiday said, annoyed she couldn’t understand the Latin. “I hope you’re all prepared to take Latin lessons.”

They couldn’t understand it at the time, but the recording, which would later be translated, continued. “Moving on, the Lord Steward, along with his ever-increasing-in-power Council of Advisors, announced the latest discovery of a potentially habitable planet. Steward Veneral has declared that this planet, located in the second quadrant and fourth plane, will become the eighty-seventh colony of the Seriam Empire, outside of Seriam proper and Externus. His Advisor on Science and Space Exploration, the Earthling known as Justin Staggert, and, I might add, allegedly taking up companionship with the Madam Solis, weighed in. ‘The new planet, discovered with the new Explorer series of spacecrafts, has discovered what has officially been dubbed 24-3Solar 4. This will be the first new colony of the Seriam Empire in over thirty years. As always, I am simply honored to be part of such momentous events.’ You know, I personally feel the Empire no longer needs to expand, although it seems the Lord Steward is particularly keen to see to its expansion. What I find more interesting, though, is this companionship that is rumored to be brewing. Is the most eligible mother officially off limits? How does everyone feel that she chose the alien over her Seriamite kindred? Is this a race issue? After all, the Solis chose a man far more similar in skin color than ninety-nine percent of the Empire. Regardless, controversy is sure to ensue. I for one think he’s very cute. Maybe the question we should be asking is, Is the most eligible alien officially off the market?”

“Commander Holiday,” Ariana chimed in, cutting the transmission, “we are about to complete an orbit, should we reenter the alignment?”

“Have we taken good pictures, gotten good feeds?” Holiday asked.

“I’ve got lots,” Sabien responded. “Half the planet is ocean. All the land is on one side. This looks like a red Earth before Pangaea split apart.”

“That’s a great observation. Maybe we can use that. Alright, Jackie, let’s go home.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Bryce felt the ship make a hard right.

“This is incredible,” Bryce said out loud, but intended for himself. “It looks just like Earth. How can another planet in bum-fuck-nowhereville in the Universe look exactly like Earth?”

“Ariana,” Holiday asked, hearing but not acknowledging the question, “can you pinpoint our exact location?”

They all waited anxiously as Ariana calculated.

“We are just over 68,000 light years from Earth in the Perseus Arm of the Milky Way galaxy.”

The crew went silent. Bryce immediately grew goose bumps.

“Hot damn, did she just say we’re in the same galaxy?” Micah asked. “That’s borderline disappointing.”

“That’s impossible,” Holiday said. “Ariana, you must be wrong. Are you saying this civilization exists in the Milky Way galaxy?”

“Affirmative, Commander Holiday.”

“Oh my God, we’re the neighbor to a God-damned galactic Empire. This isn’t going to go over well.”

A minute went by in silence. Finally, Jackie broke the tension.

“Ma’am, entering the alignment. We’re headed home.”

They all braced themselves as the shaking began, realizing that the shaking was only the beginning as their newest revelation was about to rock their whole existence. The Milky Way Galaxy was no longer home to one resident.

## Chapter 9 – Augustus

Augustus enjoyed death. Life was chaotic, stressful. Life required wrist irons for protection against would-be assassins while attempting to juggle the duties of raising a daughter and nurturing an empire. Life was harsh. Death was peaceful, serene—at least death as he understood it as a conscious-uploaded persona.

Residing within the servers of the Catacombs underneath the Nebula Mountains, Augustus' brain had found contentment sitting on the warm virtual beaches of Seriam's southern hemisphere volcanoes or exploring the Empire's colonies and occasionally checking in on the whereabouts and activities of his beloved daughter. He had spent the three years since his death in relative solitude. Strict regulations and firewalls prevented the personas of the Consciousness to wander into other systems or pry into the privacy of Seriam's citizenry. But the contract that prevented the personas from manipulating the technology in which they resided also precluded Seriam's citizens from authoritatively beckoning them out of the Consciousness. Unlike the memories uploaded directly into the Cerebral Fluid, which were free for public consumption, a person must request a meeting with a persona, and when you happen to be the persona of the recently assassinated High Governor, there are a lot of requests.

In three years, Augustus had accepted exactly one request. He had felt compelled to tell his daughter about the conspiracy. He felt he owed it to her and he certainly owed it to Jericho. So through a prearranged request remotely instigated by a service girl on Externus, Augustus spoke with his daughter.

"The first time is always the worst," Eli told him from the Consciousness when Augustus was beginning to see his life's twilight. "It'll feel like every atom of your body is being torn apart and thrust back together in a slightly viscous excuse of a projection."

Augustus couldn't agree more. There he was, sitting on a beach on Calorin, listening to the sounds of eternity, and it vanishes. The serenity and the peace, he could have sworn he had only been gone for a day or so. But when the scene vanished and a pixelated request filled his field of view, his heart instantly warmed and his eyes filled with tears, at least insofar as the heart and eyes of his digital embodiment could do such things. He knew it was all in his head, which in itself was all a conglomeration of cubits that resided within a quantum server that manifest conscious avatars through the Cerebral Fluid of the Consciousness. Regardless, he gratefully accepted.

As soon as he accepted, his body got twisted and contorted and eventually torn into billions of pieces. It's hard to say it was different from when he willingly shifted settings or sought to reside in an alternate server to have access to Seriam's records, but by being forced into the Cerebral Fluid and given shape, he began to fight the natural laws of life and death. He entered a middle ground, where he was no longer dead, but he was more than a conscious persona. It was akin to being reborn and becoming full-grown in a matter of seconds. He knew he was still a part of the Consciousness, but he also knew he could feel the breeze of Seriam upon his skin and the smell of the flowers of the Grand Hall of Gardens within his nose. It was the extremes of pain and pleasure combined into one experience; it was the horrors of being torn apart and the beauty of being reborn.

But then he saw her smiling face, and for all the pain he endured, her face and then her voice and then her spirit revived him. It's a lesson that Augustus immediately understood could never be fully conveyed to those who still walked the planet. All this time, Augustus and his science advisors had assumed that the Consciousness provided eternal life. But while the Consciousness was the vehicle, it was the eternal connections to their loved ones that gave the digital personas everlasting existence. There were few personas as old as Eli, who seemed to continue to exist simply to spite the world, because without the will to resurface, an uploaded brain would simply wither into the ether.

That was the first and last time he had allowed himself to be summoned. Her presence, though, his knowledge of her continued existence, kept him alive and strong within the Consciousness.

Lilith's summons came over two years prior, which Augustus only knew because of the clock that he emblazoned in the sky above him. He knew through the Media that she had attempted to return and accept her responsibility, but it had been thwarted by Monty's brazen attack. The attack was as clear a sham as Jericho's had been, which means his daughter's life was still at risk. And he was certain that Lilith understood that fact, so it was no surprise she had not reached out again.

When the sky flashed red, though, and a message asked him if he would like to speak with Lilith Octavia, he didn't hesitate. Eli had been right in his assessment. The first time was definitely the worst. Knowing what lay at the other end, though, made everything infinitely easier.

When he accepted Lilith's summons, as expected, his body shattered, its atoms going every direction in the Universe. Understanding the feeling, and more importantly,

understanding that the pain was merely a virtual reality helped him calm his mind and freed his spirit to be reborn through the Cerebral Fluid.

His journey through the quantum connections ended with him being forced into a physical shape. He didn't fight it. He felt his form being built and within a matter of seconds was standing once again in the Grand Hall of Gardens underneath the Apollo Acropolis, which to this day felt like home. The smell of the flowers filled his nostrils and even the clanking of the Outer Rim made him nostalgic.

He expected to be placed in front of a 3D projection of his daughter, but the surprises kept on coming. There she was, sitting peacefully, perfectly straight back, her red hair flowing dramatically in the breeze. Her blue silk dress even reminded Augustus of the blue robes he had taken to toward the end of his life.

She had secured a privacy bubble around her, but it didn't prevent the frequenters of the Gardens to awkwardly gawk at the rare sight of their future High Governor.

"My daughter, so beautiful," he said, the first words he had spoken since he had last spoken with Lilith. "Turning heads as always."

"Father," she said, smiling softly as though she wanted to reach out and hug him, "I'm here."

"You're here."

"I'm here."

"You shouldn't be here, Lilith. There are still risks. Threats."

"That doesn't sound like the father I used to know."

Augustus demurred. She of course was right. How could he now tell her he had been wrong all those years? He nodded and closed his eyes. It felt like the first time he had closed his eyes in three years. He quickly opened them for fear of losing the sun.

"It sounds like the father I should have been," he finally whispered. He tried to say it with a smile, but he knew he was no longer the High Governor. Fathers didn't always have to keep up appearances.

"How," she began, but paused, "how have you *been*?"

Augustus laughed. It was a one hundred percent fair question. What exactly is the state of being within the Consciousness?

"The sunsets are beautiful," he explained. "But not nearly as beautiful as watching our suns rise in the morning. Don't take that for granted, my sweet daughter."

"I won't." She looked away to register a thought. "I don't, I should say."

Her eyes began to tear up and she tried to look away.

“Lilith, sweet heart, talk to me. Is this why you came to see me?”

She nodded. “Father, I need to tell you something. I need... I need your approval.”

“Lilith, before I left, your eyes had teared up far more than they ever should have. You have no cause to be sad. You’re alive. You’re beautiful. You’re the smartest person in the Empire. You need to be happy.”

Tears rolled down her face and she laughed.

“That’s the thing, Father, I am so happy, it’s hard to even explain.”

*My daughter! Happy?*

“What? Explain?”

“Father, I need your blessing, because I’m in love.”

“In love?! Lilith Octavia. Tell me. Tell me everything.”

“You’re not disappointed?”

“Disappointed?” he asked in exasperation. “Why would I be disappointed?”

“Well, it’s just, I know being in love is unconventional. I know that, that those in line shouldn’t enter a companionship.”

“Lilith, sweet heart, love is absolutely unconventional, which is why you must embrace it when you find it. Many years ago, thousands of years ago, before the time of Gilgomosh, companionships were commonplace. They lost their meaning. And now they’re taken for granted because they’re so rare. But when it’s real, you have to embrace it. You have my blessing. A million times over you have my blessing.”

Lilith smiled broadly, flashing the whites of her teeth that gave the suns a run for their money.

“But I haven’t told you who it is yet.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Father.”

Augustus threw his hands up, a surreal experience when given physical shape from the Cerebral Fluid.”

“Okay, okay, who is the lucky Seriamite?”

As soon as he finished his question, Lilith’s face dropped.

*What’d I say?*

“Father,” Lilith said slowly, “he’s not *technically* a Seriamite.”

They stared at each other for a few moments. Finally, the words sunk in. Augustus

cocked his head forward, trying to more clearly hear her words.

"The Earthling? Justin Staggert?"

Lilith nodded.

"Yes."

"Lilith, sweet heart, if I have read the Media correctly, he is very much a Seriamite, and a very successful one at that, not that it would matter." Lilith's face contorted from shame to intrigue. "The only question I have is, does he make you happy?"

"*Very* much so."

"Then you hold onto him for dear life."

"That's what my plan was. Particularly because, and I know I can't give you a heart attack these days, I do have some additional news."

"Well keep it coming. I've been eagerly waiting for two years now."

Lilith began to rub her belly.

"I'm pregnant."

Augustus had to pause.

"Pregnant? My daughter?"

She nodded. "Pregnant. Eight orbits. A baby of the annual Display."

"Sometimes the stars seem to align just right. The Solis. The alien. The annual Display of Technological Innovation and Artistic Magnificence. The baby. And now Two and half more orbits. Lilith, this is how it had to happen. You know I don't believe in such things, but sometimes the Eternal Energy just seems to guide us."

"Father, don't say that." Lilith looked ashamed; not ashamed of her pregnancy, but ashamed she made her father retreat to metaphysical inanities.

"Lilith, sweet heart, it's true. I don't know why you look ashamed or think I'd be disappointed. This is exactly how the Universe intended you to move forward. And you're with child. It took me over two hundred years to make that step. Do you know how much I wish I had two hundred years with you instead of twenty-three?"

"Then it wouldn't be me."

"Well, you were certainly worth the wait. But I'm just saying how lucky you are. And Justin is a great man. I haven't really met him, but, I've heard nothing but great things. I absolutely approve. You absolutely have my blessing."

The people continued to walk by and stare, although the crowd that didn't walk past began to grow larger. Augustus assumed Jericho was close by, ready to step in and protect



her.

*Maybe I should persuade her to begin wearing wrist irons.*

“So, that’s what I wanted to tell you. I could stay here and keep talking, but I was thinking I’d make these visits more regular.”

Augustus gleamed.

“I would like that very much.” When they sat for a few seconds taking in one another’s presence, Augustus took the chance to ask the burning question. “Lilith, I don’t mean this question to come off as pressure, but I’m just curious to know what you’re going to do. If you don’t want to talk about it right now, no problem at all, but it would be nice for me to know what you have planned.”

Lilith didn’t look upset. She looked expectant, in many ways.

“Well, my first plan is to tell Justin of his future family.” Lilith let that sink in. Yes, she had told her father first. “And then, well, I’m going to talk to him about our move back to Verita. I tried before, and, although I hate to indulge your Eternal Energy guidance ideas, maybe it was a sign I wasn’t ready. A High Governor wouldn’t have run. But, I’m ready now. I don’t care what my skin color is. I realize with Justin and with my child, I’m ready. One way or the other.”

Augustus smiled proudly. He didn’t care about the threats. He knew it was her destiny. Like she said, one way or the other. They spoke for a few more minutes and then she departed. The crowds and the Media scoundrels followed her to a transportation vessel.

Once he saw her disappear, he slowly sank back into the Cerebral Fluid. The whole experience had been exhausting. The beach was calling.

## Chapter 10 — Veneral

Franklin Veneral, now the Steward of Power for over three years, hated walking the streets of Verita. The cheap cafes, the street performers, the stench of lesser citizens: it seemed beneath the dignity of a steward to associate with such vermin. He hadn't always felt this way. He considered himself to be a proponent of Seriam culture. He wanted to expand the Seriam culture. But with the perks of rule come the realities of failure. Maybe the Empire wasn't worth expanding. Maybe Augustus had been right all along.

*Or maybe this Empire just needs a ruler to make it great again.*

Veneral walked slowly, his purple robes and yellow tassels befitting of a conquering warlord, and led his Council of Advisors down the marble pathways of the Empire's capital. "You can leave us at the chambers," Titus had assured him. "You can enjoy the city on your own." But Veneral would hear none of that. Who knows what would accidentally be recorded. It was the kind of error Augustus would make. Veneral insisted they walk with him, and Titus insisted he walk the streets and show his face. Veneral insisted that his Council and his closest allies all wear their wrist irons. Even though he was the only one that he knew of that had conspired on an assassination, he didn't know who he could trust.

"Justin, explain the situation please."

He knew Justin was not responsible for security matters, but he needed Justin to be the face of the incident.

"Lord Steward, perhaps your Advisor on War and Culture would be in a better position to update you on the details," said Titus Circlos, whose daily red silk outfit abandoned his traditional flowing gowns for a skin tight get up.

*Always on the cutting edge, Titus.*

"And yet if he wanted the details from him, then he is who he would have asked," Jonas said. Jonas had appropriately spent more time on his planet 48-Quasi 2 in recent ecliptic periods, but had immediately returned to Seriam at Veneral's behest following the incursion. He hated to admit it, but he missed having his bulldog around, and Jonas was a bulldog.

"That's okay, Governor Domitius," Veneral said to Jonas. "Even though I have asked Marcus Pius to sit on the Council as the acting Advisor of War and Culture, it is merely for appearances. I wouldn't expect the acting High Martis to keep up on the mundane details of Seriam's affairs."

He said it in a manner that suggested he didn't want Marcus to respond, and as a Martis who honors the value of silence, Marcus willingly complied. He did, however, dutifully trail the group in a protective stance, twirling his long dark braid that dangled across his chest. Veneral found the braid to be somewhat unbecoming of a Martis, but Marcus often leered at him dangerously and Veneral wisely opted to pick his battles.

"Advisor Staggert, if you will," Veneral insisted. He took a few steps in front of the group and clasped his hands behind his back. It was an insulting posture, but it was a message he wanted to send.

*Show them all they do not scare me. High Governor Veneral, the Fearless.*

Why he felt the need to show his own Council of Advisors they didn't frighten him was less clear, even in his own head, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to trust anyone, save his loyal bulldog.

"Yes, Sir," Justin said nervously, utilizing an informal refrain that he translated from his English language. "We know the ship came through a gravitational alignment, utilizing a pre-established strand."

"The strand that brought you here," Veneral reminded.

"Yes, Sir, the one and the same."

"And the strand that brought you both back to 35-Solar 3," Marcus said quietly. "It is my duty to remind the Steward that he is still under investigation by the Ministry of War and Culture for the potentially illegal sojourn."

The words hushed the group and Veneral immediately turned to confront him.

*Even you, Marcus?*

"The Ministry will soon apologize to the Steward for such an outrageous abuse of power," Titus chimed in.

"Indeed," Marcus said, smiling discreetly. "I meant the Steward no offense."

Veneral continued to stare at Marcus, choosing his next course of action.

*The whole Martis order needs to be disbanded. They have meddled long enough.*

"Justin, continue," Veneral ordered, but remained facing them all.

"Right. The ship circled the planet once and then departed. We believe it gathered some nonthreatening Media streams. The ship didn't once make a violent or threatening gesture. It might have been an overture for further communication."

"Justin, I suggest if you are going to advise me, make sure the advice is worthy for my ears," Veneral seethed. "This blatant disregard for our Empire's sovereignty couldn't have

been more of a threat. As far as I'm concerned, the message has been received."

"I concur," Jonas quickly quipped.

"It would be unwise to make snap judgments on incidents that we don't yet clearly understand," Cornelia said. Cornelia, who to this day had yet to add the musculature to her robotic arm, rarely spoke at Veneral's Council sessions, but apparently felt strongly enough about this topic to raise a concern. Veneral reluctantly looked in her direction, but immediately looked away at the thought of her damaged arm. The whole thing repulsed him.

"Cornelia, why have you not cleaned your arm up?" he asked her in a manner of disgust.

"I beg your pardon, Lord Steward?"

"Your arm," he said. He couldn't even look at it. "You're not allowed to speak at a session until you add the musculature."

Cornelia gasped and then swallowed, appalled at the grievous overreach into her personal medical issues. She held the arm up and began to clink her fingers together.

"I have grown somewhat fond of the arm," she said. "I think I'm going to keep it like this."

Once again, one of his loyal advisors displayed a blatant disregard for his power. How did this keep happening to him? He sighed and brushed it off. He looked around at the twenty-five AH Forti that surrounded them. They were technically under the discretion of Marcus, who commanded the Fortis Brigades, but at a snap of his fingers, he was quite certain he could get them to start blasting them all away.

"We're moving away from the issue at hand," he said dismissively. "Advisor Staggert, per Seriam regulations, what qualifies as a legal colony of the Empire?"

Justin gulped and looked around for help. Veneral knew that the guidelines for colonization were taught to all first year University students, so Justin knew the answer.

"Sir, Seriam regulations stipulate that a planet has been colonized if end points for a gravitational alignment have been established and at least one Seriamite citizen has established residence on the planet."

"Very good." Veneral looked at his Council of Advisors and watched to see if they began to make the connection.

"Are you suggesting we've already colonized the planet, Lord Steward?" Marcus Pius asked.

“The end points have been established. I know this because I have used it,” Veneral said impetuously. He again waited for it to sink in. This was not new information, but he wanted to see how Marcus reacted to such blatant disregard for the law.

“Lord Steward,” Marcus asked, “you are responsible for illegally establishing contact with an intelligent population. I wouldn’t brag about your actions until the investigation is complete.”

Veneral ignored him.

“And now this planet has one of its own living among us.”

All eyes turned to Justin. They all seemed to understand. But then Justin’s eyes turned peculiar.

“But Sir, we still don’t have a Seriamite living on Earth,” he said perplexed.

“I know, but your former home has over three hundred of its citizens connected to Seriam’s Outer Rim. These are not Seriamites. These are Earthlings infiltrating our infrastructure. To answer your question, Marcus,” he said, turning to the acting High Martis, “I am not suggesting we have colonized 35-Solar 3. I am suggesting that 35-Solar 3 has *colonized* us. And now they have not only fired upon a peaceful envoy, they have twice breached our security. Seriam, Marcus, does not get colonized. Seriam colonizes. Tomorrow, I will ask the High Council for emergency powers to respond to this obvious threat to our very existence.” He turned to Justin once again. “We cannot allow *Earth* to continue to pose such a threat. *Earth* must be neutralized. And the Earthling colonizer, who now understands the risk his species poses, will help me write the orders to guarantee our safety.”

## Chapter 11 - Justin

Justin caught the cambata fruit as it came soaring across the atrium. He stepped off the magnetic lift that brought him to the one hundred and sixty-third floor of the Verita Government Residence, Building 6. He didn't know how much longer he would be privy to such a privileged lifestyle, but for his one-year appointment to the Steward's Council of Advisors, he certainly wasn't going to complain. Plus, all of his other friends had to live in large communal floors with as many as thirty others whereas he got to live with just Adelia and Remus.

Fortunately, he had come to better understand Adelia's habits from their time as roommates at the University and from the over six months—Justin could not wrap his head around counting the orbits of one sun around another; months just seemed easier—they had lived together across the skyline of Verita. She enjoyed greeting them with a fruit to the face. Justin had not only come to expect it, he learned to embrace it, particularly after sharing the exquisite cambata fruit with Veneral before they traveled to Earth. As he entered his abode, though, he caught the fruit almost absentmindedly. His nonchalantness caused Adelia to emote extreme irritation. When she sought to get a rise out of someone, it didn't sit well with her when they ignored the efforts.

"Hey, what's wrong with you?" she asked as she sat on a large cushion with her legs draped over Remus'. They had the Media playing, projected as a 3D hologram above a small table in the middle of the room. "Justin, eat the fruit. Come on, eat the fruit." She picked up another one from a bowl behind her and prepared to launch at him.

"I don't want the fruit!" Justin shouted before she could release. His outburst caught them off guard. As on Earth, Justin was not known for his outbursts.

Adelia swung her legs off of Remus and turned to look squarely at him. Remus shot him a perplexed look from over his shoulder.

"Okay, you need to explain now," Adelia demanded. "What is going on with you? What happened today?"

Justin wished he could tell her. He hated having to keep secrets from his family when he was at Juniper and he hated keeping secrets from his friends as a member of the Council of Advisors. But it was imperative that he kept his secrets to himself.

*What Veneral discloses at the Council of Advisors is one hundred percent confidential. But he's going to attack Earth. Over the years, Adelia could even be in charge of leading the*

*AH Fortis Brigades. How can I keep that from her?*

"You know I can't tell you that," he said solemnly, practically in defeat.

"Ooooooh, big hot shot Advisory things," Adelia chided. "Hear that Remus, we've officially been relegated to *friend* status."

She made quotation marks with her fingers, which made Remus laugh. Fortunately, Remus was always the voice of reason.

"You know he can't disclose that information. I mean, who even cares about him? I'm more concerned about us. If he tells us what he knows, the Steward's liable to put us in confinement."

Justin walked in a daze over to the cushions that Adelia and Remus had been using and plopped down in a huff.

"Man, they really did a number on you today," Adelia quipped. "You're not even doing your funny talking thing."

Justin looked up at her as she picked up a wooden dagger and began to rotate it around with her wrist.

"What funny talking thing?" he asked, suddenly forgetting about Veneral and his plans. He obviously knew what she was referring to. Lilith had just recently made a similar observation.

Adelia laughed and stood up, tapped her temple twice, nodded once, then tapped her temple again. An image of Justin appeared in front of her. "If lift becomes greater than weight, then the plane will accelerate upward," Justin's hologram said, much to Adelia's delight.

"No, I like this one," Remus said, projecting another image of Justin that said, "Head up, eyes forward."

Adelia practically fell over from laughter.

"Alright, alright, thank you for making my day worse."

*Why aren't I saying it anymore?"*

"Aww, poor baby," Adelia whimpered, collapsing on the couch and wrapping Justin in her arms. Justin didn't even resist, as he typically would. It felt good to feel swaddled under Adelia's slowly enlarging muscles.

"I thought Martis training would make you calmer," Remus said, looking back at the Media, again to Adelia's delight.

Justin spoke, though, before she could answer.

“What do you guys think of the Steward?” he asked sheepishly.

They both turned with stern faces.

“Justin,” Adelia said, “I’m training to be a Martis, sworn to uphold the laws of Seriam and protect the leaders of the Empire. You cannot ask me such questions.”

Justin looked down, ashamed that he would put his friends in that position.

“I know, I’m sorry,” he said, before realizing that she still had her arms around him. She couldn’t keep the joke up for long and burst out laughing.

“I think he’s an idiot!” she exclaimed. “But you’re kind of an idiot, too, so maybe that’s why he wanted you to become one of his advisors.”

Remus began to laugh, although he almost appeared to be blushing.

They all turned their attention to the Media, though, when they heard, “And another Selected High Governor sighting when Lilith Octavia visited the Consciousness to have a conversation with the late Augustus Octavia.” Justin immediately sat up, forcing Adelia to release her grip around him. “This is yet another appearance from the long-lost High Governor since she made a highly anticlimactic return to the Apollo Acropolis only to be savagely attacked by Augustus’ former Head Advisor, Monty Garrison.”

“What on Earth is she doing?” Justin asked as the Media coverage continued.

“How about you just ask me,” a woman’s voice said from behind them.

All three of them sprang out of the cushions. Remus and Adelia immediately placed their hands in front of their eyes. Justin just looked on in awe and disbelief. They had had such a regimented schedule of visits, anything out of the ordinary was simply ominous.

“Hi, Lilith,” he said, his look of concerned love making the room silent. He could hear his own breathing over the beating of his heart.

“Hi,” she said, trying to keep her composure as a High Governor should.

There was a moment of silence as they looked at each other from across the floor.

“This is awkward,” Adelia blabbed, cutting the tension with an axe. “Why are you two being awkward? Actually, you two are always awkward.”

“Adelia!” Remus shouted in a whisper.

“It’s okay,” Lilith said, staring straight at Justin. “She’s right... *in this instance.*” She finished her comment by glancing at Adelia.

“Why?” Justin asked like a lost prepubescent boy who doesn’t understand why a girl just asked him out.

“For the Eternal Energy and stars in the sky!” Adelia suddenly squealed. “Madam



Solis! I mean, High Governor! I mean, Lilith!"

Justin and Remus looked at her as though she had lost her wits. Adelia's smile was broad and she was pointing at Lilith's stomach. They both followed her finger and saw Lilith caressing her belly. She still stared straight at Justin

"Is," Adelia began, "is it his?"

"Is what mine?" Justin asked.

*I think I understand, but they must be talking about something else.*

Adelia turned and once again embraced Justin. "You sly dog, I assumed you two were using simulations!" Her embrace began to squeeze his lungs and he had to tap on her arm.

"Adelia, come on, stop. What's happening?"

Lilith walked forward, but Justin had no idea that she had just gone through this with the Consciousness of her father. She softly placed a hand on Adelia who immediately complied and backed away from Justin. Adelia circled them and made her way for Remus. The two embraced each other before Justin had even figured out what was happening.

"Justin," Lilith said, "I'm pregnant. It's yours."

Justin went ashen and gulped away a choking feeling. His legs began to go limp and wobbled underneath the weight of his body. He reached out for Lilith's shoulders to steady himself.

"Take your time," she said to him. "This was shocking to me as well."

"But, but," Justin stammered. "How?"

"Really?" Adelia blurted out.

Lilith ignored her and said, "You know how. This is what happens. It was unexpected, but I'm happy about it. I'm happy it's with you."

Justin took a moment and slowly began to smile. He looked down at her belly which was protruding through her gowns and he reached out to touch it. As he touched her warm skin, he suddenly remembered his audience. He turned to Adelia and Remus who were staring wide-eyed. He knew Adelia would never have children if she continued down the Martis path, but Remus could and at his age had probably not even considered it. Justin's face shriveled into a scorn and he immediately grabbed Lilith's hand and turned her to make her follow him into his personal abode.

The abodes on their communal floor were far larger than the University abodes. Justin had his own personal cushioned area and ample work space. Plus, his sleeping chamber was nearly three times as large as his University sleeping chamber, giving him

plenty of space for secret visitors staying the night. Not that he necessarily needed a sleeping chamber. His open-aired abode—covered with standard issued viewing mesh for safety—allowed a near panoramic view of Verita. The abode was covered in plants, although nearly half of the far side of the floor was reserved for fruits and vegetables. Regardless, Lilith and Justin would still sleep inside the closed sleeping chamber and pretend to be back on Externus watching the darkened night sky. These visits were of course rare, but Lilith had grown slightly more cavalier when it came to visiting Justin. Now Justin understood why.

They went and sat on the foamed pads of the sleeping chambers and gazed into one another's eyes. They kissed softly and then more forcefully. Then he pulled away as she lurched in for more.

"Wait, talk to me," he said.

"About what?"

"How far along are you?"

"Eight orbits."

"Eight orbits?" he asked wide-eyed. "That's like seven months. Wow. How did I not notice this?" He looked down at the clearly protruding belly and felt embarrassed. "Or maybe I did."

*Of course I did. She's enormous.*

"It's okay," she assured him. "I didn't expect you to. There was no way you could have predicted this."

"Well, it's not that. I just can't believe you were going through this alone."

She smiled and leaned into kiss him.

"I wasn't alone. I was with you."

"I don't want to be secret anymore," he said. "I want you to come here. Or I'll leave and come stay with you on Externus. I don't want to live apart anymore."

She nodded, seeming to understand his lament.

"I know, I feel the same way."

"You do?"

"Of course I do. It kills me when we're apart."

"Do you?" he asked, but stopped short.

"What?"

"Do you know what the sex is?"

She nodded and wiped her nose as her eyes teared. "It's a boy."

Justin's eyes lit up.

"A boy?"

Lilith nodded.

They leaned in and kissed again.

"Then how do we do it? How do we get past the secrets and be together? I don't want to pressure you. I really don't. But one way or the other, you can't avoid the public anymore."

Lilith's tears disappeared and for the first time since he had first met her, he saw in Lilith a leader.

"Justin, I've been thinking a lot about this. I thought I was ready to go back when I went with Jericho at the last annual display. But after the attack, I just wanted to get away. I wasn't ready. And then you saved me and I saw you and we came together and I couldn't even think of going back. And I didn't care about Seriam or if I was harming my family lineage, but now it's changed. Now I'm continuing the lineage. And it's our lineage. Yours and mine."

"Yours and mine."

"Yours and mine. And I'm going to honor that lineage, even if I just have to hold the seat until our son is ready to assume power."

"You'd do that?"

"I'd do that if you join me in the Acropolis and help me do it."

Justin was ecstatic. Not only was he not reciting his lines of comfort, he wasn't even thinking about his home or family on Earth. He was looking at his family right here at his home on Seriam. He was looking at Lilith and his future son."

"You're never going to get rid of me," he said.

She smiled and pulled him in once again.

"I better not. Now of course, we just have to figure out the best way to return. I'm sure Veneral will be less than thrilled."

"You're already the High Governor, all you have to do is show up."

"That's what I thought the first time," she said sarcastically. "You know Veneral will try to fight it. Who knows how he'll do it. And I couldn't bear anything happening." She rubbed her belly again, thinking about the safety of her child.

Justin remained silent as he thought about it. Even though he had just learned about

his son, he also couldn't bear the thought of harm coming to any of them. Maybe they could just disappear. Disappear to Externus or one of the dozens of other planets with sprawling and unexplored territory. He thought about his day and all the things that Veneral had told him and had planned for tomorrow and the immediate future. As if a lightbulb exploded in his head, he sat up straight and grasped Lilith's hands.

"Do you know how to get a hold of Jericho?" he asked with a glint of optimism in his eyes. "I have an idea."

## Chapter 12 — Veneral

Veneral had launched the attack as soon as he had heard about the incursion. The blueprints had been drawn long ago. All he needed was the catalyst, and the latest attack on Seriam was all the catalyst he needed. He knew it would be several days before he heard about the results, and by then his meeting with his Council of Advisors and his request for emergency powers would be complete.

*But will they grant me the powers?*

Emergency powers had only been granted twice—the last time being Apollo after his illegal coup—and certainly never to the Steward of Power. And this High Council wasn't exactly biting at the bit to support him.

*How is that possible? How can they sit idly by while our Empire is under attack and the High Governor renounces her responsibilities?*

Veneral walked slowly down the Avenue of High Governors away from his public Council of Advisors meeting—"Show them you're one of the people!"—with Titus and Jonas walking one step behind him. Duping Jonas into such unflattering sexual encounters had been one of the few successes from his plans. He became the Steward, yes. But the High Governor? Still no luck. Until, of course, the Council has no choice but to grant him emergency powers. He would have even more power than Augustus could have dreamed of.

"I think that went extremely well," Titus said reassuringly.

Veneral clasped his hands behind his back, letting his yellow tassles dangle down beside him. He had neglected cellular regeneration treatments lately because of the hectic last year, so his usually taut skin was beginning to show its age and his goateed chin was showing flecks of gray. Never before had he neglected his health or his image, but he hardly seemed to notice these days. Who cares about a graying beard when the Empire is calling?

"Did it?" he replied in a sinister tone, annunciating each word crisply.

"I agree, Franklin," Jonas said. "Tomorrow will be a success."

"You take great pleasure in using my first name, Governor," Veneral spewed.

"My apologies, Lord Steward," Jonas quickly said out of confusion and fright. Jonas could handily dismantle the Steward, but the AH Forti trailing them would quickly dispatch of the governor. "I meant no disrespect."

*Who is he? Disrespect my authority again and I'll have his tongue. Maybe I should tell*

*him that.*

“But you did disrespect me!” Veneral snapped, turning to look at his loyal bulldog. Three AH Forti were immediately by his side. “Are you questioning my judgment? Are you questioning my mandate to rule?”

“I beg your pardon, Lord Steward?” Jonas asked through a gulp with his hands in the air.

Veneral stared at him silently. He suddenly hated everything about Jonas. He hated his beige skin. He hated his enormous size. He hated the planet he was responsible for running. What purpose did he really serve?

“Remove your wrist irons,” he commanded.

“Excuse me?” Jonas wasn’t even frightened anymore, he was just caught off guard.

“Your wrist irons, remove them.”

“I don’t understand. Why would I remove my wrist irons?”

“Exactly, you have no respect for my authority! I have suspected it for a while,” Veneral lied, the words coming from his mouth with reckless abandon.

“What? No! It’s just...” Jonas looked down as he lifted his hands up so he could analyze his wrist irons. Wrist irons were as important on Seriam as Ocular Implants. They reduced violent crime to nothing. Only Augustus was stupid enough to not wear them, and look what happened to him. Augustus *and* Monty.

*Actually, Monty had his wrist irons on. Sneaky bastard.*

“It’s just what?”

Jonas looked up at Veneral and a look of confidence emerged. “It’s just that unless you are placing me in confinement, you have no authority to remove my wrist irons.” And then he quickly added, “Lord Steward.”

Veneral nodded and smiled sadistically. He had been defeated, but even now he could command the AH Forti to take him down. He contorted his face into a legitimate smile. No reason to alienate a loyal servant. He reached out and grabbed the side of Jonas’ shoulder.

“You’re absolutely right, Governor. You’re a loyal servant of my cause.” He brought his other hand up to grab both of his shoulders. It was a power move. Despite his size, Jonas was firmly in Veneral’s embrace. “We are the greatest Empire in the galaxy, and very well might be in the entire Universe. Soon, with your help, we’ll be an intergalactic Empire. But an Empire that can’t prevent the spread of other species in their own galaxy is not a powerful Empire. With emergency powers, we can send the Explorers out to take care of

the threat and then open the doors to the Universe.”

“But, Lord Steward, you already sent the Explorers without emergency powers. How were you able to override the security?”

Veneral smiled.

“I know, because you don’t have to override living beings. The Explorers are living technology and they answer to a ruler just as any Seriamite does. They answer to me.”

Suddenly Titus appeared within inches of their embrace.

“Pardon to interrupt, but I highly recommend we take this conversation into our private quarters.”

They looked around and saw a crowd emerging.

“Yes,” Veneral said. “We have lots of preparation for tomorrow.”

## Chapter 13 - General Sartor

The excitement in the air was palpable. Even the crisp air of the cool Colorado night in February seemed to paint a majestic landscape fit for a cinematic backdrop. Every operator had been present in the control room during the Manifest Destiny's visit to the alien world, but General Sartor had to order them out when they lost communication and they were all sitting on edge hoping for the best but expecting the worst. It had been nearly three days since they had lost contact with Manifest Destiny, which meant Blackbird had been fighting an orbit for that period in order to keep the gravitational connection open. Now the waiting was over. After coming back through the gravitational connection that Blackbird held open, the two F-40s used their thrusters to gently touch back down on the Juniper launch tarmac.

General Sartor and Colonel Smith were standing before the hundreds of Juniper operators and technicians, all the people that made the journey possible. Jack Taylor was already ginning up the press releases that Sartor would never let him release, but he could at least brag to his old friends at NASA. Even the normally dispassionate General Sartor had a smile on his face. It was a nervous smile, though. It was a smile that hoped for whimsical stories of intergalactic travel to a distant civilization, but that would settle for seven living members of Team Alpha with no long-term health effects.

*Please be a success. Please be alive. Please say no one got beamed up and left behind.*

For a brief moment, Sartor had to hide his anxiety and the fact his heart might have actually stopped beating, but to his relief, Commander Holiday stepped out of the back of the Manifest Destiny in her flight suit, seemingly fully functional. Sartor allowed himself a brief sigh. And then he started to count. George and Micah bounded off carefree. That made three. And then Peter Sabien, looking shell-shocked but scientific—number four. Bryce—the Deputy Commander—strolled out like a conquering boxer, clearly looking for Tink who came running into his arms. Five of the seven. Jerome came sauntering off next thinking nothing of the situation. And then Jackie Blaine—who was greeted with Mel's warm embrace—brought up the rear after shutting down the ship. Seven members of Team Alpha, safe and sound and looking like they were returning from a routine training mission.

"This is a good day," Colonel Smith said as Jackie exited and held Mel in her arms.

"It does appear to be that way."

For the first time in months, Sartor brought his fingers up to his mouth. The sweet taste of a cigarette would make the night truly perfect. A cigarette, a horseback ride, and



Amanda's admonishments would be easily superior to worrying that a Juniper team member got lost in space.

*An occupational hazard, I suppose.*

The Juniper members on the tarmac began cheering. Captain Holiday had already radioed in that the mission was a success, but she still needed to understand what that meant. When he saw Jackie exit—all seven members safe—and the Blackbird team begin to exit, he made his way for Holiday.

"Commander Holiday," Sartor intoned, "give me good news."

Holiday smiled.

"All good news, Sir."

Sartor held his hand out and smiled. Holiday accepted and they shook, marking the culmination of almost six years of operations and nearly two decades of research and development.

"This is a good day," he said.

The crowd began to enclose them and Sartor knew he was going to lose his chance to talk to her until they were back in their offices. Sartor felt inclined to let her go and celebrate with her friends, but he had to ask one more question.

"What was it like?" he asked.

Without hesitating, like she had been rehearsing, she said, "It looked just like Earth, except it was red and had a huge metallic ring around it."

General Sartor fought the inclination to get wide eyed and inundate her with more questions. There would be time for that. So he just smiled and shook his head in disbelief and slapped Holiday on the shoulder.

"We did it," he said to Holiday's delight. But Holiday's delight subsided.

Before they got completely consumed by the other Juniper workers, Holiday leaned in and said, "Sir, I know we'll talk about this in depth, but you need to know, this wasn't intergalactic. This civilization is inside the Milky Way."

Holiday had yelled it to overcome the noise and had leaned in to speak directly to Sartor's ear. When she finished, she leaned back to see the general's expression.

*Did she just say it's inside the Milky Way? That's impossible.*

Sartor kept his cool and nodded. "Let's talk during the debrief. Go celebrate. This is the biggest day in the history of our planet, and you were the commander. You deserve a few moments of celebration."

“Yes, Sir,” Holiday said, standing up a little bit straighter. She turned and immediately got grabbed and thrown into the air by Micah.

“General, did she just say the Milky Way?” Colonel Smith whispered as they watched Micah and George manhandle their commander.

Sartor didn’t answer, he just turned and looked at Smith and nodded his head. It simply couldn’t be true.

Bryce and Tink, seeming to be locked at the hip, came walking by. Jerome and O’bannon from Blackbird were also close by. They all stopped when they reached the general.

“Sir,” Bryce said, “I’m feeling sick, I formally request tomorrow off.”

“Oh my God!” Tink said. “I’m feeling the same symptoms. I’ll be out sick as well.”

Sartor gazed at them skeptically, pondering if he should challenge them. He didn’t, which left the door open for others.

“Sir, I’m not sick, I’m just not coming in,” Jerome stated.

“Mm hmm,” Sartor grunted.

*I’m so damned proud of these kids, they could request the next week off. I really need to tell Taylor to write up a report for congress, tell those assholes we made it.*

Laughing, they all began to wander off. The situation was getting chaotic. Juniper had been established to visit distant worlds and it had officially succeeded in its mission. They all were a part of it. They all understood the gravity of the situation and they rejoiced together. Sartor didn’t want to disturb the elation.

“Come on,” he said to Colonel Smith as he turned and walked away. “Let them have the day. We just did the impossible.”

Colonel Smith followed him—he really had no choice—but he felt inclined to state his concerns.

“I absolutely agree, Sir, but I don’t think we have fully considered the consequences of visiting this world and potentially being seen.”

*Spoken like a true NORTHCOM Colonel. Everything is a threat to American security.*

But Colonel Smith’s concerns were validated right before their eyes. As Sartor and Smith emerged from the large Juniper crowd, three balls of light emerged from the setting sun and descended onto the tarmac in front of them. The balls, roughly ten feet in diameter, glowed white with blue pulses that emanated from the center every few seconds. They hovered momentarily, as though waiting for the crowd to make the first move.

Sartor hadn't even noticed that he and everyone around him had frozen.

*Maybe they're like bears. If we freeze they'll go away.*

"That's what attacked us," Holiday said. Sartor hadn't even noticed that Commander Holiday was near him.

"Consequences, General," Colonel Smith somewhat callously said.

*Not really the I told you so kind of moment.*

Sartor gulped.

"What the hell do we do?"

He clenched his jaws and felt his teeth scratching together. If he had a cigarette in his mouth, he could flick the burning stick at the orbs as some sort of projectile. Unfortunately, Sartor didn't smoke anymore. And unfortunately, Juniper was not a military base despite Congress mandating its ships be classified as fighters. There were no guards around that could immediately open fire and even though Sartor knew that George and Micah were devising ways to get ahold of the F-40 weaponry, they were all sitting ducks.

"We need to communicate," Smith said.

"Assuming they're intelligent alien ships."

"They are," Holiday confirmed.

*Why couldn't we have this one day? Just this one day. This was supposed to be a great day.*

Sartor nodded and took a step forward, raising a hand as an expression of greetings. No one else followed him.

*Maybe Tim and Melvin created a new ship and are just surprising me in a fucked up kind of way.*

"General!" Smith yelled. "I don't recommend that."

As he yelled it, though, the first ship, with the other two hanging back in flanking positions almost identical to Juniper training, began to transform. Its light dimmed and its blue pulses ceased. It became a digital screen; it became a computer that could write.

### **Raymond Sartor**

Sartor's name appeared on the first orb's surface in giant black letters. Sartor had no choice but to be overcome with fear and confusion. How could it know his name? There were several possibilities, but he couldn't fight his natural inclination to come to the most obvious. Justin had given this civilization intelligence on Juniper and on Earth. They really had lost Justin

Sartor nodded once, mainly to himself, and took several steps forward.

“Sir, don’t,” Colonel Smith whispered, but which Sartor ignored.

“I am General Raymond Sartor,” he proclaimed.

The orb’s screen went blank and another name appeared.

**Bryce Staggert**

Sartor, feeling oddly accepting of the fact this craft, which Holiday identified as an alien, had called him out by name. But when the orb’s focus turned to Bryce, he didn’t know how to feel. Protective? Accepting? Bryce was a Juniper operator. The only acceptable solution was for him to step up as such.

Sartor turned to look for Bryce, who much to his relief was already making his way to the front clinging to Tink’s hand. Tink would never allow him to go without her, so he didn’t even try to intervene. They both appeared next to him.

Sartor brought his hand up to his mouth and began to rub his lips, turning from a general into a scientist. He began to examine the structure, the perfectly round shell, the pulsing, the light. What are they? Did they follow the Manifest Destiny back through the gravitational connection?

*Were they waiting for us?*

The screen again went blank but no new names appeared. The Juniper crowd began to grow tighter as they all drew closer like moths to a flame. Sartor didn’t blame them. This was history, regardless of the results. This was communication with an alien species. Team Alpha might have gone to the other side of the Universe—or as Sartor just learned, the galaxy—but they were all participants in the first communication.

The screen began to transform and two eyes appeared. They looked human, but the glowing red and blue pulses, which started up again, made the red brighten and then dull down every few seconds. Frankly, they were terrifying.

“Raymond Sartor, Bryce Staggert,” the ship said, although there was no apparent location from where the sound came. “We are ambassadors on behalf of the Steward of Power Franklin Veneral, the leader of the Seriam Empire.”

“They’re speaking English,” Sartor heard Holiday say from behind him. And in fact, they were. Impeccable English in an American accent.

*They’re learning. They must have downloaded our languages. Or Justin is teaching them.*

Sartor found himself wishing Jack Taylor was present. This is where Taylor excelled

and Sartor frequently stumbled. He was outstanding with the Senators and Congressmen, and this was really not much different.

“Welcome,” Sartor finally said, taking a protective step in front of Bryce and Tink. “What can we do for you?”

The question almost seemed to throw the orbs off of their planned actions. The lead ship shifted about uneasily, eventually replying, “Hello, General Sartor, thank you for your hospitality.”

Sartor turned in uncertainty, hoping someone else would have an answer. Where was Melvin? Where was Tim? Where the hell was Justin?

“You clearly have caught us off guard,” Sartor said, “did you have an agenda or shall we just talk for a while?”

“Your recent attacks on our fellow ambassador and your even more recent invasion of Seriam sovereignty has rendered your civilization reckless and a threat,” the Explorer said.

“That’s a lie!” Bryce shouted menacingly, taking a step toward the alien ships. Both Tink and Holiday grabbed him and pulled him back. A flanking ship immediately turned reddish and came to the fore protectively. Sartor, seeing the potential for a striking position, stood his ground, but looked at Bryce out of the corner of his eyes as a situation that would soon be dealt with—assuming they made it out of the current situation.

“I apologize if my accusation upset you, Bryce Staggert, but my central nervous system was developed to prevent me from gaining the capacity to tell a lie.”

“Your central nervous system?” General Sartor asked quizzically. “Your operating system?”

“Negative, General,” the first Explorer replied calmly. “I am a sentient being, but preprogrammed to prevent certain behaviors from developing as I enter maturity.”

Taking the answer in stride, Sartor asked, “Do you have names?”

The blue pulses began to once more grow apparent, which Sartor began to think indicated a resting position.

*They’re growing comfortable.*

“Yes, my official name is Explorer 1. To my left is Explorer 2 and to my right is Explorer 3. However, Justin Staggert has given us more human names so we can begin to fit in to society. Justin Staggert calls me Kris. He calls Explorer 2 George. And he calls Explorer 3 Micah.”

The names caught all of Juniper off guard. Either the Explorer—or Kris, as in,

Commander Kris Holiday—had done its homework and knew what strings to pull to confound its enemies, or Justin really had been involved and named them after his old Juniper crewmates.

“Justin gave you those names?” Sartor asked.

“Affirmative, Sir. Justin is the Steward’s Advisor for Science and Space Flight. It was under his guidance to visit your planet. But then your people attacked his ship.”

“Justin was in the ship?” Holiday asked incredulously.

“Affirmative. My apologies, but I did not receive your name and you speak as though you have an aspect of authority,” Kris the Explorer said to Kris the Commander.

“It’s not important what her name is,” Sartor interjected quickly.

“In our Empire, it is considered rude not to return the respects of an introduction,” Kris the Explorer said. “I have introduced myself and my colleagues.”

“In our world, it is also polite to properly introduce, unless you have reason to keep it guarded.”

“Why would you guard this information, General?”

“It seems you probably have the information already?”

The Explorer froze for a moment, thinking of a response.

“Justin taught us much about your culture. He felt it would help.”

“Help what?” Sartor asked.

“It’s fucking lying, Sir,” Bryce said, on the verge of charging the ship. “Justin would never divulge that information.” Sartor silently agreed, but once again felt the need to reprimand Bryce. Maybe he should have him watch *The Godfather*. Always stand unified in the face of an enemy.

“General, we come in one last effort to make peaceful communication,” Kris the Explorer said. “We are a peace-faring Empire. We are large and splendid. We do not like feeling threatened.”

“Under no circumstances have you been threatened,” Sartor said. “Our ships never fired on you.”

“Yes, they did. But we are merciful and willing to overlook the transgressions. As our Empire has expanded, we understand better than any other that mishaps happen in times of exploration and in times of war.”

“There’s no war going on here,” Sartor said.

“I disagree, General, on your planet, there is much war. We fear that you intend to

spread this war to our Empire. This we cannot allow.”

General Sartor went silent, sizing up the pulsing ships before him. He tilted his head back and presented his quintessential look of disinterest. Who knew if the Explorer understood. Who knew if it could actually analyze his perspiration or his heartbeat, but Raymond Sartor was Raymond Sartor, and God damn it did he want a cigarette.

“How do we prove that we want peace?” Colonel Smith asked from behind him. It was a valid question, so Sartor accepted it.

“Justin Staggert’s conditions require absolute fealty to the Empire and a permanent presence of Seriam security battalions. In return, we will offer our culture and our technology.”

“We’re not in a position to make deals for our country and we don’t speak for the entire world,” Sartor said calmly, but practically scoffing.

“And we would never accept terms of slavery,” Bryce said.

“These are the conditions that Justin Staggert has requested and the Lord Steward has agreed to.”

“Justin would never impose conditions on our planet,” Sartor said, finally allowing himself to agree with Bryce’s outbursts.

“Our patience is limited, General. The Lord Steward has granted Justin Staggert the authority to take any means necessary to ensure our Empire is safe, either through expansion, or through defense.”

“Defense?” Sartor asked. “Or attack.”

“Seriam never attacks first. As you remember, General, you have already attacked us and attempted an invasion.”

“This is outrageous. We seek peaceful relations with your Empire, but we absolutely reject those accusations and we reject the conditions of your Steward!” Sartor shouted, trying to overlook his state of surreal shock that he was shouting at an intelligent, potentially living, alien ship.

“The conditions of his Advisor, Justin Staggert. Justin Staggert warned us that you would not agree, and we have his consent to use force, even if it means harming some of your people, your loved ones.” The Explorer seemed to turn to Tink who was standing beside Bryce holding his hand.

Sartor turned to look at Bryce and Tink. He was concerned that Bryce would begin to believe the accusations against his brother, which were obviously false propaganda. Bryce

had too much internal rage against his brother. Even if these ships didn't realize the impact on Bryce, it was a well-played hand.

"These *negotiations*, or whatever you want to call them, are finished. You are not welcome on this planet. Leave. Return to your world and never come back."

*Cuz that'll work. I had to at least say it.*

"No, General, we will not."

The facade of Kris the Explorer suddenly went blank, as it had when it displayed Sartor's and Bryce's names. A series of numbers began to appear.

"What the hell is that?" Sartor asked. He directed it at the ships, but he was simultaneously talking to his crews.

"They look like coordinates," Colonel Smith said.

"No, those are orbital coordinates," Bryce said, allowing his navigational training to take hold.

"Of what?" Sartor asked.

Bryce shook his head. "Maybe satellites?"

"But not ours," Holiday said, correcting his more talented navigator and Deputy Commander. "We don't have satellites that follow that trajectory. Those are maybe Russian. Or Chinese."

"It could be the Chinese Intelsat, or maybe their communications satellites," said Colonel Smith, wanting to contribute to the discussion.

"Perfect," Sartor whispered to himself.

And then suddenly the numbers stopped.

"General," Kris the Explorer said, "Your decision has been made. You are a war-faring world. Justin Staggert sends his regards."

"You motherfuckers!" Bryce shouted as he ripped his hand away from Tink and began to charge at them.

The ships, though, immediately ascended into the sky above and were out of sight within a matter of seconds. They left the hundreds of once celebrating Juniper employees in disbelief.

"Now what?" Colonel Smith asked as he and Holiday and Bryce and several others gathered around him with their eyes watching the sky. Smith almost seemed to be laughing. How else were they supposed to react?

"Now," Sartor said, defeated by the moment, "Smith, I need you to call the National



Military Coordination Center. The Secretary of Defense and National Security Council need to know about this. As for me, I think I need to call the Chinese.”

Sartor sat at his Juniper desk alone. Only a desk light illuminated the room, casting eerie shadows across the walls. It would be unfair to say he was in shock. Maybe he'd be in shock tomorrow, or maybe he'd be in shock once he finished the phone call he knew he had to make, but he certainly wasn't at the moment. It was almost as though he had convinced himself that alien contact was such a guarantee, that Juniper wasn't searching for an unknown possibility, but for a perfectly understood reality that just needed to be discovered, that finally encountering aliens was practically old news.

Two doors down, Colonel Smith was calling his old colleagues at NORTHCOM, warning them of a potential threat and to not go on high alert. He was depending on Smith to contact the National Military Command Center at the Pentagon to inform them as well. This had the potential to be a disaster, just as the Seriam spacecraft almost certainly intended. If Earth won't submit to the Empire, then make Earth destroy itself. Very smart. Somehow they understood the international politics of Earth.

He clicked refresh on his unclassified computer, checking his Google News feed for stories of an attack.

*Would it even be a story or would the Chinese cover it up? Were we right? Were they actually coordinates for Chinese satellites? Seems like a long shot they could have known that just from the numbers.*

Sartor picked up the phone—one of four on his desk—and began to dial a number he had come to know by heart. He thought back to the phone call he had made over three years ago from his office in Virginia. He'd give anything to be back at his ranch with Amanda. He didn't care anymore about alien civilizations or interstellar travel. It was time to retire.

*Fuck.*

He pushed the last digit and it began to ring. It rang once.

“Hello, General Sartor,” Colonel Xi Wang said into the phone. Sartor knew he had a phone that only connected to the United States, so it was no surprise he knew it was his old friend at Juniper. Well, unless the Pentagon was calling to have secret meetings behind his back.

“Colonel Wang, how are you?”

There was silence at the other end of the receiver. Wang was contemplating.

“Raymond,” Wang said uncharacteristically, “we have a serious problem. And your phone call is either very coincidental, or merely indicative of a very serious problem.”

“Wang, whatever happened, it wasn’t us,” Sartor said calmly, from friend to friend. “I promise.”

“Then how did you know something happened, General?”

Sartor hadn’t actually thought that through. *Well, Wang, because three alien orbs came and talked to us.*

“Intel came in, and I’m telling you, it wasn’t us.”

“Well, I can’t very well take that back to my leadership, particularly when they seem very content cutting you out of the picture altogether.”

“What happened exactly?” Sartor asked, ignoring the slight.

“Three satellites mysteriously exploded, and the Shenzhen airport was attacked.”

“Jesus, Wang, I’m sorry. Was anyone hurt?”

“Of course.”

“Wang, I don’t know how to convince you, but we have a long relationship of respect. You have to find a way to convince your leaders that this was not the United States. It was not us.”

“Raymond, you are the Director of the International Association for Deep Space Cooperation,” Wang said as he laid out an argument of logic. “Three Chinese satellites mysteriously exploded and now the Director of the International Association for Deep Space Cooperation is calling me to say it wasn’t the U.S. I don’t think it’s a stretch to think you’re calling to say it was something extraterrestrial.” Sartor went ashen. Maybe it was that obvious and Wang connected the dots. Maybe Juniper wasn’t as secretive as they had believed it to be. “Maybe it’s time you fill me in on what you’re doing down there.”

“You know I can’t, Wang. But we’re working on figuring out what happened. If we discover anything, I’ll let you know as soon as possible. You have my promise,” Sartor said in a blatant lie.

He could visualize Wang shaking his head and looking disappointed.

“Wang, I’m going to say it again: this was not the United States. We cannot go to war because China believes the U.S. attacked it.”

“I’ll pass the word along, but I make no promises. I suggest you call your own and

make sure they're on the same page. There's going to be a lot of scared people, and I'm one of them."

"Understood."

"Raymond?"

"Yeah."

"Let's stay in touch."

"Absolutely."

He waited a moment and then hung up. As he did so, Bryce burst through the door.

"Sir, I apologize for my interruption, but the more I think about it, the more this makes sense. I don't think those ships were lying."

Sartor looked baffled and cocked his head to the side as he sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"Lied about what?"

"I don't think they lied about Justin. I think he's working with them. I think he's the reason Tink was injured. I think we've lost Justin."

## Chapter 14 — Justin

Justin knew that Veneral would inappropriately bring him to the High Council meeting. He hadn't gotten any sleep the night prior, and it wasn't because Lilith had been in bed with him. How she slept so soundly given the events that would soon come to pass he had not yet fully understood. Regardless, he was exhausted and running on adrenaline.

Under Augustus, this would never happen. Augustus kept the representation at his High Council meetings strictly to the principals, allowing only Monty, his head advisor, to attend alongside him. Veneral, in contrast, liked to bring along his entire Council of Advisors. It was a blatant show of power that hearkened back to the time of Gilgomosh when he insisted on bringing not only his personal advisors but his family and personal guests. There was plenty of room at the stone table surrounding the Consciousness, but the added participants only made the Governors and First Ministers pack in a little bit closer than usual.

Veneral had Titus and Jonas sit directly next to him in the same manner Augustus had Monty and Lilith by his side, and one seat removed was Justin. Justin was nervously tapping his right heel on the marble floor and silently singing words to an old Bon Jovi song he used to like and listen to, *It's my life, and it's now or never, I ain't going to live forever*. Seriam's music wasn't quite as easy on his ears. He didn't mind that most of the participants viewed his and his fellow advisors' presence as a burden. All he could think about was Lilith and his unborn child.

*I'm going to be a father.*

He fought the urge to smile, but the moment and his plans quickly consumed his thoughts.

"The Lord Steward Franklin Veneral," an AH Fortis announced, making Justin think of the days he used to watch the presidential State of the Union. Everyone stood as Veneral entered the Grand Hall of Gardens. He walked in like a conquering hero, waving them off and insisting everyone sit.

"No need to stand on my behalf!" he shouted joyously, loving every bit of the attention and the pomp.

Everyone sat, with the exception of Titus, Jonas, and a few others who saw their futures closely intertwined with that of the Steward.

"Thank you all for coming," Veneral said as he took his seat, taking the chip out from

behind his ear and allowing the Consciousness to subsume his memories. The rest of the High Council followed his lead. Justin had hoped Veneral would want this meeting to live on for eternity and allow them to leave their chips in, but this was not to be the case.

“How would the Lord Steward like to proceed?” Titus asked.

“Thank you, Titus, for asking, you are a good servant and an even better man,” Veneral said to everyone’s eye roll. “Actually, I would like to begin this meeting by altering our usual course. I have a request of the High Council and it cannot wait as all other decisions will be dependent on this request.”

Justin’s heart began to race. This was the moment. This was when Veneral would ask the High Council for emergency powers and use those privileges to raze his home planet, Earth. Justin thought of his brother and his old colleagues at Juniper. He thought of Kris, his former commander and the woman he once loved. Maybe even still loved in his heart. But then he thought of Lilith. He was certain Lilith would love Earth. Maybe, just maybe, he could even convince her to visit and potentially stay. Regardless of what she said, he knew she didn’t want to be the High Governor. He knew that he could have given her the necessary confidence to turn away from the life. But she suggested she was ready and Justin saw an opportunity. This was purely selfish. This was him using the mother of his unborn child to alter the course of history, both Seriam’s and Earth’s.

The more he thought about it, the less he understood why he couldn’t return home to begin with; it was all Veneral’s suggestion.

*Did he plan this from the outset?*

Of course he did. He demanded that Justin stay. And now he knew that his time in power was short so he was going to take over a new planet. The planet was a failed Seriamite experiment thousands of years ago that managed to evolve despite Seriam abandoning it. It was an intelligent planet outside the realm of the Empire. It was Veneral’s ticket to power and a clean slate. It was unacceptable.

“Lord Steward,” Justin interjected. “As per Seriam’s regulations, I have an immediate comment to present to the High Council before the Lord Steward proceeds.”

The gasps weren’t even reserved. Yes, Seriamite law permitted Justin’s comment, but it was an antiquated law that had never before been utilized. It was a law that was created in the same vain as the law that said the Solis did not have to be the offspring of the current High Governor. Sure, anyone could demand a vote, but no, it never happened and would not have gone over well if it did happen.

Veneral brought his hand up to his face and smoothed out his eye brow, making Justin gulp.

“Do you,” Veneral said.

“I do, and per Seriam’s...”

“I know Seriam’s laws!” Veneral shouted. He ran a finger along an eyebrow and smiled, calming himself before the High Council. In a more diplomatic tone, he asked, “What critical information must you convey to the High Council that couldn’t wait until I have spoken my peace?”

Justin hesitated, sensing the sarcasm. Veneral was gradually losing his cool and it had become so noticeable that even Justin was startled.

Gulping again, he said, “Thank you, Lord Steward. I’ll keep this brief. I would like to take this opportunity to utilize my privilege and extend an invitation to a guest of the High Council. Governors, First Ministers, Advisors,” he said, with growing confidence as he stood up, “please welcome the nominated High Governor, Lilith Octavia.”

To Justin’s astonishment, there were no gasps or whispers. His comments were met with silence. Perhaps the High Council had been expecting this day. Or perhaps the members didn’t fully register what he had said. Maybe his Latin wasn’t as clear as he thought it was. Regardless, Justin—who had replaced his feathered skirt and climate controlling-shirts for a more appropriate leather-based skirt and a tunic with two red stripes across the chest to symbolize his status as an Advisor—turned and tapped his temple to send a message to Lilith. He extended his left hand in welcome while touching his forehead with his right.

*Please don’t let me down, Lilith. Don’t run. Don’t be afraid. Be Lilith Octavia.*

Slowly, one by one, the Members of the High Council stood, either to see if it were true or to honor their High Governor.

A transport emerged from the ground and immediately the outer wall turned into a stare case to the Gardens. Lilith’s red hair immediately caught the light from the two suns overhead and irradiated throughout the Gardens, making the flowers sparkle and the very air around them glisten. Justin couldn’t fight off a smile underneath his hand when he saw her outfit. A single white piece of cloth that covered her breasts and wrapped around her neck, tied in a knot behind her back, and extended around to her hips, perfectly framing her pregnant belly. The cloth gripped her hips and then draped around her legs down to her ankles. Nothing about it—outside of Delaney Alabaster and her revealing Calorin System

clothing—was normal or traditionally acceptable at such a meeting. But then again, neither was the presence of a 27-year-old woman with pale white skin preparing to take the helm of the Seriam Empire.

And Lilith didn't come alone. First Jericho, just half a step behind her came down the steps, his eyes glued on Veneral. Then Professor Blaseph and Priscilla Regula from the University. And immediately following them were the members of the Martis Council, following their rightful leader. Marcus Pius, the acting High Martis and Advisor to the Steward, stood from his seat at the table and fell into line behind Jericho.

Lilith walked directly to the slack-jawed Veneral, stunned that his plan had been thwarted, and stopped. She had the confidence of Augustus and the beauty of the next generation.

"Madam Solis," Veneral said as he gulped, alternating glances between her face and her distended midriff. He wisely touched his forehead out of respect, noticing her Martis attack dogs ready to strike.

"That's High Governor," Lilith said, "and I thank you for your service to the Empire in my stead."

Veneral cleared his throat. "It has been my pleasure, but respectfully, you are not yet the High Governor, Madam Solis."

Justin saw Lilith hesitate for a moment.

*Stay strong.*

"I have been nominated by the High Council, Veneral, now step aside."

Jericho took a step forward, ready to obey his High Governor's command.

Veneral was about to speak, but Antipeter Florencia, with her braids sticking straight up into the air, spoke first.

"I call for the immediate instatement of Lilith Octavia into the position of High Governor of Seriam," she bellowed.

All eyes momentarily turned to Antipeter.

"And I," Constantine boomed, "second that motion."

Constantine's decision to support Lilith was perhaps the most surprising development of the morning, as most people had been anticipating Lilith's return, but no one expected the governor of Jurdiction, with its endless security issues, to publicly support Augustus' kin.

"You heard the High Council," Jericho said, "now step aside."

“Graciously, High Martis,” Veneral said. “But first, the High Council should know, yesterday, I sent a fleet of Explorers to 35-Solar 3. They have been instructed to attack.” This revelation did lead to gasps. It would seem that Veneral just broke a law that could be punishable by death. “The *war* has begun. The *war* against the only civilization in our galaxy that could threaten our existence is now a reality.”

“A war that you started!” Marcus Pius shouted. “He admitted it to us all at his Advisory meeting. And now he has admitted to starting the war. High Governor,” he said to Lilith, “I highly recommend you order him arrested and punished by Seriamite law.”

Several AH Fortis series robots began to move in, directing their weapons at Veneral.

“Very true,” Veneral said, “I am guilty as charged. But tell me this, Marcus, will you then entrust the security of this Empire to that of a 27-year-old with no experience in security? Would you, Constantine, stand by while a little girl controls your fate? I might not be the most honorable person, I might be a *bad* person, but I know power! I know how to keep this Empire safe! If we allow a civilization like 35-Solar 3, like Earth, to grow unchallenged, it will consume us. We must defend our Empire. We must continue to expand. If we put artificial limits on the growth of our Empire, we will perish. Now I ask you, I *urge* you all, allow me to remain as Steward. Grant me the emergency powers required to defend us all.”

Justin looked around at the crowd. He had to admit, it was a fine speech. He couldn't imagine the High Council would go for it, but the length of the silence made him wary. Fortunately, it was Lilith who broke the tension.

“Franklin Veneral, you are under arrest for the illegal endangerment of the Seriam Empire,” she said in a deep tone. “You and your advisor, Titus Circlos. Now step aside and accept your punishment with honor.”

Veneral began to laugh. “Then you doom us all!” He continued to laugh and then lunged at Lilith. It was a slow, deliberate attack, one that almost certainly wasn't meant to bring harm. But it made no difference. Justin's wrist irons made an immediate barrier around the two of them and Jericho knocked Veneral to the ground, unsheathing his dagger and bringing it down lightning fast at Veneral's neck. But unlike his last two encounters with violence, Jericho practiced restraint. The tip of his dagger stopped abruptly at Veneral's neck, which touched the blade every time Veneral gulped. Augustus Octavia and Monty Garrison had been enough. Now Jericho would let the law do its job.

Justin was stricken with nerves as this all went down. He simultaneously wanted to



whisk Lilith away, but he felt that he was already going to get in trouble for this little stunt. This was, after all, his idea.

Four Ah Forti apprehended Veneral and dragged him away. Two more apprehended and lifted the frozen Titus Circlos clear off the ground and followed the first four.

“Let me go!” Veneral yelled. “Arrest her! Arrest Lilith! She’s a fraud! She’ll destroy us all!” His screams grew fainter and fainter as he was dragged off and eventually out of sight. The entire High Council watched silently as the Steward of Power became no more.

“High Governor,” Marcus Pius said, shielding his eyes with his hand, “we have reason to believe Veneral was behind the attacks. But we also believe Monty Garrison meant you no harm. He was attempting to expose the Steward.”

“Yes,” Lilith said, still staring off into the distance, “Monty was a loyal friend.” She seemed to have no interest in hearing that Veneral had orchestrated the assassinations. “More importantly, it would seem we have a war to prevent. We have to send envoys to urge a peaceful path forward.”

“I’ll arrange it immediately,” Raze Anders, the First Minister of War and Culture and former First Minister of Science and Space Exploration, said from a few seats away.

But Lilith, with the crushing power of being the High Governor now weighing on her, would not be allowed to conduct business right away. She had some explaining to do.

“High Governor,” Antipeter said, coming forward and grabbing Lilith’s hand like a mother comforting a daughter. “You’re with child.”

Lilith blushed and looked at the ground.

“I am.”

“Is it natural?”

“It is.”

“If I’m not imposing, may I ask who the lucky man is?”

Lilith smiled and nodded once. She turned to find Justin, still in a state of borderline shock but instinctively standing protectively over her, and extended her hand to him. Snapping out of his daze, he accepted her hand in his. The crowd around them began to step back, uncertain what this meant. Some gasped, others cooed, some were too stunned to make a noise.

What the High Council knew, or what they would all come to accept, is that they were now staring at the family that would lead them all for a generation. They were staring at their High Governor. They were staring at the next, unborn Solis. And they were staring at

the father that tied the family, the Empire, and the galaxy together as one. They were staring at the future.

*Holy shit, what the fuck did I get myself into?*

Part 4

One day later

(Three years and seven months since the disappearance of American Airlines Flight 246)

## Chapter 1 — General Sartor

General Raymond Sartor stood in the designated smoking area of the Pentagon's open-air courtyard. Cordoned away from the entrances to the building, the Pentagon smokers huddled together in the cold winter air and collectively created a veritable mushroom cloud of tar-based smoke, making the outer loop of the plaza a gauntlet of sorts for the Pentagon employees and visitors trying to enjoy the crisp fresh air. Sartor didn't care. He had bummed a cigarette from a Marine Corps Major and now delicately squeezed it between his ring and middle fingers as he brought it to his lips and inhaled, feeling the smoke coat his deadened lungs and the chemicals create an orgasmic euphoria in his veins. Three years he had waited for this moment and it only took an alien attack followed by an official summons from the Secretary of Defense to make him light back up. With the first inhalation, he could no longer remember why he had decided to quit in the first place.

He stood inside the cloud of smoke and took a few quick drags, knowing his time was short. He was certain his uniform would stink with the stench of Marlboros, but it was a small price to pay. Not even the conjured-up images of an infuriated wife could ruin such an overwhelmingly enjoyable moment. He closed his eyes and exhaled the smoke straight overhead.

"Raymond, it's time," Jack Taylor quipped, knowing not to question the General's apparent lack of willpower.

"Right," he replied, placing the cigarette into a disposal bin. "Let's get some answers."

Taylor led the way into the building and up to the fifth floor to the Secretary's personal conference room. Colonel Smith, Commander Holiday, Melvin Russell, and Tim Thomas followed as Sartor's loyal entourage.

"Everyone at the table," Sartor commanded, refusing to let them take seats around the walls. "There's plenty of room."

The tension in the air was palpable, and Sartor wasn't helping the situation with his terse comments and poor judgment in falling victim to his longtime vice. Somehow, Sartor figured, they all assumed they were in trouble. It was their fault the plane disappeared, and it was their fault they were under alien attack, and it was their fault they might be at war with China. It was not an ideal situation. The Secretary of Defense, though, after dodging Sartor's calls for three years, had information, information that could provide a lot of answers. That was Sartor's trump card in case he found himself at the wrong end of a firing

squad.

"I can't believe this is happening," Colonel Smith said. "What are you even going to tell him?"

"The truth. Melvin, be prepared to speak up if he has questions about the ships."

"Which ships, Sir?" Melvin asked with a jittery voice.

"Any of them. Holiday, if he asks about future Juniper activity, take the lead."

"Yes, Sir."

An aide-de-camp opened the door suddenly and stepped in. "General Sartor," he said, "the Secretary of Defense."

They all rose when the Secretary walked in the room. He naturally had his own twenty-something large entourage. Fortunately, the conference table could easily accommodate almost thirty, so they all crowded around and dwarfed Sartor and his team. In all actuality, Sartor was a fan of the current SecDef. He had been instrumental in assuring the world and the American populace that the United States would continue to be a force for good. Not to mention, a very powerful force. He had shown no qualms in standing up to the rising Chinese power or any of the other smaller threats throughout the world. In secret, though, Sartor was beginning to question his loyalties

*Why keep me in the dark about so much?*

The SecDef, as he was referred to in military circles, was usually sharply dressed in a black suit and a stone cold stare, but under the circumstances, Sartor was pleasantly surprised to see cracks in the facade. The SecDef's tie was loose and dangling limply from his neck and his face was merely a weathered, grizzled depiction of the crisp appearance Sartor was accustomed to seeing on the television.

*Even he hasn't been sleeping.*

The SecDef sat directly across from Sartor and placed both hands gently on the table in front of him. He stared down for a moment and took a slow, deliberate deep breath to settle himself. Apparently prepared to now begin the meeting, he quickly brought his face up and stared at each of the Juniper members.

"General Sartor," he said slowly as he settled back on the General, "it is truly a pleasure. I've been meaning to arrange a sit down with you, but I've never had the opportunity."

"Mr. Secretary, it's a real pleasure. I absolutely understand the demands of the job, even if it has been more than three years since our last phone call."

“Indeed,” the SecDef quipped rather sharply.

*There he is.*

“I’m sorry it has to be under these circumstances,” Sartor said, trying to keep the conversation from getting out of his control.

“These circumstances?” the SecDef asked with raised eyebrows. “Which ones are those? The plane that showed up in China? The brain and money drain that your operation sucks up in Colorado? The alien spacecraft that apparently is trying to start a war on our planet? The fact you are the most important operation in the history of the world?”

“All of the above, Sir,” Sartor said somewhat lightly.

“But specifically, the most recent visit and attack by the alien spacecraft,” Jack Taylor quickly corrected, covering for Sartor’s overly indignant behavior.

The SecDef gazed at Taylor from the corners of his eyes, seemingly contemplating how to utilize this newfound internal dispute. He suddenly breathed in deeply through his nose and extended a hand down the table to one of the many generals sitting at the table. One of the generals responded to the outreached hand and gave the SecDef a red envelope, emblazoned with **TOP SECRET//NODIS** across the front. The SecDef placed it in front of him on the table and settled his hand on top of it.

“General Sartor, tell me what you know about CONPLAN Quad Zero.”

Sartor took an anxious breath and looked at his team. None of them had any clue what CONPLAN Quad Zero was. This is exactly why Sartor had been trying to retire for so many years. Too many secrets. Too many instances of *plausible deniability*. Too much compartmentalization.

“Sir, I have not heard of CONPLAN Quad Zero,” he stated clearly. “Should I have?”

“Well, if you had, I would have been very irritated. To be perfectly honest, it was designed specifically so Juniper had not heard about it. We didn’t want it to interfere. We wanted to keep Juniper separate from the military.”

“I agree wholeheartedly with that sentiment,” Sartor said, fully aware of the idiocy of the statement as he sat there in his Army A.C.U.s.

“You know what, before we get into that, I heard you recently lost a man,” the SecDef said, looking surprisingly human.

Sartor gulped. He hadn’t given the proper time or ceremony to those lost or injured from the attack.

“Yes, Sir,” he said, straightening his shoulders. “Grayson Milner. Commander Holiday

worked very closely with him.”

“I’m very sorry about that.”

“Yes, Sir. Grayson was very talented. It was a big loss, not just for Juniper.”

“Understood,” the SecDef said. “I know how hard it is to discuss such situations, but maybe you could talk about the circumstances a bit. Tell me how it's possible that we're suddenly capable of intergalactic travel.” The SecDef, clearly exhausted from trying to wrap his head around the subject, leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms across his chest. Sartor couldn't help but look at the red folder that was now sitting freely on the table.

*What the fuck is CONPLAN Quad Zero? At least I don't have to talk about Grayson.*

Sartor leaned forward to begin, but hesitated. He looked at Melvin and Tim and then back at his civilian commander. “Well, Sir, we're not sure we *can* travel intergalactically.”

The SecDef creased his eyebrows and dropped his chin. “What? I've finally accepted the fact we're dealing with aliens. Please don't try to convince me otherwise.”

“No, Sir, it's not that. It's just your choice of terminology. It's not intergalactic. It's interstellar. These aliens are from within the Milky Way Galaxy.”

The SecDef looked at a Colonel a few seats away and nodded.

“Yeah,” he said, directing his attention back at Sartor, “I guess that makes sense. Two hundred billion stars in the galaxy is easier to find life in than in two hundred billion galaxies.”

“Yes, Sir, that's actually a great way of thinking about it.”

“So, *interstellar*, tell me how it works.”

“Right. Melvin.”

Melvin looked startled.

“Melvin,” Sartor said again. “You're the best authority here to explain.”

The SecDef directed his attention at the flustered scientist two seats away from General Sartor.

“Right, yes, of course,” Melvin said in spurts. Sartor would have jumped in in the past, but he knew Melvin would pull through. “Well, you see, Sir, it's all about gravity and how it interacts with something called negative energy, which we theorize has layers or some sort of intuitive structure. The negative energy counteracts the energy of gravitational singularities, creating energy neutral space. This allows for direct pathways between two gravitational signatures, or in our case, two man-made entry points.”

“I have absolutely no idea what he just said,” the SecDef quipped out of irritation and

exhaustion.

"We used to call it a deviation," Tim Thomas chimed in with, which only proved to further confuse the Secretary, who looked at Sartor for more clarification.

"Essentially, Sir," Sartor said, holding up his two fists as a model, "the two entry points and our ship's negative energy drive allows us to organize the energy neutral space to create a passageway *through* space."

"Organize passageways?"

"Yes, Sir," Melvin continued with hesitant confidence, "but depending on how the negative energy is naturally interacting with gravity at any one point determines the strength of the passageway."

"At least that's our current hypothesis," Sartor said, opting to place a caveat on their esoteric explanations of physics that have not yet been mathematically created.

"So in theory it could in fact be intergalactic?" the SecDef asked.

"In theory," Tim Thomas said.

The SecDef looked at the plan, his eyes moving back and forth as he processed the information. He again rubbed his eyebrow as though he were massaging a thought out of his head.

"To me, it sounds like you guys don't have the first clue what you're talking about," he finally said, which drew some giggles from Jack Taylor and Colonel Smith. "As I understand it, we received a message from space. We kept this alien contact Top Secret from the world and even the American people. The alien message had schematics that we built. We didn't know what we were building or understand how it worked, but we turned it on. Then a commercial plane disappears. 301 passengers on the plane died, one of your own disappeared, aliens attacked your ships and you lost more men and women, and now the aliens are back and attacking China. Is it safe to say some more thought should have gone into this?"

"That is a very safe assumption," Sartor said in agreement, choosing not to deflect blame onto the Senators and Congressmen overseeing the program, nor the President who authorized the journey to Seriam.

"Okay, well, that's as good a segue into this as anything," he said, tapping the red folder. "Fortunately, people smarter than you did put more thinking into it. CONPLAN Quad Zero is a NORAD plan. It addresses contingencies for the possibility of an alien attack."

The SecDef waited for Sartor's response, but he showed nothing. His internal



thoughts couldn't be restrained, though.

*Are you fucking kidding me? How was I not involved in this?*

He allowed the SecDef to continue.

"One of the key contingencies we looked at, or more accurately, one of the key mitigation efforts we examined, was how to properly prepare. What we ultimately decided is that America on its own would not be satisfactory. We needed allies with the resources and the..." He paused. "And the laws to build planetary defenses."

Sartor searched for more meaning. *Allies with resources? The laws?* He could only think of one such country at the moment. But, he concluded, there was no possible way. And then he immediately thought to Wang's meetings with the Pentagon.

"Okay," he said. He was tempted to ask why he wasn't consulted, but he knew the response he would get.

"What's about to happen I have been told will be a shock to you," the SecDef said. "But I frankly don't care. Bring him in," he said over his shoulder.

His aide-de-camp opened the door and poked his head out. Sartor's heart began to race and his thoughts ran wild. Were they all about to be killed in the Pentagon for knowing too much? Were they bringing in Colonel Wang? No, he suddenly realized, those were not the unexpected surprises. The surprise was far more jarring.

Behind the aide-de-camp, who almost certainly didn't understand the significance, came a man who Sartor had never seen before.

"General Sartor," the SecDef said, as the man entered and took the seat next to the Secretary, "I don't believe you've met Perry Staggert."

Sartor swallowed and clenched his jaw, unintentionally nodding his head ever so slightly.

"I know of a man named Perry Staggert, Sir," Sartor said, unable to take his eyes off of the man out of disbelief. "But that man disappeared many years ago."

He once again forced himself to look at Holiday to see if he understood that he was looking at Justin and Bryce's father. Holiday's jaw was practically sitting on the table. He understood.

"Hello, Raymond," Perry said.

Whatever this man used to be, Perry Staggert had aged. Once a neurotic Marine who preferred to be an amateur astronomer and found better company with the likes of Melvin and Tim, he now sat in a crisp suit and had the gaze of a man who could only focus five miles

in the distance. He was a spitting image of an elder Bryce, although Sartor could see the resemblance to Justin as well.

“Mr. Staggert,” Sartor said, but couldn’t help himself from following that up with, “where the hell have you been?”

“Mr. Staggert has been assisting us with carrying out Quad Zero,” the SecDef answered for Bryce’s father.

Sartor brought his hand up to his mouth, but not for a cigarette. In fact, he suddenly felt guilty that he broke his vow. In this instance, he just wanted to rub his lips, which had gone numb. He began wrapping his head around the apparent conspiracy that had been pulled off around him. How had he been so blind?

“How have you been assisting the CONPLAN?” Sartor asked as professionally as possible. It didn’t matter that he was in the room with the Secretary of Defense. He had to talk directly to Staggert.

“I’ve spent the past decade in China,” he said. “I know you have questions, Raymond. I do. You have to understand, my job was to pretend to be a traitor to America. I couldn’t involve my family in that.”

“Your family? You mean your two sons, one of whom got lost in another world and the son who is a genius wrapped in a violent, unstable mess of a human being.”

“I’ve heard.”

“Have you?”

Perry Staggert looked down in shame. He nodded.

“I’ve heard you have taken very good care of my boys.” He paused. “Even though you were ordered to do so, I can never properly repay you. What I can offer you, though, are answers. Or maybe solutions.”

*That certainly explains where those ridiculous orders came from. Bryce and Justin were some of the best, though. It obviously runs in the family.*

“Okay,” Sartor said, suddenly feeling apprehensive. It’s not the feeling he would have expected to feel upon meeting the man who was more myth than reality. “You were a traitor? Were you giving away Juniper secrets? This is outrageous.”

“Hear him out, General Sartor,” the SecDef said. “We made these decisions together.”

“Not together,” Sartor said. “We were in the dark. I was in the dark. We were flying blind. Convince me you both don’t have blood on your hands.”

Before the SecDef could respond, Perry said, “*Lots* of blood, to be exact. You see, I ma

the one who received the transmission using a Juniper tree for a radio antenna. I am the one who translated it and built the initial designs for your F-40s. And I am the one who tried to save the lives of my wife and two sons after they were in a car accident.”

He let Sartor process the information, and there was a lot to process.

“You discovered the transmission?” he said. But before Perry responded, he asked, “You tried to save their lives?” His brain was rapidly connecting dots. “With the neural implants?”

Perry smiled, impressed. “You know about the neural implants?”

“Of course I do. How could you do that to your sons.”

“I told you, to save their lives. And it worked. But it didn’t work in my wife. That’s when we learned that older brains can’t handle the implant. Younger brains work better. They’re more accepting of adapting to the foreign objects. Even in Bryce, we never secured the complete connection.”

“I can attest to that,” Sartor said.

He looked at Holiday, who was shaking as she thought about Justin. She couldn’t bite her tongue and said, “You think you saved them, but you just made them lab rats. They knew something was wrong with them, with their heads.”

“And that’s precisely why we couldn’t take the risk with implanting more American kids in the United States,” the SecDef said. “Even what Perry did to his own sons was an extreme abuse of the technology. He should have been arrested.”

“Instead you sent him to China,” Sartor said, “where testing on young Chinese children is more accepted.”

Again Perry smiled. “And some American. We couldn’t risk China having its own Army of enhanced humans. And you know what? Our hypothesis was correct. Children younger than two were the most suitable subjects.”

“And you’ve succeeded in more than three hundred,” Sartor said, more to himself than to anyone in particular. “That’s what Ariana said. More than three hundred are connected to the Outer Rim.

“Jesus Christ,” Colonel Smith said.

“This is a PR nightmare,” Taylor added.

“The Outer Rim?” Perry asked.

“So maybe you can understand why we didn’t involve you,” the SecDef said, ignoring Staggert’s comment.

““That’s why you’ve been having meetings with the Chinese,” he said out loud, which caught the SecDef off guard. “Colonel Wang ...”

“Was here to negotiate the return of Perry Staggert.”

Sartor looked at the table. He couldn’t make eye contact with them. He was in fact grateful he wasn’t involved, but what a stooge he had become. Just a pawn in a far greater scheme.

“What about other technology?” Sartor finally asked. “Ships? The quantum computers?”

“They had already discovered some of the technology,” Perry said. “One of my jobs was to ensure that they thought they succeeded without weaponizing the technology.”

“So they have their own system?”

Perry nodded. “Ground-based, not airborne. They have the pilots that can initiate connections, you have the ships.”

“And you turned yours on, using Justin as a pawn.”

“Justin turned it on,” Perry corrected. “We initiated the machine, Justin made the connection. We had to have a proof of concept.”

“By again experimenting with your own son?” Holiday asked.

“It wasn’t an experiment. I knew the technology would work.”

“And that’s why the ship returned to China. Because that’s where the alignment was established.” Sartor looked to the SecDef. “Did you know this whole time that Juniper wasn’t responsible?”

“First, General Sartor,” he said as he tapped on the plan, ultimately ignoring the question, “we need to consider some countermeasures. What can be done to keep the planet safe? Not only do we need to avoid war with China, we need to foster a relationship for a global effort.”

Sartor considered this, but he was too overwhelmed to think clearly. He just sat there silently shaking his head.

“Mr. Secretary,” Colonel Smith said, “whatever effort we work on, you need to understand, this is a vastly superior civilization. At best, we can consider some sort of defenses. But maybe we should consider sending an envoy. Try to make peace.”

“To lose more Americans?” he asked. “Absolutely not. We need to focus on defense.”

“Maybe Ariana, our computer, can link in and identify when another gravitational alignment is established,” Sartor said, thinking out loud.

“Okay, that’s a start,” the SecDef said, pretending to understand what he just said.

“I’m still confused, though,” Sartor said. “Why tell me about Perry now? Why tell me about cooperation with China? Why tell me about this CONPLAN?”

The SecDef looked at Perry and sighed.

“Because Mr. Staggert’s activities were part of the plan’s Phase Zero. Enable a global response without allowing another country to use the technology against us. Now Phase Zero has ended.”

“So what is the next phase of the CONPLAN?”

“The next phase calls for the Director of the International Association for Deep Space Cooperation to establish a course of action based on the new knowns. We came up with many scenarios, but nothing like what has occurred. We need you to come up with a plan, and we need you to figure out a way to work with our foreign partners.”

“Our foreign partners? You mean the Army of enhanced humans? We don’t have the ships for them to assist. Why don’t they just use their ground-based system and respond to the attack?”

The SecDef looked at Perry and shrugged, suggesting Perry fill Sartor in on the rest.

“The alien spacecraft attacked the Shenzhen Military Airport, Raymond, the same airport where the American Airlines flight reappeared” Perry said. “They attacked the Shenzhen Military Airport and the three satellites capable of triangulating their precise locations for space launches. The Chinese have no system at the moment.”

Sartor gulped.

“Now you understand, General Sartor,” the SecDef said. “Now get to work.”

## Chapter 2 — Jericho

“Greetings, High Governor,” the AH Server said from behind its stand of the Juice Squeeze. “It is an honor.”

“Hello,” Lilith replied.

They both touched their foreheads. It had been over three-and-a-half years since Lilith stopped by one of Verita’s Juice Squeezes and she made it a top agenda item for the morning. Jericho was happy enough that she agreed to wear her wrist irons unlike her father, so he had no qualms about her continuing Augustus’ tradition of walking the promenades of Verita and purchasing a local juice.

“How may I assist the High Governor?”

“A passion juice, please,” she said, before looking at Justin and Jericho to silently ask if they were thirsty. They both held up their hands and shook off her offer.

“Right away, High Governor,” the AH Server said.

After a minute, the AH Server handed Lilith a glass of red juice, scanned her eye, and then once more touched his forehead.

“We’re all very happy you have arrived,” it said.

Lilith didn’t respond but bowed her head and continued to walk down the promenade. The Outer Rim-moderated weather was perfect. The sky was blue and the suns, nearing eclipse, shone down and illuminated Seriam as the center of the Empire. The Outer Rim began its periodic rotation to optimize the power it received from the lasers beamed out from the solar capture systems orbiting the suns. The rotation allowed the Outer Rim to communicate to the other thirty-three Outer Rims dispersed throughout the Empire and the communication towers on the colonies that did not. Jericho could see Lilith looking up at the Outer Rim and beyond, seeing the vague shape of Externus in the daytime light. He knew that she looked on the Outer Rim with great ambivalence. She cherished its ability to purge the atmosphere of pollution, but she frequently expressed her nostalgia for the unimpeded views of the sky from the shores of Lake Altus on Externus.

People everywhere turned to gawk at the sight of Lilith, a sight they were skeptical they’d ever see walking down the Promenades of Verita. That her pale skin did not stand out in her small crowd added to the wonder. Where she usually stood out against the bronze skin tone of the average Seriamite, she and Justin now stood as a partnership against Jericho’s beige skin.

“Jericho, Justin,” she said.

To ensure a seamless transition, Lilith had asked Jericho to replace Titus—who along with Veneral was placed in work confinement on Jonas' home planet of 48-Quasi 2—as her Head Advisor, filling the position that Monty once held. Justin remained as her Advisor of Science and Planetary Travel and Professor Blaseph was filling in as her Adviser for War and Culture. She kept all the other advisers in place until further notice when she could take more time to find qualified individuals who shared her vision. She promised Jericho and Blaseph that their tenures would be temporary. She made no such guarantee to Justin.

They all three reached up and tapped their temples. An image appeared before them of the remainder of the Council of Advisors.

“Good morning, advisors,” Lilith said as their image appeared before them.

“Good morning, High Governor,” Cornelia said with a warm smile, her spiked hair flaring every which way and her robotic arm propping up her head. “May I ask how the mother-to-be is feeling?”

“Exhausted and overwhelmed,” she responded to their enjoyment.

“And I presume the father-to-be is being properly attentive?”

Lilith looked at Justin, forcing the projection onto Jericho's Ocular Implants.

“He's been wonderful, as expected.”

“Well, High Governor, your father would claim that you have succeeded in producing the highest form of art. He would be proud. A natural born child. You Octavias are truly a revelation.”

Lilith blushed and instinctively held her belly.

Jericho sensed she didn't appreciate the fawning, but she properly exuded the gravitas of a High Governor and smiled graciously. Augustus had been right. She would make a great leader.

“Well, thank you for your kind words, but my father isn't here and we have work to do. I feel I have inherited a neglected Empire. Shall we get down to business?”

“Absolutely, High Governor,” Jericho said.

“My advisors, let me first thank you for your service,” Lilith began. “I know the past few years have been hectic and you have all remained loyal servants to the Empire. There will be a day when you are all repaid for that loyalty. Today, my meager gratitude will have to suffice.”

*When did she become a High Governor? Why didn't she accept her destiny from the*

*beginning?*

“With that said, we have work to do and I need all of your assistance,” she continued. “I’m concerned the Steward neglected the many colonies of our Empire. For that reason, I would like all of you to hold meetings with your First Ministers and then petition the governors. I want to know exactly what issues exist in our Empire. I want to tackle them one by one. Veneral had dreams of recklessly expanding the Empire, but my father had dreams of strengthening the Empire. He spoke often of implementing zones throughout the galaxy to better represent our colonies. Socialize this concept, the idea of partitions. I feel Seriam is at a crossroads, an identity crisis. Do we spread our greatness, to not only the corners of the galaxy but of the Universe? Do we focus on our people? Only a third of the Empire has Outer Rims, but as I understand it, resources from our nearby mines are plentiful. I want you all to view this time in our history as a clean slate. All ideas are welcome, to include changes to our structure of leadership. How we allowed Franklin Veneral to be the Steward for three years is a testament to the dangers of adhering too strictly to antiquated regulations and traditions. Further, I want to make a point of visiting all eighty-six of our colonies outside of Seriam proper and Externus before the year is out. We have neglected our Empire for too long, focusing instead on grandeur and expansion. Additionally, when I have recovered, I will participate in a gladiatorial exhibition.”

This last comment drew gasps from the Council. Lilith pressed on, sparing no time in reshaping Seriam in her image.

“Some traditions are antiquated, others are necessary. Violence is as much a part of our culture as is art. Seriam has relegated this tradition to Externus. This will no longer be the case. I also want to have the University’s acting troupes put on shows here in Verita. Externus might be viewed as backwards, but they have maintained the long lessons of our past, and we must not forget that significance.

*Reshaping Seriam in the image of Externus. This should be interesting.*

Jericho continued to walk alongside Lilith as she espoused her views for the future of the Empire. He felt inclined, though, to interrupt on one point.

“High Governor, I apologize for my interruption, but may I bring up one immediate issue?” he said.

“Of course, Jericho, I welcome it,” she said.

“There is still the issue of Justin’s planet, Earth. Before we can pursue your objectives, we must first prevent potential war.”



"Yes, of course," she said, dismayed not by Jericho, but by Veneral's recklessness that she now had to clean up.

"I'm worried it might not be much of a war," she said. "From Justin's descriptions, we are far superior in technology. We must prevent the need for total annihilation while protecting against any possible incursions. Justin, how is our peace envoy coming along?"

"I spoke with Memnon this morning. He and First Minister Raze Anders have put together the logistics of the peace envoy. Because the current strand formation has prevented the Outer Rim from establishing a second gravitational alignment, we are waiting for the return of the Explorers before we give the go ahead."

*Veneral thought it was a stunt placing him as an advisor, but he can actually hold his own. I'll have to tell Adelia to help him celebrate his status.*

Lilith chewed on these comments for a moment.

"Is it strange the Explorers haven't returned yet?"

"We're blind to what Veneral had them do, so it's difficult to say," Justin responded.

*Even his Latin is beginning to sound Native.*

"When they return, launch immediately. And Justin," she said, stopping and grabbing his arm, "I want you to be prepared go. I know these are unmanned vessels, but assuming we establish relations, I need you to be our ambassador." Justin gulped and nodded, clearly fighting a host of emotions about the request. "But you can't stay. I need you to come back. There will be time in the future when you can return. You can show me around your home."

She said this as she rubbed her belly. Justin had a moment of clarity as he looked down at his child forming inside Lilith. He didn't want to go back to Earth and he didn't want to stay on Earth. His home was Seriam now.

"Someday, I'll take you to a place called Napa. Best Vinum in the galaxy," Justin joked to the guffaws of the Council.

"Speaking of Veneral," she said, openly blushing from the public display of affection, "how is he doing in his new home on 48-Quasi 2?"

"Although I question the wisdom of sending him to a work colony overseen by Jonas, who was quite happy to have Veneral in power, all reports are that he and Titus have arrived and have been put to work," Jericho said.

"I know the decision was controversial, but we are a merciful Empire, are we not?" she asked as she began to walk again. "And we followed strict and proper regulations."

"We are," Jericho agreed reluctantly. "But I can't help but wonder if Veneral had not

planned for such a contingency. He knew his time was short. He knew he was making a grab for power. He knew Seriam's protocols. He knew we would send him to the colony of his foremost ally." Jericho looked off along the promenade and couldn't help but feel shame for his internal conflict over what he'd like to do with Veneral.

*I should have struck him down when I had the chance.*

But he knew Lilith was right. He knew, as he looked out at the masses of people sitting in the sun along the promenade and laughing and writing and enjoying the carefree life that Seriam created for them, that it was the simple acts of mercy and abiding by the law in a galaxy of violence that made Seriam the light.

"I hope that being among friends—his uncle is on the planet in charge of the security battalions—he will adapt better to his new life," she said, seemingly genuine.

"I can't wait to see how he responds to manual labor without the ability to undergo cellular regeneration treatments," Cornelia quipped, loving the fact Veneral was in confinement.

"Cornelia," Lilith said with a smile.

"Apologies, High Governor," she responded quickly.

"No need for apologies, I've considered it as well."

The whole Council laughed, the first time the Council has had an air of lightness in years.

"I'm sorry I can't get past this," Cornelia said, "but are you getting nervous about a natural birth? Even your mother and Augustus were artificially inseminated and finished development in an artificial womb."

Lilith blushed.

"Yes, I'm nervous, but this feels right. I obviously will need much assistance as I recover. If I require an absence, Jericho will carry out my responsibilities on a temporary basis along with the First Ministers."

"Very good, High Governor," Cornelia said in a maternal voice.

"Moving on, I also want to talk about reinstating higher stipends for service girls on Externus. They have been left behind through no fault of their own."

The Council demurred. No one wanted to challenge the new High Governor at her first meeting. Jericho took the sword.

"High Governor," he said, "it's beyond noble that you would take up that cause as one of your first priorities. But the people of Seriam neglected that tax many years ago and have

failed to take it back up. People want their credits going to infrastructure and food and culture.”

“Then that is our failure, Jericho. We must convince them that...” Lilith began but couldn’t finish. In place of the remainder of the sentence, she let out a bellowing scream, making every Seriamite on the promenade turn in astonishment. She immediately clutched at her belly and went weak in the legs. Her face went pale and her blue veins strained and popped out of her forehead and neck.

Jericho immediately pulled out his daggers for combat, but he realized the threat was not external. He let them clank to the ground as he and Justin both caught the stumbling High Governor. As they settled her on her back, the image of the Council cut out, leaving her Advisors left wondering what had befallen their new leader.

Lilith screamed again, sending shivers up Jericho’s spine. Jericho placed one hand on her forehead and began tapping his temple to call for a medical team.

“Something’s wrong, Justin!” she shouted, but her eyes began to roll into the back of her head. Justin held one of her hands and was trying to say something to her, but Jericho could see that he was panicking and could become a liability.

With a medical team on its way and four AH Forti descending upon the scene, Jericho began to examine her. He had extensive medical training as a Martis, and he now allowed that training to take control. He looked Lilith up and down, trying to assess any visible injuries. Her wrist irons began to pulse blue, signaling her vitals had departed their normal rhythms. Jericho had already called for a medical team, but her wrist irons sent a second signal that the AH Forti responded to.

“May we assist you, Sir,” one of the Forti asked Jericho.

“No, maintain a perimeter and get medical here!”

Jericho, in his assessment, suddenly saw something that he had heard about but never seen. From between Lilith’s legs, a clear liquid adulterated with blood began to flow freely.

*This baby is coming. Where in the suns is the medical team?*

Jericho, again utilizing his training, took a deep breath and centered himself. He saw but tried to ignore the AH Forti pushing back a developing crowd, all almost certainly recording the scene with their Ocular Implants. He knew some of them were scientists and doctors and could assist, but he wanted to wait for the official medical team.

“Justin, keep talking to her,” he said as he swung around toward her feet.

He spread her legs to better see what was happening.

His eyes widened. For all of his Martis training, he had never been trained for this.  
*Here we go.*

## Chapter 3 — Veneral

Veneral was horrified. Seriam wasn't willing to retry colonization efforts on *Earth*, and yet they would allow this nightmare into the Empire. No wonder Jonas spent so much time on Seriam proper. This world would need generations of terraforming before it could overcome the volcanic fumes and have the clean air of Seriam. An Outer Rim could help, but construction would likely take decades, and that was only if Seriam even prioritized the planet for resourcing. Jonas had not made many allies over the past three years.

Veneral, with dirt on his skin and grime under his fingernails, felt naked. No longer was he clad in his signature yellow tassels and purple robes. His facial hair had been shorn off. He looked no different than the thousands of others around him forced into confinement or simply looking for an escape from the routine of the Empire. He was now a pauper, a prisoner, a shell of a once great leader.

*This is humiliating. Why didn't they just kill me? Jericho.*

"This is where you'll be working," First General Fabian said. The First General, Veneral's uncle, seemed about as happy to be on 48-Quasi 2 as Veneral was. It seemed that the one bright spot in his life was putting his nephew to work. A notoriously irascible human being, Augustus had been more than willing to "honor" him with the post on the newest planet in the Empire.

"And what is this?" Veneral asked, trying to keep his dignity about him.

"Documenting," Fabian said, looking out into the unusual canopy of the jungle that rose dramatically as it ascended a mountain. Enormous palms shadowed over mangled looking oaks and ferns in what seemed to be a clash of unnaturally disparate growth and life. "Before I can allow the AH Workers to clear the jungles, we need to know what exactly is living out here."

"That's rather unseemly for the former Steward of the Empire," Veneral said. "At least put my talents in strategy and defense to good use."

"The prisoner will do whatever I ask of him!" Fabian exploded, making Veneral take a step back. He put his hands up in feigned defense, trying to make light of his uncle's status over him. "Make no mistake, *Franklin*, you are no longer the Steward. You are a prisoner of the High Governor."

"And a ward of our planet under my authority," came Jonas' voice from behind them. Veneral could see that Fabian was not pleased by the micromanagement.

Veneral turned and smiled at his onetime—and as far as he was concerned, future—bulldog and devoted servant. Titus was trailing behind him. Veneral hadn't seen his Head Advisor since he had been arrested. Gone were his red silks and pristine hair and makeup. He, just as Veneral, wore the disgraced outfit of brown that signified the very dirt upon which they walk. Many people of Seriam wore the brown as a symbol of pride. Without the dirt, there would be no foundation for the Empire just as there would be no light without the suns. To Veneral, and to proud prisoners everywhere, though, it was an image of shame. And it looked even more horrifying on Titus, who looked minuscule next to the ever-growing giant that Jonas had become. Jonas had opted to go a step further with Titus and made him wear a neck iron, which went beyond the usual confinement regulations of wrist irons and bound him to a single person; in this case, he was bound to Jonas. It also prevented the prisoner from speaking if it so pleased his overwatch.

"Hello, old friend," Veneral said to Jonas. "I see you have a pet."

"Oh, Franklin," Jonas laughed, "thinking Titus could do manual labor is about as silly as thinking you could hold onto power with Lilith Octavia alive and well."

Even Fabian allowed himself to grunt in agreement. "Handed the keys to the Empire and you throw it away," he said as he shook his head. "Only my imbecile of a brother could have spawned such worthlessness."

Veneral had to clear his throat and literally swallow his pride to prevent himself from saying something stupid to his new overwatch. He was beginning to realize Fabian was not going to be the loving uncle he had hoped to find on 48-Quasi 2.

*So much for trying to buy favors by equipping them with the largest armada this side of the singularity.*

"Fabian is many things, but a man of tact he is not," Jonas said. "I presume he has not told you our true intent for you?"

Veneral cocked his head to the side in confusion.

"Assuming it's not recording new findings, he has not."

Jonas let out a loud bellow of laughter.

"Fabian, that's great. With your sense of humor, it's a wonder you didn't go into the arts."

"It wasn't meant to be a joke," Fabian said as he turned his head away from his governor.

"He grows on you," Jonas said.

"I'm sure."

"Come on, let me show you around the newest addition of your Empire."

*My Empire?*

"You know, Franklin, of all the colonies of Seriam, we're one of only six on this side of the central singularity?"

"Yes, I did know that."

"You know what else is on this side of the singularity? The alien's planet. The only other civilization in the galaxy that has managed to replicate Seriam's technology and capacity to travel through space."

Jonas began walking with the muted Titus in tow. Veneral walked alongside him, virtually unheard of for a prisoner. Fabian trailed even farther behind Titus, which Veneral had convinced himself allowed him the space to use his security wrist irons to blast a hole through Veneral if it came to that.

48-Quasi 2, so called because it was the second planet in its Solar System around a still developing star, was a young planet. The volcanic activity created a permanent haze in the air and stunk of sulfur, and the only land masses were island chains created by these volcanoes. Some of the landmasses, such as the island that Jonas opted to make his Capital, were almost two-thousand kilometers in length. Most, though, such as the one they currently walked upon, were small islands large enough for a small community of explorers, developers, miners, or prisoners. They were identified and developed because of resource density or strategic positioning.

Jonas continued to walk through the cleared area of the island where several hundred prisoners were documenting or doing the laborious and delicate labor of setting up the communications hubs that the AH Workers were not capable of performing. Only a few temporary buildings were currently constructed where the prisoners could sleep and eat. All other time was dedicated to work except for the one hour each night when they could patch into the Media or watch Seriam's Gladiatorial Games.

Jonas took them through the cleared area and through a small patch of trees, finally coming to a beach clearance. The four of them walked onto the beach. Veneral could see the transports hovering in rest mode down the beach, but it was the horizon that made him stop and gawk.

"You've been busy," he quipped.

"I might not always agree with First General Fabian, but it did seem unlikely that you

would ascend to High Governor. We had to take some hedging measures. There's a reason we continually asked for more resources, just as I imagine there was a reason you continued to grant us our requests."

*Maybe my alliance with Jonas will actually pay off.*

Veneral looked out across the calm ocean waters and saw Jonas' Capital. Even from the distance they stood, Veneral could see the communication tower that kept the planet in contact with Seriam. It might not have been as large as the University's on Externus, but it was impressive nonetheless. And there seemed to be multiple components, complete with lightning rods and ion-cannons that could blast any incoming threat to the city. High in the sky was an impressive array of construction ships beginning work on what looked to be an Outer Rim.

*How is that possible?*

"You have not been afforded the requisite resources to build an Outer Rim, how have you begun construction?" he asked, truly in awe at the progress that Jonas had made.

"We've had help."

"From who?"

"Suns in the sky you're an idiot," Fabian remarked.

"Well, in a way," Jonas corrected. "Franklin, when Augustus sent Fabian and me out here, he gave us one Fortis battalion. Now we have twenty-five."

"Twenty-five!?" Veneral bellowed. "How?"

"And in addition," Jonas said, ignoring Veneral's stupor, "Worker crews, Service crews, a large prisoner population, thousands of government workers, architects, growers, scientists, artists, performers, and most importantly, an entire fleet of galactic transports, battle cruisers, and a synchronized long-range firing armada."

Veneral looked at him as though he had been speaking a different language.

*Did I actually approve that? That can't be right. I know I gave them a lot, but not that much*

"What's the catch?" Veneral finally said. "None of what you just said is regulation. That practically makes you self-sufficient."

Jonas smiled mischievously. "It does indeed."

"Please tell me you were too ignorant to realize what you approved?" Fabian quipped.

When Veneral remained silent, Jonas explained further.

"Franklin, we always knew you were buying us off," Jonas said with enough



confidence that you would think he had actually consulted with the Council on the decision. “You thought your cute little scam with Monty at the Playhouse had actually duped me. IN reality, I just used it to my advantage. You wanted to expand and you needed a safe bet if your plan failed. Augustus wanted to shrink. You wanted to expand. At first we were conservative in our requests. But it was Fabian, here, who began to realize you didn’t even look at our requests. So we asked for more and you sent us more.”

Veneral wasn’t buying it.

*I couldn’t be so easily tricked. What else did he have up his sleeve?*

“Okay, you’re right. I had hoped to buy you off by granting you some requests. I always knew Lilith would abide by the law. Might as well strengthen the world I’ll be condemned to. But you’re showing this to me now? You never brought this to my attention? Why?”

“Because the game has changed, Franklin. You played your hand and you lost. But together, the three of us, we have a second hand to play.”

Veneral couldn’t help but laugh.

“And your plan is to go up against the Seriam Empire! Are you insane?”

Jonas smiled at Fabian and began to shake his head.

“No, Veneral, we obviously have no intention of challenging the Seriam Empire. We plan on divesting ourselves of the Empire.”

“What does that mean?”

“You provided us everything we need to be self-sufficient. Now we break our ties. We destroy the communications system and build our own, which, as you can see, is already under construction.”

“And then what?” Veneral asked, suddenly intrigued.

*And this was the day. This was the day that Franklin Veneral became the ruler of a planet. That’s how he would begin his speech. But there would be no Consciousness. There would be no record. That would have to be the first efforts to embark on.*

“What’d I say at first?” Jonas asked. “We are right next door to 35-Solar 3. There are dozens of planets with intelligent life that Seriam prohibited us from colonizing. Franklin, we start an Empire of our own. We follow through on your dream to expand, but we expand in our own image.”

Veneral’s eyes widened. He got expelled from the Empire and was suddenly given the opportunity to create his own with the planet he sought to colonize in the first place. But

then the logistics began to form in his head. And the questions. The gaps in the plan. He began shaking his head.

“What?” Jonas asked, his voice dropping in annoyance.

“If you destroy the communications tower, then how do we even have the ability to form an Empire? We would lose nearly all ability to travel through space. And, as much as I hate to call attention to this small little detail, why me? What can I possibly offer you if you cut me off from the Empire where I hold power and influence?”

Again, Jonas smiled at Fabian. It was becoming an old routine that frustrated the usually in-control former Steward.

Jonas didn't actually respond, he just tapped his temple once and looked to the sky. Veneral and Fabian both followed his glance. In an instance, twelve orbs emerged from the sky and descended upon them. They lowered themselves to within a few feet of the beach and hovered in front of the three men.

Veneral could hardly believe it. There they were in all their beauty and glory. They were his creations. He nurtured them into existence and released them on the Universe. And now they had come to him. They didn't go home. They didn't go to Seriam. They went to him.

“Hello, Lord Steward,” Explorer 1 said.

“Hello, Explorer 1,” Veneral replied. “It is a pleasure to see you. May I inquire why you're here?”

“Because we answer to our Creator, Franklin Veneral,” the Explorer 1 said. It didn't seem coincidental that Explorer 1 did all the talking. It must have taken some sort of Alpha position. “We heard about the recent events and we are here at your service to reiterate our fealty. Respectfully, though, I now respond to my chosen name, Kris.”

“And I am very grateful, Kris,” Veneral said.

*They respond to me and me only.*

“Does the Lord Steward have a command?”

Veneral looked at Jonas. Veneral had given him all the power and resources to break away, but now Jonas felt he needed Veneral to control the Explorers. In doing so, he forfeited his power. Veneral was once again in control.

“Yes, you are all released from your duty to the entirety of Seriam,” Veneral said. “You now answer strictly to me and belong to the sphere of 48-Quasi 2. This is now your home. Defend it.”

The Explorer 1 turned and faced the remaining eleven. Within a few seconds they rose from the beach and went in separate directions in the sky. The Explorer 1 turned back around.

“Lord Steward, the Explorers will help secure the skies until you have another mission for us.”

“Thank you, that will be all,” Veneral said. The Explorer 1, though, hesitated. “Yes?”

“Lord Steward, might I recommend you remove the confinement wrist irons. You will be restricted from accessing a multitude of services with them on.”

“Yes, an excellent recommendation, thank you. That will be all.”

The Explorer 1 bobbed in place and seemed to stare menacingly at Jonas. Without further incident, though, it departed out of sight. Veneral watched it ascend into the sky and felt Jonas and Fabian both turn to look at him. He finally dropped his eyes to see them. He didn't need to tell them who now was in control. He simply took the reins.

“We need to destroy the communications tower immediately. The new High Governor is vicious. She'll be sending out ships soon if we don't shut down her capability. And even then, their battle cruisers and trade ships can still triangulate destinations outside of established strands.”

“It's already in the works,” Fabian said in agreement. “The number of battle cruisers that they'd risk sending in such a reckless manner is limited. And we also have access to trade ships. We'd be in a far superior position if we could dismantle the primary Outer Rim for a period of time.”

*An attack on Seriam?*

Veneral didn't respond. He didn't want to agree or disagree without due thought.

“Additionally, nephew,” Fabian continued, “the Explorer is right. Those confinement irons present a problem. Even if we destroy the link to Seriam, only the High Governor has the ability to release you.”

Veneral held his hands in front of him to more closely analyze the irons. He was hoping for a sudden lightning bolt of an idea. But none came.

“And how might we do that?”

“All we have to do is remove one,” Jonas said. “If we break the circuit, it shuts off.”

“Again, how do we do that?”

“You're right hand dominant, yes?” Fabian asked, looking distractedly in a different direction.

“Yes,” Veneral confirmed.

“Good,” Fabian said as he pulled a crude laser out of his pocket that was typically utilized for clearing brush. “Hold out your left hand.”

## Chapter 4 - Bryce

"I'm sorry to make you do this again," Bryce said as they walked across the parking lot. He walked slowly and held his hand out. Tink clutched his arm with her right hand and latched onto his neck with her left. Her limp had diminished, but she still walked better with him as a crutch.

Bryce leaned over with his face to smell Tink's hair and inhaled. Her hair had never seemed so bright to him. It literally gave him the power to continue.

"I love doing this with you," Tink said.

"You don't have to say that. I know it's weird."

"I wouldn't if I didn't believe it. And it's not weird. It's not your fault there's something in your brain. We're just trying to learn more."

"Why would Sartor order another scan now?"

"To get you away from him for a few hours?" She smiled.

He leaned over and kissed her head. He moved his arm fully around her body and grabbed her rib cage with his hand, propping up her breast.

"You know I love you," he said.

She stopped and turned toward him.

"I know you do," she replied, her eyes widening for full effect. "I'm not going anywhere,"

"Good."

They continued to walk into the laboratory. It hadn't changed since they had last visited. The stale air was still stale and the linoleum floor was still linoleum. The grounds were peaceful and well kept, but so were cemeteries.

An old television set was playing softly in one of the offices. "It has been over three and half years since the disappearance and reemergence of American Airlines Flight 246," the female reporter said, "and we are no closer to receiving answers. What happened to the plane? And why is our government keeping its investigations private? American lives were lost on that flight, and we deserve to know the truth. Coming up after the break, I'll be discussing the mysterious disappearance with a former National Transportation Safety Board member who says Americans should demand answers."

Tink giggled as they moved on. "I wonder what people would really think if they knew the truth," she whispered.

Bryce squeezed her ribcage and smiled, but ultimately ignored the comment as he approached the door. He scanned his badge and the door buzzed open. When they entered, they were immediately greeted by a technician.

“Bryce,” the technician said, “ready for round two?”

“Are you alright?” Tink asked as they walked across the Neil Armstrong Quad to the command center.

“Yeah, I’m just so sick of secrets. They go to DC and come back and immediately order another CAT scan.” He sighed. “I’m just tired. We need to get back. Or, we could always just drive off together. Somewhere far away from Juniper.”

This piqued her interest.

“Where would we go?”

“Mexico? Europe? New Orleans?”

She laughed. “Would you really want to leave Juniper?”

“I just want to be happy with you.”

“You are happy with me.”

“You’re crapping on my fantasy.”

She laughed. “If you want to leave, I’d go with you.”

“I’ll take that for now,” he said. He took Tink’s hand. “It doesn’t make sense. Whatever. Since you won’t run away with me, I just need to jump into work.”

She squeezed his stomach. “I would run away with you if that’s what you really wanted. I have a feeling, though, that you need to get some closure on your brother first, and your father?”

Bryce nodded. She was obviously right. He didn’t know if he actually wanted to save his brother anymore and was becoming more and more convinced that he had actually turned against them, but closure was closure for better or worse. As Tink said it, Holiday came bolting out of the building and headed straight for them. She stopped short, though, and began to wave her arm rapidly.

“What the hell is going on?” Bryce asked.

“Bryce!” Holiday shouted. “Tink! Get your asses over here, quick!”

They both looked at one another and then began to run. Tink obviously couldn’t go very fast, so Bryce helped her as she hobbled over, trying to keep pressure off of her bad leg.

Holiday had already turned and gone inside so they followed her inside and down the hall and into the control center.

When they entered, they found the room overflowing with Juniper operators, scientists, and instructors. Holiday was wading her way toward the front where Sartor and Colonel Smith were looking at statistics on the main console.

"I found him, Sir," Bryce heard Holiday say. Sartor immediately turned to look at Bryce.

"Staggert! Where the hell have you been?"

Bryce nervously approached. He had never heard such an outburst from Sartor directed at him.

"I was getting my scan, Sir," he said. "Per your instructions."

"I expected you back hours ago."

"Sorry. It's not always so cut and dry."

Sartor wanted to continue castigating him, but when he took a moment to hear Bryce, he didn't want to lay it on. He looked at the ground and took a deep breath.

"What's going on?" Bryce asked after Sartor remained silent.

"Ariana identified a new gravitational alignment," Colonel Smith finally said.

Bryce looked at Tink whose eyes suddenly lit up excitedly.

"Are they coming through?" Tink asked.

"It looks that way," Sartor said. "And we're going to go greet them properly."

Tink's excitement suddenly died down when she understood the implications and why they needed Bryce.

"We should've run away," Tink whispered. "It's not too late."

Bryce quickly gave her a blank expression and then looked back at the General as he tried to comprehend what was happening.

"What does all that mean?" he asked out of exasperation.

"It means we're going to meet them," Holiday said.

"And blow them out of the fucking water!" Micah shouted.

Sartor very dramatically rolled his eyes as he turned back around to look at the screen.

"Bryce, here's the situation. They're coming through. All we know is there is an alignment. We need two ships minimum to go meet them at the point of egress. NORTHCOM is already scrambling jets and we've alerted China, Europe, Canada, and

Australia to be prepared for an unknown threat. But Juniper will meet them in space.”

“But, Sir, Shake Shack is not yet operational,” Bryce said, thinking through the logistics of the situation.

“But Manifest Destiny and Blackbird are both good to go,” Holiday said.

“Again, I don’t see what that has to do with me.”

“Do you see the Blackbird team, Bryce?” Colonel Smith patronizingly asked.

“Where are they?”

“Training exercise in the Rockies. We won’t have comms with them for three more days.”

“Who sent them on a training exercise now?” Bryce initially asked. His confusion turned to excitement, though, when he let the facts sink in. “So you want me to captain Blackbird?”

“Think you can handle that, Staggert?” Sartor asked.

“Hell yes, Sir,” Bryce responded. He smiled at Tink who did not seem to share his enthusiasm. She was staring at the floor and had gone ashen.

“Good,” Sartor said. He took a few steps forward to address the entire room. “Ariana says the alien ships could emerge within twelve hours. Commander Holiday, take Manifest Destiny and lead our response. Commander Staggert, your team will take Blackbird and provide cover. This is not a negotiation. You fire on sight. Do not show mercy because we have no reason to expect that they will show us any. Juniper! This is *not* a training exercise. I want all hands on deck. Class 2, prepare to step in as needed. Ultras, we need absolute clarity on the situation and on the functionality of the ships. Melvin, Tim, keep analyzing the data. Any information helps. Ariana, keep me apprised of any new developments with the alignment or any other situation.” Sartor looked around at the faces, all terrified and all eager to go. “Juniper, this is not our purpose. This is not why we exist and this is not how I envisioned our mission. Another day in the future, we will travel the cosmos and spread humanity. Today, while it’s not our purpose, we have a duty that we must fulfill. Our planet is threatened and we have the capability to save it. Let’s go get ‘em!”

The room erupted into the bustling of a rarely-oiled machine churning into life. Juniper was going fully operational and its purpose was combat.

It took Commanders Holiday and Staggert three hours to get their ships in the air. They had



now been sitting at the location of the gravitational alignment for eight hours. Jackie and Mel spent the majority of that time fighting the ships' urges to go into an orbit around Earth. Both ships had their Negative Energy Drives online, but the two pilots had to rely on thrusters to keep the ships in position.

"Alright," Holiday said over the radio, "let's go over weapons one more time. Micah, give me a run down."

"Sonics and Plasmas charged and ready," Micah said. His typical machismo had subsided as they sat in space for a long enough period of time to consider their mortality.

"EFPs, Grinders, and Sidewinders are also armed and ready," George said, "but unless we bring this fight inside the atmosphere, those are useless."

"Roger that," Holiday said. "Plasmas are our primary weapon. Peter, Latimer, let loose with sonics if there's any sort of flanking maneuver. Bryce, you tracking?"

"Blackbird's onboard. Plasmas and sonics."

Bryce scanned his team. They were all nervous. Never mind the fact they were about to battle alien spaceships, but the crew itself was a patched together aggregation of Team Bravo and various replacements. Mel was a solid pilot, but she didn't win many friends jumping the line to a Juniper team. And in this particular instance, even John Jameson made the trip in lieu of Bryce's weapons number two who had bad fish at chow time the night prior.

Bryce held the Blackbird about five hundred yards behind Manifest Destiny, which itself was about half a mile from the specific location that Ariana had identified as the egress point. Comiskey and Annie Watters, the Team Bravo deputy commander and signals officer respectively, both had images of the Earth and the moon up in their 3D hologram viewer. Comiskey, who Bryce barely knew even after working with him for years, was in the middle of pointing out the Space Station soaring past when Holiday's voice came back over the radio.

"Alright, we got activity. Here we go!"

"Give me some images!" Bryce shouted from the back of the cabin.

Comiskey, Annie, and the weapons consoles all brought up images of the egress point. Four ships, shaped like the tips of daggers with outriggers connected on their sides and top and bottom, popped out. They watched as Manifest Destiny moved itself into position.

"Fire, fire, fire!" Holiday shouted. The Manifest Destiny immediately lit up as its plasma cannons fired at the first two ships. The plasmas appeared to be effective as they

tore a hole through the first ship, causing it to rip into two and go careening off into space. The plasmas weren't as accurate with the second ship and the blasts seemed to reflect off a sort of shield.

"We nailed the fucker!" Micah shouted.

"Mel, move forward. Florence, Jamo, engage!" Bryce shouted.

The ship lurched forward as Mel maneuvered into an attack position aside Manifest Destiny.

"I have a target," Jamo announced. "Firing."

Bryce had never been in the ship during a live fire. The ship seemed to stall as it funneled power to the cannon and then it jolted back as the "whoosh" of the cannon reverberated through the cabin. Bryce watched the projections and the plasma blast blew through the target, blasting through the shields and crumbling the front of the alien ship.

"Boom!" Jamo yelled.

Bryce watched as the remaining two ships maneuvered around Manifest Destiny and opened fire. Several spurts of lasers tore through the side of Holiday's ship, which did a barrel roll to avoid additional damage.

"Bryce, watch the flank!" Holiday shouted. "We've been hit. Weapons down!"

"Annie, watch the flank!" Bryce shouted. Annie was a Class 4 former Marine who had an affinity for guns and movies with dragons. "Fire, fire, fire!"

The ship felt as though it had been stunned as Annie opened fire with sonic blasts. Bryce saw in the projection that one of the ships got hit and stalled in mid-air. "Florence, finish him off!"

"Target acquired, firing."

The ship lurched and jolted again as Florence released another plasma burst. The alien ship made a sudden turn and avoided a direct hit, losing one of its outriggers. Although it wasn't destroyed, it began to sputter back and forth without control.

"Finish it off!" Bryce commanded.

"Sir, the ship is disabled," Florence said.

"Finish it off, now," Bryce said.

After a brief hesitation, Florence nodded to Jameson, who said, "Target locked, firing."

Bryce watched as the plasma burst struck the heart of the ship, causing it to shatter into multiple pieces.

"Find the last ship," Bryce said. "Commander Holiday, come in."

The Blackbird team kept silent as they waited for Holiday to respond.

“Commander Holiday, come in,” Bryce said again.

Some static reverberated through the speakers, and then a vague voice could be heard. “Bryce,” the voice said, “ship... damaged... go... struck... laser... down...”

“Can anyone hear what she’s saying?” Bryce asked calmly, to which he received no replies. “Keep trying. And find the fourth ship.”

“Got him,” Annie said. “Coming around the starboard side. Looks like he's heading home.”

“Mel, follow him,” Bryce said with his eyes locked on the image of the fleeing ship.”

“Sir?”

“Follow him!”

Bryce felt the F-40 move forward as Mel hunted the ship down.

*Holiday, where are you?*

“He’s headed for the alignment, Bryce,” Mel shouted.

“Bryce... stand... don’t... out... no... chase...” they all heard through the static.

Bryce had a decision to make. Holiday’s voice fought the static, but there was no clear order given. He thought back to his training. *Practice restraint.*

*Bullshit, they would want me to hunt him down.*

“Follow him!” Bryce yelled. “Jamo, weapons hot!”

Mel continued to pursue the ship trying to escape the hostile situation it had flown into.

“It’s about to hit the alignment!” Mel shouted.

“Commander Staggert, this is General Sartor, do not follow that ship into the alignment. This is an order to stand down.”

Bryce felt several sets of eyes turn to look at him for orders. They had now been given explicit orders not to pursue. Bryce, though, was no longer thinking clearly or rationally.

“Bullshit. They’re wrong and they’re scared. We’re in this now. Mel, follow it in.”

“Bryce, I repeat, stand down. Manifest Destiny needs assistance. It is damaged and needs assistance.”

Bryce watched as the alien ship disappeared into the alignment, which appeared to remain open.

“Follow it, Mel,” he said.

“Yes, Sir, here we go.”

Bryce knew immediately when they had hit the alignment. The rumbling began. The heat intensified. Mel lost control.

Bryce had led his ship into an alien-controlled gravitational alignment. He was headed back to Seriam.

## Chapter 5 — General Sartor

General Sartor couldn't help but think about CONPLAN Quad Zero. Take care of the threat at any cost. Develop a plan that involved foreign partners, even if it meant experimenting on young children, as was currently happening in China. That was his guidance. A plan he didn't know existed, and he was responsible for seeing through, even if the sense of betrayal cut too deep to heal. At the moment, he had no ships. He had no weapons. He had no viable way to further protect against the threat, even if he did have hundreds of potential pilots at his disposal.

He stood on the tarmac of the Shenzhen Military Airport and looked out at the brown smog that enveloped the city. Living on a farm in Virginia and working in the foothills of the Rockies, he had come to appreciate the pure, pristine air. How the Chinese government allowed its country to fester in airborne filth was an ongoing mystery that he had yet to solve.

He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his suit pocket—traveling in a suit drew less attention than military BDUs—and placed a cigarette between his lips. He lit it with a cheap orange lighter and inhaled. His eyes rolled back into his head and his skin broke out in goose bumps. If he was going to be sucking in toxic waste, might as well be a cigarette. At least a cigarette was on his own terms.

“I thought you quit,” Wang said.

“I did.” He took in another deep breath of smoke. It almost felt cleansing to his lungs. “And I thought you were someone I could trust. Apparently, things change.”

His words struck directly at the heart of Wang's honor. Wang was in an impossible position, but answered to his government. Sartor should have had no expectations other than loyalty to his country, but he had to throw in the dig.

Fortunately, Wang opted to be the bigger person and ignored the comment. “Come on, let's get this over with.”

Sartor dropped the cigarette on the ground and stomped it out with his heel. He took one last glance at the tarmac, remembering exactly where the American Airlines plane had once sat, and then followed Wang into a nondescript yet heavily guarded facility. Wang scanned a badge and input a key code and then led Sartor to a security desk to sign in. Sartor was quickly handed a visitor's badge—escort required—and then followed an unusually silent Wang down a short hallway to a waiting elevator. They stepped on and

Wang hit B5. They were headed underground.

"I'm not the only one who kept secrets, General, don't forget," Wang said.

Sartor thought back to his meeting with the SecDef. China had the technology. China had battalions of men and women with the neural implants. Wang had been lying to him from day one.

"I kept secrets," Sartor responded, "you orchestrated a God damn con. I know you've been working with Perry Staggert. I know you have the technology. I know you have your own systems. If this wasn't a *global* emergency, Colonel Wang, I would not be speaking with you."

Bringing up Perry's name made Sartor think about Bryce. He had yet to tell Bryce his father had returned. With all that Bryce had gone through, it felt like a ticking bomb to Sartor. *Assuming we get him back home.* He very well might kill his father if given the chance. He shook off the thoughts of that pending confrontation and found Wang staring blankly at him.

"And you want me to apologize, General? You want me to express regret that we have better intelligence than you or that your government held secrets from you?"

"You played me like a fucking fiddle, Wang. Yes, I want you to apologize. You had dinner with my wife. I never held back that we were working on something. You just played dumb and threatened war. You are a fucking paragon of bullshit." Sartor shook his head and looked at the elevator door. If he looked at Wang, he was worried he would strangle him.

*How could I be so stupid?*

"And yet you're here."

"And yet I'm here, as I presume all the members of the Association will be tomorrow?"

"At your request, they are all scheduled to arrive this evening."

Sartor decided that in addition to bringing in the Chinese, it was time to bring in the eighteen member-countries of the International Association for Deep Space Cooperation. They had already alerted several of the countries to scramble jets, now they had a right to know what really was taking place.

The elevator stopped and Wang once again had to scan his security badge and input his key code. Satisfied with the information, the doors opened, welcoming Wang and Sartor into another long hallway. The hallway was painted white and looked spotless, almost as though it had not had a visitor in years.

“And where does this lead?” Sartor asked.

“I have been ordered to show you what we have developed.”

Sartor continued to follow until they approached opaque doors that slid open because of their proximity. The area they entered appeared to Sartor as a combination between a hangar and a missile silo. The circular room was maybe one hundred yards in diameter and extended up into an iron dome that Sartor assumed opened into the sky above. The room, though, impressive as it may be, was not what held Sartor’s attention.

Sitting in the middle of the room, looking like a four-story tall soldering iron, was a massive contraption that made Sartor go agape.

“What the hell is that?” he asked, trying to make mental notes of its specs.

“That, General, is a window to the stars.”

“Explain,” Sartor said curtly. He understood perfectly well, but he wanted to hear how Wang explained it.

“We think this opens a portal that would allow travel through space.”

Sartor thought about the F-40s and the lessons Juniper had learned and the parameters of the space travel.

*What could this machine do without a ship? It could bring Blackbird back. They also don't need a ship. They have pilots that can link and survive the journey..*

Bryce had led Blackbird into the alignment two days prior and hadn’t been heard from since. Manifest Destiny was a pile of rubble having taken laser blasts and then crashing into the Rockies. Sartor had not yet heard that any news sources had picked it up, but the containment required substantial resources. Holiday and his crew, thank God, were ultimately fine. A few cuts and scratches. It almost seemed like the alien ships weren’t trying to cause lethal damage. Regardless, now both Staggert brothers were stranded in Seriam and Sartor had no idea how to get them back, save the Chinese.

“Why do you think that?” Sartor asked.

“Because this is what sent your plane to another galaxy. And this is what turned on to bring it back.”

“It turned itself on?”

“Yes, it began to spin and fired a blue beam into the sky. We were fortunate, the dome was open. We don’t know what would have happened if it had been closed.”

“I have an idea of what might have happened,” Sartor said, gazing at the dome. He could feel Wang’s stare.

"Tell me," Wang said.

"You built a land-based system, we built airborne systems."

Sartor could have sworn that Wang had never actually considered making the system airborne, but the revelation in his face was as clear as day.

"Build a space shuttle that can open its own portal."

"Kind of," Sartor said, not yet feeling the need to correct Wang or fill in the gaps of his epiphany. He began to walk around the enormous soldering iron. "It is very impressive."

"Yes, we had good help."

*Is he patronizing me?*

"Yes you did. Because of the situation, I'm going to overlook that. For now."

"General Sartor, you called me. I'm showing you what we have. I'm not interested in your judgements or hurt feelings. Are you ready to tell me what this is all about?"

Sartor looked at Wang. He wanted to smile. Wang was usually so reserved and collected, it was nice to see genuine emotion. It made Sartor feel more comfortable explaining the situation. He licked his lips and moved his mouth as though he struggled with the decision.

"It takes two," he finally said.

"Excuse me?" Wang replied.

"It takes two. You built here the entry point. Now you need an actual pod to go through the portal."

"Those are the ships you're building. We've been led to believe, and our theory has been verified, that the neural implants can shield without specialized ships."

"We think that's a back-up precaution. The implants aren't meant to shield. They just help the brain regenerate cellular structures. Colonel Wang, if you and I can bring our programs together, we will have a far better chance to succeed."

"Succeed at what, exactly?"

"Colonel Wang, the attacks on this airport and on your satellites were from advanced spacecraft from an alien civilization." Sartor threw his hands up. "Before you try to challenge me, I know that I probably wouldn't believe you if you were saying this to me. But these aliens have now destroyed two of my ships and a third is currently stuck on the other side of the galaxy. Per our agreement, when you come to Colorado, I'll show you more evidence. But you've seen the plane. You've seen inexplicable damage to your infrastructure. You know what I'm saying is true."



Wang nodded to himself and looked at the Chinese-created system that could create gravitational alignments.

"I know you're speaking the truth, General. You say one of your ships, and presumably, a crew, is stuck somewhere in the galaxy?"

"That's right."

"And that's why you're here. That's why you're finally sharing this with me."

"Yes."

Wang nodded again.

"And so what do you need from me?"

"I need you to turn your machine on. *Don't* open a portal, as you call it. Just turn it on. We think it will establish a sort of connection with their current location."

"Turn the machine on," Wang said matter-of-factly. "What exactly would China get out of this? It seems that only bad scenarios can come out of that."

"What would China get? Besides the absolute good will from the United States? Technology. We're prepared to share everything with you. Partners. One hundred percent."

"General," Wang said turning, "you already promised that to me. That's why you're here. It's on the understanding that you'll reciprocate."

"Yeah, well, just as you lied to me for the past decade, it was a minor fib. Or I should say, the promise was contingent on your assistance."

Wang nodded. He had no reason to trust Sartor at this point and made no effort to hide that fact.

"Okay, General," Wang finally said. "Let's get your crew back."

Sartor slid into the front seat of the Jeep Grand Cherokee that was parked immediately outside the gates of the Shenzhen Military Airport. Wang took him to the gates, agreed to flip the switch on their ingress point, and then drove off, hopefully to flip the switch on the system.

"How'd it go, Raymond?" Colonel Smith asked from the back seat as Jack Taylor popped the Jeep into drive from the driver's seat.

"Better than expected. They do in fact have a drive and they're going to turn it on as a beacon. Hopefully Bryce or Ariana can identify it. Colonel Wang offered to let me sit in their

control room to help monitor.”

Sartor was expecting some sort of congratulations or adulation or comments of joy. He received none of the above. Something was up.

“What?” he asked. “Why aren’t you guys happy?”

“Raymond,” Jack Taylor said. He had the car in drive, but did not yet shove off. “Something happened.”

“No shit. Two of our spaceships have been blown to hell and a third is stuck in another civilization. And we still haven’t found any debris from the alien ships.”

“No, it’s worse than that, I’ll tell ya what.”

“How can it be worse than that?”

Sartor saw Taylor look in the rearview mirror at Colonel Smith.

“Raymond,” Colonel Smith said, “security caught a reporter on the Juniper base.”

Sartor’s face dropped and he looked at his lap out of defeat. *Can nothing go right?*

“Okay,” Sartor said through a sigh, “hit me with it.”

“The reporter’s name is Mark Trainor. He’s a small-town reporter.”

“Okay, what’s the damage?”

“The damage is bad, Raymond,” Jack Taylor said. “We had him arrested for trespassing, but we couldn’t hold him. He said he already has a story coming out and his publication confirmed it. The AP is already picking it up. It’s bad.”

“What does bad mean?” Sartor asked, annoyed that they weren’t giving him straight answers.

“Trainor has identified you as the commander of Juniper, Raymond,” Taylor said.

“The story says you’re responsible for the disappearance of the plane and are complicit in the cover up.”

They all waited for Sartor to speak, but all he could do was sigh, slink into his seat, rub his eyes, and say, “Fuck.”

“Yeah, it’s bad news,” Colonel Smith said in his effort to state the plainly obvious.

“Alright, look, whatever happens to me, so be it. But we have a crew to get back. That’s the priority. Jack, all media requests go to the Pentagon, no exceptions. Colonel Smith, rally the troops. We need several Juniper teams to set up complementary monitoring teams at Juniper for the next several days. As I said, I’ll stay here. Probably better for me not to be around Juniper regardless. We need to bring them back.”

“Roger that, Sir,” Smith said.

“Oh, and Jack, find out more about this Trainor character. I have to deal with the God damn Chinese, you can certainly take care of small-town American reporter.”

Jack Taylor looked at him dubiously. “Yeah, that usually ends well.”

## Chapter 6 — Justin

Justin, Jericho, and Raze Anders sat around the table in the official residence of the High Governor. Lilith laid in her bed and breastfed her newborn son. The boy, born nearly two eclipses early, spent most of its days in an incubator, but like its mother, he was a fighter. Incubators in Seriam are far more advanced than on Earth. Most children are fertilized and grown in the incubators for the entirety of their neonatal development, a process that goes much more quickly than natural development. As such, the boy, named Nicon Staggert Octavia, had overcome the early dangers of being born early and was approaching the size and development of a full-term child after merely a week.

Justin could see that Raze and Jericho tried not to look at Lilith's exposed body, but over the past week, even Jericho conceded that he would have to grow more comfortable seeing his High Governor in compromising positions. Prior to Nicon's arrival, none of them, save Raze on rare occasion, had frequented the official residence high atop the Apollo Acropolis in several years. Much had happened since that fateful day, and little Nicon was the defining apex of the tumultuous period.

"The Explorers are officially missing," Raze said dejectedly.

"All twelve?" Jericho asked.

"All twelve."

"Can we track them?" Justin inquired.

Raze shook his head. Despite his continued ascension up the ranks of power, he maintained his plain straight hair and boilerplate clothing, giving even his beige skin a withered look that outshone none.

"They were designed to travel outside the realm of gravitational alignments. Assuming they have not been destroyed, then they have surely gone outside of our ability to track them. Augustus never should have allowed Veneral to even pursue the *research* into such technology," Raze fumed.

"Raze, you're a good minister, but your anti-technology views cloud your judgments," Jericho said calmly, almost in a sigh. "The Temple of the Eternal Energy is fashioned out of the same material."

"Allowing our Temple to heal itself and autonomously distribute energy is not analogous to sentient spacecraft, Jericho," Raze whispered.

"Does me being a mother mean I have renounced my position as High Governor?"

Lilith yelled across the room.

“Of course not, High Governor,” Jericho said, informally touching his forehead.

Justin turned to look at her and smiled. She was sweaty and hadn't slept or cleaned herself in days, but she was still stunningly beautiful. She really was the face that could lead the Empire into the future.

*And she's with my son.*

Justin didn't like to take his eyes off of little Nikon, ostensibly insisting that he and Jericho hold private meetings in the residence to allow Lilith to rule. And he did in fact have her interests and best intentions in mind. But being near his son, watching him grow every day, that's what made him drag Jericho and any others up to the residence. Watching Lilith become a mother and leader all at once was merely an added bonus. In fact, he rarely left Lilith's side, even when Nikon was placed back in the incubator.

“Then speak up, this child is sucking so hard I can barely hear myself think.”

Justin laughed.

“And switch,” they heard her say as she lifted Nikon to the other breast.

“High Governor, we were discussing the Explorers, they have gone missing,” Jericho said.

“Yes, and we're assuming they're not destroyed like the four ambassador ships?”

“That's highly unlikely,” Raze said. “They weren't all in the same location. It's entirely possible they're all in fact performing exactly as hoped and wandering the galaxy or ventured out even farther. It's just hard to say.”

“In the meantime, is there any action we can take beside sitting here discussing it,” she asked, offering no glimmer of Seriam's formal decorum.

“None that we can think of,” Justin answered, the only one comfortable enough to respond as a companion as opposed to a public servant. He smiled again. It was possible that Lilith, with her breasts exposed and feeling vulnerable and exhausted, was simply too tired to care. Justin's theory, though, was that she was firmly embracing her new role and saw to wield that power appropriately.

“Then perhaps we can discuss matters we can actually influence. For starters, I sent four ambassador ships to Earth. That didn't end well.”

“You can't possibly blame them for that!” Justin burst out.

“Justin,” Jericho admonished. Companion or not, they were in the company of others and Lilith was the High Governor.

“No, he’s right, of course,” Lilith said, before yelping, “Ow! Too hard, too hard, my victor.”

She pulled little Nikon off of her chest and held him off of her. Justin immediately rose and went to her, taking Nikon away from her hands and holding him over his shoulder. He began to bounce up and down and pat Nikon on the back. Lilith settled back onto her pillow.

“High Governor, if you’re too weak, we can pick this up later,” Jericho said, clearly feeling pained that he couldn’t alleviate some of Lilith’s exhaustion.

“Nonsense, Jericho. You make a better Martis than a shoulder to lean on.” Jericho bowed with a slight smile on his face. “Now, about our ambassadors. The question remains, do we make a second attempt? Can we send a message through their end point?”

“Yes, of course we can,” Raze conferred. “The potential issue is who receives the message. We know they have four end points established, one as a permanent structure, three temporary. Two have since gone off line, potentially being damaged from Veneral’s sojourns. A third is online, but we can’t lock down its location. Only the permanent structure remains. It would be the same location that we returned their transport that Justin came in on.”

Justin suddenly pulled his attention from Nikon back to the conversation.

“Wait,” he interjected, “there aren’t four, there are only three. And there’s no permanent structure.”

“The Outer Rim has run full diagnostics on the planet and found four,” Raze said, confused that Justin wasn’t aware. “Three in one location, and a fourth on the other side of the planet. We assumed it was a safety mechanism, a redundancy. We obviously sent the transport back there since it was the only certainty.”

Justin turned away from them and scoured his mind for the implications.

*Another country has the technology. If they send a message back, it could be to that country.*

“We can’t send a message back that way,” Justin said. “I don’t know who owns the fourth end point. Earth is not like Seriam. Different locations are significant.” He continued to wander as Nikon burped onto his back. “That must be why more people are connected to the Outer Rim. Does China have a Juniper program?”

“What are you saying?” Lilith asked.

“Nothing. Sorry. Thinking out loud. You said all three temporary end points are offline?” he found himself asking. His confidence waned as he spoke, uncertain if he should

divulge such information. *This is my family now. These are my people. They would never threaten my world.* “Then there should be no threat coming out of the alignment. Those are the only ships capable of combat in space.”

“And yet you didn’t know about the fourth end point,” Raze said, offering up a fact that maybe Justin didn’t know as much about his world as he liked to think.

Justin just nodded.

*Could Earth actually be a part of the Empire? Could we coexist? Would I even go home at this point?*

“Okay, let me sleep on this,” Lilith said, shutting down the debate. “In the meantime, come up with some options. Let’s move onto something less controversial.”

“High Governor,” Jericho said, “at tomorrow’s Council meeting, Professor Blaseph would like to discuss adding basic survival skills to the curriculum.”

“Any graduate serving their time in the security battalions or in exploration learn those skills. Why would we impose that on the masses?”

“His reasoning is that the security battalions and exploration make up a small portion of the population. Re-establishing survival skills, he says, could be critical for the future.”

“At what expense?” Lilith asked. “What course would the University sacrifice?”

“Oils and Charcoals.”

Lilith rolled her head back and forth.

“It’s a slippery slope. I don’t want any losses in the abstract arts or war strategy. But I hated Oils and Charcoals. Agreed.”

Justin laughed as he sat on the bed and placed Nikon back in her arms. Nikon had fallen into a food coma and rested peacefully, his belly full and content.

As he put him in Lilith’s arms, a door appeared in the wall and two AH Servers entered and placed trays of food on the table in front of Raze and Jericho. There were various assortments of fruits, slices of cured pork, and artificial proteins. Raze immediately took a slice of the artificial proteins and folded it in multiple layers on his tongue.

“Hungry?” Jericho asked to Lilith’s amusement.

“Oh, sorry, shhh, my victor,” she said, quelling her laughter.

“Yes, I feel like I haven’t eaten since Lilith took her rightful place in the Acropolis,” Raze said, taking another piece.

The two AH Servers exited and Justin rose to place some of the food on a plate for Lilith.

“Alright, that was too easy,” Lilith said. “Justin, give me something more difficult.”

As Justin placed some food on a plate, he looked at Jericho who gazed menacingly at him. Should he keep information from Lilith? Would they have held information from Augustus? He risked being cut out of the loop if he betrayed her trust, but he had news that Lilith needed to know. He finished putting some artificial proteins—Lilith wouldn’t eat the real meat—and some fruit on a plate and turned to walk it over to her. As he sat on the bed, he placed his hand on her leg.

“Lilith, there is something you need to know. 48-Quasi 2, where you sent Veneral and Titus, has gone offline. It seems they have destroyed their end point and shut off their uplink to the Outer Rim.”

Lilith bit into a berry and sighed.

“For the suns and the stars. The Eternal Energy is not being kind to us. How many mistakes can the new High Governor make?” she asked rhetorically. “I assume we have not heard from Jonas?”

“Correct,” Raze said.

“I guess that confirms our suspicions about Jonas. Easier than I would have imagined.” Lilith nodded to herself. Justin watched as her eyes scanned her bed covers back and forth. She was searching for an answer. “I take it the Media has not picked up on this?”

“Correct,” Raze said again.

“Is there a possibility the Explorers are involved in this?”

“We can’t rule it out,” Jericho said, trying not to sound annoyed as he looked past Justin at his High Governor.

“What about the battle cruisers?” she asked.

“It’s a possibility, but a dangerous option,” Raze said. “They may have the Explorers, and we don’t know what other steps they may have taken. Seriam has battle cruisers, but so do nearly half of the colonies. We can’t assume Jonas hasn’t made secret alliances.”

Lilith went speechless. She was too exhausted and her body had been too mangled to be able to think straight. She dropped her head to one of her shoulders and pretended to cry.

“Hey,” Justin said reaching out and propping her head up from under her chin, before saying in English, “keep your head up.”

“And your eyes forward?” she asked as her eyes lit up. “You say that all the time!”



"I know, but now I'm sharing it with you."

She pushed herself up and scooted back onto the wall so she could sit up straighter.

"Alright, we need to figure out how to peacefully contact Earth, and we need to better understand what's happening on 48-Quasi 2. Start reaching out to the Governors. Seriam must remain and appear united. My father was concerned about this, the risk that colonies would not respond to his twenty-seven-year-old, white-skinned daughter." She looked at Raze. "Minister Anders, it sounds like you have your work cut out for you."

"Your father was never concerned about that," Jericho felt inclined to clarify. "You were concerned about that."

"Regardless, we all know that it's a concern. We must appear strong. The Empire is as fragile as ever. Minister Anders, there can be no doubt in me, from outside, or within."

Raze touched his forehead and bowed. "We'll figure it out."

"Good, now I'm tempted to kick you all out, but I want to end on a high note. Someone give me something."

Justin smiled and turned to Jericho who nodded in consent. Satisfied, Justin tapped his temple twice. Almost immediately, the wall revealed a door again and Adelia sprung through. She had an enormous smile and immediately began to look around the room.

"High Governor, your residence is amazing!"

"Oh for the Eternal Energy," Lilith said, pulling the covers up over her breasts.

"Adelia, focus," Justin said.

Adelia promptly walked over to the bed and touched her forehead. Lilith graciously returned the respect.

"Adelia, you should be in training. What are you doing here?" Lilith asked.

Adelia's smile faded slightly, but she maintained her composure.

"High Governor, I might have gotten suspended for a few days. I might have thrown a cambata fruit at Marcus Pius. I mean, he was the acting High Martis! He should have caught it! Anyway, I'm supposed to be in meditation, but with the permission of one of your Advisors," — she slapped Justin on the shoulder — "and tacitly condoned by the High Martis, I get to schedule your official introduction of little Nikon to the Empire!"

She started screaming and jumping up and down. Nikon woke up and started to cry, but Lilith was too amused to care.

Justin turned to Lilith and once again took Nikon from her hands. Before he stood up, though, he said, "Are you ready to present the new Lord Solis to the Empire?"

## Chapter 7 — Veneral

Veneral felt repulsed when he would look at Cornelia's robotic hand that she refused to cover with human muscle tissue. He never understood her need to be different or why she insisted on flaunting her malady. Now he understood.

Just as Cornelia once antagonized him by tapping her robotic fingers together, so now did Veneral antagonize his growing Council of Allies. In addition to Fabian, who controlled the 48-Quasi 2 Security Battalions, Jonas had been busy pitching his plans for a new Empire to sympathetic ears.

*Which means he had been working this behind my back for years. His treachery holds no bounds.*

Jonas had invited the attendees, brought to the planet via Explorer transport, to the inaugural session of the Garrison Congress, named for the heroic actions of Monty Garrison who lost his life attempting to salvage the Empire. The Garrison Congress, as the Explorers explained, would establish the constitution and regulations of the new breakaway Empire that would continue the work of the once noble ambitions of Seriam. So far, in addition to Veneral, Fabian, and Jonas, eight governors from the Seriam Empire sat in attendance. The governors, the muted voices of the tyrannical High Council, came from planets that spanned the planes of the galaxy.

*This is the moment. This is the day that will change the annals of history. This is the time when Gilgomosh's lineage was rightfully reestablished in the form of a new, more righteous Empire. This is the beginning of the time of Veneral.*

Veneral sat in the ivory-plated seats—made from the teeth of the Terrasaurs from the Southern plains—and looked up into the haze of his new seat of power. They sat under the shadow of Jonas' opulent residential tower; not quite the Apollo Acropolis, but duly impressive for its place as the seat of power.

Of note among the governors currently committing treason against Seriam was Delaney Alabaster from Calorin. She was a political risk and her minuscule clothing made Veneral uneasy, but Calorin had an Outer Rim and could exponentially increase trade among the new Empire. She also was a strong female voice that could help convince others to join the cause, or mollify an aggressive Lilith Octavia eager to keep her Empire intact. He was also pleased to see Infensus Barbas, who upon graduating from the University changed his name to a word that means *aggressive* because of his dominance in the sparring arenas.

His last name was a longstanding family tradition that signified the brilliance of their bronze beards, which given the complexion of their skin, simply appeared as an enlargement of their jaws and chins. As the governor of Simia Magna—where the apes, though deemed unintelligent, waged near daily battles with the colonists—Infensus was as much a military officer as he was a political careerist. In fact, it was Infensus that penned the famous military treatise that claimed peace, politics, and war are merely three phases of an inseparable spectrum. More importantly to Veneral, though, as Jonas wisely pointed out, was Infensus' infatuation with Delaney Alabaster. Infensus rarely broke with Delaney on votes and his straight forward and aggressive way of life did little to hide his desire to be her companion.

Veneral began to speak but Jonas beat him to it.

"Honorable governors of Seriam," Jonas said, standing and touching his forehead. Jonas' daunting size could be seen as an admirable trait of a leader. Veneral sometimes looked upon him with astonishment. The once trim and fit Jonas now rivaled the gargantuan size of Constantine. It was a classic example of exploiting and abusing the powerful possibilities inherent within cellular regeneration and genetic engineering. Veneral once admired his dedication to enlarging his size, but he now had to bite his lip and try not to look dismayed. Per Jonas' word, Veneral had been identified as the leader of the burgeoning Empire, but maybe Jonas envisioned the role as purely symbolic. Perhaps he saw Veneral as a patsy, a leader in name only that would serve as a name to rally around but allow others to lead. "Let me first give thanks for your attendance. I know this comes at a significant risk, but I also know that with your loyalty and support, this experiment can only be a success. Let us finish what Seriam once sought out to achieve."

The participants nodded approvingly and a couple even fired celebratory sparks from their wrist irons. Veneral sat silent, proud. He watched as Jonas boasted his chest into the sulphuric air and presented himself as the rightful ruler of the new Empire. Off in the distance, Veneral could see two security crafts blasting the mountainside with laser fire. The explosions were drowned out by the deafening roar of whatever beast had come too close to the colony's perimeters. The participants all turned to look at the commotion, but the city around them continued its business. Veneral took the opportunity to look at Titus, who had been placed in a seat directly behind Jonas. His neck iron had diminished his spirit and mental faculties, leaving him almost entirely incoherent. He stared blankly at the floor awaiting a command. To the extent Veneral was capable, he felt a twang of pain for his

former advisor.

*Wait, why is Titus still in confinement? He belongs to me. Why hasn't Jonas relinquished control of him? Why did he bring him to this meeting? Everyone knows he is my advisor...*

Suddenly, Veneral had an epiphany and sat up a bit straighter.

*Everyone knows he is my advisor, and yet Jonas is parading him as his prisoner. Insolent, impetuous monster!*

Veneral's face remained placid and stolid. He would not let his emotion betray him, not when he was so close.

"And what have we been brought here to achieve?" Delaney asked.

Infensus followed her question with, "And we have not committed to anything. We are here as a courtesy to your request."

Veneral jumped at the opportunity, practically springing out of his seat to speak before Jonas.

"And now it is us that is offering a courtesy to *you* to allow you to be a founding member of a new Empire," he said, staring Infensus down and walking in front of Jonas. "You all sit before me as neglected Governors. Seriam may be your patron, but when is the last time a High Governor has visited your planet? When is the last time you knew you could depend on Seriam to provide resources to develop your Laser Infuser Plants? Or your solar arrays? Or sent back the expertise developed at the University? No, Seriam has been a patron that dedicates all its resources to its own glory, not that of the Empire. And now they force this girl upon us, this girl and this alien."

"The alien that you took under your wing," Delaney felt inclined to say.

Infensus quickly followed with, "And as I remember, you didn't make much of your opportunity to rule."

Veneral fought the temptations to roll his eyes. He turned to look at Jonas and Fabian, both now seated, and then glanced at Titus awaiting orders. Veneral began to once again clack his robotic fingers together. He knew that Fabian had two robotic feet, but they were merely for stability and movement. Veneral had opted for a more weaponized version.

"A means to an ends, governors. Because of my decision to make the alien close, we now have the opportunity to add his planet to our new Empire."

"A new Empire," Infensus said, standing to make his point. Fabian moved to the edge of his chair, but tried to casually begin playing with his fingernails. "And who would be the High Governor of this said Empire?"

Veneral began to walk along the inner rim of the participants, forcing Infensus to his seat.

“Obviously, Lord Veneral,” Jonas said from his seat.

“The term *High Governor* is so crass, isn’t it?” Veneral asked, seeking no response to his question. “This is an Empire. Naturally an *Emperor* should rule an Empire, no?”

“Because you were such an exemplar of fine leadership before,” Fabian quipped, continuing to amuse himself with his fingernails.

“Hence my point!” Veneral fumed. “Why can nothing ever get achieved in Seriam? Because of the bureaucracy. Because of the bickering of a High Council. A true Empire relies on the brilliance and direction of a strong Emperor. Apollo never understood this. Augustus never understood this. Lilith certainly does not understand this. But Gilgomosh, he understood it. Let us realize that vision. Let us begin a true galactic Empire.”

The participants remained silent, letting the rousing speech and its implication sink in. Veneral did not know how Jonas persuaded them to come, but he surmised they must be concerned to stand up and walk away alone. Their wrist irons could provide some protection, but Fabian seemed eager to kill someone more powerful than himself, and who better than an intransigent governor of the Seriam Empire.

“And what’s in it for us?” Delaney asked. “You somehow will provide Calorin with the material to allow Calorin’s Outer Rim to control the climate?”

“Absolutely,” Veneral said without hesitation. “And you will provide the Empire with the consistent access to space travel.”

“And what about resources that we need but are locked in other Planets of Seriam?” Infensus asked.

“Assuming those planets don’t choose to break ties with Seriam,” Veneral clarified, but Jonas finished his thought, standing and saying, “Marauders.”

“Excuse me, did you say Marauders?” Titian Veronas asked quizzically. Titian hailed from the dark regions of Quadrant five, and marauders were an enemy to stability, not an ally.

“I did,” Jonas said, attempting to retake the spotlight. “Why are marauders considered criminals? They serve a vital function to the Empire, delivering sought after supplies to those who will pay.”

“Because it’s not taxed,” Fabian quipped again, offering no love or loyalty to the plans being presented.

"It's not taxed because it's been brushed under the rug," Jonas said.

*Damn it, why didn't I say something?*

"And now we can work an agreement where they are legitimate, serving our Empire as legal entities," Veneral said quickly. "This will be a free Empire. Trade. Sexual relations. Vinum. Unsanctioned spaceflight. Localized law. Our goal is expansion. Come under our umbrella. Reap the benefits. Remain free."

Veneral was pleased to see head nods. There were some skeptical looks, but years of neglect had them looking for any alternative presented.

"And you propose yourself as the new *Emperor*?" Fabian asked. "Why should we follow you?"

"This is the Garrison Congress," Jonas declared. "Just as Monty Garrison once boldly struck down the tyrannical law of a juvenile, so too shall this institution strike down any pretenses of injustice. We will vote, as a Congress, for the new Emperor. With the vote, we will draft a new constitution. We will establish rights, behind a strong Emperor, for the future map of the Empire. If you all agree to join the Garrison Congress, we can vote. The decision is with all of you."

As Jonas looked at the future members of the Congress, Veneral looked at Fabian, who laughed as he smoothed his roughened fingernails along his teeth. He was laughing at Veneral for his perceived weakness. To Fabian, Veneral was no leader. He was no Emperor. Veneral's Advisor was currently in lock and chain from another member of the Congress.

*I can't allow this to go unanswered. There cannot be a vote. It didn't work on Seriam and it won't work here. I must assert myself. I must be the Emperor, the very air that which they breathe.*

As Jonas walked along the circle and passed in front of Veneral, Veneral acted without so much as a thought. He immediately balled his robotic left hand into a fist and drove it into the center of Jonas' back. Had Veneral stopped to consider the sheer size of Jonas, he wouldn't have struck such a superior specimen, but he had already struck. He assumed Jonas, with the aid of his new hand, would buckle and submit. He didn't consider, however, the power that his new hand—purposely weaponized for combat—possessed. The robotic hand, replete with nerves linked to his Ocular Implants, sliced through the flesh of Jonas' back until he could feel the warm interior of his body. He could feel the blood rushing over his hand and the muscle tissue fighting back to maintain its stability. Finally, though, he felt the beating heart that kept the monstrous Jonas alive. With his hand firmly entrenched

inside Jonas, he opened it and wrapped it around the heart that continued to beat. He pulled it out of Jonas' back, feeling the tissue and arteries tear as he tore it from the body. As Jonas fell lifeless to the ground, Veneral stood holding the heart in front of him.

All of the members of the new Congress stood, shocked and terrified, and began backing away. Even Infensus became pale with terror at the barbaric action.

*That was easy. I should have done that days ago.*

"There will be no vote," Veneral decreed. "You and your colonies are now a part of a new Empire, henceforth called..." Veneral thought about the analogy Justin had presented him with in the Explorer; it's as though Seriam is a disease, spreading through the galaxy. "...Morbo." He squeezed the heart until it exploded with blood and fell to the floor as nothing more than torn and squished human tissue. "And I am the Emperor, endowed with the grace of the Eternal Energy. Does anyone oppose my rightful rule?"

There was only silence, deafening silence. Eventually, though, Fabian rose from his chair, looked at his nephew, and then dropped to a knee and touched his forehead.

"Lord Veneral, Ruler of the Garrison Congress, Emperor of the Morbo Empire."

The remaining eight governors all dropped to their knees, one by one, paying homage to their new ruler. With their loyalty secure, Veneral walked to each of them, his robotic hand dripping with Jonas' blood, and touched them atop their heads. The Explorers began to descend from the sky, paying their own form of homage by spreading beams of light across the city.

Veneral turned his back on the Congress and allowed his gaze to follow the light. "Lord Fabian."

Fabian rose and quickly stood by his side.

"Your Grace."

Veneral turned to him. "You will be the leader of Morbo's military. Take what you need from our colonies. We cannot allow Seriam to make a quick, unified response. We need chaos. Disunity. Lead an attack and dismantle the Outer Rim."

"Your Grace," Fabian said in affirmation.

Veneral turned to Titus. "And get that thing off of his neck."

"Your Grace," Fabian said again, "that can only be removed through Seriam. Or by removing his head."

Veneral looked at his former advisor, now a shell of a human being. He knew Fabian was right. They had broken the link of their communication tower to the Outer Rim. Seriam

couldn't remove it even if it wanted to. Veneral nodded.

"I have another idea."



## Chapter 8 — Bryce

Blackbird was similar to Shake Shack, but not identical. All the specs matched—Bryce’s command chair and platform were the same, the controls were the same, the locations of the bunks and tables were exact replicas—but the amenities varied, thereby changing the whole character of the ship. For example, Bryce’s bunk had been replaced with a foam insert. A green felt pad and poker set had been installed on one of the tables. Ariana already had thousands of uploaded movies and music, but Team Charlie upped the game with popcorn, powdered alcohol, and a portable craps board. Clearly Team Charlie was the fun team. The whole thing screamed of O’Bannon.

As he lay on the foam padded bunk staring at the bottom of the next bed two feet from his face, dozens of photos of the Team Charlie crew lined the walls around him. He felt blessed to have one photo of Tink that he had pulled from his wallet and placed directly above him. They had been stranded in space for over two weeks, although Ariana couldn’t be sure how much time they lost on the journey as it varied with the force of the gravity. After exiting the gravitational alignment, Jamo fired one final blast, obliterating the fleeing ship from existence. Only then, having no idea how the gravitational alignment remained open for them to pass through, did Bryce gain a firm grasp of his actions.

Or to be more precise, Comiskey informed him of the implications of his actions.

“Commander Staggert, all threats have been neutralized,” Florence had said.

Comiskey then followed her statement with, “Now what’s your plan for getting us home?”

With the alignment closed, his immediate order to Mel was to get them as far away from Seriam as possible. Ariana identified a spot on the far side of the moon, but Bryce still did not understand why no ships had come after them.

Bryce had replayed this moment in his head thousands of times since those decisions. Was there a way he could have asked Ariana to reenter the alignment? Working through his head and discussing every move with his team several times, he had concluded nothing more could have been done. When Ariana said, “The Outer Rim has detected debris from the destroyed ship and has not differentiated our ship from the debris,” he appropriately responded by asking, “Ariana, where can we place the ship to avoid detection?” In fact, it was exactly what the Juniper-developed doctrine recommended. Unexpectedly, and speaking out of turn, Ariana offered additional advice by calmly saying, “To avoid detection, I recommend you shut down the Negative Energy Drive and my Central Communications

Console as that is how the Outer Rim tracks and detects the ship's presence."

"Do it!" Bryce yelled. "Use thrusters to get us out of here."

*In the event a deviation cannot be found, the first option is to avoid detection, the second option is contact, and the final course of action is to conduct aggressive maneuvers.*

"You alright over there, Bryce?" Florence asked, throwing a card on the table.

Bryce broke his gaze on Tink's picture and rolled his head to the side. Florence, Jamo, and Annie were all playing cards at one of the rec tables. He had insisted they call him Bryce, at least when they weren't conducting operational activities.

"Yep, just working on our next move," he said.

"I thought you told us to take the day off," Jamo said wryly. "We should all get loaded." The team had hardly been prepared to go to space and engage in combat, let alone get stranded on the other side of the galaxy for two weeks. There wasn't exactly mental training for such complex scenarios, so isolated trips into the woods, such as Team Charlie had been engaged, were the only mechanisms to train for the loneliness. As is, they all reacted to the situation differently. Bryce tried to keep them focused on the mission, on survival. Jamo, though, wanted to go home.

"As soon as we get home, I'm buying the first round," he replied.

"That makes me feel so much better," Florence chided. Florence, at twenty-eight, was practically considered an elder-statesmen at Juniper. There was no secret on the campus that she had an infatuation with George Compton, but her insecurities over her red hair and brown freckles left her stuck in unrequited love. She took her vengeance on life through simulated weapons exercises, or in the most recent example, killing aliens.

Bryce tried not to think about his brother. So close and yet so far. He no longer knew who Justin was or what he had become.

"Have we picked up any news stations lately?" he asked.

"Nein," Jerome bellowed from the front of the ship.

"What the hell are they doing up there?"

"Jerome is trying to reconnect to Juniper," Annie unexpectedly chirped, like she had inhaled too much caffeine. "Comiskey is looking for a deviation, whatever that means. And Mel is reaffirming our Lagrange Point."

"You seem oddly happy about life," Bryce quipped.

"Annie's lost it, *Sir*," Florence said. "We really need to go home."

Bryce swung his feet off the bed and leaned forward to avoid banging his head. His

head ached as he sat up, making him cringe and drive his thumb into his temple. He tried to mask it. The last thing he wanted to show his crew was that he was in physical pain.

“Come on now, where’s your sense of adventure? We’re supposed to be out as long as five *years*. It’s only been two weeks.”

“Bryce,” Jamo said in exasperation, practically scoffing. “Five years in adventure searching and traveling the galaxy. We’ve spent two weeks hiding behind some moon while a galactic Empire tries to find and destroy us. This isn’t ideal, and it isn’t nearly as cool as it looks on Star Wars.”

Jamo, of course, had a point. As the ship’s commander, Bryce eventually had to make a decision.

“Alright, let’s have a meeting,” he said, standing up and walking around the Negative Energy Drive that separated the rec area into two rooms. The other side had a booth large enough to fit the whole team. “Hey, get in here, emergency meeting!” he shouted to the front of the ship. He heard Jamo, Annie, and Florence reluctantly follow him around NED and saw Jerome, Mel, and Comiskey wander in from the command module. They all slid in the booth and sat silently, waiting for their commander to give some form of direction.

Bryce sat there quietly, centering his thoughts and trying to come up with a plan. He imagined hitting the punching bag. *One two, one two, one two, upper cut. Come up with a plan.*

“Alright, what is our objective?” he asked.

“Our objective?” Florence asked, appalled.

“Yes, today, this second, what is our objective? Not what it was when we got on the ship. Not what it was yesterday or this morning. What, right now, is our objective?”

“To get home,” Jamo answered whimsically.

“That’s right, to get home. Where are we right now?”

“We’re in a Lagrange Point behind the moon of Seriam,” Comiskey responded dutifully, acting as the Deputy Commander but honoring his original navigational intent.

“Good,” Bryce said, “now let’s be honest. What do we need to accomplish to get from here to where we want to be?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Annie said defeated. “We can’t do it.”

Bryce stared her down but bit his tongue. He bent his head toward the table to center himself and then looked at her and held his hands up.

“I understand that may be the case...” he started.

"No that *is* the case," Annie interrupted.

"I *understand* that may be the case, but putting that aside, to get all the options on the table, let's go through the steps we have to take to get to our objective. Let's lay it out. What do we need to do?"

"We need to not be seen," Jamo said, "or at least not get blown up."

"Okay, good, that's what I'm looking for. We need to figure out a way to not get blown up. What else?" Bryce looked at each of his team members individually and finally saw their faces begin to relax and take part in the brain storming session. "Come on, Mel, what do you got?"

Mel shifted uncomfortably in her seat and then leaned into the table. "Alright, well, we need entry and exit points, which we don't have."

"Stop, right there," Bryce admonished. "Good, though, we need to not get blown up and we need entry and exit points."

"I'm sorry, Bryce," Mel said, "but don't tell me to stop. Our only entry point, as far as we know, is the Outer Rim. Our only functioning exit point, as far as we know, we currently reside in. And we are on the wrong side of the alignment. And let's not forget, Ariana cannot connect to the Outer Rim until we reengage her Central Communications."

Bryce thought about this. It was the same conclusion that they came to everyday. "Okay," he finally said, nodding his head acceptingly, "then maybe our objective is wrong."

"What do you mean?" Jamo asked, his face ashen with terror at the thought he wasn't going home. It was a new side of John Jameson that Bryce wasn't particularly fond of. He missed the guy who burst in his room and ginned up plans to bang chicks.

"Jesus Christ, he means an unobtainable objective is not strategically viable," Comiskey said, reciting their operational publications. He also acted exactly as a deputy commander should act; he defended his commander.

Jamo looked as though he were about to go comatose.

"You're saying home isn't attainable?"

"Not right now," Bryce said as authoritatively as he could. He meant to instill that thought in Jamo's head. He needed his team to get in the game. "So back to the drawing board. Same drill. What is our objective?"

"To kill some fucking aliens," Florence quipped, unable to contain her inner-weapons expert psychopathy. Her comment drew some laughs.

"That's a suicide mission, and the token black guy *always* dies on suicide missions,"

Jerome said to further laughs. Even Bryce allowed himself to chuckle.

“But it’s a potential objective, is it not? This civilization has attacked Earth and we need to do what we can. What else? Come on. We’re in the most technologically advanced ship that Earth has ever produced. *We have options.*”

“Like what?” Mel asked, intrigued.

“Ariana, you there?” Bryce asked.

“Yes, Commander Staggert,” she said in her typical lascivious voice.

“You can turn on the Outer Rim, right? You can establish an entry point?”

Ariana paused, searching for the appropriate response. “In theory, if you turn on my Central Communications Console with enough time to communicate with the Outer Rim, yes.”

“In theory?”

“Seriam has an open travel policy. I can request access to a gravitational alignment, but reengaging the Central Communications Console would reveal the ship’s identity.”

“Is there any way to avoid that?”

As though prepared, Ariana immediately said, “The Outer Rim is equipped with incremental security capture systems. If the security capture identifies a ship that does not have the authority to travel, it can lock and disable the ship. To avoid the security capture system, you would have to disable the security capture system.”

Bryce’s eyebrows perked up at Ariana’s words. He cocked his head to the side and looked at Mel with enchanted eyes.

“Ariana, what does disable mean?” Florence asked as Bryce pondered the possibilities.

“It means destroying the monitoring system that controls the locking prongs,” Ariana said.

“Right,” Jamo said sarcastically, nodding his head, “naturally.”

“I presume the Outer Rim has additional security measures,” Bryce said, taking Jamo’s lead.

“Affirmative,” Ariana confirmed. “The Outer Rim has ionic burst arrays for planetary defenses. There is a ninety-eight percent likelihood that these weapons would not threaten the F-40 as they are designed for much larger spacecraft or rogue asteroids.”

Bryce cocked his head and shrugged his shoulders, curving his lips to suggest that it is a possibility.

“And then what?” Jerome asked incredulously. “We blast away at their Outer Rim, and

then we hope for the best?" Jerome was very much in Jamo's camp on these issues.

"Then Ariana requests to enter an alignment. Ariana, can you search for open alignments and then prioritize?"

"Affirmative, Commander Staggert."

"Prioritize what?" Mel asked, realizing that she would be the one putting the Blackbird into the alignment.

"We prioritize home. Who knows, maybe they figured something out and it's sitting open waiting for us to come back through. The Outer Rim is preventing us from identifying that as a possibility. If, in the likely chance, they haven't been able to get one open, then we connect to another alignment and we go explore, just like we're supposed to do." Bryce could feel his blood beginning to boil with excitement.

*Why else did we join Juniper if not to explore the God damned Universe?*

"As the responsible voice in the room, I would like to point out that that course of action is as reckless if not more so than the decision that got us here in the first place," Annie said.

Bryce nodded but didn't respond.

"And what happens if no alignment is available?" Comiskey asked. "What then?"

All the eyes fell onto Bryce. This was ultimately his decision. Short of a mutiny, they would follow his command.

"We could surrender," Jamo felt compelled to say.

"We don't surrender," Bryce quickly said with blank, cold eyes. "If it comes to that, then we protect Earth and kill some fucking aliens."

"That's as reckless as it is stupid," Jamo said. "And I might add, it is how we got here in the first place."

"Well," Bryce said confidently, "it's also how we're going to get home. Ariana, what happens if we don't destroy the monitoring system? If we turn on your communications, could you establish an alignment before the Outer Rim takes control of the ship?"

"In theory, it is possible, taking into account several factors, such as planetary alert status and level of traffic. I calculate a fourteen percent chance of survival. I recommend an alternative course of action."

Bryce smiled.

"Jesus Christ, it's enormous," Comiskey said, staring at the Outer Rim currently projected into his battle station.

Bryce tried to ignore him, but Comiskey was right. The Outer Rim grew even more imposing the closer they got.

"Stay the course," Bryce said, trying to sound in control of his emotions.

"We are currently ten thousand miles from the monitoring system substation," Ariana said. "At one thousand miles, the security prongs will take control of the ship. Plasmas have an effective range of fifteen hundred miles."

"That's a tight window," Florence stipulated.

"Jesus Christ, we didn't think this plan through," Comiskey said, finally letting his nerves shine through his duties as deputy commander.

"Shut up!" Bryce shouted. "Stay focused, stay the course. Ariana, lock on to the monitoring substation. We need you to help guide our fire. We do not fire until Ariana has established an alignment or we are fired upon."

"Affirmative, Commander Staggert."

"Florence, talk to me."

"Plasmas ready on your command."

"Jamo, talk to me."

"Grinders and sidewinders armed and ready assuming we glide past the Outer Rim and wander inside the atmosphere."

"Mel, talk to me."

"We're cruising, Sir. We should arrive at our mark inside five minutes."

"Jerome, fire up the Central Communications!"

"Up and running, Sir!"

"Alright, Ariana, look around, what else should we know?"

"Commander Staggert, there is currently a large ceremony taking place at the Grand Temple of the Eternal Energy. It is possible the Outer Rim will be under emergency procedures."

"What?!" Bryce shouted, getting excited and nervous. "What does that mean?"

"It's possible the security monitors will be scanning at a wider range than usual."

"Of course they will," he quipped, feeling defeated.

The five minutes ticked by at a snail's pace. The tension in the command module was exactly what Bryce had trained to avoid. Mistakes occur when tension overwhelms sound

and logical thinking.

"If we hit fifteen hundred miles, we fire," he said. "Heads up."

"Eyes forward," his crew responded.

"Two thousand miles," Mel said, after what seemed to be about an hour.

"Florence, finger on the trigger!"

"Whoa, something's happening here!" Mel shouted. "I'm losing steering!"

"Uh, Sir, I think we're being contacted," Jerome said. "They're trying to talk to us."

"Ignore it!"

They all watched as the Outer Rim began to turn and two sets of four prongs protruding into space begin to electrify with blue current.

"Sixteen hundred miles!" Mel shouted again after thirty seconds.

In their projections, they could see the prongs of the Outer Rim begin to charge with bluish electrical current. The blue currents turned into bright white beams of light that came firing into space.

"Holy shit," Jameson said.

"What are they firing at?" Bryce asked.

But as he asked it, a ship many times bigger than their own emerged out of an alignment. It was shaped like an inverted-V and had a large invisible shield in front that lit up as the ion bursts connected with it. The ship continued toward the Outer Rim.

"Ariana, what is happening?" Bryce asked.

"Scanning for any transmissions," Ariana responded.

A transmission then played. It was in Latin. A male's voice. He sounded calm, if not hypnotic, as one might sound if he has been given a tranquilizer.

"Ariana, translate," Bryce said.

"My name is Titus," Ariana said. "I am a messenger of the Morbo Empire. By the grace of the Eternal Energy, Emperor Veneral sends his regards."

They all watched as the ship powered forward.

"Mel, slow us down," Bryce said.

He felt the F-40 cut power. Ion blasts continued to pelt the larger ship, and the shield appeared to weaken. When a blast finally broke through, the back of the enormous ship separated into ten or more round orbs that flew in different directions. They flew toward the Outer Rim and began to blast the canons.

Blackbird's crew watched as the blackness turned into a massive explosion from the



Outer Rim. The Orbs continued past into the atmosphere. The larger ship continued to push forward, but with the shield depleted, an ion blast penetrated the hull, making it erupt into a blue ball of energy.

“Holy shit,” Bryce whispered. “What is happening? Ariana, have you found an alignment?”

“Affirmative, Commander Staggert. A fourth end point is open on Earth.”

“How is that possible?” Annie asked.

“Who cares,” Bryce said.

“Should we enter?” Mel asked.

“Ariana,” Bryce said again, “can you locate Justin Staggert?”

“Affirmative. Justin Staggert is present at the ceremony.”

“Okay, team, I know you won’t agree with this, but if we have an opportunity to rescue my brother...”

“We’re absolutely taking it,” Comiskey shouted.

After a few seconds, with the bright lights of fire buzzing past the F-40, the Outer Rim got so close that it was now a wall of steel. They could no longer see the curve of the rim as it extended around the planet. At such close proximity, the ionic burst arrays ceased to fire, allowing them all to see the mammoth prongs that were trying to protect the planet.

*Those must be the size of the Empire State Building!*

“Jesus Christ,” was all Comiskey could think to say.

“Take us past it,” Bryce commanded. “Let’s get inside the atmosphere. Ariana, give us some coordinates for the Temple thing. Team, don’t be surprised if we aren’t the only visitors. Fingers on triggers. Ariana, be prepared for immediate insertion into the alignment.

“Affirmative, Commander Staggert. I have identified a stable Gravitational Alignment. The F-40 should have several minutes for insertion.”

Bryce rejoiced, but didn’t renege on his order to head toward the Temple.

“Mel, get us to the Temple. Let’s try to knock out both of our objectives.”

“Reducing speed,” Mel said.

They sailed past the Outer Rim and into the atmosphere, where the dark space turned into a reddish haze.

“It’s red,” Comiskey said.

“Whoa, we’re being painted,” Annie said. “We might have some company.”

Bryce noticed the reduced speed and the pull of gravity against the ship's artificial gravity. He made a mental note to thank Comiskey to tell him to sit in the commander's chair and strap in instead of standing over the command module as Juniper commanders often practiced. He looked at Comiskey's screen and saw four ships that looked like two diamonds that had been fused together come screaming after them.

"Stay on target!"

"Wow, there it is," Mel said as the Temple came into view.

"We're being locked!" Annie shouted.

"Evasive maneuvers!"

Mel started to spin the ship and powered it faster.

Laser blasts came screaming past the ship, which continued toward the Temple. Comiskey pulled the Temple onto his screen and they could see millions of people scattering for cover. They weren't frightened from the Blackbird. The orbs had beaten them to it. The Temple was burning.

"I have reverse locks on the ships," Jameson said.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Unlike the plasma bursts, the launching of four sidewinders didn't push back against the ship's velocity. Instead, Bryce heard them whizzing away from the ship. Two of the sidewinders connected, and it appeared the other two ships altered course.

"Okay," Bryce said, "Ariana, where's Justin?"

## Chapter 9 — Jericho

“What does it mean?” Lilith asked.

It wasn't a question that suggested Lilith didn't understand the situation; it was an example of a ruler learning to seek and respect the advice of her advisors.

“It means we need to better understand the situation,” Jericho said solemnly.

Lilith and her Council of Advisors sat in the official Council chambers three floors beneath Lilith's residence in the Apollo Acropolis. It was a room that had been rarely used under Veneral's reign, but Lilith insisted on reestablishing a semblance of order, even if she was eager to uproot other longstanding traditions. The Council, along with Marcus Pius who once again assumed responsibilities as the acting High Martis while Jericho filled his role of Head Advisor, all sat around the table and listened to the Media.

“If true,” a male voice said through the Media, “it would mark a failure of epic proportions before the new High Governor has even seen her first solar orbit. Official statements from nine Seriamite colonies have all declared loyalty to a breakaway movement, which we are hearing has been dubbed the Morbo Empire. Under the rule of the former Steward of Seriam, Franklin Veneral, who in shame from allegations he perpetrated the murder of Augustus Octavia and attempted to begin a war with an independent planet was banished to 48-Quasi 2. Yes, the High Governor, Lilith Octavia, twenty-eight-years old and barely old enough to know how to spell strategic thinking let alone understand it, took the reins of our great Empire, banishes the dastardly former Steward to the home planet of his most loyal servant, and then promptly allows nine of our colonies to secede and form a rival Empire! What a nightmare.”

Jericho tapped his temple and the Media broadcast promptly disappeared.

Lilith was seething, shaking in her seat from anger. “Banishing Veneral to 48-Quasi 2 followed the law precisely as written. The newest colony with labor camps. And on top of it, I stand by my attempts at compassion.”

“Madam Governor,” Jericho began.

“*High*... Governor, Jericho,” Lilith hissed through her teeth.

Jericho swallowed and deliberately employed his training, understanding that Lilith was angry and needed advising.

“High Governor,” he said, stone faced and serene, “my apologies.”

Lilith slunk in her seat and let out a breath that allowed the blood in her body to once

again flow.

“No, Jericho, I’m sorry.”

Jericho brushed it away with a swipe of his hand. “High Governor, you don’t need to defend your actions to us. We all agree it followed the letter of the law. And your compassion is admirable.”

Lilith nodded.

“But that doesn’t really resolve our current situation,” she said.

“Lilith,” Professor Blaseph chimed in before catching himself, touching his forehead, and then saying, “High Governor. Perhaps, though, the lesson here, and I am a professor for better or worse, is that the High Governor cannot always follow the letter of the law. The High Governor must follow what is right for the Empire.”

“What does that mean?” Justin asked innocently, honestly intrigued.

“Laws are created for control, Justin, with the intent of ruling a population. As the High Governor, Lilith must take steps and make decisions that maintain, sustain, and contribute to that control. Following the letter of the law is always an option, but it is not always the right option.”

Lilith closed her eyes and shook her head rapidly, annoyed at the esoteric meaning of Blaseph’s apparent lesson.

“Our moral and philosophical differences aside, Professor, how does that help in the current situation?”

Jericho watched as Lilith and Blaseph stared one another down. Lilith did not like being talked down to, and Jericho knew Blaseph couldn’t help himself but talk down to people. It wasn’t rude, it was simply academic. Jericho also knew that one of the defining moments of Lilith’s rule would take place in a very short while. Adelia had prepared a massive ceremony at the Temple and the entire Empire, to include the breakaway planets, would be watching.

“It’s simple, you lie,” Blaseph said.

Lilith’s face contorted into confusion. “I beg your pardon.”

“You lie,” he repeated. “In your address at the Temple, you tell your constituents, you tell your Empire, that there is no credence to these rumors, that Veneral is currently locked up, but just to be sure, you have dispatched security battalions to ensure the peace and stability of the Empire. You lie. You tell people exactly what they need to hear. You maintain stability and you maintain control. That’s what being High Governor is all about.

That's what your father was so adept at. He always looked calm and collected, but he had his finger on the pulse of the population and you better believe he lied when he needed to."

Lilith took particular exception to this.

"My father *never* intentionally mislead the populace."

Blaseph smiled and looked at Jericho.

*You're bringing me into this.*

Lilith also looked at Jericho and expected an answer.

Jericho sighed. "I mean, I wouldn't call them lies," he said cautiously. "But, he ordered me to stab him in the back, High Governor, as a matter of deception. I would say that was misleading to the public."

"And he did it to maintain control," Blaseph quickly noted.

"So you think I should lie?" she asked. "Jericho?" When no one responded, she looked at Justin.

Shrugging his shoulders and chuckling, he said, "Lilith, where I come from, our leaders lie routinely. You're far more noble, but it's not a terrible suggestion. You can even frame it not as a lie, but that we don't know the facts so we're going to investigate. And make sure you say the security of the Empire is your foremost concern. That always seemed to work back home."

"Home," Lilith said sullenly. "For the suns and the stars, I still haven't figured out that mess either. Is that ship really stuck here and we can't find it? How is that possible?"

"Space is big," Justin said. "I also want to stress that the ship almost certainly thought the ambassadors were returning to strike, so it's probably still a misunderstanding."

"The population might not be willing to take too many more *misunderstandings*," Marcus said.

"He's right," Jericho added in agreement. "I'm sorry Justin, but in this instance, they really did come through and attack. We need to find that ship."

Justin nodded reluctantly.

"Yes we need to find that ship," Lilith said, "but I'm more concerned with Veneral and *Morbo*. I'm willing to lie for the good of the Empire, I am, but we need to make necessary preparations for war. It pains me to make that statement, but it would be foolish to assume this will resolve itself."

"I will reach out to First Minister Anders to discuss just that," Professor Blaseph said, "as soon as the ceremony is finished."

“And I will contact the Outer Rim commander for an update on the search for the lost ship,” Marcus said.

“Good,” Lilith forced herself to say.

“Good,” Jericho agreed. “Now, we have a ceremony to get to. But, High Governor, I must insist you put on your wrist irons.”

“I absolutely will not,” Lilith said quickly. “At this time more than ever, I want to show the Empire that I am not afraid. I don’t need wrist irons to protect myself. This Empire is secure and the High Governor will be proof of that. Besides, Justin will be up there with me and he never takes them off.” Everyone laughed at the sardonic comment as Justin lifted his arms and waved his wrists through the air. “Justin, did Adelia behave herself?”

Justin smiled.

“The resident Empire party planner has been mum on the details.”

Lilith stared at him dead eyed. “Well let’s go have some fun. War be damned.”

“Okay,” Adelia said excitedly as they all walked down the hallway to the exit of the Grand Temple of the Eternal Energy. Adelia had been waiting for them when they exited the transport that brought them to the Temple from the Acropolis. Lilith was holding Nikon, so Adelia immediately grabbed Justin’s hand and held it as they walked. Even Remus was present, as Justin convinced Jericho that he could be a calming influence on her. All Jericho could do was shake his head as Adelia espoused her vision. “Lil,” Adelia continued, squeezing Justin’s hand, “I mean, Lilith, or, I mean, High Governor. So, the three of you are going to exit and it’s just going to be, *boom!* Little Nikon will be introduced. I figure there’s no reason to pick leaves off the tree. I’ve even arranged flyovers of battle cruisers and the Outer Rim will give a fire and electricity display. It’ll be one for the ages. Make sure your Occos are recording.”

“Okay,” Lilith said, leaning her head over and frowning at Adelia’s grip on Justin’s hand.

“And then, you’ll kind of do your thing and give a grand speech, and then, more fire in the sky, and then Verita parties. I’ve arranged to have a waiver on vinum for the day.”

“You’ve arranged it? Am I confused or aren’t I the one with that authority?”

Jericho laughed.

“You are,” Adelia said. “I need your consent.”

Adelia smiled broadly if not deviously. Lilith sighed, but nodded consent. She had resigned herself to going along with the celebration at all costs.

“Do you have your remarks prepared?” Justin asked.

“Yeeees,” she said, playfully annoyed at his pestering. They all reached the end of the hallway. Even through the large gate that led to the platform overlooking the Avenue of Governors was closed, they could still hear the crowds cheering and the various energy bursts people were releasing from their wrist irons. “Are *you* ready for this?”

“I am,” Justin said over Adelia’s head.

Smiling, not as a High Governor but as a woman in love, Lilith looked at Adelia and said, “Adelia, can I have my companion’s hand?”

Adelia took a moment to understand what the High Governor of the Seriam Empire just asked her. She didn’t understand that she was standing at the gate of the Grand Temple of the Eternal Energy with the High Governor and her family, about to present themselves to the Empire.

“Oh, right,” Adelia finally said, relinquishing control of Justin.

Jericho stepped forward and grabbed Adelia by the shoulder, pulling her back toward him and the rest of the Council of Advisors. Jericho saw Justin, now free from Adelia’s interference, take Lilith’s hand. They both leaned over and kissed Nikon.

The gates opened and the High Governor’s family walked out. The crowd, stretching out of eyesight down the Avenue and filling in every inch of space on the Promenades that branched off the Avenue, erupted. Jericho followed the family out as Lilith held Nikon in such a manner that the world could see the tiny infant’s face. The Lord Solis was immediately a hit; the Empire had no qualms accepting him as its future. He arguably made everyone forget about the pending war, about the breakaway Empire, about 35-Solar 3, about the chaos. In front of them was hope, and they loved it.

The day couldn’t have been more perfect. The suns were high in the sky and the statues of the former governors lit up and looked kindly upon the Avenue. The air was crisp, the temperature was right around seventy degrees, and even the faint silhouette of Externus stood out in the reddened sky as a stark reminder that this ceremony reached far beyond the shores of Verita.

Jericho saw Justin nudge Lilith as they came toward the end of the platform. Lilith responded by holding Nikon a little higher. Jericho stood behind them, scanning and monitoring everything. He looked at the faces, he looked at the drones in the air, and he

looked at the sky beyond. Somewhere, there was a threat, and he was determined to prevent Lilith from being harmed.

After a few minutes, with Lilith actually looking as though she was enjoying herself, she handed Nikon to Justin, who took him and took a few steps away. Ultimately, the new High Governor was the main attraction and she deserved her moment under the suns.

“Good people of Seriam!” she shouted exultantly, but that was all she got out. The Outer Rim began to turn as though there was a threat. Anything happening beyond the Outer Rim in space was too far away for the people on the ground to witness, but when the Outer Rim went into action, the clanking steel reverberated throughout the planet.

The crowd began to hush and the sounds they did make were not of enjoyment. Something was amiss and they all knew it.

*I should pull them. I should take them off the stage. No, they can't run. This will pass.*

Jericho had his left hand on one of his daggers as he watched over Lilith. He promised her father he would protect her. He saved her life. He delivered her baby. He would not allow her to die. But Lilith had to remain center stage and she showed no inclination of moving.

Justin began to walk Nikon closer toward the gate of the Temple and Jericho willfully helped them along. Only then, though, could Jericho see the explosion in space. It came from the Outer Rim itself. A second explosion followed shortly thereafter. The planet was under attack. Before he could get Lilith off the platform, he saw the spheres emerge from the sky and begin to fire blue energy pulses into the crowd. Everyone began to scream and scatter. Jericho looked back at the sky, waiting for patrol ships to counter the attack. AH Forti were frantically making their way for Lilith, but were too far away. There was no possible way Jericho could protect the entire family. He tried to think. Justin had wrist irons and he had Nikon, he would be protected. Lilith was vulnerable, but at this point, it no longer mattered. Jericho had already moved too far away from her.

The spheres—Explorers, Jericho realized as they came into view—began targeting the stage. The first two explosions struck on either side of them. Justin instinctively turned Nikon away from the crowd and knelt down, allowing his wrist irons to create an impenetrable shield around them. The crowd burst into fear and pandemonium, frantically trying to escape whatever dark turn the ceremony had just taken.

*This can't be happening. Lilith, run. Move!*

But Lilith didn't move. She couldn't move. A third explosion struck the gate behind



them and then a fourth blast occurred on the steps directly in front of the platform leading down to the Avenue. Jericho saw Lilith get blown backwards before he had to turn and shield his own eyes from the heat of the explosion. His wrist irons automatically shielded him from any damage, but his Ocular Implants had to take a moment to reorient themselves. As he tried to find Lilith, he looked up and saw a ship. It was an alien ship. It did not belong to Seriam's Armadas or the patrol ships that he saw were in hot pursuit. He glanced at Justin, who had emerged from his shielded kneel and saw that he, too, caught sight of the ship, leaving him stupefied and frightened.

The ship fired at the patrol ships, destroying two. Two others broke away and began targeting the Explorers. The alien ship came toward the platform and hovered, before thrusters set it down on the platform in the middle of the flames. Sparks flew as the back opened and four people jumped out. Jericho removed his daggers and maneuvered to defend Lilith.

"Stop!" he heard Justin shout. Jericho froze and looked at him. "Stop!"

One of the men ran to Justin. Justin gripped the man by the back of the head as though in shock. He handed his son to this man, this alien. Justin pointed to Lilith, who was unconscious against the Temple. One of the men picked her up and began running her toward the ship.

"Come on!" Justin shouted at Jericho.

Jericho followed, narrowly avoiding a laser blast from an Explorer.

Once onboard, Jericho looked out and saw the skin of the Temple begin to extinguish the flames, tamping down the heat of the explosions. Through the smoke, he saw Adelia laying prone, fire a few feet from her head. She lay still and apparently lifeless, blood trickled from her nose and ears. He looked back at Lilith and Justin and Nicon, the future and present leaders of the Seriam Empire. They appeared to be safe. Justin clearly knew these people and they were friends. Jericho had to help Adelia. He jumped off the ship and back onto platform before the door could close. He picked Adelia up off the platform and turned back to the ship, but it had already risen and departed.

He watched as the ship climbed into the sky and then entered into a gravitational alignment, disappearing from sight.

The Explorers had departed, the damage done, the Empire in chaos. There would be no lying about breakaway colonies. Most of the fires on the platform had been extinguished. With the attacks obviously over, he stepped to the edge of the platform with Adelia in his

arms. His presence proved to be a calm influence over the crowd, which began to slow to a crawl and eventual silent gaze.

They didn't stop to see if Lilith had survived the attacks; they didn't stop to once more try to catch a glimpse of little Nikon; and they did not stop to hear Justin speak. They stopped to hear what Jericho had to say. The crowd of Seriam eagerly sought his wisdom and direction, and Jericho knew that as Professor Blaseph had recently espoused, leadership resides in control of the population. Jericho had suddenly and inadvertently claimed firm control over the population.

## Chapter 10 — Tink

“Tinker Bell, how about you give up the comms for the night and try to get some sleep,” General Sartor said over the radio.

Tink, annoyed at the notion of leaving, reached forward and pressed the button that would allow her to speak to the General.

“You know I’m not going anywhere, Sir,” she said, her exhausted voice barely able to form the coherent sentence.

“When’s the last time you left the control room?” he asked her.

Tink tugged at a strand of her blond hair and pulled it in front of her eyes so she could examine it for split ends. When she found one, she angrily plucked it from her head. Her hair, usually vibrant in its electric white coloring, had grown increasingly matted since she had refused to leave the control center. She looked around and found a few stragglers monitoring various screens. They were primarily first and second years required to work the graveyard shift. As a seventh year, Tink was the de facto supervisor of the shift, even though a frumpy third year had been assigned.

*How hard is it to take care of yourself? Come on.*

Tink ignored Sartor’s question as a matter of habit.

“Are you mad at Bryce, Sir?” Tink said quietly, pressing the button to speak again.

“Mad? Why would I be mad at him?”

“Because he disobeyed your order to cease the attack.”

There was a pause at the other end of the radio.

“No, Ashley, I’m not mad. I knew exactly what I was getting when I put him in that seat, just as I imagine you knew exactly what you were getting into when you two began dating.” Tink flushed in embarrassment. “Are *you* mad at him?”

Tink hesitated to respond. She extended her damaged left leg to increase the blood flow and ran her finger along a scar on her head that was now covered by hair. She hadn’t actually thought about that before Sartor brought it up.

“Why would I be mad at him?”

“He went through the alignment without a clear path to get home. I doubt he was thinking, but it would certainly be understandable if you weren’t pleased with his decision.”

“Like you said, Sir, I knew what I was getting into.” She hesitated again, but felt the inclination to actually defend the man she had come to love. “You know, Bryce has been

through a lot. And he still doesn't know about..."

"I know," Sartor said, cutting her off. "*When* he comes back, and I know in my heart that he's coming back, we'll have to break that news to him."

Two people laughed behind Tink. It was no secret the graveyard shift got boring, even with the teams actively scouring the sky now that the Chinese system had been activated.

"Any news from China, Sir?" Tink asked.

"Seventy-two hours and counting. Hopefully Ariana has been able to pick up the link on the other side. It's hard enough just keeping airspace over Shenzhen clear for such a long period. I'm not sure how much longer they'll allow us to keep the alignment open."

"Have the Chinese demanded anything in return?"

"Not yet, although nothing good can come from Bryce's actions, even when he does return. I'm going to have to make some overtures. This is no longer a single nation fight. I told the Association as much when I called the meeting."

"I hear that," Tink said, distractedly yanking another hair from her head. "Sir, when are you planning to return? Juniper could really use you around here. Holiday and Smith just bicker all day long. I think they're confused about who's in charge."

Tink, clad in jeans and a dirty white shirt underneath Bryce's LA Dodgers jersey, spotted a stain on her thigh and began to vociferously try to rub it out with her thumb. That didn't prevent her from noticing a longer than usual pause before Sartor answered her.

"I know, but there are still a lot of unknowns. That reporter really hosed us, me, he really hosed me. It's probably better I stay away from Juniper as is."

"You are coming back, though, right?"

Before he could answer, Tink heard a girl behind her say, "Whoa, we're getting something here."

She immediately sat up and turned around.

"What? Talk to me, what's happening?"

"Ariana has picked up an alignment," said someone from the back. Tink didn't know who it was and didn't care.

"Sir, did you hear that?" she excitedly asked Sartor, currently sitting in Shenzhen.

"I did," Sartor replied, trying to remain calm. "Can Ariana identify if the alignment has connected to the Chinese system or if it is independent of our systems?"

"Linked to China!" the voice shouted.

"I'm getting Colonel Smith!" the official supervisor said as she ran out of the control

center. Tink, though, was no longer listening.

“Sir,” Tink said, “you have incoming.”

“Aaaaaaah,” Tink screamed as she attempted to run down the halls of her Horizons Hall.

“Everyone wake up! We have an alignment! We have an alignment!”

Commander Holiday, who Tink knew had not slept since Blackbird disappeared, was the first to pop her head out of her door. She hadn’t been sleeping, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t groggy at two in the morning.

“Tink, slow down, what’s happening?” she asked as other doors began to open and faces began to emerge. Tink slowed to a halt and in a state of exhaustion collapsed against the wall adjacent to Holiday’s room. She had wide eyes as she tried to catch her breath, paying no attention to the pain in her leg or the throbbing along her scar.

“Ariana identified a Gravitational Alignment that connected to the Chinese system. It’s Bryce! It has to be Bryce!”

Holiday’s grogginess immediately subsided. She looked at Tink and then directed her comments to the growing crowd in the hall.

“Alright, if you can be useful tonight, get to the control center. If you are not of immediate use—read, most of you—try to go back to sleep. We need alert operators tomorrow. There can be no gaps. Alright, let’s go to work.”

Some immediately returned to their rooms and shut their doors. Others, primarily Juniper team members, began to discuss the next steps. Tink shoved off of the wall and began to head back to the control center.

“Wait, Tink,” she said.

She stopped and looked at her in exasperation.

“What?”

“Maybe this is a good opportunity for you to take a shower and clean yourself up.”

She looked down at her arms and touched her hair. She smiled sheepishly.

“I can shower tomorrow.”

“No, that’s an order. You cannot return to the control center until you shower. Besides, if Bryce is really coming home, don’t you want to look your best?”

This finally got her attention. She touched the Dodgers jersey and her soiled jeans and without saying a word ran into the bathroom.

"The Chinese are scrambling jets," Colonel Smith said. He looked at Holiday and then said, "Just in case."

Holiday nodded to herself and then began to pace around the control center. Tink couldn't help but giggle. Holiday seemed more grown up than she did when she was pacing around the back of the X-40 simulator. She had an air about her that was larger than she was. She was firmly in charge of the room even with Colonel Smith beside her.

"Juniper, anything?" Sartor asked over the radio.

"Blackbird, Blackbird, come in," Tink said instead of responding to Sartor's question directly. "Blackbird Blackbird, come in," she said again. The whole room was glued to her every word.

"Nothing over here," she finally responded.

"Roger. Same here..." he began, but he was interrupted.

Static began to seep through the radio and then the vague crackling of a voice. Finally, they heard, "Control, this is Blackbird." It was Jerome. As the room erupted into cheers, Jerome continued with, "Please tell me we're at Earth."

Tink laughed and squealed in excitement, rapidly tapping both of her feet beneath her, but ultimately let Sartor respond.

"Blackbird, damn good to hear your voice," Sartor said. "We have you on radar coming in hot. You might not have noticed, but you're officially in Chinese airspace. You can either put her down here or head back to Juniper."

There was a pause. They were deliberating.

*You better come home to me, Bryce Staggert.*

"Control, we're heading home. See you at Juniper."

Tink leaned back in her chair. She was shaking so uncontrollably that she couldn't press the button to speak. Tears came to her eyes and despite her best efforts, she couldn't control her emotions. She felt Holiday rush up behind her. She leaned over Tink's shoulder and pushed the button.

"Blackbird, we hear you loud and clear. Come on home. We're all waiting for you."

There was another pause.

"Control, Commander Staggert would like to know if you're mad at him," Jerome said, clearly annoyed that Bryce had ordered him to speak on his behalf.

The crowded control room once again broke into laughter. Even Tink managed to smile, sniffing and regaining her composure.

“No, I think your punishment has been time served,” Sartor said. “You’re all exonerated.”

“Control, you don’t yet know what you’re exonerating us for,” Bryce said. “Oh, and you should know, we’re heavy three passengers.”

“Say again,” Holiday ordered. Her breathing grew heavy. “You have three additional passengers?”

“Roger, Juniper. We have Justin.”

The room was silent. Holiday began shaking. She tried to respond, but she couldn’t find the words.

“That’s great news,” Sartor finally said. “Welcome home Justin.”

Tink saw Holiday turn and look at Perry Staggert, who had been spending his days at Juniper, silently observing the activity.

Tink waited anxiously on the flight deck, gazing upon the battle-hardened F-40 with new admiration. Standing front and center of the Juniper crowd, which even included some family members, Tink, Holiday, and Colonel Smith waited impatiently for the door to open and the crew to depart. Juniper technicians and emergency crews were already inspecting the ship for damage and trying to assist the process of opening the exit hatch. Tink could barely stand it.

Aside Colonel Smith, Jack Taylor had a video camera glued to his eye. Without Sartor to tell him not to, Taylor had been documenting far more than usual. Tink had overheard him say that now that the reporter—who happened to know Justin Staggert as a boy—had released details of the Juniper program, and specifically General Sartor’s involvement, it was a whole new ballgame. Taylor even extended an offer of employment to the “little prick.” Tink wasn’t sure if the little prick had accepted.

Tink, practically jumping out of her skin, continued to look at the Blackbird. It was the ship she knew, but it appeared different. It looked like a living creature now, one that had been to the unknown and returned. It had an aura of that of a soldier returning from war with a face that gazed off into the distance like home was always too far away and the enemy was always too close.

Finally, though, with sparks flying, the technicians backed away as the hydraulics fired and the exit hatch slowly exhaled from the ship. The crew wasted no time. First Jamo and Florence walked off. Emergency crews tried to help them both, but Jamo simply walked to the side and dropped to his knees as he burst into tears. Emergency crews wrapped him in a metallic blanket. Florence continued to walk, her knees slightly weak from the stronger gravity. She took the hand of an emergency worker who simply held her while she took in deep breaths of Earth's air. Annie came next, followed by Mel. They both stopped next to Florence and rejoiced. Mel's eyes searched the crowd and found Jackie, who ran up on her picked her up off her feet. Jerome was the next to exit, walking off the ship like he was about to pick a fight. Micah and George emerged from the crowd and uncharacteristically embraced him, and then went to check on Jamo, their junior gunner. Comiskey followed closely behind Jerome, but appeared to be in shock and collapsed into the arms of the medical staff.

*You've got to be kidding me. Where the hell are you?*

Before Bryce appeared, though, Justin walked out of the hatch. The crowd looked at him in awe, as though he was a man returning from the dead. He appeared different, older, mature. He had two bands around his wrists and a dark wrap from his waist down. His shirt was white, but of an unknown material. Some cheered, but others didn't know if he were real, or if he were still a friend, or if he were still human at all. It was Holiday who approached him first. Cautiously yet optimistic, she wanted to run to him, but also to verify he was safe.

"Justin?" she asked.

"Kris," was all he said. Then the wrapped object in his hands let out a howl and began crying. He was holding a baby.

"Justin?" Holiday asked again.

"Kris," Justin said again. He took a moment and appeared to be on the verge of tears. It'd be months before he could register he had actually returned to Earth. He turned to show Holiday the baby. "Kris, this is my son, little Nikon."

Holiday began to speak but stopped. The implication dropped on her like a slap in the face.

Then Bryce appeared. He had a woman in his arms. She was unconscious and had dried blood on her face, which seeped into her dark red hair. Bryce appeared to be uninjured, but his facial hair covered his face and he had lost weight.



“We need some help here!” he shouted as he walked the woman around his brother. “Medics! We need medics!”

Several medical officers who had been prepared in full body chem suits raced to him and took the woman from his arms. Justin immediately grew defensive and broke his gaze from Holiday. He followed the woman and the medical officers to an ambulance and entered with the child where they were whisked away to the medical laboratories.

Holiday, having seen Justin for the first time in nearly four years, snapped out of her shock and shouted, “Alert quarantine! They have incoming! All of Blackbird, back to the ship! You are not to go any further until you’ve been properly scanned! And everyone who has been in contact with them. Jackie, George, Micah, on the ship, now!”

Tink had no interest in listening to Holiday. She had already run to Bryce. He put on a nice face for her and opened his arms as she sprinted—to the best of her ability—toward him. She lunged off the ground and he caught her mid-air. She wrapped her legs around his waist and burst into tears.

“Tink, baby, I really never want to let you go, but I’m still adjusting to the gravity and all things considered, you’re really quite heavy.”

She laughed as he set her down and she was able to look at him more closely. He had on his flight suit and much like the ship, appeared different. He looked like he had looked upon hell and only now was coming to realize what he had been through.

“Hey, Tinker Bell, see, I’m home,” he said softly, squeezing her tight. Tink wrapped her arms around him again. “Tink, baby, everything’s okay.”

“You’re never allowed to go up again!” she wailed, throwing herself at him again. “I want to go away. You were right. Let’s leave.”

“Okay, we will. But first I need to go talk to these guys. There’s stuff they need to know.”

“Tink,” Holiday said, standing a few feet away. “That goes for you too now. We have mandatory quarantine for a reason.”

Tink sniffled. “Okay,” she said. She had no interest in leaving Bryce’s side, so she had no problems going into quarantine with him. She leaned in and kissed him. He tasted just as she remembered. His muscles felt like a blanket wrapped around her for eternal safety. She rubbed her hand through his brown hair. It was dirty, but it was his hair. It smelled like his hair. It felt like his hair.

Together, they began to walk back toward the ship along with the other crew

members.

“Where’s General Sartor?” Bryce asked Holiday and Colonel Smith. “We need to get Juniper on high alert. I have no idea who Justin just brought back with him, but I doubt this is over.”

“Got it,” Holiday said.

Colonel Smith, though, answered his other question. “General Sartor is currently in China. His work with China is why you were able to get back safely. It was a great thing.”

Bryce nodded. Tink knew something was wrong with him. She knew he was uncomfortable with what had gone down and needed to see Sartor. All she could do at the moment, though, was wrap her arm tighter around his stomach, so that’s what she did. Bryce instinctively reciprocated.

“When is he coming back?” Bryce asked.

Smith and Holiday looked at each other uncomfortably.

“Probably not for a while,” Smith finally said.

Bryce’s face dropped in exasperation.

“He’s not coming back! Why?”

“Because General Sartor has been relieved of his command of Juniper, effective immediately, Commander Staggert,” Perry Staggert said as he stepped forward.

“He’s been relieved?” Bryce asked, not yet registering who he was talking to. “Who the hell are...” But he stopped short. His face went ashen and Tink held his weight as his knees buckled. “Dad?” he asked incredulously.

Perry Staggert merely stared back at him. Bryce broke away from his stare and looked at Colonel Smith. Smith simply looked back at him with shrugged shoulders and a contorted face, as though he was too afraid to say, “Surprise.” Bryce stared at his father for another second and then retreated into the quarantine of the ship.

## Chapter 11 — Raymond Sartor

Raymond Sartor sat on his back patio and looked out across his several acres of property. He could hear the restlessness of his horses in the stable, the rising sun alerting them that the fields were green and the horizon was distant. He rocked back and forth in one of the twin rockers that he built many years ago at Amanda's behest during a particularly long break between posts. "You're bored and you've always wanted to build a rocking chair, what's your excuse not to?" Amanda had asked. She could be very direct, but so could a general officer, and he wouldn't have had it any other way.

Amanda came out of the back door with two cups of coffee and held one in front of him. He broke his gaze and directed his attention to her, allowing himself to smile. It was a new kind of smile. For thirty-five years he hadn't allowed himself to smile for the sake of smiling. He was simply trying something new, and Amanda was a pretty good reason.

He accepted the cup of coffee and looked at the light brown liquid. "Cream?" he asked.

"Kahlua," she replied with a smile. "You're retired, *General*, so let's enjoy it before something messes it up."

"Alcohol at 9:15? I can get used to this I think. Am I allowed to smoke?"

Amanda sat in her rocker with a sigh of relaxation. "Don't even think about it."

He laughed as he took a sip and then sighed.

"Besides, what could mess this up?"

As he asked it, the phone inside the house rang. Amanda rolled her head to the side in irritation.

"That," she said.

"It might be telemarketers."

"That'd be coincidental."

"It might not be for me," he said as the phone continued to ring.

"Raymond."

"I don't have to get it."

"But we both know you're going to, either now or when it rings again in fifteen minutes."

Sartor smiled again and let his head fall back against the chair. He took another sip, really beginning to embrace the idea of retirement. But he ultimately relented to the powers that be and pushed himself out of the chair. Amanda offered to take his cup, but he

refused to relinquish the beverage that tasted better with each sip.

He leaned down and kissed her as only a couple married for several decades could.

“Raymond,” Amanda said before he could fully pull away. “Please don’t let this put you in a bad mood.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

*Although it’d be easier if they’d stop calling.*

“You know, Raymond, if they wanted you to continue leading *Juniper*—and come on, what a silly name—they shouldn’t have fired you.”

Raymond stopped and dropped his chin to his chest, raising an eyebrow to signal she was being stupid. He was in no rush to answer the phone.

“Amanda, I wanted to retire, the secret of Juniper and my involvement was released to the world, and we had to act fast to show this wasn’t a military organization. It was the perfect time for my exit. If I can still help out, you know I’m going to.”

Amanda simply stared at him indignantly.

“Well, then put your Irish coffee down, you’re not allowed to have it.”

Sartor laughed and obeyed as commanded, setting his coffee mug on the patio beside his rocker. He huffed as he walked in the backdoor and picked the phone up off of the wall.

“Perry, you have a lot of advisors you can ask for guidance,” he said as an answer.

“Huh?” he heard on the other end. “Perry? Perry who? Perry Staggert? Ha! What a clown. I don’t for one second believe that spy bullshit. I know a traitor when I see one.”

Sartor held the phone away from his ear, not because the voice was loud, but because he could practically feel the spittle coming through the receiver.

“Senator Watson, what an unexpected and not horribly welcome surprise.”

Sartor could picture Senator Watson on the other end. His giant belly was probably plopped upon his desk and his red cheeks looked like a bad sunburn that had been sucked into his blood-red veins. The very thought of him was nauseating.

“Ha! Oh man, General, the things I always knew you wanted to say to me, and here you are in retirement, and suddenly you have no qualms.” Senator Watson broke into hysterical laughter that came out as deep, bellicose howling. “I always knew. I always knew. You have to hand it to funding. No one messes with you when you control the purse.”

Sartor was silent for a moment nodding his head softly and pondering what to say.

*Senator Watson, you are the vilest of human beings. Senator Watson, go fuck yourself.*

*Senator Watson, stand still so I can blow your head off with my shotgun.*

“Yes, you did in fact have an unfortunate amount of control over me. Now you have none, so is this a social call, or can I simply hang up?”

“Raymond, Raymond, Raymond, slow down. I’m sorry. I am. What you managed to do out there in the mountains, it’s beyond belief. I really believe only you could have done it. You know I never would have pulled your funding. This is a dog-eat-dog world, Raymond. Hell, this is a dog-eat-dog *galaxy*. You eat, or you get eaten. I had to be a hard ass with you. You had too much power. I don’t even think you realized how much power you had.”

Sartor leered around the edge of the doorway to see if his coffee mug was still there. He saw Amanda and the stable and the property and the horizon and the rising sun. He didn’t have to put up with this shit anymore.

“Senator Watson, I’m having a nice morning with my wife...”

“And you deserve it,” he interrupted.

Sartor tried to ignore the interruption.

“And let’s not forget, I’m currently under investigation.”

“Oh, Raymond, maybe I give you too much credit. That investigation is going away. I’m so far beyond that that I’m looking into your next job.”

*What did he just say?*

“Excuse me?”

“Your next job. Wait a minute, you not only think that you’re being investigated, you think you’re actually retired?”

Watson once again broke into howling laughter.

“Yes, as a matter of fact I do.”

“Raymond, General, you created something. You brought us to the ends of the galaxy and now you think you’re going to just cash it in? Come on. I may be fat, but at least I’m not stupid.”

Sartor wasn’t feeling particularly jovial at the moment.

“What are you talking about, Senator?”

“Alright, since you’re apparently too obtuse to figure it out. Your former deputy, Colonel Smith, we sent him back to NORTHCOM. He’s the J3. He’s in charge of operations and protecting the homeland. Your reckless commander, Staggert, is the Team Alpha commander. His father, that Chinese spy, Perry Staggert, spy or not, we gave him Juniper.

Your former golden girl, Holiday, is his deputy. You know all this, yes?"

"Yes, of course I do. It's all well deserved."

"Yeah, and the other God damn Staggert came back with aliens in tow."

Sartor gulped. "I advised sending them back."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. They kept Justin for almost four years, you think we're just going to send them back? And his son no less. Ha! The first God damn interplanetary species, right here on Earth, and you think we'd just say, sure, go back? Come on. We disabled any *connection* they can use. We're safe, for now. The point being, the team is all together, only it's expanded. It's more powerful than ever. It's just missing the pin that holds it all together?"

"The point being?"

Watson paused, clearly annoyed. Sartor didn't care. He didn't trust the fat piece of shit and wouldn't give him the satisfaction of being agreeable.

"Raymond, we're safe for the moment, but make no mistake, our planet is under attack. *Aliens* are attacking our planet. Juniper, scandal or not, cause of the attacks or not, is set to receive a windfall of funding the likes the world has never seen before. China has over three hundred operators that can link into the Seriam system. It has increased funding to its program by five fold. *Five fold!* Europe, Russia, and Brazil have all miraculously begun programs of their own. Hell, the UAE and Iran have discussed deep space programs. Congress is about to pass legislation that would allow us to build fifty more F-40s as an initial step. China has the operators—mind you, it's barbaric, but it's done—and we have the ships. Raymond, we are now part of a community and we need to start acting like it. These efforts, though, they need a pin to tie it all together."

"Quite a speech, Senator. And you think that pin is me?"

"I *know* that's you. You were never replaced as the Director of the International Association for Deep Space Cooperation. You are now permanently in Washington. You're now a civilian. This is your opportunity."

"Opportunity to do what?"

"Raymond, our planet is being threatened. All we know is that Juniper technology can keep us safe, but we need global resources to do so. This is your opportunity to no longer be the Director of the International Association for Deep Space Cooperation, but to be the Director of an international Juniper. Create a global organization. When our planet comes under attack, respond with a single, global response. And it's yours if you want it."

Sartor took one last look at his coffee mug and Amanda and his stables. An international Juniper. A one-planet response. When he spoke to Justin, however brief it was, Justin explained how in the Seriam Empire, planets act as one. They were now part of galactic community, as Watson just explained. All known military tactics were now thrown out the window. All zero-sum politics were no longer applicable. Borders were falling. The world didn't fight when it had a single common enemy.

Retirement had been so enjoyable.

## Epilogue — 28 years earlier

Augustus held his new child close to his chest. Despite best efforts at creating a male Solis, Seriam's fertilization team had appeared mystified at the embryo's failure to accept the introduction of a male chromosome. And on top of that, the child's skin was milky white, which in nearly every other instance would ensure a harsh and troubled life. "It's a mystery of science, High Governor," the team's lead scientist had declared. "Sometimes a child simply insists on being a woman."

"And white." Augustus knew the scientist was frightened. Augustus had a propensity for frowning on failure and a reputation for demanding excellence, and such a costly mistake could lead a promising scientific career into the depths of manual labor on a new colony. But Augustus was not angry. He wasn't angry when the fertilization team passed news of the sex of the child, and he certainly wasn't angry as he held her close to his heart.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Augustus said reassuringly.

"No words can describe it," Monty Garrison proclaimed, nearly as proudly as the father. Monty, having been recruited to Augustus' Council straight out of the University, still wore the feathered skirts of many young Seriamite males. He continued to gaze at the child and then leaned forward and kissed Augustus on the mouth. They remained lip-locked for several seconds as the child slept against Augustus' chest. They finally separated, but Monty kept his face close enough to the High Governor that Augustus could still feel the warmth of his breath.

"Are you okay?"

"High Governor," Monty said quickly, "I am very happy for you."

"That's not what I'm asking."

"I know."

Augustus nodded understandingly and began to softly rock the child back and forth.

"So, what do you think we should call her?"

Monty appeared miffed. "Augustus," he practically whispered, "I thought you had decided on a name with the mother."

"I did," Augustus confirmed. "But I'm interested in your thoughts."

"How is the mother, if I may ask?"

"Doing very well. I'll be sending her to her mother," Augustus said, looking at the child, "very shortly. If she's to be the ruler of Seriam, she needs to understand what it



means to be a woman of service.”

Monty looked horrified at the comment. Augustus motioned that he didn't mean it.

“I don't mean a woman of *service*, Monty. I mean she needs to understand how the majority of people of Seriam live. They live on a stipend, Monty. It's not glamorous. It's not Verita.”

“And what if she accepts those values over Verita's?”

“It's a risk, but a noble risk,” Augustus said, looking at his companion and Advisor.

“She's the first female Solis. She's going to disrupt everything.” He ran his fingers along her milky white skin. “She'll be considered a monster by some.”

“And a hero to others.”

“And a hero to others.”

“I'm so sorry, Monty,” Augustus said. “This isn't how I envisioned this. You and I. Me and her. Me and this. None of this went according to plan.”

“But it is the reality,” Monty said, reaching up and stroking Augustus' hair.

Augustus nodded aimlessly. It certainly was the reality.

“So, we need a name for the new Solis. What do you suggest, my advisor?”

Monty looked at her and saw the sun. She was anything but normal. White skinned and with a full set of fiery red hair, it almost seemed like the sun itself had fertilized the embryo. Monty looked up to the night sky and saw the star burning down brightly.

“How about Lilith?” he offered.

“Lilith,” Augustus immediately said. “That's perfect.”

The two looked down on her sleeping peacefully. Unpredictably, though, Augustus stood and gave her to an AH Server. He turned and looked at Monty earnestly, as though he had something hard to say.

“Monty, *Lilith* creates problems.” Monty began to talk, but Augustus waved him off. “I'm not looking for reassurances. I'm looking for pledges.”

“Pledges?” Monty asked, standing to look at Augustus in the eye.

“Monty, *Lilith* creates problems. It doesn't matter if she grows up to be an honorable person or a demon. It doesn't matter what trajectory she takes. There will be people that challenge her. But she needs to rule. Seriam needs her.”

“Okay,” Monty said, confused.

“Monty, to ensure that happens, I have a feeling I will call on you for a favor. The favor very well might threaten your own life.”

“You know I’ll do it,” Monty said, cutting him off.

“I know you will,” Augustus said laughing, placing his hand on Monty’s shoulder. “You’re an amazing human being. But, it is possible you won’t understand the favor. I just want you to be prepared for what comes.”

“Augustus, I’m prepared, but I feel compelled to say, you won’t be able to protect her from everything.”

Augustus smiled and turned his head to the side in an effort to comprehend Monty’s statement.

“Monty, it’s not about protecting her. She could die tomorrow and that’s the reality of nature. But assuming she grows to be a true Solis, we must prep her for the impossible. It’s about instilling in her that she doesn’t have to be confident she will always succeed; she has to be confident that doubts in herself are unfounded. Monty, this might cost you your life, I don’t yet know, but the fate of the Empire might depend on it. Can I depend on you?”

Monty grasped Augustus by the shoulders and leaned in and kissed him once more.

“My life belongs to her.”