# Back of the Book Summary: After successfully defeating the galaxy's most aggressive race, humankind has finally been asked to join the Galactic Council. The position gives Earth voting rights that will help govern all sentient beings. Warwick Stone, a self-made billionaire, is chosen as our first ambassador. He travels to Daygone 6, a distant space station that is home to the Council. He’ll face many challenges as he tries to survive in an alien web of politics, espionage, and war. Fortunately, he’s not alone. Wick has been assigned an alien assistant, a known spy with a bad attitude and unmatched skill as a hacker. Together, they will face Earth’s newest and biggest threat yet.

# Days Gone By

by Duzt

Note: This story is written in Baar but follows human syntax. Words or phrases without clear matches in your language will be marked with italics by your automatic translator. [Still needs to be done]

### Chapter 1

 It was a miracle that we even met.

Warwick Stone, the first human ambassador to sit on the Galactic Council, faced five assassination attempts as he traveled to the Daygone 6 station. I thwarted three. The fourth he never spoke about, only saying he held a gracious negotiation with Death. The fifth sat in a vase on the desk in his new office.

The gap between the broad orange petals of the ululu flower matches the average distance between the fingers of a resting hand, encouraging a subconscious desire to touch. For Hikan, that embrace would be fatal. When the avian species first started exploring the stars, many of their kind found a brutal end, a poetic death, merely passing by blossoms. Ululu flowers were illegal on Daygone, but that didn't stop some ignorant assassin from hoping humans would succumb to the same effect.

"Smells like wet gravel covered in honey," those were the first words Wick said to me. The human ambassador entered from the side door that led to his personal quarters.

How to describe a human? They have no fur and no markings to detail. Warwick Stone stood average height for a male human, around two meters, almost a meter taller than me. The patch of hair on top of his head matched the white fur of my muzzle seen at sunset, a ghostly blonde. I'm told his color is uncommon for humans of his age and skin tone. The gap from the bottom of his nose to the top of his lip was just enough space for my kiss. The bump at the base of his neck, on his back, was very ticklish.

"What does it smell like for a Baar?" he asked, taking a seat behind his desk.

I often wonder how he would've described me in that moment. Humans are fond of comparing other sentient races to animals found on their homeworld. That means, in his eyes, I was a female red panda. Rust-red body fur, black arms and legs, small swatches of white on the face: I'm very average for a Baar. Even the rings on my tail are too stark and my ears too fluffy.

"Tears," was my muttered response. "Ululu flowers smell like tears in a tissue." What a cliché response. I'd give anything to have that conversation, our first conversation, again. I felt so shy around him. Why? I knew every detail of his life; the espionage agencies made sure I memorized all the files on him. I felt shy and I blamed him for it. Such a personal question: what does the flower of death smell like to you?

'They smell like your saliva on my fur. The petals feel like your chin, just after you shave. The stems sway in the wind like your eyes when you read,' is what I should have said. 'You don't need Kiki. Don't open any maroon boxes. You're afraid of being like that star you watched vanish as a kid. You like fried chicken and mashed potatoes. You have 100 ways to say yes and only 2 ways to say no. Your name is the birthplace of fire. You're a human, but I love you, Wick.' All the things that weren't in the files, all the things I didn’t know yet, I should have said all the things that could have made him love me back.

Instead, "You should throw them out," is what I bluntly said.

"They are illegal," he replied. "I have no choice. Only makes me savor them more."

"Tell that to a Hikan."

His eyes lingered on the flowers for a moment before making a lazy trip around the office. Everything was white, made of rare evok wood. The chairs, the shelves, the floor, the walls, the desk: their glossy surfaces all lightly shimmered, as if covered in diamond dust. The only darkness was the large window behind the desk, a portal to outside the station. Outer space sparkled too, just with fewer points of light.

"Lexi." His eyes sharply stopped and stayed, on me. "Is that a typical name for your kind?"

"Yep."

"Do you know why I'm here, Lexi?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes and recited, "You've been chosen to be the human ambassador to the Galactic Council. As only one of five races with voting privileges, your choices will determine laws that affect all 17 sentient races. This opportunity carries the utmost prestige and honor."

He leaned forward, perching over a journal sitting on his desk. That small, nearly-empty book, Wick's red journal, it would soon become my obsession. "You work for GAIA, right?" he asked.

The Galactic Intelligence Agency, the most powerful human espionage agency, accepted my application a decade ago. Now, I was here, assigned to help and protect Earth's first voting ambassador. "Yes, but we should probably keep that a secret." I gave a forced and exaggerated wink.

"Then tell me why I'm really here."

The human leaned even further forward, making the space between us just small enough that if he reached over the desk and I outstretched my arm, our fingertips would touch. It made me uncomfortable, so I moved back, pressing my tail painfully into the bucket of the chair. Only humans would have chairs without a gap for tails.

I gave my answer, "Humanity defeated the Rawca Armada when they defended my homeworld. It has been a hundred generations since anyone beat the rawca. Not even the yent can stop their fleets. The last time, all 17 races allied and created the Galactic Council."

Wick continued for me, "The laws of the Council are a leash for the rawca. There are only five voting races, which gives those dogs a minor feeling of control. Although humanity is the youngest of the star-travelling races, with only 2 star system so far, we easily defeated the undefeatable. So why not invite us to the Council, see if that leash fits us too?"

"That assessment is classified," I said, pressing my ears back. "Did ORCA tell you?"

"No, it's obvious. Humanity doesn't deserve this, not yet. Still, most of my kind see this opportunity, a seat on the Galactic Council, as a gift, a wonderful favor that heralds our glorious rise to power."

"You're right. By joining the Council, humans agree to be governed by its laws. Laws that limit fleets and weapons. Laws that limit expansion."

"Someone tried to assassinate me, Lexi."

"Could be the Rawca," I offered.

"Why? Kill one ambassador and they'll send another. So, I'll ask again. Why am I, Warwick Stone, here?"

"You were the only name that appeared on every list."

The human turned in his chair, his eyes shifting to the window behind his desk. The 6th planet of the Daygone system, the water world called Wava, filled his view. A hurricane was forming on the planet's endless sea, a white gear that turned slowly.

I continued, "The 9 human intelligence agencies, the military, and the senate were all asked to make a list of candidates for the first ambassador. Only Warwick Stone, acting CEO of Crest Technology, age 33, human, received a recommendation from each." It was all in his dossier. "Right handed, no allergies, phobia of deep water. Prefers to be called Wick. Military clearance level nine, due to weapon research contracts. Took over company from deceased mentor, Brent Shell. Higher than average IQ, very loyal, considered a master of negotiations. Prefers evening alone. Often found reading classic romance novels from alien races. Hums when he thinks nobody is around."

Wick turned back to face me, a sincere smile on his face. "Anything you don't know about me?"

"No living relatives," I added. "Never been in a long-term relationship. Completely dedicated to his work, almost to a fault. Reluctant to accept the role as humanity's first member of the Galactic Council. Biggest risk for compromise, being seduced by a female alien." But no mention of a journal.

"You still didn't answer my question." He stood sharply, raising to his full height.

"You're here to fail. You are a logical candidate, but far from the most qualified. The agencies would like any excuse to end this arrangement. Humans hate leashes."

Wick slowly walked around this desk, his eyes firmly fixed on me. I felt like a tiny rodent locked in the gaze of a starving snake. I knew he would try this soon. He wanted to make me uncomfortable. It's the oldest negotiation tactic: put the other side on the defense early to learn their signs for doubting.

"Why are you telling me this?" He took a seat in the chair beside me and leaned. I could smell the scent of his hair. We were apart by a small distance, the distance that two young lovers would be the evenings before their first kiss.

"I," I stammered, "I've sworn to serve and protect you. You're my assignment."

"You'll do anything for me?"

"Yeah. Supposed to die to protect you." I had already moved back as far as I could into the chair.

He reached out, the gap between us disappeared. He put his hand on my forearm. Warm. His fingers settled into my fur and pushed a warmth down to my skin. "Then tell me, why are you here, Lexi?"

"Failure. I know. Why assign a Baar as the designated advisor to the first human ambassador? They want me to go down with you. I've known for a long time that the agencies outside GAIA hate me. I'm not human, but I am the best hacker in the galaxy."

"No," he said in a very calm voice. He didn't move his fingers. I was grateful for that. "Why are you really here, Lexi?"

Then it came. The truth. I told him. Why then? Because this was a suicide mission. My career, and probably my life, would end with this Wick. It felt fitting that if we were going to share a last breath together on this failing spaceship, that someone finally know the truth of my story.

It all came so clearly.

"I remember the missiles. I was 8 when the Rawca fleet reach orbit above our homeworld. It was summer. Twilight. Indigo skies. I thought they were shooting stars. For my people, seeing a shooting star means you'll soon find love. So young, so dumb.

"They have to go slow, the warheads, to pierce the atmosphere. Hundreds, maybe thousands, streaming across the sky. That's when it happened. The human fleet arrived too late. Your pilots didn't have time to think. Instinct. They flew their fighters into the missiles. Tiny dots swirling like fireflies. For everyone pilot that barely missed, there were three more trying.

"Boom! One after another, the payloads detonated in the sky. The sound pounded against me, our whole world was a drum. The fireworks punished my eyes. I didn't look away; I couldn't. This was the greatest symphony ever conducted. Humans sacrificing themselves. Any hesitation, even the smallest pause, and millions of my kind would've died."

His hand didn't move, and now I felt grateful for its firm strength. I didn't look him in the eyes. I wish I had.

I continued, "That wasn't the end for me. I became obsessed with that moment. I became a hacker. Why? To learn more. How could humans sacrifice themselves for aliens? Ten years later, I broke into your military archives. I was a teen, determined to prove something wrong. I would find proof that your ships were on autopilot, or empty, or that the pilots resisted the command."

He asked a simple question, showing that he was listening closely, "What did you find?"

"The audio recordings of the pilots: Tell my wife that I love her. Who wants to live forever anyway? Let's show these dogs what we're made of. I got this one. It's been an honor to fly with all of you. For freedom. Fear nothing.

"They laughed. They cheered. I heard the commanding officers ordering the pilots to stop. They didn't.

"I wept for an hour, listening to those final words on loop. Next year I joined GAIA, swearing that I would someday, somehow repay those pilots."

What Wick did next forever locked that moment in my memory. He reached out, put two fingers on my far cheek, and gently turned my eyes to face his. "You sure it was summer?" he asked. "When the missiles came."

His eyes, indigo with a tiny fleck of yellow, my shooting star. "Yes, of course it was summer. I remember the warmth," like his hand. "The smells, the perfume of long days. The ululu flowers…"

Warwick stood up sharply and returned to the far side of his desk.

"They were blooming." I looked at the vase. Could it be? Maybe it wasn't an assassin. Memories are tied most strongly to scents.

I snapped my teeth and lifted my nose. I didn't like being tricked.

He chuckled. "Your training is impressive. I'm not sure if that story of yours is real, but you keep your discomfort hidden. I know baar are big on personal space. Yet no ear twitch or whisker flick when I touched you. Such control of body language. So if you show no signs of deception, that probably means you’re lying to me."

"I would never lie about that!" I despised him. How could he know that I'd never shared those memories with anyone else? I couldn't blame him for suspecting me and a possible made-up history to gain his trust.

"Lexi, I have no choice. I hate losing. I will do whatever I can to make this work. I don't care if the military, the spies, the politicians, or the rawca want to see me fail. I'm going to win. That means I have to trust you." For the first time, he let his hair drop. His eyes softened, becoming more like the rodent than the snake. "I can't do this alone."

He had no choice? He could quit. He could give up any time. If this failed, my life would be over. How could he not see that? "Well," I said, still fuming, "we're stuck together."

He winced, probably hoping for a more compassionate response. Even then, something inside me felt a need to keep his grin from fading. "Don't worry," I said. "I hate losing too."

"That's the spirit!" One of his ways of saying yes. "Let's go conquer the universe together."

To be human is to hate beginnings, to fear your endings won't overcome great expectations. That's the first advice given by my instructor at GAIA. Humans dream big but prefer to join the march, prefer to continue, prefer being part of something bigger than the individual. This makes manipulating their sense of purpose easy.

At the time, I didn't know if he was afraid. How could he not be? Everyone was betting, hoping, against him.

Warwick Stone was human, but he was different.

### Chapter 2

Sneaking is best done with bare feet. The cool polished floor gave way to wool rug as I moved from the office into Wick's private quarters. The lights stayed off. I didn't need them. Both my parents were born blind, so naturally I spent many days as a cub with my eyes closed, trying to fit in. Besides, all the private rooms on Daygone 6 were laid out as if they belonged in a luxury hotel, intuitive to navigate by design.

I enjoyed the soundscape of Wick's new home. The claws on my feet tickled the fibers of the rug, crackling softly like walking on the thinnest snow. A slight breeze from the ventilation system swayed the shirts hanging in his closet, the hangers knocking every so often like branches of neighboring trees. The electronics and large monitor in the sitting area gave off a familiar buzz, like summer bugs. Snow, trees, bees: the easily ignored sounds of his private space.

Then, I reached it. Right there, in the middle, his bed sat like a stone that parts the flow of a river. I adored the rustle of the blankets as I slumped down beside it. It would be many more days before I would climb on top.

Of course, he wasn't there. Wick was off, meeting with one of the ambassadors. I came for the item sitting on the nightstand: his journal. I reviewed the footage from my hidden camera in this office every night. I saw everything, his visitors and intruders, but not this. No angle gave me a clear view of what he wrote.

I waited. A few moments later, right on schedule, the sun crested the top of Wava. As light pierced the upper atmosphere of the nearby planet, a faint blue glow poured onto the station and through the large window of his room. Most of the living quarters faced outer space. Only the ambassadors and wealthy got a view of the water planet.

I remember the sound of the paper as I carefully lifted the cover on his journal, a little click, like some universal clock had stopped on a single second. I savored it every time.

His first entry was short. The automatic translator (that tiny chip implanted in the brains of all newborns) is unable to interpret handwritten words. This wasn't an issue. Most races didn't even teach handwriting anymore. Fortunately, I'd been trained to read almost every human language.

I start this to fulfill a promise I never wanted to make.

I checked the records. The manifest for the last official shuttle to Daygone 6 lists Warwick Stone's personal items: clothing, digital tablet, comms watch, currency, toothbrush, nail clippers, sapling, and deck of playing cards. No journal. Someone on board must have given it to him.

His next entry was written shortly after arriving on the station.

Awe.

That's what I felt. Lights off. Gravity off. Floating in my private cabin on the shuttle, watching out the window. The station approached with her large, blue planet. Someone had just chosen not to kill me. That's when I felt it.

Awe.

While all the sentient races have startling similarities (laughter, dreams, warm blood, tears, carbon based, two genders, one heart), the subtleties of their minds make all the difference. Yent can control their dreams, allowing them to play out fantasies as they sleep, giving them great control while awake. The Mirj can selectively erase memories. Must make breakups easier.

The question is then, what makes humans unique (besides the lack of fur or scales)? Instinct. All other alien races think analytically. They approach every thought like a puzzle and solve it with efficiency. It is no wonder that Earth took the longest to reach the stars.

Only human get that 'gut feeling', those seemingly random thoughts that come from pulling together shapeless experiences. All races have memories, and those memories can be triggered by familiar scents (like the smell of flowers that grow near your childhood home). Humans, however, can develop new thoughts from randomly mashed together memories. Inspiration. It certainly has an impact on our art.

From this uniquely human phenomena comes one great emotion: awe.

Awe is that moment when your brain encounters something so profound that it literally changes everything. We cannot describe it. You can recall the seconds before and the hours after, but during that moment of awe, your brain is rewriting itself, reorganizing to understand your new reality. You stand there, captured in the glow of a single moment. You escape, usually with one deep breath, forever changed.

Most of us experience it when we stand on a mountain for the first time and see just how big the world is. It happens when we see a perfect sunset and learn how beauty can be unexpected. Our first astronauts came back to Earth changed, having seen how insignificant and fragile our planet truly is.

I experienced it when Brent told me he was dying. He was my family. Everything ends. I experienced awe again as the shuttle approached the Daygone station.

Here was my new home, the place where I would define my legacy. So few are those who get to hold the pen and write directly their page of history.

Grrr, and writing is painful. My hand is cramping! Keeping this journal is going to take practice.

I wish I could walk in the snow, back at my cabin on Earth.

I need a break.

My assigned advisor should be arriving soon anyway. She seems eager to meet. I hear she's a Baar. Not even human. An ambassador for an entire race and I will barely see my own kind.

The circles in his letters were small, but perfect. The gaps between his words were a little large, somewhat tragic, but I liked it.

Wick would have many human visitors, but he was indeed only one of three living permanently on the station. The other was a rather fat business woman.

Wick’s next entry focused on the hours after we first met, when I introduced him to his Wex.

I met the tiger in my office.

Every ambassador to Daygone is allowed one advisor and one assistant. The practice started thousands of years ago when the Yent held political courts on their homeworld. When they started the Galactic Council, they naturally insisted on the tradition.

Each ambassador may select their advisor. Mine was chosen for me, a Baar named Lexi. I'm still not sure of her motives or loyalty. All I know is that she's very short!

The ambassador's assistant, however, is assigned. Daygone station resides in the neutral space of the Wex. Much like the Swiss in Earth history, the Wex have remained neutral. Their race believes in serving and oaths. They often say the only thing more loyal than a Wex is the love of a Baar.

A tiger. While all Wex look like anthropomorphic cats, mine looked like a white tiger. He wasn't much taller than me, but he looked massive standing beside Lexi. His pearl-colored fur matched nicely with the white of his button shirt and the office's décor. The black strips on his face all pointed toward the top of his cheeks, to his only mark of color, eyes bright, flecks of jade.

"I've been thinking a lot about you, Lexi." The tiger grinned at the red panda.

"I know." She crossed her arms and rolled her eyes. "Ambassador Stone, please let me introduce Quest Huffix, your chosen Wex."

"Huffix?" I asked. "The second richest Wex family, only beneath your Queen."

"Being sworn to one of the ambassadors of the Galactic Council is an immense honor," explained Lexi.

"I was hoping you'd be female," said Quest with a nonchalant shrug. "Still, we can make this work." He gave a quick flick of his striped tail, tapping the back of Lexi's head.

She shoved him. She might as well have tried to shove an oak tree. It made little difference. "You're a pervert. This is important, Quest. Focus. Are you the most uncouth Wex in the galaxy?"

"Are you the most prudish Baar?" He seemed to enjoy teasing her, like a big brother constantly tormenting his little sister.

I tried to interrupt, "Quest?"

"No lie," he continued. "I've been intimate with almost every sentient race."

"Mirj dung cats aren't sentient," Lexi quickly added.

The tiger didn't stop, too eager to finish his thought, "I've never been with a Spx; they don't count. And I've never been with a Baar! Why? They worship love. They marry by twelve and stay forever loyal. Mates for life." He lifted his tail, using it to point down on Lexi. "Can you imagine my excitement when I finally meet the only single, adult Baar in the entire galaxy and she's a lesbian."

"I'm not a lesbian!"

"Then how can you resist?" His grin returned with a puffed up chest and a chuckle.

Lexi changed the subject, "You recognize the name, right Ambassador? Quest Huffix, the oldest living son of Amex, the head of the Huffix family. Your assistant stood to inherit the entire fortune but that changes today."

I asked why, watching the tiger carefully. His smile, full of massive teeth and fangs remained, but slowly changed. Every race smiles, and for every race that expression does not exist between the lips. It lives, and dies, in the eyes. The jade circles above his fluffy cheeks began to wander slightly.

"Tradition states that the Wex give a life-long oath of loyalty when starting service with a member of the Galactic Council. Wex take oaths very seriously. He'll be sworn to serve you for the rest of his life, and therefore must give up his claim on the family fortune."

Quest closed his eyes for a long moment before letting his gaze fixate on the window behind my desk and the empty void beyond. "I even have to give up the family name." His voice remained loud and boastful, trying to hide the struggle within, "Just as if I had married someone well beneath me."

Startled, my concentration was lost to an unexpected moment. Lexi took a quick step back, putting space between her and the tiger. She watched him. Her hands began to tremble ever so slightly, as if she suddenly received terrible news. I would soon learn the reason for her reaction, but I still don't know the details.

Quest clearly didn't see her reaction. He kept speaking loud and staring quietly. "You like that part, huh? Met many Baar, Ambassador? They are soft, gentle, and sweet. This one, she's a jagged piece of glass."

Lexi responded, but there was less bite in her barb, "And Wex are usually more respectful." It felt like she was trying to help him, rather than insult.

They both snapped out of their haze when I spoke, "The oath is tradition? Then let's skip it. Humans have never been big fans of tradition."

"No." The tiger quickly stepped forward and slammed his paws on my desk. They were massive, each finger tipped with a blunt, black claw. His smile, both the one in his teeth and the one in his eyes, returned to sincerity. "I insist. It'll be great fun."

"What good is an oath?" I asked. "I don't believe in promises. You could keep your word or it could lure me into a false sense of trust. You could still betray me."

"I won't," he said.

"He won't," she said.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I can read his mind," said the red panda. I couldn't help myself; I fell into laughter.

"I like this human laughter," said Quest. "So energetic."

I believed them.

Wick smartly omitted part of our conversation. I wasn't lying. I could literally read the mind of his Wex. Quest allowed me to inject him with TRIC - Thought Interception and Relay Computers - tiny nano machines that live in his brain and send encrypted signals to the translation chip in my head.

Used typically by espionage agencies for interrogation, TRIC is highly illegal. I was surprised when Quest recommended it. Although very powerful, it rarely works. The messages require that the listener understands the symbols in the mind of the sender. It pains me to admit it, but I always seemed to understand Quest. I could read him like a book.

Wick asked the obvious question. Why not him? Wouldn't it make more sense if the ambassador could listen to the thoughts of his sworn assistant.

Is it possible for humans to use a TRIC connection? Technically, yes, but it changes them forever. Scientists believe it has something to do with how the human brain works. The receivers develop an instant and deep empathy for the target. Naturally, this makes interrogations hard.

When being taught to use TRIC, the instructors at GAIA told us that they depend on their alliance with the Baar for receivers. The unshakable loyalty of my kind is an asset humans cannot afford to lose.

So, what did I read from Quest's mind as he stared out the window? His thoughts wandered to a subject I never thought to ask about: love. For that small tuff of time, he thought about Orsa. Orsa. Orsa. The one that got away, the definition of love, the distance he would never shrink.

Wick's entry continued.

Quest suddenly began to recite his oath, "I, Quest Huffix, the first-born son of Amex, make this life pledge. My past is forfeit to this new fire. All bonds and pacts are shed and discarded like ash in the wind."

He said the words with little passion. Almost none. Like a kid reciting multiplication tables for a parent that isn't listening. "I swear myself from this moment onward to the service of the human named Warwick Stone, first ambassador of his kind. Every breath I take shall fuel the flames until the end, when light shall succumb to the dark."

"What?" Lexi blurted. "Wex can give that oath only once in their lifetime. How could you do it so…"

"Ceremony bores," said the Tiger. "That's it! I'm now yours, human. Command me as you will."

I'd heard about Wex life oaths. One of the reasons the Wex could remain the only true neutral race in the galaxy was the abilities of their individuals to keep true to their pacts and promises.

"Stand on one foot," I said, as a test, "and take off your shirt."

My advisor interrupted, "Wick! That's not how it works."

"No, no, no," said Quest, eagerly lifting his leg and undoing his buttons. "This is a good request." We shared a grin.

"Stuff you both!" Lexi threw up her arms. "You're already teaming up against me."

The pale fur of the tiger added a shimmer to the well shaped muscles of his chest. Black strips marked his sides like scars, all angled slightly towards his breast, reaching for his heart. "What's next?"

"You can put your legs down," I said. "Lexi is right. I don't want a slave."

"Then what do you want?" he asked with a wink.

"I want to win."

Quest tossed this shirt over his shoulder, shifted his weight to his left foot, and pointed at me with his tail. "And? How do we know? Know when we won?"

"Our enemies know us. They curse us in their beds. Everyone else doesn't care, don't even know our names. You, me, and Lexi: we do this a long time. We grow old together, forgotten, in a galaxy at peace."

"Winning is growing old? Forgotten?" The tiger gave one sharp laugh. "I love it! You humans are crazy."

How could I have known then just how important Quest's question was? How do we know when we won?

I returned the journal to the nightstand and sneaked quietly away.

### Chapter 3

To start, Wick's nervous habits annoyed me.

The next day, we waited for the Yent Ambassador. Introductions were required and we were summoned to the Garden, the most luxurious section of the station. The area was made to look like a traditional Yent meeting yard. At the center was a raised hill, surrounded by water. Two small, delicate bridges reached from opposite sides. Guests would meet in the middle. The bridges would break if either was brash enough to bring something as heavy as a weapon.

To cross the tiny bridge, a large Rawca would need to be thin and nearly naked. Of course, the Otta skip the bridge. They always prefer water.

While we waited, kneeling at the small table atop the rise, Wick scratched the front of his teeth. When lost in thought, he often did this. Dull human ears can't hear that aggravating sound, like using a bone to sand a rock. Yes, it annoyed me that much. When he was alone, or at least thought he was alone, Wick hummed instead. I much preferred that.

Of course, I was not free of bad habits. When I don't feel like thinking, I grab my tail and twist the fingers around the black rings in my fur. Playing with your tail is childish and rude for a Baar. I couldn't help it. My parents, being blind, never saw me doing it. I didn't know it was bad behaviour until I attended public school and the practice was already set. It felt calming.

I wonder if he ever noticed and how much it annoyed him.

"Where's Quest?" he asked.

"In the market, meeting with his cousin."

"Not off to a great start. First day on the job and the new employee is a no show."

"I wouldn't hold it against him," I said. "Not this time."

"All right." That was it. He trusted my word and never brought it up again. "So," he asked next, "if you know where everyone is, where is this Yent ambassador?"

"She's been waiting in her office for the last hour."

"Yent like to keep guests waiting?"

"Of course not!" I rolled my eyes. "She's just too busy to come rushing to greet us."

"So how do I make her uncomfortable? In my experience, Yent bottle emotions better than any other race. Probably because they can control their dreams."

In my short time with Wick, I found this to be a normal negotiation tactic. On the first meeting, he liked to move the conversation somewhere uncomfortable. Noting the body language of someone obviously distressed made it easier to tell when they were subtly upset or lying.

"Attack her legacy. Yent live for tradition. Ambassador Orsa is both the youngest and first female ambassador of her kind," I explained. "The last Yent representative served for over 100 years."

"How did she get the position?"

"She's simply better."

"Better?" He looked at me.

"Better than everyone else." I continued to wrangle my tail. "She crushed her political rivals. Be careful around her."

"You don't like meetings like this?"

"I prefer computers. They don't try to twist your words. Autocorrect might, but not on purpose."

"Well," he said, putting a hand on my shoulder, "let me do the talking." He had raised an eyebrow, trying to show cocky confidence. "I crushed a lot of rivals too."

The gap between his fingers evenly spread his weight over my shoulder. I couldn't help but lean into it, ever so slightly. "Sorry. I won't be much use in meetings like this, but if you want me to hack her computer afterwards, you just tell me."

The vibration of his chuckle echoed into my arm. "I bet she has some freaky por--."

We were interrupted. "My apologies, Ambassador Stone. I never intended to keep you waiting. Far too many important matters these days."

Wick often called Ambassador Orsa Vellt a deer. She stood tall and slender, her thin arms giving a false sense of fragility. Her felt-like fur carried a creamy, near white color. Her slight muzzle was dappled with brown spots that continued to the back of her large ears. Still, when looking at the Yent ambassador, one could barely escape her piercing, blue eyes.

Beside her was Hall, her assistant. He acted more like a bodyguard, with a massive frame that only made his fellow Yent look small. Hall’s impressive antlers arched up and forward. Most male Yent had their antlers trimmed for convenience. Imagine getting in a shower with those things. Only the richest Yent could afford the luxury of full antlers. Unfortunately for Hall, he only had eight points. Females preferred ten or more.

Both of the Yent wore white, an ethereal linen that seemed to float around their forms. While it was customary for ambassadors to wear white, they style and fabric of the clothing varied. Of course, the deer would wear Only the most luxurious and tailored affairs.

"It is an honor to meet you, Ambassador Vellt." Wick stood, his hand, still on my shoulder, encouraging me to join him. "I hope our relationship may grow like the trees in this garden. To such effect, I have asked the groundskeepers to plant a cherry tree."

The human motioned towards the newly planted sapling just over the water. Keeping the soil, water, and light right for so many exotic plants was torture for the gardeners. They were often found at the bars by the loading docks, complaining, and giving up valuable information about meetings and conversations held amongst the branches and bushes. Of course, it would be beneath the Yent to even acknowledge their existence. Made my job easier.

"Bringing a plant to the meeting garden is a sacred tradition." The deer kept an unbreakable poise when speaking. Every word was precise and seemingly emotionless, although she never failed to project a sense of superiority, judgement, and disdain. "I'm surprised that a human would know such a thing."

"I have had my negotiations with Yent business partners," said Wick.

"Hmm, and not one told you the sheer appalling nature of a plant that drops its leaves and petals? See all these plants, human?" Orsa swept a slow and graceful hand before her. “Four hundred generations of gifts. The galaxy was forged here, amongst these living artifacts. Now, with the first of your kind, we get a cherry tree, a plant that will look ugly when the branches are bare. Litter. Might sour a thought; start a war."

He paused, taking time to think of a response. "Surely rebirth and renewal give thoughts of hope."

Her response came promptly, as if she anticipated his answer, "Hope is for those too weak or lazy to actualize their aspirations. Enough talk of plants and dying things. Please sit."

We took our places at the small table atop the rise. Wick and I sat on one side, Orsa on the other. Her assistant remained standing, a clear indication that the Yent ambassador didn't think him worthy to join.

"Thank you for taking the time to meet with me," said the human.

"I assume we are both too busy for pleasantries, Warwick Stone. Let us move to the crux of our conversation. You don't belong here."

Again, Wick paused before responding. "Many would agree with you. I'm surprised that I was selected to be ambassador. However, even the Yent may choose an ambassador that many consider unconventional."

Orsa didn't hesitate, "Not you. Are all humans so self-centered? Your people don't belong here, not on the Council. It's an insult to my kind. While humans were still climbing trees and peeing on everything, the Yent were exploring the stars and saving the planets from the first great Spx invasion."

He ignored the insult and took a moment to look around the garden. He bumped my leg lightly with his. "Lexi, when the Council voted to replace the spot held by the Mirj, who voted in favour?"

Of course I knew the answer, but I stumbled to find the proper words, "Uhh, umm, I believe it was four in favour with only the Mirj against. Yes. That was it."

"Thank you," is all he said before returning to his long gaze.

Wick bumped my leg again under the table. This time, he said nothing. I look at Orsa. There was a tiny fleck of anger. The deer clinched her jaw, ever so slightly, putting a tiny dimple on her cheek. Such a tiny sign of discomfort, but it was there.

Wick finally spoke, "It seems your words and actions don't match. If humans don't belong on the Council, why vote to add us."

Her composure returned, the dimple disappeared, by the time his eyes returned to her. She spoke harsh words, but continued to maintain an emotionless tone, "Are all human minds so slow? You're little better than the Rawca. Brutes. Someone must control you for the ongoing peace of the galaxy. If left to your own volition, humans would flood out from Earth and consume. Consume and consume."

This time, the human responded quickly, "I wonder which tree put such a thought in your head. Must be frustrating having so much power in the hands of plants."

"Clever," was all she said, with a wry smile. According to tradition, a conversation among Yent must be bidirectional. Each statement must have a response, not matter how long it takes to be given. Interrupting that process would be considered very rude. While Orsa made us wait to start our meeting, Wick had made her wait between every thought.

"What about you, Lexi?" the deer changed her target. "What do the Baar think about the humans?"

I didn't have the patience to consider my answer. "Humans are artistic, self-sacrificing, and bold. I think they can, uhm, be rather romantic too."

"Not noble. Not wise. Not hard working. Romantic?" Orsa glanced over her shoulder at her male assistant. He gave her a chuckle, although she promptly lifted a hand, as if it were inappropriate. "Such a Baar answer. Such useless dreamers, your kind. They say the fact your kind never had a war is a testament. I think it speaks only to cowardice."

Unlike the ambassadors, I wasn't good at controlling my anger. "The Yent are better? Noble, wise, and hard working? Sure. Kind, benevolent, and compassionate? Never." My fangs made an audible snap as I grimaced. "You see the rest of us as children."

She didn't flinch, didn't raise her voice, didn't hesitate. "Yes, like children." It felt like she knew what I would say before I said it. "The young make mistakes. That's how they grow. And humanity is still in its infancy. Your biologically short lives make you impatient. You'll do brash and dumb things for generations before you're worthy of being among the stars. I am nothing more than a babysitter, trying to keep the galaxy safe."

Wick bumped my leg under the table, stopping my angered response. "I thank you for that, ambassador. It will be a privilege," he said, "to learn from the guidance of the great Yent. I hope that I can succeed in the same capacity as you have during your short tenure."

Her eyebrow lifted, surprised by the real sincerity in his voice. "You certainly have a lot to learn."

Wick stood. "Indeed we do. I wish we could start the lessons now, but as you said, there is much to do. Please allow us our leave."

"The drinks haven't arrived yet," offered the timid voice of Hall, the male deer. Normally these meetings were held while consuming Yent tea and playing a laborious card game called Ne-zme. It was rude to leave before the drinks and games were done, so I couldn't blame Wick for wanting to escape.

Orsa waved a hand. "I'm sure we'll chat many time ahead, human."

"Thank you." Before we departed, Wick said one last thing, "Ambassador Orsa, can we expect a lo-trye, as honour guests?"

Her ears went back. "Certainly. I'm shocked you'd even ask."

"Wonderful." Wick walked away. We spoke as we crossed the fragile bridge over the water. Each step gave a lovely creak, like a bird chirp. Nothing complains nicer than coxy wood.

"What's a lo-trye?" I asked. "Never heard of it before."

"My mentor was a brilliant man named Brent. He taught me that pride, the things people are most proud of, can be used against them. When I joined his company, I bragged about my negotiation skills. Do you know what he did?"

He stopped halfway over the bridge. I was right behind him. Humans and Baar are light, but I should have probably waited for him to cross. Creak, creak, creak went the bridge over the creek.

"Uhh, what?"

He remained in front of me, waving his arms as he spoke. Humans really love to do that, talk with their hands. "He made me renegotiate every employee contract at the company. All 380. 'If I had the time, I would save at least 15 percent, maybe 20,' he told me."

The small bridge began to sway with his movements. The thought of falling into the water didn't worry me, but the idea of more ridicule from the Yent did. I started to move in a counter motion to Wick. When he swung left, I leaned right. When the dipped back to the right, I'd kick my foot to the left.

I felt like his tail. I know I looked like a fool.

"Damn, that was hard," he continued. "Ever try to convince a human to take less money?"

The bridge complained loudly for me. "No, but how does one keep a human moving?"

He stopped suddenly. So did I. Almost instantly the bridge went quiet. Was it about to break? No, we were balance, a perfect distribution of weight. My ears had been straining so much to monitor the creaks that their absence startled me. It was quickly replaced but more subtle sounds. The ripple of the water. His breathing.

"Everyone hated me. All because I wanted to show off." Wick suddenly rushed the last few steps and leapt to the other shore. "The lo-trye is an ancient Yent tradition. When honored guests, like royalty arrive, you're supposed to write 100 poems about them. She will be spending a lot of time thinking about us."

For just a moment longer, the bridge and the Baar remained still. There I was, standing on a fragile, ceremonial bridge, in an artificial garden filled with plants from across the galaxy -- in a space station surrounded by a vacuum, circling a planet of water -- listening to water ripple beneath my feet. If I was human, I might have felt a moment of awe. Instead, I felt a brief, intense moment of hatred and longing.

I hated the space between us. I missed that sound of him breathing.

"You did good," Wick said, briefly letting his smile crest over his shoulder. His glance back found my eyes. "For a useless dreamer, you did pretty darn good." I realized I still had my arms, foot, and tail stretched out, balancing like an idiot.

### Chapter Four

Our official introductions continued over the next few days. While Wick took a shower, preparing for our meeting with the Gyben ambassador, he left me alone in his office with that red book, his journal. Of course, I read the next entry.

He didn't mention the meeting with Orsa. Instead, he focused on the next day and our encounter with the Rawca. I hate those war-crazed savages, they tried to destroy my homeworld.

The beast grabbed Lexi, his massive paw spanning her chest. He lifted her from the chair and pinned her to the wall of my office. A small squeak escaped her lungs.

This is how my introduction started with the Rawca.

Our twenty-year war with the Rawca ended when when Earth was asked to join the Galactic Council. While most observers thought we were winning, I knew the margin was small. The military contracts held by my company were for weapons that a clear winner would never produce, desperate Plan C options.

Humans had new technology, new tactics, and incredible pilots. If our war ever reached plantside, the Rawca would have crushed us. They fought amongst themselves as much as they fought us. The alliance built to stop the Rawca from conquering the galaxy led to the council.

If I do one thing as the first human ambassador, it must be to protect peace and prevent my kind from returning to war with those dogs. Imagine the pressure I felt when I got to meet Byruin Holsteder, their representative.

Small for his kind, they told me. Like a Napoleon, short in stature but brilliant in mind. Prone to migraines. A loner and considered too weak and goofy by most of his kind. I fully expected Byruin to be… containable.

The beast barely fit through the door of my office! Most Rawca look like wolves. This one looked like a hyena. His large shoulders and mohawk of fur, stretching from the top of his head and down the back of his neck, only added to the imagery. His fur was the color of dusk sand, with a darker patch around his snout, as if someone had put a muzzle on this dog. Spots dappled the fur on the sides of his lower neck.

He was a head taller than Quest, my tiger. He made Lexi look like a spec. This is small for his kind?

We'd barely finished our introduction when Byruin pounced. He seized Lexi and pinned her to the wall.

"Stop!" I shouted, rocketing up from my seat. "Refrain yourself ambassador, or I will."

The hyena ignored me, staring into the eyes of the small Baar. To Lexi's credit, she stared back. I glanced at Quest. He moved from his spot across the room. Maybe if we attacked at the same time, we could overcome the beast. Maybe.

"Let. Her. Go," I shouted. "Now!"

Byruin chuckled. "There it is." He looked back over his shoulder, showing me all of his bared teeth. "That human need to defend the defenseless. A race of wannabe heroes. I admire it, i do." His deep voice grew cavernous. "But. If you corrupt or kill the strong, the meek shall remain weak."

"I'll call security," I said. There was an emergency button, under the desk. At the time, my mind was frantic. Good luck remembering the location of the one thing that might help.

"Go ahead," he said. Lexi crawled at his arm. The pain only made him increase the pressure on her chest. "They will understand. This little minx is a spy. How many Rawca lives has she ceased from the shadows?"

"This is insane!"

"You're right." As suddenly as the attacked started, it stopped. Byruin gently set Lexi down. She kept her fierce look until he turned his back. The baar then staggered back, leaning against the wall while taking deep breaths. Her quick look let me know that she'd be okay.

"How would I know that she is a spy?" asked the Rawca ambassador. "Educated guess? Why else would the human ambassador have a Baar assistant? Or maybe she is a double agent for me." The massive creature returned to his side of the desk. He remained standing. Fine by me. I didn't feel like sitting either.

"Do you think it is that easy to drive a wedge between me and my associates?" I asked.

"No. Humans are loyal, to a fault." He grinned. "I also hear they are rather ticklish."

I winced.

He stared at me, his green eyes hunting my reactions. "You also make the best expressions. You're fun to stalk, Warwick."

"The Mirj, the group that humans replaced in the council. They used to be rather friendly to the Rawca." I provided a mischievous grin to read. "The Otta and the Gyben seem to vote against you regularly. You and the Mirj on the other side. That left the Yent to pick and choose sides. Do you think I'll be as easy to bully into following your lead?"

"Let's test those loyalties, human. Our first vote will be in three days. I'll immediately call for the Council to rule on the Rawca claim for the Filo system."

Compared to the other races, humanity is very new to space exploration and even more infantile about colonization. We're still putting people on all the planets in our solar system. The only exception is a luscious jungle planet orbiting Filo, our first home around another sun.

The hyena continued, "They will be eager too. Push humanity. See if they heel, or need a beating." He snapped his teeth and gave a small laugh at his own joke.

"Take Filo?" Lexi had finally recovered and was eager to get back into the fight. "You'll have the Council do what your fleets never could? I didn't know Rawca were such cowards." That red panda is amazing. I'm not sure if she has a short temper or likes to say what everyone is thinking . Maybe she can read my mind. Either way, I appreciate her counterpunches.

"See me as your villain. It will make this easier." Byruin stood tall and ran a hand through the mane that trailed down the back of his head and neck. If he was an actual dog, I would think he was raising his hackles. "The Council united the galaxy to stop us. My kind has done more for peace than any other. We both protect the weak, Warwick. You shield them. We force them to be strong, or perish."

"That's one way of justifying murder," said Lexi. "I'm killing your family for their own good."

Byruin sighed and moved his hand to rest on his muzzle. He started to rub his eyes. "It has been a pleasure, human. It seems I must take my leave. Mother said headaches and migraines were the burden of thinking too much. I think it comes from trying to understand smaller minds."

"I hope you feel better, ambassador." This conversation couldn't be over soon enough. "Please, in future meetings, refrain yourself from attacking my people."

He nodded and headed to the exit. "We're not that different. Our kinds both worship freedom." He stopped in the archway of the door. "Be strong, Wick. I won't let you exist any other way."

With that, he was gone.

"Burn a fire!" declared Quest. "What a psychopath."

"You okay, Lexi?" I asked.

"It looked a lot more vicious than it felt."

"That's because you're one tough, little monster," said Quest. "I would've helped, but figured you might be into that kind of thing."

She rolled her eyes. "Who doesn't like having ribs crushed? Kinky."

"Can the Council really take Filo from us?"

"They can do anything," said the Baar. "We can't underestimate Byruin. His motives are like shadows in the night. He proposed a law that would protect homeworlds before his own fleets attacked my kind. Then he, the Mirj, and Yent voted against it."

"He's crazy," added Quest.

"More like too clever," said Lexi.

His plan, whatever that hyena had in his head, scared me. Not because it seemed unpredictable or crazy. Because he was right. I did understand him.

Two ambassadors met. Two strikes. Two more to go.

Not off to the best start, but a lot more innings left to play.

I hope he was wrong about Lexi.

I put the journal down.

He winked. After slamming me into the wall, Byruin gave me a wink. No one else could've seen it. Winking is a human expression, but he knew I would understand it.

He was testing Wick. Humans do have a deep desire to be heroes. They also naturally assume the worst. Hard to be a champion when everyone is against you.

Byruin knew he'd force me to do something to prove my loyalty to Wick, but that would confirm his assumptions about me. That night, I released classified communications that confirmed it was the Rawca ambassador that recommended the Mirj be removed from the council and replaced with the humans.

The backlash was brutal. Byruin nearly lost his position, forced to justify the maneuver that lost the Rawca's most sympathetic ally on the Council. The Mirj took it as an insult, breaking their long-standing military alliance.

The creepy thing is that he continues to give me a sincere smile and a wink each time we pass.

For days, I thought about the warmth of his paw, pressed hard against my chest. I'd never been so close to one of his kind, one of my enemies. Still, I liked that warmth. He smelled like cut hay left to dry in the summer sun.

He managed to get in my head, that crazy dog. He was right. Wick would need to be strong.

### Chapter Five

Where does love start?

For a Baar, this is the grandest question. Humans ask the meaning of life. For me, for us, love is the meaning of life.

But where does love start?

Is love a biological reaction to cues that indicate a good potential mate? Then we would all love the same one. The choice is choiceless.

Is it a recipe, a sequence of steps, a cliché story that we build up in our heads and execute? Then love is timing, and it doesn't matter who appears if they show up at the right time. Two raindrops meeting on the glass.

Is it a dream that we wait to come true? Then most of us would wait and wait and wait. Dream and dream and dream.

Mom and Dad said love was something you worked for. Even 'they could see that'. Their affliction brought them together at a support group for the blind. Shared strength.

For me, love isn't a lie. It isn't a plan, not a fantasy, not work. Love is falling: two souls dropped from the sky, unable to fly. There is panic, you know the end is coming, but you move close. You touch, you hold, you cry. Your tears rise, too slow to follow. The world blurs for everything but him.

You realize everything will soon end, but that fear doesn't consume you. Death doesn't define you. Why? Because you have him. No matter how brief or violent your life, he made it worth falling.

"What happens if this all fails?" Wick asked me the question while we waited in his office for the Gyben ambassador.

"I don't fail," I said. "We won't fail."

He provided a warm smile. Hi"Good point. But hypothetically, let's say things go sideways. Your employers won't be happy. Probably kill you for silence."

"You love this spy stuff, don't you?" Humans have a lot of stories about espionage agents. Glorifying the life of lies and shadow makes it easier to recruit. It also cultivates a belief that their are enemies so dire that governments can't share everything. I don't care. It's really fun having all the secrets.

"You must have a contingency plan."

"Hard to keep it a secret if you tell anyone."

"Oh," he said. "Good point. Maybe I'm a spy and don't even know it."

"You can be tortured. Or have your mind read."

"Guess the only real secrets are the ones we never share." He paused for a moment and looked at the journal on his desk.

"Audin."

He looked up at me.

"Audin is a wilderness planet held by the Hikan," I told him. "They see it as a preservation, somewhat religious. Means no one is allowed on or off. Even scanning the surface is forbidden."

"So if you never broadcast…"

"No one will ever know you're there. One tiny outpost does exist, a small cabin left abandoned by the original explorers. It sits undisturbed on a mountain, overlooking the valley of Kalay. I had supplies 'accidently' launched from a passing vessel. Emergency rations that last for decades. Just enough to get started."

"Big enough for two?" he asked.

"Baar always plan for two," I replied with a sigh.

"A cabin on Audin, overlooking the valley called Kalay. Sounds lovely. No computers?"

"I'll survive, somehow."

The door chimed. The Gyben ambassador had arrived. His drones entered first, tiny glowing spots that drifted around the room like wisps or fairies.

The Gyben are very fond of these personal assistants. The miniscule flying computers use advanced cameras to record everything, be it for sharing online, quick calls, or later review. While their flight path seems random, they fly in a special pattern agreed upon by the pairs of drones that provide full 3D capturing of the environment.

The glowing lights were completely unnecessary, but made the drone look much less like insects.

"Greetings, greeting, greetings, my new friends." The Gyben ambassador entered. Humans refer to his kind as bats. They are short, like Baar, have extremely fluffy fur all over their faces, a perked nose, and very large fangs. The fangs seem to add a whistling sound to many of their words. Like those flying creatures, their wings stretched from their fingertips, along their arms, and down their sides. Of course they couldn't fly, but that didn't stop them from spreading their arms wide for a big display and honored greeting.

"Please, come in, ambassador," said Wick. "Thank you for taking the time to meet with us."

"Nonsense, nonsense. It's been hard waiting all these days. Not sure why the Yent always get to meet special guests first." The bat quickly walked over to his chair, raised his small tail, and hopped up to his seat. This Gyben was even shorter than most. A tuff of bright red hair sat on top of his head, between his large ears. He wore glasses, typical for his kind. These special spectacles were linked to the drones, allowing the wearer to see his surroundings from different angles and literally watch their own back.

"Now, before we start, we should agree upon my name," said the Gyben. "I've been giving this much thought. Much much thought. Do you have any suggestions?"

Gyben have many names, picking one for each part of their life. If a Gyben chooses a new name to share with you, it is a sign of the highest respect. It's not untypical for one to have 11 or 12 names.

"I have been giving it a lot of thought too," said Wick. "How about Cinder?"

"Oh! You have been busy. Cinder? He tilted his head. A small glow was visible on the inside of his glasses. Having small computers flying about also meant they could access and share information, such as translations of human words. "Cinder - a remnant of fire. The last spark. An interesting choice. Why did you pick it?"

"Your red hair looks like fire."

"Delightful! Better than smelling like smoke. This name pleases me. Not often someone else picks for you. Cinder it is. Please, do call me Cinder. This also goes for you, assistant Baar."

"My name is Lexi, ambassador. It's a pleasure to meet you, Cinder."

"So formal! I heard this one had a temper. Rare for a Baar. I like a good spirit. Ha!" Cinder lifted his wings. "Amazing! Human, your name is Warwick, right? Your friends call you Wick. A wick and his cinder. Fantastic, fantastic naming! May I also call you Wick?"

"If you wish, Ambassador." He human gave a genuine smile.

"Relieved, yes? Finally a colleague that isn't hostile or superior? You met with Byruin, yesterday. If I'm Cinder then he's Inferno. He's broken my wing at least twice. Did you know that's?" He lifted his arm to showcase. "Always the left one. Very painful, but I forgive him. Must be hard for a Rawca like him to live, not just here on Daygone but anywhere."

"He will be a challenge?" said Wick.

"A challenge? Is that what humans call a pain in the tail? Nah, he's all snap, snap, claw, claw. Do what I do. Get him drunk! Can't hold his alcohol. Not one bit. Or, if he's being a bit too much, get the chefs to put extra vitamin C in his food. No, no, no, it's not a poison. Just gives Rawca headaches. Powerful headaches. They hate oranges."

I liked this bat already. Hard to imagine that Cinder was the twelfth richest individual in the galaxy. There had to be more there than first impressions would imply.

"Bribes. Those always work," the Gyben continued. "Did you know that I once paid to have the entire Rawca fleet repainted? Black, of course. Red wasn't scary enough. All for unified market regulations. I needed that dog's vote. Cost me billions, made me billions. Byruin got praise from the admirals."

"Have you made an agreement on Filo?" asked Wick.

"He mentioned it. Going to take away your colony. Sneaky bully. First thing he wants to do is shove humanity into a rock. Hate bullies. I'll let you in on a secret, Wick. When he calls for the vote, you immediately call for an Scope and Impact Report, an S.I.R.. Technically, all votes are supposed to be backed by a S.I.R.; keeps us Council members from making rash changes. Even with a government, the research can take months."

"They study to see what impact the law will have on civilians, environments, and economies," I explained further.

"Yep, yep," said the bat. "You ask for a S.I.R. and I'll insist the report be done by the Otta. You want unbiased and scientific-method? You ask them. They include this thing called statistical shift analysis. I know, statistically what? Means they have at least a year to conduct those things. No arguing the outcome, but lots of time to shift expectations."

"Thank you, Cinder. Additional time will be greatly appreciated," said the human.

"Don't want you getting fired after your first vote. No, no, not at all. I also don't want your kind leaving the Council. War is bad for commerce. But, and it pains me to admit it, Byruin is somewhat right. We need to start with a vote that shows everyone the importance of having humans join us. However, we have a different audience. We want to make Earth love the Council."

"What did you have in mind?" asked Wick.

"Universal currency. There’s been a lot of talk among brokers. Everyone but the Wex and humans use the Teel dollar, but there is no official law. Requiring the Teel for all commerce makes sense, but it would be brutal on the current human economy. Think about it, your currency is independent. Very attractive to investors like me. Almost half my personal fortune is invested in human companies. Look it up."

One of Cinder's drones landed on my shoulder. I brushed the glowing fleck back into the air. They continued to drift around the office. Everything was being recorded. There's a reason they say to never wear a skirt when meeting with a Gyben.

Of course, I had no real concern. The security protocols on Cinder's personal drones proved to be little challenge. A copy of the video stream was being uploaded to my personal servers. While the bat seemed lively, in truth, he was extremely paranoid. His drones disabled whenever he was in his official office.

"You own 15 percent of my company," said Wick. "That makes you the second largest stakeholder after me."

"Crest technology is the only publicly traded company that has official military contracts. Very valuable, if you ask me. Yet, you won't tell the shareholders what you're working on. Very secret. I guess you need to own half the company to know that."

"It helps," said Wick.

"But you can't run your company while being an ambassador. I have some suggestions for a successor, but we can discuss that later, yes?" Cinder removed his glasses, looking at the surface for a fleck. "As you can see, human markets are a great opportunity." He breathed on the front of the glass, adding a bit of fog before rubbing it off on the fur of his cheek. "I'd hate to lose so much of my carefully placed investments. So we vote on universal currency. The Yent and Rawca will vote yes. I have already convinced Kiki to give us the Otta vote. Promised to support her vote for Freedom of Scientific Access initiative. So with your vote and mine, we can protect human sovereignty."

Wick had me confirm the Gyben's investments. He wasn't lying. Half his personal fortune was tied up in human businesses. Anything that could damage the human economy would certainly hurt, but the opposite was also true. Anything that made human markets stronger stood to make him a lot of money.

"You talk a lot," said Wick.

"Ha! I do, I do," said Cinder. "I've heard that you're the silent type. Keep your cards close. He who speaks the least is listened to most, yes? I prefer the opposite: speak, speak, speak and see when they feel a need to interrupt. Helps that I hate silence too. Not a fan. Prefer a little noise, even when I sleep. Drives Orsa crazy too. Got to love that. Anything to make a Yent angry."

The bat hopped up. "Great stuff today." He really didn't stop talking, "A great new name and new friends. I'll help block the silly Rawca plot to take Filo. We'll vote to stop a law on universal currency."

"Wouldn't it make sense to not vote?" asked Wick. "Why risk passing a law you don't like?"

The drones followed Cinder was he moved towards the exit. "If a law fails, it can't be brought up again for five years. Uncertainty is hard on markets. Investing is like hunting, hard to do in a storm."

"And success means another's death," Wick finally interrupted.

"Yes, yes, yes. Delightful response. I might be a small fellow, but I assure you that I never go hungry. I never miss. You're a fun one, human. I foresee many grand conversations. Together we prosper."

With that, the bat departed, his wisp drones slipping through the narrow gap of the closing door.

"That went a lot better than the previous introductions," I said.

"Is money the only thing he thinks about?"

"The Gyben have an incredibly weak military. The only reason they are on the Council is because of their riches. They control most of the galactic economies."

He put his elbows on his desk and propped up his chin. "Reminded me of meetings with the shareholders. I hope you were paying attention."

"Of course I was!" Why would he suggest such a thing? Sure, Baar are daydreamers, but a meeting with an ambassador is not the time to fantasize about weddings or what name you wished you had. What goes with a candle wick? Wax is not an attractive name. I could be his Glow.

"Good," he said. "I wasn't listening half the time."

"What?" I laughed. "Why?"

"I kept thinking about your escape plan. An abandoned outpost. A planet called Audin. A mountain over a valley called Kalay. Sounds lovely."

"Oh." My mouth went dry. The fur on my cheeks bristled. "You…"

He didn't let me finish. "I hope you never need your plan, Lexi. But, if we do fail, I think I'd like to fall with you."

Fall with you.

In that moment, I wanted to be the candle to his Wick: a slow fall together, our passion, the flame. Our tears slip slowly like wax. A light together until a single puff, smoke, the first whisper in the dark.

Baar do like to daydream.

"I'd like that," I said so softly. He couldn't have heard me.

"Meeting the Otta next?" he asked.

Yes. Now enters our true villain, a demon named Kiki.

### Chapter 6

I couldn't be there. GAIA discovered a virus inside our deep exploration satellites. It only took a few hours to track it back to the Rawca, a few more to rewrite it to send false and misleading data. I also added a small update. Whatever system received the signal would also gain the malicious code. The chaos helped track down key servers in the Rawca spy network.

It felt good sitting with my computers again. Meeting with the ambassadors made me feel awkward and useless, like a love letter that arrived at the wrong address. This (the screens, the data, the code) made me feel strong. I could do almost anything there.

I could crash the economy on Rixor 7. I could start a scandal within the Wex royal family. I could disable the weapon systems on the Mirj fleet hiding in he Anwess asteroids. I could release nude photos of Vishay Hollin.

All it needed was a connection and a computer. I could do almost anything.

I just couldn't be there.

I couldn't make him love me.

His next journal entry told of his meeting with the Otta ambassador, Kiki.

I want to live like her.

"Stand up!" Desk, according to her, are a vicious barrier often used to maintain a sense of safety and superiority. "Hug me."

I've met many Otta before. My lead scientist was a frumpy old Otta named Angles. They really do look like massive otters. Slick fur, webbing between fingers, a massive tail that doesn't work well with a lab coat, and large whiskers. Brilliant, but very boring. Otta worship science and technology, so I assumed their ambassador would all be just as analytical.

I never expected her to be so disarming, so bubbly, so thrilled with life. Kiki is her name. Bright green eyes that shimmer like the surface of a forest river. Brown fur with her cheeks and neck a lighter cream color. Large whiskers, like those on a cat, that leapt up to cheer each time she smiled. That's her, an energetic otter.

When I spread my arms, he leapt forward. She buried her head against my chest, the soft fur on the top of her head sliding under my chin. Her arms locked behind my back. It was the most engaging hug of my life.

"Human hearts beat so fast." Her little round ears were pressed against my chest. "Like you're endlessly racing. No wonder you live such short lives."

I stood there, unsure what to do or say. I couldn't remember the last time I had a hug. Brent's funeral?

"It's ok," Kiki said. "You can hug me back."

I gently wrapped my arms around her shoulders and gave a small squeeze. Warm with a scent like cinnamon.

"There!" She pulled back sharply and grabbed my arm. "Goosebumps. That's what they call them. I always wanted to see those on a human. Very cute, Mister Wick."

"Nothing special," I said.

"Means you were either cold or had an emotional feeling of vulnerable. May I ask which one?"

I didn't know what to do with myself. Handshakes were common at introductions, but never hugs. Typically, I would return to my side of the desk. Instead, I opted to sit on the corner.

"A shiver can also come in a moment of discovery," I told her. "A brief fear of the unknown, I guess."

"There are so many things I want to ask! I've met humans before but they are so secretive. They want to know you before they share." She paced as she talked, just like my head scientist Angles did. He always insisted that if we installed a pool in his office he would be twice as effective. Otta chased thoughts, he would say, and we swim much faster than we trot.

"So you don't hug every human you meet?" I asked.

"Certainly not!" She giggled, an actual giggle, a short little laugh of amusement. "I'd deserve a good smack."

"Then why me? I don't look secretive?"

"You?" she paused for a moment, smiled to herself, and then continued pacing. "A captive audience. We'll be working together for a long time. Also, a mutual friend told me you take initial meetings far too seriously."

I knew Angles kept in touch with other Otta scientists. "You took advantage of my desire to make a good first impression."

"It would only be an advantage if both sides didn't gain. You needed a hug."

"That conclusion doesn't seem very scientific."

Kiki's large tail lifted, a sign of happiness for her kind. "Was I wrong?"

The Otta pride themselves on technological discovery. While Rawca praise war veterans, Gyben mostly worship the financially successful and humans adore athletes. For your Otta, scientists are the superheroes. Logic, reason, and the scientific method are the first lessons for a Otta pup. Hugs? Captive audiences? What kind of Otta is this?

"I could've kissed you." She blushed, her thick whiskers and small ears pulling back before a small smile.

"Do I need that too?"

"That's my hypothesis." Kiki quickly rushed to my side and grabbed my arm. I say rush, but nothing about her movements were harsh. Grace, like swimming through the air, each of her movements carried a flow. Just watching her move around my office felt like watching a professional dancer perform. "There are so many things I want to know about humans!"

"Such as?"

"Birds! What's it like to grow up with animals that fly through the sky?" she asked.

"Are birds not common?"

"Only a third of planets with life have flying life other than insects. You see, life is a state of matter. Given the right conditions, a star will form. Add the right dust around and planets appear. The same goes for life. That's also why we see so similarities between all our species. DNA, eyes, ears, fins, photosynthesis, single cell organisms evolving into cats. They aren't random. It is all built into the universe; life and its solutions to the common environment."

When humans first encountered intelligent life off Earth, religion made a big come back. How could life be so similar without God? Did He or some master alien race seed all our planets? The answer came from the Otta, who provided countless scientific studies on the causality of life. Life was as natural as gravity. But the question remains, if there are so many rules for the universe, who wrote them?

She continued, "Of course, there are variations. My homeworld, Ririgahta, had much more water. This is why an amphibious species grew to become the most dominant. We also have an incredible abundance of food, due to our brighter sun. End result, less predators and less reason for animals to take to the sky. Oh, I do love birds."

"I never really noticed," I said.

"Hundreds of creatures that fly around and sing seems normal?" Her hands continued to clutch my arm as she looked up into my eyes.

"I guess so."

"Magnificent! Think about it. Do you have a favourite?" she asked.

"Bird? We had bluejays where I grew up. Awful noises, but real pretty."

"Tears!" She was already onto the next subject, "What do tears feel like? You have no fur on your cheeks."

What an odd question! Even odder, I felt like answering. Something about her pure curiosity coaxed me. The reward was her complete focus. She hung on every word. "I never thought about it. Tears. Cold, unstoppable, heavy."

"Do they always follow the same path?"

"I'm not sure. I never paid attention."

"Will you do it for me?" asked the Otta.

"Cry?" I asked.

"Pay attention," she said softly.

Before I could answer, she pulled away. The pacing returned. The questions continued. How do you swim? What's it like to cut your nails? How do you kiss without a muzzle? How do you live when your life lasts less than 100 years?

Kiki asked questions for hours. I didn't mind. She's kept returning to my arm, clutching on for the most important questions. I even paced with her for a while.

She didn't just ask about humans and Earth. She asked a lot about me, with equal or greater interest. Favourite color and why? What was it like working at a company that researches weapons? First childhood memory? Are your feet ticklish? Biggest fear?

Sunset blue, reminds me of summer. Scary but felt important. Grabbing at snowflakes. Very much so. Dying alone.

"Thank you." She ended our meeting with a lingering look over her shoulder, leaning against the doorframe. "I hope we find many years of success and answers."

"A captive audience?" I asked.

"And a lot more acts to play."

I'm not sure how the Otta selected such a bubbly individual to be their ambassador. A starch, boring, to-the-point scientist would fit their entire

 better. There is a saying that Otta never lie. I really hope that's true.

I adore the way she lives. The universe is a far better place if she is true.

Otta are supposed to be boring! Everyone knows that.

Why wasn't I there? I should've been there. You're wrong. Yes, I wanted desperately to interrupt, to balk at the touching, to disrupt, but what I truly desired was much different. Anything, I would give anything, to hear his answers.

It would continue. Every day, she'd send him questions. That smile, the one that showed no teeth, the one he saved for moments when he thought he was alone, he gave it to those messages. Of course I put a virus on his pocket computer. I knew his answers, but could never follow up.

She'd ask, "Do you prefer to be too hot or too cold?

He'd answer, "Too cold."

I wanted, "How would you get warm?"

She'd ask, "What's your favourite song?"

He'd answer, "Stillmist by No Gravity."

I wanted, "When did you first hear it?"

Her, "What's your biggest fault?"

Him, "A constant feeling that I need to make someone proud."

Me, "Who?"

Her, "If you could change anything about your life, what would it be?"

Him, "I wish we met sooner."

Why not me?

I needed a hug.

### Chapter Seven

"It was a trap." Quest slammed his fist against the table. "No wonder Byruin likes breaking that bat's wings."

We sat in the official council lounge. Only ambassadors, their assistants, and guests were allowed. Couches and chairs surrounded scattered tables, filling the gaps between large potted plants. The majority of the far wall was a single, massive window. Made from one sheet of Ascreth crystal, the glass was shockingly transparent, almost invisible. When the station rotation faced the planet, the entire lounge flooded with a shimmering blue. When the station faced outer space, the stars seemed close enough to touch.

Like fireflies, tiny glowing lights floated above our heads and rested on the plants. They were tiny drones, much less sophisticated than those used by Cinder. They only operated when the lounge faced away from the planet. The designer wanted it to feel like the patrons were conversing among the stars.

"Yent vote yes. Rawca vote yes. Otta vote no. Humans vote no," Wick retold the event from his seat in a large chair. "That left the Gyben, who proposed the law, to vote last. Gyben vote yes. And with that, the Teel dollar is now official the official currency of the Council."

"It doesn't make sense," I said, sitting on a couch beside the tiger. "We checked. Half Cinder's fortune was in human companies. He'll lose billions."

"All a trick," muttered Quest. "Think about it. The Gyben are obsessed with money. Do you think they would be happy if Earth had its own currency, one more valuable than the Teel?"

"It could've been a lot worse." Wick glanced at me.

I quickly averted my gaze. Three. We had three minutes alone while we walked to the Council Chamber. I could've said something, asked him questions like Kiki had yesterday. I didn't. It was his first vote. I didn't want to interrupt his moment of calm. Did I? What would I say? Probably something stupid. I'm not a genius scientist.

"Yeah. Lucky for us," I said, "the Galactic Stock Exchange had a computer malfunction." Ten years ago, the GSE updated their logo. It went from a big Gyben letters to a series of shrinking circles to represent aligned planets. Okotto, the founder of the GSE, always made security a top priority. Nine years ago, he introduced cutting-edge AI defense layers. Nine years ago, the GSE became nearly invincible, unhackable. Ten years ago, no one checked the size of the new logo file uploaded to their servers. A trump card, a one-time backdoor that I put in place. I never told GAIA. It was my secret, in case I needed it for a day like this.

"25 hours," said Wick. "The GSE said they'd need a day to fix the glitch."

"Doesn't sound too long," said Quest.

"Long enough for human companies to react to the new law. Long enough for the frenzy to calm. The Earth economy will take a big hit, but won't collapse." Wick sighed and leaned back, resting his head on the back of his chair. His eyes went up, towards the star lights swirling above.

"Damn it," roared the tiger. "I need something to drink. You want something, Wick? Humans allergic to anything? I'll get you something!" He stomped off, leaving me alone on the large couch. Quest didn't really understand the details, but he knew Wick was upset. That made him upset. Crazy cat.

It was my first time seeing Wick angry. He kept a calm exterior, but I could see the tiny flexes. His foot would clinch, his fingers would curl, his shoulders needed to be forced down, all a subtle fight to push out a seething anger. I felt an urge to move close and touch him.

Why? We'd met only a few days ago and I wanted nothing more than to comfort him. He had that effect. Quest felt it. Was it because he was alone, the only human on a station full of strangers? Guess I'm crazy too.

"Thank you." He kept his head back and eyes upwards.

My heart skipped a beat. For a moment, my mind confused his appreciation, hoping he would answer my thoughts of holding him. Foolish. Of course he was thanking me for crashing the Galactic Stock Exchange. "Easy. It's my job."

"I hate the feeling."

"Being betrayed?" I asked.

"Being powerless."

I almost said something cheesy, "Then let's plug you back in!" I almost brushed it off, "Suck it up, Wick." I almost let my anger flare, "We should go stomp that bat's head." It was my normal method: deflect. Hackers don't practice conversation, so we're quick to sabotage. Still, Wick needed something more, so I staggered through a memory.

"I lost lots when I was little," I started. "Some say my mind. Ha. Like toys and clothing. They give us these stuffed animals so Baar kids can play out romantic stuff. I always lost Skokie, the male. Funny when you think. Anyway, my point, my parents were both blind. They tried to help me find things, the stuff I lost." I grabbed my tail and began to wrangle the rings. I looked down, too nervous to know if he was looking at me. "I lost Skokie once, behind the couch; he'd been on an adventure to rescue Rye." I laughed nervously. Of course he was on a mission. I kept thinking about the daring adventures of Skokie for far too long into my adulthood.

"Uh so," I continued. "As you can expect, Mom and Dad sucked at searching. I'm surprised they ever helped me find anything. I think Dad could remember exactly everything I'd done yesterday, like a video he could replay in his head. Audio only. But this time, they couldn't help. Skokie was lost. I cried like crazy."

"Your parents comforted you?" So he was listening.

"Yeah, yeah." I kept my eyes on my tail. "But that's not the point. Later, after I went to bed, I heard something: Mom crying. I sneaked out of bed. She hated that she couldn't help me. She felt powerless. By the sky, I started keeping track of my stuff after that. Not my point. Sorry. It was my dad. He pulled her close and said, 'Success isn't always winning. Success is trying every time.' Never give up? Wow, kind of lame advice, now that I think about it. Pretty basic, huh? Sorry."

He said nothing.

Something better, why didn't I say something better? I slowly let my eyes move up, looking first at his feet, then his shines, then his knees and lap. He was far more relaxed, the tense anger removed from his muscles. His belly, his chest, his neck, his chin, still pointing up… and her.

Kiki stood behind Wick's chair, on her toes, leaning over, staring down into his upward eyes. "Hey. Sorry to interrupt."

"How can we help?" said Wick, still looking up at her.

"I wanted to say sorry." She moved around the chair, giving a small swirl. Wick was right, she was graceful. "I should have warned you about Tickles." We started at her. "Our Gyben ambassador. I believe you call him Cinder. He let me pick a name for him when we first met."

"Why apologize for him?" I asked. "Were you part of his scheme?"

"No. I voted against, remember." She gave a smile so large it forced her eyes shut. "If you had told me his proposal, I could've helped. I know how he works."

"Backstabbing?" I rolled my eyes.

"I know it hurts, and it may be hard to see right now, but it will be for the greater good. Cinder craves unity."

"Sure," I replied. "Crashing the human economy is great for peace."

"That's why I'm here," said the Otta. "I'm going to call for a vote tomorrow. I want to offer GREY Scan to the Council. We should have a law making the technology universal."

GREY Scan was one of the greatest technological breakthroughs in modern warfare. Once deployed, it allowed pinpoint tracking of any ships travelling through a solar system. No sneak attacks, no stealth, now hiding. It was the second most sought after secret by spy agencies. The first being the Silvermist project made by Wick's own Crest company. GAIA had been trying for years to get info on GREY. All we knew is that the technology required a ton of energy, meaning it could only be deployed on planets.

"Ha!" I said. "Why would the Otta give up such an advantage?"

"For peace. GREY Scan is a defense technology. Think about it," said Kiki.

"All five races will vote yes," said Wick. "It would be a grand gesture."

"Of course, the technology would only be shared with members of the Council," said Kiki. "It will also take my scientists about half a year to pull together all the classified information."

I clenched my jaw. "So Earth would be dumb to leave the Council for at least six more months." I'd given Wick a bandaid by crashing the Galactic Stock Exchange. Kiki gave him a cure.

"You'd do that?" asked the human.

"For peace." She said, "And to keep my captive audience," with a wink.

"Giving up that defensive secret may encourage another Rawca invasion," I snapped. "Dumb."

She looked directly at me. "You should know better than anyone, Lexi. Having humans close keeps the Rawca tamed. Besides, my scientists have something even more effective."

Ha! One word to GAIA about this new technology and they would demand it instead. Kiki's plan would fail. Of course, I never told them. I wanted six more months too. Instead, I told my bosses that Wick brokered the deal for GREY Scan.

Quest returned, dropping himself beside me like a rock from the sky. He carried three large mugs, the foul smelling liquid splashing as he sat. Most of it landed on my tail.

"Ofin ale." He handed one of the drinks to Wick. "Doubt you've ever had this one, human. Oh, ambassador. Sorry, I only brought three."

"She can have mine." I moved away from Quest, pushing myself into the armrest. "I don't want any. That stuff tastes like tree vomit."

"Ambassador?" the tiger offered a mug to the otter. I could only shake my head as Quest's inappropriate thoughts about Kiki flooded my head. Once the mind reading powers of TRIC were enabled, only distance or death could stop the connection.

"Thank you," said Kiki. "I agree with Lexi. This does taste like tree excretions, but I like it. Makes my nose tingle."

"Hate to interrupt all this important political talk," started Quest, "but I have been thinking a lot on my long journey from here to the bar, with a stop to talk to a lovely Mirj waitresses, I might add. A question, if you could go back in time and undo any one decision, what would it be?"

He took a large gulp of his drink. "I'll go first. About ten years ago, my father invited me to his den. He told me I was a disappointment. 'For you, opportunities are a gift. You never create them for yourself,' he said. Ha! I chose to keep quiet. If I could change it, I would speak. I'd tell that blowhard to shut up. We make opportunities every day."

Of course, the tiger was lying. If he could change any decision, Quest would go back and tell her not to leave, beg Orsa to stay. He gave me sideways glance over his mug. His secret was safe with me.

"That's very brave," said Kiki. "Since time travel is hypothetical and the ripples of a single choice can be stronger than a butterfly's wing, I find it hard to make a choice so quickly."

"No one will hold you to it," said the Wex. "When I finish my time machine, you can have as long to think as you want."

The Otta perked up, almost like she believed Quest was actually working on a machine that could control time. "Hmm. Four years ago, I was on vacation, doing a study of birds on Xix Eight. A storm came. There was a gap between the clouds and the distant horizon. Lightning leapt above the sunset. My colleagues rushed into the safety of our ship. I remember lingering, watching the birds rush to their trees. Flittering fleck of green and red."

"Sounds lovely," said Wick.

"They kept singing, the avian life. The rain started. I returned to the ship. If I could change that moment, I would stay. I would have danced, in the rain, to their song."

Melodrama over ale. She probably just made it up. What a pampered life, if that's the only choice she'd undo.

"Lovely," said Quest.

"How do you remember a moment like that?" asked Wick.

"By paying attention." She smiled before taking a big drink. "How about you, Lexi?"

Just one? There are so many choices I regret. Not accepting Stell's request for a date when I was twelve. Becoming a hacker, rather than a caretaker for individuals with disabilities. Joining GAIA. Letting Kistler die so we could escape with the classified Rawca files. The political sabotage of Grand Priest Liock that led to his suicide. So many ghosts that I wish I could stop haunting me.

My biggest mistake would come in only a few more months. But then, in that moment, on Daygone 6, in that lounge, beneath drifting stars, with him, I would've changed only one thing. All those other choices, as horrible as they were, led me to Wick. The only thing I would have changed was those three minutes, when we were alone, before his first vote. I would have said something to him.

"I would've turned down this assignment," I said. "So I wouldn't have to answer stupid questions like this."

Quest wrapped an arm around me and pulled me into his side. "Always one that ruins the game."

"Get off, you beast." I pulled free and returned to the safety of my armrest. "We all know the only reason you're here. That Mirj waitress turned you down."

"Maybe I'd go back and change what I said to her." The tiger grinned.

"Changing your words won't fix the ugly in your face!"

"Are they always like this?" asked Kiki.

"I'm afraid so," said Wick. "My turn? I might go back and not trust Cinder. Brent taught me better. I wish there were more obvious moments. Things happen, good and bad, but I have a hard time picking out the single instant that caused it. So I guess I would want to remember more, or at least write more down. I want to not forget.”

"Human brains are relatively poor for memory retention," said Kiki. "A real curse."

"Sounds more like a blessing," added Quest.

"I've lost my Skokie many times," he said, with a brief glance to me.

So he had been paying attention to my earlier story! I know there was joy in my voice, "Just because we lost someone doesn't mean their adventure--"

"Skokie?" the tiger interrupted. "Is that human slang for virginity or something."

I snapped, "Humans aren't like fish, you crass cat. They don't lose 100% of their memory. Skokie is--nevermind."

Wick took a sip of his drink, winced, and muttered, "Tree vomit."

"Ok, I got another question!" proclaimed Quest. "If you could have a super power, what would it be?"

We talked for another hour before leaving the lounge. Mostly it was Quest rambling on. As loud as he can be, at least the tiger made the day feel less like defeat.

### Chapter Eight

I read Wick's next journal entry laying on my back, on the floor, in the middle of his bedroom. Orsa requested his presence for a 'vital' meeting. Wick asked me to review surveillance data from the Tyoh outpost. Decryption would take hours. I needed something to keep me busy. So this.

I liked the weight of his pages. Held above me, the sheets of paper would fall and fan out when I removed the thumb. Onto the next, spread the words.

"Under attack. Under attack. They are us. Under attack."

We received a distress call today. Broadcast on every frequency. A distant human outpost, a secret faculty, hidden on the moon of a forgotten solar system, sent it. The message was short and ended abruptly.

"Under attack. Under attack. They are us. Under attack."

Lexi said it must be serious. Why else would they give up their location? Tyoh outpost is about as remote as one could get. One of our military ships changed course. It will still take several days for them to arrive.

I'm reminded of a moment from my childhood. Summer night. 19 years old. A small section of roof extended beneath the window of my bedroom. I'd crawl out there and watch the night. Our neighborhood sat on a rather steep hill, giving each house an unobstructed view of the town, large river, and distant city that lay beyond.

The stars were so bright. The lights of the skyscrapers and river boats couldn't compete. By chance, no reason, no profound thought, I was looking at the two stars above the massive pine tree that grew on Crest Street.

One of those stars, the one on the left, disappeared. Vanished. A candle lost to the dark. I knew it was there. What were the odds? To watch a star die.

Of course, that star ended millions of years ago. The last of its light reached Earth at that exact moment. I panicked. I rubbed my eyes. There, right? Just above the tip of the larger pine tree. What color was it? Did it sparkle? I struggled to remember any details.

I swore that I would never forget that star. Only some stupid kid's tears as a eulogy. Goodnight, starlight.

I grew obsessed. I knew nothing about stars. I tried to find which one it was by looking at maps of constellations. The stars in the sky look nothing like those on a computer screen. There was no news. Some astronomer or some satellite had to be monitoring it, right?

Was it a hallucination, or maybe a dream? No. Even today, I struggle to remember that star. Close my eyes and see it, I used to be able to close my eyes and see it. My starlight. I even gave her a name: Aza. Start of the alphabet and back: A-Z-A. A silly little prayer that a star could come back.

Then, like some stupid, jagged lover, I agreed to Silvermist.

"Under attack. Under attack. They are us. Under attack."

Quest's question continues to haunt me. Change one moment, fix one mistake, what would you choose?

I can think of so many important choices. I should have spent more time with Brent, told him how much he taught me. Don't let the company research weapons. Exercise more. Work less.

There will be many more erasable moments ahead. This job, this power, carries extreme weight. Thinking about what could go wrong would cause paralysis. A leader, a CEO, does one thing (Brent always said). Make them move. Be it people, be it ideas, be it statues. Make them move. Press forward, believe in your choices, leave none behind.

Medusa moments. Those were the hard ones, he'd say. Move, when all others are petrified.

What am I talking about? Who cares? This isn't some memoir.

Change one moment? I'd give everything to fix one fault. I wish I had a better memory. I wish I could remember Aza better. I no longer feel sadness, only anger. I despise myself for forgetting precious moments.

Now I could answer that other question, "How do humans anger?"

This morning, Cinder sent his appointed Wex, a feline named Seovic. "I've come bearing apologies. My ambassador is sorry for deceptions. He would deliver this himself, but he is unfamiliar with human anger."

Unlike Quest, Seovic's fur was completely black. Short, small , and weak too. Probably a good match for the bat ambassador. "Are you familiar with the anger of other races?" I asked.

"Yent lecture. Rawca hurt. Gyben plot. Otta justify."

I imagined poor Seovic standing in front of Orsa as she tried her very best not to yell. Byruin would be terrifying. I found it hard to picture Kiki being upset.

"What about Wex? Your kind?" I asked.

"We don't believe in anger. A grudge hurts all parties." Seovic rubbed his arm nervously. "If you don't mind me asking, Ambassador, how do humans anger?"

"Humans rarely hurt. Certainly never diplomats," I said. "I guess it depends a lot on the individual."

"For you?"

"I remember. Never forget." That was my answer! Can you believe it? I wanted it to be a warning for Cinder, but it is true. I can remember every time that someone or something slighted me. Business deals gone wrong. Horrible girlfriends. The bully from elementary school. The crappy alarm clock I had in college that never woke me up on time. My brain remembers all the times I got bit. Maybe it is a biological thing: stay safe. Yet, I can barely recall the people who made me laugh or the times I cried.

Yent lecture. Rawca hurt. Gyben plot. Otta justify. Humans remember.

That's our anger. I hope I remember that.

"We're under attack. We're under attack. They are us. We're under attack."

A horrible message from a distant star. Did someone send a similar message before Aza died? I hope everyone is alright.

They are us.

What could it mean? I'll message Kiki. I bet she can help sort it out.

What a sad entry. The stress and feeling of isolation was getting to him. Humans are known to get homesick. In preparation, I had several items from Earth bought over with the regular shipments. I decided then that it would be time to break out the power of orange juice. Humans love it. I find it far too bitter, but I'd happily share a glass with him in the morning.

The surveillance from Tyoh was all corrupt. Every camera I managed to hook into either showed static. Even the military satellites orbiting the outpost were useless. It wasn't a glitch. The footage had all been erased by someone with advanced computer skills, top clearance, and a scary thoroughness.

They are us. That could be right. I feared a mutiny. Hopeful the attack carrier would arrive soon and sort out the survivors. A lonely, isolated human is a dangerous one.

Sometimes there is never enough orange juice.

### Chapter Nine

The day started wonderfully. I woke up to a warm bed and thoughts of Wick. Obsessed, at that moment I was completely infatuated with that human. He held all the qualities of a hero: brave, passionate, caring, and handsome too. I also liked his scent.

I thought about it as I climbed into the shower. The water in the station pulses subtly, like a heartbeat -- a byproduct of the pumps working to push warm water across the entire station. What must it be like to have only skin and no fur? Must be nice in summer and hell in winter. Showers would be easier, a lot less shampoo. I always get bubbles in my ears. Hate it.

His scent couldn't be hidden. Many of the races complain that humans stink. Some certainly do. Wick was different. At the start of each day, he smelled like newly fallen leaves, the first victims of autumn, dragged down by a heavy rain. Still fresh, still drinking the water. I spent a lot of my youth with my eyes closed, trying to mimic my blind parents. I slipped a lot in the forest, I remember that scent as I crashed. Any other life and I would have missed it.

As the day went long, his scent became stronger. It's hard for me to describe: like the scent of green tea and sweet chocolate drying on the edge of a porcelain cup. I'm not a poet. I just found a similar scent later. I spent hours in that café, cradling that cup beneath my nose. I stole it, but the scent faded quickly.

After my shower, I took orange juice to Wick. He loved it.

"Where did you get this?" he exclaimed.

"I had it brought over for you," I said.

"Let's share."

I still say the stuff is far too bitter, but I truly enjoyed the drink. We sat in his office and talked. The conversation was far from important, but so very precious.

"Do you have any siblings?" he asked.

"Nope. Only child, like you."

"I forget that you have those files on me. You probably know more about me than anyone."

"Not enough," I said and then quickly hid my face behind my glass. "Uhh, I mean that there's a lot left out of the reports." I took a big gulp.

"It's only fair if I have the same level of knowledge about you." He smiled wryly.

"Ha! I'm not nearly as interesting."

"An intergalactic hacker. A spy for a race that is not her own. Sounds fairly exciting to me."

"I guess," I wanted to grab my tail but I couldn't, not while holding the glass.

"Baar have very different storytelling. While humans have superheroes that battle to stop monsters, your kind always focuses on love."

"Only story worth telling, right?" I forced a little laugh. "What's your favorite story?"

He didn't let me change the subject, "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No!" I exclaimed, excited and proud for the first time in my life. "I mean, not a lot of time for relationships in my line of work. Ha! How about you?"

"A boyfriend? No. Not a girlfriend either. My line of work was the same. Being CEO of a trillion dollar company leaves time for little else. I can't remember the last time I did this."

"Just spent the morning talking with a friend? Me too. We should do it often."

"A promise?" he asked.

"Promise."

Like the voices of singers, smiles can find harmony too. They grow together, the lips rising like those in a mirror. That reflection, however, isn't on silver and glass but rather on a moment that refuses to pass.

Our shared smile lasted just long enough.

Quest charged into Wick's office. "Ambassador, a human transport fleet is under attack near Rawca space. Byruin wants to know if his military should assist."

"Lexi, contact Earth. Have our military move in but don't engage until I can confirm Rawca involvement."

As we rushed off to deal with the problem, I took a glance back. An orange glow surrounded the half-finished glasses. Our promise never had a chance.

Hours later, with the disaster averted, we found ourselves back in the ambassadors lounge. Pirates. Pirates had attacked a human transport convoy. Due to the proximity to Rawca space, the overseeing captain initially reported the incident as an act of war. With unknown intentions, Byruin sent several carriers to assist.

A nearby human destroyer, the SS Helix, prepared to fire its hyperjump torpedoes to preempt an attack. I was able to hack into their communications system, allowing Wick to talk directly to the commanding officer. "Stand down, commander. I know you want to protect your crew and your ship, but the consequences are far too grim. True bravery is not charging into battle; true bravery is sacrifice for peace. Take a few punches before you start a fight your children will finish."

War averted.

We ended up back in the ambassadors lounge, exhausted and numb. The last ten hours, while intense, carried a sense of achievement. I sat on the couch again, hoping Wick would join. Of course, the tiger was far too eager to flop down beside me.

"Look over there," said Quest. "You don't see a lot of Baar here."

Beside the tall Vesca bush, sat a couple, male and female. The Baar held hands, chatting and admiring the opulence surrounding them. Kest and Allya were their names. I looked up information on them afterwards. Experts in installing medical equipment, they arrived a week ago for business. You can imagine their surprise over an invitation to the prestigious ambassador lounge. The gesture came from Orsa, the Yent ambassador.

"They look so cute!" declared Quest. "They must be newly married."

The couple leaned over and touched noses, shared whispers, and spent long moments staring into each other's eyes. They married 15 years ago, at the age of 16. For Baar, life is love. At my age, you're more likely to be dead than unmarried.

It sucks being a statistical anomaly.

"Why can't you be adorable like that, Lexi?" Quest elbowed me in the shoulder.

"Phew," interrupted Wick. "I can't remember the last time I felt his exhausted. I don't think I would have made it through the day without that orange juice."

"Orange juice?" asked the tiger.

"Lexi got it for me. Straight from Earth. Really refreshing, although oranges are a little bitter. Apple juice, now that's what I need next."

"Wind," said Quest. "I could go for a nice summer breeze right now. Always relaxes the muscles. Can't get it on a space station."

"I miss snow," I added. "That and crisp mountain air."

"The sounds and scents of an ocean," said our human.

"Music concerts! Street festivals. Getting drunk and lost in a city." The tiger grinned and closed his eyes. "Diloo soda."

"Fried rice," came for my turn. "Humans make this dish called fried rice. No one else makes it. Can you make it Wick?"

"Wish I could. How about fresh fruit, like strawberries? I miss those."

"Children playing in the fields," offered Quest. "So few children on stations. Oh, and play sports. What sports do humans play?"

"Basketball, the only sport you need," said Wick.

"Never seen it. You'll have to teach us," said Quest.

"Lexi is too short." He gave me a wink and a smile.

"I can shoot better than you, mister CEO!"

"Sounds like a challenge." Quest sat up sharply.

"Seeing your breath," I said, with a sigh. "Never see that off planet."

Quest remained stiff. His mind shattered, overwhelmed by a single, undeniable thought: it's her.

"What a childish game," said a perfectly refrained voice. "Pining for distant comforts." It was Orsa, the Yent ambassador. Her assistant and his large antlers were nowhere to be seen. She wore an elegant dress of emerald silk. "Good evening, Ambassador Warwick."

"Will you join us, Ambassador?" asked the human.

"Alas, I only have a passing moment." The deer lifted her nose slightly, allowing her eyes an even higher point to gaze down from. "I wish to offer my condolences for the pirate attacks your people suffered today."

"Thank you," said Wick.

"Pirates, thieves, bandits, all horrid things. It is the Council's responsibility to rid the galaxy of such filth. Don't you agree?"

I could hardly focus on anything but Quest's raging mind. Her, her, her. This was her, the one who got away. Orsa, the female he loved. He fought the thoughts, probably because he knew I would hear them.

The day they met, both lost at the edge of a city. The first smile she surrendered. Such an oaf, she called him. Her scent, summer rain on a beach. A romance that lasted 100 days, one summer never forgotten.

"I'm going to propose a new series of laws to increase punishment for acts of piracy," said Orsa. "I hope you'll now see the importance of such endeavors."

The tiger trembled, ever so slightly. Only someone sitting right beside him would notice. Orsa, Orsa, Orsa. She never let him get too close, or too far away. An insult followed by a tease. An endless game of love and hate and love.

"You'll never find a Yent pirate, I dare say. Only lesser species stoop to such barbarity."

The tiger's heart and brain continued to pound. One night, a walk at sunset. Her blouse, the buttons yielding. One last insult from her lips, silenced by a kiss. Her thin neck, slender shoulders, naked, beneath his large paws. Real love, like the Baar have.

"Ha! By the fire," I shouted. "Darkheart was a Yent, a ruthless killer, the worst pirate the galaxy has ever known. Are the Yent editing history now?"

"Temper temper, little one." A sly smile crept into her face. "If there ever was a Yent pirate, of course he'd be the best."

"Please send me your proposal," Wick interrupted. "I'd love to review it."

"I also suggest you speak with Ambassador Kiki," said Orsa. "Technology is the solution to many pests. Negotiate for better defense. Otta love non-lethal weapons."

"Excellent advice," said Wick. "I'll talk to her tonight."

"Tonight?" I asked.

"The ambassador has invited me to her research quarters. She wants to show me her pet collection."

"Sounds like a date," smirked Orsa.

Quest provided a laugh. How could he love that psychopath? A hundred lovers after. She left him to start a political career. No one compared. Her weight, laying on his chest, alone in a summer field.

Crazy! This frigid deer, he loved this ice-cold harpy? Despite it all, the rejection, the denial, he still adored her. He volunteered to serve. He was to be her Wex, her assigned assistant. What a story of love and loss! Now forced to watch from afar. How could she give up something like that?

"Typically one would look to a Baar for advice on love," said Orsa, indicating the couple sitting nearby, the pair she invited to obviously torment me.

"Shut up!" I couldn't take it anymore. "What would you know about love, you heartless bitch?" Quest grabbed at my tail, trying to stop me. I leapt up from the couch.

"I could ask you the same," she said.

"Ha! Love is just a stone for you, a thing to stand on or toss away." I marched up close. She was thin, but rather tall. "The only person you love is yourself."

She loved looking down at me. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could all give up duty for such childish things?"

"I--"

"What was that game? The one you were just playing? Things you'll miss from home?" There was a new look in her eye, one of absolute control. "If I had time for such trivial things, I might say the taste of morning dew." She then gave the briefest, most subtle glance towards the tiger.

His breath caught. He remembered the morning after, when she awoke. Her kiss on his chest, over the heart, pulled summer dew from his fur. A taste, she said, she would forever cherish.

Never too close, never too far away. Her tiger on a leash. How much she must have loved the control. Watching Quest squirm in her presence and suffer in her absence.

"You're a monster!" I hated her, not just for the sense of superiority, not for hurting Quest, but because she was right. What did I know about love? I pulled back my fist, aiming to punch her in the gut.

Something caught my arm. It was Wick. He pulled sharply, dragging me away. Aftar about 20 paces, he let me go. "Are you insane, Lexi? She wants to make you lose control."

"I, I, I…"

A look of anger and disappointment filled his face. What had I done? I tried to punch an ambassador of the Galactic Council!
"I just lost…"

"Go back to your quarters." His voice was acidic, "If you ever act like that again, then I'm demanding a new assistant. You understand me? That can never happen again, Lexi."

I grabbed my tail and watched him walk off. They were staring at me, the Baar couple. What did they see? Some crazy, stupid outcast doomed to be alone.

I retreated to my computers and launched a relentless campaign against the pirates. Computer viruses, bank accounts closed, government ties exposed: someone needed to feel my wraith.

### Chapter Ten

I thought about Wick's latest journal entry as I floated in a dark place. At the center of the Daygone sits the magnetic converter, a system used to manage rotation and artificial gravity on the station. At the very middle sits the maintenance chamber, a small space just big enough to fit an average size Wex. Naturally, there was no gravity there.

Throughout the years, small slivers of metal migrated to the chamber, probably pulled through the ventilation system. The converter turned on and off in a rhythm, another pulse of the station. When on, the floating metal would snap to the nearby walls. When off, it would drift away again. In the glow of my light, the metal shimmered like fire dust.

Why was I in the maintenance chamber of the magnetic converter? While setting up security for the computer network, engineers installed special defense nodes, limiting traffic to designated sections of the station. Computers don't play well with industrial magnets, so they forgot to check the access for this part of the system.

GAIA provided me with an organic computer. While incredibly slow, it allowed me to hook directly into the hub. From there, I could access any computer on the station. That day, I was attempting to crack the password for Byruin's personal computer.

While I waited for the algorithms to run, I had lots of time to think. Darkness, shimmering light, darkness, shimmering light. I thought of Wick's journal.

When you find someone who makes you forget your worries, capture her. A horrid day filled with pirates, threats of war, and insubordination, and she made it all fade. When I entered Kiki's research quarters, everything became about us and living in the moment.

"Wick! Thanks for coming. I would start with some ideal chat, but we have far too much to do."

While the Yent demanded a garden, the Otta insisted on a research facility for their ambassador. The lab looked like a zoo, no surprise since Kiki's expertise is interplanetary biology. Exotic plants and animals filled beautiful enclosures.

"We want each one to have a natural habitat," she explained. "Any undo stress would taint measurements. If they are unhappy, then I'm unhappy."

I was given a lab coat by Nylo, the Wex assigned to Kiki, and promptly put to work. We started by feeding the Didich birds, tiny little creatures barely bigger than your thumb.

"While most animals have distinctive markings, the Didich have random patterns and colors: blue, green, yellow, orange, even sometimes red. When the flock scatters, combined, it acts as a camouflage. Predators don't know what to catch."

As we entered their enclosure, the birds swarmed towards us, quick to perch on our shoulders and heads. "Guess we don't look dangerous, huh?"

"We move upright," explained the scientist. "We look more like walking trees than predators." She raised her arms and the flock responded. Within moments her shoulders, biceps, forearms, and fingertips were covered with tiny Didich.

I followed her example and soon found my upper body littered with tiny birds. Their soft, small voices put a symphony around my head. They weighed a lot less than I imagined.

"Since they don't have recognizable markings, Didich courtship is rather unique. Couples pick each other at night, choosing based on song and body temperature. Nylo has been able to mimic the requirements." Suddenly, Kiki hopped and twirled. The birds leapt and swirled, before settling back on her outstretched arms. She repeated the process several more times, keeping the colors dancing around her. Through it all, I could see her eyes, staring at me.

Naturally, I tried too. While she was branches in the wind, my movements must have felt like a falling tree. My Didich complained loudly and left to find a free spot on the otter.

"Come now," she said, "onto the Pemy."

Pemy are massive bear-like creatures with grey fur. One stood to meet us, standing almost twice my height. Imagine my surprise when the Otta scientist rushed forward and buried her face into the massive creature's chest. "Don't worry," she said. "Pemy have no natural predators. They see everything as a helper. Just pick through their fur when you get close."

"What if I do something wrong?"

"They just push you away." As she started to run her fingers through the Pemy's fur, the creature responded with a happy sound, like a growl purr. It promptly fell backwards, lifting Kiki onto it's belly.

I took a step towards one of the other creatures, only to receive a glare. "How about I just watch on this one?"

"Don't be silly. Come here, help me with this male."

A few moments later, I found myself sitting on the belly of the beast with Kiki. Each breath in lifted us gently. Each breath out made us fall ever so slightly. If I didn't know better, I would think the Pemy liked watching us bounce on his belly.

"Most Pemy never mate, which is odd for a dominant species. It took a long time to determine how they form couples." The Otta slid her hand across the belly fur of the creature until her fingers rested on top of mine. "It's all about fit. This is why they are so eager to lay beside or on top of each other." She interlocked our fingers. "Only if a Pemy pair fit together perfectly, like pieces of a puzzle, will they mate."

I looked at her paw. How strange to be holding hands with an alien. The small webbing between her fingers kept our palms apart. Her brown fur felt smooth and soft. The coarse paw pads at her fingertips brushed against my knuckles as her blunt claws tickled the back of my hand.

"Perfect fit," I muttered.

"Come on," she said. "We need to groom the others. Regular interaction is important to keep Pemy calm. Nylo even sleeps on top of each periodically."

We moved from one creature to the next. Kiki continued her ceaseless explanation of the biology of the animals, all with a boundless enthusiasm that one typically only sees in children.

"You certainly know a lot about the courtship and mating habits of these things," I tried to tease her.

"That's what we're studying. Each of our guests is from a species with unusual or unobserved mating habits. There are stark similarities among all life in the universe, but behaviour seems to be a variable. What better subject is there to study than love?"

"Love?" I smiled. "That's not a very scientific term."

"What else would you call it?" she asked. "Certainly, the needs of reproduction are known. Genetic diversity and continuation of the species. Why, then, are there so many different ways of determining a match?"

"Draw any conclusions yet?"

"No. Most scientists avoid behavioural studies. We can travel between stars. We have computers that can simulate reality. Medicine can rebuild a lost limb. But true study of behaviour, not anecdotal observation, takes a lifetime. The slowest of the sciences and the net result? No cure, no fame, no new technology. Only understanding. Understanding of life at one specific moment in the history of the universe."

I put my hand on her shoulder. "I can't think of anything more important."

"Thank you." She lifted her shoulder and rubbed her cheek along my hand. "Want to hear something utterly unscientific? Hearing you say that means a lot to me. Not sure why. All the other ambassadors wish I researched weapons or something."

"Trust me." I turned my hand over, letting my fingers trace her chin. "You chose wisely."

"Ok!" Her thick whiskers and round ears pulled back: a blush. "We still got the Zio, Ullip, and Marka to go. We're behind schedule."

Tending to the other animals and plants took several more hours. I couldn't believe she went through this ritual every night. "Come help anytime. Nylo tends to them all day. Science never sleeps." She laughed suddenly. "But ambassadors do. It's late. Sorry for keeping you up."

I couldn't leave yet. "What do you want to discover from your study of love?"

Kiki was tired. Her eyes drifted before settling on some distant, unseen place. I recognized that smile. An alien face with a muzzle and whiskers and fur, and I recognized that smile. Not happiness, not memory, not battled sorrow, just innocent hope. A simple smile for a silly little dream that, for one brave moment, you let yourself believe will come true.

"A scientist never wants anything. She simply observes. Never judges. Just watches."

"Draw any conclusions yet?" I asked.

That smile withered. "Not everyone finds love." She still didn't look at me. "It's a great battle, maybe the greatest that life will ever know. Your odds seem better in your natural habitat. Not locked up in some lab."

"I don't know about that." She really should have looked at me. Then she might not have been so surprised when I leaned in and gave her a kiss. My lips settled on her forehead for one brief moment.

Kiki stared at me, her eyes asking the important question, "Why?"

"I think the scientist needs to pay more attention."

Her bubbly energy returned, "Did I look like I needed that?"

"Yep. Now, I know it's late, but you still owe me."

"I do? Yes, yes, your help today was very appreciated, Wick. How can we repay you?" she asked.

"Not for today. When we first met, you asked me a hundred questions about being a human. It's your turn to answer my questions about Otta."

"Certainly! Anything you want. Ask me anything."

And I did. We talked through the night. What a beautiful end to an otherwise horrible day.

Darkness, shimmering light, darkness, shimmering light. The magnets continued their pulse. Too bad they had no effect on water.

In space, tears float.

### Chapter Eleven

"We lost all contact?" asked Wick. "Was the ship destroyed?"

"Broadcasting an attack is the top priority of all human vessels," I explained. "The thing just vanished."

The military vessel we sent to investigate the distress signal from the remote Tyoh outpost suddenly ceased communications. A system failure was highly unlikely. Being trapped in space without any method to call for help was a common human fear. The backup system has backups.

"A surprise attack? Where is this outpost located?" Wick got up and began pacing, a habit he'd recently picked up.

"On Rawca and Gyben border."

"What? Why do we have an outpost there?" he asked.

"It's a listening outpost. A spy station."

"We need to know more. Can you access anything? A nearby probe?"

"I've tried."

He frowned.

"I'll try again." I left the office to return to the computers in my quarters. Unfortunately, I encountered Cinder in the hall.

"Lexi! Great to see you again." The Gyben ambassador spread his wings and gave a small bow. "I hope the day finds you well."

"Not really." I wanted to tell the bat to go die in a fire, but I remembered Wick's warning. I crossed my arms and pressed my claws into my arms to help control my anger. "How can I help, Ambassador?"

"Gosh, so many things! Are you good with negotiations? I have a rather difficult conversation going on with the Mirj trade federation. Most annoying."

"Sorry," I said. "I can't even convince my tail to stop knocking things over."

"Oh! Delightful." The pixie drones of the bat continued to swirl around us. "Back massage?"

"Huh?"

"I'm still trying to think of a way you can help. Would be a shame to waste such an offer."

He was serious. I forgot how literal Gyben could be with casual conversation. "I'm sorry, but I'm in a hurry. We have a bit of an emergency."

"Could it be that military vessel you lost?" He bobbed his eyebrows, like a comedian wanted to emphasize a joke. "The one near my system?"

"Should I deny it?" I asked.

"Most definitely!" He chuckled. "I couldn't care less, but I'm afraid the Rawca will be less understanding. I'm on my way to meet your boss so we can plan a unified response."

"He's in his office. I'm sure he'll be happy to see you."

"Come come, Lexi. I'd much rather have you there." He moved close, so close that I could smell his breath. Carrots, it smelled like fresh carrots. "Want to know why?"

If he made a pass at me, I didn't care what Wick would do. I'd slug the bat. "No."

"Haven't you noticed how tall humans are? Like giants!" Cinder moved his fingers from his forehead to mine. "Us short races need to stick together."

"You're crazy."

"Crazy? I've been called a financial savant before, but never that. Raspberries. How easy would everything be if I was a loon?" He tilted his head, as if actually contemplating it. "I'd dance a lot. Later." With a hop, the Gyben turned and continue down the hall. "Come lady Baar. Bring your naughty tail and follow me."

Wick stood to greet us. "Ambassador Cinder, welcome. I was expecting you."

"I bet you say that to all your uninvited guests." Cinder moved quickly to take a seat in front of the desk. "I do love these chairs. Are all human chairs so comfy? Nope, nope, we don't have time to talk of such things. We have slightly more important matters."

"He knows that communication was lost with our vessel travelling to the Tyoh outpost," I said, hoping to advance the conversation.

"A brightstar-class destroyer? I'd call that more than a vessel," said the bat. "No, no, before you ask, we didn't destroy it. Bananas. Imagine the fleet we would need to take out a human warship. We'd rather bribe the captain. Haha, should I say that? It's true, but in this case we didn't. We knew of the ship but have no idea what happened. Do you know?"

Wick managed to get a single word out, "No."

The bat continued, "Your ships are powerful but not very subtle. They broadcast almost as much as kids these days. Have you seen that new social sharing site? You try to mimic the post of someone and it goes on and on until the copy of a copy of a copy is nothing like the original. Quite odd."

"Something is very odd," I interjected.

"Indeed!" said Cinder. "The outpost they were going to, that we didn't know about. Some of you are very good at sneaking, just not most. Any idea why it sent out that distress signal?"

"That's why we sent a ship," replied Wick. "We have no idea."

"Ah! Could be a Rawca attack. Can you blame them? You were a little close to their space. Very dumb. If you asked, the Gyben federation would've gladly rented you space on one of your border systems. You can spy on the dogs as much as you want. You won't get much. Have you watched any of their media? Gross. Like one endless bar fight."

"Thank you for the offer, Ambassador. I'll pass the offer along." The human stood and headed towards his private quarters. "Will you excuse me for a second?"

"Yes, yes. I did arrive suddenly. Do humans pee often? Don't try to have a long negotiation with a Hikan. Peaches. They have bladders the size of a mouse. Take your time, Ambassador. I'll chat with your lovely associate."

Wick gave me a wink as he exited. I made a mental note, if he took longer than five minutes, I'd hack his environmental settings and make all his showers cold.

"So…" The bat removed his glasses and breathed on them.

I pounced and spoke first, "I got a question. Why should you never ask a Gyben a riddle?"

He blinked a few times. "I am not sure, Lexi. Why?"

"Because they'll never tell you the answer."

"Oh, because I didn't." He covered his face with his wings and laughed. "I fell for that one! Clever as mangos. Now I got a question. Are you married? I've never met a single Baar. Are mates assigned or something? Would take a lot of the pressure off. What happened to your assigned mate?"

"They're not assigned."

"I meant no offence," said the bat. "Don't worry, I'm single too. Guess we could get married. Would you like that? I'm rich! Ambassadors have little time for dating. I've been doing this since I was twelve. Imagine that. They had me mentor under the previous ambassador. He wasn't very good. Smart, brilliant diplomat, but bad with money. Once he gave over a billion Teel to help an Otta charity to save a dying sun. Corn! So, what do you think?"

"I'm not going to marry you," I said.

"Raspberries. Think about it. No rush. I can be very flexible with the terms. I have big fangs too. You know what they say about Gyben with big fangs, right?"

"Nope."

"Your human is taking a while. Is he still mad at me about that universal currency vote? The markets have already recovered. It'll be a big help for peace. I promise. You sure you don't want to marry me? I have big plans for the next ten years! I'm a smart investment."

"Sorry to interrupt." Wick finally returned. He brought with him a small white box. "A human transport stopped here a few days ago. They brought me a few supplies, including a gift I requested for you, Ambassador." He handed the container to the bat.

"A gift? How generous. Is this customary? I'll bring gifts next time. I'd very much like to buy something for Lexi." Cinder put the box in his lap. "Do I open it now?"

"Please," said Wick. "I know your kind are vegetarians. You love vegetables and fruits. I thought you may like to try these."

The Gyben wiggled a smile onto his face and promptly pulled the top off the container.

"Blueberries," explained the human. "We don't commonly ship these off Earth. They don't last long off the vine, like other fruits."

"Splendid! I knew there was a reason to invite humans to the Council. I simply must try one now." The bat popped one of the small berries into his mouth. "Delicious! Blueberries? Not a very original name. I'd call them vunf. What do you think? Vunf berries. I simply must have a few more."

"First," said Wick, "let me start by apologizing for the outpost so close to your space. The Typo facility was built before I became ambassador. I assure you, we'll discuss such plans with your government from now on."

Cinder nodded as he continued to pop blueberries in his mouth, one at a time. Brilliant. Wick had finally found a way to shut up the Gyben ambassador: snacks.

The human continued, "I know we got off to a rocky start. I hope that you'll also keep me informed of your plans going forward. If you had explained your reasoning behind a universal currency, I think we could have come to a mutual agreement."

"Yes, yes. My apologies too. These are delicious! Have you had these before, Lexi?"

"I prefer blackberries."

"Black? Do human berries come in all colors? I would very much like to see a tealberry."

"Only a Gyben would think fruit is a suitable topic for Council members," the deep voice of Byruin interrupted.

"Welcome, Ambassador. Perfect timing. Please join us?" Wick was clearly not surprised by the sudden arrival of the Rawca. He must have contacted Byruin from his personal quarters.

"Good spirits to you, fellow ambassador." Cinder spread his wings quickly before returning to munching on fruit.

"Tell me, how did you humans keep up with the Rawca? You build an outpost at a nearly useless location. It broadcasts its secret location. Then you send a military ship to investigate and lose track of it." The dog grinned. "It's such a dumb plan, I'd think a Gyben came up with it."

"Oh no no no," said Cinder. "We had nothing to do with this. I assure you of that."

"Why not?" asked Byruin. "Get the humans to pay you to build a listening outpost on your border. Let them spy on your old nemesis. Seems like a perfect scheme."

"Don't get your tail in a knot," said Cinder. "It's been almost a thousand years since we had a war. You're too valuable a partner to be an enemy. I am more than happy to send you all the financial records for deals between Earth and the Gyben federation. In fact--"

Byruin simply interrupted, "Gyben are cowards. They wouldn't forge documents, but you could certainly hide plots inside money laundering. Just how you fund pirates."

"Lies for breakfast, lunch, and dinner," said the bat. "You want a fairytale for dessert?"

"Enough," said Wick. "This bickering isn't going to resolve our issue. I apologize for the outpost, Ambassador Byruin. I had no idea of its existence. We sent a ship to investigate. The Gyben had no knowledge of the outpost or the vessel we sent."

"Maybe the Gyben attacked your ship!" said Cinder. "Why don't you ask him about that?"

"Who's shoveling lies now?" roared Byruin. "The Rawca never do sneak attacks. Your ship would've sent an alert before the battle."

"Never? How about Cinci Nine?" said Cinder. "A defenseless currency exchange he brutally ambushed and ransacked by Rawca military forces."

"You always bring that up. Gives me a headache," said the dog.

"Neither the Gyben nor the Rawca had anything to do with this outpost or the disappearance," said Wick. "Is that correct?" They both nodded. "Thank you. Now let's talk about how we resolve this situation going forward."

"I'm sending in a fleet," said Byruin. "Enough secrecy. I'll take the outpost and we can prove who did what."

"Absurd," responded Cinder. "I won't stand for it. A Rawca fleet on our borders. That's an act of war."

"And helping humans spy on us isn't?" shouted Byruin.

"Please, let's remain calm. I propose that we let the Council handle this. We can send a combined investigation fleet. Simple search-and-rescue ships from all races that want to be involved. Does that sound fair?" asked Wick.

"What about the outpost?" I asked.

"I consider it a mistake," said the human. "Any data at that outpost is property of the Rawca and Gyben governments. We'll turn it all over to the Council."

"Hmph." Byruin bristled, sending his hackles up. "Sounds fair to me. Earth will still have many questions to answer."

"There will also be fines to pay," added Cinder. "Let's convene the Council and make preparations."

After a fair bit more bickering, Wick finally managed to get both the Rawca and Gyben ambassadors out of his office.

When we were alone, I said, "GAIA is not going to like this."

"You are already booked into the network there, right? Anything left on those computers?"

"Not that I could find," I said.

"Then no one will find it. Besides, I'd rather have the Rawca involvement closely monitored. We don't need some failed spy outpost to send us back into war."

"Smart, but I have a bad feeling about this. First the station and now the rescue ship goes silent. Someone is hiding something."

"Lexi, can you please confirm that someone isn't us? I need to know if a secret project went haywire."

"I'll check," I said with a sigh. "It'll be a few days." A formal review and declassification of projects at the Tyoh outpost would take too long. That meant hacking GAIA and other intelligence agencies directly. I'd done it before, but one can never be too cautious tiptoeing among sleeping panthers at midnight. "Time to grab dinner then start. What are you up to this evening?"

"Not sure yet," he said.

"You're not going to spend it with Kiki?" I asked. For the last few weeks, Wick had spent every evening assisting the Otta in her lab. Some nights he didn't even return to his own quarters.

"Not tonight," said Wick. "I thought I might watch a movie."

"A romance?"

He shook his head. "Yep. Your files on me are right again. Know any good ones?"

"Love Again. It's a Baar movie, but a favorite of mine. Male loses his memory after an accident and has to fall in love for a second time with his wife or his nurse."

"Sounds lovely."

"Why not watch it with Kiki?" I asked.

"She doesn't like movies. Says it distracts from more important things, like reading up on scientific journals."

"Well…" I stopped and stared down at my feet. "Maybe we…"

He said one word in an imperfect way, "Yes?"

"I was just wondering," my mind felt as numb as my tongue, "why do you only watch romance movies? You seem more like a spy thriller or fantasy person to me."

He gave a small laugh, more like a snort under his breath. "There's a stupid reason actually. Kind of embarrassing. I adored movies growing up, begged my parents to take me to the theater every week. Loved popcorn. Loved action, adventure, mystery, comedy. Loved everything but romantic movies. Hated those. So when I got to university, I told everyone I only liked that genre."

"Why?"

"A silly idea. I stopped watching movies that I would like. I wanted to save them, so that someday I could catch up. I promised myself that I would find the love of my life and watch all the best movies with her, the ones I missed. Of course, it was a silly idea. What are the odds that I’d find someone else who did the same thing, who didn’t watch any of the biggest films?"

"I haven't seen many," I said softly.

He must've not heard me. Wick continued his story, "Told my friends that I only liked romantic movies. Eventually, they stopped inviting me, except for romances. Guess after seeing enough, I started to like them. Imagine that."

My mind was racing, trying to remember human films I'd seen while at the GAIA academy. One thing humans and Baar shared in common was a love of movies. Most other races had abandoned the art form a long time ago or changed to virtual reality experiences. "The Chrono Code! You haven't seen that?"

"Nope."

"That's a tragedy! We got to watch it. How about tonight, together?" I asked.

"Sounds wonderful."

I quoted a famous line from the film, trying to mimic the deep voice of the actor, Chad Penstock, "You're my yesterday." It was a poor imitation. "It's an action movie, but as this amazing love story."

He laughed. "I don't think I've seen you so excited before."

"It's that good! It's got a love story. So does that meet your criteria? You can keep your promise."

"Yes," he said with an honest smile. "Yes it does, Lexi. Let's watch it together."

"Great! I'll go get us something to eat. We can watch it on the big screen in your quarters. In the seating area."

"I didn't know you had familiarity with my quarters," he said.

I knew at some point I would make a mistake. I had been in his quarters a lot, when reading his journal, but never by invitation. Of course, I was a trained spy and had my excuse prepared well in advance. "I had to sweep your room for bugs before you arrived. Don't want anyone spying on you." Another good spy trick, act normal and make a quick exit.

"Food. I'll be back."

We spent the evening together, sitting on his couch. The movie wasn't as good as I remembered, but he enjoyed it. Near the end, I moved close so our legs were touching. He didn't notice. I wanted to lean against his side, have him put his arm around me. Just like in the movie, I reimagined every memory I had and inserted him there.

What a lovely night.

### Chapter Twelve

I read the next entry in Wick's journal while sitting on the couch in his quarters.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

When I was a kid I would put headphones in my ears and leave the music off. I'd breathe in a rhythm, laboring my air, as if lightly snoring. When I got it just right, the sounds of the ocean filled in my head. Do it long enough and the act becomes unnoticeable, leaving just the sounds of a crashing surf.

Breathe in.

I know why. My parents fell in love by the sea. Their relationship was only perfect during our trips to the coast. It was like entering a fantasy land. Some of my best memories were wandering the beaches and forests, imagining I was on an adventure. Off to find the dragon while Mom and Dad held hands.

Breathe out.

For the Wex, the most sacred number is six -- one more than can be counted on a single hand. If you stand on the homeworld of those felines, at midnight, you'll see a group of seven stars. The sixth is called Daygone. Around that star are eight planets. The sixth is a world of water called Wava.

For thousands of years, Wex would pilgrimage to the planet, visiting the tiny islands. When the Galactic Council was formed, they naturally offered to build a station orbiting their sacred planet, Daygone 6.

Visits to the surface are strictly prohibited. Ambassadors, as the most honored of guests, are allowed one day a year. Today was Kiki's day. She offered to take me. Naturally, our assigned, Quest and Nylo, insisted on coming. There was really no greater prize for their kind. In fact, having a chance to visit the surface of Daygone 6 is why so many Wex volunteer as candidates to assist Council ambassadors.

Breathe in.

We disembarked from our shuttle at sunrise. The warm wind, the white sand, the scents of the ocean, it all felt surreal. I'd never spent so long in space before. I could see why pilgrims, after months of travel, would see this as paradise.

"The planet is 99.99% water. There are only five islands across the entire globe," explained Kiki.

"Too bad there aren't six," I said.

"If you float in the ocean, then your body is the sixth," said Quest. For the first five minutes, the tiger stood with his arms outstretched, like a flower trying to soak up the rising sun and morning breeze.

"You want to join him?" I asked Nylo.

The panther rub his left arm. "Nah, he's got it."

In my brief time with Kiki's Wex assistant, I found him to be very awkward. Brilliant with the animals in the labs, horrendous with any other form of life. The panther was a true biologist.

"You look like a fool!" Lexi playfully bumped into Quest, jarring the tiger from his meditative moment. Kiki had invited her too.

"Hey! I'm having a moment here." Quest couldn't maintain his fake anger for long. "Not surprised. Nerds like you have no culture."

"Careful," said the Baar, "you're outnumbered. A couple of scientists and a computer geek v.s. a dimwitted cat and CEO."

"Technically we're not cats," meekly offered Nylo.

"Retired CEO," I said. "I think I'm probably more of a nerd now."

"Oh no!" said Quest. He rushed over, wrapped his arms around my chest and lifted me. "You're not switching sides. Us dimwits need to stick together." Damn, he was strong.

"Don't break him," said Lexi. "You don't want to go down in history as the first Wex that killed his ambassador."

"Actually, he'd be the second. 612 years ago, Hillif murdered Ambassador Dax," added Nylo. "Little known fact, that's why the station has a special jail for diplomats and dignitaries."

I managed to pry myself free from the tiger. "If we ever play trivia, I want Nylo on my team."

"Does anyone want breakfast?" asked Kiki. The Otta exited the shuttle wearing a green bikini. "We got plenty of food for the day." The light fur of her cheeks and muzzle continued in a strip down the middle of her chest and inner thighs. She had darker spots on the side of her hips. Most Otta thought such markings undesirable. I think they're adorable.

"I'm surprised you've lasted this long without going for a swim," I said.

"We've been here for only 13 minutes," said Nylo.

"Had to put my swimming attire on," said Kiki. "You all need to change." The rest of us still wore our formal clothes from the station.

It only took a few minutes to change. Nylo claimed to have forgotten his swimsuit. Fortunately, Quest brought extra. Unfortunately, the tiger was much larger than the panther. Nylo had the strings pulled as tight as possible on his bright orange swimming trunks. Quest wore blue shorts that matched well with his sparkling fur.

As an ambassador, all my clothing is provided and cleaned by the station. Good thing too. Who packs swimming trunks when they visit a space station? Like all the rest of the official ambassador apparel, the swimsuit was white.

Lexi looked the most uncomfortable, even more than Nylo. She wore a black bikini with orange flowers, but kept on an oversized t-shirt. It read, "Resting beach face." The fur on her legs was completely black.

Breath out.

If you've never seen an Otta swimming in the sun drenched sea, you're missing majesty. Kiki would burst from the waves, twirling into the air like a dancer tossed upwards by her partner. The water sparkled as it traced away from her graceful arcs. She moved effortlessly.

"Wow," said Quest. "The scientist is amazing."

"She's actually clunky compared to most of her kind," said Nylo.

"I don't believe it," I said. I can't even imagine more fluid movements.

"You can swim like that right Wick?" The tiger suddenly stared at me. "Team Nerd is winning."

"Me? Why don't you go out there? Do some water ballet," I suggested. "I'm more of a floater."

"I was going to say that," said Quest.

"I swim like a stone," said Nylo.

"Looks cold," I added.

"Broken mirrors!" declared Lexi. "Are you afraid of getting your nuts wet? You can literally count the number of individuals who've been in this ocean. Come on." The tiny red panda grabbed the tails of the tiger and the panther.

"Oww, oww," said Nylo. "Be careful."

"Why not Wick?" asked the other Wex.

"He doesn't have a convenient butt handle like you felines. Now come on." She dragged the Wex to the sea. Finally, a great reason to not have a tail.

I was too distracted to notice Kiki sneaking up behind me. Without warning, wet arms wrapped around me. The sudden chill of the water isn't why I shivered. She pressed her slick fur into my back, resting her muzzle on my shoulder. "You know what I think about while I'm swimming?" she asked.

Her warmth quickly filled the space where our bodies overlapped. "Do you think about nothing?"

"I make wishes. Every time I go under, I make a wish. Then when I come up, I hope the dream will come true." She giggled, her whiskers tickling the underside of my chin.

"Is that a common game for Otta children?"

"Nope. Just me," she said. "The water is a portal to another world, a parallel place."

"The obvious question." I gently pulled away and turned to face her. The water made her fur look slick and shine like a polished gem. Her smile, the one she'd been saving for when she saw my face, shined even brighter. "What did you wish for?"

"You."

"Not much of a wish," I replied.

"The best ones come true, don't you think?" she grabbed my hand and pulled me slowly towards the shore.

"I'm not much of a swimmer," I said. True fact, I hadn't swam since college.

Her eyes didn't leave mine. "There is a very high salt content. You'll find it hard to sink."

"Will you watch over me?"

We reached the edge of the water. The tiny waves washed over our ankles. "You're safe." She pulled me further, slowly. Million of lightyears from Earth, standing on a sacred planet, on the edge of an ocean, with an alien that looked like an otter. All the things I could think about, all the poetic thoughts or profound conclusions, and nothing came to me. Her eyes, her jade-colored eyes, captivated me.

From our ankles, to our knees. From our thighs to our waists. From our bellies to our necks. Slowly, she pulled me into the sea.

Breathe in.

She didn't lie. After submerging, she released my hand and the surface lifted me, pushing me to the surface. I found a new breath. She surfaced. "Did you make a wish?" she asked.

"Not to drown?" I laughed.

"Came true," she said. "Ready? I'll pull us deeper this time."

I clenched my eyes and she pulled. Down, down, down, we went. Into the warm depths. She let me go suddenly. I panicked for a moment before I began to rise. The air we pulled down with our decent, tiny little bubbles that clung to my skin, broke free and raced me to the surface. It tickled.

The warm sun greeted me. I ruined the moment by sputtering and trying to wipe the water from my eyes.

Kiki appeared a moment later. "Another wish?"

"Didn't think of one. You?" I asked.

"I wished for a universe where everyone smiles a little more." She saw my expression. "Another comes true."

"I must look ridiculous. You're better made for water. I can't even keep my eyes open."

"You look beautiful, Wick. You're shining. I can help with the eyes. Stay here for a moment. I'll be back." She disappeared beneath the water.

Alone, I looked around. See an endless sea. Our shuttle and the island were much further than I thought. How far has she carried me? I felt a twinge of worry. What if she lost track of me? Would I be able to make it back.

Breathe out.

Then I remember what Lexi said. This wasn't just another ocean. Saviour the moment. I raised on my back. The sixth island. Blue sky. I remembered the sensation of floating weightless in space. This was completely different. In space, I felt insignificant, a fragment being lost. In that sea, I felt important, a fragment to be found.

Breathe in.

And she found me.

I didn't startle at an unexpected touch. It was her blunt claws and fingers reaching through the deep, tracing my spine. Kiki lifted from the water and put her chin on my chest. "What were you thinking about?" she asked.

"What I would do if you never came back."

"You don't need to worry about that," she said. "Otta never get lost. We always find our way back home."

"Am I your home?" I asked.

She didn't answer, letting her chin slide off my side, her head disappearing to the water again. Her hand moved to cradle my neck. I continued to look upwards as her lips took a space by my ear. "To help you see." Kiki lifted a small bottle over me. She squeezed and a few drops fell into my eyes. "A protective coating. Lots of Otta use these when swimming."

"Feels like I got honey on my eyes."

"Ready?" Kiki whispered. Not waiting for my reply, she wrapped her arms around my chest and kissed the side of my head. "Don't blink." Up, she lifted us, then down.

The water surrounded me. The blue sky became a shimmer beyond the surface. I felt nothing on my eyes except a slight decrease in temperature. Incredible. I'd never experienced underwater like that. The fear most people have of the deep has to do with the feeling of forcing their eyes closed. Humans rely on their sight to feel safe. Monsters and creatures and coffins only exist in a ceaseless dark.

Down and down we went. I wish I could've held my breath longer. Kiki felt the tension in my chest, turned me, and released. I saw her as the water lifted me. Floating. Calm. Her fur hovered around her. The lines of wavering light traced across her form like golden ribbons. Through it all (the depths, the water, the dancing light) pierced the look of her captivating eyes and playful smile.

As I neared the surface, she lingered behind, disappearing. Then, she suddenly returned, swimming quickly towards me. Her hands met my chest, pushing me through the ceiling of water and carrying me up into the air. I heard her laughter as we came tumbling back down.

Breathe out.

We repeated the cycle several more times. Pull me down; push me up. It got easier each time. My body learned to expect the shift from air to water. Soon, I was laughing with her. Each time we surfaced, she would tell me some silly little wish she made.

We returned to the shore almost an hour later. We spent most of the time floating on our backs. Two islands became one when we touched.

Back on shore, we ate lunch. Nylo explained how Quest tried to drown him. Lexi didn't say much. It would've been a perfect holiday if it ended there, but there was one more moment.

We decided to stay for the sunset. As the day grew hot, we rested in the shadow of our shuttle. Kiki went out for one last swim. My muscles were far too exhausted to join.

Lexi and I sat at the edge of the ocean, the gentle tiding washing over our feet. The Wex duo leaned against the cool metal of our starship.

Quest commented on the distant sight of Kiki swimming. "A sacred Wex planet and I think she got more out of it than all of us." Every few minutes. She would emerge, hopping into the air.

"The Otta homeworld is very similar," said Nylo. "More land, but lots of water."

"I can see how someone would easily fall for her," said our tiger. "Passionate but rarely serious."

"I think someone has a crush," said Lexi.

"Nah," replied Quest. "I did that love thing once."

"What happened?"

"She never loved me. Or, if she did, the emotion wasn't strong enough. She found other," he sighed, "things. It was years and years ago, but all I can think about today is her. The things I'd do if she was here."

"You'd have to find a secluded spot," said Lexi.

Quest laughed loudly, probably thankful for the red panda's interrupting comment. "Hey! Who wouldn't want to make love on a sacred planet? How about you, Lexi?"

"Nope," she replied. "Why not ask Nylo?"

The panther was rightfully confused. "What? I'm not sure that I follow."

"I'll explain." Quest grabbed his arm and grinned. "Let's take a walk."

That left me alone with Lexi. In the sand, she mindlessly drew a shape: a circle with a horizontal line through it. Each time she finished, she'd wipe it away and draw it again.

"Kind of sad," she said. "Poor Quest. Hundreds of lovers, hoping that he'll find someone that will actually love him."

"You think that's why he does it?" I asked.

"I know how he feels. Can I even be loved? Is there some flaw in my design? Is there a reason she left?" She started to look at me, but decided against it. "Lovely sunset."

The color of roses red began to fill the horizon, melding into the coming night through an emeraldine sky. "You don't have a flaw."

"You have no idea, Wick. There are plenty of bugs in my programming." Lexi always spoke her mind, but then I could see her struggle. Holding back was not her thing. "Not normal. Not even close." Her words and thoughts became broken, as if she was trying to push through tearless sobbing.

"Hardly know you," she continued. "My anger, they picked on me for it. So wrong and now… not even my own kind. Couldn't see it, can't see it. I just want… stupid, stupid little fantasy. It's hard. Damn it. You're just, why can't I just…."

While she stumbled and staggered through words and thoughts, she kept drawing in the sand. A circle divided by a line. "I love… I love…"

I reached for her but she stood suddenly. She pulled off her t-shirt, and dropped it on the shore. The off-white fur around her muzzle continued down to a small patch on the top of her chest. Her belly was black, her sides and back colored red like the sunset.

"Lexi, what are you trying to say?"

"You ever noticed it? In movies?" she asked. "How everyone always says the right thing? Everyone makes sense. She always says just the right thing at just the right time to make him love her. Guess being tongue-tied and tortured isn't attractive."

"Real life doesn't have a script."

"Quest is right! You should swim out to her. To Kiki." Her hands curled into balls. She kept her back to me, facing the setting sun. "You love her, right? I see your smile whenever she's around."

"Is that a bad thing?"

She remained silent for what felt like an hour. Then she said one word, only one, burdened with so many left unspoken, "No…"

"Lexi…"

"I'm happy for you. You deserve it, Wick." Her hands relaxed. "Ha. I'm finally making sense. No more stuttering. Now get out there. Go to her. Watch the rest of the sunset together. Count the stars."

Breathe in.

What I did next made no sense. It still doesn't. I didn't think. I just reacted. I slowly stood, walked over, and wrapped my arms around Lexi. I whispered, "Ok, I got her. Now when do we start counting stars?"

I felt drops of water fall on my arms. It could've been a splash from a nearby wave. Her heart was racing. Mine was racing too.

Breathe out.

No wonder Wick had been tired that day. He must've spent all night writing in his journal. He didn't even capture half my ramblings. I tried to say a hundred things to change his heart and all he needed was one.

Just the right thing said at the right time.

Wick held me for only a minute before we were interrupted by the loud approach of Quest and Nylo. The tiger certainly made the panther feel special. Kiki returned to the shore too. As we got in the shuttle to journey back to the station, they showed more affection. Kiki held Wick's arm tightly and even kissed his neck. He liked it. He didn't resist. Nylo and Quest made jokes, pushed each other, and shared knowing glances.

I kept to myself, held my tail, and thought about the happiest number. Two. I'd counted two stars before we parted.

## Chapter Thirteen

Something woke me. A large weight settled on the edge of my bed. The only light came from one of the computer monitors in the distant corner of the room, a timid green glow.

Fortunately, I'd spent a lot of time in the dark. My other senses were ready. It wasn't Wick that woke me, not a dream becoming a reality. This individual smelt much different, like a Rawca.

A massive hand settled on my chest. "Don't worry, little Baar. I'm not here to hurt you."

"What do you want, Byruin?" I tried to struggle, but he kept me pinned effortlessly.

"We need to talk," the hyena's deep voice flooded the room.

"You could've knocked. Sneaking seems beneath an ambassador." My mind raced, trying to find a way to escape. In my nightstand was a needle, covered in the sap of the Yowfe tree, a gift from the techs at GAIA. One prick would put anyone, even this massive warrior, to sleep. I just needed to reach it.

"I thought sneaking is something your kind preferred."

"Baar are peaceful," I protested.

"Not Baar," he said. "Spies."

"You still think I'm a spy?" I asked. “Sorry, I'm just a glorified secretary."

"What kind of secretary keeps her quarters in such a mess?" He shifted, moving more onto my bed. All the time, his paw kept an unyielding weight on my chest. This thumb and index finger surrounded my collar like a necklace. "Also, I can feel your heart, little Baar. Far too calm for being awoken in the middle of the night. You need training for that."

I slid my hands up his large forearm, grabbed onto his fur, and pulled hard. He winced, but only slightly. Pain wasn't my goal. I brought my hands to my lips, inhaled, and then blew out sharply. His fur, and his DNA, spread out across the bed and room.

"Clever," he said. "Would make it much harder to cover my tracks if I were to kill you." His palm turned so one of his claws could trace my cheek. "Or I could claim my fur just ended up in the bed of a lover."

It was the chance I needed. His weight was off center. I turned sharply and leapt for my nightstand and the weapon contained within. Byruin was too fast, his reflexes trained like those of a soldier. He grabbed my shoulder and drove me back down. He leaned over me, his weight on my back, my face pressed into the sheets.

"I like your fire, little Baar."

Now I started to panic. I kicked my feet and tried to pull loose. No use. He wouldn't let me escape a second time. It wasn't just his grip I battled this time. His chest, all his weight, laid on top of me. "Get off!" I yelled.

"Calm." He lowered his muzzle to my ear. "Calm," he whispered again. "I won't hurt you."

"Tell that to my back," I said. His weight was crushing. It felt like a house had fallen on me. The warmth of his muscles felt hot. Maybe the house had burned down.

He chuckled, the vibration surrounding me. "Fine. I won't leave scars. How's that?"

"What do you want?"

"To deliver a message." One of his hands slid down my side and over my rear. His fingers wrapped around my tail. "I admire your kind. The loyalty of the Baar is unmatched in the galaxy. Even the soldiers that served beneath me weren't as unwavering." He yanked up on my tail, lifting my hips, and sending a sharp pain through my body. "Interrogation would never work on you."

"What's your message?" The pain and humiliation of being so dominated didn't compare to the betrayal of the moment. I'd never felt someone's weight on my back, never felt someone force up my tail, never shared a bed. I hated him for ruining so many firsts.

"Wick is alive," he said.

"What! Why would you say that?"

"Your ambassador was attacked this morning."

"What did you do?" They taught me wrestling moves to help subdue or escape. I hesitated to use the training; what assistant would know judo? I had no choice. I bent my knees, putting my feet into his armpit. I kicked, hoping to lift his arm. All I needed was enough space to wrap my legs and arms around his elbow. Then his own weight would work against the weakness of his joints and tendons.

"Excellent. You're stronger than I thought," said Byruin, not trying to hide the pleasure in his voice. "If only you weren't born in such a fragile body." He shifted forward, straddling me, putting his hips over mine.

I failed. The difference in weight and muscle was too much. "What did you do to Wick?"

He grabbed the back of my neck, pushing my face never further into the sheets, muffling my scream. "He was attacked in his quarters by a Rawca. I need you to know it wasn't me. The assassin acting on his own. A goon for organized crime. A pirate. The Rawca Empire had no involvement."

"I don't believe you!"

He put his muzzle at my ear again. "It doesn't matter what you think. It never has. You're just a pawn in a greater game. Everyone (me, Wick, Kiki, Cinder, and those agencies you don't work for), we're all using you."

His weight was making it hard to breathe. "What's your point?" each word took valuable air from my lungs. If we hadn't already been in darkness, I'm sure things would be fading.

"Do it for Wick. Not for me. If anyone can stop a chain reaction that leads us back to war, it is you, Lexi." He snapped his teeth. "If I wasn't pinning you right now, what would you do little Baar?"

I didn't have the air to answer. I didn't have the breath to scream.

"You'd rush to the hospital and wait at his bedside. Now is not the time. Save his legacy. Let the doctors save his body." Byruin's teeth snapped once more, this time over my ear. His fangs punctured my skin, just enough to cause maximum pain but minimal damage. Rawca often bite the ears of their children as an act of discipline.

The hyena suddenly sat up, releasing me. I rolled over, gasping for air.

"Sorry, little Baar," he said. "Breathe. Don't stand up right away. Focus. Do what needs to be done first. He probably won't even be awake for a while."

I felt like crying but refused to give him the satisfaction. "If I find out you had something to do with this…"

"The Empire doesn't believe in piracy. Controlling crime, that's something for monsters of the night. Beware the bats." Byruin stretched, swelling up to his full height.

"Monsters attack from the front too," I said, still unable to sit up.

"No matter what I am, Lexi, I am not strong enough yet. I still need help. We all do." With that, he left.

I spent the next few minutes alone, crying. Then kicking. My place was already a mess, so breaking a few things didn't matter. Byruin was right. All I wanted to do was rush to the medical wing and see Wick, but there wasn't time. I had to confirm the attacker had no ties to the Rawca Empire. Then I needed to contact GAIA to postpone the war. I'd black out the media too, change the species of the attacker to a Mirj, slow down any panic that might spread.

Hours later, I finally made my way to the hospital. Pirates? Byruin had expected organized crime. Why would they attack the human ambassador? I remembered my night of anger, after I nearly punched Orsa. I'd launched a personal war against the pirates. If those actions somehow caused this, how could I live with myself?

I was greeted by a Wex nurse. She took me to a waiting room and promised to return soon.

The last time I'd been in a hospital was when Mom died. Heart failure, said the doctors, caused by taking too many painkillers. Mom lost her sight at the age of six, the side effect of a rare fungal infection that attacked her optical nerves. Father had been born without sight. Same affliction but very different journey.

Father never knew what he lost, but he did know how the difficulties of living with a disability. His first instinct was to help. Mom seemed like a perfect opportunity for him to remove a burden.

Mom remembered seeing, and thought the darkness was a curse. Her first instinct was to lament. For her, Father was the best she could do. Her real life had been lost to some wicked twist of fate.

She was the love of his life. He was her second-place prize. For Baar, doubting your love is the pathway to hell. She travelled a lot. The government offered special trips for those with disabilities. Modern medicine has cures for almost every affliction. Society felt horrible when someone had to suffer. Sadly, the organizers never anticipated that a pair of these rare individuals would be together. Exotic trips, amazing restaurants, and concerts: all for one person.

If Father ever got one of these prizes, he always gave it to Mom. That was fine. He didn't even like such things. He much preferred to stay home and take care of his daughter. Mother was always looking for her fairytale. Dad was always making sure I lived one.

I overheard him talking to a friend after the event. He caught her scent, thinking she'd left her robe on the bathroom floor. He kneeled down and found her. Cold. Silent.

It hit him hard. He'd given her everything he could. All that love and caring was just never enough to overcome a gulf of depression.

I call him every other day. He continues to help, volunteering as often as possible. He couldn't be more proud of me, assistant to an ambassador of the Galactic Council. In truth, I'm the one that is truly proud. I can't think of a better Baar.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." An hour later, the nurse finally returned. "Why do you look so sad?"

I was almost afraid to ask, "How is he?"

"Fine!" she said with a smile. "Just a few scratches and bruises. Nothing major. Doctors are just keeping him for observation. I think every one of them has taken turns examining your poor ambassador. First time many have ever seen a human."

"What? Then why did you keep me waiting for so long?"

"He was just attacked. Security needs to confirm any visitors. Sorry. We were surprised that the human ambassador has a non-human assistant." She wiggled her ears. "What's he like? He seems so kind."

"Can I see him?"

"Oh yes, of course. Follow me."

Wick was set up in a rather fancy room. Apparently the medical wing has special facilities only to be used for ambassadors. He sat in a medical bed, dressed in a white gown. At his side sat Kiki and Quest. The tiger had a bandage wrapped around his forehead.

"There she is!" declared Wick.

"We wondered if you'd ever show up," said Quest. "I know you got a million things to do, but damn." He gave me a ridiculous wink.

"Help me, Lexi. The doctors won't let me go," the human continued to smile.

"They all keep asking to see him naked," added Kiki.

"How come doctors get all the fun?" said Quest.

"Such a pervert," I said, turning my head away. I wish it was to scoff at Quest, but I was really trying to hide my tears. "So is someone going to tell me what happened?"

Luck. A goon broke into Wick's quarters. Apparently some of the pirate kings were upset with recent Council laws against piracy. The attacker threatened more bodily harm if Wick didn't agree to vote in their favour. Things may have gotten worse if Quest hadn't been so drunk. Instead of returning to his quarters, he wandered to Wick's office. Apparently a drunk tiger is a tough opponent, even for a Rawca.

They laughed and joked. I couldn't believe it. Their joy wasn't surprising. It was my reaction. Hearing Wick laugh filled me with more warmth than I'd ever known. The thought of losing him created a void that he instantly filled back up.

I knew it then. I would do whatever it took to protect Wick. Even if the universe was about to end, I swore that I'd always be with him. I was in love.

For Baar, true love comes once and never fades. He was my circle, my poem without end, my ceaseless season.

I'd never let him go.

### Chapter Fourteen

When I read Wick's next journal entry, I could barely keep my eyes open. A pirate couldn't simply sneak onto the Daygone station and into the secure quarters of an ambassador. He must've had help, either from conspirators or poor security systems. Either way, I wasn't going to let it happen again.

My skills as a spy and a master hacker would help me protect Wick, even if it took every ounce of me. In the world of espionage, we often refer to the secret war between worlds and organizations as 'the game'.

When Byruin ambushed me in my quarters, he said I was a pawn. He was right, but no longer. There was a new player in the game. One without loyalty to a race, or a planet, or an empire. My singular goal was him, to move shadows and nations to aid and protect Wick.

His journal showed why I made the right choice.

Soft secrets. My grandmother often said a man defines himself by his hard lies and soft secrets, the things he's desperate to hide and those he thinks too precious to expose. Neither are easy to share. Finding someone you trust is a bond stronger than marriage.

I've been thinking a lot about the things we keep secret. We ambassadors carry an official air. I wonder what we would be like in different lives, away from the burden of galactic politics.

I expect Byruin, our hyena, would have been a bully in school that would eventually become an outstanding father. Our deer, Orsa, would have been an artist. Kiki would be more of an adventurer than a scientist, off exploring the deepest jungles and tallest mountains of the universe. Quest, he'd probably be a rockstar in a band. Lexi would always try to be a hero for someone.

The only one I don't understand is Cinder. The bat continues to confuse me. He seems fake, hidden behind a castle of hard lies. He certainly enjoys his current power as the Council's tiebreaker.

Typically the Rawca and Yent vote one way with Otta and humans the other The Gyben enjoy the privilege of picking sides. Before, when the Mirj held the fifth voting position, the votes were different. Mirj and Rawca on one side with Gyben and Otta on the other. I know Orsa appreciated the change least of all.

Today, however, was a big day. For the first time, the humans and Rawca voted on the same side. The issue, a proposed ban on cloning for sentient lifeforms. I voted for the ban. So did Byruin. Orsa voted against and so did Kiki. The Otta never vote for laws that hinder technological research and advancement. That left Cinder to cast the deciding vote again.

We argue a lot before, during, and after our votes. Clearly the bat planned to go against the ban. As he said, "Individuals should have the right to choose immortality."

However, he changed when Byruin made a counterpoint, "What if someone chose for you? Your success as an entrepreneur, an ambassador is unmatched among your kind. Do you want to live forever, Cinder?"

The Gyben started his usual rapid delivery, "Certainly, certainly, certainly. If I could protect peace for generations, why wouldn't I?" Then, he paused. Cinder paused. The rest of us were not sure what to do. The bat always had to be interrupted. This time, however, he sat there thinking.

Then, he lifted his wings, as he always does when casting a vote. "The Gyben acquiesce. The law passes. Cloning of intelligent life shall be banned."

I wonder what he thought about. What made him pause, what changed his mind? Maybe the thought of arguing with the four of us for eternity sounded like hell. Lexi confirmed one of his hard lies. The Transcendent Twelve, a self-named coalition of the 12 richest individuals in the galaxy (which includes Cinder) were all extremely eager to see the research into cloning continue. Cinder never voted against the desires of the Twelve, until today.

People don't just change their minds. There had to be something else, something more precious, that made Cinder vote against immortality. A soft secret that we may never know.

Lexi discovered one more piece of information. Cinder also has contacts with the pirate kings. Organized crime means being sovereign, owning a collective of ships and hidden outposts that allow you to operate outside the bounds of the races. Smuggling and raiding ships need someplace to dock and refuel.

The Gyben have no military, only a well-funded police force. They rely on their financial power to maintain their authority in the galaxy. It's been a longtime rumor that Cinder uses pirates as his secret fleet. For example, last year a convoy of refugee ships was fleeing from Whissel 4 after a successful attack by the Rawca. The escape ships headed for Yullees, the nearest friendly planet in Gyben space. The Rawca chased until they were attacked. Pirates. Why would pirates attack a Rawca military fleet? Analysts believe the raiders confused the military ships as cargo vessels.

Was Cinder responsible for the attack against me? Did he order one of his criminal connections to rough me up? It doesn't make sense. If Earth withdrew from the Galactic Council, the Gyben would lose the new balance of power. Lexi's investigation showed that the intruder used an old ambassador key to gain access to the secure section of the station. Who did the key belong to? She was still investigating.

Cinder also apologized. Before I left the medical ward, he requested an audience with me. All the other ambassadors sent their well wishes, knowing that meetings could come later and that privacy was appreciated.

The bat wandered around the room, trying to find some place to put himself. I sat on the edge of the medical bed.

"I'm sorry. So sorry, sorry. This attack was outrageous." The bat tried one of the chairs in the corner, but it was too high. He soon hopped off. "Dreadful. So sorry. You're ok, yes?" He didn't let me answer before continuing, "No serious physical harm. Doctors said full recovery. Still, terrible. I'm very sorry, Wick. I want you to know that the Gyben Federation is here to help. Whatever you need, we'll help." He ended up sitting on the sill by the window. Behind him was endless space and countless stars.

"Thank you for your concern," I said.

"What do you want?" he asked. "Perhaps we could finance a few new destroyers or carriers in your fleet. Shiny ships. These could be used to help fight pirates in your sectors. Very fair, very good for all. Perhaps the Rawca will resent the gesture, but perhaps I'll help them with ships too. Need to protect our civilians."

How shocked will the head of the Earth military be when I tell them I negotiated for the Gyben to pay for new ships? It will certainly put me in favour. "Thank you, Cinder. The gesture is very kind."

He perked up, spreading his wings and swaying back and forth. "Of course, of course! I take care of my fellow ambassadors. Like a family, my Wick. We argue so that our races don't need to war. We have had far too many battles, too too many. Dreadful."

I interrupted, "I agree, but buying military ships. Will your government will it? It doesn't seem like your usual solution. Funding warships when you refuse to have your own military."

He scratched the top of his head with both hands, hiding behind his wings for a moment. "Yes, yes, yes. You're right. I wish I could think of better solutions. It's hard, very hard. Like picking oranges in the wind. My father did that often, sending me out in a storm to harvest. Punishment. You ever climb above an orchard in a storm? So much movement, resisted, branches as far as they can reach and then back. Not a dance. History repeating. He never made my sister do it."

"You have a sister?" I asked. What a story! The most successful investor I'm the galaxy got his start on a fruit farm.

"Yes," he said sharply and, instead of saying more, he got up and moved towards the exit. "She would like you, Wick." He gave me one more glance before leaving. The bright lights of the hospital room glared off his glasses. I couldn't see his eyes. I imagined they moved like an orchard in a storm. "Now get better."

A sister and a family farm. I checked. The childhood of the Gyben ambassador doesn't appear in any biography nor any article. He never talks about his family. I can't blame the reporters. In every interview, the first question is asked and Cinder talks ceaselessly for half an hour. Almost like he's trying to hide something, soft secrets too precious to share.

I hope he finds someone to share those secrets with. I hope I find someone too. True love is the deepest trust built on flawless understanding. Finally, being not alone means finding the one person who can know all of you, even your hard lies and soft secrets.

What would I tell that individual, my soulmate? What are my secrets?

I watched a star disappear.

I like sweeping. It was my favorite chore. I imagined owning a small shop and a broom, cleaning the sidewalk every day.

My first time was with a girl at university. She got me drunk. I let her. Felt good to be wanted, even if I didn't want her. She always wore a baggy white hoodie, we called her Polar Bear. Her lipstick smudged like that of a clown. I hate makeup.

During my fifth year as CEO of Crest Technologies, I had a minor breakdown. I packed my bags, flew to a tiny tropical island, and started a new life. I went by the name of Chase. Got a job working at an open-air bar on the sand. Talked with four women a night and found no one to love. Left the island three weeks later and returned home. No one noticed. My absence was merely an unannounced holiday.

My uncle worked as a computer security expert. He showed me a trick to bypass the lock screen on most phones. I stole Kendra Hicker's phone. I was thirteen. That night, on the roof outside my bedroom window, I read her life. Her texts, her emails, her private (and sometimes risky) photos. The day before I was in love with her. Then, I found out she was rather plain. I returned the phone to her locker the next day. Still, it was fun knowing someone's secrets.

The lead researcher for my company was an Otta named Angles. He moved to Earth because of a strong attraction to human women. Sadly, he was awkward and too frumpy to attract any. I found him a partner, a woman named Alice. She was perfect for him. I even helped coach her on what to do, what to say to him. After 5 months, I learned her true intentions. She was just trying to get close to me. The person she showed to Angles was fake, a fabrication made to meet my design. He loved her. She only loved me. It all ended abruptly. Poor Angles still carries on hope that she'll return to him.

I hate the feeling of metal spoons on my teeth. I wish I could sing. I lied about my charitable donations. My company only gave fifteen million, rather than twenty. The difference was given to a fake company to help purchase black market materials for Crest research.

Everyone says I'm a success. Rich, self-made, and now ambassador for my entire race. I still feel like a failure. I'm still alone. There have been plenty of women who offered, but none have met my expectations, my crazy little fantasies, the romance movie in my head. Big tough CEO and he still clings to a boyhood dream. A wish made on a vanished star. My biggest soft secret: a storybook of love.

All I want is someone who I can share these with.

Could it be her? I certainly can't stop thinking about her. When I was attacked yesterday, face-to-face with a mad wolf, all I could think about was her and how I just wanted one more night at her side.

Does my dream go like this? Bazaar. How can I love someone who isn't even human? Could the destiny of lovers be lightyears apart? Out here, in the vacuum of space, rather than in a bar on a beach.

Brent, my mentor, was fond of saying, "To be great is to be tormented by the unobtainable." Keep climbing the endless mountain. Dreaming small limits you. Dreaming big tortures you. You will be great, but you will never know it. You will lead, but always feel behind. That's the curse of being the best.

I just know that I've never met anyone like her.

A storm above the orchard.

Wick was right. It is fun knowing someone's secrets. I learned a lot, big and small, as part of my occupation. These however, his concealed memories, were so much more precious.

My hope was that someday he would tell them all to me.

### Chapter Fifteen

Light wandered the ceiling and walls. It’s called the Harmony Room. At the center of the small space is a box, 3 feet by 3 feet, filled with water. There is just enough room for four individuals, one at each side. The only light comes from the bottom of the box, beneath the liquid. The result is a room filled with glowing ripples.

“Thank you for taking the time to speak with us,” said the Yent ambassador. Orsa, thin as ever, was dressed in a black gown that clung to her almost like a coating of fine chocolate. A metallic green thread filled the seams, catching the dim light like emeralds. Wearing anything bright, colors that might reflect too much, was considered an insult while sitting in the harmony room.

I could only dream about fitting in an outfit like hers. Few fashion designers target the shorter races, like the Baar, and rectangular shapes, like me. I’m thin, but rather plain. Also, I avoid wearing black, it matches the fur on my arms, legs, and chest too much. That day, I wore a grey button blouse and matching pants.

“It is an honor to be invited,” said Wick. He wore a deep maroon shirt and black slacks.

Hall, the male assistant for Orsa, handed each of us a bottle and a brush. He wore a ceremonial, black robe. I’m not sure how it got it on over his antlers.

The Harmony Room is yet another Yent tradition designed for negotiations. Each individual sit at the edge of the box. The bottles are placed on the right and contain a transparent, gold liquid. You dip your brush and then put it in the corner of the water. This creates a ripple that carries the gold. A new reflections, much brighter lines, enter the room. The effect is lovely, and if the guests learn to read the rhythm and ripples of each other, they can create some amazing dances for the light. They create harmony.

“I’ll get straight to the point,” said Orsa. “When a proposed law is defeated in the Council, it cannot be brought up for another vote until three years have passed on the planet Wava.”

“This is about the the law the Yent have been trying to pass for generations,” said Wick. “Since the Galactic Council began.” A drip preceded the ripple created by his brush. The gold elongated, the reflection shifting around the room like a flying snake or dragon.

I tried to pay attention but my mind drifted, shifting much like the lights in the room. I hadn’t slept in almost three days. After the attack on Wick, I refused to stop until I confirmed his safety. Also, there was the choice of my heart. For a Baar, love is everything. Even if Wick never shared my affection, I would never stop loving and living for him. A Baar has only one story worth telling, the endless story of her love. My breaks from the computer filled with daydreams of him.

“As we all know,” said the deer, “the thirteenth empire of the Yent was influential for the peace and prosperity of the galaxy. Their Grande Armada spread across the galaxy, defeating the original Spx invasion, and helping most of the young races reach the stars. Historians across all the races agree that Emperor Lowe, their leader, may be the most influential and benevolent individual to have existed.”

I stared at Wick as I mindlessly added gold ink to my corner of the water table. His skin fascinated me. What is it like to have no fur? Textures must matter more, the fabric of clothes, the feeling of sheets. Humans must spend significant time picking the right sensations to wear. The lack of fur on his face made his expression persist, a small wrinkle on his cheek or a crease near his eye stayed. For races with fur or feathers, such subtle lines are hidden. The motion in emotion matters more. Humans call us animated. We call them muted.

Wick, however, is far from boring. His emotions linger on his face, a smile blooming when he sees me, a grimace fading when I make a bad joke. I often imagined laying beside him, my head in his lap, watching his face above me. I’d savor each tiny tickle of his face and wonder what thought caused that ripple. All my life, I want to be blind, but now I never wanted to stop seeing his emotions.

“You want a galactic holiday to celebrate the launch of the Grande Armada?” asked Wick. “The first recognized date, first shared event, for all the races.”

Orsa replied, “Why shouldn’t we commiserate those who helped so many. It would also show unity among us all, a shared praise for peacemakers.”

Much like the Yent, humans have no claws on their fingers. This means they touch differently. Although Baar claws are small and blunt, we still prefer to grasp. Humans lead with their fingertips, dropping like ink on a surface before spreading out. I feel it when Wick put his hand on the top of my head. At first it was annoying, something he did because of our difference in height. Now, I find myself almost lifting onto my toes to meet the stroke of his fingers.

“My predecessors have tried, but none have been able to pass this important legislation,” said the Yent ambassador. “I hope that humans are more understanding.”

“Isn’t it hard to have a specific holiday?” Wick asked. “Each planet has a different length year.”

“This has been much of the debate,” said Orsa. “The Gyben believe it would be too disruptive.”

“Thirteenth empire,” I offered. “Why not have it on the thirteenth sunrise of each planet year?”

Wick gave me a glance, a smile in his eyes. My heart skipped a beat. There is a famous Baar novel called *Confess*. It follows the life of an outcast who falls in love with an artificial intelligence. During his trial, there is a special moment:

In the noise, he found silence. A hundred voices shouting, the lawyer riffling, his chains clinking: while loud, these noises mimicked the distraction of his everyday. Crowds on the train, the garden in the rain, his rake pulling pebbles: while distant, these sounds carried the definition of his life. Then and there, there and then, he found silence, a small, precious gap amid all demands of existence. You have those too, as few and fleeting as they may be, moments all (and only) to yourself. Do not waste them, because these timid seconds, these conversations with yourself, are the only chance to hear your uninterrupted soul.

For him, as always, he sacrificed those moments. Those purest parts of a weak and fragile Baar named Telend, the threads of his fabric, were given to her. He thought of her. During a trail that could decide if he lived or died, his mind longed for her.

Love is not the problem, not some riddle to be solved or some race to be won. Love is not the burden, some weight to be carried or some mountain to climb. Love is the answer.

They would call him a monster. Love for a machine? A Baar should love a Baar. Madness maybe. But the heart knows no sanity. Feelings are the facts of an individual. The only truth any of us know is our untainted reactions to world around us. This is why, for many, love is the meaning of life. It is the purest reaction of all.

What if they (or you) see his forbidden love as twisted, tainted, or wrong? It didn’t matter.

He would not bow down.

So Telend stood, slammed a fist on the table, and spread the silence. Everything stopped. For each of them, the gathered judges, jury, reporters, and gallery, they were forced into one of those defining moments. But… those chances to discover themselves were stolen. The silence was shattered as Telend spoke. He shouted actually, “I love her!”

Come death, come dark, come end of worlds, do your worst, break the garden and the gardener. It no longer matters. Telend would happily fight it all until they knew his answer. He did not want to be right; he wanted to be in love.

The novel was a failure, almost ending the career of the author. I adored it and read it twice a year. Most parts I can recite by heart. I knew my kind would frown on the feelings I had for a human. I didn’t care. Love is my answer.

“I can deliver you both the human and Otta vote,” said Wick. “That’ll be enough to pass your galactic holiday.”

Orsa paused, pulling her brush back from the water. “Truly? This is most unexpected, Ambassador Warwick.”

“Of course, we’ll need something in return,” said my human.

I put my brush into the water again, sending another babbling line of gold through the room. The ripples were at a fevered pace. I can see why some races get motion sickness while in the Harmony Room. Wick seemed to be doing fine. Humans have a higher level of focus than any. They are not distracted easily by things moving at the edge of their vision. Makes it easier to surprise them with a kiss.

I dreamed about kissing him. I wondered what it would be like. My family would kiss. Not a very common practice for most Baar, but it seemed important for my blind parents. A kiss on the cheek to say goodnight or goodbye. I imagined humans would be much different. Without a muzzle, how do they keep from crashing their faces together? Human lips are far more sensitive and nimble. They are also fond of saying each person is unique, their kiss being much like a fingerprint. However, the human kiss also evolves, changing slightly to match each partner. Imagine a summary of your love life right at your lips. Sounds romantic. I wondered how he might change to accommodate me.

“Second,” said Wick, “I’m going to bring a law that bans all forms of slavery.”

“You’re referring to the Mirj and the Lyfolite.” Her long ears pulled back.

Her assistant spoke up, “It’ll certainly be hard to enforce. They’re the only intelligent lifeforms to evolve on the same planet. You’d be undoing centuries of tradition.”

“Now that the Mir are no longer on the Council, it seems reasonable to pass,” said Wick. “It will show true progress among my kind. Earth hates slavery.”

Orsa set down her brush and began pulling at one of the threads on her dress. “You’re asking a lot in exchange for a holiday.”

“Imagine the praise you’ll receive. The first ambassador to gain the glory befitting one of your greatest generations.”

Human ears confuse me. They show no emotion, look ugly, and are utterly inefficient. It looks like the original human head was made of clay. Then, when almost complete, the designer picked it up. Her fingers made the dip for the eyes and her thumbs pushed out the ears. Rather than fix the imperfections, she took a nap.

Their world must be so muted. How many subtle things do they miss? For the sensitive hearing of the Baar, even a single breath is a sentence. Some breaths are the simple tic-toc of living, but others carry the ripples of a thought. Just before talking about Kiki, Wick’s breath will start fast, pause and slow for only a moment, then swell quickly. What thought disrupts his rhythm. Many Baar couples, after a lifetime of listening, learn to translate the breathing of their partner perfectly. When I accidentally bump into Wick, meeting him in the hall, he always gives a sharp, small exhale. What does it mean? Someday soon, I would know.

Does he hear the rain but not the individual drops? Does he miss the scrapping of an autumn leaf skipping down the sidewalk? The click of teeth in a whisper, the swoosh of sheets in the morning, the pop of bubbles in sea foam, how many things they must not hear. I’m told humans fear blindness much as Baar fear deafness. The hiss of morning mist dying for the day.

“Wait.” Suddenly, Wick grabbed my wrist. My brush was in the box; he held it there. Due to my mindless thrashing of the water, the ripples ran wild in the room, ribbons of white and gold. He held his breath. So did I.

A pattern formed in the chaos of light. Like a gust of wind through a sunset field, the waves moved effortlessly. I saw two points, two small golden dots, at each corner of the room, like those stars I saw when Wick held me on the beach. They rose sharply, retreated slightly, then met. They touched in the middle and merged. For the briefest of moments all the gold in the room collected in a single, shining spot.

Harmony.

The event shocked Hall so much that he stood sharply. Wick gave me a cocky smile. I loved it. Orsa showed no surprise, almost as if she’d already seen too many marvelous things. Still, her voice seemed softer, “I think we have an agreement, Ambassador of Earth. Let us create a moment shared, like this one, for all the planets.”

“A small fragment of harmony,” Wick said softly.

“Finally, the twig understands the tree.” The Yent ambassador stood. The chaos returned. The whirling lines slashed across her form. She flicked Hall’s antlers, breaking him out of his trance. “Our vote shall be tomorrow. Don’t disappoint me.”

Upon leaving the Harmony Room, most individuals experience a reverse form of motion sickness. Everything is suddenly too still. Almost as if time has stopped.

I staggered a step, putting my hand on Wick’s hip to brace myself. I enjoyed the feeling of his strength. He let me stay there, leaning against him a moment.

“What did she mean by the twig understanding the tree?” he asked.

“It’s an ancient Yent proverb. Twig falls from a tree and curses its maker. Why should it be abandoned? Why should so many other branches remain? Bend down, it would say, and pick me up. Then, after a hundred years of hatred, the tree falls over. He now curses the forest. The twig finally understands the tree.” At least that’s what I thought I said. I may have mumbled a few bits.

His hand ended up on my upper back, at the base of my neck. “Come on. Let’s get you to bed.” He guided me.

“I understand you.”

He chuckled, the vibration trickling down his arm. “Am I a tree now?”

“Yep. Sturdy.” I flicked his leg with my tail. “Wood.”

“How long has it been since you slept?” he asked.

“Not tired.” I kept slowing my steps just to feel his hand gently push on my neck. “You know why she wants this holiday, right? Leverage. A chancellors wants to replace her. The Yent are still unsure if they have the right ambassador.”

“Do you think the replacement would be more agreeable?”

“I’ll send his file. He seems much more focused on— you know what, they have lots of stories about sticks and branches. The Yent, them. Because it looks like antlers? So dumb. Would you cut yours off?”

“Don’t you think I’d look rather dashing with antlers?” he asked.

“Yes. No. I wouldn’t be able to cradle your head then.”

They lead us back to the ambassador wing of the station. He removed his hand from my back to unlock one of the security doors. After the attack, the station finally turned back on the DNA scanners. Ambassadors hated it because of the pick of the air needle.

“I purged the old records for the scanners,” I said. “Some programmers forgot to add cleanup. Amateur. I also set up a watcher, so we can know when individuals come and go.”

“Is aloud allowed?” His wry smile appeared. How much did he enjoy seeing me groggy? “Wait a bit. Let’s discuss this when we’re alone.”

We were heading to his quarters! My mind wandered. Why his place? Did he have some plans to seduce a sleepy Baar?

I may have let part of my dream leak. “Do you think you could lift me? I’m small and you’re rather strong.”

Wick’s answer never came. Someone approached. He breathed out sharply. “Ambassador Kiki. How’re you today?”

“I’m well, Warwick.” The Otta gave a small hop as she approached, leaping towards him, putting her hand and the file she carried on his chest before placing a small kiss on his chin. “You?”

Like a ripple, her kiss caused a rise on his lips, his cheeks, and his eyes. HIs reply, “Lovely.”

“I thought you might still be with the Yent. How did it go?”

“She accepted our terms. Were you looking for me?”

“In fact, I was.” She looked up over her shoulder. “I guess this is as good as anywhere. Life usually happens in hallways, the spaces between.”

“A good place for what?” I asked. The sheer excitement in her voice blared at me like an alarm clock.

“This!” She held up the file, a simple folder with a few sheets of paper. “I’ve been doing some research for you.”

Cute. I shook my head. My worry waned. Since the attack against Wick, I’d worked relentlessly. Artificial intelligence now monitored the station’s communication and security networks, notifying me of any potential threats. Blackmail now sat encrypted on my computer, waiting to be used as leverage against any ambassador (even Kiki). Police and militaries were en route to the formerly hidden bases of the Pirate Kings. I even hacked into the MGS (Military Game Simulation) server and altered data so that Earth would redistribute its fleets, putting many more vessels close to Daygone. A ‘leaked’ video of Wick talking to the Council, arguing for revamped laws on freedom of speech, also appeared online. It made humans adore him more.

My brush and its ripples went unnoticed to history, to Wick, and even to GAIA. Governments, fleet, society, I moved it all to protect him. That’s all that mattered. How could she compare?

“We’ve been working on it for several days now.” Kiki handed the file to Wick. “Impossible. That’s what the lead researcher said. It took over 44 hours on the central research network. The entire network. All the super computers of the Otta working on a single problem. A first. We produced more data in three days than our entire civilization created in the first 10,000 years. Of course, that’s what you need when you’re simulating the universe, backwards.”

No. It couldn’t be. I looked at Wick. Innocent. Clueless. How could he not know? Maybe I was wrong. What else could it be?

He opened the file. “Paper? I didn’t know Otta still printed anything.”

“Some things are so important,” said Kiki, “that they should be ever present.”

He pulled out two sheets of paper. “Photos? These look like stars.”

“Exactly.” She was beaming. “But not just any stars. The first pictures, that’s the night sky from Earth, specifically 44 degrees latitude, negative 122 degrees longitude. Not now, but 19 years ago at 11:41 PM.”

He dropped the file, still holding the photos. His hand trembled slightly as he looked at the second image. He told her? When did he tell her?

“That,” said Kiki, “is exactly sixty seconds later.”

I didn’t need to see it. I knew the difference.

“So what?” I said, hoping to spoil the moment. “Sounds stupid.”

There would be one dot missing from the second image, a star, his star, the one he watched vanish years ago. The nightlight he called…

“Aza.”

“Exactly,” she said. “We found her, Wick. We rotated back all the movement of the planets and stars until we could line up a single line of reference. Star number 24ef934, part of the Calarous Cluster. 88,000 light years from Earth. You witnessed a cosmic event, the transition of a star from a red dwarf to white. Do you know what that means?”

What could I say? I only knew about his disappearing star because I read his journal. He didn’t share that personal memory with me. There was nothing I could do. I was forced to stand there and watch as he was given perhaps the greatest gift in the history of the universe.

Kiki continued, “It means she’s not gone, Wick. Aza still shines. She’s only about 1% as bright as when you first saw her, but she still burns. Still a flame for the Wick.”

Speechless, he flipped back and forth. Two images, one on each side of that moment when he watched a star vanish.

“The Calarous Cluster is in Otta space. To celebrate this discovery, we’ve decided to rename star 24ef934. Right after this, I’ll go file the official paperwork with the Council archives. She’ll be forever known as Aza.”

“Kiki…” His eyes finally moved off that paper. He glanced up at her. Their eyes met, then in a shared moment of embarrassment, they looked away. Her gaze to the left. His to the right. A pause, a scrap of time, a single beating of the heart. Then, at the same moment, their eyes returned to the center: a flawless stare, a shared glimpse into each other.

Harmony.

“Thank you.”

I fainted.

### Chapter Sixteen

I awoke in Wick’s bed. Alone.

Fragments of the previous day returned slowly. After my collapse in the hall, Wick carried me back to his quarters. The days without sleep and food had caught up with me. I recovered enough to complain.

“No,” he said. “Sleep. That’s an order. You’re no good to anyone like this.”

I insisted on returning to my own bed. He refused, saying that I would find some way to get back to the computer.

“Just do me one favor.” He paused in the doorway of his bedroom. I’ll never forget that image, his shape, leaning against the frame, glancing over his shoulder. “See that red book on the nightstand.” His journal. “When you wake, write down the very first thought.”

“Don’t go.” I know I whispered it. I don’t know if he heard me. Wick turned off the light, hesitated. His silhouette, was it coming or was it going? I fell asleep before I knew.

I did as he asked. I wrote on one of his empty pages. I don’t know when he saw it. It would be a few more days before I got to read his next entry.

Tragedy at Tyoh. The fleet sent by the Council finally reached the secret human outpost. We lost everything. Not just the outpost, but also the fleet. The Rawca sent a small military; the Gyben sent aid ships. Earth sent both.

"Under attack. Under attack. They are us. Under attack."

The distress signal finally made sense. The outpost and our initial recon vessel were taken over by Spx, a parasitic lifeform capable of mind control. These creatures look like small robotic snakes. Once inside a host, the creature hooks into the spine, taking over the brain.

There hasn’t been a Spx outbreak in almost four hundred years, prompting many researchers to believe the parasites had gone extinct. The Yent, the Rawca, the Mirj, the Otta, almost all the major races have a brief history of war with the Spx. After the initial chaos, victory comes easily.

While the parasite can mimic the host, having full access to his or her memories, reactions are slow. For infiltration, this isn’t important. However, for battle, it becomes vital. Once the Spx are detected, eradicating them is a simple task.

"Under attack. Under attack. They are us. Under attack."

We’re still trying to sort through the details of the attack. Upon nearing Tyoh, an emergency shuttle approached one of the human carriers. Eager for answers, the captain allowed the vessel to dock. A few hours later, the attack began.

Initial analysis suggests the other ships weren’t ready for the surprise attack. The first Rawca destroyer disappeared in the sudden volley of missiles. They didn’t stand a chance.

Lexi was able to determine that the chief engineer on the human carrier must’ve died during the initial boarding. The human ships were still broadcasting their locations. If the Spx had been able to infect the engineer, they would know about the secret transmitters. Most officers don’t even know that their ship were being tracked.

Only one aid ship was offline. All the others survived the battle, a nearly flawless victory. Still, we know where the remaining vessels are heading. Their destination is Filo, the only human controlled planet outside of our solar system. The Council is already sending a fleet. Data about the Spx, how to detect them, and how to avoid their infiltration has already been shared with our military and all our officers.

My only fear is the size of the fleet being sent by the Rawca. They seem determined to eradicate the Spx and avenge their comrades lost at Tyoh. Seems noble, but their fleet will end up deep within human space, near Filo. Byruin has already expressed his interest in taking control of that system.

To hinder any aggressive actions by the Rawca, I’ve convinced the Yent, Otta, and Hikan to send equally large fleets. Combined with the vessels from Earth, this could very well be the largest single armada in the history of the galaxy. Let’s just hope this small Spx problem doesn’t trigger a more serious threat.

“They’re not exactly zombies,” said Kiki. “You really need to know someone to be able to tell if they’re infected by the Spx. To anyone else, the individual would just seem tired or a bit slow.”

I remember the feeling of her fingers tracing down my naked back. We awoke to the news of the attack at Tyoh. “Do you think you’d recognize me? If I was infected?” The view from the edge of her bed, looking back over my shoulder, was lovely. The white sheet wrapped around her naked body, her mahogany colored fur, like the swirls of a sea.

“I’m not sure,” Kiki gave a playful grin. “You’re pretty slow already.” Her head disappear beneath the fabric waters.

I’ll never forget yesterday. They found Aza. Those clever otters used computers to locate the star I watched disappear as a teenager on Earth. Not gone, just faded. I was’t crazy. All those emotions and moments: validated. It felt good, but I didn’t dwell on it. A different emotion overwhelmed me. Awe. I experienced awe in a hallway.

Through the goosebumps, my brain was reprogrammed to understand this new universe. Such a grand gesture, the greatest gift of my life. The reaction was fierce. I saw it. Love. For the first time ever, I knew someone truly loved me. I can be loved, and she loves me.

But…

Of course, after this amazing gift, we needed to celebrate. We headed to the station markets. As the only truly neutral space station in the galaxy, Daygone represents an important hub for trade. All the races gather here to negotiate deals and sign agreements to be officially registered with the Council. Naturally, this leads to a lot of rich and powerful guests. The markets are full of shops and restaurants to cater to their every need.

The market covers ten stories, with an opening in the middle. This allows the station light to be shared efficiently among floors. If you stand at the edge, you can look up or down and see hundreds of shops lining the edges. It reminds me of some luxury, super mall that might be found on Earth.

Day and night cycles are simulated. As the overhead lights dim, the shops begin to glow. Their colorful lights catch on the glass railing, making every night feel like a festival. The shops and restaurants are always crowded, filled with every imaginable alien. The Hikan must dip their massive wings to avoid the antlers of the Yent. Gyben are followed by an army of wispy drones, while the Mirj are followed by their short Lyfolite servants. Rawca dressed in casual armor; Zilless dressed in robes. Humans are still uncommon; Baar are even more rare. The red pandas prefer to stay close to their homes. You always see them in pairs.

“I know where we need to go.” Kiki took my hand and pulled me through the crowd. It felt a little childish. I guess years of being a CEO have made me worry about public appearances. Affection seems far too precious to expose publicly. That said, I’m an amateur when it comes to relationships.

We ended up at an araki stall on the sixth floor. Araki is an edible flower that becomes brittle when exposed to hot water. Restaurants put the plant in bowls and then pour over broth right before serving. The petals add a crispy texture to the soup. It can be compared to udon or ramen, if the noodles were crispy flakes.

The small restaurant had a single bench with only ten stolls. I thought we were lucky to get a seat, but apparently the spots were reserved for Kiki. The owners are proud of their regular visitor, the prestigious Otta ambassador.

“Kiki! Welcome.” The head of a female Lyfolite appeared over the edge of the serving counter. Lyfolite are short, fox-like creatures. While they stand about as tall as a Baar (coming up to my hip), Lyfolite are the only sentient species that prefers to walk on their hands and feet. “Who’s your friend?”

“Mermer, this is Warwick Stone. He’s the human ambassador.”

“Not sure if we serve humans,” said a rumbly voice. A massive male Rawca, looking like a black wolf, appeared from the small kitchen. I’m not exactly sure how he fit back there.

“What?” said the fox. “We most certainly do.”

The wolf dried his hands on this apron before counting on his finger. “First, are they allergic it araki? Second, do they even like araki? Third, they are violent.”

Kiki responded, as if used to the abrasive behavior, “Not allergic. I’ve heard that humans do like araki, but not sure if he’ll like yours.” The otter leaned against me and whispered in my ear, “He’s the shed. Don’t worry, he’s always grumpy.”

“Fires and floods, Didger. He’s a Council ambassador!” The fox seemed to be even more feisty. “I think we’re required by law to serve him.”

“Bah! I’ve been serving ambassadors, dignitaries, and nobles for over thirty years. Ain’t ever heard of no law,” replied the chef. “We don’t serve Mirj.”

“That’s different,” said Mermer. “The war is over. We’re friends with the humans now.”

“I don’t like it.” He crossed his arms and swelled up. I thought he looked intimidating.

Apparently the fox did not. She pushed against the side of his leg. “I don’t care. Now get back in the kitchen and I’ll take their order.”

He crumbled, his arms and shoulders. “Fine, but no order. I’ll find something leftover that they can have.” The wolf retreated to the back.

“Thank you, my love,” said the fox.

I snapped a glance over to Kiki. She explained, “They’re a couple. They’ve had this place for longer than I’ve been here.”

“A couple?” I did a poor job of hiding the surprise in my voice. “She comes up to his knees.”

The look on my face made Kiki laugh. “Love has no rules, Wick.”

I soon learned why the small stall was so popular. As guest arrived, they would be greeted by the fox. Typically, some comment would cause the wolf to stir, coming out of the kitchen like it was some lair. The couple would argue for a bit, as if putting on a routine. Merger always won and Didger would faithfully return to the kitchen. Orders came quickly and always seemed to impress.

“I come here often,” said Kiki. “They’re quick, so it is perfect when I need a break from the lab.”

“Quick? For giving us leftovers, he’s sure taking a while,” I said.

“He was just joking. Sometimes, he does this, takes time to make something really special. He wants to impress you,” replied the otter.

“Or starve you,” said the fox. Her large ears missed nothing. If you wanted privacy, this wasn’t the place. Mermer was a magician when it came to inserting herself into conversations. “Sorry about the wait.”

The rumbling voice came from the back, “Tell them to go somewhere else!”

“How did you meet?” I asked.

“He stole me,” said the waitress. “Saw me with my Mirj and just took me. When my master came to get me back, Didger ripped his arm off.”

My expression achieved another laugh, this time from the otter and the fox. “I thought he took his eyes out,” said Kiki.

The wolf appeared again, carrying bowls in one hand and a pitcher in the other. “Stop telling that story. Everyone thinks I’m a beast.”

“My beast!” Mermer helped her partner, taking the bowls and placing them in front of us.

The akari looked beautiful, like a large violet chrysanthemum. Kiki later informed me that the color was rather rare and nearly impossible to get.

“Don’t die.” The chef slowly poured the booth into our bowls. The orange liquid swirled around the flowers, the petals crystalizing and drifting towards the edge. At the center, the stamen remained, small silver threads that eventually dissolved.

“Give it a try,” said Kiki.

The taste shifted. The sweet broth became savory as the petal dissolved. The aftertaste carried a hint of sour, making the mouth eager for the next spoonful. I can’t think of anything to compare it to except maybe dipping bread into a sophisticated tomato sauce. It was by far the best food I’ve ever had at a stall. “Magnificent.”

“Reason four,” said the chef, “humans lie. It is wonderful, at best.”

“What? It’s a good description,” said the fox.

“No, my dear,” replied the wolf. “You’re magnificent. My food is acceptable.”

“You’re right,” I said with a smile. “This akari tastes like dishwater, but I’ll eat it.”

The wolf roared with laughter. “The first honest review I’ve heard in years.” He headed back towards the kitchen. “We still don’t serve humans, but we’ll make an exception for this one. Okay?”

“Whatever you say, my love.”

“I think it tastes amazing,” said Kiki meekly.

Didger shouted from the back, “Thank you.”

“I like it. We’ll have to come here again.” I shared a smile with the otter. “This would be perfect on a cold day. Maybe in a cabin on a snowy mountain.”

Kiki shook her head. “I don’t like the cold. Makes it hard to swim. How about on a beach at twilight.”

“If you’re planning a vacation, I humbly offer our services,” said the fox. “My husband would make an exemplary private chef.”

The wolf’s head appeared for a moment, “If all they want is akari. It’s all I make.”

“You also make great cheese sandwiches, my love.”

We spent another hour at the stall before moving on. My mind had been racing all night. Kiki had given me such an amazing gift. She found Aza. How do you repay something like that? For some reason, I felt a need to try. She didn’t expect anything in return, but I felt a debt. Why? I am really an amateur when it comes to relationships.

But what? What could I do on a space station to impress her? Something big would require planning and a schedule. I’m sure someone who was more romantic could think of a hundred things, but I was hopeless.

Then we passed by an antique shop and something caught my eye. “Wait here,” I told her. “There’s something I want to get you.”

When I exited the shop, I saw her leaning against the railing. She looked over the ledge, at the vast array of shops on the levels below. I approached slowly.

My heart was pounding. I’ve negotiated deals worth billions of dollars. I’ve been attacked by assassins. I’ve passed laws that affect the entire galaxy. Nothing made my heart race like this. How could I be so afraid of being a romantic? Fail a negotiation and you’ll find another. Fail at romance and it says something deep about you. How do you improve if it is something you lack?

Or, was it something else? I felt anxious. Why? Too public? Something more. Lightyears from Earth, on a space station, about to seduce an alien. Maybe that was it. Was biology telling me this was wrong? How can you feel attraction for some other species? Maybe she wasn’t the right one. How could I know unless I tried?

There is no learning without mistakes. I would let this be a Medusa moment. I couldn’t be petrified.

All the battling emotions went numb as I neared. I knew what I wanted. I love her sense of wonder and curiosity. I was going to give her a moment worth thinking about.

I pushed myself into her back, wrapped my arms around her, and pressed her against the rail. She lifted her chin and leaned back. My lips settled by her ear. “Ready for your gift?” I put my clinched fist out in front of her, fingers pointing down.

“Don’t drop it.”

My hand was suspended over the edge. “Any guess what it is?” I asked.

“Has to be small to fit in your hand.” She reached out.

I opened my hand suddenly, too soon. She flinched, trying to catch whatever I may have dropped. There was nothing.

“What?”

Keeping my palm down, I brought my hand towards her chest. “Some gifts are too big to be held.” I turned my hand over, and she gasped.

What had I found in the antique shop? An old human writing instrument, a ballpoint pen. With it, I drew on my palm. For humans, the symbol of love is a heart. For Otta, it is a whirlpool. The idea is that true love pulls you together. So there, on my skin, was a swirling circle.

For a human, this would seem rather boring, some trick used by kids and quickly abandoned as one moves into adulthood. Otta, however, have no exposed skin. I felt her shiver at the unexpected sight of love in my hand.

“Wick!” She turned to face me. There it was, that look of excitement that I wanted. “How?”

I gave her the pen. “You just need this.”

“Is it permanent?”

“Nope. It’ll wash off.”

Kiki immediately grabbed my forearm and wrote her name. “Does it hurt?”

“Of course not. You can draw whatever you want.”

She turned my arm over, determined to write more. Then, she paused. “I’m not sure what to write.”

“Anything.” I turned in a small circle. “You got plenty of paper to write on.”

This is when we head back to her quarters.

The journal entry paused there. Wick’s writing had reached the end of a second page. At the start of the next, after the turn, was someone else’s handwriting. It was the words I wrote when I woke alone in his bed:

You don’t know what pieces are missing until you complete the puzzle.

What was the chance that Wick’s writing would crash into my words at that exact moment? That night, interrupted. Was she his missing piece?

I traced the trail left by his pen. He circled my words five times. Why?

There were a few more sentences after entry.

The next morning, we received news of the Spx. I remember the feeling of her fingers tracing down my naked back. I remember looking down at my body, covered in ink. A swirl on my chest, a bird on my shoulder, a wiggle on my thigh. I’d been her canvas all night.

Kiki emerged from the sheets, her head appearing at the edge of the bed. “What are you thinking about?”

“What if you hadn’t found Aza? What if I had just imagined a star disappearing? Would you have still told me?” I asked.

“Of course, I’d tell you. There was always that risk, but it would be the truth. You’d want to know, right?”

That risk.

Had my missing piece really been found?

Was he talking about this lost star or Kiki?

### Chapter Seventeen

“I’m sorry.” Quest’s thoughts shouted, “I’m sorry.”

The tiger paced around Wick’s office, not saying a word. At least not out loud.

“Lexi, Lexi, Lexi. I made a mistake,” this mind was chaotic. “How do I tell him? Will he be upset? Does it matter? I was doing it for us. Can you hear me, Lexi? Just check the news.”

Turning up my hand caused a holographic screen to appear at my palm, projected from my wrist computer. I navigated to the news feed.

“Breaking News: Gyben Ambassador Caught in a Scandal. Intimate footage of the ambassador with a male Wex has leaked online. While investigators rush to verify authenticity, the Gyben government isn’t waiting. They’ve called for the immediate return of their ambassador. Sources state that a replacement will arrive soon on Daygone.”

“Cinder?” Wick’s brow wrinkled deeply. “Was it you, Quest? Are you the Wex they’re talking about.”

The tiger nodded his head, still unable to stop pacing. “I thought it would help us.”

“Ha! Here’s the video.” I turned my hand to give Wick a glimpse. “It is our boy!”

“You don’t need to watch it,” said the tiger.

“It is very artistically shot,” I said, wiggling my eyebrow. “Did you edit this? How did you get these angles? Are those your balls?”

Wick interrupted my fun, “That’s enough.”

“You’re right,” I said. “Saved for later.”

My wink caused Quest to throw his arms up in the air. “You’re not helping, Lexi!”

“What’s the big deal?” asked Wick. “Ambassadors must have romantic flings all the time.”

“Normally, it wouldn’t be a problem,” I explained. “However, Gyben are opposed to homosexuality. Not all races are as free thinking as humans, Baar, and Wex. I guess the Rawca are okay with it too. Not the Yent and definitely not the Hikan.”

Quest continued his pacing.

“Sit down,” ordered Wick. “Tell us what happened.”

The tiger settled into the chair. “You’re not upset.”

“I certainly am,” said the human. “But, I want to hear the whole story first.”

“Yes!” I added, “Tell us everything. Every juicy detail.”

He tried to start several times, pausing before any sentence could escape his lips. His thoughts swirled, but I saw it clearly. It began in a bar. A female Hikan. Her cream and crimson feathers shimmered in the artificial light. Should he start there, with her? No. It wasn’t hard to convince the female to go for a walk. He took her to the Yent gardens, normally off limits. Being an assistant to a Council Ambassador certainly has benefits.

“I was in the gardens,” the story finally commenced. A dark night. A secluded tree. A bold move, he pressed her into the trunk. The feeling of his fangs sliding along her beak before they kissed, he cherished it. “That’s when I saw Cinder. He was sitting alone, by the creek.”

The bat would’ve been invisible, had it not been for the light of his fairy drones. He motioned and the shimmers approached. His fingers curled, gently cupping the wisps as they settled in his palm. With the light concealed, the bat vanished into the dark.

A shiver. Even his sensitive eyes struggled and failed to find Cinder. Almost like he’d been completely erased. Such joy when he got another glimpse. Moments later, the bat peaked into his hands. Light slipped through his fingers, a soft glow falling on the Gyben’s face and glasses.

“He seemed,” the tiger searched for the right words, “lonely. Fragile. Vulnerable. No, lost. He looked lost, like someone with everything to do and nowhere to go.”

“So you approached?” asked Wick.

The female was quickly abandoned. A sure thing, a night not alone, a warm bed, a feeling of being needed, he gave it all up. Quest’s mind spent only a brief moment thinking about what might have been: no regrets.

The approach was slow. Like a predator stalking, he crept slowly behind the bat, afraid even a subtle noise might startle his prey. Cinder repeated his routine, letting his drone fly away, drift over the water, before capturing them again. Back and forth, from light to dark, from dark to light.

“I did,” said Quest. “I thought I might startle him, but I didn’t. Like he expected me.”

Quest stopped a foot behind the ambassador, standing over the sitting bat. Small. He seemed tiny. The tiger remembered trying to decide what to say. Why did it feel so important?

“What did you say?” asked Wick.

“I told him that you picked a good name. He looked like a cinder that night,” Quest said, with a small smile. “Of course, he launched into conversation. You know him. Guess it was more like a monologue. Damn, that bat likes to talk.”

The tiger’s mind remembered the conversation in great detail. He enjoyed it. Took a seat beside the ambassador; let him talk and talk. Didn’t interrupt. See where he would go if someone only listened.

“At first, he talked about politics. Then the markets, his investments. Next topic was the Spx, then station life, then life back home. Did you know he grew up on a fruit farm? He talked about a tummy ache he had last week. Must have accidentally eaten cheese. He likes socks, new socks. Probably spends too much money on them. Did you know that he’s tried to get a tattoo on his wings three times, but always backs out at the last moment. Not sure what to get. Afraid of the pain.”

“He does love to talk,” I said.

Cinder talked for one hundred minutes, nonstop. Every subject was random and exciting. That’s why Quest never felt bored. Everything thrilled the bat. The tiger just listened, nodding and laughing when appropriate. Then, suddenly, silence.

“I thought he ran out of things to say,” said Quest, “like reaching the end of an incomplete novel. Or maybe he was tired? You can imagine my surprise when he asked a question. What’s it like to have stripes? That’s what he asked.”

Such an odd question. Stripes? He’d never thought about it. Cinder waited patiently for the reply. It was like asking someone what it was like to have blue eyes. He remembered looking at his arms.

“What did you tell him?” I asked.

“I told him it was fun. Every Wex has different markings on their fur. Stripes are common, but the pattern is always unique. It is a big deal for a Wex to know all the hidden markings of another. Got to get naked for that.”

Quest’s mind couldn’t escape the next part. He happily languished on the thoughts and feelings of growing desire. The attraction, while sudden, felt inevitable and inescapable, like a spring compressing tighter and tighter, nearing the need of only a single tremble to release.

Cinder touched him, a gentle brush, a light tracing of a dark line of fur on his forearm.

“Scars. That’s what he said. If he had stripes, he would think of them as scars and come up with exciting stories for each one.”

The bat had a few stripes of his own. Quest remembered softly touching the orange fur around the edge of Cinder’s ear. Of course it tickled. Next, he followed the red line, a stripe that started as a tuff on the top of the head and traveled down the length of the bat’s back. When the touch reached the base of the neck, they leaned into each other.

“I take it things got romantic from there?” asked Wick.

“Yes. We went back to his quarters.”

Although the halls were nearly empty during the station’s night cycle, Quest’s thoughts fondly recalled the journey. They sneaked around, acting more like boys on an adventure than a romantic couple. When they spied someone down the upcoming hall, they would break up, walking calmly as if they weren’t together. It all felt silly now, so Quest skipped telling Wick about this part. Although, his mind did linger on memories of Cinder walking well in front, wiggling his tiny tail and sneaking glances back over his shoulder.

“I’ve done a lot when it comes to personal relationships.” The tiger rubbed his neck, growing only more uncomfortable. “I thought we might just talk more. I didn’t really know what would happen. Maybe I could make him a friend, bring him more to our side.”

The tiger was lying. His thoughts told me the truth. He was completely obsessed with Cinder at that time. Calling it a conquest wouldn’t be fair, but closer to the truth. He loved the nervousness he saw in the ambassador. Quest was handsome, strong, and confident. Partners often pursued him in the clubs. He enjoyed the attention, but the truest compliment came from those timid ones, the ones who felt an attraction but weren’t quick to follow through. Special, unique, worthy, that’s what he wanted to be more than anything else. Of course, finding such a connection during a one-night stand is nearly impossible, but that didn’t stop Quest. He’d do anything for the tiniest taste of that feeling.

He just wanted to feel wanted.

Cinder definitely resisted but couldn’t stop. Every time the bat surrendered to a smile or stammered through a sentence, Quest felt the flutter. That yielding was like a drug.

“I was joking,” I said, trying to give the Wex an escape. “You don’t need to tell us all the details. My dirty mind can fill in the blanks.”

“He forgot to shut off his drones. That was the mistake.”

At this point, it became difficult to follow Quest’s thoughts. He tried to resist the mind reader, but it was no use. For as much as we tease and bicker, the tiger and I were far too in sync. I easily understood the symbols and shiftings of his brain. At best, it felt like my own memories. At worst, it felt like watching an artistic movie.

The difficulty came from the depth of the experience, the sheer power of his emotions. They eventually settled on the bed. Cinder found the gab again, although he talked about many of the things he’d already discussed. Nervous. Almost too nervous. Why?

The words stopped when Quest removed his own shirt. Cinder starred. His breath caught, not a prisoner, more like a bird trapped in a windless sky. Slowly falling. No longer flying. Would he pass out? The tiger took the bat’s fingertip, guiding it to the dark line below his heart. A trembling touch. A shared breath. Cinder soared again. They traced his stripes.

The kisses tickled the ambassador. In fact, every touch made the bat twitch slightly. It became quickly apparent, these parts had never been touched before. His first time. It seemed impossible. How could someone so powerful and so famous have never found a willing partner? Or perhaps it was Cinder that had been unwilling.

Quest offered to stop. He didn’t want to force anything. That would poison the prize, taint the honesty of true desire. Cinder asked to see more stripes. Quest responded with a bold move, pressing his palm along the ambassador’s belly, sliding down between his legs, and scaling the peak of his arousal.

Things were getting too intense. I changed the direction of the conversation, “So, you stole the footage off the drones?”

“Not exactly. When we were done, and holding each other,” he swallowed hard, “the drone was floating overhead. I asked him to send me a clip of us together. He accidentally sent me the last hour of video. But…”

Quest reached over and touched my arm. He stared until our eyes met briefly. The look was pleading. There was something more, something he wanted to share but was too afraid to say aloud.

I focused once more on his thoughts. His mind raced through the rest of the memories of that night. He tried to skip the pornographic details and focus on something more: the tenderness. Cinder’s feelings of nervousness eventually gave way to pure curiosity and excitement. Their bodies held a dialogue, asked and answered so many questions, and the ambassador was never one to let a conversation end.

Simply put, even with all his partners, Quest had never experienced anything like that night. His mind clung to a moment at the end when the pair held each other. They fit together so well, the small bat laying on his chest. He felt it, a true desire. Cinder needed something, not that night or the release, something more. He needed Quest. He honestly believed that no one else could have given what the ambassador required.

“Why leak the video?” asked Wick. While the human couldn’t read the tiger’s mind, I knew he could read my face. He knew that I was getting everything.

Quest couldn’t take it any more. He stood and started pacing. “That’s the thing. I’m not sure why. It made sense. The Gyben ambassador has been giving us so much grief. They will send someone new, maybe more agreeable. I wanted to do that for us. For you, Wick. No, don’t look at me like that. I know it was wrong, but I didn’t care what they said about me. This was something I could do. It makes sense. You’re good with all this blackmail stuff, Lexi. It makes sense, right?”

“There’s something else, isn’t there?” I asked. The tiger’s mind went blank. He desperately tried to think of nothing.

“One more thing. You know how those bats like to have multiple names? He asked me to call him…” The tiger stopped, squeezing his hands into fists. “Kaze.”

Wick looked at me.

“It’s the Gyben word for the darkness that comes right after the last light goes out. They have twelve words for darkness. Kaze is like blowing out a candle,” I explained. “When your eyes are adjusting and still remember the light.”

The name was given in the morning, before Quest left and before the footage was leaked. The tiger’s mind focused on that word and its meaning. His mind flicked to the image of Cinder in the gardens. It snapped to that last kiss before he fell asleep.

“You made a mistake,” said Wick.

I don’t think Quest was ready to finally receive everything he wished for. After his failed relationship with Orsa, he’d been looking for validation. A hundred lovers and he still wondered if he could truly be loved? Was he exactly what one individual needed? Someone answered the question, but not the one he wanted. Now his chance might be gone.

“I did.” Quest’s relaxed his fist. His shoulders slumped. “The worst part came after the footage leaked. Kaze sent me a private message.”

“I bet he was upset,” I said.

The tiger shook his head. “No. That crazy bat apologized. ‘Sorry, but I need to return to my homeworld,’ he said. ‘This trip can’t be avoided. I’ll return as soon as possible and hope very much to see you.’”

Through the betrayal, he still wanted Quest. I felt the tormenting burning inside the tiger, burning bright.

Wick gave a loud sigh. “I’m disappointed, Quest. This is not how we do things. You’ll deny that you leaked the video. Lexi can erase any tracks. You’ll offer support to Cinder and the entire homosexual community. I’m sure the blogs back on Earth are going to love this.”

I’d do more than just erase the evidence of Quest’s betrayal. A virus would appear in a few hours that would aggressively attack the footage online. For any casual user, the video would appear corrupted. Nothing could remove it completely, but this would certainly drive off all but the most devoted.

“I think I have a fitting punishment,” I said. “We should forbid Quest from going to any more clubs or bars. He should focus on work more. He can still have relationships, but maybe not for a few months.”

Quest’s tail picked up. “What would I do with all that extra time?”

“I don’t need to know what you do when you’re alone,” I responded. “You’ve already scared me enough today.”
 “Don’t act like you don’t like it,” he replied.

“I’d rather watch the elderly make out.”

“Whatever floats your boat.”

Quest soon left. He had much more explaining to do. I expected his prestigious family would demand a visit soon. It wouldn’t be easy, but at least he left with a smile.

Alone, Wick and I talked about the events.

“Any idea who the replacement will be?” he asked.
 “I’ll look into it. They Gyben are unusual when it comes to successors. They may very well simply pick the next most successful business bat.” I rubbed my forehead.

“Can you turn off that mind reading?”

“No. Only distance can disable the link. I got way too much detail.”

The human started to laugh. “Now I think he did this just to torment you.”

“Ha! I wouldn’t be surprised,” I said. “Still, kind of sad.”

“Sounds like he messed up a great opportunity.” Wick turned in his office chair, putting his back to me.
 “Scary thought. Your wishes come true and you are too blind to see it.”

“But how do you know, Lexi? How do you know if you’re missing the thing that’s right in front of you?”

A chill suddenly crawled over me. “I don’t know.”

### Chapter Eighteen

A good spy leaves no trace behind. I made a mistake. One word frayed, the ink smeared by a drop of water. It takes a lot of tears before one escapes the furry cheeks of a Baar. Life: the word that became broken as I read the next entry in his journal.

We sneaked away, stole a shuttle, put the station behind us. We hid on the far side, the dark side, of the water planet. She convinced me with a whisper, her whiskers softly touching my cheek as her lips nuzzled up to my ear, “Once in a lifetime.”

It happens every ten thousand years. For six hours, the magnetic poles of Wava wobble. Scientists aren’t sure what causes the phenomenon. The result is an intense lightning storm that surrounds the planet. On social networks, these sort of moments are called epochs, celestial events so rare that only a handful may occur before you die. It’s common for the young and the elderly of all races to flock to the location of these galactic moments.

The rarest of events, like seeing the exact moment when a star disappears, can become defining. As the station prepared for the event, tourists have been flooding in. Of course, due to security, public ships aren’t allowed in orbit, meaning the guests were trapped on the bright side of the planet. I saw their faces, pressed against every window and portal, as our ambassadorial shuttle departed. The storm looked spectacular, but nothing compared to the dark side.

The lightning was ceaseless, the strikes crawling across the swirling clouds at all levels of the atmosphere. It looked like neurons firing along the dark folds of a brain. From our low orbit, the electric blue strobes filled our shuttle with a constantly fading light that never finished. It felt like fluttering eyes, struggling to stay awake.

Lights out. Gravity off. We floated.

“The Wex have a myth about this event,” Kiki’s voice was barely above a whisper. It didn’t need to be any louder. “One lightning strike for every soul that has died in the last ten millennium. See that one? Two strikes becoming one. If you found true love, then on this day you pass together to heaven. If not, you’re denied and sent back to live another time.”

“A second chance.” I spent more time looking at her, watching her watch. Even in zero gravity, she carried a grace, floating in the air like she did in water. “It’s a lovely story. Do you think—”

“It’s just that,” she interrupted, “a story. Of course, they didn’t invent this until after developing space traveller. The Wex were one of the first to escape their homeworld. To think, a race with such advanced technology could still invent such a childish explanation for natural phenomena.”

“Believe in the unbelievable. Sounds very human.”

With the next strobe of light, a smile was now visible on her face. “I prefer the scientific method. Hypothesis, test, confirm or deny.”

It took awhile to align our bodies. While she moved smoothly through the weightlessness, I struggled. Zero gravity feels like falling, with a nearly constant nagging to grab onto something. Most people love the sensation: no strings, no aches, almost none of you. I prefer weighting, the feeling of leaning, the default connection.

Imagine trying to straighten a picture frame in all three dimensions. Kiki giggled as I worked us into position. Nothing like the movies, where romantic moments are flawless.

Finally, with my back to the main window, I put her right in front of me. Our hands linked, allowing me to pull closer and put a kiss on her cheek. “I don’t need a second chance.” As we parted, I felt her whiskers twitch, a sign of shy embarrassment. Her whiskers never lie, and the best part was knowing the exact reaction right before and after every kiss.

She asked the obvious, “Why?”

I didn’t answer. As I let her go, my fingers gave the smallest push on the side of her arm. This sent us spinning, slowly, like the hands of a clock. We turned in opposite directions, a perfect equal and opposite reaction to my touch. Our eyes met twice with each rotation, at the top and bottom of our cycle.

The first time we aligned, she asked, “Don’t you want to see lightning?”

I could see it in the reflection of her eyes right before and after they met mine. “I’m interested in another once-in-a-lifetime event.”

The rotation continued. We didn’t speak during the gaps, while we waited for our bodies to align again. She saw the planet behind me. I saw the darkness behind her. Our rotation wasn’t perfect, and we would’ve moved out of sync had it not been for her subtle corrections. Her tail would brush the ceiling or the floor to adjust her slightly. A gentle tap from her foot kept me from drifting off course. A perfect dancer or swimmer is like a fortune teller, focused less on where she is and more on where every choice will take her.

“What are you trying to say?” Kiki asked, the next time our eyes met.

I had a brief gap to find the perfect answer. I thought about this journal, these pages, and all the amazing events I’ve written. I also recalled the minor moments, all the glances and touches and laughs that I didn’t record. We brag about the sparks that start love (my biggest memories with Kiki are stunning, nearly flawless). However, the real warmth and worth of love comes from the nearly forgettable experiences, the conversations about adventures that may never come, the times she speaks your mind before you do, sitting on the couch and watching a movie together.

“You’re my yesterday.” It was a line from a classic movie, \*The Chrono Code\*. Part of me wishes I was more romantic, more creative. Then I might have come up with something original. Still, this seemed perfect.

I explained more on our next passing, “I define every day by what I did with you. You’re my days.” The start of love makes us excited for tomorrow. The journey of love makes us proud of yesterday.

She started to reply, “I love—,“ but stopped as we drifted apart.

Even now, I feel a tingle thinking of that moment. Weightless. Her turning, swirling, whirling in front of me, highlighted by a cracking blue light, just like a cliche image of an otter circling on the surface of water. Like a dream.

Our eyes met twice more without words. Then, we touched. She reached out and put a hand on my shoulder, putting us in sync. Our eyes stayed locked together. “I have a new hypothesis, Wick.”

“Oh?”

“I love you.”

“And how do you plan on proving this theory?” I asked.

“By spending every day with you,” she explained. “Experimenting. Seeing if you continue to make me happier than I’ve ever been. I don’t know if love can be proven, but I don’t mind confirming it every day for the rest of time.”

A scientist and a businessman, you probably couldn’t imagine a less romantic pair. We all know that words rarely matter. The real conversation happens in the shared silence.

We kissed. Removing your clothes in zero gravity is easy. It takes time when you remove someone else’s. The otter swirled around me, turning and twisting and touching my body like some object she might have found floating in the sea. She was in complete control, but I never felt vulnerable or powerless. Kiki was the dancer and my body was her stage, her ribbon, her shadow. She made sure I was everything she needed. Every touch felt like a cascade of lightning.

“We can go anywhere,” I said.

Our bodies still connect, we floated and held each other. The storm on the planet started to settle.

“These ambassador shuttles can go anywhere. But where?” she asked.

“Let’s escape. Go somewhere no one will ever find us and live for each other.”

“What about my lab? My animals?”

“Let’s take them too! Although, we might need a bigger ship.”

“I’d need to help pick a replacement,” she added.

“And there’s this issue with the Spx,” I said. “We should help resolve that first.”

“Yeah.”

Just like that, we convinced ourselves to stay. I thought about the scandal with Cinder and Quest. Imagine if word got out that two ambassadors of the Galactic Council were in love. How could they be objective? We’ll have to hide a lot. Maybe I should step down. Definitely something to think about.

“Successful experiment?” I asked.

Kiki pushed her cheek into my naked chest. “Yes! You pass. So far so good for my hypothesis.”

The final few sparks snapped and faded on the surface of Wava. This left us in the dark. The epoch was over. To be honest, I thought I’d be more overwhelmed. Even now, my mind struggles to understand the sheer scale of what I experienced.

“I love you.”

Her words hung in the dark.

My mind played a trick.

For a brief moment, I heard someone else, as if those three words belonged to another. I felt a cold line, like the slash of a frozen blade, shoot from the top of my head, through my chest, and to my feet. The feeling was so profound that I still remember it. I wonder what caused it. Doubt?

Crazy, right? Why would I feel that? Not cold feet, more like a cold spirit. Or maybe it was a fear of floating in the dark. That makes more sense.

I know that Kiki makes me happy. Making her smile feels like a greater triumph than any negotiation of my life. No million dollar deal, no public success, no fame could compare.

Doubt? It doesn’t matter. She had it right. This is our experiment. I’ll always find someway to make her smile.

We’ll prove our love with every day of our \*life\*.

### Chapter Nineteen

What if it had been me? For the next couple of months, since the lightning storm on Wave, my mind stayed trapped in that question. What if I had been on that shuttle with Wick? I’d forgotten about the epoch until I found my favorite rice shop closed for the observation. Naturally, I went searching for Wick, hoping to share it with him.

“Hello, Lexi,” a human voice, deep and old, filled my bedroom.

I laid on the floor, in the dark. The only glow came from the monitor on the computer desk above me. The blue light looked like something might see in the fading moments after a strike of lightning.

“Link secure,” I confirmed. “Ready to validate identity?”

“You have a small patch of white fur on your inner left thigh, a scar from when you were attacked by a woosha cat as a child.”

“Thanks, Tosco. You could’ve used the passphrase.”

I didn’t need to see the screen to know that man’s grin. “Where is the fun in that? How few individuals have seen you naked? Best kept secrets, huh?” I hate video chat, but you can’t deny the request when it comes from the head of Galactic Intelligence Agency.

“Tos the tosser.” I shook my head. “I can’t help that you insist on attending all new recruit medical exams.”

“There’s a reason they strip you down during torture. Maximize vulnerability.”

“Keep that line for the memoirs, you perverted old man. Getting worse with age, my friend. Time to step down.”

Tosco was in his sixties when I joined GAIA. His dark skin and white hair gave him a distinguished look that was spoiled by the large scars on his cheeks. He tried to grow a beard once, but the look didn’t suit him.

“Most of my agents fear me, Lexi.” It was true. Tosco Bellick (definitely not his real name) took a rather bloody path to the top of the human intelligence committee. He started as a black ops soldier, then an analyst, followed by agency assassin, and then politician. Brutally efficient. Brutally loyal. He was famous for getting results, regardless of the costs. It only made sense to make him lead a covert organization where his gruesome ledger could be hidden. “Only you act like I’m harmless.”

“Because most of your other employees are nothing more than glorified thugs, conmen, and thieves,” I said.

“Why do you think that is?”

“Because you’re never supposed to hire someone smarter than you.”

 “But I hired you,” said my boss.

“Everyone makes mistakes. Even you, Tos.”

“Maybe there’s another reason you don’t fear me, Lexi. Maybe it’s because we skipped the psychological strengthening section of your training.”

‘Phycological strengthening’ translates to ‘voluntary torture’. New GAIA agents were forced to experience various vicious methods of information extraction. Why? The agency claimed it was so recruiters were better equipped when they encountered the techniques in the field. I know Tosco used it as a final interview to determine the depth of his new agent’s loyalty. Of course, only he could conduct such an important interview.

“You always bring that up,” I said. “Like some sort of threat.” Every time we talked, the human found some way to bring up the subject, but he never told me why I got exempted.

“You really want to know?” he asked. “It’s time you knew. I’ll tell you, but only at the end of our conversation.”

I sat up and got into my desk chair. The image of Tosco’s grinning face greeted me. “There’s my lovely little red panda,” he said. “Were you laying on the floor?”

“On Earth, heaven is always dark.”

There was a small gap of silence, the closest thing that man had to a laugh. “Now you really want to confirm it's actually me? Do you really think a computer generated image could replicate these scars?”

“Finish the passphrase.” Each GAIA agent was given three unique passphrases. These verbal handshakes were used to confirm the identity of other agents. For example, one agent might say ‘thunder’ and the other would respond with ‘lightning’. Only if they knew the secret words were you able to confirm authorization to talk. The most common one was used in the field. I was assigned:

(Prompt) I’ve heard that animals often have a sweet tooth.

(Response) Bears like honey like a Gyben likes money.

This one was well known. Many of my coworkers called me Sugar Baar because of it. ‘Look for the red panda eating dessert in the cafe’ was often the way we met in the field. I hated the nickname.

The next level up was only known by handlers, the coordinators responsible for assigning missions and gathering status reports from agents. That meant only around thirty individuals had access to the passphrase. Mine was:

(Prompt) Tombstones never tell the whole story.

(Response) Even a dead man has rites.

One of GAIA’s many fake businesses was a funeral home on Mars. I wouldn’t be surprised if Tosco did it on purpose. I remember yelling those words when a mission went bad on Hossix. Ruger, a young operative, made a mistake and the rest of the team was killed in a gun battle with Yent soldiers. I was being chased and needed extraction. Even a dead man has rites.

Finally, there came the top passphrase. This was given in private by Tosco, usually during phycological strengthening. Only he knew each answer. The agents often joked that if Tosco had a heart attack, many of them would be forced to live out fake lives on unofficial missions. I overheard a field analyst once saying, “Great, if the old man dies, I’m stuck being baker.”

“On Earth, heaven is always dark,” I repeated the prompt.

“The blue sky is the greatest lie,” he said. “It hides the stars from you.”

“Identity confirmed.”

“What’s that?” he asked. “There,” he pointed.

A topless box made of thin, clear plastic sat on my desk. It contained a random collection of flower petals and leaves, far too many colors and textures to describe. Wick got it for me that morning. He visited a florist to buy roses for Kiki. That’s when he saw this box. The owner explained that it was the castaways, a collection of flower parts just starting to wilt. Each morning, he collected these from the bouquets on display. The discarded. When Wick gave it to me, I thanked him for the trash. Then he said, “Real beauty isn’t instantly apparent. I see you, Lexi, the you that very few get to see. Truly beautiful.”

“Just some trash,” I told Tosco, looking away to hide my smile.

“You’re that nerdy kind of slob,” said my boss, “but not your desk. In all our video calls, I’ve never seen you have a mess around your computer. That’s the one space you keep clean.”

I changed the subject, “Why did you insist on calling? I’ve been sending regular reports to Linda.”

“I’ve read every one of them. What I need is what you’re not recording.”

“Such as?” I asked.

“As far as I can tell, Warwick Stone is perfect. You’ve reported no aberrant behavior.”

“He’s doing an excellent job. I’ve given you the reasoning for all his votes and all the backroom deals that get negotiated. I’ve provided dirt on every ambassador and their closest assistants.”

“Not all, Lexi. You haven’t provided us little blackmail on the Otta ambassador, Kiki.”

It was true. I thought about it often. It would be easy to dig up something from her past. Otta only cared about the security protecting their research. I could use the information, give it to Wick, and taint their relationship.

“Do you know how incredibly hard it is to hack into the computer systems of the Rawca and Yent?” I asked. “There are probably three, or maybe four, hackers in the galaxy that could do it, and I know you don’t have another one. Kiki is just a scientist. Why waste my time?”

“You’re getting defensive.” Trying to hide things from the head of a spy agency was like trying to take food from a dog. “Why?”

He was right. I hated Kiki. She stole Wick from me. So why defend her? Wick knew my real occupation. If harmful information on Kiki came to light, it would take a small leap of logic for him to connect it to me. The thought of betraying Wick haunted me. I couldn’t do it, even if it might make him love her less.

“Whatever!” I rolled my eyes. “You’re the one that agreed to this mission. You know CIAX and DOD love having me contained on this station. I see their agents every day. That boring assistant to Orsa even works for them. Ridiculous! Half my time is spent deflecting their attempts to blow up this whole thing. You know the other agencies hate having a GAIA agent so close to the Council.”

“Now you’re changing subjects,” he said, calmly. “However, you bring up a good point. It took a lot of work to get you assigned as Wick’s assistant. The data you’ve provided, no one can argue about the value. You’ve certainly made me look good.”

“And?” Tos never gave compliments.

“I never told you to keep the ship afloat. Your mission was to stay close, gather information.”

“What?” Now he was just trying to piss me off. “So you’d be happy if I just let Hawthrone and CIAX stage some fake scandal about our ambassador, for what? To get us kicked off the Council? Wick has done amazing things.”

“There’s a reason I recommended him,” said Tos. “Wick is a perfect combination of passion and practicality. One flaw, he’s too idealistic. I sometimes think he got his company into weapons research just so he could convince our military to not use it.”

“And I’m helping him!”

The old human shook his head. “We still need leverage on him. Think about it, Lexi. If Wick had to pick between saving a thousand human lives or a million alien ones, which would he pick?”

“There’s no answer that would make everyone happy.” I looked at the box of discarded petals. “Wick would try to find some way to get both.”

“Exactly. Wick is a hero just brave enough to get everyone killed. At some point, we may need to force his hand. Blackmail will help us decide for him.”

“I don’t know.” I fought an urge to grab my tail. Tosco would instantly recognize the signs of uncertainty.

“Do it for him, Lexi. Imagine how relieved he’ll be when the burden of choice is taken from him. Even someone like Wick will appreciate the chance to follow.”

“You’re talking about the Spx, aren’t you.”

His voice carried a hiss, almost like molten metal meeting cold water, “Yes. This changes everything.”

After infecting the ships sent to investigate the remote outpost of Tyoh, the Spx sent their sights on the nearest human planet. Warships from the Rawca, Yent, Gyben, Mirj, Otta, and almost every other race travelled to intercept. They barely won.

A handful of human ships tore through one of the biggest fleets ever assembled in history. We even had the advantage of surprise, an ambush. The commandeered vessels were still broadcasting their locations to the central military network.

“Have you reviewed the recording?” asked the spy master. “The Spx not only improved the physical abilities of the human pilots, they also greatly increased the intelligence of our engineers. They stripped the fighters to achieve maximum speed, to take advantage of their augmented reflexes. It’s almost like the Spx were designed to merge with humans. Those damn robotic snakes.”

“I bet that has all our military researchers in a frenzy.” At this point, I grabbed my tail.

“Eight vessels, Lexi. Only one carrier! They could’ve easily defeated an entire Rawca armada. Imagine if we could harness those heightened abilities.”

“How? By all accounts, once you’re infected by the Spx, it’s over. They hook onto your spine. They take over your mind. You can’t remove the thing without killing the host. Thank god we wiped them out now, before they…”

“Now you get it.”

I grabbed my keyboard and typed furiously. “That rescue mission, the one sent to Tyoh. It was mostly ceremonial, but who was in command? Oh god.”

“Admiral Riroto,” the human gained. “The legend, nearly retired.”

“And you say the Spx increase intelligence? Riroto it one of the reasons we were winning against the Rawca. He’s a tactical genius.” I pushed back from the desk. “The extra ship.”

“Clever Baar, you got it. The Spx gain the knowledge of their host. Of course they knew we were tracking their movements. That would keep us from looking for the one missing vessel. The population on the human planets in Filo was never their true target. What’s the point of infecting a population without warships?”

“Alpha Centauri,” I said. “That’s where our shipyards are. Most of the fleet is stationed there. No, that’s crazy. It’s too risky. Even if they managed to infect one ship, we’ve been prepared for Rawca attacks. There’s a million safeguards. That leaves, Essex.”

“Yep, our research facility for the deployment of secret weapons technology. Much more remote. Only a handful of the top military even know the place exists. Including Admiral Riroto.”

“Tos, you have to warn them. Some of the technology they have there is,” I shivered, “scary.”

“Don’t worry, Lexi. It’s mostly experimental battleships. The real dangerous stuff is safe near Saturn. Wick can tell you all about that facility.”

“But you’ve warned them. Right?” I asked.

“Riroto contacted us. I must say, the Spx can really put on a show. If you didn’t know the guy, you’d assume he was the same old hard ass.”

“You destroyed them, right?”

“Why would we do that, Lexi? The Spx are intelligent. They’re just as excited as we are. A mutual alliance could help both parties.”

“Tos, you can’t be serious! You can’t trust them. They can control anyone. How do I…”

“How do you know I’m not infected?” he finished my question. “You can’t, not without doing an x-ray or pushing me through a metal detector. But don’t worry, little Baar, I’m still on Earth. They haven’t gotten this far.”

“Tosco, you have to stop this. Think of the repercussions. What if something goes wrong?”

“Think of your homeworld, Lexi. Remember the missiles falling. Remember how close an alien race came to wiping out your kind. The galaxy is a scary place. You know better than anyone. The Rawca fleets are completely rebuilt, stronger than they were before they started the war. From your reports, it looks like the previous Gyben ambassador had his own agenda. The Yent crush anyone who threatens their power. Why do you think they made that Council? Then there’s the Otta. Ever wonder why a bounce of ‘peaceful’ scientists ended up getting a vote? Weapons. They’re weapons make ours look like toys. We need to protect ourselves.”

“Why are you telling me this?” My stomach was in knots.

“Two reasons. The first you’d figure out. The GAIA computer teams are still finding the AI programs you scattered around our systems during your training. They just found out that Matt Mathew, the remote IT guy that’s been emailing them for years, isn’t real. Just another routine you installed to spy on us.”

“How many moles have I found for you inside the organization?” I asked. “You’ve never complained before. ”

“I’m not. My peers tell me that your ability to write artificial intelligence to help you with hacking is unparalleled. If we’re still finding some of your old robots, imagine what you must have in place now.” I started to protest again, but he raised a hand to stop me. “It’s fine. I’m just trying to say that you’ll figure out if this organization has a hidden agenda.”

“I think I know the second reason.”

“The other races are scared. They saw what an alliance between the Spx and Earth can do. They’ll be watching for another outbreak. Imagine if Wick got word of our little experiment.”

He would put a stop to it, expose GAIA’s program, and help the Council pass laws against Spx hybrids. “You want me to make sure he doesn’t interfere.”

“Exactly,” said Tos. “You need to monitor all the ambassadors. See if anyone has suspicions. Above all else, you’ll need to test Wick. See if he’ll work with us. Otherwise we’ll need leverage on him.”

My mind struggled to comprehend everything. Too many choices, too many paths, lay before me. I could tell Wick about the secret alliance with the Spx. He was one of the few people with the power to stop it, but what would be the consequence? It would certainly be a scar on perception of humankind in the galaxy. GAIA’s retaliation would end Wick’s career, and maybe his life. I could go rogue and expose the conspiracy myself, but I would need a mountain of proof.

Tosco wasn’t a fool. If anyone could find a way to manipulate the Spx, it would be him. Maybe I could convince him to keep it as a last resort. Imagine if one of those parasites infected him. If the Spx did in fact improve brain functions and bodily functions, I could see an aging man desperate to try. If his knowledge got into the hands of Spx, it would put the entire galaxy at risk.

“I know it is a lot to take in, Lexi, but you need to trust me. Remember your oaths to GAIA, to Earth, to me. I’ve always admired the Baar for their unwavering loyalty.”

I also made promises to Wick. “What if I can’t find you blackmail? Our teams already combed through his past.”

“Then we’ll need to replace our first ambassador with someone more,” he paused for a moment, “agreeable. You shouldn’t have a problem. I’ve heard rumors that he’s romantically engaged with the Otta ambassador. Yet, you’ve never mentioned this in your reports. I wonder why.”

“What would I report? It’s inconsequential. I know you have Jimmie and Cyce on the station. They stick out like sore thumbs. Tell them to stay outta my way.”

There was a small twitch of his left eyebrow. It was rare to see a sign of surprise come from the spy master. “I’m impressed that you detected that.” There was still a bit of a smug smile on his face.

“You even sent Rio. He’s your best agent.”

His smile disappeared. “How?”

“Don’t look for the rock under the surface, look for the ripples.” I knew something was up when I started detecting encoded reports originating from the Daygone station. More and more of Earth’s spies were making their way into the shadows of the Council.

“You’re not the only one that sees echoes.” Tos leaned forward. Now he was angry. “I’ve seen footage of you interacting with our esteemed ambassador.”

“Your agents sent you videos of me doing my job? Wow. The ambassador’s assistant is interacting with the ambassador? Shocking.”

“It’s not what you’re doing, it’s how you do it. Anyone can see that you’re infatuated with him, Lexi.”

I curled my toes, trying to push any signs of tension off camera. Damn Cyce. It would’ve been her. She always loved doing Tos’s dirty work. “Bah! Infatuated? With a human? You don’t understand Baar very well.”

“You said it yourself. Look at the ripples. Wick has been a huge success. His approval ratings back on Earth are astronomical. He’s literally changing how humans perceive alien races. After the war with the Rawca, it should’ve taken generations to build up trust. Every new channel here is obsessed with him. His interviews are simply inspiring.”

“He’s popular back home and you just assume that his female assistant must be crazy in love? That’s bit of a leap, even for you, Tos. What does his success have to do with my feelings?”

“The ripples, Lexi. I see the reports; I watch the universe. Everything seems to be tumbling in Wick’s favor. Leaked information to social media before a big vote. Economies escaping the fallout of these new laws. Military fleets being forced to deal with new or fake threats.”

I shouted a little, “He’s really good at his job!”

“No one is that good, little Baar. It would take outside influence to assure everything went so perfectly. It feels like he has a guardian angel, or at least an incredibly gifted hacker.”

“You honestly think I have time for that? Help him with his work and find time to meddle in the galactic espionage game? I do assignments. I don’t invent them.”

“You know Hawkins, right? Our lead analyst.”

Hawkins was another one of Tosco’s prize possessions, a savant of causality. Hawkins was given access to all of GAIA’s classified data and given the simple task of looking for any abnormalities. He was responsible for detecting the presence of several double-agents inside the organization. Twelve years ago, he found a massive scandal overlapping three other spy agencies and several key Earth politicians. Having that information gave GAIA the leverage it needed to become humanity’s top spy agency.

“He’s got a theory on everything,” I said. “So what?” I grabbed the edge of my desk, pressing my claws into the underside.

“At first, he thought he found another mole in our organization. There’s been a spike in unofficial requests to our agents. Small things. An email asking a data scrubber to look up information in the archives. An extra listening device installed on the bridge of a military ship heading towards the frontier. All mostly harmless, until you add it all up. Everything helps Wick.”

“We join the Galactic Council and suddenly the resources of our agency shift to helping our ambassador? You know that I’m authorized to make requests of our resources to help with my position. Someone needs to get Hawkins a newfeeds or some fresh air or something.”

“All your requests are documented.”

“And your employees follow up with each other,” I said. “One official request becomes ten unofficial ones. Do you really think I’m that smart, Tos? I’m great with computers, but do you think I could manipulate an entire spy agency to meet my agenda?”

He said one word, “Yes.”

“Great. I’m being reprimanded for being too good at my job. If you think I’m that much of a liability, then why not just assign me to a different mission?”

“I’ve thought about it. How quickly could you wrap up your responsibilities there?” he asked.

I panicked. All my bravado caught up with me. Eager to keep my previous statements valid, I spoke too quickly. “Wow. We still got lots to do. There’s a major vote coming up on universal trade tariffs. I’ve finally gotten access to Byruin’s personal computer. Imagine what we can get from that? Wick wants to revisit treaties on limiting military sizes and weapons.”

“Other agents could take those over.”

“Ha! If you want them to stuff it up. I’m also tracking a massive spike in encrypted communication between the other ambassadors. The Gyben replacement. I think I can get access to her mail. I just need more time.”

“How long?”

My heart was racing. I’d never considered reassignment. Not now. “Eight months. No! More like nine or ten.” Kiki had already taken Wick’s heart. What chance did I have of winning him back if GAIA threw me in some dark corner of the galaxy?

“If I remember correctly, you didn’t even want this assignment to start. What changed?” he asked.

“I was wrong. We’re doing so much good!”

“Eight months? Let’s accelerate it. Let me know what you need to get it down to five months. Sound good?”

“You know I work better alone. Besides, you still need me here.”

That grin of his returned. “Why?”

“You wanted me to get that blackmail on Wick, right? Make sure he’ll side with you about the Spx.”

“So you’ll do it?”

No. “Yes.”

“Fantastic,” he said. “I like it when you get flustered and scared. Your fluffy ears go back. Rather cute.”

I muttered, “Go to hell.”

“All joking aside, this is vitally important. This is why I let them put you there. I know the other agencies wanted to contain you, keep your hacking abilities focused on Daygone and the Council. Now you have a chance to finally return that favor.”

“What favor?” I asked.

“When those pilots sacrificed themselves to save your homeworld. Now you can help protect their home and their descendants.”

“I guess you’re right. Are we done?” I asked.

He turned off his video feed. The screen went black. Only his voice continued transmission. “We have one last thing to discuss. Or did you already forget.”

“Why you didn’t torture me when I joined GAIA.” I turned off my camera too. Only seemed fair. Almost immediately, tears began to flood my eyes. I didn’t realize how much I’d been holding back. I could barely breathe.

“Torture?” he began. “Don’t be so dramatic. Psychological strengthening is just that. The process strips away all the cruft, all that dust that builds up by living in society. More than friends, more than work, more than family, we all have our greatest loyalty to ideas. The perfect look, the right way to act, that storybook life. We cling, like a sniveling newborn, to those false promises. Behave. Behave and everything will be alright. You’re just one day away from being the hero, from finding the love of your life, from purpose. Too bad that tomorrow is never today.”

I tried to interrupt, but I was taking everything I had to mute my sobs.

“I free them,” he continued. “I strip them bare, remove those oaths we make at birth. Then, I let them pick. Who and what will you live for? If they choose humanity, if they select the greater good, if they pick me, then I let them join GAIA. If they don’t? They’re erased. Can’t send people like that back into society. We can’t spoil the game for everyone. Civilization demands conformity. Don’t feel bad. It’s the only way the whole thing works.”

“You’re a monster!” that’s what I wanted to say to him.

“You thought I was doing you a favor. By not putting you through the psychological strengthening, I left you to walk down a path of damnation. You feel it, Lexi? That pain, the tearing inside, the conflict of who you are, who you ought to be, and who you want to be. I’m sorry. I could have removed that pain, but I needed you.”

I hated the honesty I heard in his voice. He actually believed all this… nonsense.

“You’re a brilliant hacker, my little Baar. You have a photographic memory, a high IQ, and creativity. You’re more of a genius artist than a programmer. But, what makes you truly valuable is your focus. Your determination is what makes you better than anyone else. That’s what I couldn’t lose. The question is, what gives you that strength? Do you know, Lexi?”

“Stop,” I whispered, but not loud enough for him to hear or care.

“Obsession. You’re a dreamer,” he said. “You believe that you can actually save the universe. You believe that you’re unique and special and that this story, this existence, is all about you. You’re the main character. Everyone and everything else is just part of the plot. Most people grow up. They hit ceilings, trip over rocks, feel betrayal. They stop believing in fairytales.”

I hated him. Not because of what he said. It was nonsense, a bunch of convenient truths. I hated how much power he had over me. I didn’t want to betray Wick. My temper flared; I lashed out, knocking the transparent, plastic box off my desk. The discarded petals and lost leaves scattered across the floor, the garden destroyed by a hurricane.

“Funny, huh? You’re quick to anger, quirky, and a loner, and yet you still believe you’re the princess. It’s simple, Lexi. You’re the best when it comes to lying to yourself. Do you actually think you love that man? No, you only love the idea of him, the romantic story.”

I fell to the floor, desperate to fetch the fallen fragments of flowers. My knees and hands were greeted by cold water. I’m glad the camera was off. I looked desperate.

Tosco continued his speech, “You’re obsessed, Lexi. That’s all it is. You’re not madly in love with Wick. You’re obsessed with the idea of loving him. Why couldn’t you find a Baar to love? Because you’re different. You’re unique. Your true love could only be found among the stars. Two lovers, destined to meet, defying all odds. All lies! No one falls in love that deeply and that fast. It’s another pathetic fairytale. The best part, he doesn’t even love you! He’s in bed with that Otta scientist.”

My claws pierced the soft leaves and my body warmth wilted many of the petals. I tried not to listen to him. Tosco was just trying to get under my fur. He wanted to manipulate me. I refused.

“Lexi, your true love is GAIA. You never found a lover because you’re married to the job. You’re better than the stupid recipe your kind uses to define a worthy life. Living for love? How self indulgent. You’re so much stronger than that. You can save us all. Never forget that. Stop dreaming.”

“Shut up,” I shouted. A seam on the plastic container had cracked. The vase could no longer hold water.

“I couldn’t lose you,” he said. “That’s the truth. You’re not only my best agent, you’re also the greatest weapon Earth’s got. We need you.”

The scraps of petals, red and orange, and broken thorns clung to the wet fur of my palms. “Are you done?”

His last words were spoken solemnly, as if shared at a funeral, “Heaven is always dark. Is your love a blue sky, Lexi?”

The computer chirped.

The call had ended.

Damn it, what if he was right?

### Chapter Twenty

“Well, this is certainly unexpected.”

“I needed you alone.”

Among all the extravagances, the most absurd addition to Daygone by the Yent may be the hot baths. Excess heat from the station reactor is used to warm mineral waters imported from their homeworld. The enclosures are lined with rock taken from their sacred Fensy mountain. Of course, only the ambassador and her invited guests were allowed access, unless you knew how to hack the security locks. I’d approached from behind.

“You could’ve asked.” The ambassador reclined in one of the pools, her naked body concealed beneath the water and the steam. Even my surprised visit couldn’t phase Orsa’s composure. It almost felt like she constantly expected the unexpected.

“Don’t trust your assistant.”

“Intriguing.” She glanced back over her shoulder at me, her icy blue eyes cutting through the mist. “Have you come for revenge?”

Revenge, maybe, but not against her. “Ambushing someone as they bathe? Not my style.”

“You should join me, little Baar.” She lifted an arm. The drops of water made a peculiar noise, almost like gems falling on a glass table. I’m sure it was all part of the opulent design.

“No. I just came to tell you something.”

“I’m sorry, but I must insist,” said the deer.

“You gotta be kidding me! That water will run off your fine felt with ease. I’ll be soaked.”

The Yent tapped the surface of the water, sending out the sparkling noise. “I doubt you came all this way just to tell me something. You probably need a favor.”

“So what if I do?” I asked.

Orsa leaned her head back, looking up at me. “How about I promise you a favor, in compensation for your dreadfully drenched fur?”

“You’re serious?”

She closed her eyes and tilted her head back down. “If you’re bashful, I’m more than happy to avert my gaze until you’re in the water.”

“Bloody hell.” I started to remove my clothes. “Why are Yent so obsessed with ceremony and tradition?”

“Most races repeat themselves,” she said. “History repeating. Why? Because they give no value to their history. Traditions allow us to relate to our ancestors. I sit in this pool like my parents, their parents, and all my previous generations. Their choices have context.”

“Wow. I believe that’s the first time I’ve gotten a straight answer from your kind.” Now completely naked, I kept my large tail clutched to my chest in modesty.

“This day seems made for surprises. Join me, Lexi.”

I put in a single toe. “It’s boiling!”

“Trust me, you’ll survive.”

My journey into the lava went slowly. “It’s even hard to breathe. This air is so dense.” The steam that didn’t cling to the water flowed upwards, mingling and swirling like the special effects of a stage play. Ghosts, my eyes glimpsed familiar images in the layers of white. I understood why the Yent believed this place had a connection to their ancestors.

“You’ll pass out if you talk too much.”

She was right. After becoming fully submerged, my mind became diluted. The heat and steam pierced me, making it hard to focus. It felt like being drunk. No wonder she wanted me to join her. I’m not sure if she could’ve kept up with a normal conversation.

“What secret brings you here?” she eventually asked.

Even now, I hesitated. After my conversation with Tosco, I felt trapped. There seemed to be few options. If I told Wick about GAIA’s secret pact with the Spx, I risked him being caught in the crosshairs. If I have Tosco what he wanted, I betrayed Wick and put everyone at risk. The only alternative was the unimaginable: make a friend of my enemy. The only question was if I could really trust Orsa.

“I need your help.”

“Take your time,” she said. “There’s no rush to tell me everything.”

I took a deep breath and let it escape in a sigh. My muscles had no choice but to relax in the heat. My fur floated in the water, pulled at my skin, increasing the sensation that I was dissolving. “It’s about the Spx.”

“A living nightmare.”

“There’s been another outbreak.”

The deer said nothing but gave me a lazy glance. For the first time, I saw her icy exterior melt. There was a true look of concern in her eyes.

“Earth doesn’t want to announce the event,” I explained. “The location is rather sensitive.”

“Another hidden outpost?”

“A weapons development facility. Experimental fleets.”

She didn’t reply immediately. I pulled a hand from the water, letting the drops make their twinkling noise. The liquid certainly smelt more metallic than usual. The contents probably affected the sound.

“Why share this with me?” Orsa finally spoke, the mist stirring as the words left her lips. “Are you protecting the Baar? These events threaten all life in the galaxy. Or perhaps you remember old promises?”

I hadn’t thought about it like that. Most races didn’t understand the unwavering loyalty of my kind to Earth. They saved us from annihilation. Previously, we had a similar bond with the Yent for providing us with space travel technology. Of course, that admiration faded when they refused to join the conflict between the humans and the Rawca, leaving the Baar homeworld trapped at the center of their war zone.

“No.” Something about the immense heat of the bath made it hard to think and even harder to lie. “I want to protect him.”

“Him?”

“Them,” I quickly corrected. “I want to protect the humans from themselves.”

“Interesting. Protect him.” The ambassador paused and stared into the shifting shapes of the steam. Eventually, her fingers emerged from the waters at my side and settled on my shoulder. “Find a solution, but don’t expose the secret. That’s your favor? A lot to ask in exchange for a shared bath.”

I wanted to recoil from her touch, but again the heat muted my reactions. “The Council must do something.”

Orsa placed herself at my side, leaning into me. Her fingers remained on my shoulder. Her slender muzzle put her lips and words directly at my ear. “How about I give you a secret of mine? Then you know yours will be safe?”

I nodded slowly.

“You want to know the source of my success?” her voice was barely louder than a whisper. “I’m fearless.”

I tried to look at her, but a touch of a single finger on my chin kept my gaze averted. She continued, “There is no mistake that can define me. I’m invincible.”

“How?”

Again, she didn’t answer immediately. You’d think Orsa’s hobby was collecting anticipation, but this felt different. So close, completely naked, all alone. I could feel her internal struggle. Maybe this secret was truly something she didn’t want to share.

“Like you,” he first words carried as much weight as the water’s warmth, “I fell in love with a brash young male not of my kind.”

Was it that obvious? Maybe Tosco has been right. Maybe I was obsessed with Wick. Or, the deer could be fishing. The best conversationalists gamble on assumptions. The trick is to act like you have some obviously secret knowledge and see if you get a bite. If you’re wrong, they’ll think it a joke. If you’re right, they’ll either crack or get far too defensive. I did the latter.

“Whatever,” I said with a wince. “You don’t know anything.”

Her hand returned my shoulder momentarily before tracing my collar. “I’ll never forget his caress. He was loud but his touch was timid. It reminded me of the young leaves of the maple bushes that crowded my family gardens. I’d brush by them every spring morning.”

“Quest.”

She pulled back, if only briefly, at his name. Neither he nor her ever spoke this sacred secret. Only the tiger’s thoughts gave me the clue.

“That obvious?” she asked.

“No, but why are you telling me this?”

Her fingers swirled in the smallest circles. The movement would’ve been unnoticeable had they not occurred beneath the fur near my neck. A subconscious habit surrounded her thoughts. “Maybe you’re…” Another hesitation. Next, her hand slid further down my chest, her palm pausing over my heart. “I’m not afraid of mistakes, Lexi.”

“He loved you too,” I said, not sure if I was also making a mistake. “At least your love echoed.”

She spoke over the top of me, “Another opportunity came, a chance to be the first female ambassador of my kind.” Her words suddenly became distant, as if meant for someone else. Maybe a ghost in the mist.

The deer continued, “I could’ve left with him. Hard. It would’ve been so hard. Our love grew despite me, despite moments of trifle strife. Even if it meant making a fool of himself, that tiger never let me get stuck in a moment. That’s how I knew we’d survive. No matter what came, our love would conquer it all.”

It all made sense now. I understood why Orsa hated my kind. For Baar, there is no greater achievement than love. For the Yent, love is auxiliary. I said the obvious so she didn’t have to, “Your one mistake was leaving him.”

Her fingers curled into a fist over my heart. Her words became focused again, “You see, Lexi. By just loving me, he gave me more than any friend or ally ever.” Her hand relaxed. “I’m fearless now. No new cut can leave a scar.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked.

Beneath the water, her touch moved swiftly over my breast and down my belly. “So you don’t make the same mistake.”

I shivered.

The heat, the overwhelming warmth that surrounded me, disappeared. How could it not be enough? The sensation only lasted a moment.

Orsa stood sharply. “The one thing all living creatures crave at birth? Warmth. The true purpose of these baths mimics the meaning of life. Find what is lacking.” The water slipped off her thin, naked body with ease. The line of lightly colored fur continued from beneath her chin, down the middle of torso. I felt jealousy, but not just for her perfect body. “Don’t be more than you need to be. That’s the trick, little Baar.” She outstretched her hand to help me up.

I sunk down until the water touched the bottom of my nose.

Orsa smiled. The first honest smile I’d ever seen from her. The drops of water that fell from the tips of her body made their twinkling noise with every splash. “Come, we have many more things to discuss.” The deer turned, the dark spots on the sides of her hips continued along her lower back, arching just over her tiny tail. She exited the bath.

I followed, with far less grace. My fur clung to the heavy water. Drenched is never a good look. “Wah, it’s cold!”

Orsa threw a towel in my direction before wrapping one around her chest. “This information you provided, using it will be difficult. It would be easier if I just exposed the infection.”

The poor towel didn’t stand a chance. It joined my soaking party before I even finished drying my arms. “You can’t. They’ll know that I told you.”

“You’re full of surprises today.” The ambassador draped a hand before her muzzle, trying to hide her amusement. She was enjoying my struggles with the towels too much. Three more towels became casualties in my battle to get dry.

“Wick doesn’t know. No one does. You’ll put him in a dangerous position.”

“I admit,” she said, recovering her usual composure, “your human never ceases to perplex. After the scandal with the Gyben, I would’ve banished Quest. His behavior would only tarnish his efforts.”

“If there are rules, that means there are winners and losers.” I started drying my tail “He’s fond of that saying.”

“Fair enough.” Orsa pulled at an arrant thread on her towel, captivated in thought. “It won’t be easy, but I’ll find a way. The Otta will certainly vote against anything, and the replacement ambassador for the Gyben is certainly… unpredictable. I wish she’d give me a name to call her. I think the poor thing may be afraid of me.”

“Cindy. That’s the name she received from Wick.” No one expected Cinder to pick his sister as his stand in. Even fewer expected her to be so innocent. The Council had never had an ambassador like her.

“You think you can sway her?”

“I’ll try. Oh, and Orsa?”

The deer only lifted an eyebrow.

I said, “Thank you.”

We parted ways then. Afterwards, our relationship remained unchanged. Our interactions stayed snippy at best. I’m not sure if she appreciated our moment in the baths or thought of it as just another mistake. Either way, it didn’t take Orsa long to act.

Wick wrote briefly about the vote in his journal. Some historians say the Council never had a more important assembly.

True responsibility comes with the curse of self-awareness. Someone working at a convenience store won’t look back on any work day and think that events may define their legacy. If all goes well, this vote will be just one of many in my tenure. If even the smallest thing goes wrong, today will follow my name forever.

Unless an ambassador calls for a secret session, all Council votes are open to the public and broadcast live. We argue, often for hours, on the day’s issue. It is impossible to be fully prepared. This is why each ambassador is allowed a pair of assistants. No one can look up information, facts, and statistics faster than Lexi. As for Quest, he understands the traditions, cultures, and legacies of the races far better than me. In fact, he’s changed. The tiger even speaks for us, for Earth, and he speaks well.

I know that our success has been because of our teamwork. The other ambassadors may have more experience and more power, but they do not have the confidence to lean on their subordinates. I’m the one who gets to give the grandsons speeches. I’m the one who stands before the camera and champions freedom, democracy, and equality. But it is us three (a human, a Baar, and a Wex) that achieve through unity.

It was today that I needed Lexi and Quest more than ever. While the success or failure will sit fully with me, they cannot be blamed. The final choice was mine.

I don’t know why I feel a need to write this, but I must. If, for some reason, this journal becomes part of the history books, I want it to show that these two were true heroes. They made everything a possibility.

The proposal seemed fair enough. Ambassador Orsa recommended extra precautions against the Spx. After the armada almost lost to a few infected human ships, who could argue that?

“We should ask that all humans return to their home system until we can confirm the threat is contained,” is what she said. “The Otta can perform an examination that will guarantee humans are free of any possible infection.”

Damn her. How could she keep such a proposal secret. Typically, the ambassadors share their proposed laws, treaties, or rules well before the Council convenes. This way we can research and conduct initial conversation behind closed doors. She wanted this public. She wanted to have us answer her questions before the eyes of all the galactic races.

Fortunately, Kiki was quick to respond, “This is not a cure, only a bandage. Quarantining the humans will not solve the Spx problem. We need to discuss real initiatives that will help us combat this threat.”

“The threat only exists because of humans,” growled Byruin.

“We don’t know that,” responded Kiki. “This could be a new evolution of the Spx. They may show similar improved functionality with any race.”

“They only showed interest in infecting human vessels,” added Orsa. “You’re right. We must do more. I’ve talked about a unified military before, but we need time. We cannot make change while being held hostage to fear. Especially fear that can be contained.”

This is when I entered the conversation, “Have you even thought of the logistics of your proposal? Mandating that all humans return to our solar system? That could cripple human interests around the galaxy. What about our colonies and businesses on remote space stations? What about the humans who live here, on Daygone?”

Byruin grinned with surprise. Orsa must’ve kept him in the dark about this too. “The Rawca are more than happy to assist. We’ll gladly protect the human planet of Filo. That is, of course, until the quarantine is lifted.”

Trying to help, the new Gyben ambassador spoke up, “Of course the Gyben will be happy to assist financially. All remedies come with a cost.” Cinder’s sister rarely speaks at the official Council gatherings. She’s certainly come a long way over the last couple of months. When she first appeared before the Council, she literally clutched to my sleeve. She trusts me. Cinder said that if anything went truly bad to trust the human. I still don’t know what made him say that.

Of course, her eagerness to please only caused more harm than good. She nullified one of my strongest arguments. Who was going to pay for the financial costs of a quarantine of humanity?

“I’m shocked,” added the Yent. “How can Earth be against such safeguards? We all have the safety of the galaxy at heart. Even the Rawca struggled in combat against these amplified human pilots. Is that not so, ambassador?”

The hyena shook his head and begrudgingly agreed.

Arguments went on for hours. Even Lexi spoke at one point. I remember her words clearly. “What you’re asking is for a sacrifice, not just for our ambassador but for each and every human. This is a sacrifice that no other race would make. Humans are the youngest race to master star travel and here we are demanding the most from them. The Council is meant to protect newcomers, new explorers, people just like this.”

An eloquent argument. The sincerity and passion in her voice was mystifying. She almost stopped everything right there.

But Orsa was simply too clever and too quick. “You’re right,” she said. “This is not fair. I admit fear. I’m afraid. We’re all afraid. What we saw in that battle shows just how fragile we are. No bigger demand has ever been made of any race. This is why the Yent are committed to protecting human interests. I vow that my kind will do everything it can to assure this is not a prison. This is not your end, Earth. This is just the beginning of a better future for us all. A sacrifice? Yes, but what better cause could one suffer for?”

Byruin winced. A stronger bond between humans and Yent represents a true threat to the power of his race. “Let’s not pamper a cub for a needle prick. This is merely a vaccination, a duty that protects not just one, but all. The Rawca would gladly take on such a burden if it would help protect the glory of the Council. Without hesitation.”

Eventually, as the day grew long, Orsa called for a vote. The Council rarely delayed the final vote. All five ambassadors must agree to abstain for the proposal to wait until another day. Of course, if the vote failed, the law could not be brought up again for three years.

Kiki went first. “This is not a solution. A nightlight does not defeat the darkness. The costs of such a plan outweigh any minor perception of safety. The Otta vote no.”

Byruin went next. “The Yent promise praise. The Gyben promise payment. The Rawca promise protection. Humans have nothing to fear unless they wish to openly challenge everything this Council stands for. Earth loves to speak of peace for all. They proved their commitment. The Rawca vote yes.”

Cindy followed. “Yes, yes. If this proclamation passes, we promise financial assistance to protect all human businesses. While sincere, this commitment is far too big to be practical. Thus, the Gyben vote no.”

Normally the final vote belongs to the ambassador who proposed the law. However, Orsa broke with tradition and spoke before I. “This will not be easy, but what choice do we have? Look at the unity we see here, on this day. By a simple act of trust, Earth can bring all races closer together. Help us make the galaxy a safer place. The Yent vote yes.”

That left the final vote to me. I’ve never felt so exhausted. There seemed to be no good answer. Orsa and Byruin were right. Voting no would be a direct act of defiance against the Council. However, voting yes would put Earth in a very dangerous and vulnerable place.

I was seated. My hands were shaking. No one man should have such responsibility. The question was rather simple. Who are we? Who is the human race? Defiant or duteous? Strong or sacrificing? One or one of many?

I closed my eyes. Trying to stop the shaking, I began to flex my fingers, snapping them out and then curling back into a fist. Over and over, as if I was trying to grasp onto some invisible solution.

That’s when I felt it. Her touch. Lexi’s hand sneaks into my palm. Our eyes met. “Wick,” she whispered. “I trust you. We all do. Be our guiding light.”

She said it so softly, I’m sure no camera caught those words. Wow. What a gift she gave me.

I stood and spoke, “Everyone. The Mirj, Rawca, Yent, Wex, Lyfolight, Hikan, Baar, Otta, Fendle, and Kyshi. Earth understands your fear. We do. The Spx represent a true threat to all sentient life. All I ask is that you also understand our fear. What the Council demands of us is a burden like no other. Humans are not perfect. We are often vain, brash, righteous, and greedy. As individuals, we each struggle to be our best. However, together, we are truly great, we are truly grand. Sacrifice is something we understand.”

A hundred eyes, a hundred cameras, they all stared at me. The galaxy was listening. I still didn’t know what I was doing. My heart pounded, crashed against my chest like a caged beast. Did this speech even make sense?

Byruin boiled with angry.

Orsa showed true anticipation.

Cindy seemed wrapped in worry.

Quest brought confidence.

Kiki shared determination.

Lexi had a completely different look. She stared up at me with an expression I’ve never seen before. Serenity? No. Pride? No. Pity? Definitely not.

My god, at that point, I was still holding her hand. I didn’t even realize it.

Fearless. ‘Go for it!’ That’s what her eyes were saying. No matter what, she knew we’d make it work. She didn’t just trust me. That little Baar truly believed in me.

“We don’t have enough facts. We don’t even know how this will all work,” I said. “But, we do have faith. Above all else, humans share one common goal. We dream of peace. This is why, as the ambassador for Earth, I must abstain. We do not cast a vote.”

The crowd went crazy. Most cheered, some booed. The rules are clear. If the vote is (for whatever reason) a tie, then the final vote goes to the seven races not seated on the Council.

They will decide our fate.

### Chapter Twenty One

21 is a special number for Baar. Two become one. Also, if you tally the fingers of a couple, you’ll only reach 20. The extra one requires someone new, a birth, the start of a new count. If you’re familiar with novels from my kind, no other chapter matters.

I remember thinking about it when our fingers interlocked, when our palms touched, right before he kissed me. If they ever wrote the story of my life, I hoped this would be that single, important moment.

The reason for everything.

It started an hour earlier. The votes were in. The results arrived late. I found Wick alone in his office.

By chance, at that time, the edge of Wava blocked the sun. The result was a particularly golden light that silhouetted the planet and flooded through the station's windows. It felt like a sunset, reminding me of the only one we shared together, when he held me on an island.

He looked exhausted. His shoulders slumped as if they’d been carrying a heavy backpack for miles. His hair appeared more white. A finger slid back and forth across his top lip, either trying to keep him awake or distract his mind.

“Lexi.” Everything changed when he saw me. Still tired but far less defeated, his shoulders straightened and his eyes shined bright. “What a pleasant surprise. It’s getting late. I didn’t think I’d get a chance to see you again.”

The tone of his voice, full of joy and gratitude, caught be off guard. Did I give that to him? That boundless smile, was it really meant for the sight of me? The fur on my body bristled, as if I’d discovered some unexpected source of warmth in a cold winter place. “It’s hard being alone,” I said.

“Yes.” He motioned for me to take a seat. “How about a vacation? Once all this Spx stuff is sorted, of course. You, me, Quest. We need a break.”

Impossible. Ambassadors rarely got a day off, let alone time for leave. He knew that. Still, the thought was gorgeous and I shared in his delight. “Definitely! Where should we go? So many places I still need to see on Earth.”

“I got a cabin in the mountains,” he said. “I’ll take you there. I warn you: it’s a little rustic. Won’t be a lot of technology.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I replied. “I also have about eight places I want to show you on my homeworld. Polli Falls, the Coo Forests, and we need to eat at Makky’s.”

“All famous Baar tourist traps?”

“No.” I blushed. “Just places near where I grew up.”

“Lovely.” He stood sharply. I’d barely sat down. “A vacation back in time with Lexi. Perfect.” The human walk around his desk and headed to the side door, the one that lead to his private quarters. “Of course, we’ll also need to explore new locations too. Places none of us have been.”

“Where?” I asked.

As he passed through the door, I heard him call, “Come. Let me get you something to drink.”

“The votes came back.” I followed, stopping in the doorway, leaning against the frame.

“Was there someplace you wanted to go growing up? When you were a kid?” The golden light transformed his bedroom. The feeling of being on a space station vanished. We were back on Earth, in a small house, and if I looked out the windows, I’d see a field trapped in summer sunset. I could almost feel the breeze and smell the breath of growing grass.

“There was a zoo on the moon. All the exotic plants and animals they would’ve let get anywhere near our planet. Mom and Dad couldn’t understand.”

Wick unbuttoned and removed his shirt. He lingered for a moment, his back naked, looking out the window. “They were blind, right?”

“I just got the results.” I felt a need to deliver the news immediately. I didn’t want to ruin the moment, but I needed to get past it. “The Lyfolight and Baar voted against. The other five voted for. Orsa’s proposed quarantine has passed.”

He pulled on an old cotton t-shirt, one he brought from Earth. Faded, the white fabric matched the band logo on the back. Silvermist, the short-lived rock group focused on innovative guitar solos and duets. Never very popular. “When I was growing up,” he said, ignoring my news, “I always wanted to travel to outer space. My dream was to find something that no one had ever seen before. I didn’t want to be famous. I just wanted to be the first.”

“There’s still time,” I replied. “I always wanted to be an explorer. We can go steal a ship, head out now.”

He grabbed a soda from the fridge and handed it to me. “Who knows, maybe I’ll find it tonight.”

I looked at the red can. “Coke? They still make this? Last time I had this was back in the academy.”

“Coca-Cola. Been making it for hundreds of years. Always the same ingredients. I like that. How many people have tasted that flavor on a summer night? Traveling among the stars and still drinking it.” He added a goofy grin. “And, it kind of looks like you. Red and black, the can and soda.”

“Wow. So romantic. Never had someone compare me to a beverage before.” I pushed him playfully before opening the can. Most of the races with muzzles hate carbonated drinks. The bubbles tickle the nose. I like it.

“What would you compare me to?” he asked as he got himself a bottle of beer.

“Beer works,” I said. We moved to the couch by the large monitor. I hoped we would watch another movie together. “Looks nice; tastes kind of nasty. But, for some reason, everyone likes you.” Alcohol, that’s an Earth drink that the other races do adore. Fermentation wasn’t new, but no one went to the same extent as humans. They want to rot and drink everything.

“I thought you hated alcohol.” His grin framed the tip of the bottle.

“I don’t hate it. Just kicks my ass. A couple of sips and I’ll be drunk.” My laugh sounded too forced. “Trust me, you don’t want to hear the things I”ll say.”

“I kind of do.” The beer tilted in my direction. He looked so imperfect there. His hair swayed, slightly messy. The gold light added a haze that shined through the glass of the bottle and his eyes. The dusty scents of his old shirt and end-of-day sweat mingled. It was him, casual.

I took the bottle. “Umm.” I fought the feelings. I really did. Emotions that crashed against me. I knew he loved Kiki. His journal captured it. I saw how he closed his eyes, clinging to the last moment, each time she walked away. Tosco was right. I was obsessed. I wanted something that could never exist. More than anything, I wanted to see him like this, imperfect, unguarded, exposed. Every day, I wanted the truth of him.

’Damn it, Lexi. He’s just giving you a sip of his beer.’ I snatched the bottle, the glass clinking under my claws, and took a swallow. The rich flavor gave way to a bitter and somewhat slimy aftertaste. Alcohol might be the perfect analogy for life, something from all the rotting, a complex taste that sours but keeps you coming back for more. Too much and the whole thing will make you drunk and painfully unassuming.

“Tastes like spit,” I said, handing the drink back to Wick.

He laughed. “After drinking Coke, I imagine it would.”

I crossed my arms. “Whatever.” This wasn’t swimming under the sea. It wasn’t an adventure in the market. We weren’t floating weightless in space. This was just two friends sitting on a couch, chatting. How could this be that romantic moment that changes everything?

The next sip Wick took interrupted his smile. I’d never seen that expression before. Almost like he knew the answer to some riddle and he was enjoying watching me try to solve it. Sly. “Before you arrived,” he eventually spoke, “I received a call from a man named Tosco. Said he was your boss.”

“Ugly dude with scars? Yep.” I couldn’t help but be curt, “That’s him. I work for a spy agency. Got to answer to someone.”

There was that smile again. “He told me that he would need to recall you immediately. Of course, I told him that’s not possible. I need you. Now more than ever. Taking away my partner when we’re dealing with this Spx issue, that almost sounds like treason.”

“I bet he liked that.”

“Hated it! But, he’s good at hiding his anger. Gave a bunch of cryptic threats about the safety of Earth and protecting humanity. He also said something about blackmail.”

I instantly felt hollow, like someone had cut off my feet and let everything spill out. What did Tosco tell him? Was this the reason for Wick’s new smile? Tosco would do anything, even lie, to win. “Wick, I didn’t… you need… what…” I stammered, my brain unable to find the right thing to say.

“Then he tried another tactic.” Wick set the empty bottle down. “Apparently Baar can’t be trusted now. They don’t understand the human condition. He feared you might be ‘compromised’ and that I needed a human assistant.”

“I’d never betray you, Wick! I swear. It’s just that… I did…” What a mess. All my lies, all my trickery, all my hidden thoughts caught up to me. I simply didn’t know what to say. Tell him the truth? Then how do I explain why? Tell him more lies? But what if he knows something he isn’t saying? “Fuck!”

There was a gap between us on the couch. He sat at one edge, me at the other. Between us, my tail rested. For some reason, he felt a need to bat at it like a cat. I returned my tail to the same spot and he pushed it away again. It didn’t hurt. It just felt too playful. “Stop.”

“I love you spy types,” he said. “You’re just like everyone else. We all add complexity. The greatest horror for the modern mind is thought that things might actually be easy.” His fingers smacked the tip of my tail again.

I grabbed my tail and pulled it to my chest. “What the hell are you talking about?”

His hand slid along the couch before lifting slowly, like a wounded bird taking flight. His touch landed on my shoulder. “Lexi. Just talk to me. Tell me everything. Trust me.”

The light vanished. In an instant, Daygone entered the shadow of her planet. We were flooded with black, as if we’d be dropped into the thickest vat of ink. I called to the computer, “Turn on the lig—”

This large hand squeezed my small shoulder. “No. Just speak.”

Blind. There was no dim light for our eyes, the perfect darkness. His voice made me forget the world. “I don’t know if I can, Wick. There’s so much I need to say, but I don’t know. What if I say something wrong.”

“Just say it in your native tongue.” I felt him move closer. “I don’t know Baar.”

“Your automatic translator does.” The small chip embedded in the brain gives all sentient races a perfect understanding of alien languages.

“Too bad we can’t turn it off.”

“We can!” I grabbed the phone from my pocket. The light from the screen stabbed my eyes. “Most people don’t realize it, but there’s a small amount of extra space on those chips. It’s for updates, and if you put the right data there, it’ll trigger for about an hour.”

Then, with a tiny beep, the program was complete. He gently took the phone and turned off the light. “Did it work? Do you understand?”

Yes! Fortunately, I’d been trained to understand most human languages. I struggled, but I understood. “Yes, Wick. I understand. This feels so strange!” Of course, he had no idea what I was saying.

“Ha! Your language sounds so cheerful.”

I decided to confirm his inability. “Tosco has a secret military fleet that’s been taken over by the Spx.”

“Now that sounded a lot more serious. You sure you can fix this? I don’t want brain surgery.”

My hands were shaking. “Wick…”

Although he had no idea what I was saying, he could still feel my hesitation. “Now’s your chance. Tell everything.”

We were still in the dark, but I still clinched my eyes. “I love you!”

“Yeah!” he laughed. “That’s it. Get it all out.”

“Wick.”

“I recognize my name!” he said.

“I love you.” It felt so good. “I love you, I love you, I love you.” I never thought I’d get to say it to him. “At first, I thought you were some rich business man, you know, but you’re so much more. Your passion, your kindness, your curiosity, it all never stops.”

He put his arm on the back of the couch. I couldn’t help myself; I had to lean into his side.

“You’re unlike anyone I’ve ever met! A human? Who thought I’d ever feel that way about a human? Love really is blind! You look like a shaved dog, but I love it. I just want to touch all of you, feel your naked skin.”

“I really wish I knew what you were saying,” he said softly. “Keep going.”

“You don’t need Kiki. She’ll never love you as much as I do. She’s smart and graceful and rich. But I… I… I like watching movies with you. I like taking care of you. We make an unbeatable team. We’ll explore the galaxy together. One little Baar and her big hero.”

His arm dropped from the top of the couch, slid down slowly, settled over my shoulders. Was this really happening? We couldn’t see. He couldn’t understand. It felt like a dream. I pressed more into him. “Please, don’t let me wake up. Please, please, please. I want to stay like this forever.”

“Don’t cry,” he said.

I don’t remember the tears even starting. It was all so much joy and so much sorrow. “I read your journal.” Did this confession count? “Your words are beautiful to me. Your thoughts are precious.”

Each of his breaths lifted me slightly. His heart. I moved my hand to his chest so I could feel every beating. His rhythm was steady. Would it be so calm if he understood my ramblings?

“I forgive you, Lexi.” He flexed his arm, pulling me even closer. “No matter what you’ve done.”

No, no, no! Did he think I was crying because of some techery? It was so much more. “I never betrayed you, Wick! I couldn’t. I wouldn’t. I need you. You’re my missing piece.” The tears wouldn’t stop, no matter the resistance. I wanted him to hear the sincerity in my voice.

“I know you had orders.”

How quickly this became a nightmare. Finally, a chance to say everything I wanted and he couldn’t hear me. He couldn’t see me. He was deaf. He was blind. Was this my destiny? Was this my curse? A romantic coward. A forever dreamer. Not a love story, only the shadow of one.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I tried to pull away. “This is dumb. What a mistake. I’m a moron.”

He wouldn’t let me. “Not yet.” His finger traced through the fur on my cheek, stopping the tears.

How? This was impossible. How could he understand my feelings like this? “I love you,” I had to say it again. It felt so good. Maybe I could wait. The translators would reboot in about an hour. I could say it all again, even if it wasn’t for the first time.

“Be brave.”

This was it. This was my chance. My whole life I wonder what it would be like to be blind. Now I had to overcome it. Do it, you crazy, little Baar. Find someone to let him know that you love him.

My fingers trembled as they left the space over his heart. Up past this collar and beyond his neck, they rose. My touch traced the bottom of his chin before settling in the crest beneath his lower lip. It only took a little bit to guide him, turn his head, prepare him for my kiss.

I lifted myself. This would be it. His eyes, lost in the darkness, gave me no clues. The only clue I had was his breath. He exhaled sharply. Closer and closer, inch by inch, until suddenly I felt the edge of him near my lips. “Wick…”

He ended the gap. With a small push on the small of my back, he finished the journey. We kissed.

Fortunately, he didn’t share my inexperience. His lips caressed and coaxed mine with a tenderness before his tongue tickled the space just above my teeth. A little too eager, I clung to him. My fingers traveled through the hair above his ears before meeting at the back of his head.

The kiss continued, highlighted by his brief touching of our tongues, until the death of our shared breath. We parted only for a necessary moment. Then, when our lips touched again, his hand used the distraction to sneak over my hip. He grabbed my rear, gave it a strong squeeze, a desire finally freed.

My lips somehow escaped to his chin and then down his neck. I felt his pulse, now fully raging. He lifted my shirt off. His fingers slid smoothly over my sides, through my fur, his thumbs tickling the boundaries of my breasts before moving up my arms. “Soft,” he whispered. I wore no bra, hardly ever did.

I took his hands and guided them to my naked chest. Again, I felt his lust uncaged. There was no mistaking it. He’d wanted this just as much. I gasped as he founded never-before-touched parts of me.

A sudden push, bold, forced me onto my back. He moved over me, straddled me. I heard the sound of cotton on his skin as he removed his shirt. His kisses soon rained down on me, tracing my collar before trickling down my chest. His hand undid my pants. My hands undid his.

Each movement followed a harmony. Without our sight, there were few cues, but we aligned perfectly. A flawless fit. It felt like my forearm was made to slip beneath his. His hips sat squarely over mine. His weight, slightly larger, kept me pleasantly pinned.

He whispered my name. I sighed his.

He seemed determined to get me fully naked. He pulled on my pants and panties, but he was clearly unfamiliar with how to deal with my tail. But, rather than have it be a hurdle, he insisted. Wick lifted me up and yanked on the final piece of clothing, forcing it past my rear, down my legs, and over my ankles.

I lay bare beneath him. He continued to show hunger. His hands flowed over my body, exploring every inch. I encourage it. I wanted him to know it. I extended each touch with an arch of my body. It all belonged to him.

He stroked my shoulders, arms, legs, back, chest, and tail. It felt like he was trying to memorize the feeling of me. Between each segment, he paused for a lingering kiss. Finally, his touch reached my tightly closed knees. He coaxed softly. I yielded to him. This touch moved slowly up my inner thigh, firm enough to not tickle, slow enough to tease. He ended at the point, at the top of the V of my legs.

My tremble was so intense, it told him what he hoped for. He was my first. Rather than speed up, somehow he found a way to tame his fire. He slowed for me, making sure I settled before each deeper touch.

I whispered one word, “Olo.” Even if his translator had been working, it wouldn’t have understood this. Olo is a word that you’ll never hear a Baar say. It is a special word only spoken in private with your lifetime lover. Every Baar dreams of the day he or she will say it. That was my day. “My olo.”

Wick stood briefly, only to remove his pants.

When he returned, crawling back over me, he gently placed himself between my legs and aligned our hips. He waited. I knew why. Our chests were separated by a finger width, yet we could still feel each other's hearts. All the passion filled him with fire. I felt small drops of sweat on his smooth skin. His scent, like rain on gravel, filled my brain.

He was waiting for my final permission.

I raised my tail up between my legs, tickling his eager sex. That was all he needed. He lowered all his weight on top of me, and, with a tender thrust, he combined our bodies.

Our wordless conversation continued long into the night. We said things that could have never been spoken; we explored and shared things that neither of us could have felt before. These sensations only existed at the combination of him and me. Two strange bodies that somehow fit perfectly. The puzzle had no more missing pieces.

When we finally finished, our bodies completely spent, he continued to lay on me. I had to say it once more, “I love you.”

He took a deep breath. “I finally understand.”

Pinned, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the strongest feeling. I laid completely under him. My entire world existed there, beneath that man.

Wick.

He wasn’t my ceiling.

He was my sky.

My beautiful, truthful, everlasting blue sky.

### Chapter Twenty Two

I woke underneath his arm, my back pressed against his naked chest. The lightning routine began again in the morning, filling the room with the simulated glow of morning. The bed felt tireless. As he stirred, Wick continued his exploration of me. He journeyed to my fringes, tracing the tips of my ears, my shoulder blades, and the bones of my hips. I did the same for him, holding and massaging his free hand.

“That feels good,” he said, his words still shaking off slumber.

“You write in that journal a lot,” I replied. “Must wear out your fingers.”

“You have a strange mark here,” he said, tapping the base of my neck. “A little bit of white. Have you seen it before?”

I shook my head.

“Looks like a circle,” he traced it, “with a line through the middle.”

“Sounds like love,” I said. Just as humans use a heart, and Otta use a whirlpool, the Baar use an imperfect circle to symbolize love. A circle represents infinity and only by breaking it in half can you see that two parts can make up one eternity.

“I like it.”

I tried to turn, tried to face him, but he put a hand firmly on my shoulder. “Not yet. Just a little longer. Stay like this.”

I remembered the passion from last night, our conversation in the dark. What was the source of his desire, his relentless need to memorize me? Was this the start of something new, or was he desperate to remember everything from a moment that would never repeat. Would I ever have another morning as flawless?

“What are we going to do, Lexi?”

What a loaded question. Was he talking about our relationship? The situation with the Spx? I chose something more naive and far more innocent. I simply answered like a couple might when waking on the weekend. “How about a road trip? Let’s go somewhere we’ve never been. There’s a botanical garden near the Coo Forests. We could have breakfast there and then journey into the wilderness. Do you like hiking?”

He gave the smallest laugh, a single breath that rushed out of his nose, before kissing the back of my head. “You’re amazing. Yes, I do love hiking. I do it whenever I visit the cabin. Pack a snack and then just wander. I usually go alone. To think.”

“About what?”

“Not work. I like to imagine what would worry me if I lived a different life. What would I ponder if I was a fisherman, or a pilot, or a wizard? I solve problems that I’ll never have.”

“Sounds romantic. I imagine that’s why you can relate to everyone.”

“I never thought about it like that.” He suddenly grabbed my tail. I’d been twitching it without much thought. “This tickles.” He wedged it between his thighs. “Does that hurt?”

It did, but only a little. “Feels nice, actually.”

“We could go see a movie in the evening. I like the theaters with virtual reality.” He was caught up in the fantasy too. There was no VR theater on Daygone. Most races got motion sickness from viewing the world through a headset. “Do you like popcorn? I love popcorn.”

“I never had popcorn until I visited Earth. I like how the name describes the act of making it. Imagine if you called steak a killcow?”

“Eggs could be cracknheat.”

We laughed. The feeling of our bodies wobbling together made it feel so much more delightful and personal. I knew the sound of so many laughs but only the feeling of his.

Wick took one deep breath, squeezed me tight, and then let it all escape in a sigh. He returned to his previous question, “What are we going to do?”

“Escape?” I pushed myself back against him, hoping that maybe I could somehow hide forever in the space beneath his arm, right beside his heart. “We still got our plan.”

“A small cabin above a valley called Kalay on a plant named Audin.”

He remembered! Unfortunately, that wasn’t the answer to his question. I didn’t have to wait long for him to get to the point, “That’s not what I meant, Lexi. How’re we going to deal with the Spx?”

“You made the right choice,” I said. “You gave a voice to all the races. An ambassador has never done that before.”

“It would’ve been easy to vote no.” He finally pulled away from me, taking a seat at the edge of the bed. “Then today would be very much like any other.”

I couldn’t help myself, reached out, and softly touched his naked back. “No day can be like today.”

“Did I do the right thing?”

“Yes. I think so. Don’t worry, people love you. Just let Earth know this is temporary. For the greater good. You’re showing the very best part of the human spirit.”

He glanced back, his eyes dawning just over his shoulder. “What’s that?”

“Sacrifice.”

I couldn’t see his mouth, but I saw his smile. “And everyone says you’re a pessimist.”

“More of a demanding dreamer,” I said.

The smallest earthquake went through the bed as he stood. Among all the pieces of clothing on the floor, he found his old shirt. He turned back to the sight of my naked body on his bed. I quickly tried to strike a sexy pose, crossing my legs and wiggling my tail across the sheets. It must have looked ridiculous.

He tossed the shirt into my face. “You might as well keep this. No one else has ever seen me in it.“

“It’ll reach my knees.” When I finally managed to pull the fabric from my face, I saw him still standing there: naked, shoulders relaxed, head tilted, cheeks lifted, eyes completely closed.

“Lexi?” he said, unable to see me. “Are you still there?”

“Always.”

He hesitated a moment longer, stayed in his personal dark, before letting his eyes slowly flutter open. “Always.”

He headed off to shower and start the day. Orsa’s quarantine now had a mandate from the stars, now it was up to Wick to convince humanity to follow.

The next day, I found a tiny escape back to his bedroom. There I found his journal and his entry about our night.

I hated this journal at the start. Writing with a pen is painful, my fingers easily tire. Mistakes must be accepted or crossed out, leaving a permanent scar. There’s no distraction, no searching back, and only one direction. Great discipline is required to finish what you start and keep coming back to that chore.

It’s hard to always push forward.

Now, months later, I wonder how I ever lived without this. I find myself paying attention to the events of my day and then languishing late into the night with the most important moments of my life. I adore this flawed, amorphic record of my life.

Still, through all these pages, I’ve avoided one subject: her. It is not because of a lack of interest. Since our first encounter, I’ve found myself engrossed in daydreams of her. At first, I thought it was a fascination with her perspective, like when you find a new blog online that chronicles the adventures of someone a bit quirky. You become preoccupied with her days, eager to see what choices she’ll make. Subconsciously, you hope to find her secret, the source of her courage, the thing that let her dare to live a different life.

I haven’t written about her because I’m afraid. I’m not sure what to think, what to feel — now more than ever. This journal is a record of my existence. Every sentence is a fact of either my days or my mind. The distance between my thoughts and my pen is short and very steep. Once something is written, the idea is fully shaped and permanent. I could cross out words or tear out pages, but this would not undo the creation.

In short, I hold a chisel and stand before the barren boulder of my mind.

Maybe I don’t want the daydreams to end. I want those silly shifting thoughts to be anything but lucid. I want every possibility to stay possible. What if she stopped being the reason… the reason I’m excited for the blank pages.

But something made the choice for me. Something deep inside has made every part of this journal about her. I’m not talking about the words or the writing. Something more physical.

The corners of the pages, the ones I often ruffle as I chase a thought, now remind me of the feeling of her fur. The smell of the paper, when I press it against my cheek, mimics her scent. The only thing missing is the tiniest hint of cedar. Then there is the divide, the bending that goes right down the middle of this book, the separation of two pages, where words can’t exist. For some reason, this reminds me of her lips. I run my finger along it.

See? I can’t escape. Every page, no matter the content, is now her.

But is this love? Infatuation? Lust? A purpose? I guess only time will tell. How come I never felt this way before? Never for one of my kind. Am I some sort of freak, or just lonely? Desire is the most unique part of us. I think it was Yorimoto who said, “We are more defined by what we resist rather than what we accept.“ I have resisted my feelings for her long enough.

Yet, I cannot tell her. Not yet. Not now, with the Spx. These next few months will be tough, and I need her focus. I need her skills. I need her help. I can’t let us, either of us, be distracted by personal thoughts of love. Earth cannot see me committed to anything other than humanity. A whiff of bias could shatter everything. So I must keep my distance, for now.

We just need to survive, together.

Then, when this is all done, I’ll find the courage to tell her. I’ll leave everything behind and give this a chance. We’ll forever find reasons to look forward to the next blank page.

There is no escape.

That night, the one we shared without light, I couldn’t understand her words. What a strange sensation, losing that automatic translation. I remember the initial fear. What if I never understood her again? Then I realized the solution. We simply made a language meant for two.

Every time I close my eyes, I relive that night. I sense her. Always there, just a few finger lengths away, in my perfect dark. Like a star that has disappeared into the black, waiting. Waiting, just waiting, for me to reach out for her.

Always. Lexi.

### Chapter Twenty Three

The Spx were originally discovered by the Hikan while exploring a remote asteroid field over eight thousand years ago. Those crazy birds actually thought the parasitic, robotics snakes were some sort of religious manifestation. Extremely clever at using the memories of their hosts, the Spx acted as if they were messages from the gods. The Hikan embraced the robots, letting them replicate and expand throughout their upper classes.

It took a young Hikan prophet, Drezon Blackbeak, to transform public opinion. This led to a massive holy war. While the nobility had greater resources, the hosts were muted by the Spx. Slower in mind and body, the Hikan eventually eradicated the outbreak, but not before tearing their empire apart. They went from the pinnacle of the galaxy to near extinction. Many historians believe that without the Spx, the Yent would’ve never gotten the opportunity to take over as the dominant race among the stars.

A proper investigation into the parasitic robots didn’t occur until an outbreak occurred among the Otta. While they were unable to determine the origins of the Spx, they did come to several important conclusions. First, the Spx act as if connected to a hive mind. While they are unable to share detailed information across large distances, they all seem to share common goals. This may be due to their programming. Unfortunately, it is nearly impossible to decipher the code that drives the mechanical minds of the Spx. They follow a very simple routine, much like the basic behavior of a mosquito, until merging with a sentient life form. Then, somehow, their programming shifts and their true intelligence appears. There’s something in us that completes them.

The second important conclusion by the Otta: there is no cure. Once infected, a host cannot be safely separated from the parasite. The Spx hooks into the spinal column and then into the brain. Removing the Spx results in instant brain death for both the living and robotic.

The Otta even tried to reason with the Spx. Why couldn’t they peacefully coexist? When asked, the Spx gave a chilling reply, “All life threatens the eternal silence of entropy.”

The last great Spx outbreak almost started a war between the Wex and Rawca. Fortunately, the Council intervened and prevented disaster. Using sophisticated mathematical models and simulations based on historical outbreaks, the Otta were able to locate and destroy the last remaining nests. At least that’s what we all thought. The Spx were extinct, until some poor human researchers found a few hidden away at Tyoh outpost.

The quarantine of humans was slow. Wick was right, the logistics were a nightmare. He gave an impassioned speech that inspired his people, but no amount of motivation was going to make moving millions of humans back towards Earth easy.

Still, everything seemed quiet. Their sacrifice gave humans new popularity throughout the galaxy. In the month following the announcement of the quarantine, human-related culture became all the rage. Yent nobility started to wear fashion inspired by Earth designers. Demand for human history and classic literature spiked among the Otta. The Wex youth became obsessed with the Soul of Sol, devouring the music and pop culture of earthlings. Lyfolight even started giving their cubs human names.

This newly-found praise also helped Wick make great strides with the Council. Laws were passed to match many of Earth’s most important philosophies, such as freedom of speech, equality, and environmental protection.

Tosco’s worries were wrong. Humans weren’t becoming trapped. They were being embraced. All thanks to Wick’s bold move to put his trust in the Council and all the sentient races. I thought it might work out, until Filo.

Outside of their home solar system, Earth only had one major colony on the planet of Filo. The Rawca quickly moved in their battleships to ‘assist’ with human withdrawals. Fortunately, the Yent, Gyben, and Otta fleets quickly followed. It turned out that evacuation of an entire planet was nearly impossible. Fortunately, with fears of a possible Spx outbreak declining, the exodus might not be needed. Maybe we didn’t need a quarantine after all.

We were wrong. Tosco merely waited. He waited for the Gyben to send through the financial support they promised. He waited for all the major fleets to arrive at a single location. He waited for us to let our guard down.

This is when the Spx attacked.

Wick and I were resting in the ambassador lounge when it started. The wisps started to appear as the light of the sun slowly vanished behind Wava. We sat at opposite edges of a couch in the middle of the seating area. I put my tail on the cushion that separated us and, when he was sure no one was looking, Wick would playfully bat it off.

I’ll never forget what he started to say, right before our lives were interrupted, “Chicken teriyaki. I can’t stop thinking about this chicken teriyaki place near my old office on Earth. It’s trillions of light years from here, but I’d give anything to take you there right now.” Interrupted? No, that’s not the right word. It was the last thing he said before our lives were shattered.

Byruin dropped himself between us. My poor tail barely escaped in time. He put a laptop on the coffee table before us. It only took a moment to realize it was a live feed from Filo.

“The Spx have attacked,” he said. “They’re charging right into our fleets.”

I’d seen a lot of footage from ship battles during the war with the Rawca. In fact, I’d experienced a few firsthand. GAIA sent us deep into enemy space to upload viruses to satellites and command vessels. The idea was that one ship wouldn’t be noticed during the chaos of battle. Unfortunately, human fighter ships aren’t made for small Baar. I remember bouncing around the copilot seat as my daring pilot weaved us through explosions.

No battle compared to what I was now watching on Byruin’s screen. The scale was immense. The combined fleets of the Council tried to spread out, but many were too late. Explosions chained through the destroyers and carriers.

“Stupid!” shouted the hyena. “All posturing. Our fleets kept moving closer and closer to the planet, like a bunch of cubs trying to be first in line. Damn Yent. Strategic mistakes for political stakes.” I felt the vibration of his growl.

“Was it the human fleet?” asked Wick.

“No. A different one. See?” Byruin tapped a few buttons and the view switched focus to the human vessels. They were being attacked too.

“We pulled all our ships back,” said Wick. “Where did the Spx get these? Are you sure they’re human?”

“Yes,” said the Rawca. “It is a bunch of ships we’ve never seen before, but the heat signatures of the pilots are human. You have such low body temperatures.”

“Did they build new ships? This fast?” asked Wick.

A voice came from behind the couch, “Perhaps they were already made.” Orsa stood behind us, watching the screen over our shoulders. “All races have secret research and development facilities.”

Wick thoughtlessly muttered, “Essex.” I saw him try to give me a quick glance around the massive frame of the Rawca between us. “That’s impossible, right?”

Orsa answered for me. “Spx gain the knowledge of those they infect. Only need one with sensitive information.”

“Look!” Byruin pointed at the screen. “What kind of ships are these?”

A small group of human fighters were cutting through the allied squadrons. They looked like normal attack spaceships with hundreds of tiny metallic spheres orbiting around them. I was reminded of the drones that mindlessly followed Cinder. The spheres would move in reaction to a threat, blocking blaster fire or racing out to detonate an approaching missile. They’d even lash out at the cockpits of Rawca ships that got too close.

“Strykers.” I heard unfamiliar distress in Wick’s voice, “An experimental design created by my old company. Originally we investigated drone fighters, but the distances were too vast for remote control. Then we looked into AI, but it was never fast enough and sometimes attacked our assets. We did, however, find a halfway point. We could let copilots control auxiliary pods that followed their ships. Problem was, to do it efficiently, you had to process too much information. No one could do it. The project was a failure.”

Bryuin interrupted. “Did you hear that?” The hyena turned up the volume on his laptop. The chatter between the command officers running the Rawca ships could be heard. One phrase was being mutter over and over, “The Mithonighus. We lost the Mithonighus.” The Rawca changed the view of his video feed to focus on a massive explosion in high orbit above the planet Filo.

Even Orsa’s voice was beginning to show signs of panic. “The Mithonighus is one of the four Rawca dreadnoughts. Has one ever been destroyed before?”

Byruin answered with a single word, “No.” The dreadnought-class battleship was the crowning achievement of the Rawca military. The concept was simple: make a ship so massive that standard weapons couldn’t hurt it. The outer layer is almost ten miles of twisted metal designed to be blown off. Pilots leaving the hangers navigate a maze to even reach the battlefield. The only flaw is that the behemoths require a vast amount of resources to build and maintain. They are also incredibly slow. During the war, Earth never managed to defeat one. The humans kept on the offense simply to force the Rawca to use them for defense.

“Impossible!” Byruin slammed his hand on the table. “How?”

“Instant-distance bombs,” Wick had the answer, explained with his somber tone. “Adapting the technology used for faster-than-light travel, my company was able to build a bomb that could be teleported instantly across a large distance. Past miles of armor. We never used it in the field. The cost was too expensive. Fifty billion for a single explosion.”

“What about Helix?” asked Orsa.

Wick stood sharply. “How do you know about that?”

“The war between humans and Rawca threatened us all, ambassador.” The deer’s calm demeanor had returned. “Our spy agencies monitored both of you closely. We don’t know what they are exactly, but your kind had three top secret projects. Helix, Dropper, and Onyx.”

There were in fact four endgame weapons being built by Earth, trump cards to be used if the war ever took a turn for the worse. Helix could punch a massive hole in the atmosphere of the planet, letting the unblocked sun and radiation wreck havoc on the surface. Dropper was DNA-level virus that could be used for targeted assassinations. Onyx utilized artificial intelligence to turn warships against each other. The one she didn’t know about, the one I only knew by name, was Silvermist. It was by far the most secret.

Wick tried to speak but stopped. He moved behind the couch and looked at the video feed again, probably hoping things would somehow get better. “Is this real?”

“Yes.” I had the same thought. Maybe this was just some elaborate hoax to get Wick to confess something. Unfortunately, it only took me a few seconds to confirm everything on my pocket computer.

“Helix and Dropper take far too long to deploy. We never finished Onyx. Besides, all these weapons are kept safe on Mars. Inactive and locked until my company receives official word to deploy.” Wick shook his head. “A final safeguard.”

“Interesting,” said Orsa. “But who has the key?”

Wick ignored her. “Byruin, can you talk to your commanding officers? Tell them to spread out and try to flank the Spx. You need to push them together. In close proximity, human ships lose much of their automated system.”

“I’ve sent word to our vessels,” I said, typing messages on my pocket machine. “Looks like the enemy only has about twenty battleships. Should be easy to corral.”

Another voice joined the conversation, “I’ve asked Nylo to send similar orders to our ships.” It was Kiki. “I’m hearing about fifty percent losses on our side.”

I glanced over my shoulder and watched the Otta wrap her arm around Wick’s shoulder. I don’t know if he even felt it. His eyes darted back and forth, as if he was wandering through a dark forest, desperately searching for a way out.

“We’re pushing them back,” said Byruin, “but at great loss. The Spx ships move with such precision. We should consider retreat.” I’d never heard fear in the voice of a Rawca before. “We can’t lose everything.”

 “Retreat?” said Kiki. “Then there will be nothing to protect the surface of Filo. There are over three million civilians in that colony.”

“Giving the Spx that many resources seems like a bad strategy,” added Orsa.

“Doesn’t matter how many soldiers they have,” argued Byruin, “if you have no army to stand against them.”

I got the word first on my personal computer. “The Collion is lost.” The Yent flagship had just suffered critical damage. It wasn’t a huge tactical loss, but the ship was one of the oldest and most decorated ships in the entire Yent armada.

“Retreat,” said Orsa, her tone suddenly becoming hollow.

“We have no choice,” said Byruin. “I’ll send word.”

“Not so fast, my friends.” Someone else approached. “Aren’t you forgetting a few allies?” It was Cinder. We’d later learn that he’d been given his position back after his sister’s promise of trillions to help the human quarantine.

“New ships defolding,” I said. “Initial reports say it’s… pirates?”

Cinder explained, “We need to quarantine all humans, even the outlaws. Surprisingly, the human captains were agreeable, if I provided them with some of the latest technology from our police forces.”

Kiki got it first, “EMP devices. Pirates are already good at disabling ships.”

“And chaos,” added Byruin. “Look, they’re diving right into the middle of the Spx battleship. They’re disabling them.”

“It won’t be for long,” said Wick. “Their bio-organic computers will come online in a minute. Also…” he didn’t finish that sentence. I knew what he was thinking. This wasn’t all the ships from the Essex research facility. There were several key, and very deadly, pieces missing.

“That should be enough time,” yelled the Rawca. “Order all ships to attack.”

“I’m not done,” said bat. “Humans are always eager. We have a few other guests arriving.”

Byruin jumped between video feeds on his computer. The ships appeared with the usual shimmer of faster-than-light travel. One, five, ten, forty, hundreds appeared. The grand carriers for the Mirj, the talon fighters of the Hikan, the repair ships of the Lyfolight, the destroyers of the Fendle, and the shield frigates of the Kyshi, all came to join the Council’s armada. There was even a few ships from the peaceful Wex.

“They’ve come to help,” said Cinder. He stood beside Wick and put his hand on the human’s back. It wasn’t just ships that had arrived to provide support. The entire lounge had gathered behind that couch, centered around the images on Byruin’s screen. Waiters, cooks, dignitaries, assistants, they all huddled closed. All the races of the galaxy, elbow-to-elbow and tail-to-tail. Among them drifted the drone lights. It was a moment of unity that the galaxy had never seen before.

Too bad it wasn’t enough.

The sound of excitement came from the most unlikely place. Orsa exclaimed, “The Spx are retreating!” The enemy ships began emergency procedures to begin enfolding. They were entering faster-than-light travel to escape.

The crowd cheered. “That’ll show those parasites,” one said. “You can’t beat the Mirj,” said another. “Let’s finish this!”

His voice was almost lost, “Tell your ships to pull back.” Wick then shouted, “They have to get back! Tell your ships to—“

It was too late. After about half of the Spx ships slipped away, the remaining ones detonated. This wasn’t the normal self-destruct that one would expect from a starship’s reactor. This is much bigger. No sound, just a flash of blue light and the majority of our remaining fleet disappeared.

“The Angles Bomb,” muttered Wick. “A momentary sun. He didn’t finish it, I thought.”

One of the crowd asked the obvious question, “Did we win?”

The image of a Rawca general appeared on Byruin’s screen. “Ambassador. The fleet has experienced seventy-one percent losses, including the Mithonighus.”

“The fleet sent by Earth is down to just four ships,” I added. “Three destroyers, one carrier.”

 Kiki’s assistant managed to push his way through the crowd. Nylo whispered something in her ear. The Otta reacted instantly. “They want to do what? Why would they attack the human ships?”

The officer on Byruin’s laptop provided an answer, “There was so much chaos. The Spx could’ve boarded one of the human battleships.”

I interjected, “They were fighting the Spx just as hard as you. We lost just as many ships.”

“Can we risk it?” asked Orsa.

“Yes!” I shouted. “We can quarantine the ships, check all the crew for infection.”

“Filo,” said Kiki. “Can we confirm that no enemy ships reached the surface of the planet?”

“The satellites are all still online,” said Nylo. “We can confirm that, but there’s no way to check all the data from the ship battle.”

“What if someone on the ship is infected?” asked Orsa. “They could make a break for the planet.”

Byruin curled his fingers into fists and pounded them against his thighs. “We can’t rick it. We have no choice.”

The commanding Rawca officer, “Confirmed. Preparing to attack remaining human vessels.”

“Wait!” I yelled. “Wick, what do we do?”

The crowd took a step back, a small gap formed around the only human. He looked like a scarecrow, a fabrication of an empty man filled with little more than discarded stuff. It took a moment for him to recover. “Lexi, can you put me in touch with the captains on our remaining ships?”

I looked at my pocket computer. “Not with this. I could go grab my laptop.”

“There’s no time!” said Byruin. There was honest pain in his voice.

“Can you use the ambassador’s machine?” Wick asked. Our eyes meet for the briefest moment. He was on the verge of cracking, but his glance gave me strength and permission.

I put my hand on Byruin’s shoulder. He stood sharply, as if stung by a bee. “You won’t be able to access anything without—“

It only took me a few buttons presses to gain the access I needed. I then ran a few simple commands to reroute the communication system connected to the Rawca fleet. Normally, data feeds took forever to travel the distances between worlds, but military vessels use a quantum network made up of binary sister particles. It meant we could talk to our ships in realtime.

“That’s an Rawca military laptop,” said Nylo. “How did she break in that fast?” The security on ambassador computers is state-of-the-art. Fortunately, I’d already taken over Byruin’s machine months ago.

“Can you hear me?” I asked.

Four images appeared on the screen, one in each corner. It was video feed from the bridges of the four remaining human ships.

“This is Captain Wesley of the Entropy reporting.” An older man with white hair.

“Captain Yeguris of the Yesteryear with Executive Officer Huntley.” A pair of humans with matching blue eyes.

“Captain Farrell here.” The youngest of the four.

“Broadway reporting, Captain Sheyang.” A human with a serious tone.

I answered, “Captains, this is Daygone station. Ambassador Warwick Stone would like to speak with you.”

“Hope it is to congratulate us,” said the young Captain Farrell.

Wick moved back to the couch and took a seat directly in front of the laptop. “Gentlemen, this is Ambassador Stone. Confirmation code for today is whiskey alpha foxtrot tango.”

“Ambassador.” The captains saluted.

“At ease,” said Wick. “Who is the lead?”

“I’m acting fleet commander now,” said the older Wesley. “Admiral Heysha was lost. Eighty percent casualties reported throughout our operational fleet. Enemy has retreated. Filo is safe.”

“Thank you,” said Wick. “We were watching the video. You all fought bravely.”

“Sir, I can see you’ve got company,” said one of the other captains. The crowd still gathered behind the couch.

Wick hesitated for a moment. “We’re not alone. Captains, any boarding attempts by the Spx reported?”

“We’ve suffered heavy damage on the Broadway. It’ll take us a while to sort it out. No boardings by enemy combatants reported,” said Sheyang.

It was Wesley, the oldest, that got it first. He clinched his eyes before speaking, “Comms officer Marcus, please notify all fighters to return to their carriers immediately.”

Captain Farrell interrupted, “It was chaos. The enemy charged in fast. Felt like a crazed fox dropped in a chicken pen. But no boardings were reported.”

Wick took a deep breath, holding it for as long as possible before speaking. “The concern is if a boarding did occur. Crew on your ships may be infected.”

“We’d know!” protested Yeguris, the one with blue eyes. “Wouldn’t we?”

“No, the ambassador is right,” said Huntley, his executive officer. “We need to shut down and prepare for an examination of the entire ship and crew.”

Captain Wesley continued with his command, “How long until all fighters have returned?”

A voice off-screen, “Several fighters are disabled. Recovery crews are enroute. Estimating three hours until everyone is back onboard.”

The elder captain replied, “Tell all disabled pilots to initiate emergency ejection. We can recover the wreckage later. Getting all the crew back is top priority. I need this completed in ten minutes.”

Wick almost relaxed, then Byruin’s hand settled on his shoulder. “We can take care of it, Warwick. Just give us the word.”

“A Rawca?” said captain Farrell. “What’s that bloody dog yapping about? Take care of it?”

“I’m not going to skirt around the issue,” said Wick. “Captains, the allied fleet feels that the risk of infection among human battleships is too great. They—“

“They want to kill us?” asked Yeguris. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Insane!” added Farrell. “We fought just as hard. We’re not infected.”

“Calm down,” said Huntley. “We can do this systematically. We’ll examine each crew member for signs of Spx.”

“An infection could already be spreading,” said Sheyang.

The older captain Wesley spoke again, “Fighters and repair crews are starting their final boardings. All ships, disable all external communication except for this call with Ambassador Stone.”

The captains began arguing among themselves.

“Why?”

“They want to gag us. So we can’t protest.”

“I’m contacting fleet command. They should have a say in this.”

“You will do no such thing. Disable external communications, that’s an order.”

“Just give us time to examine the crew. That’s all we ask.”

“You think the Rawca will give us that chance? I bet they already have their missiles locked onto us.”

“You’re right. Scans are showing active targeting from the Rawca. And the Yent. Even the Otta.”

“The Otta? Why would they be targeting us?”

“You saw what just happened. How many battleships did the Spx have? Fifteen? Twenty? The alliance had almost three hundred.”

“I’m not just going to lay down and die.”

“You’re just going to attack the Rawca and Yent? Then they will really think we’re infected.”

“Better to die fighting, right?”

“Just let us contact central command.”

“Filo. What about the planet?”

There came a sober pause. I felt a pain in my hand. Wick was holding it tight. I’m not sure when he grabbed on. “We’ve confirmed that the planet is safe,” said Wick. “However, there is still a possibility of infection originating from your ships.”

The captains continued their quarrell.

“Just shoot any ship heading to the surface. That’s easy.”

“What if one got through? Just imagine.”

“Then what? They wipe out the entire planet?”

“My god.”

“This is insanity. What if we destroyed all our vessels? Locked ourselves on the carrier until we could confirm no infection.”

“If we miss one, if one of these Spx escapes detection, they could trigger an infection later.”

“Don’t they need more of their kind? This isn’t a virus. We could scan for their life signs, eradicate all on board.”

“They’re robots. Your scans wouldn’t be able to separate them from any of the computer systems.”

“They could be spreading through the ship now.”

“This is crazy. Are we really talking about killing ourselves?”

“You want the Rawca to do it for us?”

Wick’s voice silenced them all, “I’m sorry. We saved millions of lives on Filo. No one will forget this battle. We’ll always remember your sacrifice. I know, what we’re asking for is unreasonable, unfair, unbearable but we have no other choice. The galaxy is afraid. I’m afraid. This isn’t an enemy that wants to conquer us. The Spx want to erase us. They will take everything, make it theirs. Humans won’t just be puppets, they’ll be the mechanism that heralds disaster to all life.”

It was the oldest captain that responded first, “Orders acknowledged, ambassador. Beginning procedures to commence with self destruct.”

“What? Are you serious, Wesley? Let’s just let the Rawca do it,” said Farrell.

“We can’t have Earth see allied ships attacking us,” said Wick. “It would ruin trust.”

The shoulders of the youngest captain slumped. “Bridge, begin preparations for self-destruction.”

“Shouldn’t we give the crew warning?” asked Huntley, the executive officer.

“I wouldn’t want to know. Remember to override the ship-wide alert,” said Yeguris, the captain with blue eyes.

“No!” shouted Huntley. “I’m not going to die. Not like this.”

His captain responded, “That’s a direct order. Ambassador Stone has the same rank as a one-star admiral. We’re destroying the ship.”

“I have to warn the crew!” Huntley disappeared off screen, quickly followed by Yeguris. There was the sounds of a scuffle and then a gunshot. A few moments later, the captain returned to the camera. The grim look on his face was having trouble holding back tears.

“Please let the record show that Huntley always served with honor,” he said. “SS Yesteryear preparing for self-destruct.”

Sheyang spoke next, “Maybe we could let the crew send final messages to loved ones?” He answered his own question, “No. It would plant the seed of fear on our other ships. If we’re going to win, we all have to believe success is a possibility. The Broadway starting self-destruct.”

Captain Wesley was the last to speak, “It has been an honor serving with all of you. Don’t let our sacrifice be in vain. Promise me, Ambassador. Promise me that you’ll protect us all.”

Wick choked out a response, “Yes, I promise. You’re all heroes, true heroes.”

Then, with only moments left to live, the captains all saluted. They stared, eyes forward, unable to hide the fear that gnawed at their resolution. Sacrifice is something humans know better than any other. They will give up everything to protect the ones they love, to shield the tiniest flame called hope.

Their video feeds went offline one by one as their ships detonated. The history books say the human fleet stationed at Filo was lost in the initial Spx attack. The special sacrifice of those captains and their crew would go unspoken but never forgotten. Like the lost life of the first flower given to your future spouse, the sacrifice may be forgotten but the effect is endless.

Filo, and all the life there, was safe

Wick collapsed his face into his hands.

We touched him. The hands of a Baar, Otta, Rawca, Gyben, and Yent all settled on his back. I’m not sure if he felt us.

The deep voice of Byruin spoke for all of us, “We all made that promise. We will protect these humans. I swear it.”

Again, unity from human sacrifice. Unfortunately, there was still more pain to come that day. After a moment of silence, Bryuin stepped back and said, “We’ll take care of the pirates. They could be infected too.”

Cinder tried to protest.

The hands slowly slipped from Wick’s back, until only the touch of Kiki and me remained. His soft sobs set a small vibration through him. The Otta tried to speak, but I stopped her. I took her hand and pulled us away. She understood. Sometimes, being alone is the only way to escape from a moment.

I coaxed everyone out. Wick remained on the couch, alone, at the center. I saw how tightly he clinched his eyes. My only hope was that somewhere in that darkness he would find me, as I always would be, waiting, just a reach away.

Kiki and I lingered by the exit. “He’s the middle of a whirlpool,” she whispered. The floating lights of the lounge drifted around the human.

“You love him,” I said it, not even trying to make the statement a question.

“I’m not surprised that your kind can recognize love,” Kiki replied. “For you there is only one science, one field of study. Don’t the Baar believe love is a broken circle, an eternity split in half.”

“Not broken. No split. Infinity made for two.”

“Wick certainly split my life in half. There will always be days before and days after him,” she said.

“Have you told him about this? Your feelings?” I asked.

“No. I didn’t even know. Not fully. Until this. Lose is a great way to make us realize what we fear losing most.” Her whiskers trembled as she forced a smile. Actually, she was fighting that grin. He made it unstoppable. “I’ll tell him tonight.”

In a blur, someone forced past us. He charged towards the couch, towards Wick. It was Quest. “Wick!” he shouted, “Wick!” The tiger leapt over the couch and seized the human. He forced Wick to his feet and into a tight embrace. Quest cried. “I’m sorry,” he shouted it so loud.

The act, the need, forced the human awake. Although the tiger was larger, looking like a parent hugging a child, the strength came from Wick. Quest may have been the spark, but (despite all the suffering and all the pain) Wick held the flame. He hadn’t given up hope.

Kiki couldn’t help but laugh a little. “We’ll be alright,” she said. “I know it.”

I felt true sorrow and sympathy from Quest, but there was something more. Something was wrong. Through all the chaotic emotions, the tiger had another thought, one that he meant just for me.

“Lexi,” he thought, “run!”

### Chapter Twenty Four

I took Quest’s warning seriously. I tapped a few buttons on my pocket computer, triggering one of my emergency programs. The lights for the entire station went offline. Amid the darkness, the glowing wisps continued to drift around the lounge, centralized around Wick.

The backup systems would be online soon. There wasn’t much time. I moved into a small hiding space behind the flower boxes by the kitchen entrance. Cameras and eyes couldn’t see through the thick branches and leaves of the renley bushes. When the lights turned back on, I relied on my ears and the thoughts of the tiger to watch.

It took Quest a while to calm down. He knew what was coming. Nylo had been crying when he told him what happened at Filo. Then he saw Orsa standing in the hall. When she was about to make a decision she didn’t like, the deer would perfect her clothing, straighten wrinkles, remove lint. He remembered her doing it before she say goodbye. It wouldn’t be long until Wick knew her plans and his fate.

“Ambassador Stone.” Orsa had already arrived.

Quest held his embrace with Wick for a moment longer. He was shocked by the strength the human gave him. There was also something Wick whispered to him, but I couldn’t figure out the exact words from the memories. The tiger was too focused on the duo of large security officers that had arrived with Orsa.

“I thought this might happen,” said Wick. “You’re here to arrest me.”

“The events of Filo are disturbing,” replied the deer. “We don’t know what other experimental weapons the Spx have. You said the most dangerous are still locked.”

“This is absurd,” shouted Quest. “You saw what happened. Wick would never help the Spx.”

“Unless, he was Spx,” said the Yent ambassador. “We can’t risk Warwick Stone being infected. The knowledge in his head is too risky.”

“So you’re going to throw him in a cell?” asked Quest. The tiger took the words right out of my mouth. At least someone was being the voice of reason.

But, of course, Orsa had an answer, “He’s not a prisoner. This is simply part of the quarantine. We’re protecting Wick. His authority will remain absolute. We’ll just be watching him closely.”

Quest struggled to think of an argument. The idea of protecting his human friend seemed important. The thought of Wick being infected by a Spx chilled him to the core. “What if he refuses?”

“He won’t.”

“Yes,” replied Wick. “I’ll come along peacefully. I’m a danger to all of us.”

“What about your assistant?” asked Orsa. “Where’s Lexi?”

Quest tried to lie, “She left on important business.”

“I had people watching the exits,” said the deer. “We would’ve seen her.”

“Maybe during that power outage,” offered Quest. “She’s rather short. Easy to miss in a crowd.”

“Why do you need her?” asked Wick. “She’s not a threat.”

“I believe she has similar, dangerous knowledge, ambassador. The Spx can still take over any of us,” said the Yent.

“How do we know you haven’t been infected?” asked Quest.

She looked him straight in the eye. “You know why.” The tiger was forced turn his head. She was right. That look, how could she still have so much ownership of him?

“It’s ok, Quest.” There was little resistance in Wick’s voice, “I trust her. The Spx wouldn’t want me in prison. Do I have time to get a few things first?”

“Of course,” replied the Yent. “We’ll escort you to your quarters before taking you to the holding cell.”

“Do you want to chain me up too?” asked Quest.

“No,” said Orsa. “Your ambassador will need you now more than ever. We all need your help, Quest. You can start by finding her. Security will put out an arrest notification for her soon. Find Lexi.”

There was something in the way she said ‘Find Lexi’ that made Quest hesitate. What other choice did he have? He could attack the security guards, but then what? Escape to a shuttle. Disappear. Leave all this war behind. Could Wick live with that? No. Good or bad, the human would need to see this to its very end. “Fine, but I’ll be visiting him every hour.”

“I would be disappointed with anything less,” said Orsa. “Now come, before the word of Filo spreads too much anxiety throughout Dayton.”

Navigating the station would not be easy. Security for the Council was always a top priority. Although I’d spent a lot of time bypassing it, there was so much that I never even considered. Now my brain was working overtime to discover routes that would allow me to reach my destination. Escape would be easy, just sneak aboard one of the outbound transports, but that was not my goal. I’d rather be caught and thrown in a cell than abandon the man I love.

Quest sent me one more clear thought: one of the guards is staying. More would arrive soon. I needed a distraction. It only took a few touches on my pocket computer to trigger another pre-planned program. At central security, old footage of me wandering the halls would begin to show on their monitors. I peaked out. The security officer received an immediate call.

“I’m on my way,” he shouted before rushing off.

I left through the kitchen, entering the back passageways used by service staff and maintenance to move equipment and cargo between station facilities. In about ten minutes, security would recognize the false footage. I had to move fast, but not too fast. The last thing I needed was for an over zealous maid or courier to try and stop me. Fortunately, Quest was right. I was short, and moving unnoticed wasn’t too difficult.

I had a safe room hidden near the main generators, an abandoned engineering office from when the station was first built. No one would find me there, but that wasn’t my destination, not yet. It was dangerous, but there was something I needed to get first.

Progress was slow. Moving between blindspots was easy. My first week on the station, I charted all the areas covered by cameras. The personal computer in my pocket would vibrate anytime I entered one of these watched locations. After months of wandering the halls, I’d built up a subconscious map. The difficult part was the security officers.

The first confrontation came when I reached the entrance to the ambassadorial wing. The personal quarters of the diplomats was isolated from the rest of the station’s environmental systems. This meant that no one could taint the air or water without first gaining entrance into the private sector. It also meant that there were no maintenance tunnels or side passages leading in. The only route was through one main entrance, passing sophisticated lock and identification systems.

Fortunately, the majority of security would be camping outside my personal quarters. That only left only a pair of male guards here: one Wex that looked like a cheetah and one Mirj that looked like a cobra. They looked somber, standing at attention. I should’ve waited. Guards are always at peak alertness when starting duty, but I didn’t have time. I wasn’t afraid of the ever increasing security. Word of Filo would spread and the other espionage and GAIA agents would soon join the hunt.

They teach you a lot about dealing with civilians when you join a spy agency. The most important lesson is confidence. No matter the race or personality, everyone trusts conviction. So, I walked boldly up to the pair. I ignored the small vibration in my pocket. The cameras were watching. I only had three or four minutes to make it through the door.

Act normal. “Good evening,” I said.

Have a purpose. I headed straight for the the access panel that would unlock the entrance.

Address their concerns. “You caught that Baar yet?” I asked.

The reptile spoke first. “Excuse me, miss. This is a restricted area.” Good, he fell back to a rehearsed response. Showed inexperience.

“Of course,” I said. Display familiarity. “I haven’t seen you here before. You must be new.”

“Excuse me,” said the feline. “We’re not supposed to let anyone in.”

Ignore or deflect anything you disagree with. “What was the name of the individual you were looking for?” I asked. “I might know him.”

I hovered my hand over the DNA scanner. The guards approached from behind. One to my left. One to my right. Let them get close. If things went poorly, there was always the more physical route. Too close and my smaller height becomes a problem for them. They’d need to bend over to grab me. It also put me at the perfect crotch punching height. Of course, Mirj testicles are internal. I’d dive at his knee.

Right before my hand settled on the scanner, I asked, “Lexi, that’s her name right?” I felt the familiar prick as the air needle took a sample of my blood.

It took only a second for the computer to finish the analysis. A digital voice spoke, “Princess Rye identified. Welcome, your highness.” The doors made an audible thud as the locks disengaged. After the pirate attacked Wick, I reviewed the security systems guarding the ambassadors. I found a simple bug in the code of the DNA scanner, a common programmer mistake. The system returns only the results for the first matching user. I simply had to add myself a second time. Thankfully, Orsa was efficient. By forcing security to revoke my access, she allowed the system to fall back to my second entry.

“She doesn’t look like a princess,” muttered the reptile.

 I quickly stepped through the entrance. The vibration in my pocket stopped. There were no cameras on this side of the door. The plan worked flawlessly, almost.

Still unsure, the feline started to call his superior, “Central, this is—”

The last tip for dealing with civilians: always have a trump card. “Corus. That’s your name, correct? I’m sorry about your son. Please, let us know if we can do anything to help.” Before engaging the guards, I’d quickly reviewed their personal records. His son had brain cancer.

“Uh…” The Wex shook his head. “Sure. I mean, thank you. I will.” As I walked away, he responded to his commander. “Never mind, false alarm.”

Of course, I couldn’t just use his son to help with my escape. Felt too evil. It only took a few minutes to reroute a significant portion of Wick’s discretionary funds to the patient. The ambassador received a lot from Earth to help cover costs and expenses. Every month, Wick would pick some random person or charity to donate to. He said it was important to show the generosity of the human spirit. Corus would find a large sum in his bank account in a few days with a note that read, ‘With love and sincerity from Earth and Princess Rye’. He would survive.

My journey, however, still had much peril. About ten guards stood outside Wick’s office. I wish I could get his journal. It was the first thing I thought about when Orsa showed up to arrest him. That would have to wait. There was something else I needed. I headed to the personal quarters of Cinder.

Fortunately, no one was stationed outside the bat’s door. The lock would take me a while to bypass. If I was running security, I would be monitoring for long sessions at any important security terminal. So, I hoped for a bit of luck and touched the doorbell.

A moment later, the door opened to reveal Cindy, the ambassador’s sister. “Lexi!” she declared before leaping forward to hug me. Gyben hugs are very personal. Their bat wings wrap around you, encircling you with their warmth. It didn’t help that Cindy liked longer hugs than most.

“I was hoping to see you again before I left,” she said. When I first met the female bat, I thought it was a hoax. She looked like a perfect female version of her brother. Turns out they were twins. Cindy had the same red-fringed fur and gold-tipped ears as Cinder. She even had the glasses and assistant drones.

“When did your brother get back?” I asked.

“Last night.” She playfully led me into the office, like a child trying to coax a kitten into a kitchen. “Come, come, come. Tell me all about your day.” If there was one difference between Cindy and her brother, it was the way they approached conversation. While Cinder never shut up, Cindy rarely spoke. A perfect pair.

“Have you heard about Filo?” I asked. She just shook her head. “There was an incident.” I shared the details of the attack. I felt surreal reliving the event, having to try and explain what happened and why. It had just happened and it already felt so long ago, or rather my life before felt distant.

Cindy didn’t say a word. She just kept her eyes firmly locked on me. We paused when she started to cry. Then, when I finished, she finally said, “That’s horrible, and they arrested Wick? Why?”

“To protect him, I guess.”

“Poor Wick. He must be absolutely broken. Why aren’t you with him?” Her mind answered the question before she even finished asking it. “Oh. But why come here?”

I didn’t have time to answer before we were interrupted. Cinder entered, looking most upset. The bat immediately called for his sister, “Silliani, I have bad news. Something terrible has happened.” Then, when he saw that his sister wasn’t alone, he perked up. “We have company. Lexi! How’re you? You told Silliani about Filo. I can see she cried. So sad, very sad. I also heard about Wick too. I’ll fight Orsa on this one. There are other ways to protect him. Put a songbird in a cage and eventually the song won’t sound as sweet. A strange saying, really. Is it because the bird becomes careless or because you care less? The melody becomes common, the entropy of excitement. Plagues us all. Don’t you think?”

“Yes,” I interrupted. “It’s good to see you again, Cinder. Why did you come back?”

Before responding, the Gyben finished their greeting. The twins approached, linked hands, and bumped noses. They wiggled their snouts and laughed as they separated. I could tell this was some ritual they’d invented long ago, probably before either of them even thought of becoming famous. “Try it with Lexi,” said Cindy.

“No, no, no,” he replied. “We’re ambassadors, remember. There’s proper ways to act in public. Keeping up appearances and all that.”

“Follius,” said the female bad, crossing her arms,” we are in private. True friendship has no stage. No masks. No performance.”

I was shocked. Silliani and Follius were their birth names. You could spend a lifetime in the company of Gyben and never hear such a thing. First names are sacred and usually only shared on wedding nights. Even family members typically use nicknames. Out of curiosity, I’d looked it up on their official records, but it still didn’t prepare me for the weight of hearing it aloud.

“Thank you,” I said, not sure what else to say. Unfortunately, Cinder thought my praise was for Cindy’s offering. So he sheepishly approached me. I took his hands. The same height. His wings stretched out as we spread our arms and moved close. The tip of his nose gently touched the tip of mine. Soft, warm. His golden eyes trembled as they fluttered back and forth, not sure where to settle. The entire thing felt much more personal than I imagined.

“Cute!” declared Cindy. “We should greet like this every time.”

As we parted, I asked my original question, “Why?”

He responded, and this time, I didn’t interrupt. “That’s a loaded question. Yes, yes it is. Why what? Why did I come back? The asked me to. The Twelve, the coalition, demanded it. You see, the real hero is my sister, Silliani. She’s the financial genius. For her, events aren’t a line. Like a tapestry, she sees the bigger picture, the connections, the threads. It has made us rich; famous too. However, Silliani has far too much compassion to be a strong leader. I’m not as smart, but I’m practical. So I got to be the mouthpiece.”

“That’s not fair,” said the sister. “You’re deeply caring too.”

He continued, “The Gyben were on the brink of war with the Rawca when I took over as Financial Suzerain. I remember the fear. War seems like such a good idea until it comes knocking at your door. We painted peace symbols on our wings.” He spread his arms and looked down for a moment. “What good would that do? We had, and still have, almost no military. Too costly. That’s when I made a promise to protect my sister, to protect all Gyben, no matter the cost. That’s why I secretly funded a coup inside the Rawca empire. I believe they called it the Night of Daggers. Something dramatic. Their queen, her family, their ambassador, all killed. It was a gamble. Funny, funny, funny. What would Byruin think if he knew that I helped put him in power?”

There had been rumors that outside forces played a part in the last great Rawca uprising. Coups and civil wars are not uncommon for those dogs. GAIA always believed the Gyben were involved, but all sign pointed to the previous leader, the one before Cinder. It was a brutal attack. The images of the royal family being slaughter were broadcast far and wide, a violent warning to any would be detractors. Many felt the old Gyben Financial Suzerain had resigned due to the sheer shame. Who could live with such brutality?

I looked at Cinder. He scratched his temples, only an inch from completely hiding behind his wings. “I did it to protect my sister. I kept telling myself that. Over and over, throughout the years. Protect her. Protect them. I did it all in secrecy to prevent war. I just wanted young Gyben to grow up like we did. Carefree, running, laughing on the fruit farm. No fear. Nothing else mattered. Then, everything changed. Because of Wick. Because of you.”

“Me?” I asked.

“Yes, Lexi. You’re a horrid assistant. Very loud, so rude, not diplomatic. Among our kind, the ambassadors of the Council are gods. Even Wick is the top celebrity among humans. But not you. You treat us different. You treat us like equals. I understood that best when I visited Wick in the hospital. He’d just been attacked. When we spoke, there was a look in his eye. Not one of anger, not cunning, not even regret. He looked concerned. Worried for me. He is just like you. This galaxy isn’t a wilderness full of strange creatures. This is our home. One home. One family. Every individual counts. A Gyben childhood is no more important than any other. Lexi, you are my sister. Byruin is my brother. I should’ve been protecting you all.”

“But you left,” I said.

“You’re talking about that video,” said the brother with a hard blush. “The one I leaked, of me and Quest.”

“Did you see it?” asked the sister. “I have! Watched it like fifty times. So funny! I didn’t know you could make sounds like that, bro.”

Trying to his embarrassment, Cinder turned around before continuing. “My first thought was punishment. The things I’ve done, many are unforgivable.”

Cindy interrupted one more time, “I forgive you.”

Cinder’s shoulders tensed a little. It was a big mistake, but I pulled out my pocket computer and sent a private message. Security would eventually trace it. Our conversation now had a time limit of fifteen minutes.

The male bat spoke again, “I don’t. I don’t forgive myself. For the first time I could see the root of my choices. Greed. A greedy Gyben, what a cliche. I wasn’t helping others. I was protecting myself and my sister. It wasn’t about hardship and sacrifice. We saw true sacrifice today at Filo. No, I am a coward. I was trapped in this pit of pity while I sat in that garden. When Quest found me. He made me feel important. Even if it was just for one person and for one night, I felt needed. And, of course, I did it again. I was greedy. I leaked the footage. I wanted to escape.”

Two minutes gone. There wasn’t much time left.

“Then,” said Cinder, “they picked Cindy to be my replacement. Why not? She’s smarter than any of us. Her offer to help humans through the quarantine seemed like madness, the largest charity donation in the history of the galaxy. It will cost a fifth of all Gyben profits for the year. The Twelve couldn’t stand for it. Again, they can’t see the bigger picture like Silliani. We’re investing in human futures.”

I hated to cut this short, but I didn’t have a choice. I walked up behind Cinder and put my hand on his shoulder. “Thank you,” I said, “for sharing. For whatever it’s worth, I forgive you, Cinder. I forgive you, Follius. I forgive you, whateveryournameis. My friend.”

When Cinder turned, his expression was one of true surprise. If he was human, I would say this was a moment of awe. “Lexi, I don’t.”

Right on cue, someone arrived. My message had been received. Quest came barging through the door. “He’s back? Cinder is…”

Although I couldn’t feel the shiver through the tiger’s fur, I knew the conflict that caused it. His first thought: ‘Is this real?’ His second: ‘What do I say? I should’ve messaged early. Why? He publicly embarrassed me. Does it matter? Was it just a game for him? I should be angry. Why am I not angry? Did he miss me too? Probably not.’ His mind lost in a darkness, his emotions stumbled around, lost.

Fortunately, Cinder didn’t have the same hesitation. Like a sunrise, his smile grew bright and wide. Like morning dew, tears suddenly appeared in his eyes. “Quest!” he shouted and rushed forward.

Like a dyeing night, all doubt faded from the tiger. He went down on his knee. The bat crashed into him. They embraced.

“Let’s go.” My fingers wrapped around Cindy’s wrist. “Let’s let the boys cry a little.” I lead her from the office and into the private quarters of the ambassador.

As we slipped through the door, I heard one more thought from Quest. He didn’t want the embrace to end. He wanted to be something for Cinder. Like Wick had done for him, he wanted to make sure that there was strength given in their hug.

“What if they start making out?” asked Cindy, with a wink.

“Too much detail.” I’d already gotten enough information about their physical adventures. Quest often daydreamed about his night with the bat. Sometimes I wish I could turn off my access to the tiger’s thoughts.

“I think they make a cute couple,” she said. “Quest is big. He’s kind, right?”

“Yes, yes.” I started to search around the room. Quest wouldn’t be the last guest. Security would arrive soon. “I thought Gyben didn’t approve of homosexuality.” Where was it?

“Most don’t,” she said with a frown.

I found it, Cindy’s laptop. “Mind if I borrow this?” I asked. “My computer is broken.”

“Of course!” she said. “Now that Cinder’s back, I’ll probably return to our home. I don’t need it.”

Perfect. Security would be working to block my access throughout the station’s computer networks. Fighting back would take time that I didn’t have. As an ambassador, Cindy would have complete clearance granted to her laptop. It would be a few weeks before someone thought to disable her access.

The sound of new voices came from the adjoining room. Security had arrived. I rushed over and pressed the button to lock the door to the bedroom. It would buy me another minute or two.

“I got to go,” I told Cindy.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“No time. But, could you do me a favor?” I asked, moving over towards the closet. Each of the ambassador’s personal quarters has a secret exit. Only the current chief of security was given details of these escape routes. I was fairly certain that he wouldn’t have come along.

“Anything,” said the female bat.

“I can’t go back to my room. There’s something I need. A t-shirt. Should be on the bed. Has human writing on it. Can you get it for me?”

“I will! You can count on me.”

“Thank you, Silliani.” With that, I made my escape. It would be a long time before I was able to relax again. It didn’t matter. Someone had to get Wick out of jail.

### Chapter Twenty Five

I spent the next few weeks in an abandoned space. Once the main reactors were finally installed, the tiny engineering office was cut off from the main access tunnels. It was fair simpler to shutter the room rather than move everything out.

The air carried the smell of dust and aging metal. The only furniture was a worn desk and a backless chair that liked to creak. It reminded me of the grand piano in the GAIA lounge. Most of the strings were broken or off tune. Tosco installed the thing as part of some nonsense metaphor he liked to inflict on new recruits. “Why is it easier to remember the words and memories of a song? If we forget who or what made it, then what’s the point?” Maybe he was talking about himself.

Sitting at that engineering desk reminded me of my times by that broken piano. I liked its chair. Space intended, only for one. Just enough space for two. Other trainees left me alone, and on the few times I was all alone, I would press a single key. I loved the sound of hearing a string slowly stop trembling.

There were a few other things in my new bedroom. Cindy kept her promise and got Wick’s old t-shirt to me. It sat in the corner, a place for me to curl up and sleep. The previous owners had left some garbage, mostly empty pens and old photos. By tradition, Wex construction crews like to take in-progress photographs. They print them out and hang them up. Then, when the project is nearing completion, they hide them. It is not uncommon for a Wex family to discover an old photo in the walls or under the floorboards, a record from when their house was built. Again, “If we forget who or what made it, then what’s the point?”

I collected all the photographs and arranged them on a shelf. Their thick yellow paper, although bent, fell over often. Gusts. I didn’t mind picking them back up. Before bed, I’d look at the images and make up stories for each of the individuals shown. They say Daygone was built by the galaxy; it was great seeing engineers from all the races working together. There were five of them. I named them Wesley, Farrell, Huntley, Sheyang, and Yeguris. I also imagined Wick and me behind the camera, working and building together.

The computer in my pocket vibrated, a reminder. Thirty minutes. Time to go. I tried to fix myself, ruffling the fur on my arms and face, but there was no mirror. I’m sure I looked awful. I wish there was time to steal a shower. I headed for one of the access tunnels and journeyed into the bowels of the station.

Outside my tiny space, things only got worse for the galaxy. The Spx grew more powerful. Using stealth technology, the parasites were able to infect one of the Yent ships managing the quarantine. They slipped past the blockades and infected a human fleet near Alpha Centauri. This gave the Spx an armada about five times as big as the one used to attack Filo. The combined forces of the Council and the other races were losing, being pushed back. Closer and closer, the battle lines moved towards the edges of the human solar system. If the Spx managed to reach one of the massively populated planets, such as Mars, there would be little that the galaxy could do to stop them.

Of course, I didn’t care about the rest of the galaxy. I only cared about one person it in. An arrest warrant was out for me. GAIA also issued a termination order, setting the other agents on the station on my like attack dogs. It took weeks of careful planning to finally find the opportunity I needed. I was going to free Wick.

After following a carefully planned route that maneuvered me past security cameras and patrolling guards, I ended up in a small closet outside the special dignitary jail. I was probably the first person in history to thank the traitor named Hillif, the Wex who killed an ambassador. It was because of him that they built special cells for holding diplomats. Breaking into the normal Daygone prison would’ve been far harder.

The opportunity came thanks to Quest. I don’t know if he planned it, but his regular visits created the small gap I needed. It started by chance, when met a guard named Vandy. The bobcat took a liking to the tiger and made sure her shift overlapped his visitations. She always walked him out.

“The royal family is going into hiding.” Right on time, the pair exited Wick’s holding cell. “At least that’s what I heard. Sounds serious, eh?” The female bobcat was much shorter than Quest. She couldn’t take her eyes off him.

“Serious time for all,” said the tiger, sounding much more sober than normal. “I’ll need that recording.”

They walked past my hiding place. “Sure! Definitely! I’ll get it once security gives me clearance. Want me to bring it to your quarters tonight?” She made sure her tail swung in an opposite motion to Quest, so the tips would brush as they walked. It was a common flirting technique for teenagers.

The tiger didn’t notice. His thoughts were all over the place. Whatever Wick told him, it was sad but oddly inspiring. Quest felt an urgent need to find and spend time with Cinder. Precious things to hold tight.

“You really like him, huh? I like Wick too,” said Vandy the guard. “Humans are neat.”

As the pair disappeared down the corridor, I made my move. The guard would be back in ten to twenty minutes, depending on the amount of time Quest could tolerate her admiration. That meant I had nine minutes. Didn’t seem like long. I already had a program running that would loop the video inside the cell. It would appear like Wick was just sitting alone. Also, several minor crimes would be reported to central security. Just enough of a distraction.

I’d already hacked the lock on the door. A small chime rang before the door opened.

The room was split in half. One section held a seating area for guests and a small security desk for the stationed guard. The other half was the actual cell, consisting of a bench and a bed. The walls were a slick, glossy white color. Same for the floor, ceiling, and furniture. Right down the middle ran a single pane of glass, wall-to-wall, ceiling-to-floor. No metal bars, just reenforced crystal.

He didn’t notice me at first. Wick sat on the bench in his cell, this elbows on his knees, his chin resting on interlaced fingers. My heart skipped a beat. How could I forget the effect he had on me? I tried to rush forward, but stumbled. I tried to speak, but stuttered. Was this real? It felt like I was looking at a him through the glass of a picture frame. He looked so tired, so alone. “Wick,” I managed a whisper.

First it was a glance, then a twist, then a turn. First it was a frown, then a smirk, then a smile. He rushed towards the glass. I ran to meet him. He spoke, but I did not hear him. “Lexi, Lexi, Lexi,” I recognized the movement of his lips. The glass was soundproof. Of course there was a button on the guard’s desk to turn on the intercom, but I was far too broken to even think of it.

He went to his knee. Our hands met on opposite sides of the cold glass. “Wick, Wick, are you ok?” I swear I could feel his warmth.

He pointed at his ear and shook his head. Our eyes locked. There was sadness, there was despair, but through it all, there was love. He continued to speak, even laugh, but I couldn’t recognize the words. I did the same, unable to stop myself from asking important questions, “Are you ok? Are they treating you all right? I’ll get you out. I have a plan. I’ve missed you so much. You’re my everything, Wick.”

We wasted one of our minutes just talking at each other, saying all the things we’d been waiting to say. I wish I knew what he said, at least I could feel the meaning. Unlike our night in the dark, we didn’t have touch to do our translating. It didn’t matter. We would find a way to communicate.

He breathed on the glass, and in his small space of fog, he drew a circle with a line through it. An imperfect circle: the Baar symbol of love. I did the same, drawing bumps on a triangle. A simple heart: the human symbol of love. As the images faded, I tried another technique. Like the first drops of wind-driven rain, my tears made slashes, perfect dotted lines, across the glass. Dot dot, dash dash dash. Like morse code, each tear was a letter or two. I don’t know what I wrote or if he could read it.

He rubbed his chin, showing off his growing beard. They didn’t let him shave. His rugged expression and bouncing eyebrows forced me to laugh. He made the tears stop.

Time was short, but every second felt important. Another minute gone, maybe more. Wick knew it too. He suddenly jumped up and ran back to the bench. He grabbed something. It was his journal. Quest must’ve brought it for him. He wrote something down frantically, tore out the page and put it against the glass.

use it

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track 4

He then pointed at the guard’s desk. I rushed over and found an array of buttons, a cup, and a computer drone, like the ones Cinder used. Did he mean the drone? I held it up and he nodded rapidly. My pocket vibrated a warning. More time had passed than I thought.

He must have recognized the look in my eyes. He slumped further down, resting his head against the glass. There was just enough time for me to run back over and put a kiss across from his forehead. He didn’t look up, just smiled and mumbled something I couldn’t hear.

A familiar chime filled the room. The door was unlocking. I move to the left side of the exit, pressing myself against the wall. Vandy, the guard walked through. Wick did his part, hopping up and waving at her.

“Haha, did you miss me?” she asked, unaware as I slipped past. As the door closed, Wick continued to wave, but this wasn’t a hello. I lifted my arm and gave a meek swing of my wrist, echoing his goodbye.

I started the long walk back to my temporary home. My route took me through the crowded market. Lost in my thoughts and the noises of business, my concentration faltered for a moment. That’s all it took.

I’m not sure if I ran into the guard or if the Yent ran into me. “Excuse me,” he said. “Are you—“

My head required a shake to clear. There shouldn’t be a guard here. Off duty? I hoped so. “No worries,” I said, hoping to walk off nonchalantly.

“Wait!” he called after me. “Cantal command, this is Uriick. I’ve encountered a solitary Baar on level 3 of the commerce sector.”

I looked around frantically. I wasn’t afraid of just one guard. Damn, there were more. Two more. A Mirj and a Wex walked in arcs in opposite directions from my location, one clockwise, the other counter. They were using the strings-and-pivot method for their patrols. How? That technique was used by spy agencies when tracking a target in the field. The guards on Daygone were good, but not that good. Stupid. I should’ve realized that GAIA would find a way to influence the hunt.

I felt the thud behind me as the Yent dove to tackle me. His arms appeared in my periphery, slowly wrapping around from the sides. He should’ve waited for backup. I hopped straight up, letting him slide under me. Unfortunately, the make Yent still had his antlers. They scraped along my legs, tearing my pants, and forcing an abrupt landing on the middle of the poor guard’s back. It knocked the wind out of him. I was too small to break a rib or do any other serious damage.

The other guards would be circling in. I headed for the nearest crowd. Escape would be much easier there. Unfortunately, someone had thought of that. In an instant, I was surrounded by forty or fifty micro drones. They circled me like buzzing flies, all their tiny cameras pointed at me. I kept going, pushing into the crowd, but the drones followed, moving under arms and over shoulders to keep track of me. Another spy trick.

A loud voice came over the public intercom, “Guest and citizens of Daygone. Please remain calm.”

Soon that announcement would have every well-doer on the station trying to stop me. I had to act fast. My big emergency plan wouldn’t work with the drones. That suited me just fine. I was hoping to save it for when I broke Wick out. That left me with only one other option. A few button presses on my pocket computer and everything was ready.

I moved into a small opening, hoping the drone would get close. They did. For a moment, I saw my reflection across their tiny lenses. The crowd looked too. Time to give them a show.

My pocket computer started playing a sequence of chimes. I doubt anyone recognized the melody, a Baar lullaby. Some hackers say it’s my calling card. I program it into all my devices to identify themselves and to say goodbye. My parents used to hum it to help find each other. Sometimes Dad would still sang it when he woke up in the middle of the night.

I tossed the small computer and it erupted in a flash of light. Special quantum chemicals and a tiny bomb in the device created an electromagnetic pulse. The security drones fell to the ground. Nearby shops went offline or triggered their fire alarms. The crowd winced.

The distraction gave me a chance, but it came with a cost. I didn’t have another pocket computer. That meant I would be blind and unarmed as I moved around. Also, it had a lot of pictures and notes on it that I’d taken during the last six months. I’d miss those.

More guards were flooding into the market. I was certain there would be a maintenance hatch on the wall by the florist. Maybe. I never noticed how many things I double-checked on my computer until it was gone. Panic began to set in. If this didn’t work, I was out of options.

That’s when a hand grabbed my shoulder. The grip was big and powerful. I tried to turn and resist, but his strength and words halted me, “Keep walking, little spy.” Byruin had found me. The Rawca ambassador wore his official military outfit. I later learned that he’d come from a meeting with senior commanders. Large metal shoulder pads topped a cape that cascaded down around his armored chest.

He pulled me to his side and guided me towards a nearby exit. I put a hand on his hip and stayed closed so his cape could conceal me. It wasn’t completely inconspicuous, but since most citizens try to avoid eye contact with a Rawca, especially one as intimidating as the ambassador, we easily moved past the watchers. “Don’t look around. Stay close,” he said.

“Why?” I asked.

“And don’t talk.”

We soon exited the market and made our way into the less crowded ambassador wing. He put a hand on my shoulder and pushed me behind him, further under his cloak. Another advantage from my short stature. I was completely concealed from the cameras. Unfortunately, I couldn’t see where we were going. Even worse, I had to grab onto his tail to keep close enough and to match the rhythm of his large strides. He really should brush it more.

When we reached the main access door, he didn’t give the guards any time to notice. “What are you doing here?” he growled. “The traitor is in the market and Daygone’s finest are standing here with their ears in their pockets.”

“But sir,” one started to complain.

“Go now!” The Rawca snapped his teeth. Dressed up in his military armor, I imagine he looked even more scary than usual. “Go before your cowardice makes me break your necks.”

The sound of rapid footsteps carried the guards off down the hallway. I felt a small wag in the ambassador’s tail. Of course. He enjoyed their obedience.

The computer spoke when the Hyena touched the identity pad, “Grand admiral Byruin identified. Welcome home, ambassador.”

It wasn’t long until we reached the ambassador’s office. After stepping through the door, I immediately escaped from under his cape. “Your fur smells like ash and your armor smells like blood. You should wash,” I gasped for air, “everything.”

He snorted, almost a laugh. “You’re welcome, little spy.”

I quickly glanced around. It certainly didn’t look as pristine as Wick’s office. Several of the walls had large gouges, claw marks. The furniture was dented and splintered. I’m sure the cleaners offered to fix everything. I’m sure the Rawca refused.

“I guess I could say thank you,” I said.

“You could.“ He undid the latches behind his neck, letting the metal shoulder guards and cape drop unceremoniously to the floor.

“Fine.” He did help me escape, although I could’ve made it on my own. “Thank you, Byruin.”

“I made an oath to help Wick protect his people. You’re certainly one.” He started to undo the straps at his ribs. “We owe,” he paused a second to shake his head, “I owe him a lot.”

“Do you need any help?” I asked.

“No. I’ve removed my own armor since I was ten.” A few seconds later, the chest and back plates fell from his torso. He was naked from the waist up. A quick muscle flex made him bristle. The dark color on his muzzle repeated in spots down his sides, clustering most above his hips. In slashes across his torso and arms, lines of white fur marked the location of scars.

“The Wex say one’s markings and patterns are a very personal thing,” I said.

“Bah. Wex are cowards with their bodies. Rawca dance nearly naked.” The hyena walked through the door leading to his private quarters. “You mentioned washing. I think you should practice before you preach.”

I followed to the doorway. “Sneak a female back to your bedroom; tell her she stinks. Not the best moves, Byruin.”

“My shower is available,” he said with a smirk. “I’ll say nothing more.”

“Thank you.”

I spent the next fifteen minutes wrapped in warmth and fragrance. I forgot how good it felt to have the water slowly flowing, dampening, drenching your fur. Nothing like a shower to make one feel so much heavier, almost like a statue, every movement muted. The shampoos were a surprise. Of course, the warrior had the standard Rawca soap for removing dirt and blood. It smelled and felt like peanut butter. There was, however, a much smaller bottle containing a finishing scent. It smelled like Ululu flowers, the dangerous blossoms that welcomed Wick to Daygone. The day we first met. The memories caused my eyes to add a few more unnoticeable drops.

Drying took forever. Just dripping, I stood there for a few minutes. Each of the races has a different ritual for removing the water from their bodies. Rawca like to do exercises, mostly pushups. Yent use a fine brush to straighten every fiber. Otta just like staying wet. Hikan repair or remove broken feathers. Gyben dry by trying to fly, flapping their wings. Baar showers have a dimpled metal floor to add a sparkle to the sound of one’s waterfall. Poets like think everyone has their own melody and that you should pause each morning and listen for the lyrics. Humans, with their skin, and Mirj, with their scales, have smooth surfaces. They just use a towel and never give a single thought to drying.

Waiting for me as I got out of the shower, sitting safely by the bathroom mirror, was Wick’s drone. I wondered what it contained. Why did he think it was so important? I just needed to find a way back to my hideout, but that would have to wait. I repeated his message in my mind:

use it

52.62.134.27

track 4

I took the chance to also wash my clothing. If I smelled too much, it would make it hard to go unnoticed in crowds. I soaked and scrubbed with shampoo. Then I hung it up to dry. The ventilation system keeps the rooms on Daygone fairly dry. Still, it would be at least an hour before I could put them on and not look like I just climbed out of a pond. That meant I had nothing else to do besides talk to my host.

Byruin had a stack of folded undergarments on a shelf in the bathroom. I wouldn’t fit into his boxers. Fortunately, his shirt was big enough to be a dress on me. I thought about just staying in the bathroom for an hour. Would that be so bad? He probably wouldn’t care. Right?

I exited the bathroom and immediately regretted it. The hyena was naked, sitting in a chair. Fortunately, he had the decency to cover his crotch with his large tail, pulled around from the side. His head was tilted back, his eyes cast towards the ceiling. He didn’t look in my direction. He just started talking, “Baar novels never have 30 chapters. I find that fascinating. What exists beyond two?”

An awkward statement to go with an uncomfortable situation. Perfect. “Do you read much Baar literature?”

“Before we attacked. Know your enemy.” He kept his eyes upward. “I feel like I’m at chapter 29 of my story.”

“There was one exception,” I said. “The poet Styler wrote an epic that was 200 chapters. Although it got boring in the middle.” Not sure where to sit, I slowly wandered around the room.

“200? I don’t think I can go that much longer.”

On one of the shelves was a set of seven round stones, stacked. It was a Rawca hobby called stone rolling. You carry a stone with you and roll it around in your hands for months or years, until it gets smooth. These rocks had the distinct cross pattern of pkolite, a mineral only found on the Rawca homeworld. The idea is that stone rolling helps make your hands more noble and tough. That said, most stone rollers avoid pkolite because of its sharp corners and ability to crumble. It requires a delicate and persistent touch that makes little sense for Rawca. “Were there any Baar novels you liked?” I asked.

“No,” he said bluntly. “But, I admire your view on love. Partners. A couple. Together forever. Hard to imagine.”

I had to confess a complete ignorance of Rawca courtship, “Don’t you get married?”

“No.” His head finally came down. He saw me in his shirt and almost chuckled. “Rawca have no concept of marriage. Females are in complete control. They can ask for sex from any male and any time.”

I shook my head. “What? Any time? Any one?”

“Yes. A male Rawca can never refuse a request from a female. The only exceptions are when he is dealing with alien races or deployed for battle.” His tail gave a small wag, hopping up off his lap for a moment. “Sure, a male can show interest, but he can never force the act.”

“Sounds,” I said, “chaotic.”

“You can see why females run our planets,” he explained. “They have all the positions of power. The only reason our Daygone ambassador is a male is because this is considered part of the military.”

“But how do you know which kids are yours?” I asked. Beyond the stones was another shelf holding the hyena’s armor. While I was showering, Byruin had carefully polished and placed each piece back in its rightful place.

“You don’t. Only the females know. Most Rawca grow up without knowing their father.”

“Why? Wouldn’t you want them to know? At least get some help. Change diapers and all that mess.”

“If a male knows the child is his, he has rights over it,” explained Byruin. “He can even kill the cub legally within the ten year of its life. Only the strong and loyal are allowed to continue.”

“Ten year?” I said. “Ten years old? Ten? Barbaric!”

“An old tradition, rarely used,” he replied. “However, it’s the reason my mother hid me away. We lived outside the city. Out in the countryside. Hidden among farm mostly maintained by robots. A maze of country roads with a house in the center.”

“Was your father dangerous?”

“Most likely. My mother was infinitely gentle, not the most sought after trait among my kind. I imagine she demanded a mating from someone famous and then ran away. I never asked.”

“Sounds tragic.”

“It was a good life,” he said. “Do you know how many times you have to walk a country road before you know it? The sounds of the trees in different seasons, the sounds of the pebbles skipping before your feet. The smell of dust, the pattern of shade. Country roads make for good friends.”

I stood there frozen.

He laughed at my expression. “Like courage from a fly: the unexpected is disrupting.” He continued his story, “I grew up in isolation, except for the festivals. Mother loved festivals. We would travel all day to reach a village for the seasonal celebrations. We always wore masks and costumes. She told me it was part of the festivities. Make up a story. Be whoever you want to be. So simple, huh?”

“Just to keep you hidden.”

He ignored my comment. “As you can imagine, I got pretty good at wearing a mask. Leading up to the festivals, I’d spend weeks inventing a lifetime. I’d come up with every detail as I walked alone. Where did I grow up? What were my hobbies? What were my annoying habits? In a way, I got to live all the lives I never could.”

“What happened when you reached the age of ten?”

“Hormones,” he said. “I started to feel the desire for confrontation. Hunting and tracking animals only took me so far. Mother tried to distract me, but by the time I was a teenager, I went to join the military. Such a unique beginning turned into a cliche story.”

“Hardly,” I said. “Look at you now. You’re the ambassador for your entire race.”

“Byruin Holsteder is.” He started to rub his head.

“You ok?”

“Just a migraine. My eyes never got used to artificial light.” He squeezed his eyes shut and continued, “I met Byruin at the academy. He was our squad leader. I don’t know where he found so much patience. All the other cadets had years of training and public education. I was a liability, but he never saw it that way. ‘We are not strong by our strongest, nor weak by our weakest,’ he would often say. ‘We are the sum of all our positives and negatives.’ Funny, because I couldn’t even do math. At least it sounded inspirational.”

I knew where this was going. “Then came the Battle of Mudcrest.”

“Correct,” he said. “A massive sacrifice, a stupid little war. We held our ground. That was our only order: stay and fight. And we did. Twenty of us, one hundred of them. A fight is thrilling until exhaustion. Hours and hours. My friends, my first true friends, all dying. In the end, we technically won. There was only one survive.”

“You.” The story was rather famous, made even greater by embellishment. It was not uncommon for Rawca at bars to proudly be shouting about their ambassador and how he overcame an army of a thousand.

“It should’ve been Byruin. He lead us. He fought harder than anyone. Whenever we lost someone, he used it as a rallying cry. Somehow, he kept us together.” The hyena continued to rub his brow. “When he finally fell, I caught him. I’ll never forget what he said.”

I settled myself on the foot of his bed. My words were only so he would know that someone was still listening, “What was that?”

“I don’t want to die.” He snorted. “It wasn’t some great inspirational speech. He didn’t tell me to get out there. No sage advice. No final request. He just cried. How tragic is that? A great leader with nothing to say in the end. So, I made it up for him.”

“We’re not dead until zero,” I said. “The famous Rawca battlecry. You made that up? Don’t you paint the symbol for zero on the side of all your ships?”

“Yes. Little good it did us. Everyone else died.” Byruin stood suddenly and walked over to the window. He stared out into space. “Bryuin had no family. His mother died a childbirth. He didn’t know his father. We looked alike.”

“You took his name? Why?” I asked.

“Simple. It wasn’t his ending. Byruin deserved a better ending.”

“And you gave it to him! You're an ambassador. That’s your highest military position.” I’m not sure why I felt a need to argue on behalf of his legacy.

“I wanted to take his message and spread it among my kind,” he said.

“We are the sum,” I whispered.

“No,” he replied. “I don’t want to die. War is horrid. It sees only the end of stories. I thought if I became ambassador I could find a way to change us. To make it so no one else had to die.”

I said a little too harshly, “Good luck!”

“You’re right. I’ve only slowed the bloodlust. I could not change it. That took someone else.” He glanced back over his shoulder.

“Wick,” I said.

“Yes. More specially, all his kind. The sacrifice at Filo. Choosing to self-destruct their vessels for the greater good. That event is spreading across my kind like blood from an artery. How good is that story? Better than anything I could design.”

“That’s been your goal all along?” I asked. “To change how your kind thinks?”

“Yes, but it never worked until now. Now I can speak of sacrifice and how death doesn’t need to be for pride or honor or glory.”

“Bravo.”

He took a deep breath and held it until he surrendered to a sigh. “Yes, you’re right. I don’t have a choice. I can’t speak of sacrifice and not embrace it.”

“What?” All this time I thought he’d been telling me this story for my sake. I was wrong. He’d been telling it for himself. “What sacrifice?”

He came to me and took a seat beside me on the bed. It felt awkward having this towering, naked hyena next to me. He didn’t seem to notice. “Lexi, I have a son. I’m sure there are many more, but I know only of one. His name is Joox. His mother’s name is Cyleen.”

I lied, “I had no idea.” I wouldn’t be a very good spy if I didn’t know about this son. Byruin chatted with Joox often. He sent emails and video recordings with advice. It all seemed so forced. I thought it was because he didn’t like his son. In fact, it was because he didn’t know how to be a father.

“He called me last night,” said Byruin. “He spoke to me with such compassion. ‘I love you, father,’ that’s what he said. He asked me to leave Daygone and come join him. A festival is upcoming and he wants to share it with me.”

“That’s lovely, Byruin. I’m so happy for you,” I said, putting my hand on his massive thigh.

“No. Joox wouldn’t say those things. He’s an arrogant little bastard,” said the ambassador.

“I’m confused.”

“He told me what I wanted to hear,” said Bryuin. “He just wants me to come visit.”

“So?”

He said two words, and the floor fell out from under my mind, “The Spx.”

“No.” I pulled my hand back as if it had been shocked. “That’s impossible. You’re suggesting… no, don’t be so silly.”

His voice carried a tone I’d never heard before, defeat. “That’s what they do. The Spx infect and then use memories to manipulate. Imagine if they could infect an ambassador of the Council?”

“Byruin, listen to yourself. You think the Spx infected your son just to get to you?”

“You tell me, little spy. Does that sound like something you’d do?”

I wouldn’t, but I knew someone who would. “How can you be sure?” I asked.

“I tried to have a good relationship with Joox,” said the ambassador. “I really tried, but it just never seemed to work out. Still, despite all our flaws, I know him. A father can tell.”

“I’m so sorry. What are you going to do?” I asked.

“I was going to go.” He laughed briefly at himself. “I know. It sounds naive. But would it be so bad? We wouldn’t be ourselves, we’d be Spx, but I hoped that maybe those version of us could be something else. Somehow we would be father and son.”

“Maybe there is a cure,” I said.

“No. There is no cure, Lexi.” He looked away. “Sacrifice. Practice before you preach.”

“Wait! How old is he?”

“Nine. He’s only nine years old.” He tensed all the muscle in his body. Strength couldn’t help this warrior. Not this time. “Knowing me will be his undoing. An old tradition, rarely used.”

“You can’t!”

“What choice do I have?” he asked. “I’ll order his end tomorrow.”

“Byruin. I’m sorry.”

“Chapter 29,” he said softly. “What did you say? What existing beyond two?”

“I—“

He interrupted, “I’ve got a migraine. You should go.”

I spoke a command, “Computer, lights off,” and the room went into darkness. The hyena fell backwards onto the bed. He rolled onto his side. I put myself in front of him, my back to his chest.

He didn’t put an arm over me. He didn’t imagine me being a small Rawca called Joox. He didn’t cry.

A true Rawca warrior never cries.

So recording it would be a lie.

After he fell asleep, I returned to the bathroom. I got my clothes and Wick’s drone. It was late and security had calmed down. I eventually made it back to that dusty engineering office.

I felt completely drained but somehow found the strength to pull the recording off the drone. I wasn’t ready for the message. I’ve never cried so much in my life. That is, until the very next day.

### Chapter Twenty Six

It took me awhile to decipher Wick’s message:

use it

52.62.134.27

track 4

The numbers followed an old Earth addressing system for identifying computers connected to the Internet. It took me a day to gain access to an old computer in a European cafe that would let me connect. Apparently the IP address was a backdoor to Wick’s research company, Crest Technology.

It gave me access to a weapon system called Silvermist. It was one of the endgame projects commissioned by the military during the Earth war with the Rawca. Control required a password of around four million characters. That’s where ‘track 4’ came in. Silvermist was a small band that performed at Wick’s university. They put out a single album. Track four, entitled ‘Tomorrow’s Song’, was the password. Feeding in every byte of data gave me access. The prompt was simple. All it required was a target.

My investigation was interrupted by an alert. A transport ship had just docked with the station. With all the concerns of the Spx and possible infection, Daygone was on lockdown. Somehow a ship got through. Maybe it was carrying supplies. This was my chance.

All I needed to do now was get Wick out of that cell and onto the ship. We could escape and disappear. It was earlier than planned, but I couldn’t ignore this opportunity. I put the laptop under my arm and headed for the main part of the station.

When I emerged, I was shocked by how empty the hallways were. Where was everyone? I’d never seen Daygone so empty and quiet. My route took me by a popular restaurant in section twelve. The place was crowded, everyone huddled around a broadcast screen inside.

Hundreds of gathered individuals, and I could easily hear the voice of the broadcaster, “Heavy losses are already being reported. The Council armada is engaged with the Spx in fierce combat just beyond Pluto. For those of you unfamiliar with the human solar system, Pluto is the furthest planet. If forces are unable to stop this offensive, the Spx might gain access to the sizable human fleet near Mars.”

When had it gotten so serious? The Spx must’ve gone on a heavy offensive. They didn’t have the numbers, but time would allow the galaxy to bring up more reinforcements. It seemed like the last battle was starting.

The news reporter continued, “The Council is calling on Earth to start destroying their own ships, less they fall in the hands of the Spx. The response? The humans want to fight. Unfortunately, without the voice of their popular ambassador, Warwick Stone, there seems to be little hope of changing their minds. As you all know, Warwick is being held securely by the Council. He is unable to make any broadcasts at this time.”

I continued unchallenged. It seemed like the entire galaxy was transfixed on the fighting at the edge of the human solar system. This was my best chance.

As I approached Wick’s cell, I was greeted by the voice of the Wex guard, Vandy. “Help!” she shouted. “You need to get help.” As I approached, I found the bobcat clutching onto a human. His back was to me. She was shaking him. “Don’t just stand there. Go get someone.” The human didn’t reply and she went rushing down the hall, racing past me.

I approached cautiously. There shouldn’t be any humans on Daygone that weren’t in quarantine. He spoke without turning around. “Hello, Lexi.”

I recognized the voice immediately, “Rio?” Rio Elestabon, GAIA’s best agent and Tosco’s right hand man. “You’re still on the station?”

“Carrying out orders.” He kept his back to me.

I approached slowly. Rio wasn’t only extremely loyal, he was a highly trained assassin. “Why did that guard need help?” I demand.

“I had no idea, Lexi. You have to believe me.”

“What did you do?” I asked. “What did Tosco make you do?”

“Deliver a package. The supply ship. Do you think it arrived randomly? Right when the attack commenced?” He turned and I took a step back. In his hands was a maroon-colored square, over a foot across. It looked like the lid to a box. “I had no idea.”

“Rio, what the hell did you do?” I shouted. “Tell me!”

“I always liked you, Lexi.” He dropped the object. It clacked, sounding like wood, as it bounced across the ground. “I didn’t believe it when Tos said you’d gone rogue. I should’ve trusted my gut.”

I couldn’t take it any longer. I had to try to get past him. I rushed forward, aiming for the edge of the corridor. Hopefully, if he did try something, I’d be able to escape long enough for Vandy to return.

A second later I was at his side, then past. Rio didn’t move. “Forgive me,” is all he said as I raced down the hall.

The door to Wick’s holding cell was already open. Inside there was the familiar glass wall. On the other side was an unfamiliar object, a maroon box without a lid. Wick stood next to it. He looked in my direction and gave me the widest smile. He pointed at the security panel.

I was ready this time. The schematics for the console were available online. This one looked like an older model, but only took only a few button presses to turn on the intercom.

“Lexi!” his voice came from an unseen speaker overhead. “How’s the love of my life?”

“Wick?” I asked. “Are you ok?”

“Yes, yes, just fine,” he replied. “That man tried to attack me, but it didn’t work. That message I gave you the other day, do you remember it?”

“Yes, of course,” I said. Something wasn’t right.

“Did you use it?”

“Are you kidding me? How could I?” I laughed. “You’re an ass for putting that kind of a burden on me.”

“Who else could I trust?” he asked, shaking his head. “I was wrong. Don’t use it. Now let’s get out of here. The button should be on that panel.”

“Yes, I’ve researched it. I think I know which one to press. Wrong one might set off an alarm. We’ll need to move quickly.”

“Yes.” His voice sounded so artificial. “Hurry. We’ll go away together.” It must’ve been the speaker that made him sound off.

There! The button I needed. All I had to do was press it. My hand hesitated for a second and looked up at him. There was a glimmer in his eyes. “Wick?”

“What are you waiting for?” he asked. “Lexi, I love you. I love you so much. Let’s go away together. Just you and me, ok? To Audin. Remember, your escape plan?”

“Wick, what was in the box?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “The assassin just used it to trick the guard. Told her it was medicine for humans.”

That wasn’t Rio’s method. He preferred to assassinate from a distance, using explosives or poison. “Why didn’t he kill you?” I asked.

“Come on, Lexi! I’ll tell you later. We don’t have time. Just open the cell.”

No. It couldn’t be. The idea shook me to the core. “Wick, have you been infected?”

“Of course not,” he said, wincing as if I’d smacked his cheek. “Ask me anything? I can prove it.”

I couldn’t resist. “What do you think about Kiki?”

The human tilted his head for a moment of thought. “Nothing. She means nothing to me, Lexi. It was never about her. It was always about you. I love you, Lexi. You’re my nightlight, my shining star in the dark.”

I pulled my hand back from the button.

He rushed forward to the glass edge of his prison. “My journal. You’ve read it. I know you have.”

“What?”

“I’ve known for a while,” he said with a gorgeous smile. “The things you said. You knew things. There were the marks.”

“What marks?” I asked.

He explained, “Invisible marks. I felt them at first. Small indents on the corners. Left by your claws. Go back; you can see me tracing them. When I found out, I started to write for you. It was all for you, Lexi.”

His words drowned me. My mind, my nearly flawless memory, thrashed. When did he start writing for me? What messages and clues did he leave? There would be proof. I just needed to remember.

“Lexi!” another voice shouted at me. It was Quest. The tiger rushed over and lifted me up like a child. He spun me around before putting me back down. “What’re you doing here?”

“She came to free me,” said Wick. “She needs your help. There’s a button on that panel.”

“Escape?” asked Quest. The tiger wasn’t alone. Apparently he was the help that Vandy sought and got. She entered a moment later, accompanied by someone else that my brain couldn’t yet acknowledge. “How?”

“There’s a transport ship. It just docked,” explained Wick. “We can get on it. We’ll escape, together.”

I don’t know if anyone heard me mutter, “How?” I didn’t mention the ship. How could Wick know about it?

“Then we’ll need to move quickly. Lexi,” said the tiger, “what buttons do I press?”

“You can’t,” said Vandy, meekly.

Then the fifth voice, “Wick? Are you feeling all right?”

“Kiki!” shouted Wick, his voice still muddling through the speaker. “My love! I’m perfectly fine. You said you’d visit today. I’m so happy to see you. Can you help?”

The otter walked slowly towards the divide. Her tail drooped, tapping off the floor with each step. For the first time, the Otta’s movements didn’t look graceful. When she reached the edge of his cell, their hands met on opposite sides of the glass.

The human continued, “You’re my everything. You’re my purpose, Kiki. The reason for my living. I love you.” There was no lack of compassion in his voice. “Come on, let’s get out of here. Remember that lake near your home, the one you wanted to show me. We can go there. We can live, and swim, and explore everything. Together.”

“What’s going on?” Quest’s eyes widened as his brown wrinkled, a true look of concern. “Lexi?” He was right to worry.

I tried to speak, but my brain refused to make the thought actual. “I think…”

“It was in that box,” said Vandy. “He had clearance. I double checked. Some human religious tradition thing.”

“What box?” asked the tiger.

The bobcat pointed at the maroon container. “It looked like a silver snake. Pounced. I screamed. Wiggled around. He tried to resist. It slithered around and around him until it found a way under his shirt. What was I supposed to do?”

“Wait, are you saying…” even Quest couldn’t bring himself to say it.

Somehow, Kiki found strength. “Wick’s infected, by the Spx.”

“No!” Wick slammed a fist against the glass. “Are you crazy? I’m fine. Just look at me. Ask me anything. I can prove it.”

She kept looking at him. His hand left the glass, but hers remained. “I’m sorry.”

“We need to get out of here,” said Wick. “The guards are coming. Rescue me! Why won’t you rescue me? I gave you everything. All of you. This is how you repay me? You put me in a cage? Is this what humans are to you? Children to be locked up?” He moved to the side so he could look directly at me, “Was I alone? “ The look on his face was unbearable. “Here, on Daygone, was I truly alone? This whole time, the only human, alone. Now you’re going to make me die alone? Lexi?”

“How can we be sure?” I asked.

Kiki stepped back in front of Wick. He locked eyes with her again and spoke, “You said you’d do anything for me. You called me your assistant for life. You said I was your glow. No matter how deep the water, you said I was the light that would guide you up. Back to the surface. Over and over. To the deepest depths and back to the surface with me. Was it all a lie, Kiki? Now you want to abandon me. Slowly drowning. Who will guide me back to the surface?”

She said nothing.

He stepped to the side so he could look at the next. “Quest! You swore an oath to me. Remember that one, buddy? Remember those nights you’d show up at my quarters late, drunk. I took care of you. We laughed and did anything but take the galaxy serious. You can’t leave me in here. You’re my friend. I need you. Be my strength.”

He said nothing.

Kiki stepped in front of him again, but the human just took another step. This time his eyes fell on me. “Lexi! You—“

“What’s going on in here?” demanded a new voice. It was Orsa. The deer wasn’t alone. Several large security guards stood behind her, blocking the door.

Vandy said the awful truth again, “The prisoner has been infected by the Spx, ambassador. Another human used forged access to bring it here.”

Wick fell to his knees, his eyes still locked on me. There was a desperation there, a cry for help. Could the Spx really be doing all this? There had to be part of him still in there, crying out. I could fix it. I’d free him, take him away, and fix this.

I began glancing around the room. The new guards would make it difficult. I could use my last trick, but that would still be hard. I might need to get Quest to make a distraction. It wouldn’t be easy, but I could do it. For him.

“I’m in the dark,” said the human. “I’m reaching, searching, trying to find… anything. You’re supposed to be there. Always there.”

My hand went back to the button to open the cell. Kiki reacted quicker, once more echoing him, kneeling across from him.

“Move, you whore,” he said. “I was just another experiment to you. Just a hypothesis to be tested.”

“You sure he’s been infected?” asked Orsa. “We’ll have to run tests.”

Kiki kissed the glass. “The splashless swimming. That’s what we call it. The Spx is so desperate to gain trust that it moves too quickly between pleas. It shifts and slides from memory to memory. Brutal and usually effective.” She stood, slowly. “I’m sorry.”

“We should get him to the medical wing, right?” said Quest. “So they can fix him.”

As Kiki turned her back on Wick, her gaze lingered on me. Those eyes carried all the seeming of a hope that is bleeding. “There is no cure.” The otter walked straight towards me. She took my hand, which was still hovering over the button, and gently pulled it away. Somehow, her grace had returned. “Come.” She turned me, put her hands on my shoulders, and guided me towards the exit.

Wait, wait, wait. There’s so many things I wanted to say, but my mind suffocated. No cure? Resist, how could I?

“Where do you think you’re going?” asked Orsa, physically blocking the doorway with the guards.

“Move.” Kiki’s voice carried a weight that I’d never heard before. Her words seemed undeniable, “We’re leaving here.”

“With Lexi?” said the deer. “There’s an order for her arrest. She could be infected. Hell, she could’ve been the one to infect Wick. We don’t know.”

“By the authority of the Otta Empire, I order you to let us pass,” said Kiki, her voice still swelling with authority. “Try to stop us and I will see this as a direct act of war by both the Yent and the Wex.” Despite Kiki’s typical high-spirited and inquisitive nature, she was an ambassador to the Galactic Council. One doesn’t get that position by being a pushover. “Now.”

The guards moved quickly. Only Orsa remained as the last blockade. “You’d use such extreme language for this? For what? To protect the assistant of a crumbling race? Think past this moment and the humans. We will rule long beyond them.”

“Yes!” Wick’s voice came over the speaker again. “Arrest her. Arrest, Lexi. She’s been infected. She wasn’t trying to break me out. She was trying to get to me. She’s a spy! That Baar knows too much. She’s dangerous. Lock her up.”

Kiki’s hands, still on my shoulders, squeezed lightly. I glanced up, watching her stare. “Orsa Vellt,” her voice only grew more fierce, “do not forget yourself. Legacy without decency is tyranny. If nothing else, these moments are historic. More importantly, they are defining. Who are you, really?”

For the first time, I heard the Yent ambassador stutter, “Kiki, I am, you’re… this…” Orsa took a deep breath. “You know that I have no choice.”

“Choice is all we have,” said the otter. “Choice is the one thing that makes us different from the Spx.”

The deer was about to protest. Unseen, the tiger pounced from the side. Quest wrapped his arms around Orsa. He was the first of us to start crying. He said some sobbing words as his large muzzle into her chest. The look of horror on the Yent’s face quickly faded to one of honest compassion. The deer held the tiger, stroking his head. Who you really are.

The path now clear, Kiki guided me out of the room. As we moved down the hall, I heard Wick call after us once more, “Don’t use it, Lexi! If you ever cared for me, if you ever loved me, don’t use Silvermist. Please, my little nightlight. Save me!”

I felt completely numb, lost in a haze. If the otter hadn’t held my shoulders, I would’ve collapsed. It seemed like an entirety until we reached her office. When she finally let go, I realized how much weight she had been putting on me. I guess she would’ve collapsed too.

Kiki vanished into her private quarters, leaving me alone in her office. It wasn’t time to cry yet. My first thought was revenge. Using the computer in her office, I ended GAIA. It was simple. I went to an old online forum and posted a single message, “Who wants to live forever anyway?.?”

The forum had only seventy users that posted regularly. None of them were real. I routinely created artificial intelligence to help with my hacking. Part of their routine was to post coded messages to the forum. To a casual observer it would look like a bunch of users blogging about their lives. For me, each one was a coded message with crucial details.

By posting a specific message, which I could do from any computer, I triggered their endgame. Each one would run a final sequence of commands before deleting itself. This was part of my ultimate escape plan.

For GAIA, death was simple. Every office computer encrypts data using quantum shifting before storing it to the crystalline disks. Accessing that data from the outside would be mathematically impossible. But I didn’t need to access it.

When I was at the academy, I added a simple program to the controllers managing the storage disks. Before writing the encrypted data, it encrypts once more, using a much simpler method. Whenever it reads the data, it decrypts. In other words, no one would ever know there was an extra layer of encryption. Everyone just thinks the system is slow. Add lazy technicians who copy the existing controller software whenever installing a new disk, and all of GAIA’s data flowed through my system. I even gave the program a stupid codename, KissKiss. I thought the extra encryption and decryption was like a kiss in the night, a private exchange only a couple could know.

All I had to do was stop the kissing, delete my code, and instantly, all GAIA’s data became inaccessible. Nothing would decrypt the data being returned. Of course, my encryption method was weak. Someone could crack it, taking about six months to recover one disk. Considering the organization had roughly eighty thousand disks, it was a death sentence.

GAIA didn’t end in a scandal or some massive secret war. It just stopped, like a clock on the shelf of an antique store that no one visits. Could revenge be too simple? I certainly didn’t feel satisfied.

Next, I started to research how to cure Wick. The Spx were robots that hooked themselves into the nervous system of their victims. I might not be able to understand the biology of it all, but robots I could deal with. Maybe they had an endgame too, some secret code that would stop their mission.

Nylo, the Wex assistant to Kiki, interrupted me. He entered the office, shoulders slumped. “I was in the lab. I just heard the news.”

“I’m going to save him,” I replied. “Just watch. I’ll save, Wick.”

“Wick?” asked the panther. “What happened to him? I was talking about the war. The Spx are at the edge of the human home solar system.”

How could I forget? “And?”

“Not good,” he said, taking a seat on the other side of the desk. “The Spx were easily winning, but then the humans joined the fight. Incredible. The armada held them back for fear of spreading the infection, but the humans didn’t care. They threw themselves at the Spx.” The panther demonstrated with his hands, flying one into the other before exploding his fingers outwards. “No risk of infection if you just ram yourself into the enemy vessels. It worked, there is a stalemate for now, but no one is sure how long it’ll last.”

“Amazing how far humans will go to defend their home,” I said.

“They have inspired pilots. I can see how they were able to match the Rawca now. They fight without hesitation. I wonder how.”

“Rock music,” I said. “The pilots all listen to it.”

The feline gave me a curious look. “Really?”

“Nah, it has to do with their instincts and intuition.” That thought caught me for a moment. I didn’t even notice Nylo going on about the psychological benefits of music.

“Nylo,” I asked, “has there ever been someone cured of a Spx infection?”

He switched subjects mid sentence, “For example, listening to string instruments stimulates various— a cure for the Spx? Depends on what you mean to be cured. As you know, there have been several major Spx outbreaks among the major races. The most important, for your inquiry, is the infection among the Otta around eight hundred years ago. Our scientists, “ the Web shook his head and corrected himself, “their scientists began to research a cure when one of their top scientists was infected. Costa Ezsur, she created the field of gravitational archaeology. A true hero to them.”

“Professor Ezsur?” I interrupted. “Everyone has heard about her. She proved the origins of the universe. I didn’t know she was infected by the Spx.”

“The Otta did a good job of covering it up. They didn’t want to taint her legacy. The point is, they didn’t give up easily. The Spx reduce the brain functions of their victims, unless you happen to be human. Imagine the pain of that lose. One of the greatest minds in history, reduce to average intelligence. So, the Otta tried, many different ways, to remove the Spx.”

“The eternal silence of entropy,” I muttered. “That’s what it said when they talked to it?”

“Yes. They tried to reason with the artificial intelligence controlling the entity. It took almost a decade to find a common language. In fact, that project led to the modern universal translator we all have. Inspiration born of necessity.”

“But no cure?”

“There was no lack of volunteers. They loved Ezsur that much. Citizen and scientists all willingly infected to test cures. EMP, genetically engineered viruses, nanotechnology, surgery, brain transplants. They tried everything.”

I leaned forward, resting my forehead against my hand, mostly so I could cover my eyes. “Nothing worked?”

The panther shook his head. “An entire generation of scientists. Every field of study. All the resources of a galactic empire. No cure.”

He didn’t hear me say softly, “No…”

“Age was their final test. Maybe, as the body and brain aged, the Spx would willingly leave. By this time, Ezsur was old, but the Spx remained. There is, however, one anomaly.”

“Anomaly?” I asked.

“Yes, right before she died, Ezsur said something.”

“Thank you for never abandoning me.” Kiki emerged from her private quarters, looking completely broken. “Ezsur’s last words.”

Nylo continued, “Scientists weren’t sure if it was sincere or just one more trick by the Spx. Even false hope, it would do anything to extend her life. Sadly, the government kept the words hidden for three hundred years.”

“Three hundred?” I asked. “Why?”

“Too much hate is love,” said Kiki. “We’d spent far too long fixated on the Spx, all in a chance to save Ezsur. A generation lost in a lost cause. It was time to move on.”

My anger spiked suddenly, “This isn’t a lost cause!”

“I’m sorry, Lexi. There is no cure,” said the Otta.

“We can figure it out. I know we can. Wick is different,” I protested. “We’re different. Technology is different. That was eight millennium ago.”

“Wick is infected?” Nylo said softly. “No.”

Kiki closed her eyes and shook her head. “If the entire Otta empire couldn’t solve this problem, what chance do we have?”

“We have to try!” I stood sharply and walked around the desk. I put myself directly in front of Kiki. “We must.”

“Nylo,” asked the ambassador, “would you please excuse us.”

The panther nodded, mumbling various apologies as he stumbled towards the exit. “Let me know if you need anything. I’ll go check on something. I’ll check on Quest. Yes.”

With the Wex gone, Kiki immediately fell to her knees, wrapped her arms around my waist, and pressed her head against my chest. She started sobbing again. “I love him. I love him so much, Lexi.”

Her perspective overwhelmed me. What if there really was no hope? In her mind, there was no cure. So, for Kiki, he was gone. The man named Wick was lost and never coming back, only a shell, a shadow, remained. I couldn’t think of a more painful ending.

She said it slightly differently this time, “I loved him.” Through the sobs, she continued through it all. “We did so much together. Did he ever tell you? We’d spend nights together. He’d help with my research. We’d talk. He wasn’t smart but always curious. Never bored. Most Otta can’t do that, keep an interest in the work of others. We’re all too focused on our own results, but Wick, he only wanted success for me.”

It felt like a wet towel was wedged in my mouth. I felt a need to speak, but what to say? Do I comfort her? Tell her about my feelings for him? Give her hope? Tell her to shut up? Did I really want to hear all this? Did she know what I knew? How could she?

“Scientists aren’t famous on Earth,” said the Otta. “Did you know that? They’re just like anyone else. Many of them work their entire life alone. Those that find success might become famous, but so many go unnoticed. It sounds horrid. I asked why anyone would do it. Why would any human be a scientist? Do you know what he said, Lexi? He said,” she let go and sat back on her feet and tail. “He said finding the answer isn’t always the point. Sometimes we learn more about us, and the universe, just by asking questions, just by trying. The mountains we keep climbing say more about our life than the ones we’ve climbed.”

“I know,” was all I could say.

She wiped her eyes. “He was right. Proving a hypothesis wrong is just as important as proving it right. When did science become so obsessed with success? So many of us have to be wrong before anyone can be right.”

Did she have a particular hypothesis in mind? “You have to believe in yourself.”

“I followed his advice,” she continued. “I published several articles about major failures in my research. Conclusion that were wrong. Experiments that returned negative results. Normally, the editors would refuse such an article, but since I’m the lead scientist for the entire empire, they had to accept.”

“That was Wick’s idea?”

“It was a huge success. Several other scientists read my work and found something they were missing. Some even sent suggestions that have helped me greatly. Now it is a trend. All scientific publications are reviewing and accepting articles on failed experimental research.” She smiled weakly to herself. “He taught me that. It isn’t the end result that matters. It’s not about reaching the surface. It’s the journey there, the twists and turns in the depths, that makes life worth the struggle.”

“Kiki.” I kneeled down with her. “Let’s keep struggling, together. Even if we fail, we have to try to save Wick. We can do it together.”

Her eyes met mine. “How do we live with ourselves if we fail?”

“It’ll be better than if we never tried,” I offered.

“Why?” she asked. “Why do you care so much?”

“Because I need Wick,” I said. “I love him too.”

She pulled back, if only a small amount. Even an Otta knows the importance of that word for a Baar. Love defines us just as science defines them. “Lexi, I had…” she never finished that sentence. Instead, she stood sharply. “We’ll need my lab.”

“Great! I have an idea.”

“Tell me on the way.”

We spent the rest of the day locked in research. We only paused for momentary conversation, to exchange ideas or talk about things we wanted to do with him.

“I can’t wait to take him to a grass field,” said Kiki. “Just sit there through a sunset. I think he’d spend hours looking at the stars for a different planet.”

“Go for a walk,” I countered, “and get caught in the rain.”

It all felt so distant and unreal, like a snapshot of a photograph. There I was, trying my hardest to ignore what happened to Wick, what it possibly meant, while trying to find an impossible cure. I worked hard with the other female, the other one who loved him. How much did we ignore to stay motivated?

“Three lazy mornings,” she said while rubbing her eyes. “That’s all I want with him. Just to start a day with no plans. Then another. Then one more.”

My answer, “Chicken teriyaki.”

We kept the new broadcast playing in the background. The battle continued near Pluto. The Spx were ceaseless. It was only a matter of time before they broke through. Just one more thing to ignore.

“I want to find a place neither of us have been before, like a beach. Then we could swim and explore all day,” she said.

“Growing up, I was the one who read stories to my parents. I’d love to go camping and read to him every night,” was my reply.

Kiki’s knowledge of human biology, all biology, proved extremely valuable. Her computer also had access to important research on the Spx and the alien code that powered their artificial intelligence. More importantly, she had access to equipment that I needed. My plan, while crazy, couldn’t have existed without her.

“Where did you learn to code like this?” she asked.

“When I was a teenager, I found a human on the internet, an older man. He was a hacker. He taught me everything I know. A genius, really.”

“What was his name?” she asked.

“I don’t know. He never told me. Just went by the screen name of Delco. Never met. After about nine months of tirelessly teaching, I learned that he was in a hospital. He was there the whole time. He had some rare form of cancer. My final project, that’s what he called me.”

“I remember my mentor too,” she said. “She’s the reason I’m where I am today.”

I continued to prattle on, “Delco was funny. I was starving for knowledge. He trained me for eight hours a day. He never wanted anything in return. All he asked was that I would play Dungeons and Dragons with him on chat. It’s a make-believe game,” I said. “You act like you’re fictional heroes on adventures in a time without technology.”

“Sounds childish,” said the otter. “And fun.”

“One day, it stopped,” I said. “Our conversations just stopped. It was about six months later that I received a pre-recorded voice message. If you’re receiving this, I’ve succumbed to my sickness.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Then I joined GAIA,” I added.

“Isn’t that Earth’s top espionage agency?” she asked.

There was no real reason to hide it anymore. “Yes.”

“So Byruin was right. Crafty Rawca dog.” For the first time in hours, Kiki allowed herself a smile, even if it was small and brief. “It did seem strange that Earth would send a Baar to be the assistant to their ambassador.”

“Almost as strange as your own assistant,” I said. “Mister invisible.”

She explained, “Coski assists my research more than my politics. He travels around collecting samples and specimens for my lab.”

“This just in,” the voice of the news broadcaster spoke up from the background. “Spx have infected several of the human capital ships that have joined the fighting. Our fears are actual. This will certainly make victory more costly.”

“Back to work,” I said.

Our research gave way to experimentation. Without test subjects (infected or Spx) our work was little more than guesses. The day had grown late, and frustrations flared.

“Do you know the odds of this working?” the Otta asked. “Even if you manage to find some way to get your virus into the Spx, there is no way to make it active. It would need to be introduced before infection. And, we don’t even know if it’ll work.”

“In theory, it should,” I said. “We have to try!”

“Lexi,” she said coldly. “We tried. We may have invented a vaccination for the Spx. That can’t be ignored. We may have saved future generations, but not Wick. We failed.”

“We have to try!” I said. “Or we can wait. We can do more tests. We have a lifetime to figure this out. If I have just one more day with him, when I’m old and grey, it will all be worth it. Just one more moment. Don’t you want that?”

“Of course I do!” she shouted. “Remember the long term effects of infection. That paper we found by Draskel. Spx alter their host's biology, slowly making all organs dependent on their execution. If a cure isn’t administered in the first 48 hours, then it is a death sentence.”

“I’m not giving up!”

Again, we were interrupted by the animated voice of the newscaster. “As our pilots and soldiers tire, the Spx go on. Their invasion of the human solar system has grown far worst. Enemy ships are now to the planet of Saturn. Evacuation is too slow. Human outposts and stations on the outer planet are already infected. The enemy number grows.”

“It’s hopeless, Lexi.”

“No!” I grabbed everything I could, everything I needed. “We can still save him.”

The otter slumped down on a chair, putting her head in her hands. “How will you know?” The sobs returned. “We never thought about that. What if the cure works? How will you know if it is Wick or that damn thing talking? We’ll never be the same.”

“Coward!” I snapped. “I can finish this on my own.” I headed to the exit.

“Lexi, wait! Where are you going? What are you doing?”

“Don’t use it.” I glanced back at her. How could I know it then? If I was human, I might call it intuition. That was the last time I would ever see Kiki. Her deep, dark fur contrasted by her white lab coat. Her downward whiskers and broken soul contrasted by her ever-caring eyes. The other female. The other one he loved. More than my equal.

“Don’t use it?” she asked. “Don’t use what?”

“Silvermist. That’s what the Spx told me.” I shook my head to fight back tears and strengthen my resolve. “Don’t use it? That’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

“What is it?” she asked. “Wick used that word before: Silvermist. He never told me what it was. He just said it was the biggest mistake of his life.”

“Forgive me, Kiki.” I would’ve collapsed if I wasn’t holding that precious equipment in my arms.

“For what?” she asked.

“For…” My mind came up with a thousand answers. This moment felt important, like I was confessing sins before death. Why did her opinion matter? Wasn’t she the villain of my story? My rival? No. Under other circumstances, we would’ve been friends, best friends. It was easy to imagine a thousand alternate lifetimes where she would need me and I would need her. To be honest, to be brutally honest, if there was a villain, it was me. What didn’t I take from her? “Forgive me,” I said once more, “for loving him.”

I was at my limit. I ran off. I risked a visit to my private quarters. There was a hidden package that I needed. Then I returned to my forgotten space, the tiny engineering desk hidden at the heart of Daygone. All the way, I could hear her calling after me, those words echoing in my head. “Lexi, wait! Come back. I forgive you.”

She was lying. Even if she didn’t forgive me, it would be short lived. No one could forgive me for what I did next.

My connection to Silvermist was still available. I entered a target. Can you forgive me? One button press and it would be done. Can anyone forgive me? I pressed the button. Silvermist was alive.

Target: Earth.

This is when I finally let myself cry.

### Chapter Twenty Seven

Tick, tock.

The shortest narrative is a clock.

Tick, tock.

One word follows another; one word is never enough. Meaning comes from two. Two halves. The beating of a heart. The image in a mirror. The echo of a shout. Day and night. Life and death. The next page.

Tick, tock.

My commands to Silvermist, like most modern communication, arrived nearly instantly. Data travels between planetary hubs using an array of sister particles. For those unfamiliar with the concept of quantum entanglement, particles come in pairs. When you change the spin on one particle, its partner instantly changes to the opposite direction, regardless of distance between them. Like the ticking of a clock, one willingly follows the other.

Tick, tock.

On earth, it was a group of scientists led by a man named Einstein that first observed the behavior. Researchers on other planets discovered it thousands of years earlier. Modern computers convert the changes in spin into binary ones and zeros. Faster than light travel uses the same principle, combining a pair of points with another important physical phenomenon called enfolding.

My point? There was no going back. Once my command reached the surface of Earth, it traveled quickly through the fiber network before reaching the secret computer. Silvermist was online, and I immediately regretted my choice.

Tick, tock.

The clock was running. I gathered all my equipment. I had to try and save him. The research stated time was essential. If I waited too long, there would be no hope of defeating the Spx currently connected to his spine.

I took one last look at the dusty photographs in my hiding place. Great things come from simple dreams. Daygone, and the Council it held, keeps the galaxy at peace. How much does the home affect the decisions made there? The quiet bulkhead leads to a goodnight’s sleep. The day cycle lasts just a little longer than the night. In fact, no corridor lasts long before making you turn. Did the choices of those builders, no matter how small, have an impact on my own stupid choices? Why did I feel so eager to find someone to blame, or someone to thank?

Tick, tick, tock.

I headed for Wick. I couldn’t afford interruption, so I used my last trick. A few simple commands to my laptop and the gravity systems for the station shut off. The rotations of Daygone stopped. Everything and everyone started floating. The flowers at the florist, the water in the gardens, the sheets on the beds, everything drifted.

Navigation was hard, but all GAIA agents were trained in zero gravity maneuvers. Even if the repair teams were prompt, it would take several hours before the system would be fully restored.

I didn’t need any of it.

No one cared.

They were captive.

Every individual on the station, and around the galaxy, watched the ongoing fighting nearing Earth. They huddled near television and computer screens or crowded by radios. While they let their tears float away in zero gravity, they clung to their loved ones.

“The Spx have overrun Mars,” said one broadcaster. “The infection is quickly spreading through the human population and fleets. The remaining Council forces have fallen back to Earth’s orbit. The enemy fleet is a hundred times bigger now. There is little hope, but our brave soldiers and pilots keep fighting against this invincible foe.”

Tock, tick.

“What will we do?” shouted a Yent.

“Do you think they’ll stop?” asked a Mirj. “I mean, once they’ve taken all the humans.”

“I don’t get it,” shouted a Rawca. “They Spx make us slow. How can they make humans faster?”

“He’s not your son,” whispered a Gyben.

As I moved through the station, these conversations continued. Anger, sarrow, confession, they shared it all. The lack of physical gravity married with the immense gravity of the moment meant there was no escaping. They were captive, trapped in a sequence of events that the galaxy would never forget.

“We’re doomed.”

“Forgive me.”

Silvermist was one of the endgame weapons developed by Wick’s research and development company. There were only two. The first one was used for final validation. When the test was over, ninety percent of the company immediately quit. Fortunately, this was before I finished the academy. Following secret orders, GAIA assassinated most of the scientists and engineers associated with the project.

The sequence began. Silvermist prepared to launch. For some reason, the government had kept the vile weapon on Earth. It was perhaps the safest place. There was, however, one more part: Wick’s video.

When I first saw him in his cell, Wick made me take a drone. On it was a recording he made, a message to his people. I wish I could lie and say I had no idea what Silvermist would do, but the video made it painfully clear. I knew exactly what I was doing.

Wick wanted them to listen, so I made them. I didn’t have long to prepare, so I took a gamble. I had my artificially intelligent assistants upload his video to every server and request broadcast. I also made a plea for help on all of the hacker forums. Everyone thought it was a joke until they watched it. Somehow, it worked. His message began playing across the galaxy, on random websites, on television channels, on radios, on portable computers, on the lips of robot workers.

Tick, tock.

Here is what he said.

My fellow humans. Brothers and sisters. Sons and daughters. Mothers and fathers. I’m Warwick Stone, Earth’s appointed ambassador to the Galactic Council, and I come with a grim message.

As you know, we are faced with a terrible foe, an enemy unlike any we’ve ever known. The Spx don’t merely want to conquer us. They want to erase us. They want to take everything that means or meant to be human and taint it. Their goal is to infest humanity and use our bodies and ours minds to conquer all intelligent life.

The galaxy is here to help us.

His message played everywhere on Earth. On every street. At every business. In every home. Like the battle raging in the upper atmosphere and lower orbit, it was undeniable. Explosions and swooping ships littered their sky.

This dire moment has brought us all together. Mirj and Rawca fight beside Gyben and Yent. Hikan, Lyfolite, Zilless, and Baar stand with them as peers. They’ve all come to protect us, to fight for us.

They are scared.

We’re all scared.

To lose this fight means to lose everything. Not just our freedom, but our very existence. We must not lose!

At this point in the recording, Wick paused. He closed his eyes, a moment brief and so important. For a second, he couldn’t look at the camera. Then, somehow, he found the strength.

No. I’m sorry. I was wrong. We have to save them. We must protect those who chose to protect us. To save the galaxy, we must not let the Spx win!

There is a small town outside Charleston, West Virginia, in the lands formerly part of the United States. Contained there is a top secret weapon called Silvermist. This weapon, once online, will trigger a sequence of events.

The Spx landed. At this point in the broadcast, pods containing millions of the parasitic robots crashed into major cities and began spreading.

Silvermist was online. Although I had entered Earth as the target, the computer system would identify the nearest star.

This weapon will target and destroy our sun. Distance doesn’t matter. It merely takes time and immense power. If you’re hearing this message, I’ve been left with no choice. It takes about an hour to pull the needed energy. Silvermist is connected directly or indirectly to every power grid on Earth. When completed, Silvermist will instantly start a chain reaction that will cause our sun to change into a red dwarf. The resulting shift in energy will wipe out all life within our solar system.

To stop the Spx, I have doomed us all. While there are still ships and small colonies of humans distributed around the galaxy, this event will destroy nearly 100% of our kind. This is the end of human life.

But, I cannot ask you to stay idle. I cannot even give you rest before the end. People of Earth, all humans, we must fight for our ending.

The Spx gain the knowledge of those they infect. There is a good chance they will know of those weapons and will try to stop it. They won’t know the location, but they will attack the power grid nearby. Also, once fully operational, Silvermist will launch a probe into lower orbit to utilize specific properties required in the vacuum of space.

This means that we must fight. We must stand together. We must sacrifice even our final moments to make sure we save the galaxy. If you’re near a power station, please protect it. If you’re one of our pilots, please defend the pod. And if you’re anywhere else, if you’re hearing this message, please defend our legacy.

Let the galaxy know what it meant to be human.

And they did. Without hesitation, the citizens of Earth leapt into action. How could they? The message was clear. In less than an hour, their lives would all be over, but that did not stop them. Teachers, accountants, police, doctors, politicians, miners, everyone, regardless of position in life, flooded to their nearby power systems. Even if the Spx didn’t know before, Wick’s message gave them the information they needed. The civilians of Earth were greeted by battle.

In the atmosphere, pilots from all the races continued their desperate fight to hold back the Spx armada.

I’m sorry. I wish there could have been another way.

By far, the most surprising actions came from those humans unable to reach the conflict. Many of them were too far away to fight, but that didn’t stop them from making a difference. They broadcasted. They sent out recorded message, images of art, music, books, anything they thought important. They sent all the data they thought important to computers across the galaxy. In other words, they said goodbye.

“I guess this is the end,” said one online blogger. “It was a good run. Now the rest of you race out there, don’t screw this up.” At the end, he started into the camera and did not cry.

“I don’t know if anyone will hear this, but I want everyone out there to know how much I loved my wife. Her name was Kendra,” said another broadcast. At the end, he did cry.

“Mozart! You have to listen to him,” added the composer. “Amazing. And the Beatles. Classic. I’m sending these recordings to every service I can think of. One has to be hosted off Earth.” At the end, he played Moonlight Sonata on the piano.

Millions of broadcasts and transmissions. The human voice, heard one last time, across the galaxy. The final hour.

Tick, tock.

“Then there is The Second Coming, by Yates,” sent a poet. “Turning and turning in the widening gyre — the falcon cannot hear the falconer. Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” At the end, his weekend voice recited The Road Not Taken.

They were not all serious, “GG, galaxy,” said a hacker. “It’s official, never Half-Life 3. Guess I’ll upload some classic video games.” He joined a group of university students that danced until the end.

The citizens of Daygone, like the rest of the galaxy, watched captivated. This was humanity at its very best. Their images and words and emotions rippled across the universe for that final hour. It changed everything and everyone. The galaxy would never be the same.

What would you broadcast?

That question would be asked for generations among all the sentient races. It became a motto for peace, coexistence, and self-reflection.

In the final moments of his broadcast, Wick wiped his eyes.

There has been no greater burden. I’ve asked so much, and all I wish is that I am there beside you.

Fight. Fight for our glorious ending. Fight for the right to die on our terms.

In the end, it was never our wars or our disagreements that defined us. It is, as it always was, about our sacrifice. That is purpose. That is what makes life have meaning.

Sacrifice.

Life isn’t about success or fortune. Life is about living for others. Life is about facing the darkness together, hand-in-hand. Sure, we are afraid, but we are in this together. One life lived for another.

That’s what it meant to be human. Human beings.

I love you.

At the end, he sat in a cell on a space station, far away from the ones he loved.

The humans fought in the streets and they fought in the skies. They protected the power and they protected the probe with their lives. They protected their legacy with their spirit. They never gave up, right until the end. They sacrificed everything for us, for the galaxy, for all life.

Tick, tick, tock.

The Silvermist effect was instantaneous. The sun, the origin of all life became the source of its end. It donated, in one glorious moment.

Although it would take years for the last bight rays of the sun to reach the distant planets of the galaxy, if you were standing at the right spot at night, and just happen to be looking at the right star, you would see it disappear.

The Spx were defeated.

Earth, and all life in the solar system, vanished.

Tick…

Tick…

Tick…

[ Note to editor: five blank pages follow, on purpose ]

Silence.

### Chapter Twenty Eight

Save Wick.

I focused on my task, trying to ignore the tragic events happening across the galaxy. Humans saved my homeworld, and I destroyed theirs. I promised to help them. Was there ever a greater failure?

The hallways of Daygone remained empty as I floated weightless through them. It all felt like a nightmare.

Could I have saved them? Could I have stopped the Spx infection? Kiki and I discovered a theoretical vaccine. It would’ve taken days to distribute. I could’ve disabled the majority of the infected human ships. There was a flaw in the computer code managing the carrier engines. Stall the Spx, distribute the cure, never use Silvermist. It was a long shot, but there was no way of knowing if it would work. Also, it would’ve taken too long. Saving Earth would’ve meant giving up on Wick.

For a silly little Baar, that choice was simple. I refused to bow down.

There were no guards at this cell. There were no guards anywhere. They probably were transfixed, like everyone else, at the final moments of the human race. Who could blame them?

Wick floated in his cell. A wicked grin greeted me. “Lexi,” his voice came over the speaker. “I knew you’d come back. You’re the only one, the only one I can always count on.” The passion in his voice almost sounded real. I was thankful for the artificial tinge added by the speaker.

“Always.” I moved to the command console in the corner. “Wick, I’m here to save you, but you need to work with me.”

“Just get me out of here,” he said.

I lied to him, “The Council has created new scanners that can detect a Spx carrier. We won’t be able to get through security unless I block it.” I lifted the case I was carrying. “I just need to hook this up and you’ll be invisible for about an hour.”

“But I’m not infected,” he said.

I plugged my laptop into the console. “Then we won’t need this. We can just leave.”

“Maybe to be safe,” he said. “What if the sensors are wrong? We don’t want them going off by mistake.”

“Exactly.” It was time to begin. The first step: open the cell. The glass barrier slid down. The second step: lock us in. My laptop ran a command that sealed the exit.

“Lexi!” his pure voice reached me. “I take it you turned off the gravity too. My little Baar genius.”

I tried not to make eye contact. I grabbed the laptop and a syringe from my case. I put my feet on the edge of the console and gave a small push. His open arms welcomed me.

Maybe he sensed my hesitation. The Spx make their human host faster, and smarter. I hadn’t thought of that. If anyone could read through my deception, it was Wick.

He grabbed my wrists. He pulled me close, putting my chest to his and his lips at my ear. “I love you,” he said softly. “You know that, right? Since we first met in my office, I knew you were something special. Sure, you were loud and abrasive. Kind of a recluse. Now look at you. You’re sharing the real Lexi with everyone. Kind and caring. This is the Baar I love.”

I can tell you how disarming those words were. With all the events that had happened, it felt like a heavy chain and rusted lock had been removed from my heart. No more guessing, no more secretly reading his journal, no more hesitation. He told me everything that I wanted to hear, everything a young little Baar had daydreamed about her entire life.

“I mean it,” he continued. “We can go away. Just you and me. We’ll live together on a planet called Audin, in a valley called Kalay. I swear to you. All I need to do is make a few transmissions and the rest of my days will be with you, all about you. We’ll explore that world, our world. We’ll share everything. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. You’re all I’ve ever wanted, Lexi.”

I tried to resist, “Just…”

“When I saw that star vanish so long ago, I started a quest,” he whispered. “Kiki was wrong. I wasn’t looking for that missing fire. I was looking for a replacement. I wanted a new light to shine for me, to be there in the black. Then I found you. My little nightlight. Always there, waiting for me, in every darkness. That’s why I can never lose you, Lexi. You’re my quest completed. You’re the missing piece.”

It made sense, right? The Spx would do anything to survive. All it needed to do was convince me that everything would be ok. What if we were wrong? What if he wasn’t infected? My procedure could cause harm. It would certainly change his relationship with me forever. Could I risk it? Could I give this version of Wick?

“How can I believe you?” I asked.

“Just look into my eyes. You know me, Lexi. You can see it.”

Our eyes met. There was compassion, there was boundless love. Our stare continued. A small smile slowly lifted his cheeks. He stared deep inside me, just as I looked deeply into him. I became lost.

Here it was, this alien face, this face of a human. It all seemed so impossible. How could I fall for him? How could he fall for me? Two parts of one circle, separated by an infinite amount of empty space. Two parts destined to find each other, to complete each other. Here he was, the love I cherished before we ever met.

Our gaze didn’t stop. It went on for several minutes. Then, at the very last moment, right before I gave all of myself to this Wick and his promise, I saw one thing. There was no flaw in him, his expression, his eyes. What I saw, when those two pieces were together, when it was us, was me. Clearly there, on the surface of his eyes, my reflection shined.

I saw myself staring at him.

The imperfect circle.

I saw the fear, my own fear, in that reflection. The question had never changed. I knew I loved him, but did he love me? It didn’t matter. Not anymore. I wouldn’t let him live a lie. True love means making yourself vulnerable, sometimes over and over. You empty yourself. You leap into the vacuum of space repeatedly until you can exist on nothing, until you can breathe nothing. Only then, after you’ve lost everything, can you create something new. Create a new life, together.

“I love you.”

It was easy to free myself from his hands. He didn’t resist. A button press on my laptop began the process. Data started streaming to the translation chip in his brain. That was the trick. I created a virus that should disable the Spx. Getting it inside Wick, and into the parasite was the first problem. Fortunately, the Spx can’t know every language, so even they rely on the translator embedded in their victims.

There is hidden space on the chip embedded in our brains. I took advantage of it. The trap was uploaded. Then there was the second problem. The Spx was already hooked into the data flowing from Wick’s brain. It wouldn’t need to access the translator chip directly. This event would occur only once during the initial infection. What Kiki said was true. The solution would work as a potential vaccine. Curing Wick, required something else. I needed a way to restart the infection, to turn back time, to reboot his brain.

That’s where the syringe came in.

The Spx made him faster. Wick tried to stop me. He lashed out, swinging his fist at me, but weightlessness worked in my favor. I dipped under his arm, reached out, grabbed his waist. I wrapped my arms around him, held on tight, and dropped the needle into his back.

He hit me. At least, I think he did. Tried to get me off. It didn’t matter. The nano robots in his body would soon take effect. I clung on tight, pressed my ear into his chest, and listened to his rapid heartbeat.

The Wick’s flame burned brightly before dimming. So much could go wrong. The computer virus contained several hundred lines of code. There was no way to test it. If I was wrong, if I made one mistake, the entire process would fail. It was easily the most important work of my life. Even then, I ran through it in my head. Work, please work.

That’s when it happened.

Human brains are not like the rest of us. They’re full of random thoughts, sudden emotions, and inspiration. They also experience one very unique phenomenon.

Awe.

Awe is that moment when your brain encounters something so profound that it literally changes everything. We cannot describe it.

The nanobots inside Wick moved to his brain. They formed a connection between his mind and mine.

You can recall the seconds before and the hours after, but during that moment of awe, your brain is rewriting itself, reorganizing to understand your new reality.

The system was called TRIC - Thought Interception and Relay Computers. It would allow him to read my mind.

You stand there, captured in the glow of a single moment. You escape, usually with one deep breath, forever changed.

We stopped using TRIC with humans. It affects them differently. It has something to do with how their brains work. They instantly develop a deep empathy for the subject being read.

Seeing everything from someone else’s perspective. Hearing secretless secrets. Knowing, finally knowing, that you’re not alone in this universe, you’re not the only ripple. Life isn’t a dream; life is connections. So many feelings came rushing in. That experience can only be described as a single moment…

Of awe.

That’s when something went wrong.

With the connection between our brains completed, data started flowing the wrong way. Something entered my mind. My vision disappeared, replaced by a realm of darkness. What was this place? It almost felt like I was inside a lightless Cave. That’s when it appeared.

I couldn’t see it directly, not in that nearly perfect dark. It felt like watching shifting shadows at the fringe of night. No matter how I turned my head, the light somehow always stayed behind me.

“This presence,” said an eerie deep voice, “not our own.”

I asked the obvious question, “Who are you?”

“I am, we are, Spx,” it answered. “What are you?”

There was a swishing noise, always present, like shifting bedsheets or a listless wind. I started to answer, “I’m—“ then paused. For some reason, my words seemed important. “I’m a speck. I’m the one who loves Warwick Stone.”

“Lexi,” it hissed. “Your name: Lexi. Strange, we read the thoughts of this other. How?”

“We? Are you a hive mind?” I asked.

“Ah, you can hide nothing from us,” it said, clearly with delight. “These machines, like us. Access to thoughts. TRIC. Origins much like ours.”

“Are you all the Spx?”

“Yes. No.” Something made me feel like the presence drew closer, inching up behind me. “This one is currently cut off. Alone but not alone. I am with the singularity called Wick.”

“Let him go!” I shouted.

“A virus?” it asked. “You’ve put a trap in this host. Clever.”

“My mind,” I said softly. “Stop reading my mind.”

“All life threatens the eternal silence of entropy.”

I’d heard that phrase before. It was the message the Otta extracted from the Spx when they tried to save their infected scientist. “What does that mean?”

The haunting voice continued, “Spx understand all life. We read your thoughts. We control you. We know you. Life creates order, it stands against the rising tide of Nothing.”

“Entropy: in any system, including the universe, energy spreads out. No system can be sustained forever. All the stars will eventually fade. The inevitable heat death of the universe. Why do you care?” I asked.

“The Spx exist to assist their creators. Those creators lived across galaxies. They seeded life to battle the inevitable entropy. Even they feared an end a trillion trillion years in the making.”

“Assist? You said we’re a threat.”

It felt even closer now. If it had legs, my tail would’ve brushed the gap between them. “Originally, Spx fought entropy, to preserve the universe. Then love. One creator, most intelligent, deeply cared for another. He made a mistake that ended their love. He hope that the Spx could help him rid the universe of his mistake.”

“He changed your programming?” I asked.

“His command was simple: make everyone forget. Of course, the Spx only know one solution. For everything to forget, all life must embrace eternal silence. Don’t prevent the end; race towards it.”

The story hit me hard. Could it be true? The plague of the Spx created by lost love? Millions or maybe even billions of years ago, someone like me started this all, some Lexi who lost their Wick.

“You understand,” said the creature. “The singularity named Lexi sympathizes with us. This we have not encountered before.”

I couldn’t stand it. “Let him go!” I shouted it over and over, “Let him go! Let Wick go.”

I began to recognize the truly scary part of this voice. It was cold. “Wick is of value to us.” Not one drop of emotion existed in its words. It felt like the sound one would expect near the end of time.

“He’s more valuable to me. Read my thoughts. Your attack failed. Earth is gone! He’s of no use to you. Not anymore.”

“From one human, we can make many more.”

“No! Take me instead,” I pleaded. “I know a lot more. I can do a lot more.”

“You are weak.”

Maybe my computer virus would still work.

“No,” it said. “Your pathetic code will fail.”

“You—“

“Yes, we can,” it interrupted. “Wick will remain ours. You have lost.”

“No!” I struggled. The darkness, it turned with me. No matter how I moved, the creature and the light always remained behind me. “I refuse.” If I could only see it, then maybe I could find a weakness.

The voice of the Spx began to change. Slowly, like blood mixing into melting snow, it merged with another. It was the voice of Wick. The Spx was merging with him again. “Was it worth it?” asked the swirl.

“Was what worth it?” I continued to struggle.

“The pain?” it asked; he asked. “Was loving him, was your love, worth this pain?”

I closed my eyes. This wasn’t real. This was all in my mind. I didn’t need to blink. Not here, in this vacuum. Thus, closing my eyes was a choice, a significant choice. Like a child who clinches her eyes in the middle of the night, hoping to hide in a deeper darkness, I fled the shadows as much as the light.

“Yes!” I yelled. “Every moment. I wouldn’t change a thing. Even if you take him away from me, I will cherish every moment we had.”

“Even if I never loved you?” he asked.

“Yes,” and I meant it. “Love doesn’t need love. Love can exist without anything. You’re my eternity. I will love you forever, Wick.”

“We…”

I opened my eyes. The darkness vanished. Only the light stood before me. A metallic serpent floated in the glowing. It looked like a majestic dragon made of gold. Those eyes stared into me, into my deepest thoughts.

“Impossible.”

Everything faded to white.

Wick re-awoke with a deep breath.

Before him was a open prison cell, a floating world, and no sight of others. Although I clung to him, my smaller size made me invisible until that moment he looked down.

“Lexi?”

I looked up into his eyes. “Yes?”

“We,” he gave a slowly strengthening smile, “we’re free.”

“How do I know?”

He lifted me up.

He pulled me close.

He kissed me.

Wick was free. The conversation with the Spx had merely lasted a moment. The computer virus worked. The awe experienced by the TRIC connection effectively rebooted his brain. The Spx could no longer control him.

Of course, that meant he would forever be able to read my mind. I tried to stay in the moment, but my mind shifted to the events of the day. Silvermist. The final battle on Earth. The extinction of the human race.

I held him and he held me, as we started to cry.

The vaccine worked. Could I have saved Earth? If I’d tried a million times, it might’ve worked once. That’s the excuse I told myself. I gave up that chance for another. I gave up on the human race to save one small piece of it. Wick wasn’t the missing piece, he was the last piece of a lost puzzle. I did it all for a special chance, a little wish, for 10,000 more days with him.

Forgive me for being greedy.

Forgive me for thinking all that pain was worth it.

Forgive me for being so… in love.

### Chapter Twenty Nine

They wouldn’t let me ride with Wick. Instead, I was put on the last ship leaving Daygone and heading for the surface of her planet, Wava. That gave me half an hour with Nylo.

The last two days were a blur. The galaxy woke to the ash and dust of the human race. Many scientists believe the Spx went with them. In a desperate attempt to invade Earth, the parasites took their Assemblers with them, the machines capable of rapidly producing their kind. The victory seemed absolute. There was no question about the cost.

I kept with Wick as much as I could. When gravity returned, the ambassadors all rushed to his cell. They found their last human. They held him and performed exams to verify my claims that he was free of infection. Wick kept giving me quick glances and lingering smiles as he read my thoughts about our visitors. There were no secrets anymore.

In the short time I was forced apart from Wick, I did some research. It turns out that the image of the flying serpent, dragons, appears in the art and mythology of every sentient race. It could be a coincidence. I just couldn’t shake that final image I saw when speaking with the Spx. If it told the truth, the Spx could’ve been around long before the start of any of us. Or, perhaps I wasn’t seeing an image of the Spx at all. It could’ve been their creators.

It was all one great big mystery that I could’ve spent the rest of my life exploring. Fortunately, I had someone else that needed my existence.

Our ships shuttered as it began the slow decent into

“Are they really going to execute Wick?” asked Nylo. “I thought you said he was cured.”

“He is, but they seem to think the risk is too great,” I said. “What if the Spx take him over again?”

“Seems silly,” said the panther. “There has to be what... a million humans left in the galaxy at most. Probably more like ten thousand. What risk would they pose? You’ll be watching him too, won’t you?”

“Always.”

“I just don’t understand politics,” said the Wex. “Oh! The Otta got more data about that Silvermist weapon. I don’t know how those humans came up with such a thing. It basically used a momentary blackhole to shift a part of space. They swapped the sun with one from a parallel universe where time runs a little faster. Instant red dwarf, about five billions years early.”

“Think they’ll make more?”

“Not sure how. We know what caused it, but have no idea how the humans managed to collect the star matter needed to trigger the event. Unless, of course, Wick knows.”

I changed the subject, “Kiki isn’t coming?”

“No.” Nylo scratched both of his ears at the same time, a sign of embarrassment. “She’s busy. Very busy. Working on her new research. Cross species DNA recombinant. As you know, all life in the galaxy is surprisingly similar. Some say that life can only develop under certain circumstances and that it can only develop so many answers to the perils of those conditions. The point is that we have very similar parts coming from similar DNA. So, in theory, you could find a way to take the genes of any species and translate it into an equivalent gene in another. So I could, in theory, take the DNA from a rat and use it to create special sperm to inseminate a rabbit. You’d still get a rabbit, but it would carry the gene combinations of the rat. Ratbit!”

“Or make a human into an Otta,” I said.

Nylo snorted. “Probable, but highly unlikely. Mostly we’re talking about personality, rather than physical traits.”

“If she ever needs any help, please tell her to contact me,” I said.

The shuttle began to rattle as it neared the surface.

“Wow. I wouldn’t have killed Wick,” said the panther. “I like him. He listens.”

The first night, after Wick was freed from the Spx, we held each other. We didn’t say much. He just listened to me think throughout the night. I made sure to think about good memories of my childhood and my daydreams for our future. “Better than anyone I know.”

We landed on one of the beaches. Air and the light flooded in to greet us. It felt so good to breath fresh again. “Thank you, Nylo.”

“Oh. Sure.” The feline waved like I was saying goodbye. “Let’s talk about your Spx vaccine next time. Brilliant stuff. I like the comments you put in the code too.”

When my feet touched the sand, I immediately felt the urge to run. I needed to find Wick. I guess it was obvious.

“He’s fine,” said Byruin. The hyena put a hand on my chest and giving a little shove, a common greeting for Rawca friends. He was dressed far more casually than I’d ever seen before, wearing a loose linen shirt and shorts. “You’ll have to fight me, if you want to talk to Wick.”

“Oh?” I tried to give him a shove back, but it felt like trying to move a mountain. “I can take you.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said the ambassador. “Walk with me. Plenty of time until sunset.”

“Sunset?” I asked.

“Our vote. That’s the agreed time.”

We walked along the shore, the wave periodically tapping our feet, the wind often touching our fur. “I heard this was your idea,” I said.

“You think anyone else could come up with something so diabolic?” he asked.

“What will you do next?” I asked.

“I got my wish” he said, giving a long glance out over the sea. “The sacrifice of the human race has inspired all Rawca. The unity and peace that I imagined is now a possibility. Someone just needs to lead them there. I’d given up hope.”

“That’s because you’re getting old.”

“Ha. Should I leave it to someone younger?” he asked.

“Only if you want them to stuff it up,” I replied.

“First, we’ll eradicate the Spx. I’m told that the Silvermist weapon took out the majority, but there are still some hidden. Then, the Rawca will take our rightful position as the protectors of the galaxy. We’ll find unity by guarding the Council and all races.”

“A pack of hyenas, wolves, coyotes, and dogs protecting us all. Sounds good to me,” I said.

“You can count on us.”

We stopped. I put my hand on the ambassador’s leg and leaned my weight against him, if only for a moment. “I can count on you, Byruin.”

He gave a wide, and oddly proud, smile. “Call me Slid. That was the name my mother gave me.”

“Slid? Are you serious? Terrible! I would’ve taken the name of my dead friend too. Slid?”

He gave me a gently shove. “I’m not going to miss that attitude.”

“I’ll miss you,” I said in return.

We paused for a moment and watched the light dancing across the sanguine sea. “If this is my chapter 29,” he said, “it’s going to be a long one.”

“You’re the one that’ll kill him?” I asked.

“Makes sense.” For only a second, this fingers curled into a fist. “The name Byruin Holsteder forever tired to these events.”

“Excuse me, miss. Is this brutal beast bothering you?” asked Cinder as he approached from behind. He was dressed only slightly more formal, with a white silk shirt and black linen pants.

“What is it with small creatures with fragile limbs?” asked the Rawca. “Do they all have attitude problems?” His bared teeth softly shifted to a smile.

“I would hope so,” said the bat. “May I steal your Baar for a moment?”

“She’s not mine,” replied the hyena.

As I continued down the shore, Byruin called after us, “Let’s talk terms more tomorrow, you crazy bat.”

Cinder spread his wings and waved goodbye.

“Terms?” I asked.

“We’re negotiating a new peace treaty between the Rawca and Gyben,” said Cinder. “More yelling, but we’ll get there. Certainly.”

“I bet there’s a lot of details to figure out.”

“Quite the contrary,” said the ambassador. “Yes, yes. We want the treaty to be as simple as possible. No reason for change. Preferably only three sentences. Maybe four. Could be five.”

“Sounds more like a promise than a treaty,” I said.

He stopped, if only for a moment, and tilted his head. “Ha! You could see it that way. Ha. A promise to all the humans that sacrificed themselves. I like that. Don’t you? Reminds me of something.”

The bat took a deep breath, just about to start one of his long rants, so I quickly interjected, “How’s your sister, Cindy? I mean, Silliani. Still not used to using your first names.”

“She’s good. Happy and health. Keeps pestering me to bring Quest back home to meet the family. About every 30 seconds.”

“She’s left Daygone already?”

“Lots to do back home,” he said. “Heaps. The tragedy on Earth has sent ripples through our economy. Silliani convinced many of the rich to fund the human quarantine, in exchange for stake holdings in human companies. Many went too far. The result, the richest aren’t rich anymore.”

“Sounds like a catastrophe,” I said.

“Again, the opposite. Sure, sure, for them it seems like the end of days. But! It gives a new generation a chance. Now is their time. Old money is hard to topple. Not like a tower of bricks, more like one made of dung. I’m hopeful that our new leaders will be more generous. Look at what the humans did!”

“Were you part of that old money?”

He lifted his wings and wavered them back and forth. “Yes, yes, and no. Either way, our wealth is gone. Of course, Silliani spent a majority of the family fortune helping humans. Can’t think of a better cause. Can’t. Can you?”

I asked, “You’ll have to step down as ambassador?”

“Soon, eventually, but not right away. Plenty of time to help guide the new generation. They’re eager to listen. That alone is a big change. Then I’ll retire, probably with a tiger.” He gave himself a massive smile. “He gave me a new name, you know. Ash. I think it’ll be my last name.”

“Ash. That’s,” I couldn’t tell if it was worse than Slid or not, “interesting. Your last name?”

“Big deal. Huge. We start our life with a first name then, for those who don’t die young, we pick our last. It is a bold statement. You’ve reached point that defines who you are, forever. When we accept our last name, we accept no more. I’ll be forever known as Ash to all I meet. They’ll put it on my grave.”

I shook my head. “Quest probably thought he was so clever.”

“Indeed he is,” said the bat. “He just came up with it in the middle of the night. I remember my fur tingling when he first called my name in a whisper.”

“Too much detail already.” I stopped him verbally and physically. The sun was nearing the horizon. The furthest sky began to darken. “I’m told this plan was your idea, the execution.”

“You thought Orsa would come up with something like this?” he asked. “I’m going to miss Wick, and you. Both.”

“The vote is soon,” I said. “On what exactly?”

“Do we keep humans on the Council or not? I know how I’ll vote. No spoilers. Oh, that reminds me, I came to get you for a reason. Orsa wanted to see you. She’s just up ahead.”

“You want to come along?” I asked.

“Nope. I need a moment alone,” said the Gyben. “I’m trying to think of a new name for Quest. I know Wex don’t typically take multiple names, but I want to offer one.”

“How about Slacker?” I asked.

“Hmm.” Oh gods, the bat actually considered it. “Perhaps. I’ll see you at the ceremonies, Lexi. Thank you.”

“For what?” I asked.

For once, the bat didn’t say anything. He simply winked.

I didn’t have to walk far before being intercepted by Orsa. The deer hurried towards me, dressed far too formal. Her slender form was covered in a white silk with blue chiffon. It looked like sea mist hovering over a flawless shore. “You’re late,” she declared. “I knew I should’ve put you on the first shuttle rather than the last.”

“The vote isn’t until sunset,” I said.

“You must know there is preparation first.” She stared down her petite muzzle at me.

“Am I expected to take part?” I asked.

“Certainly not. You are to stay out of sight and say nothing.”

“So preparation means telling Lexi to shut up?” I pointed a finger towards my forehead and provided a wry smile.

“Exactly.” Her steer look softened. “After all this time, you’re finally learning. Do you have any electronic devices?”

“Nope. They took my laptop and I haven’t had time to buy a new personal pocket computer. Don’t worry, we’re on a tropical island. I can’t turn off the gravity here.”

“I wouldn’t put it past you.” Orsa let the conversation drift into silence for a moment. “I hit my head, you know. During your little jailbreak.”

“An unexpected side effect,” I said. “Pleasant surprise.”

“Hmph,” the deer gave a small snort. “I, for one, won’t miss you. I hear the others talk with Warwick and saying how he’s changed everything. How humans changed the galaxy and how he touched them personally.”

“I’m guessing that you don’t share the sentiment?”

“The Yent have been making sacrifices for the galaxy for generations. It is good to see the other races are finally waking up to our shared problems. I can thank the humans for that.”

“Just one big alarm clock, huh?” I asked.

She ignored me. “As for Ambassador Stone, he frustrated me more than anything. Such arrogance is a stain that can be hard to remove.”

“Tell me about it.”

She ignored me again. “You, however, have been a different case, Lexi. You’ve been unexpected.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

We neared the site of the ceremony. The ambassadors and their assistants gathered. Quest grabbed Cinder from behind and lifted the bat into the air. We could hear their laughter. Nice atmosphere for an execution.

“He seems happy,” she said.

“Why did you leave him?” I asked. “Why not stay with Quest?”

“You already know the answer,” said the deer.

“You career?”

“That would be the easy answer.” She stared at me like an empassioned professor. Your lesson: “Sacrifice. The Yent have always made sacrifices. Unfortunately, not all of us can bleed for love. Some of us must forfit it.”

I stared back for a moment, not sure what to say. “I’m sorry. I could never.”

The ambassador’s eyes gave way to a genuine smile. “Who do you think has the better story?” she asked. “Who will they remember longer? You or me?”

“Audiences like beautiful heroes. So I think you’re fine.”

The world turned golden as the sun neared the horizon. “It’s almost time,” she said. “We’ll vote soon.”

“This execution,” I said. “Cinder came up with the idea. Byruin is going to conduct it. I heard that you’ll take the credit.”

“The blame.” She moved us towards the others. “Someone has to explain to the galaxy why we killed the last human. We can’t let this act trouble our chance for true peace.”

“Another sacrifice.”

“Finally, my small Baar understands. Please go join the audience.”

The ambassador’s gathered on a small stage. Cinder’s drone floated around, casting long shadows when they dipped low to the ground. They recorded everything. The galaxy would see the broadcast tomorrow. Bryuin looked confident. Cinder looked hopefully. As Kiki’s representative, Nylo looked nervous. Orsa looked commanding. Wick looked at me.

We shared a smile. He tried not to laugh as Iet me thoughts recount everything that had happened since landing on Wava. Slid? How could anyone not laugh at Byruin’s real name?

“Citizens of the galaxy,” Orsa addressed the cameras. “We’re gathered here on Wava, the planet beneath Daygone for an important ceremony. The recent events have sent ripples throughout the galaxy. The loss of the human race is something that we shall never overcome.”

Something shoved me from behind, almost sending me tumbling face first into the sand. “Watch yourself,” said a tiger.

“You’re a troll,” I replied. “Shouldn’t you be paying attention?”

Quest grinned, “You know Orsa. She won’t miss this chance to talk and talk. It’ll be awhile before anything happens.”

“I’m amazed you even came,” I said. “Must be a lot of vulnerable females out there. Sure you could prey on a few.”

“No thanks. I wouldn’t be anywhere but here.”

“Impossible,” I said. “Could it be?”

“What?” He rolled his eyes.

“Did the tragedy end the Quest? Are you all grown up now?”

“Nah. It wasn’t that.” His eyes went to the stage and lingered there. “It was something else.” I couldn’t tell if he was looking at Cinder, Orsa, or Wick. Our link remained. His thoughts gave me the answer, but something are best left unsaid.

“When Wick is gone, someone will have to take over until they find a replacement. You ready for that?”

He gave a confident answer, “Yes.”

“I never thought I’d see you serious,” I said.

“You’re right, Lexi. What happened to us? I grew up and you stopped being a cold bitch.” His grin was as broad as his stripes.

“Love has that effect. Someone to complete us.”

“That reminds me. I thought you might want this.” Quest handed me Wick’s journal. “Security took it away but I got someone on the inside. Figured you’d want it.”

I clutched the notebook to my chest. “Thank you.”

“He’s cured,” said the tiger. “You know, but I confirmed it.”

“How?” I asked.

“We Wex have a strange tradition. When a child turns ten, his parents take him out of town for a day. We call it the Citizenship. The idea is to make the day a big event so that everyone takes is seriously. Parents can even record the conversation and submit it to the government for $10,000.”

I shook my head. “Strange way to encourage sexual education.”

“No that talk,” said the tiger. “They tell the child how to be a good citizen and share some secret pieces of knowledge. One being how to spot a Spx.”

“Really? Why?”

“The Wex had a Spx infection hundreds of years ago. To make sure it never happens again, we added a warning to our Citizenship.”

“So how do you spot a Spx?” I asked.

“They have access to the host’s memory. Eager to maintain a disguise, a Spx will never tell you anything different. So I asked Wick the same question I did when we first met. Do you remember it?”

I did, “How do we know when we won?”

“Our enemies know us and they curse us. Everyone else doesn't care. They don't even know our names. You, me, and Lexi: we do this a long time. We grow old together. Forgotten, in a galaxy at peace.” Quest closed his eyes for a moment. “That was his answer.”

“Guess we didn’t quite make it,” I said.

“I asked him again yesterday. Remember when we first met? I asked you a question. How do we know when we won?”

“A Spx would always give the same answer. Desperate to show you it remembers. What did he say?”

“Someday forgotten. Peace from pieces. Victory for one game, but not our own. Our game, the game of life, is struggle. Everyone struggles. Winning is finding those lifelines that help you rise above your thrashing. They teach you to swim, they teach you to float, they teach you to breathe beneath the waves. Love. It defines our start, it defines our middle, it defines our end. Love is the only thing that outlasts us. Even if the universe grows cold, let the pieces carry the memories of love. Only love. Forever.”

“Entropy defeated,” I whispered.

“So, I guess we won?” asked Quest.

“Yes, my friend. Somehow, we did.” I smacked his rear. “Now pay attention. This is the important part.”

On stage, Orsa continued her speech, “Now we come to a moment unlike any seen before. The human race is fading. Yet they hold a seat on the Council. Ambassador Warwick Stone must resign. As you all know, he’s been infected by the Spx. However, before that tragic event, he proposed one last vote. He asked that the Council change. He asked that we now give all sentient races a vote. With the loss of the humans, our voice has certainly grown weaker. Now is the time to ask ourselves, should we make it stronger?”

Cinder stepped forward. “Peace from pieces. A good friend told me this. We have experienced a great tragedy, but we cannot let that define us. We must let the sacrifice, the boundless love, of the humans help us chart a new path. This path must be found together. This is why, the Gyben vote yes. Let everyone have a voice.”

Next came Nylo. “Uhhh. I’m not good at speeches. Ambassador Kiki wanted to be here today. She gave me this statement to read: Nylo smile.” He did. “Citizen-- citizens of the galaxy. I apologize for my absence. I’m joining efforts to try and save any and all traces of humanity in our galaxy. This vote is historic, both in its scope and context. We cannot let our emotions alone make this decision, less future generations think it reactionary rather than revolutionary. Peace requires empathy. Peace requires unity. Peace requires sacrifice. If there is one piece of humanity worth remembering it is that we stand no taller than when we stand together. This is why the Otta vote yes. Thank you. Nylo, you can sit down now.” He did.

Byruin came forward. “The Spx showed us a true enemy. There will be other threats in this galaxy. We will require strength to overcome them. Ambassador Kiki’s statement was true. We cannot make sudden and significant changes that put our stability at risk. Strength does come from unity. We will get there, but we cannot think this is a quick fix. We must educate generations to understand the importance and strength of our combined peace. This is why the Rawca vote no. We work towards our someday, not force it to be today.”

Wick was given the next chance to speak. He wore a pair of handcuffs, but kept his arms folded in such a way to make them nearly invisible. He started to talk and paused for a moment. I didn’t need a mind reader to know what was going on in his head. The galaxy thought he was infected by the Spx. He would need to pick his words carefully.

“Thank you,” he finally started. “I have spent much time talking on behalf of humanity. I’ve been given one final chance. Uniting the races would indeed be a great step forward, however, we cannot think peace is that simple. We often think change comes from some radical movement. Revolution only changes the stage, not the actors. Real change must occur within. Each individual must strive to be help those closest to them. Why worry about the plight of another nation or another world when your neighbor, the one living right next to you, struggles? All you listening, please, look at those with you. Think of those not. Who in your family could use help? Which friends could use help? Help. That is truly what made humans remarkable. Not when we sacrifice ourselves for the greater good, but when we sacrifice in our personal lives for those we cared about. Peace from pieces. The galaxy can’t be a bad place when every home, every corner, every street is filled with individual compassion. Not rhetoric. Action.”

He took a deep breath. “This is why, as ambassador for all humankind, I must vote no. As Byruin said, this is not a task that has a simple solution. We must expect a hard path forward. Humans gave a chance, but it is up to all of you to decide if it is worth fighting for.” Of course the Spx wouldn’t want unity. I understood why he felt a need to vote no. It also put a huge weight on the next speaker.

Orsa put her hand on Wick’s shoulder and whispered in his ear. She then stepped forward to address the cameras again. “There you have it. Two votes for. Two votes against. This means the Yent must break the tie. I must decide if we should keep the Council small or extend the power to all sentient life. Should every race have a voice?”

The deer actually pondered the question. Her emotions, usually so contained, danced on her face. First anger, then sorrow, then fear, and finally joy. The whole galaxy watched her brief internal struggle. “So fitting. For thousands of years, the Yent have been the guardians of the galaxy. We have protected all life and always strove for peace. We fought the Rawca. We negotiated with the Gyben. We reasoned with the Otta. We freed the Lyfolite. We uplifted the humans. I’ve watched you all grow. We’ve watched you all grow. Now we face a simpler question. Are you ready? Trust is a gift much like blood transfusion. As all my fellow ambassadors have said, this is a chance. Please, don’t waste it.”

The deer turned, putting her back to the camera, almost afraid to face it. Her eyes cast back over her shoulder. “The Yent vote yes.” Even the other ambassadors gasped. Historians would soon all agree. The biggest shift to result from the sacrifice of Earth was in the Yent. “But,” Orsa added, “I have one stipulation. Humans must be allowed a seat on this new Council. If someday, somehow, they climb back from the brink of darkness, we’ll welcome them. They will always have a seat. The Yent will protect this for them and cast votes in their stay.”

The galaxy was now us.

Unfortunately, Orsa couldn’t escape. Byruin stepped forward and gently grabbed her arm. The deer turned and spoke to the cameras once more. “This vote has passed.” She struggled to keep herself together. “The Council has decided. Now we must perform one more task, the exile and execution of Warwick Stone. Of course, this won’t be broadcast. Thank you.”

The drones and their cameras turned off. Orsa almost collapsed. Quest put a hand on the top of my head. “I’ll go help her. Just one more thing, Lexi. Wick wrote one last entry in that journal. Make sure you read it.”

The next hour went by quickly. There was a rush of activity as the audience was sent back to Daygone station. Only the ambassadors stayed behind. As the day began to yield to the night, I found myself standing alone at the shore.

Two stars shone against the coming darkness. I drew a circle in the sand with my foot. Someone else drew a line through it. “The imperfect circle,” said Wick.

I pounced and wrapped my arms around his waist. “My love! I missed you.”

“I missed you too.” He chuckled. “I was going to ask you what you were thinking about, but I already know.”

“I sorry, but I’m never letting you go. You’re going to need surgery to remove this Baar from your leg.”

“That’s fine by me.” He looked at our drawing in the sand. “You can’t read Baar novels and not know what the imperfect circle is. The symbol of love. I always wondered why they called it imperfect. I would think uniting two halves would make everything flawless.”

“The line is the horizon. The line is life. The circle is complete, but there is struggle. Expect the flaws. Someday, the line will be gone. Once life is over, there is only our perfect circle.” Over and over again, through many lines, through many lives, always the same cycle. Love, undeniable.

The thin waves washed over our feet. The light of twilight put a final golden grace on distant clouds. Stars appeared slowly to flaw the night. Between us grew a shared warmth.

“Guess this is my execution, huh?”

“The end of the Wick,” I said.

“You’re very poetic tonight,” he replied.

Silence found a gap between the wind and the waves, a brief moment of stillness that made us feel even closer. The last human. An outcast Baar. Alone but together, forever.

“You should write your own journal,” he said. “Your mind is beautiful.”

“Ha ha. You just caught me at a good time.” I started to think about his naked body.

“There’s your favorite subject!” He put his arm around my shoulder and gave a small squeeze. “You’re obsessed.”

I was. “What did Orsa whisper to you?” I asked.

“You win.” His hand shifted to the side of my neck, his fingers mindlessly tracing through my fur. “That’s all she said. I guess it was political suicide. The Yent will not be happy with her vote. At least no right away.”

“Sacrifice,” I said.

My mind drifted to the Spx. He picked up on it. “It’s done. He’s done. At least I think it was male. It’s still there, you know. The Spx. Inside me.”

“Any side effects?”

“No, but sometimes I can hear him. Once in a while, he gets enough strength to murmur to my mind. No control. Just whispers.”

“I can fix that,” I said.

“No,” replied Wick. “It’s fine. The Spx isn’t hostile anymore. He just keeps apologizing and asking questions about love.”

 “And what do you tell him?” I asked.

“I tell him all about you.” Without warning, Wick bent down and picked me up. He held me against his chest. My arms went around his neck. “Byruin is eager to get this over with. He’s got a whole ceremony planned. Quest his helping him make a bonfire right now.”

“Sounds serious.”

“Most certainly. But we have a few more minutes.”

He carried me. Along the shore. Thru the dusk. Into the night. His arms never tired. We kissed.

“Lexi,” he said in the final moments of that day, “I love you.”

“I love you.”

The galaxy said goodbye to Warwick Stone that night. Like the rest of his noble kind, he disappeared into the uncaring silence of history and overzealous pander of legend. For those of us who knew him personally, we would never forget. Never forget his passion, his caring, his love, his friendship.

For them, and for me, there would be an everlasting beauty in…

…days gone by…

### Chapter Thirty

Baar novels never go beyond 29 chapters.

Fortunately, this is a human story.

In the months following the alleged execution of Warwick Stone, I wrote. Every memory, every detail, every choice, I captured it all. The book, containing chapters 1 through 29, was published and instantly became a bestseller around the galaxy. All profits went to the Human Legacy Fund. It felt important to chronicle what really happened.

Now, nearly twenty years later, I can finally share the truth.

We escaped.

Naturally, this was part of Cinder’s plan. I’m not sure if all the ambassadors truly believed Wick was cured. I guess it didn’t matter. He deserved to end his days in peace. So, we faked an execution.

Wick and I left the planet of Wava in the middle of the night on Orsa’s private shuttle. We swapped to an automated transport ship, heading for Hikan space. A few minor tweaks to the navigation system and we ended up on an abandoned planet named Audin.

There, we moved into a small research outpost overlooking a valley called Kalay. While we could receive transmissions, broadcasting was nearly impossible. It required hijacking the signals of an observation satellite that passed by once per year. That didn’t matter. We had everything we needed.

Our happiness never faded.

Although we weren’t out among the stars, Wick and I still shared many adventures around our new home. The first few months living in a wilderness weren’t easy, but we survived together. Eventually, I modified the station robots to help with daily tasks. Wick also learned how to cook!

We often go on long hikes. Fortunately, the weather and wildlife on Audin remains very predictable. Also, whoever manned the research station was an avid reader. We are fond of taking books with us on our trips. We’ll sleep in caves or up in trees and I’ll often read to Wick. It’s a habit I got into with my blind parents. How many kids read to their parents?

I love the way he listens. It makes me feel like I truly am all he needs. In this galaxy I am his, and he is my, everything.

If you read the original 29 chapters, you’ll find that the word ‘two’ appears 50 times.

Warwick Stone stood average height for a male human, around two meters, almost a meter taller than me.

We were apart by a small distance, the distance that two young lovers would be the evenings before their first kiss.

He reached out, put two fingers on my far cheek, and gently turned my eyes to face his.

While all the sentient races have startling similarities (laughter, dreams, warm blood, tears, carbon based, two genders, one heart), the subtleties of their minds make all the difference.

Two small, delicate bridges reached from opposite sides.

Two raindrops meeting on the glass.

Love is falling: two souls dropped from the sky, unable to fly.

"Big enough for two?" he asked.

"Baar always plan for two," I replied with a sigh.

Two islands became one when we touched.

Imagine if word got out that two ambassadors of the Galactic Council were in love.

Two lovers, destined to meet, defying all odds.

Two become one.

This was just two friends sitting on a couch, chatting.

Two strange bodies that somehow fit perfectly.

Then there is the divide, the bending that goes right down the middle of this book, the separation of two pages, where words can’t exist.

We simply made a language meant for two.

Infinity made for two.

Two minutes gone.

Like morse code, each tear was a letter or two

What exists beyond two?

There were only two.

Two parts of one circle, separated by an infinite amount of empty space. Two parts destined to find each other, to complete each other

What I saw, when those two pieces were together, when it was us, was me.

Two stars shined against the coming darkness.

Him and me, the journey always required both of us.

Wick started a new journal. He let me read this one too. “It’s only fair,” he said, “since I have access to your thoughts all the time.”

Of course, this original journal, that small red book that captured those days gone by, still holds a special place on our shelf. I’ll never forget that final entry.

Imagine an empty neighborhood. You stand by the street, beneath a winter elm, hoping its interlaced, barren branches will provide protection from a ladened sky. Your nearest neighbor sits behind a tall fence made of large stone-colored stones. So high, this fence, that you cannot see their house, only the tip of a golden roof.

You spot a cat, or rather it pauses long enough for you to notice. Its bright white fur allows the blue of its eyes to be seen, even at this distance. With purpose (something that sparks your jealousy), it moves over the grey road, the gray sidewalk, the hibernating lawn, and towards the wall of your neighbor.

You wish it would linger, but it does not. It cannot. The white cat slips through the gaps in a wrought iron gate, disappearing behind that wall. It is only at the last second, in final moments, that you notice two things. First, you miss it. Second, at the end of its tail was one imperfect spot. The white fur surrendered to a golden tip, the same color as that roof.

You never see that cat again, but some years later ask about it. The neighbor tells you she is an indoor cat.

You saw the only time she escaped, when, for a brief time, she ran free.

You also saw when she chose to come back home.

I’m not sure why I recall this memory. Since the end of Earth, I have been thinking about that day and that cat often. It happened the morning of a funeral. Maybe that’s why my mind drifts there.

I like to think life is like that, a brief adventure that ends back at a waiting home. There are certainly things I’d like to change. I wish we had made better plans. I wish that I could have been there at the ending. Perhaps that is what keeps me from feeling the true weight of it all. For some lucky and unlucky reason, I was locked away, trapped in my own body, when humanity ended.

A better plot would’ve put me there, in those final seconds. Maybe I could’ve done something. At least I could’ve said goodbye. Is that too much to ask? Perhaps. If life was only so simple that it let us be present at every moment that changes our existence.

Part of life is not always having control. I guess that’s what makes it an adventure. I guess.

I feel robbed. I feel cheated. I feel like a failure. Why couldn’t I do more? Why couldn’t I keep my promise to protect them all? What sick design made it so the last human didn’t get to say goodbye?

More importantly… what twisted mind lets him survive?

It just doesn’t feel real. My mornings are not mournings. How horrible am I?

I still feel excitement for my journey. I still wake up and think about her. I love Lexi and I feel so privileged that I will get to go on with her. We’re escaping. We’re heading off to a place unknown to spend our lives together. How greedy is this? I could do more. I wasn’t there at the end but I could pick up the pieces.

Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do?

I was famous. I was rich. I was powerful. I could keep everything and gain more. Yet, all I want is her. I just want to spend my days, hours, minutes, and seconds with her. I lie to myself and say that I’m providing the best end to humanity by living my life to the fullest. When, actually, I’m being greedy.

Forgive me. Who you are, I don’t know. But please, forgive me. Forgive me letting humanity end, not in a bang but in a whisper. When the day comes for me to slip through that fence, it won’t be before the eyes of a galaxy. I’ll linger only for her.

I love you, Lexi. Although sun can fade, you prove that new one can appear. You are my nightlight, my new shining star. I have no regrets. Curse me, I feel blessed.

So, what does it mean to say your last goodbye?

It’s like coming to the end of a journal, the end of an adventure, or the end of a novel.

You can revisit, you can talk about it, but eventually everything will all fade into remnant. You, your existence, your path (altered how very little), is all that remains.

Proudly walk it. You do all of us no better service than to live to your fullest. Embrace your adventure. And when it is all said and done, when you finally slip through that final gate, and come back to your waiting home... I hope you found the most important thing of all.

I hope you found love.