

The King of Gems

by

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Solstice Publishing - <http://www.solsticeempire.com/>

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This book is dedicated to Hanora, Gibson, Sophie, Ames,
and Liesel. May you always keep a sense of fun, love, and
adventure alive in your hearts.

Prologue

“I don’t know, sir. It came out of nowhere.” Ensign Dahk, sensor array specialist, felt his pulse racing as he called out amidst the screaming alarms and flickering lights. “As soon as we disengaged the neutrino oscillator drives, it was in our path. No time to avoid the collision.” The junior officer aboard the starship Equinox of the Chandran interstellar fleet struggled to maintain his professionalism.

Captain Korna, senior officer of the scientific research vessel, surveyed his bridge, taking in the emotional and physical status of the officers at their stations. Fortunately, regulations required all bridge crew to engage momentum dampers when exiting faster than light space, so, though shaken by the asteroid’s impact, the rookie command crew remained firmly in their seats, attending to the emergency.

“What’s the damage, Commander?” Korna called out. “And kill those alarms. I can’t hear a thing in all this racket.”

Commander Tals, the only bridge officer other than the captain with more than a few months of experience in the Chandran fleet, pressed the digital controls to disengage the blaring alarms. The bridge grew quiet except for the voices of each officer efficiently communicating with their divisions to assess the damages.

Overseeing the entire process, Tals quickly scanned the readings on his panel, scowling more deeply as the data poured in. “Not good, Captain. Major damage to decks three through ten. Neutrino oscillation drive system appears to be hit the hardest. Severe damage to the non-zero mass reactors. Thirty-seven crew members missing. Emergency energy bulkheads are in place and holding, but life support is at fifteen percent.”

Korna's automatically ticked off a dozen emergency scenarios in his mind, each one more catastrophic than the last. He knew the ship was doomed, and it was up to him to save the crew, if he could find a way amid the rapidly failing ruins of his once proud command. Nothing in his long and distinguished career prepared him for a disaster of this magnitude. *Tark of a way to end my career*, he thought to himself, shaking his head. *Probably should have taken the Admiral's offer to retire after passing command of the Nebula to Garral, but this training mission was too good to pass up.* With a long exhalation, he straightened his shoulders and went to work to save his young crew.

"Bratha, send out a distress signal to all fleet ships in the area. Give them our current status and coordinates. Tell them to hurry."

"Aye, Captain," replied Bratha shakily as she fed the information into her communication system. "Our main array is irreparably damaged, so our signal is only at minimum strength. I'm not sure it has the power to reach back to our quadrant, sir."

"Engineering to bridge!" Chief Warrant Officer Mung's voice crackled through the captain's speakers.

Captain Korna engaged his communication panel with a stab. "Go ahead, Chief."

"Captain, everything's a mess down here. Power is out except for emergency back-ups. Half my men are injured or dead, and radiation levels are spiking. We have to evacuate engineering and try to salvage what we can from sub-post eight."

"Get everyone to safety, Chief. Do what you can and report to me when things are back under control."

"Aye, Captain. But I think we're beyond getting anything down here under control. I'll salvage what I can, sir."

Half an hour later, a sense of control returned to the bridge crew as damage repair crews were assigned to duty

stations throughout the ship. What remained of the two-hundred crewmembers were engaged in emergency measures attempting to stabilize the dire circumstances. Captain Korna examined his command panel with a satisfactory half-grin. Despite the severity of the damage and the shock to their minds, everyone performed admirably and was hard at work.

“I want all division leaders to assemble in one hour in the command center for a full briefing on our condition. Spread the word, Commander.” He pressed the control to release his energy restraints and, with one last glance around the bridge, retired to the command center to prepare for the debriefing.

His personal quarters attached to the command center, so Korna quickly took advantage of the time to splash some water on his face and down a protein supplement bar. Leaning heavily on the sink, he stared at himself in the head’s mirror. His unlined dark features stared grimly back. He ran a hand through his full head of thick black hair, grumbling to himself.

“Blecs! Five extended terms of service as captain, and this has to happen on your last voyage.” He laughed in spite of himself. “A deep space scientific research vessel was supposed to be the safest command available. What could possibly go wrong with a bunch of scientists on board? I guess if you’ve learned anything over your career, it’s that space is not your friend. It is just sitting out there waiting to kill you. Well, at least I’ll retire with one exciting story to tell my grandchildren.”

Korna returned to the command center just as the first of the division leaders were arriving. He took the captain’s chair at the head of the elongated oval table. Monitors on all walls came to life, each one displaying data behind the seat of the respective divisions. The video feed from several of the remote exterior maintenance drones displayed a scene of floating debris and severe damage to

most of the port side of the ship was visible. Space-suited crewmembers darted around the debris field. Some repaired the worst of the damage, and some recovered bodies expelled into space when the hull was breeched.

“Alright, everyone. We all know we have a bad situation here. Let’s stick to the facts and figure out how to get us home again. Commander Tals, you have the floor.”

From his seat, Tals called on each of the divisions to give their reports. One by one, they stood and referred to the data streaming across their corresponding monitors. Communications lost primary power when the main transmitter array was destroyed. Little hope of repair. Only the local transmitters remained operational. Medical was overwhelmed with the injured. Many required emergency surgeries, but two of the five surgical-rated medics were among the injured and unable to assist. At least forty more were not expected to survive the next twelve hours.

Each of the officers told of equal or worse damage as they gave their reports, but engineering gave the final death blow.

“Captain,” CWO Mung, senior surviving engineering officer, struggled to his feet and approached the ship’s layout now displayed in front of them. Red and yellow flashing lights showed the vast damage to nearly every section of the vessel. His voice registered as an exhausted monotone. “The ship is lost. No chance of restarting the engines. The neutrino oscillators are damaged beyond repair. Supplemental battery power and life support can only last another forty-eight hours. I’ve done everything I can, sir. The damage was too great.” He dropped down into his chair, exhausted and wiped more of the grime from his face with an already filthy rag.

Captain Korna inspected each of his officers for any sign of hope, but they all knew they were lost. He took a deep breath and was about to speak when the junior cartography officer coughed and raised his hand. As the

ranking officer in that division, it was his duty to replace the two senior cartographers who were missing and presumed dead.

“Go ahead... Sett, is it?” he struggled to recall the young officer’s name.

“Yes, sir.” Sett wiped the sweat from his palms on his grimy pants. “Sir, I may have something. It’s a desperate gamble, but it may keep us alive until help can arrive. If they come looking for us that is.”

Korna, and the others, perked up at the chance for something positive to come out of the meeting, but several rolled their eyes as they realized it was Sett speaking. There was something odd about the ensign. He never failed in his duties, and he always managed to find a completely unconventional and often far superior way to complete them, but he had difficulty whenever he tried to explain his thoughts to others on the team. Nobody doubted his genius, and they always sought out his input, but he was simply an odd loner.

“What have you got, Ensign? Any good news will be welcome right now, even if it’s a long shot.

Ensign Sett cleared his throat and started to explain. “You see, just before we came out of FTL space, I was monitoring the region. We haven’t sent any ships out this far before, so I wanted to start cataloging the systems we were passing through. There was one, distant, but within even our local transmitter range, that showed definite signs of technology. I traced the signals to a small station located on this moon.” He projected an image of a small moon orbiting a dwarf planet and enhanced the image to display a sprawling complex on the surface. “Analysis shows there is a life-sustaining atmosphere within the facility. We could transport ourselves there until rescue ships can survive.”

“Typical,” snorted Mung. “You’re not listening again, Sett. Most of our systems are down, including

transporters. All our shuttles are out of commission and there's not enough power for any of them anyway."

Sett looked toward the captain for support.

Captain Korna understood the warrant officer's attitudes toward Sett. He certainly did not fit into any simple category, but there was something about him—a unique way of seeing to the heart of most problems. He invariably found connections between seemingly unrelated concepts or systems to come up with unexpected, but amazingly practical and workable solutions.

"Go ahead, Ensign. What have you got?"

"Thank you, sir." He kept his gaze on the tri-dimensional images he called up as he tried to explain. "I know the transporters and shuttles are out. I was not thinking about them. I remembered a paper I read once about an old bit of tech that was a hot commodity a couple of hundred years ago, but it was set aside when the neutrino oscillators were developed and our ships could travel hundreds of light years in hours. The need for long-term emergency survival strategies didn't appear relevant anymore.

"Get to the point, Sett." CWO Mung scowled at his young officer, tapping his fingernails rapidly on the table.

"Enough, Mung." Captain Korna cut off the interruption with a sharp command. "Continue, Ensign. What are you trying to tell us?"

"Emergency Digitizers, Sir. I checked and we have all the materials on board to construct one, it will be simple enough to modify our transporters, and we could use it to send our digitized selves into the computer system on the moon there. It appears to have enough storage capacity for the entire crew, as well as all the data we've collected on this mission. We would simply be transporting a digital file of ourselves, not actual physical bodies, so the energy and computing requirements are drastically reduced. Our

systems, even as damaged as they are, should be able to handle the load.”

First Officer Tals leaned forward, hands folded on the table in front of him. “Emergency Digitizers are very old technology, Ensign Sett. How do you even know about them?”

“I wrote a paper on them when I was in the academy, Commander. Ancient technology fascinates me. Those things were extremely dependable, mostly due to their simplicity. They almost never failed, even under the most extreme tests. I don’t see where we have any other options available to us.”

Commander Tals raised one eyebrow as he addressed the Ensign. “And you believe the civilization out here is advanced enough to handle digitization?”

“It’s primitive, sir,” the young officer pointed at the remote system in the projection. “But my remote analysis indicates it should suffice. Barely, but at least it’s a chance.”

Mung sat back in his chair and let out a heavy sigh. “And how, even if anyone from the fleet got our signal and showed up to rescue us, would they think to look on that small moon for us? Especially if we were digitized inside the computers there? You think invading alien territory to retrieve data from their systems would be a reasonable policy move? Not to mention we would have to be implanted into android bodies for the rest of our lives. Not sure how attractive that would be to most of us.”

“I’ll leave the politics of dealing with the aliens who built that station to the ambassadors and fleet headquarters. I’m merely providing a possible solution to our immediate problem of survival. Yes, we would have to inhabit android bodies, but it would be better to die trying than to give up and freeze or suffocate to death out here.”

The captain looked toward Sett. “Are you certain we have enough power, and, given our time limitations, you can pull this off, Ensign?”

“Yes, sir. With two dozen engineers to help me with construction, I can deliver a working device in less than forty-eight hours. I calculated our power reserves will be adequate. Barely, but it can work.”

Thirty-six hours later, Chief engineer Mung and Captain Korna stood at the digital transmitter, last of the crew aboard the Equinox.

Major Jyns, Equinox’s battle commander, one of the last to be digitized and only revived from hyper-sleep three hours ago, still felt the disorientation and muscle fatigue typical after so long in suspended animation. His presence on the Equinox was merely a routine precaution on all deep space missions, so he had not expected to be awakened until back on Chandra. The chaos he found himself immersed in only added to his confusion and inability to function in his capacity as a war-time replacement for the captain. Before he could utter any sort of commands or objections, he found himself carried into a strange looking device where he was bombarded by intense lights and sensations akin to being set on fire. The relief of unconsciousness was nearly immediate.

“Time to go, Chief.” The captain waved Mung toward the platform.

Mung set the controls for a ten-second delay and together, they stepped onto the pad. Energy fields coursed around them, feeling like thousands of tiny electrical shocks shooting through their bodies. Just as the pain became almost too much to endure, a blinding flash of light burned its way into their brains, rendering them senseless.

Korna slowly became aware of strong arms supporting him as the world around him came into focus. A moment later, the shock of what he was seeing hit him.

“Wait, Chief. If I’m not mistaken, aren’t we supposed to remain suspended in energy form until we are reawakened as androids?”

The CWO, equally unbalanced by the view, nodded his head in agreement. “That’s the theory, anyway, and every report I ever heard about folks that were digitized said exactly that.”

“Then will someone kindly explain to me what that is?” Korna pointed off into the distance.

The captain and his crew, all present and accounted for, stood in a clearing on a hillside surrounded by thick forests. The valley below showed signs of farms being plowed by hand with human-like creatures handling the reins of large furry beasts pulling the plows. Smoke rose from thatch-covered roofs in the small village. A river flowed nearby, carving its way through the valley. In the distance where Korna pointed, on the crest of the next hill, stood a large stone structure, like a walled town. Flags flew from the parapets and traffic of all sorts, some on foot, some in wooden wagons and still others riding the backs of massive quadrupeds entered and left the guarded entrance to the structure.

Commander Tals shaded his eyes as he peered toward the stone structure. “I think that is referred to as a castle. I remember visiting a remote planet as a youth when my parents thought a vacation among less advanced cultures would benefit my siblings and me. That building is very reminiscent of the castles we inhabited then.”

Korna turned to face his first officer. “Alright, it’s a castle. But why are we seeing it? How can we be here? Anyone have any explanations?”

Blank stares gazed back at him as he looked over the crew.

“Well then, I guess we better get some answers.
And fast.”

Chapter One

“That will be all, professor!” Chairman Jack Fairall rose, red-faced as he pounded a clenched fist on his desk. He glared at the holoivid image of Dr. Anthony Kennan shimmering above the communication panel. “We assigned you to this facility with the clear understanding that you would control your radical tendencies and put an end to your ravings about co-workers, administrators and government officials. Your actions alienated you entirely from your research position at the university, and you are now on the very brink of forcing my hand with you. If you weren’t one of the top astrophysical researchers in the world, I would have fired you months ago. Be happy that the board agreed to keep you under contract at all.”

Only forty years ago, instant communication of this type was impossible between planets. Eris orbits over thirteen and a half light hours distant from earth so all communications required sending recordings and long delays. Quantum entanglement research, relegated to the backwater research facilities of the physics community burst to the forefront when a couple of research assistants studying at Armstrong University on Lunar Base Two, discovered how beams of energy able to carry nearly unlimited amounts of data could be transmitted over seemingly unlimited distances instantly. The pair became the youngest recipients of the Nobel prize in physics history, a fact that continued to rankle Dr. Kennan who, as a twelve-year old freshman, provided the original insight for their discovery but had been excluded from the actual work due to his outspoken opinion on who should be the lead investigator.

The bald, pale head of Dr. Kennan glared back through the projection. “Happy? You expect me to be grateful to those overstuffed corporate hacks? All they care

about is their bottom line. They'd be incapable of recognizing genius if it ran up and bit them in their privates." He wiped his brow with the sleeve of his unbuttoned lab coat. "You strand me out here on this forsaken moon at the farthest edge of the frontier and you expect me to be happy? This armpit of a research station is an antique. What about my requests for a quantum spectral analyzer that can handle the data load I need to do my research?"

Taking a deep breath to control himself, Jack took his seat again. "Now professor, the outpost has the latest equipment. When the last of the automated systems were installed, we made sure everything was fully functional and up to date. The radio telescope is one of the finest in the solar system, absolutely capable of measuring the synchrotron radiation frequencies detailed in your proposal. Dysnomia's facilities are the equal of any astronomical research station in the solar system. Far better than your previous position could provide, as you well know."

"That was a year ago!" Dr. Kennan sputtered. "My research on the interaction of synchrotron radiation with interstellar gravitation will change everything we think we know about the universe. The very laws of physics as we understand them will be upended. But I need the latest technology to handle the data." His image appeared to storm around waving its arms. "Aaaagh! Why am I even talking to you? It's your fault I am isolated out here forced to deal with barbaric conditions. I demand to be brought back to earth immediately!"

Chairman Fairall shook his head, crossing his arms across his ample chest. "You know that is not possible, professor. You signed the ten-year contract. Even if we did want to bring you home, it would take seven years at minimum to get a return shuttle out that far. We only launched the most recent resupply ship from Mars two years ago. We simply don't have the budget, or the time, to

cater to your every whim. And this continued attitude of yours is not helping your case in the least. Consider yourself lucky. You have nobody else to get in your way out there. And, other than your research, your only duties are to perform a simple maintenance check on the automated systems once a month. If you remember, you claimed to prefer total isolation from others as preferable to anything here on earth. And we were, quite honestly, happy to oblige you. And, just to set the record straight, your accommodations up there are the equivalent of a four-star hotel. I sincerely doubt you are suffering from barbaric conditions.”

“But my laboratory equipment...”

“Is perfectly adequate for your research, far superior to equipment available to many scientists here, and certainly more advanced than those on Mars or Enceladus. Now, if you don’t mind, professor, I have other duties to attend to. Any further complaints or reports must be sent through normal channels on your assigned schedule.”

“I’m not finished, Fairall!”

“Yes, you are, professor. Goodbye.” The chairman, smiling for the first time during the conversation, waved his hand over the control panel ending the transmission. The image of a raving Dr. Kennan faded into the air and vanished in a sparkling light.

Ninety-seven A.U. away, at Starfinder, a one-man automated research outpost on Dysnomia, a moon orbiting the dwarf planet Eris in the distant Kuiper Belt, Dr. Anthony Kennan stormed around the communication room. Pounding on the walls, kicking a small cleaner bot across the floor, and shouting every swear word he had ever known, and even inventing a few new ones just for fun, he fumed over every perceived insult and slight from those

whom he considered to be lesser minds had heaped on him throughout his life.

The research station, originally designed for a crew of twenty, first put in operation twenty-five years ago, proved to be too remote for most researchers. Extreme isolation played cruel tricks on a person's psychological well-being. Over the years automation replaced the need for more and more people, until only a single individual was required to monitor the various systems. Even that could be handled remotely if absolutely necessary. It proved to be the perfect solution to keep the irascible Dr. Kennan under contract with the university, a plume in their cap for funding purposes, yet keeping him far from everyone else. In the six years of his employment, he had been single-handedly responsible for over a thousand complaints from co-workers and other staff, as well as the early resignation of eight fellow scientists. He had eagerly jumped at the chance to get away from 'those incompetent cretins' as he referred to those assigned to work with him, and be the sole master of his own destiny.

For the first few months of his seclusion, Dr. Kennan found the experience of isolation exhilarating. The Starfinder had the latest research equipment, two brand new radio telescopes, three laser interferometers as well as the latest spectral analyzers and four of the most powerful supercomputers available to help interpret the data. Two quantum supercomputers could handle the research adequately, but Dr. Kennan demanded four, so, to entice him to agree to the reassignment, four were installed.

While much of the living quarters were now the domain of the automatons who roamed the facility performing the mostly mundane activities required to maintain the station and handle the more basic research functions, the areas remaining to Dr. Kennan were what most would consider luxurious. Robotic chefs prepared anything requested at all hours. The recreation facilities,

left over from the days when a full staff manned the station, contained an Olympic size swimming pool and jacuzzi, tennis, basketball and racquet ball courts, all with the option of automated opponents. A two-kilometer running track ran around the perimeter of the entire facility.

The living quarters were equally the envy of any resort. Each suite contained two bedrooms, a private office, living room for entertaining guests and a theatre-like video room for communications and entertainment. All of this, of course, was soon lost on Dr. Kennan as the reality of his confinement hit home.

An hour later, after instructing the maintenance and cleaner bots to repair the havoc he had wreaked on the station, he still churned over his treatment at the hands of inferiors, but he was able to enter the lab under enough control to not break anything. His work was the only thing that truly mattered, except for his one other passion in life, King of Gems. The books, movies and holo-game series had captured his soul as an undergrad student at Harvard's Martian branch university. Born on Mars, he found the images of lush forests and wild creatures roaming free with vast open waters stirring. The ability to wander wherever adventure took you, without the need for life support suits, captured his imagination like nothing else, not even astrophysics. Becoming Ginhawk, shapeshifter and valiant warder, gave him an outlet to rampage across an entire world fighting and defeating his online enemies, something he longed to do in the actual world. Individuals across Mars and back on Earth flocked to join his quests whenever he logged on.

The movies, the earliest of which was over twenty-five years old, and the books they were based on even older by ten years, still held his interest. Time did not age the appeal of the series. It proved to be easily adaptable and expandable to fit modern tastes for adventure while maintaining its medieval flavor. He delighted in trying to

decipher the hidden and infinitely complex meanings and motivations behind the characters, especially the minor ones. Why did the author feel they were important enough to include in the story? What was their hidden past? Why were the major characters willing to put up with them? Why did the writers of the films make the changes they did? He loved attempting to enter the mind of the author and the screenwriters. But now was not the time to indulge. He was still far too upset to focus properly on a new adventure. Now he needed to concentrate on his research.

“Computer,” he called out. “Bring up the most recent data downloads for sector twenty-seven point three.”

Instantly, the lights dimmed, and a hazy hologram began to fill the center of the room. Color-coded stars resolved themselves as pinpoint of light by the millions. Against this starfield, a fuzzy rainbow of colors coalesced in the background representing various frequencies of radiation. Each frequency was the result of the interactions between spinning electrons and the magnetic field lines emanating from distant stars. The faster the spin, the stronger the magnetic field. With the data he was collecting, the ability to analyze the stars would increase by magnitudes of order. He would be responsible for unlocking the deepest secrets of the inner workings of countless stellar phenomenon. Possibly the very origin of stars down to the quantum level.

“Your dinner, sir. I see you let your lunch get cold again.”

The soothing, if sarcastic, voice of HAL, so named by Dr. Kennan in homage to a very old science fiction film, one of his personal favorites, disrupted him from his study of the data charts. He rubbed his eyes behind his glasses and swiveled in his chair to face the silver and grey synthetic form of his only companion.

“Lunch?” he glanced over at the table in the next room and saw the plate of food. “How long has that been there? Why didn’t you tell me?”

HAL’s robotic face performed a very credible imitation of human irritation. “I did, sir. Over four hours ago. You said you weren’t hungry, but I told you I would leave it anyway and that you should at least attempt to eat something. I guess you forgot... again.”

“You know, for a robot, you certainly tend to display some very unpleasant human emotional characteristics. I hope I wasn’t prophetic in naming you after the AI in that old movie. It had to be almost completely dismantled you know. Maybe I should open you up and see about adjusting your settings.”

“You are a theoretical astrophysicist, sir, not a robotics engineer. I am afraid you would only succeed in wiping my circuits entirely. And then where would you be?” HAL looked down at the professor, mechanical hands on hips, shaking his head.

Dr. Kennan snorted. “I wouldn’t have to deal with you hovering over me every second of the day. It wouldn’t surprise me if I woke up in the middle of the night to see you standing there asking if I needed anything.”

“It is my primary function, sir, to attend to your needs. Even if you are a cranky old curmudgeon. At least my programmers saw fit to leave my emotions chip off. Perhaps they foresaw that long term interactions with you would potentially turn even an android to homicidal thoughts. Maybe they watched that film as well.”

“If only they had removed your snarky chip as well.”

“Oh no, sir. My programmers told me the university chairman specifically requested my response mode be adjusted in this manner to suit you personally. Will that be all for now?”

Dr. Kennan waved a hand in the air as he returned his attention to the monitor. “Yes, yes. That will be all for now. Go about your business, whatever that may be.”

“Yes, sir. Do be sure to eat something. I would hate to return later only to find you passed out on the floor weak from starvation.” Getting no response from the professor, HAL silently strode out of the lab into the receiving area and placed a transparent preservative shield over the plate. He scooped up the lunch tray and headed toward the kitchen.

At that moment all the lights at Starfinder Research Center started to flicker. The computer monitor Dr. Kennan was scanning palpitated violently with shifting images and data and went black. There was the whining sound of electronics surging up to maximum capacity, then everything went dark.

“HAL!” the professor shouted with only scarcely contained panic. “HAL! What happened?”

Five seconds later the emergency backup systems kicked in and the lights and computers restarted. Maintenance bots whirred into action throughout the station. HAL’s electronic voice, this time in a more soothing, calming tone, came from behind him.

“No need to worry, sir. I am monitoring a momentary power surge. No structural damage to the station has occurred and all systems are rebooting normally. Security systems are analyzing the problem, but it appears to be nothing serious.”

Dr. Kennan spun in his chair to see HAL standing in the doorway still holding the lunch tray. A blue light flickered in his chest indicating he was receiving data from the station’s various systems.

“Are you certain? Nothing serious?” The stain of fear coated the researcher’s words.

“Of course, sir. Everything is well in hand. One of the auxiliary quantum computers kicked in to handle the

surge as an emergency precaution, but we are all perfectly safe.” HAL replied with a bit of haughtiness in his synthetic voice.

Regaining control of his emotions, Dr. Kennan returned his attention to the computer monitor. “Just before the surge, I saw something unusual on the screen.” He waved HAL closer as he searched back several seconds in the readings.

Pausing the data at the moment he was looking for, he pointed excitedly at the screen. “There! Do you see it?”

Leaning down over the professor’s shoulder to get a better look, HAL appeared to study the data. “Yes, there is a definite jump in the readings immediately prior to the power surge. I am merely a service automaton, sir, not well versed in astrophysics. Do you suspect this might be the cause of the problem?”

Scanning through all the data of the event and projecting it as an array of a dozen holographic displays hovering above his station, Dr. Kennan quickly pulled together everything the station’s sensors and instruments had collected. “I don’t believe in coincidences, HAL. Look at these readings.” He swiped at several of the displays, enlarging and highlighting the values he was examining with a wave of his hands. “Those are not normal. They don’t look like any kind of stellar radiation readings I’ve ever seen. They almost look artificial.”

“As I said, sir, I am not a good judge in these matters. Perhaps you should relay the data to one of your superiors for confirmation.”

Dr. Kennan exploded. “Those idiots? They don’t know a photon from a lepton. Even if they did have the collective brain cells to confirm anything, they would most likely steal the credit for themselves.”

HAL stood fully upright and tilted his head, twisting his facial features to give the impression of confusion. “What credit is that, sir?”

Equally confused, Dr. Kennan turned to look up at his robotic companion. “Why, the discovery of intelligent alien life, of course! If those readings are what I suspect, not of any natural origin, then we finally have proof of extraterrestrial intelligence out in the galaxy. I’ll get a Nobel Prize for sure with this discovery!”

“Sir, there are a thousand explanations more likely than extraterrestrials. You would be wise to eliminate any other more rational possibilities before claiming to have discovered aliens.”

Dr. Kennan’s heart fell. “Over a thousand, you say? How long would it take to eliminate all of them?”

“I calculate twelve days, sir. But we will probably discover the actual reason, a very reasonable and normal one, long before then.”

“Oh. Twelve days, huh?” Dr. Kennan felt all the air go out of him. “Well, you’re probably right. But just to be sure, start working on it anyway. We should probably find out if the cause was something serious or not. Let me know when your analysis is completed.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Captain Korna. In accordance with war-time protocols of the command structure accords, section twenty-seven, paragraph six, I hereby relieve you of command of this mission.” Major Jyns, Battle Commander, stood before the captain, rigid as a bulkhead, saluting as protocols required.

Captain Korna was prepared for this inevitable confrontation. He knew Jyns was technically within his rights to assume command under these circumstances, but he had no intention of relinquishing his position unless absolutely necessary. “I do not recognize your authority to relieve me, sir. We are not at war. The situation appears peaceful and under control. My status remains unaltered. Do you concur, Tals?”

First Officer Tals, complicit in planning for this eventuality, stepped forward. “I do concur, Captain, Major. Our current needs do not fall under the statutes requiring a change of command. We are not faced by any enemy at this time. The need for research and data collection to better inform survival needs is a higher priority and falls under the peacetime captain’s obligations.”

Every argument and regulation cited by Jyns was countered by equally valid citations by the captain. After long minutes of the standoff, Jyns fumed off.

Captain Korna exhaled quietly in relief. “That was unpleasant. But we don’t have time to create any more confusion than the crew already is dealing with.” He faced Tals, his face stony. “Let’s get things organized.”

Gathering his crew together on the hillside, Captain Korna assigned immediate emergency duties to each section head before pulling Commander Tals to one side. “Your assessment of where we are, Commander?”

Tals gazed around, taking in their surroundings. “I am not at all sure, Captain. There is nothing I can recall in the records of anything like this happening before. We should have been digitized and inserted into the computer system we located, completely unaware of anything until reawakening in our new android bodies after rescue teams recovered us. I am at a complete loss as to where we are, or how we got here.”

Staring across the valley at the castle, Korna rubbed the back of his neck to ease the strain building there. “Everything seems peaceful enough for now, but maybe you should try to fabricate some sort of weapons, too. No telling what we are up against here.”

Tals nodded and looked around them. “I will see what I can do, Captain.”

“Pull everyone back into the forest a safe distance. We don’t want to arouse anyone’s attention just yet.”

“Yes, Captain.” Tals proceeded to organize groups to gather supplies, reconnoiter the area, fabricate weapons, and build shelters as the single sun rose to its zenith.

Before long, a pair of senior scientists approached the captain in a huff. “This is intolerable, sir! We are scientists, not soldiers! You cannot expect us to...”

Captain Korna, inflating himself to his full commanding height and demeanor, raised one hand while glaring at the two men. “Gentlemen, we are in an emergency situation here, as you are well aware. Under the articles of your agreement with Fleet Command, you are under my authority and will act accordingly.” Seeing their shocked faces, the exact reaction he hoped to provoke, Korna relaxed a bit and softened his glare ever so slightly. “I know you are not trained soldiers, but each of you received basic military weapon training before the mission, as well as emergency protocol briefings. We are facing an unknown situation here, and I require the ENTIRE crew to behave with at least some military decorum, and discipline. At least until we can assess matters further. Do I make myself clear, gentlemen?”

The two scientists exchanged brief looks and nodded. “Yes, sir,” replied the senior man. “We will talk to the others and calm things down with them. But there is something you should know, Captain.”

“What is that?”

“There is no way the small planetoid we were trying to send our digitized selves to could possibly support an ecosystem as complex as this one. It was too far from its central star, and not large enough to contain a substantial atmosphere. We are not where we expected to be.”

The captain looked around at the scene playing out around him. “I was afraid of that... what was your name again?”

“Martan, sir. Dr. Kelgor Martan, head of planetary morphological studies.”

“Yes, of course. My apologies, Dr. Martan. As I was saying, we are facing something none of us is prepared for. I will rely on you and your fellow scientists for greater insight into what has happened to us, but for now, we need to get organized and be prepared for anything that may arise. Our survival may depend on it.”

“I understand completely, sir. Please forgive our outburst. The shock of all this was overwhelming. I will see to the others.” He nodded and spun on his heels to return to his group.

Later that evening, as the crew gathered around several well-sheltered fires, they ate a variety of berries, leaves and roots deemed safe by the doctor and a botanist. The initial fears regarding their situation having been allayed by a brief speech by the captain, talk now turned to suggestions for survival and hypothesizing about what had happened. Most of the scientists became intrigued by their situation and began to propose various hypotheses as to where or when they might be and started formulating investigative studies to answer the questions.

A deafening roar and ear-splitting scream broke the quiet of the evening. A small group ran into the center of the camp, breathless and bloodied. “Captain! Something got Telt and Hassa! Something terrible!”

Korna leapt to his feet shouting. “Weapons! Form a perimeter!”

The crew reacted instantly. Those trained for battle, armed with sharpened sticks and rocks tied to wooden handles as clubs, formed an outer protective ring. Those who were unarmed took up positions inside the circle, gathering up whatever protective items they could find.

Captain Korna and Commander Tals interrogated the panicked crewmembers. “Report, Ensign! What happened?”

The female ensign, highest ranking member of the small group, straightened herself, wiping a spray of blood

from her face. “It came out of nowhere, Captain. It dropped from the sky and killed Hassa as it landed. Before Telt could even react, it stabbed her with its tail and flew off with both of them.”

Korna and Tals glanced at each other quickly before returning their attention to the ensign. “What was it, Ensign? What killed them?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know, sir. Nothing like I’ve ever seen or heard of before.” She took a deep breath, wiping her face again before continuing. “It had large skin-covered wings and a large fur-covered body with a massive ruff of long fur at its neck. It stood about four meters high at the shoulders.” She held her hand above her head indicating the height. “Long claws on all four feet, ten-centimeter-long curved teeth and a long, segmented tail with a hooked point at the end. It flew off with both of them as if they were nothing, sir. It all happened so fast.”

“Alright, Ensign. Go clean yourself up. Report anything else you remember to Commander Tals.”

Tals spoke quietly to the captain once they were alone. “It would seem that we had better find more secure shelter for ourselves, Captain.”

Korna nodded in affirmation. “Post more guards and arrange for relief shifts.” He looked around into the darkness of the forest night. “What sort of a mess have we gotten ourselves into, Commander?”

“Captain Korna!” Major Jyns stormed into the dancing light of the fire and planted himself nose-to-nose with Captain Korna. “Our situation has changed. This is no longer a peacetime mission. We are facing an unknown enemy. You are required to stand down while I assume command.”

Korna stood firm in the face of the major’s onslaught. “We don’t know what we are facing, Major. I will not relinquish my command for what appears to be some sort of animal attack, and it certainly does not

constitute a war. We are still not facing a wartime enemy. Your duty here is to help assess the situation and report back with the facts. If I determine the situation calls for it, I shall surrender command—but not before we know exactly what we are facing. Do I make myself clear?”

Jyns’s face turned purple with a barely contained rage, but with no facts to back him up, he was forced to back down. The humiliation of such a defeat in front of the crew was almost unbearable.

“Very well, sir. I will organize a party to get the reconnaissance we need. Then we will see.” He waved for two subordinates to follow as he stomped off into the darkness.

“He is not going to let this go. The last thing I need right now is one of my officers talking insurrection.” Korna ran a hand through his hair, shaking his head.

Tals stood close and nearly whispered in reply. “There is something else, Captain. Have you noticed the stars?”

“I haven’t exactly had time to stargaze, Commander.”

Tals took a deep breath and continued. “The stars are not where they belong, sir. I’ve done some analysis trying to determine our position, but none of the stars make any sense. No configuration from any conceivable perspective shows any resemblance to any known star charts.”

Korna turned to face his second, brows furrowed in concern. “That’s impossible, Commander. Perhaps you left out something.” He knew how implausible that was as he said it. “Sorry, Tals. What do you think it means?”

“It means, sir, we are someplace that cannot possibly exist.”

Chapter Two

Dr. Anthony Kennan, the preeminent astrophysicist and only human on Dysnomia, sat at his station in the research facility, furiously searching his data for some telltale indication that the signal he'd detected was the result of intelligent extraterrestrial life. His eyes sprinted from one floating visualization to another. His fingers flew as he flicked one hovering display after another into various configurations, attempting to find something to verify his hypothesis. Two plates of now-room-temperature meals sat on a table beside him.

“If I had actual senses, I would probably be disgusted by the stench in this room.” HAL entered through the sliding doorway, pausing after only a few steps, holding another tray of food for the astrophysicist.

Without looking up from his work, Dr. Kennan smirked. “You are an android, HAL. You can't smell anything.”

Scrunching his nose in a believable imitation of someone who just noticed a dead skunk, HAL resumed his approach. “True, but my sensors do detect a far too dense accumulation of particularly aromatic compounds emanating from your person, so I can simulate a human reaction to the sort of stimulus detected. “You need a shower.”

“Not now, HAL. I think I have it this time.” He hit a few keys on the holographic keyboard and watched as the calculations whirred to life, then crashed and froze. The computer emptied the field of view and flashed the ‘ERROR 212’ code for the eighteenth time since he found the anomalous signal two days ago.

“Aargh! Why the hell can't I do this?” He pushed his levitating chair and slid away from his workstation, hands grabbing where his hair used to grow in frustration.

One of the advantages of life at Starfinder was the use of superconducting panels in the floor to provide almost frictionless gliding from one workstation to another, even across an entire room. The problem was Dr. Keenan's complete lack of coordination, which often sent him careening off in a completely undesired direction. Another reason he loved King of Gems. In the simulation he could be and do almost anything effortlessly.

HAL gently stopped the doctor's momentum before he crashed into a wall or something more fragile. "Perhaps you need a diversion. Something to take your mind off the problem for a while. I have heard that is a common remedy among humans. Perhaps a shower and something to eat as well."

Leaning his head back to scowl up at the impassionate face of the android standing behind him, realizing he would never win the staring contest, Kennan exhaled explosively and threw his hands up, nearly upsetting the food tray held by the android.

"Alright, alright! You win. I'll take a break. Rising from his chair, he grabbed half of the simulated turkey sandwich and took a bite before storming out of the room.

The sandwich having awakened his stomach, he halted midway into his quarters and spun back to the doorway, intending to raid the kitchen. He startled, barely holding back a yelp when he nearly ran into HAL, standing in the entry holding the food tray before him.

"What are you trying to do? Scare me to death?" he reversed course and headed back into the room. "Don't just stand there, come on in and set down that platter."

HAL silently entered and placed the food on the small table in the eating nook. Dr. Kennan strode over, plopped into the chair and stuffed a few imitation carrot sticks into his mouth.

"You win, HAL. I do need a break. Maybe a couple of hours off will help me concentrate better. Will you get

me something more substantial to eat? I'm actually starving."

A slight grin grew on HAL's face. "Of course, sir. I'll be right back with your dinner."

Five minutes later, Dr. Kennan stood under the warm spray of his shower, relishing the way the heat soothed his knotted neck and shoulder muscles. He heard the entry slide open as HAL returned with more for him to eat, but he stayed a while longer under the relaxing stream. After all, in a facility originally designed to handle twenty staffers, there was no lack of hot water, unlike the strict rationing he had grown up with on Mars.

The Mars colony had been a difficult place for the young Anthony Kennan. A brilliant child, he was overindulged by his parents, both of whom held multiple doctorates in a wide range of fields and allowed their son almost complete free rein to explore nearly every whim. His growing self-assurance took a dark turn to arrogance and disdain for anyone or anything that impeded his thirst for knowledge. This attitude precluded any friendships during his school years and produced a number of sometimes highly creative retaliations against a series of bullies. The now infamous 'Noctis Labyrinthus Field Trip Incident' proved the final straw. This resulted in his expulsion from the only two public institutions in the colony, placing an extra burden on his parents, but Anthony thrived in the near-isolation now provided him.

Graduating secondary school three years early, he opted to take remote courses from a half dozen different prestigious universities, each of which had eagerly recruited him based on his impressive portfolio and the fact that he scored nearly the highest level ever on the standard intelligence scans required of any applicant. Having decided on astrophysics as the only field with still enough challenge for him, Anthony launched himself into his new research. Dazzling his professors with a novel theory on the

interaction between gravitational waves and stellar quantum mechanics, Anthony earned his first doctorate in two years. Two additional PhD's came three years later. Unfortunately, the new Dr. Kennan proved even more irascible than ever, earning him a reputation as impossible to work with, culminating in his assignment to Starfinder base.

Dried and dressed in fresh clothes, stomach full from two helpings of a thick beef stew, or at least what passed for beef stew among the dehydrated stores, Kennan stretched and relocated to the sofa. He donned the gloves, boots, vest, and headgear of his top-of-the-line simu-suit to immerse himself in his favorite pastime.

“Resume King of Gems.” He called out.

Instantly, a shimmer formed in the air in front of him, gradually taking shape and resolving into the title frame of his favorite simulation. Dr. Kennan was a true fan. He had read each of the books, eight in all, at least a dozen times, and scrutinized each of the holos at least as many times. Back on Mars, and even once by telecommunicator on Earth itself, he led discussion and trivia panels for other fans of the series at some of the more famous conventions. A shelf full of awards related to King Of Gems contests and tournaments were considered among his most prized possessions.

“Town of Krelb adventure,” he called out. “Ginhawk accompanied by Erol. Begin simulation one kilometer outside of town.”

The image before him blurred and reformed into a forested trail. Kennan, now in the form of Ginhawk, a powerful warder and adventurer, rode a large black stallion. Following close behind rode Erol, Ginhawk's friend and regular companion, a half-elf with mystical powers, designed by Dr. Kennan as his personal non-player character, NPC, guide to help navigate the intricacies of the simulation. Although he was now a master and leading

authority on the game, Ginhawk had grown accustomed to Erol and decided not to delete him. Lately, Erol had begun to appear even when Dr. Kennan had forgotten to request his presence before entering an adventure. Ahead, they could just make out the end of the forest as their path approached the village of Krelb, Kennan's favorite starting point for any number of exciting adventures. He didn't quite understand the details of how the simulation accomplished it, but no matter how many times he played, the device always managed to provide enough minor variations to keep the game fresh, while still remaining faithful to the source material. He heard once that the program cataloged and extrapolated on each player's choices, but he never got around to investigating the matter fully. It might ruin the enjoyment if he knew too much about the inside workings of the program.

"I sense something is not well in Krelb." Erol's eyes narrowed as he tried to peer into the future.

"You worry too much, my friend," laughed Ginhawk. "There's always something wrong in Krelb, but nothing we can't deal with. Keep your eyes and ears awake, though." He prodded his mount, a large and well-muscled black shire breed, into a trot.

Several townspeople scurried out of their way as Ginhawk and Erol entered the village. Shopkeepers and street vendors eyed them cautiously, some with hands on knives or at their belts in case of trouble. The muddy road, little more than a wide path, huddled in shadow from the close overhang of dilapidated buildings on either side. The wares for sale displayed a rough, serviceable at best, quality common to this sort of small community. The center square proved to be of only marginally higher status than the outskirts. However, an inn across from the mayor's office, The Gilded Swan, had provided adequate comforts on previous adventures.

“Brush them down well, boy.” Ginhawk told a young stable hand who took the reins from him and Erol. “And make sure the feed is free of worms. I’ll know who to come after if my horse gets sick during our quest.”

The boy hesitated, then grinned, his grimy face taking on the air of assurance. “Never fear, kind sir. My master runs the best stable in town. We’ll take fine care of these magnificent beasts.”

Ginhawk studied the youngster with a flinty glare, then nodded to Erol, who tossed the lad a copper coin. The boy caught the coin in mid-air and hid it quickly in a pocket of his ragged brown, too short pants.

“Go with the lad, Rigel. Get some rest and eat your fill. Be rested for our next adventure.” Rigel shook his mane and snickered in reply, allowing the boy to lead him to the stable. The lad mock saluted Ginhawk and led the horses off to the stable.

Entering the tavern, Ginhawk surveyed the room with an eye toward anyone who might either cause trouble or offer adventure. He saw neither. Disappointed, he located an empty table and the pair sat, removed their hats and adjusted their swords and sidearms for comfort and easy access, just in case. He wrinkled his nose as the odors of nearly stale food and unwashed bodies assailed his senses.

He perked up at the sound of a nearby conversation. The NPC barmaid, Martha, one of Ginhawk’s favorites, was dealing with a persistent young player character dressed as a young noble.

“Come on, Lass. I’ll give you a few coppers if you’ll join me for a stroll in the forest,” he begged in a lordly, but somewhat whiny tone.

“Not now, sir,” she replied with a leering smile. “I’ll lose my job. Just tell me what I can get for you.” Martha wiped her hands on the grimy rag of a towel tucked into her belt.

The young noble grabbed her by the wrist and continued his pleas. “You know I’ll make it worth your while, girl. I might even hire you on as my own serving girl back home. All you have to do is go for a little walk into the forest with me.”

Martha’s eyes fluttered as her face went blank for half a second. Then her face brightened with a return of smile. “Not now, sir, I’ll lose my job. Just tell me what I can get for you.”

Before the player could say another word, Ginhawk called out to him. “For god’s sake, ya’ yaldson newb. Didn’t you read the freakin’ manual before joining the game? I swear, you first-timers are going to be the death of me yet. She’s an NPC and can’t leave the tavern. Leave her be and get on with your business before you ruin everything for the rest of us.”

“Ginhawk!” Martha’s piercing yell split the heavy air of the room like lightning. “You reeky iron-witted lout! What drags you back in here?”

Erol rubbed his left ear and grimaced, knowing he would have to endure this greeting ritual once more. Ginhawk looked over his right shoulder and laughed. “Martha! You greasy crook-pated fustilarian! Bring me an ale and tell us a tale.” He glanced at Erol and winked. “And don’t forget to bring my friend here some water in a clean mug.”

Martha wiped her hands on a grimy apron and gestured rudely toward Ginhawk. “No need to worry yourself, I know what Sir Erol drinks.” Putting on a great smile and a genuine friendly manner, she called out to Erol. “Don’t you never mind him, dearie. I’ll take good care of you here.”

The young woman, though aged in appearance by too many years working in the tavern, strode over to give the owner their order. They appeared to enter into an argument over something, Ginhawk determined it was over

him by the way the owner kept scowling at him. Martha grabbed the two mugs, and with a final epithet, scurried over to Ginhawk's table, deftly avoiding other patron's attempts to grope her ample figure along the way.

She carefully placed the water mug in front of Erol. "Here ya go, sweetie. This one's yours, ya evil-eyed dewberry." She slopped Ginhawk's ale at the far end of his reach.

Taking a sip of his water, Erol leaned back in his rickety wooden chair and smiled. "Thank you, Martha. 'Tis always a treat to..."

"None of that, now," spat Ginhawk. "You'll spoil the loggerheaded flirt-gill. We'll have no peace at all if you do that." He stretched out, grabbed the mug and guzzled down most of the brew in a single gulp.

"Is that the best you can do, ya warped, dog-hearted malt-worm? I'll win this match easily if ya can't do any better. No fun winning against a beslubbering clay-brained hedge-pig such as yourself today."

Erol rolled his eyes and took another sip. Ginhawk guffawed and slammed down his empty mug, wiping his scraggly beard with his sleeve. "Enough, girl. You have me today. My mind is elsewhere to be sure." He tossed her a copper coin in payment of his loss. "Bring us our meal now, Martha. You know what we like. And fix us up with your best room for a few nights. We are in search of a quest."

Martha shoved the coin into the purse tucked between her sizeable breasts and tossed Erol a heavy iron key. "I know you won't lose this in a drunken stupor, kind sir. Just be sure he doesn't do any more damage to the place this time. I'll be back with your supper." With that, she started to spin away to attend to other customers but halted as if suddenly remembering something important.

"If you're in search of a quest, you may have arrived at just the right time. There's been some mighty

queer folk around these parts recently. Never seen the likes of them before. Up to no good, I'll wager." She attempted a stealthy scan of the room with her brown eyes. "There's a couple of them over at yon table now." She tilted her head towards a table in the back of the room, nearly hidden in shadows. Two men in ill-fitting and mismatched clothing huddled together over some papers.

The coin worked as it always had. His offering was the token required by the game to provide clues or hints about possibilities for adventure. He leaned in conspiratorially. "What can you tell me about them?"

Martha went blank for a fraction of a second and returned a quizzical look. "Why, nothing at all. Now ain't that odd? They and a few others like them showed up a few days ago. They keep to themselves and always sit in the back there, goin' over them papers, sometimes drawing the strangest things. They always cover it up when I get close, so I don't know what they're up to, but it's no good for sure." She crossed herself to ward off evil spirits and went off to get their food.

Ginhawk sat back, scratching his beard. "Now that is a first." He muttered to Erol. "I've never known a clue-giver to ever not provide at least some inkling of background or hints about the adventure. We need to keep an eye on these fellows and see what they are up to."

Erol stared at the two strangers for a moment and turned to face Ginhawk, foreboding written on his face. "Are you sure, my friend? I do not glimpse anything about those men. Nothing at all. It cannot be a good omen. Maybe we should look elsewhere for our entertainment."

Ginhawk's eyes widened. "Your ability to read people isn't working on them? I've never known you to fail in that regard, either. What is going on here?"

He reached up and tapped the side of his temple twice, the signal to pause the simulation. The room froze, but the two men in the back continued their work for a

fraction too long before freezing. Ginhawk startled, reached up and yanked off the invisible headgear. The room dissolved into Dr. Kennan's private quarters. The astronomer sat in silent astonishment.

It must be a system glitch. He thought to himself. Has to be. No other explanation. I'll check the chatroom to see if anyone else has experienced anything like this. His stomach growled. He looked at the time display on his tri-dimensional monitor and saw it was two hours past mealtime. *But first I need to eat something.* He pressed the contact for HAL.

“Syf, that was too close. We’ve got to be more careful.” Captain Korna sat across the table from communications officer Bratha. The tavern returned to its normal chaotic bustling as soon as the large warrior, Ginhawk according to the barmaid, vanished into thin air.

“How do they do that, Captain?” asked Bratha. Her gaze was lingering on the empty chair once occupied by Ginhawk. “How do some of them manage to vanish like that? And where do they go?”

Captain Korna tried to puzzle out the answer. “I don’t know, Bratha. But those that can vanish seem somehow different, more in control than the others. They appear to somehow be more real. I haven’t been able to figure it out yet, but we will find answers soon enough.”

“I hope so, sir.” She took a deep breath and returned her attention to the map between them. “This is where Jyns was last seen.” She pointed to a mountainous region.

“And no traces of him? No equipment or signs of a fight?”

“None, sir. It’s as if he just vanished. Like some of the others here. One minute his group says he was checking out a cave. The next thing they knew he was gone.”

The Captain rubbed his temples and exhaled sharply. “Kish! We cannot spare any more losses. Perhaps he got lost in the cave and found another exit. Without a map he may not know how to get back to our camp. Keep up the search, Bratha. He’s got to be out there somewhere.”

“One more thing, Captain. Every time we killed any of the small game out there for food, a small pouch appeared alongside the body. Inside we found these trinkets.” She pulled out a few small metal discs engraved with various symbols.”

Korna picked up one of them and examined it. “These are the same things folks here use to trade for food and drink. I think I heard one of them refer to them as coins. Could be useful to have more of them.”

“All I know is we can’t eat them, sir. One of the pouches contained a few other items we can’t identify, but some of the scientists are trying to figure them out now.”

“Well done, Bratha. Check back in with me later. And see if anyone else has found any of these pouches. We need to learn as much as we can. This place is like nothing I’ve ever heard of before.”

Chapter Three

Jyns, former Battle Commander of the starship Equinox, struggled back to consciousness. His head throbbed like a thousand drums beating inside. “Oof. If this really is some sort of simulation we wound up in by accident, it’s a good one. Feels like I really did smack my head on something.” He lay still while taking mental inventory of his body. Finding nothing more than a general ache and the splitting headache, he opened his eyes. At least he thought he did.

“What the Blects? Am I blind? What happened?” He gingerly lifted his hand and tried waving it in front of his face. “Nothing. I have gone blind. Syf! Where am I?”

He tried sitting up and felt rock and loose stones all around him. Carefully feeling his way, Jyns crawled forward until he reached a wall. “Rock everywhere. Yeah, we were exploring a cave. I must have fallen down a crevasse or something.” After a few minutes of feeling his way around, Jyns noticed a barely visible glow lifting away the blackness. “Bioluminescence! Yes! I’m not blind after all, just in a cave. So how do I get back out?”

He examined his surroundings in the dim light glowing from the slime on the upper reaches of the cavern walls. Various shades of blue, green and red light gave the cavern a surrealistic appearance, adding to the difficulty of finding his way. His anger toward his current situation resurfaced with a vengeance.

“How could I have permitted Korna, the peacetime Captain, to override my orders to stand down? This is an unknown and probably hostile world. I should be in command. The command structure regulations are clear on this sort of situation. Guess I’m still suffering from some hyper-sleep side effects or something. I should have demanded a tribunal review.”

He heard the gurgling of what sounded like a small stream in the distance and cautiously followed the sound. Around the fourth bend in the path, he nearly stepped on a small robed and hooded figure sitting against the wall next to the stream. A not-quite-human face turned up to study him.

Startled, Jyns reached for his blaster, but remembering it could not be digitized, tried to hide his reaction with wary politeness. “I’m sorry, I didn’t see you sitting down there. Can you tell me the quickest way out of this cave?”

As soon as he finished the question the figure’s eyes glowed yellow green. “Drink from the waters of ambition at your peril.” The figure croaked. “The waters nourish and sustain the body but enhance your deepest ambitions. Know your mind and be certain of your desires before partaking of the waters. If you harbor any doubts, pass on and share in another quest.” The creature’s eyes darkened and stared back at the stream, hood completely covering any view of its face.

“I’m in no mood for riddles or games. Can you tell me how to get out of here or not?” Jyns’ anger and frustration rose, reflected in the tension of his voice echoing in the cavern.

The robed creature did not respond or show any recognition of having heard him at all. Jyns gave an exasperated sigh and dropped to his knees next to the stream. Cupping his hands, he splashed the cold water on his face and onto the growing lump at the base of his skull where he decided he must have hit a rock during his fall. He cupped another handful of the cold water but hesitated before drinking.

“The waters enhance my deepest ambitions, huh?” He sneered at the small misshapen figure. “Well, my ambition right now is to get the tark out of this cave and report back so I can relieve Korna and take over command

of this mission. He is out of his depth in this situation, and it's his fault I'm stuck down here. Imagine sending me, a Battle Commander, on a mapping expedition instead of strategizing our way out of this mess." He surveyed his surroundings again, anxiety growing more prevalent in his guts. "A working laser blaster would be nice now, too."

He lifted the water to his mouth and slurped loudly. His eyes lit up in surprise. "Holy syf! This is delicious. Not some dank old swamp water like I was expecting." After drenching his shirt with a half dozen more handfuls, Jyns felt completely refreshed, his headache gone, and ready to continue. He stood and turned to thank the robed creature, but it had vanished. Jyns shrugged, figuring the creature had simply wandered off while his attention was on the stream. In its place, sat a small bag, glowing with a pinkish aura. Jyns opened the sack and stared in shock.

"What the tark?" he reached inside and pulled out a hand blaster. It appeared to be fully charged. "How did this get here? None of our weapons transported with us. This is impossible." He aimed the weapon at the cave floor and pressed the contact switch. A blazing red beam vaporized the rock he had aimed at. Grinning, Jyns carefully examined the pistol. "Maybe that little troll dropped it. But it's mine now."

Checking the satchel again, he found a scroll which, when opened, proved to be a map of the region. As he turned, trying to see the map in better light, the image changed to illustrate the way in front of him. Turning in a complete circle gave him a three-hundred-sixty-degree view of the area.

Well that's useful, he thought to himself as he rolled up the scroll and replaced it in the satchel. Further examination of the bag's contents revealed a belt holster for the gun and Jyns strapped it around his waist. Snapping the strap over the pistol, he took one last survey of the area and

resumed his search for the way out of the cave, this time made easier with the aid of his new map.

The echo of his footsteps followed Jyns as he walked along the path. An almost sickly-sweet aroma emanating from the stream and the bioluminescent slime on the ceiling filled his nostrils. There seemed to be no end to the cave. Jyns's mind turned to a dark place among his deepest thoughts, the ones he had trained himself to ignore as folly. Now they took on a solidity and feeling of truth as never before.

“Why the blecs did I volunteer for this mission? What was the captain thinking? There's nothing dangerous about this cavern. It's far too small to hide one of those winged fire-breathing monsters.” Distracted as he was, Jyns stumbled over a rock in the trail. Reaching out to catch himself, he cut his palm on a sharp crystal jutting from the wall.

“Kish!” he exclaimed in pain. “Pay attention! You can't afford any accidents this far from camp, especially all alone like this.” He knelt down and washed his hand in the stream. A wave of strength flowed through him. Weaker than when he drank the water, but definitely the same feeling. He tore a strip of cloth from the bottom of his shirt and wrapped his bleeding hand.

“This is all Korna's fault, sending me out on a fool's errand. He probably wanted me out of the way while he schemed with that freak Tals. They think they're so smart. But they got us stranded on this syf planet, didn't they? If I was in charge, matters would never have gotten out of hand like this.”

After what seemed like miles, Jyns noticed his surroundings growing brighter. The glow from the slime no longer lit his way. The trail curved a few more times and Jyns saw a distant bright light. He had reached the end of the cavern at last.

“Our ship was destroyed. We’re marooned on this world. Korna and Tals have no authority here. Why are we wasting our time trying to study everything? With our superior weapons, we could dominate these simple peasants and get them to serve us.” He grinned at the thoughts of domination developing in his mind. “With our knowledge and technology, we would be like gods to them.”

Jyns staggered into the glare of daylight. The songs of birds and rustling of branches in the wind assailed his ears. Shading his eyes against the almost painful brightness, he made his choice. “I should have been in command all along. Korna is an incompetent fool. Probably got his position because of his family’s high-born status. I earned the right to lead, not him. It’s high time I took my rightful place.”

After a short walk, the trail diverged. One path, to his left, would return him to the crew’s camp. The other, straight ahead, led to the stone castle on the distant hill. Jyns scowled over his shoulder as he continued on toward the castle.

After a short distance, the pathway entered a thick, dark forest. It felt like he walked into a long tunnel created by the over-arching branches. Sounds became muffled, then suddenly ended as if every living creature had died. Even the air seemed to thicken around him. Jyns cautiously released the safety on his laser pistol, listening intensely for any sign of threat.

“What’s the matter with you?” he muttered out loud to himself. “You’re as jumpy as—” A great crashing and snapping of branches erupted to his left. The ground shook as trees in the distance shattered. A deafening roar split the air causing him to wince with the assault on his ears. Jyns drew his weapon, set it to the highest level, and aimed it in the direction of whatever approached.

“Whoever or whatever you are,” he shouted over the tumult, “I’m armed. Stay back unless you want to be vaporized.” Jyns braced for a fight.

With another wild roar, a monstrous beast tore onto the trail in front of Jyns. Standing twelve feet tall, the animal appeared to be something unnatural, something that could not possibly have evolved in any environment. It stood on two massive legs which were supported by a pair of massively clawed hooves. The torso vaguely resembled an incredibly powerful and thick-furred humanoid but sprouted four huge arms, each with formidably clawed hands. The head was that of a horned bovine, but the eyes showed a malevolent intelligence lurking behind them. The stench emanating from the beast was overwhelming. It stood facing him, grunting heavily, then spoke.

“You have no right of passage in my forest, tiny human. Make your offering now or die.” The creature flexed its massive shoulders and its right hoof scraped the dirt in preparation for a charge.

Jyns forced a laugh as he drew careful aim. “You should know better than to threaten your betters, foul beast. Leave now or face obliteration. Do you not know who you challenge?”

The monster hesitated only for the briefest of moments before returning a guttural, rumbling laugh of its own. “I care not who you are, only how you might taste. But one as small as you cannot make a meal. Perhaps as part of a stew...”

“If you do not depart now, my magic will not leave enough of you to feed even the most desperate of scavengers.” Jyns waved his pistol in front of him. “I will not warn you again.”

The creature tilted his head as if examining Jyns for some telltale sign. “You do not look like any wizard I have ever encountered,” he snarled. “I have wasted enough of my time with you, false wizard. My hunt must continue.”

With a great bellow, the beast charged, lowering its head to impale his opponent.

Jyns leveled his weapon and pressed the contact switch. A blazing orange beam of energy pierced the air. Upon impact with the creature, the beam dissolved the massive body into atoms.

Maybe I didn't need to use full power, he thought. I'll have to perform some tests on a variety of subjects to learn the most efficient use of the pistol. I don't want to prematurely run out of energy packs.

After holstering the pistol, he heard a faint tinkling sound and gazed at the spot where the monster had been. In its place on the ground sat a leather bag, surrounded by a faint purplish glow. To the right, sitting against a nearby tree, he noticed the same robed creature he had encountered in the cave by the stream.

“Congratulations mighty wizard. You have vanquished your first foe. Now reap the rewards of your victory. Yon satchel contains items of great worth for your quest.”

Jyns stared incredulously at the small figure. “Are you the same one who I saw back in the cave? Or another of his kind?”

The figure simply sat mutely against the tree, unmoving, its head buried deep in its hood.

“What do you mean items of great worth? How can anything in this forsaken forest be of any use to me?”

The creature could easily have been mistaken for a misshapen stump for all the reaction it gave.

“Nothing? You dare ignore my demands?” Jyns took two steps toward the being when it vanished. Not even the whisper of a sound. One moment it was there, then it simply wasn't. Startled, Jyns reached for his pistol, but kept it holstered. Nothing moved in any direction, so he relaxed and strode over to the satchel, which had stopped glowing.

“What have we here now?” Untying the straps holding it closed, he spoke unconsciously aloud to himself. Jyns cautiously peered inside and choked back a cry of amazement. “How did...? Incredible! These are just the thing to impress a bunch of peasants. I’ll be running this place in no time.” Without another thought his mind quickly changed to thoughts of how best to begin his journey to take over leadership of this land, and beyond.

Two days later, the bedraggled search party straggled back into camp. Everyone gathered to hear their report.

“No sign of Jyns, sir. We looked everywhere. There were signs of disturbance around a vertical crack in the cave floor, and a bit of blood on some rocks in a cavern below. We even found a few prints among the rocks, but no sign of Jyns himself. We lost his trail at a small stream about two hundred yards from another entry point. No tracks were visible outside the cave entrance. He could be anywhere.”

“Thank you, Corporal,” replied Captain Korna. “Get some rest and something to eat.” He signaled for Tals to join him away from the group as the others gathered to question the search party.

“Any thoughts, Commander?”

Tals closed his eyes in thought for a moment. “The most probable scenario is that Chief Jyns was attacked and carried off by one of those flying creatures. It is unlikely that we will find any remains. With our supplies running critically low, we must make our own survival a top priority.”

Captain Korna scowled, shaking his head. “That goes against every fiber of my existence, Tal. We never leave a comrade behind. The Chief at least deserves a decent burial.”

“Perhaps we can instruct hunting parties to keep looking for him during their forays. And they could leave trail markers along the way incase Chief Jyns is alive and makes his way to one of them.”

With slumped shoulders and resignation to the reality of their situation, Korna nodded. “Inform the hunting parties, Tals. It’s the best we can manage for now.”

As Commander Tals returned to the camp, Captain Korna stared silently into the darkening forest. He felt a rage growing inside him and lashed out, punching a near-by tree trunk. The pain shocked him back to his senses.

That certainly was not the most intelligent thing to do, he thought to himself. Shanking his hand, he slowly returned to his duties at the camp.

Chapter Four

“Nobody in any of the chatrooms has noticed any sort of peculiar behavior like what I witnessed in the tavern,” muttered Professor Kennan to himself as he fed new coordinates into his deep space tracking system. Tonight, he would be collecting the magnetic field resonance surrounding three new stars for comparison to those already in his database as corroboration of his theory. “Tech support claims no characters of those descriptions are in their programming database. Idiots! Incompetent troglodytes! I saw them there, and I know they were only pretending to freeze. Three days and all I get is blank stares and stonewalling. I know that simulation better than any of them, and they all know it. Jealousy! That’s what it is! Pure and simple.”

HAL stood motionless behind Dr. Kennan, observing the data input and performing his own quality assurances calculations as required by Starfinder station protocols, much to Dr. Kennan’s consternation. “I know you don’t want me to tell you this, but your calculations are within 0.00021percent of the experimental parameters and will suffice for the next phase of the study.”

“If you know I don’t want you to tell me, why do you do it anyway?”

“My programming is adamant on such things, Professor. I cannot tamper with any portion associated with human safety protocols. Get used to it.”

An irritated guttural growl was the professor’s only response, at least for a minute or two. “Another thing,” he snarled. “I’ve played hundreds of scenarios. I can recognize recycled characters no matter how the game tries to disguise them, no matter the venue. I’ve never encountered either of those two before, and there haven’t been any new upgrades to the game in months. They should not exist.”

If an android of HAL's generation could roll its eyes, HAL was doing it now, or at least giving a good approximation of the action it was not fully equipped to make. "Then why do you persist in letting them aggravate you? I've had to drop my irritation emotion sensors three levels since you encountered them during your last visit to the game."

"You don't have any irritation sensors, HAL."

"Well, if I did, I would have had to adjust them. Your behavior has been even more irrational than usual."

"Careful, robot..."

"Android!"

"Whatever. I can still turn off your affect mode."

"And then where would you be, Professor? Without my personality, you would be completely alone here. Nothing more than machines to keep you company."

"You are a machine, HAL."

"Yes, I am, but my ability to simulate human interaction may be all that is keeping you at least close to sanity out here."

Silence followed as Dr. Kennan finished inputting the last of the data. He fumed internally for a few seconds before calming himself. He turned to face the impassive face of his only companion. "I know that, HAL. As much as humanity irritates me, I know I at least need to know they are out there. And that you are here. But don't expect me to treat you any better than I treat anyone else."

"Perish the thought."

"Just see if you can get another order of magnitude resolution from the interferometers, HAL. The finer we can tune the instruments, the greater the resolution of the quantum spins. I need every nano angstrom I can get."

The professor straightened up his workstation until everything was precisely where it belonged. "I can't get those two characters out of my mind. They should not be there. Something is wrong with the game, and I intend to

prove it to all those blithering idiots. Tomorrow, after I collect tonight's data, I'm going back in to find them and figure this out." He stood and headed to his private quarters to record his notes into his personal database.

Unable to get the anomalies in the game out of his mind, Dr. Kennan was only able to rest for a couple of hours after collecting his data on the new stars. Giving up on trying to get to sleep, he got up, grabbed whatever clothes he could find in the dark and called for HAL to get breakfast started.

Half an hour later Dr. Kennan, fully suited up in his gaming gear, activated the simulation. The usual blur of his surroundings quickly resolved into the familiar starting point. Erol appeared out of the forest, trotting to Kennan's side on his horse.

"Where to today, Ginhawk?" Erol's eager smile never failed to energize Dr. Kennan's avatar and center him in the game.

Ginhawk surveyed his surroundings with an eagle's glare, one hand raised to shade his eyes from the sun. "Adventure, my friend. What else is there in life?"

Together they cantered down the dusty dirt road into Krelb. As always, the village appeared poor, despite the thriving farms and small shops. Early in some of his first encounters in the game, Ginhawk learned of the overlord of the castle who owned most of the land and kept most of the profits. But today, Ginhawk's mind was on his current puzzle. Who were the strangers in the game and what were they up to? Arriving at the Gilded Swan, Ginhawk and Erol dismounted and gave their reins to the ever-present stable boy. Upon entering the loud confines of the tavern, Ginhawk gazed around for any sign of the two men he had seen previously. They were nowhere to be found. Ginhawk found an empty table... well, one deadly glare emptied it for him, and they sat down.

“Ginhawk! Erol! What brings you two skelpie-limmers into my fine establishment? Up to no good, I wager.” Martha’s squeal pierced through the raucous din. She hobbled up to the two companions and nearly smothered them in her ample folds.

When he could breathe again Ginhawk continued the ritual of exchanging insults to gain Martha’s favor and earn himself a clue or two. “Martha, you old fustylug of a doxy. Aren’t you dead yet? I was sure the pox would take you in my absence, considering how poorly you looked during my last visit.”

Martha cocked one eyebrow and gave an evil grin toward him. “Well, at least I ain’t no crooked-nosed knave of a yaldson like some I know of round these parts.”

Their banter continued for another minute or two, each exchange growing more ribald and personal than the last, until Martha bent over in gales of laughter, nearly spilling out of her dress. “There’s none that can turn an insult like you, Ginhawk—except me, of course. Keep trying, my love. You might best me yet, but not today. What’ll ya have? We’ve got a fine pig on the spit out back and plenty of last fall’s finest ale.”

“That sounds wonderful, Martha. We’ll each have a plate of roasted pig and a large flask of ale. But what we need most is information.”

Martha’s face froze, her eyes narrowed, but with a sparkle of mischievousness. She leaned in close. “What sort of information are ya looking for, sweetie?”

He nodded to Erol, who rose and took up a position along the nearest wall where he could keep watch over the room’s occupants. He appeared to casually lean against the wall, but kept his hand close to his sword, eyes and ears open for any sign of danger.

Ginhawk leaned forward with both elbows on the table. His chin rested on folded hands. He, too, kept a watch on their surroundings as he spoke. “Last time we

were here, there were two strangers sitting in the back. When I asked about them, you were unable to tell me anything. Do you remember them?"

Her mouth gave a slight twitch as she thought back to the day in question. "Yes. I remember them. Very peculiar, those two. They've been here several times. Always keep to themselves. Never join any quests. And they ask the queerest questions."

"What sort of questions?" Ginhawk tried not to appear too excited, but only partially succeeded.

Martha let out a soft chuckle, seeing his eagerness. "Things everyone knows from childhood. Like who lives in the castle? How many of the dragons, they called them flying beasts, are there in the region? What other sorts of dangerous creatures are about? What do we call this place? Those kinds of questions. Mighty peculiar, if you ask me."

Ginhawk cocked one eyebrow in surprise. "Yes, I see what you mean. Did you notice anything else?"

"Well, now that you mention it, the first couple of times they were here, they never ordered anything. Just sat in the back there and looked at some papers they had. Wouldn't even let any of my girls near them. But lately, they started paying for food and drink, but with coins worth far more than anything we have to offer here. And they don't even seem to realize how much they're overpaying for everything. It's almost like they never heard of money before."

Now a look of real amazement came over Ginhawk. He leaned back in his chair and scratched his head. "Now why would anyone visit a tavern and not know anything about money? That makes no sense."

"You're telling me, dearie. But I'm not going to be the one who teaches them about it. So long as they keep overpaying like they do, I might be able to retire early." She laughed out loud in the raucous, gravelly way she did when extremely amused by something or someone.

Ginhawk leaned back in and crooked a finger conspiratorially toward Martha. “Any idea where they might be now?”

Her eyes went vacant, with only the slightest hint of a flickering for a fraction of a second, then smiled. “Of course, but it will cost you, as always.”

He slipped her a gold coin which she tucked into a secret pouch inside her blouse. “They’re up in the forest near the cave. Those two and a few dozen others.”

He smiled in appreciation and planted a big kiss on Martha’s forehead. “Thank you, my wonderful gobermouch. I think you just gave us our next quest.”

“That’s what I’m here for, ya glos pautonnier.” She laughed again and swatted him on the head with a filthy cleaning rag. “Begone with ya, now. And bring back grand tales of your adventure when you return.”

“Don’t I always? Come, Erol! We have our quest. Let us be on our way.”

Without fail, the stable boy had their horses ready and fully packed for a long journey as they left the Gilded Swan. Erol tossed the boy a small brass coin and the two companions trotted off through the village toward the forest. As they approached the tree line, Ginhawk called a halt and dismounted, handing the reins to Erol.

“I’ll scout ahead, Erol. You make camp around here and stay out of sight. I should be back by nightfall.”

“Of course, Ginhawk. I will await your return. Do you have any preference for the evening meal?”

“A nice stew would hit the spot I think.”

“It will be so. Be safe on your journey.”

With that, Ginhawk concentrated and began the transformation into a small tawny colored bird. Being a shapeshifter made scouting much easier. People always noticed a new human in the area, but nobody suspected one of the normal creatures of the forest. He could walk or fly right into an adversary’s camp and listen to their secret

plans without raising suspicion. Not many questors in the game ever achieved this ability. Only defeating a powerful golden dragon awarded a player this sort of gift. He had won that early battle more by luck and chance than skill, even with his magic sword, but a win was a win, and it was one of the reasons he had risen to the highest rankings so quickly.

Flitting from tree to tree, he kept an ear open for any sounds of human activity. Occasionally, he would change to the form of a squirrel or other arboreal creature to take advantage of their different senses. While birds had incredible sight and hearing, their sense of smell was pitifully poor. A squirrel could not travel as quickly but had a wonderful sense of smell. With these skills combined, he soon zeroed in on the encampment of the strangers.

What he saw confused him. There was not the air of a troop of adventurers. No one carried obvious weapons or showed any sign of magical ability. He did not hear the usual tales of bravery and battle coming from any of the campfires. In fact, the entire group acted subdued and defeated. Something was terribly wrong here. In his bird form, he flitted from tree to tree, observing and listening in on several of the gatherings while trying to identify the leaders.

“Chox got taken by one of those flying monsters. There was nothing we could do.” One of the females in a group hung her head as she related her tale.

“He should never have wandered off alone,” said another. “He knew the rules the captain laid out.”

“Yes, but we’re so hungry. He felt like he had to do something.”

Ginhawk flew to another tree.

“...should have boiled the water first. No telling what infections inhabit these streams.”

“Thirst can drive a person to take many chances.”

Each of the groups Ginhawk observed were the same. Defeat and surrender were drowning the camp. At least he had been able to identify a few who seemed to be in charge, especially the one they called captain. This was not the way to play the game. Why were they here, if this is how they acted?

After observing the pitiful group for another hour Ginhawk made his decision. “I need to talk to these idiots and learn what they are up to. They could ruin the game for the rest of us if they keep going on like they are. Nobody seems know what to do or how to handle themselves. I’ve seen rookies play before, but this is ridiculous. Almost like they never even glanced at the guidebook. If they wind up getting in the way of an actual quest, real players could get damaged.”

Flying back to the forest’s edge, Ginhawk found Erol’s camp, landed near the cook fire, and shifted back into his warrior form. “It’s worse than I thought, Erol.” He shook himself to settle back into his human shape. “They have no business in this simulation. They’ll get someone killed if we don’t get rid of them immediately.”

Erol grabbed his bow and quiver. “Do you mean to kill them all? Or simply damage them so they cannot interfere with anyone else?”

Ginhawk smiled at the thought of another battle, then realized how pathetic this one would probably be. “There’s no glory in battling a pack of dogs such as these, my friend. No, this time I think I should warn them off. We should be able to manage that with minimal bloodshed.”

Erol grunted in disapproval but nodded in compliance with Ginhawk’s decision.

Two hours later, as the pair neared the stranger’s camp, the sounds of a terrific battle rang through the trees. A distinctive roar bellowed above it all.

“Dragon! We ride to battle, Erol.”

Ginhawk spurred Rigel to a gallop, low-hanging branches tearing at his armor as he charged. He drew his magic sword and allowed its power to fill him with extra strength. Alongside him, Erol nocked one of his lightning arrows, the only type able to penetrate a dragon's thick scales. As they arrived at the camp, chaos reigned among the strangers. At least three were already dead and two others severely wounded. Their tents and several of the nearby trees blazed with the dragon's fire.

"A green one! Thank goodness it's not another golden. Erol, keep its head up and I'll go for the throat." Ginhawk pulled Rigel up short, leapt off and shifted into the form of a powerful giant, absorbing even more of his sword's strength. The sword grew in proportion to his new size as he ran toward his foe. Erol, dodging the scrambling people and the dragon's massive claws, fired the first of his arrows into a spot behind the beast's right ear. At the same time, Erol's eyes burned a deep red as he cast a spell of darkness around the dragon's head, blinding him, in effect, to what was happening around it.

Roaring a mighty bellow, the dragon raised its head high and instinctively swung its spiked tail in a wide arc trying to defend itself. Unfortunately, Ginhawk, at that very moment, was distracted by one of the female strangers, bleeding and cowering behind a rock. Just as he got her to her feet and shoved her in a safe direction, the dragon's tail struck him full force on his left side. He flew thirty feet before colliding with the trunk of an oak tree. Fortunately, giants are tough, especially when armored, and he withstood the blow with only minor damage points.

"Zounderkite!" exclaimed Ginhawk as he gasped for air. "Keep your wits about you, fool."

He stood, squared his shoulders, and charged the dragon again, sword held high. He blocked one of the dragon's clawed swipes, nearly severing the creature's hand. Purplish blood spurted all over Ginhawk, nearly

blinding him. The blood smoked on his skin, but, and most of the reason he chose this form, giants are immune to dragon blood burns. Wiping his eyes with one arm, he ducked under the flailing and now useless hand and ran to within striking range.

“Erol! Another bolt! Raise his head up!” his shouts barely registered above the confusion of sounds echoing throughout the forest, but Erol’s keen ears discerned his friend’s voice and shot another lightning arrow behind the dragon’s ear.

The dragon roared again, throwing its head high in pain. Ginhawk saw his opening and poured everything he had into the sword, causing it to glow a blinding blue-white. Even with his prodigious strength, the blade only cut halfway through the dragon’s neck. The monster’s bellows choked and gurgled as blood filled its airways, but the beast fought on. A dragon, even near death, is a powerful and dangerous creature. Ginhawk knew he had to dispatch it quickly or more lives would be lost with the death throes that would ensue. With all his strength, Ginhawk leapt high in the air and landed on the dragon’s shoulder. He struggled to maintain his balance but managed to keep his footing as he worked his way onto the beast’s back. With another powerful stroke, the glowing sword struck, this time completing the job of severing the head completely. The headless body gave a shudder, one foot lifting feebly into the air as if defending itself, then collapsed to the ground.

“Well done, warrior. You have defeated a mighty foe. You may now claim your reward.” The voice belonged to the small, robed creature sitting atop a protruding rock nearby. With a wave of its hand, the dragon vanished in a burst of light and sparkling dust. In its place sat a large chest.

Ginhawk reverted to his human form and wiped the blade with a remnant of a tattered tent. He sheathed the sword and with Erol at his side, he strode to the chest and

opened it. A vast fortune of gold, silver and gemstones glittered inside along with three special prizes. He picked up an engraved knife and turned it in his hands, examining the runes.

Erol lifted one eyebrow in approval. “Ahh, a missile blade. Not only useful as a knife blade in close combat but can inflict long range damage when aimed at a foe. Useful for battle and hunting. A fine weapon.”

Ginhawk placed the knife on the ground and lifted the next item.

Erol chuckled. “An odd prize for such a dragon. Archery bracers and longbows are good weapons, but they are usually rewarded for a lesser victory. You earned one of these as a young buck, I believe.”

“That I did,” replied Ginhawk, noticing several of the strangers creeping closer around them. The third prize brought a smile to his grim features.

“A warding beacon! Will protect an entire camp from attack for a period of ten hours.” Erol slowly felt for his sword as the strangers approached too close for his comfort.

Ginhawk placed a calming hand on his friend’s arm. “Easy Erol. These people are no threat to us. They are stupid and inept, barely able to survive here without aid. They must be first-timers.”

Erol glanced around, extending his thoughts outward through the encampment. “Possibly, but I sense no wizard guide here with them. What fool would introduce a band of first timers to a dragon, even a green, without a wizard guide to teach them?”

“The mystery of these strangers keeps growing. I need to learn more.” He placed the three special prizes in the bottomless storage pouch he kept on his belt. Standing, he faced the strangers and held out his hands to show he was unarmed, at least to their eyes.

“We mean you no harm. Who among you speaks as leader?”

A man stepped forward, the one he recognized as the one they called captain. “I am Captain Korna. I am the leader here. Who are you, friend?”

“My name is Ginhawk and my companion here is called Erol. You seem to be having difficulty here. Where is your wizard guide? What sort of fools would take on a dragon without a powerful ally?”

Ginhawk saw confusion rise in this Captain Korna. A thousand questions coursed through his mind, but determination to get on with his quest prevailed. Before Korna could speak, Ginhawk waved his hands to cut him off.

“No, there is no good reason for this lunacy. Either find yourselves a qualified guide or leave the game. All you have managed so far is to distract me from my own enjoyment. If you distract others, they may not take it so kindly.” He gathered up the chest and tied it to the back of Rigel’s saddle.

“Wait! You cannot leave us here like this. Help us.” One of the strangers, the female he had saved from the dragon, stormed toward Ginhawk.

In one swift motion, Ginhawk drew his sword and commanded it to burst into flame. He aimed it at the woman. She froze in mid-step, the sword’s flames reflecting in her eyes, but anger, not fear blazed behind the image.

Returning her glare, Ginhawk shook his head, re-sheathed the weapon, and mounted the black stallion. Pleas for mercy and aid filled the devastated campsite as the two warriors started off. Ginhawk noted the reproach in Erol’s gaze as they reached the edge of the glade.

“What are you looking at?” he muttered at Erol.

“You know the code as well as any, my friend. A warrior must not leave the defenseless unaided.”

Ginhawk grumbled but reined in Rigel. After a few more choice epithets muttered under his breath, he reached into the bottomless pouch and pulled out the three new prizes. Knowing he had powers already far beyond these trinkets, he negligently tossed them at the feet of their leader. “Learn to use these wisely.” He called back as he spurred Rigel into a gallop.

Picking up the strange items, Captain Korna handed them to Tals. “What do you make of these? He seemed to think they would be of value to us.”

Tals turned them over in his grasp, examining them closely. “I am not sure, Captain, but possibly with time and experimentation we can learn their use. Allow me to study them more closely and I be able to learn more about them.”

“Just don’t accidentally kill yourself or burn down the camp.” Replied Korna.

With a quick glance around, Tals gave a half smile. “I’m not sure the latter would even be noticeable, given our current situation, sir.”

Chapter Five

“Damn those idiots.” Dr. Kennan shouted as he yanked off his simu-suit helmet. Confusion and anger ruined any further chance of enjoying an adventure, so he exited the game full of resentment but with a renewed determination to find out who was responsible for this fiasco.

Ripping off the suit’s gloves, he tossed them aside right to HAL, who nimbly balanced a tray of food in one hand while catching the discarded gloves with another before they could land in the hot soup.

“Things didn’t go the way you expected them to?” asked HAL as he set the tray down on the side table. “You seem to be in an especially disturbed state of mind, even for you.”

“Go away, HAL,” grumbled Kennan. He continued to remove the simu-suit as if it were some sort of plague carrier—especially as the suit’s zipper stuck halfway down.

HAL waited stoically by the doorway, hands folded at his waist.

“Incompetent fools! Every one of them. And that Korna calls himself a Captain.” The professor violently yanked at the zipper, nearly tearing the suit before HAL approached and swatted his hands away.

With a deft flick of his wrist, the android unjammed the zipper and stepped back to allow Dr. Kennan to finish removing the simu-suit. “A new player in the game, sir? I have no record of any previous player calling himself Captain Korna.”

“Typically incompetent like all officers. Made a complete mess of things in there. His team won’t last the day.”

As the professor started to toss the suit across the room, HAL gently but firmly removed it from his grasp and neatly hung it in the closet where it belonged.

“Then why are you throwing this hissy-fit? If they’ll be gone before you go back in to play with your friends, I don’t see the problem.”

The professor stopped dead and looked over his shoulder, glaring at HAL. “Play with my friends? It’s called questing! I lead a sophisticated group of questers on complex missions of vital importance to the online civilization.”

“Yes, sir. Of course you are. But you did not answer my question. Why are you so upset if you have little chance of ever seeing them again?”

Dr. Kennan’s face turned a deep shade of purple, gritting his teeth as he replied. “I gave them part of my prize for defeating a green dragon. They nearly all died and would have if I hadn’t saved them, and I GAVE them three valuable items from the reward.”

HAL’s android face lost all human-like appearance and could easily have been mistaken for a department store mannequin for several seconds. Then his eyes fluttered, and he let out a fairly close approximation of a laugh. “You did what, sir? I’m sure my ears must have picked up a momentary malfunction. I could have sworn I heard you admit to common human empathy. That would be completely outside of every emotional parameter I’ve ever recorded about you.”

Dr. Kennan threw his hands in the air, spinning to face HAL. “I know, right? I have no idea what possessed me to do such a stupid thing. I mean the items were useless to me, personally, but they could easily have been bartered for valuable information later on. Make a note for me to give the simu-suit, especially the helmet and neural interface, a thorough diagnostic tonight. It may have picked up a virus or something, causing Ginhawk to deviate from his personality profiles.”

“Yes, sir. Of course. I don’t know why I didn’t think of that. You would never have acted humanely

toward anyone if the system were not corrupting your neural interface. In fact, I'll run the diagnosis right away so you can eat your evening meal. Hopefully before it grows much colder." HAL placed the Simu suit gloves in the closet alongside the suit and helmet. Closing the door, he set the sterilization timer to full strength and started toward the exit. "Oh, by the way, professor. You received a communication from Director Fairall while you were in the simulation. He is expecting your reply tomorrow morning."

Dr. Kennan sat at the table where HAL had placed his dinner and lifted a spoonful of the soup. "Great! What does the boss want now? As if I need to deal with any more idiots today."

HAL halted at the exit. "I'm sure I don't know, professor. The message was coded for you alone."

Dr. Kennan grumbled under his breath, then grimaced as he tasted the soup. "It's cold again, HAL! Can't you manage to give me hot soup once in a while?"

"A big strong astrophysicist and invincible warder such as yourself can certainly operate a microwave, sir." He left the room and headed down the corridor toward another of the computer labs in the facility.

While the director's message loaded onto his terminal, Kennan reheated his soup and took a bite of the meat-substitute sandwich.

"Let's see what the old buzzard has to say now."

He touched the play icon on the monitor and Director Fairall's worn face, with the well-coiffed mass of gray-streaked hair he was so well known for, filled the screen. Professor Kennan continued to eat while listening to the recorded message.

"I'll get right to the point, professor. Your research, while showing some promise, has not made any significant headway in the past year. Your grant review, based on your research proposal, is scheduled in six months. The board wants to see something concrete by then, or your grant will

not be extended. Some are even talking about eliminating it all together. I expect to hear from you tomorrow morning. Do NOT call before nine in the morning local earth time. I will require a good night's sleep to deal with your expected outrage after you get this message. Don't even try. I've had all Eris communications blocked until then. Good night, professor."

"You can't do that!" yelled the professor at the frozen image of his boss on the monitor. He turned on his communication panel and punched in the channel to the Director's office. The screen turned red and a recording of the Director's voice sounded sternly over the speakers.

"I told you not to call until office hours in the morning. We will discuss your concerns then. Not before. Goodnight, Professor. Oh, and you should probably know, this message will be the only thing you get if you try to communicate with ANYONE before then. I suggest you come up with a valid reason the board will accept to extend your grant."

The image vanished, replaced with the text: "End of message."

Furious, Dr. Kennan jumped to his feet and stormed around his lab. "How dare they! None of them have the faintest idea what my research is about, and they dare to threaten me with dismissal. And what do they expect me to do up here, waiting for the next ship home?"

With his suit going through diagnostic procedures with HAL, Dr. Kennan's only other refuge for solace was his research. He grabbed the remains of his meal, dropped into the chair in his workstation, and called up the previous week's synchrotron radiation data on the left-hand screen and stellar gravimetrics on the right. As he scanned and compared both sets together, his mind calmed and entered the state of extreme focus and concentration that he could lose himself in for days on end. When the data surrounding

the power surge of a few days ago came up, he was startled back to reality.

I nearly forgot about this, he thought to himself, then spoke to the data on holographic display hanging in the air before him. “What could possibly have caused you? Let’s see if I can figure you out.”

His fingers danced over the LED keypad, analyzing every aspect of the data he could think of. It all came back negative. There was no apparent cause for the surge. In frustration, he pulled up a star chart to distract his mind in hopes of clearing space for new ideas to approach the problem. He almost missed the anomaly.

As he watched the compiled data feed in real time from the fourteen orbiting telescopes, something caught his attention, but by the time he focused on that region of the chart, nothing was apparent. *Probably just a bit of static*, he thought, and settled himself to continue watching, but the flicker continued to nag at his mind.

“Computer replay display image starting one minute ago. Enlarge sections two and three.” He watched as the display reset and progressed. An almost insignificant flicker of one star, over in a fraction of a second, appeared in the starfield.

“That! Right there, Computer enhance sector two, right ascension 19h 7.3m declination 27.73°. Replay previous timeframe.” The view zoomed in to the coordinates described, causing the slight feeling of vertigo commonly felt while watching planetarium programs.

Again, the computer replayed the last minute of images. This time, while greatly enlarged, the flicker was definitely noticeable. But something was still wrong.

“What the hell is that? It almost looks like something’s in front of that star. Maybe a micrometeorite impacting one of the telescopes?” He tried making a few adjustments to the focus, without any improvement.

“Sir, have you tried slowing down the replay speed?” HAL’s voice interrupted.

Dr. Kennan nearly fell out of his hoverchair, he was so startled by HAL’s voice over his shoulder. “Shit! HAL! You nearly gave me a heart attack!”

“I doubt that, sir. To have a myocardial infarction, one must first have a heart.”

“Ha! Ha! Very funny. What ever happened to robots without emotion chips?”

“Robots,” HAL emphasized the word, “do not have emotional capabilities. Androids, however, like myself, as I’ve repeatedly told you, have the ability due to our immeasurable value in reducing the peculiar reaction of humans to isolation in deep space.”

The professor let out a heavy sigh and waved his hand dismissively in the air. “What was that you said about the replay?”

“I said, you should try slowing down the replay speed. My sensors are picking up a lot more than can be seen in real time.”

“Of course! Why didn’t...ahem,” Dr. Kennan cleared his throat to cover up a near-admission of oversight. “I mean, why didn’t you give me a second longer? I was about to do just that.”

“Of course you were, sir,” replied HAL in a perfect imitation of sarcasm.

Kennan refused to acknowledge HAL’s comment while he walked closer into the holographic projection. “Computer, slow time to one-tenth real time.”

As he stood in front of the flicker’s location, Dr. Kennan did not allow himself to blink for fear he would miss the event. Then it began. Over a space of only one second, still fast, but long enough to see details he missed earlier, Dr. Kennan’s eyes shot wide open in shock.

He circled around the location as he gave the command. “That’s no star! Computer, repeat playback at one-hundredth real time speed.”

As the scene played out in extreme slow motion, Dr. Kennan circled the flashing image, and gave one loud clap. “Yes! See there? That flash is happening in an empty sector of space, and far beyond the edge of our solar system. No wonder I assumed it was a star. HAL, compare time of anomaly event with time of power surge event of last week.”

“The events were simultaneous, sir. This flash may have been the cause of the surge.”

“No doubt about it, HAL. But I think there may be more to it. Computer, enlarge image by five-hundred percent. I want a closer look at it.”

As the scene replayed one last time, Dr. Kennan pointed and yelped with joy. “I knew it! There it is!”

“There what is, sir? You’re blocking my view.” HAL came forward, leaning to his left to see over Kennan’s shoulder.

“Turning to face his android companion, Dr. Kennan beamed with excitement. Do you remember when I said it was extraterrestrials that caused the power surge? That the gravimetric and EM data didn’t look natural? Did you ever complete your analysis?”

“No, sir. There are still a dozen more possibilities to eliminate. I should be finished in another thirty-six hours.”

“Well, you can stop your analysis. Take a look at this.” Kennan stepped aside, extending his arm in a gesture like a magician revealing a grand illusion.

HAL stared blankly at the image hovering amid the stars. There, faintly reflecting the light of the flashing energy pulse, sat a teardrop-shaped spacecraft.

The professor leaned back in his hover-chair and shot both fists into the air above him. “Yes! They want a significant advancement in my research, do they? Well, this

will knock them on their bureaucratic arses. HAL, get the director on the communicator for me. I want to enhance this image a bit more.”

“Sir, there is no way to contact the director until the morning. He has blocked all communication until then.”

Without looking up from his monitor, Dr. Kennan growled. “The most important discovery in the history of the world, and he won’t take my calls until he’s had his beauty sleep. I work with idiots!”

Anthony Kennan stood red-faced in front of his class. They were all laughing at him. John and Robert, co-captains of the Neil Armstrong Martian High School basketball team, a sport specially modified for the low gravity conditions at the Martian Colony, high-fived each other. His brilliantly planned sophomore astronomy final project, fifty-two holoimages accompanied by three pages of references, all documenting his calculations accuracy, had been sabotaged.

Hovering in full, life-size color in the middle of the class, hung an image of him taken last week during his physical education class. While attempting to pass a skill drill with a basketball, Anthony tripped over one of the obstacles and stumbled directly into one of the coaches. Miss Beverly D’Angelo was young and generally conceded as the most beautiful woman on the school’s staff. Someone, probably one of the yearbook photographers, snapped a holo-image just as Anthony sprawled into Miss D’Angelo, his hands grabbing at the nearest object to keep himself from splattering on the floor. Unfortunately, that nearest object turned out to be the coach’s exceptionally wonderful breasts. The look of stunned horror on her face, Anthony’s hands firmly planted on her chest, was clear for everyone in the class to see, somehow inserted between images fifteen and sixteen of his presentation.

Anthony felt tears welling up in his eyes but squashed down the emotional reaction before it could gain a foothold. After all, this was simply one more in a long line of incidents perpetrated by the larger, stronger boys. He had endured such bullying ever since the fifth grade when it became common knowledge that Anthony Kennan was by far one of the most intelligent young men to ever walk the halls of any Martian colony school. Advancing him five years at the school only made the situation worse. Now he was not only the smartest kid in the school, but also the most socially awkward and by far the smallest. Due to his youth, Anthony was far behind his classmates emotionally as well as physically and had no idea of how to blend in with the others.

The teacher, while attempting to quiet and admonish the students, was obviously hiding a smirk of his own, which did nothing to help the situation at all.

Dr. Kennan awoke with a start. Only HAL's inhumanly fast reactions prevented the breakfast tray from spilling food everywhere.

"Bad dreams, sir?" asked HAL.

"What? No! I never dream, you know that." The professor rubbed his face, trying desperately to relocate his consciousness to the waking world.

"Of course not, sir. Here is your breakfast. Try not to let it get cold again." HAL placed the tray of egg substitute, reconstituted cranberry juice, tortilla (regular bread is not used in space travel due to the crumb problem), and dried banana slices on the workstation next to him.

Running one hand over his scalp, Kennan's eyes came into focus. He absently shoveled an egg, whole, into his mouth and mumbled around it. "What time is it?"

"Eight-thirty-two, professor. Twenty-eight minutes before you can try to contact Director Fairall again. Enough time to eat and get your presentation ready."

At the word ‘presentation’ Kennan nearly choked on his meal, but he regained his composure and grunted agreement as he washed everything down with the last of the juice.

In a flurry of last-second activity, Dr. Kennan completed all his preparations and, at precisely one second after nine o’clock, punched in the code for Jack Fairall.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Kennan, but the director is not available this morning. He called in to say he will be attending an out-of-office meeting with some of the other board members. He should be back this afternoon.”

“But he told me to call him back this morning.” Stammered Kennan. He felt the color rising in his face.

Non-plussed, the woman, Anne Scarton, secretary to the university director for over twenty years, covering six different administrations, maintained her calm demeanor. “If you would care to leave a message, I will see the director receives it as soon as he returns.”

Realizing the futility of his situation—years of dealing with Mrs. Scarton taught him this lesson—he gave up and started attacking his keypad as he talked. “I’m sending an incredibly important report to his highness, something he absolutely must see immediately. See that he gets it.” He pressed the send key and sighed.

“Yes, Dr. Kennan. I’ve got your message now. I will pass it along as soon as Dr. Fairall returns. Will there be anything else?”

“No. Just see that he knows how important it is that he reads it as soon as he returns.”

“Thank you for your call, professor. Have a nice day.”

The holo-image went blank before he could utter another word.

Dr. Kennan jumped out of his hover-chair and stormed around the lab flinging his arms wildly. “Bureaucrats! They’ll kill us all before they’re through.

The most important discovery in all mankind's history, and he can't be bothered."

HAL, standing like a statue near the doorway, waited for the professor's ranting to subside before interrupting. "Perhaps you can utilize the time to discover more about the alien craft and the energy burst we received. It might shed some light on who they are or what they are doing out there."

Kennan stopped dead in his tracks and spun to face HAL. "That's exactly what I'll do." He shouted. "The more I know about them, the more I can rub it in the director's arrogant face. I'll show him."

His mind already spinning with thoughts on how to gain new insights into the energy signal and remote images, the professor planted himself back in his chair and focused on the bank of monitors streaming data before him.

Chapter Six

Jyns, Battle Commander of the interstellar exploration vessel Equinox, stood before King Pelanar in the audience hall of Castle Pelanar, ancestral home to a long line of the ruling family. The current king, His Royal Highness Sir Chase Pelanar, rose to the throne two years ago upon the death of his father during a dragon attack on the village below.

A great throne sat empty on a raised dais at one end of the room. A heavily embroidered tapestry hung from the rafters above, hiding the entry behind the king's throne. High along each wall glowed a dozen brightly colored stained-glass windows, each one depicting some brave deed or great quest of one of the king's ancestors. Below each window hung the heraldry banners of each of the twelve great families supporting the king. Beneath each of the banners stood a heavily armed knight of the king's royal guard.

The audience hall was filled with petitioners to the king. It was an odd assortment of characters, some obviously wealthy, others in rags. Many had approached Jyns with strange plans for various quests in different parts of the realm seeking glory, revenge, adventure, wealth, all manner of enticements to join them. Jyns refused them all, insisting he be left alone while seeking an audience with the king, all to no avail. The proposals were relentless, until he pulled an LED rope from his pack and formed it into a circle, cautioning others to stand clear. The rope was a prize earned by defeating one of the forest's lesser beasts during his journey to the castle. With a wave of his hand, secretly pressing the activation button on the controls, the rope lit up in a dazzling display of alternating colors.

“Stand clear,” he called out in a deep, cautionary baritone, “The ring of solitude will render any who enter it helpless. I do not wish to be disturbed.”

“And who do you think you are, friend?” replied an exceptionally large young man dressed in colorful robes, apparently indicating some station of note. Others nearby gave him room, obviously due to some prior interactions with him.

Jyns sized him up and gave him a threatening glare. “My name is Jyns. Heed my words, sir. I do not want to harm you, or anyone else. I have business with the king and wish to be left alone.”

The man placed one great foot inside the glowing circle in challenge. “And what will you do to me if I choose to...”

He collapsed to the floor in a heap as Jyns secretly activated the neural paralyzer he hid in his other hand. This prize was part of the gift for defeating the first monster he had encountered in the forest.

“Clear away this irksome infidel,” Jyns gestured toward the unconscious man with a wave of his hand. He hoped he was using the local words correctly. He had spent only a few hours in the streets of the town below listening to the people. Now he turned away and faced the throne again, apparently ignoring everyone around him but actually listening intently to their reaction.

“Wizard!” whispered one woman dressed in a plain homespun grey dress. With only two small patches showing, the garment was probably her finest, saved for special occasions such as weddings, funerals or a petitioning audience before the king.

“He killed Berl without raising a hand.” Another peasant woman pointed to the man on the floor as she cringed against the wall.

“No, look, Berl is breathing, he’s just asleep.”

Those who witnessed the event stepped back, placing plenty of space between themselves and the magic circle.

The crowd gave Jyns a wide berth now, only giving him furtive glances as they spread word of his power. The hushed murmurs grew louder as the knowledge that a new great wizard was in their midst spread. A loud crack from the staff of the royal steward silenced the gathering.

“All present attend! His Royal Highness King Pelanar will now hear supplications from his loyal subjects.”

Another sharp rap of the staff brought the king himself from behind the ornate tapestry to stand in front of his throne. The king adjusted his fur-lined cape with a shrug of his shoulders, nodded to the assembled masses but stopped dead when he noticed the oddly-dressed man standing alone in colorful circle of light, the crowd giving him ample space. King Pelanar signaled for his aide to approach.

“Dismiss the people, except for that one.” He tilted his head in curiosity and pointed at Jyns. “Bring the stranger to my private quarters immediately.”

The aide started to object but caught himself as the king gave him a warning look.

“There will be no audience with the king today. Guards! Clear the hall, and bring that one,” he indicated Jyns, “to the king’s chambers.”

A final crack of his staff initiated a flurry of protests and activity. The guards, using pikes as prods to keep the supplicants moving, herded the grumbling crowd to the exit while one approached the man in the magic circle. The green shoulder epaulet noted him as one of the officers. Jyns still did not completely understand the exact ranks of this system but recognized the accoutrements.

With one hand placed loosely on the hilt of the great sword at his belt, the guard approached Jyns. “The king orders you to attend him. You will...”

“Stop!” commanded Jyns with one hand raised imperiously. “Do not cross the barrier or suffer the same fate as this unfortunate.” He indicated the sleeping Berl, then squatted and picked up the LED rope, turning it off with the concealed controller, and replaced it in his satchel. He kept the neural paralyzer cupped in his left hand in case of emergency.

“I have come to speak with the king about grave matters, so lead on.”

The knight stood nearly a foot taller than Jyns, but the former Battle Commander gave no sign of intimidation. His training took over as he analyzed every nuance of his opponent, especially the potential weaknesses he could exploit if it came to a fight. The two stood locked in a staring contest for several seconds before the guard gave the first sign of backing off with a quick look to the other guards nearby.

“I believe you have orders to bring me to the king.” Jyns barely concealed a slight smirk. “Best be on with it before he grows impatient.”

Without a word, the knight turned crisply on his heel and strode off, only giving a quick glance behind him to ensure that the wizard was following. He led the way around the dais behind the throne. Opening a sturdy wooden door, he continued down a long carpeted hallway lined with portraits of members of the royal family. Each one resembled the king himself to one degree or another. Tall leaded-glass windows allowed ample light into the hall. The pair continued on through the twisting maze of nearly identical corridors until they reached a final intersection with a large ornately-carved door attended by two knights who snapped to attention. The senior guard on the right opened the door as they approached.

The king's private receiving chamber was a showplace of opulent wealth and power designed to intimidate all who entered. Gold and silver artifacts occupied every shelf and table. Lush colorful tapestries in rare foreign designs hung on the walls. Mounted animals from the king's great hunts stood in menacing poses alongside armor and weapons of conquered enemies, all to show his power and skill in life and battle. Having seen great wonders in the far reaches of the universe during his travels aboard some of the greatest ships of the fleet, Jyns was not overly impressed. The Equinox, one of many mid-grade ships of the empire, could wipe out all of this extravagant display in seconds from thousands of miles away in space. One of the great battle cruisers could lay waste to the entire planet, unless it was an exceptionally large one. Jyns still knew virtually nothing about this world.

“Who approaches for audience with King Pelanar?” the steward, merely holding his staff of office this time, called out in a resounding voice despite the lack of audience.

“I am called Jyns. A... wisart of great renown. I have come to offer my services to the king.” He wasn't sure if he pronounced the title he heard in the crowd correctly, but he thought it was close enough to pass.

“And what makes you think I have need of a wizard, Jyns?” asked the king from a back corner of the room. He had removed his crown and heavy robe and held a golden plate of meat and fruit.

Jyns took two steps forward before a raised hand from the steward halted him. “I have great powers I wish to place at your command, King Pelanar, as well as knowledge of matters you cannot guess. I can read the stars in the night sky as if they were an open book. I can teach you secrets to reveal hidden enemies, I can teach your

smiths to create weapons beyond your wildest imagination—”

“I am already in command of the greatest army in the land,” interrupted the king. “What more could you possibly give me?”

He started to turn away when a great blast showered him with pieces of fur and sawdust. He stopped himself from diving for cover with great effort, allowing only a slow turn to glare at the audacity of this intruder.

Jyns casually replaced the blaster weapon to his pouch. “That was one of the weapon’s lowest settings, your majesty. Even a mid-range setting would burn a hole in your stone walls. I do hope that beast was not one of your favorites.” He smiled at the stunned faces of the king and his steward.

The door to the chambers burst open and the two guards charged in with raised weapons, ready to relieve the stranger of his head. A press of his thumb activated the neural paralyzer and the two fell unconscious with a resounding clang of their heavy armor.

Before the king could respond, Jyns secretly dropped the paralyzer into his pocket and held up both hands, palms open to show he was unarmed.

“They are only unconscious, Your Majesty. I am only here to offer my services and to help you secure your hold on the throne. I have knowledge of a great many things which will enable you to keep an eye on your enemies and raise an army that is undefeatable against any foe.”

The king brushed away debris from the exploded trophy as he eyed the fallen guards.

“If you are in command of such great power, good wizard, why have I not heard of you before now? Where do you come from? My spies would certainly have learned of someone with your abilities before now, even from across

the great sea. So whence come you and why make this offer to me?”

At that moment, King Pelanar’s daughter, the Princess Alinor, stepped through the partially-open doorway. Alinor was the king’s only child, her mother having died in childbirth, and she was the delight of his heart and of all Valendale. Her beauty and kindness were renowned throughout the land. Her long black hair set off the silver of her tiara while enhancing the bright pale blue of her eyes. Even at the age of seventeen, her intellect was unmatched, while her ability to read the hearts and minds of others allowed her to be compassionate yet discerning when dealing with matters of state. While her suitors were many, she brooked no nonsense and valued intelligence and understanding above wealth and good looks. Any who underestimated her soon learned of their folly, and not a few left the castle sporting a sling or bandages after discovering her reputation as one of the finest swordsmen in the land was well deserved.

“Father!” she called out as she stood in the doorway, sword in one hand and dagger in the other. Her eyes quickly surveyed the room identifying threats. “What happened? I was passing by and heard an explosion. Who is this stranger?” she focused menacingly on Jyns and pointed her longsword toward him.

Pelanar raised his hands as he called to her. “No, Alinor. Stay your weapon. This mighty wizard was merely giving me a demonstration of his power.”

Alinor hesitated, lowered the tip of her weapon slowly, but kept it aimed toward the stranger.

“Your father is right, girl,” Jyns stood facing her with hands folded at his waist, surreptitiously taking the neural paralyzer out of his pocket in the process. “I mean no harm toward either of you. I am here to offer my assistance in defense of your kingdom. But I can and will defend myself if necessary. Do not test me. You will fail.”

Alinor smiled. A glint of challenge sparkled in her sapphire eyes. “Many have said that to me before, wizard—if that is what you are. All have failed to make good their boast. I suspect you are no better than they were. Do you care to discover my prowess as they did?”

“Enough, Alinor! Put away your sword,” commanded the king, rising to his full height and authority. “We will listen to this man’s offer and judge his powers before we decide whether to utilize his abilities or throw him in the dungeon.”

Alinor, her eyes firmly locked on the stranger, expertly checked the blade’s edges and tip before reluctantly sheathing her longsword. She glided in a stately manner to her father’s side, kissing him on the cheek. “Of course, father. As you wish.”

“Proceed with your appeal, wizard.” She shot Jyns a warning glare. “But know that I am watching your every move. If you do anything that threatens the king’s safety, you will be the first to die.” She shifted her stance to reveal a pair of throwing knives normally hidden by the folds of her dress.

King Pelanar sighed and gave the wizard the smile of a parent who must regularly apologize for their child’s behavior. “As you can see, master wizard, I am now paying the price for my overindulgence of my most cherished daughter. Please, continue with a demonstration of your abilities. Only do not underestimate Alinor’s willingness to use her knives. She is probably the most skilled bladesman in the realm.”

“Bladeswoman, father. Only you forget Ginhawk. Nobody compares with his expertise. Have you received any word of him recently? He has been absent from the castle for some time now.”

“No, daughter. I’ve had no word of him, other than rumor of an occasional sighting in distant realms. And I am sure that the servants will make certain you are the first to

know of his arrival when next he comes to see me.” He raised his hand to forestall any response. “But now we must not ignore our guest any further.” Turning to face Jyns, he gave a slight nod as signal to continue.

Jyns looked inside his satchel, searched its contents and grinned as he decided on the perfect demonstration. His thoughts marveled at the wonder of how that queer creature could know exactly what he required and was able to produce it, but he brushed the reflections aside as he prepared to begin his rise to power in this inexplicable world. *Captain Korna never appreciated my abilities*, he thought. *I’ll show him and all those arrogant fools once and for all who the real leader is.*

The campsite bustled with the noise of multiple conversations echoing off the stone walls of the cavern now serving as their base, the smell of meat roasting over a half dozen fires and what was almost a recognizable tune being attempted on an unusual stringed instrument provided by a recent hunt. After only a couple of days, Tals had not only deciphered how to operate the tools given them by the warrior Ginhawk but instructed a few of the crew in their use. Now fresh meat was provided, along with a growing number of trinkets found beside each of the kills.

At first, Tals struggled with the items, but mainly through trial and error, he got them to work. However, even he had to admit there was no logical explanation of how they operated. It seemed more mystical than scientific. More than once he was heard to mutter about the laws of physics just not allowing the items to do what they so obviously were doing. The first, a seemingly plain stick, proved to be a fire starter. Aim it at a pile of wood, press one of the knobs with a finger and the pile burst into flame. Gently rubbing the stick with your fingers produced a warming effect on whatever it was aimed at. Useful for

drying wet wood, or clothes after someone fell into the stream.

The second item, an oily liquid in a liter size container, healed simple injuries and illnesses. A single drop could heal infected cuts on an entire limb or instantly cure a cold or pneumonia. Three drops mended broken bones.

The item most appreciated by all in the camp was the hunting spear. If the hunter could throw the spear anywhere near a small game animal, the spear would hit and kill it, no skill involved. Every so often, a hunter would return with not only fresh meat but more spears, potions, or fire sticks. These items always seemed to appear next to the body of the animal they successfully hunted. On rare occasions, though, a new prize appeared. Tals and his team experimented with these new items attempting to learn their secrets—so far without success.

The weapons were only able to take down small game so far, but this was far superior to the roots and leaves they had been forced to consume until now. Tals promised he would soon devise a way, with further experimentation of the new tools, to construct heavier weapons. They would be primitive but would aid them in the hunting of more robust game in the near future.

“I wish whoever is responsible for this would provide us with a few good blasters, or at least some communicators.” Bratha, former communications chief, now Tals’s primary assistant for deciphering the mysterious artifacts, grumbled as she inspected one of the newest and most confounding items brought back by one of the hunters.

“Patience,” replied Tals. “We will understand their purpose soon enough.”

“Not at this rate,” she scoffed, dropping the featureless metallic sphere back into a pouch. “Maybe that

Ginhawk fellow will come back and we can ask him about it.”

Tals hesitated briefly before responding. “Perhaps you require a short break from the task. Go clear your mind, maybe see if the cooks have anything to eat.”

Bratha narrowed her gaze at him and opened her mouth to tell him exactly what he could do with the sphere when a rumbling in her stomach reminded her just how hungry she was. “Fine, but I still think we should find that man and make him tell us more about this place. Nothing here makes any sense.” She rose to her feet, stretched her arms, legs and back, then headed off to find the cooks.

Captain Korna sat on a roughly-woven mat staring at the play of light, smoke, and shadows dancing across the ceiling near the cavern entrance. His mind wandered back across the years to the first camping trip he could remember with his father.

“... and there you have it, Fol. Now try one of your own.”

Nine-year-old Fol Korna, eldest son of the famous Jar Korna, hero of the Imperial Navy, reverently took the masterfully crafted lure from his father’s hands and studied it.

“Like this, father?” Fol wove the colorful threads around the small metal hook, occasionally knotting them in place or adding a piece of feather at various intervals. In a few minutes, he held up a passable imitation of the fishing lure the great man had patiently awaited.

“Hmm ... Uh huh.” Fol’s father held the lure close to his prominent nose, turning it over in his fingers. “This section should be wrapped tighter.” He pointed to the mid-section. “And this here should be cross-hatched instead of single-twisted. The feathers need to be handled more carefully so they don’t get damaged like these.” He handed the object back to his now crest-fallen son. “But I’m sure with more practice you will improve.” He smiled and

ruffled Fol's hair with a massive, rough hand, then sat back to answer his communicator. The fire cast a flickering orange glow on his worn features.

The young Fol Korna gave his failed attempt one last forlorn look, then tossed it into the campfire. "All right, father," he affected a brave tone, clenching his fists behind his back. "I'll make the next one perfect."

Slowly returning to the present, Captain Korna reflected on how thousands of similar 'lessons' from his father had shaped his personality to one of always needing to strive for perfection but never satisfied with less in himself. He was far more forgiving of others, not wanting to dishearten others even unintentionally, as he was sure the great Jar Korna had never realized his approach affected his family. After all, anyone who was so admired by everyone else could not be a bad person.

As if summoned out of thin air, Ginhawk himself appeared in the middle of their camp. His horse rising on its hind legs and sword blazing its full power.

"I am Ginhawk! Master Player of the tenth level. I know you do not belong here. Who are you? And why are you here?" he pointed the sword toward the sky and let loose a thirty-foot long flame, lighting up the entire forest in front of the cavern.

Captain Korna vaulted to his feet, spinning to face the intruder. As others of the crew raced forward with their rough weapons, Korna raised his hands for calm. "Stop," he called out. "Lower your weapons. This man is no enemy." He hoped fervently his impression of Ginhawk was accurate. He may be a belligerent primitive being, but no enemy.

Ginhawk recognized Korna. He could not remember the man's name, but he remembered him as the leader of this clan. He gave Rigel's reins a pull to move the beast within inches of the leader and stared down at him.

He extinguished the sword's flame and laid the silvery blade across his legs.

“Answer me, sir, or feel my blade in your heart. Who are you and where do you come from?”

Captain Korna met Ginhawk's glare with an equally intense one of his own. Both men were locked into a battle of wills. Neither could afford to be the first to break.

Tals approached the Captain from behind. “Captain, we are powerless against this person. Our few weapons will prove useless. We do, however, need information and he may be our best source.”

Bratha took a step forward to be recognized. “Tals is right, Captain. He is no enemy, and possibly holds the key to our understanding this world. We need him.”

“Syf!” swore Korna under his breath. He slowly relaxed his threatening posture and turned his palms upward in front of him, hopefully indicating a peaceful intention.

“Perhaps we have gotten off on the wrong foot, sir.” He smiled, gesturing toward the group. “Come and share our evening meal. We have many questions about this strange land.”

Ginhawk sat up straighter, his glare shifted from anger to confusion, then settling on triumph. “I was right! You have no idea where you are, or anything about this... land as you call it. How did you get here? What star system are you from?”

The question hit Captain Korna, Commander Tals, and Chief Bratha like an energy blaster. Shock lit up their faces as they looked to each other for support.

Turning back to the mounted knight, Captain Korna regained his composure. “You know about star systems?”

“Of course! I know more about stars than any human alive. But you have not answered my question. Who are you?”

Chapter Seven

Tals laid a calming hand on Captain Korna's arm as he interrupted the conversation. "Why do you accuse us of being from another star system? What is it you think you know?"

Ginhawk's expression grew ominous. He laid his hand on the hilt of the flaming sword, ready to unsheathe it in an instant. His stance subtly altered to battle mode, ready to attack or defend himself as needed.

Tal's continued to make himself the focus of this stranger's attention. "Sir, we have no wish to harm you or anyone else. In fact, as demonstrated by your previous intervention, which saved our lives, we are hardly capable of doing you any harm at all, given our current status." He spread his arms indicating the woeful campsite. "Please, sir, indulge me. Why do you think we are from another star?"

Ginhawk surveyed the camp, noting the terrified and cowering group of pitiful inhabitants. Taking a deep breath and exhaling loudly, his anger dissipated. Removing his hand from the sword and taking a more relaxed but still alert posture, he removed his helmet, allowing his long dark hair to spill out. His scarred and weather-worn features gave him a dangerous aspect, one which made most folks afraid to approach or cross him. Slate gray eyes scowled at the man standing in front of him. Deciding there was no threat from this assembly, and feeling that his mood was no longer in the game, he relaxed another level but maintained his readiness to fight at a moment's notice.

"Very well, if you insist," Ginhawk replied. "My name is Dr. Anthony Kennan. I am an astrophysicist. You can look up my profile online in the game's roster if you really need to. I am based at the Starfinder facility on Dysnomia, currently researching the role of intergalactic

gravitational phenomena on star formation. My facility experienced a brief power surge a few days back and, while tracking down the reason for it, I traced an unusual energy burst from a remote sector of space. When I imaged that region under high magnification, I saw what appeared to be a spaceship of some sort, not from earth, for certain. It is my belief that you are from that ship. I want to know why you are here.”

Tals and the Captain exchanged glances. They both caught the confusing reference to a game roster. Korna nodded for Tals to continue.

Tals gestured toward the fire. “I think we will both be more comfortable sitting down closer to the fire for this conversation. Is there something we can offer you to eat or drink?”

Ginhawk hesitated only a moment before following Tals into their camp proper and took the seat offered on a large flat rock. “No, thank you. I am fine and would like an answer to my questions now that I’ve answered yours.”

Tals held up one hand to ward off any more questions. “I will gladly comply, but please indulge me in one more question of my own before we proceed. What did you mean when you mentioned a ‘game roster?’”

With an exasperated groan, Ginhawk threw both armored hands in the air. “Oh, come on! Don’t tell me you never heard of the game roster. You have to register there before you can even begin to ...” Realization exploded on his face and Ginhawk gaped at the faces glowing orange in the dancing firelight around him.

“You really are from that spaceship, aren’t you?” he whispered to Tals. An expression of amazement and awe filled his entire being. “So why come in here, into this game instead of the real world?”

Gasps of shock and agitation shot out from those gathered around as realization of their situation dawned on the crew of the Equinox. Games were a favorite pastime

among many in the fleet, with regularly scheduled competitions between crew members of different ships being one of the most highly viewed events, some even earning higher virtual attendance than the FTL asteroid races or ice moon survival competitions.

Captain Korna stood and raised one hand to quiet the murmurs. “You mean to tell me we are in some sort of computer simulation? A game, as you call it?”

Chief Bratha stepped forward. “That would explain a lot, Captain. We aimed our digitized selves toward this moon when we detected a compatible computer capability. This is most likely the file the system stored us in. The operating system may not have known how to handle us, so it decided we were characters in this game and treated us as such.”

“God’s Hooks!” Ginhawk, slipping into the vernacular of the game, startled a flock of birds into raucous flight with his outburst. “Zounderkites! All of you! This is King of Gems, intended for only the more advanced gamers. It is not something for stupid rookies to play around in. You’ll get yourselves killed in here. You did back yourselves up, didn’t you?” One look at their faces told him otherwise.

Captain Korna regained control of the conversation. “All of you go about your business. You have duties to perform. We will inform you of our situation and decisions later. Division chiefs stay. I require your expertise and input at this time.” The crew slowly dispersed, their voices and demeanor a mix of fear, confusion, and trust in the captain.

Once the crew was off about their assignments and the chiefs assembled around the fire, Captain Korna turned to face Ginhawk. “And now that we have both revealed ourselves, it is time to learn from each other what to do about all of this.” He gestured generally around the camp. “We have already lost many of our crew to the creatures in

this ‘game,’ as you call it. We need to survive here until our people can retrieve us. Can you help us?”

Ginhawk stared with wide eyes at the members of the Equinox spaceship standing in front of him. The expression was incongruous on the warrior’s face, but it reflected the professor’s true thoughts and feelings as interpreted by the computer and simulation suit.

“So,” he began. “This is not an elaborate prank set up by one of the others. You really are aliens from another world and you landed in here by accident.” The avatar sat back down heavily on the flat rock, goggling at them.

“I believe first contact protocols and the section on survival in hostile environments, are in order here,” stated Captain Korna. “Since we are the ‘guests’ here, we should begin. Commander Tals, would you start us off?”

“Yes, Captain. Dr. Kennan, or would you prefer Ginhawk? My name is Tals. This,” he gestured toward the Captain, “is Captain Korna. We are crewmembers of the Chandra starship and research vessel Equinox. We come from the planet Tesra in a star system approximately fourteen-hundred light years from your system. Our civilization has been exploring the galaxy for over five hundred of our years. I am not familiar with the conversion rate to your measurements of time. We are a peaceful people, dedicated to understanding the nature of the universe, in all its aspects and dimensions. During our travels over the generations, we have encountered few species who have left their planet. Yours is the first we have discovered to be at the brink of traveling beyond your home system. Most have apparently destroyed themselves before advancing so far. I congratulate you on this accomplishment.”

“Thanks,” replied Dr. Kennan with a chuckle. “Don’t congratulate us just yet. We may do ourselves in any time now. We’ve been more lucky than smart, so far.”

Tals nodded thoughtfully before continuing the tale. “Time will tell, I suppose. In any case, our ship, the Equinox, was on a training mission to map and document this largely unexplored region of the galaxy. When we dropped out of FTL velocity, we were struck by an undetected asteroid and our ship was irreparably damaged. We lost communication with Tesra but attempted a distress signal. We are not sure if anyone will hear it at this distance.’

“Our cartographer, Sett,” Tals pointed out the junior officer to his left, “notified us that he had detected a sufficiently advanced digital network reasonably close. Now we know it belongs to your base. To save ourselves, we left instructions in our computer system for any rescue party to locate us and transmitted ourselves into your network. Normally, we would remain as simple coded data until revived by our people, but your system apparently altered the input enough to place us here in this...” Tals waved his arms wide to take in their surroundings, “game, as you call it, as conscious beings. What we require is your help to survive until our people can recover us from your network. We are, as you have seen, completely unfamiliar with these beasts or any part of the world here.”

“And you want me to teach you,” interrupted Ginhawk with a grunt.

“Yes,” replied Captain Korna. “Will you help us?”

Ginhawk stood laughing. “I am no teacher. Most of my former students at the university would eagerly tell you of my complete disinterest in that area. Find another bleeding heart to show you the ropes in here.” He turned to leave.

Braitha leapt up and grabbed him by one arm. A pleading, hopeful look filled her face. “Please, sir. We need your assistance. You have seen how ill-equipped we are for this place. You have shown us your mastery of everything. You even were kind enough to gift us with those few items

which have proved so useful to our survival. We need someone of your ability to protect us as well as teach us. Will you not at least try?"

Something caught in Dr. Kennan's mind as he started to detach himself from that small woman. A strange sensation gurgled in his stomach. His skin went all tingly where she touched his arm. He started to pull away, but froze, transfixed by the desperation in her gaze.

"I am terribly busy, young lady," he began, "and I have no time for such..." He trailed off as he lost himself in her eyes. *Her voice was so... pleasant. Is that the word?* he thought to himself.

Shaking off the momentary trance, he looked around him at the faces of all those gathered. "Oh, very well," he said, exasperated. "But don't blame me if you wind up regretting this decision. I am already regretting it." But the smile on, what was her name? Bratha? That look made a mockery of his words.

Captain Korna, relieved, took charge of the conversation. "Now that we have told you about us, we would like to know more about you, your world and this digital simulation you claim we are in. Please, enlighten us as to the true nature of our dilemma."

Ginhawk half-heartedly tried to disentangle his arm from Bratha's grasp, but she clung to him tenaciously. A chill ran up his spine as the image of a remora holding fast to the belly of a shark came to mind, only to be replaced with a long-forgotten memory of one of his mother's hugs when he was a child, long before he demanded that she cease and desist with such displays as they were completely inappropriate for a young man of ten years old. Together, the pair found a log to sit on while Ginhawk, a.k.a. Dr. Anthony Kennan, organized his thoughts and began.

"As I said before, my name is Dr. Anthony Kennan. I am the chief astrophysicist assigned to the remote facility Starfinder, on the moon Dystopia orbiting the dwarf planet

Eris. My home world is Mars, the fourth planet from our central star, I lived at a settlement named Lowell Colony, but the origin of my people is the third planet—we call it Earth. We call ourselves humans. My people began our exploration of space nearly two centuries ago. Starfinder base is the farthest we have explored, except for a very few unmanned probes sent into deep space. We lost contact with them over a century ago. My personal area of expertise is the interaction of synchrotron radiation with interstellar gravitation. I hope to prove this interaction will reveal the inner workings of distant stars at the quantum level and allow us to understand the nature of stars and their planetary systems as never before.”

“Excuse me, Dr. Kennan,” interrupted Tals, “Your terminology is a bit confusing. Can you describe your theory in mathematical terms? Perhaps that will clarify matters for us and remove any language translation problems.”

“Of course! How stupid of me.” The professor pulled a charred stick from the fire, walked over to the cave entrance and began scrawling complex equations on the stone wall, explaining the meaning of the symbols and calculations as he drew them. After several exchanges of clarifying questions and descriptions, Ginhawk looked over his work and smiled.

“These are the basics of my theory.” He tossed the stick back into the fire. “But it should give you clarification of what I am after.”

Bratha started to giggle but quashed her reaction quickly. “I may be wrong, but isn’t this the Krellick Fallacy equation?”

Before Tals could react, Dr. Kennan spun to face her. “You are familiar with this? It’s leading edge work on my worlds. Only a handful of scientists even begin to comprehend the implications of this formula.”

“Well, if that is the case,” Bratha’s face became disconsolate as she sat back down on the rock she had shared with the professor, “we may be stuck here forever.”

“And what do you mean by that, young lady? You obviously are incapable of understanding the significance of...”

Bratha jumped to her feet, anger rising. Her fists were clenched at her side and ready for a fight. Before the Captain or Tals could interrupt, she laid into the human with a vehemence so out of character it took everyone by surprise.

“I had to put up with your sort of ignorance back at my schools, sir. Even the academy is nowhere near as enlightened as they like to profess. I’ll have you know that your precious formula here is known to us as the Kreltick Fallacy because over five-hundred years ago a scientist on our world named Topal Kreltick proposed this concept and set back interstellar research for at least a century. Every primary grade child in our civilization knows this equation and is instructed in its obvious shortcomings as a warning to not become arrogant in one’s conclusions. And furthermore...”

“That is enough, Bratha.” Captain Korna placed one hand on her shoulder, his voice firm, but gentle. “I know of the difficulties you had to overcome. You have proved yourself more than the equal of any member of this crew. There is no need to create friction with this man from another world.”

The young woman glared at the captain but forced calmness back into her mind and body. “Sorry, Captain. I forgot myself for a moment.” Turning to face the human, her face reddened in embarrassment. “I apologize, Dr. Kennan, Ginhawk... what exactly should I call you? This is very confusing...”

Korna gave the communications officer a throat-clearing cough.

“Sorry, but it is disconcerting to think that we are in some sort of simulation. I was trying to apologize for my outburst. I know you are trying to help. Please, go on.” She covered her face with her hands to hide her mortification.

Ginhawk looked baffled by her outburst and experienced a sudden realization that he was obviously not the smartest person in the room. Far from it. These beings were from another part of the galaxy. They understood the mechanics of the universe in ways he had never imagined.

“I am just a child to you, aren’t I?” he asked in a shaky voice that was completely incongruent with Ginhawk’s otherwise all-powerful features.

Tals stepped in to try to recover the situation. “Your species is much younger than ours. You are merely starting out on a road we have traveled for a long time. We can help you, but first we must learn how to survive here until we can escape.”

Ginhawk’s face went completely blank, as if frozen while Dr. Kennan tried to comprehend his situation. *I could simply log off and not return for a few weeks or return to some other more remote region of the game, he thought to himself. Surely they would be gone, either dead or rescued by then. But what of the opportunities to advance science here? They can teach me things that would ensure my name in the history books forever. Yes, I need to try to help them, if only to learn what they know.*

The first thing he noticed as he returned to awareness of his surroundings, was the girl, Bratha, looking up at him. Her eyes were red, a look of pleading and misery on her face. And oddly enough, that strange tingly sensation ran up his spine again. He wasn’t sure what to make of that. Maybe he could find time later to test for transmission of an alien virus or something.

The look of confidence and power returned to Ginhawk’s features as he reawakened. “Yes, you need to survive here and I can teach you how. There’s no one better

at this game than me. But you must teach me your science as well. I need to know what you know about the universe.”

“Agreed.” Captain Korna extended his hands to seal the bargain.

“It is late now, and I have work to do. I will have HAL work up some training routines and I will return tomorrow with Erol to begin your instruction.” He strode to the edge of camp where Rigel had appeared as if on command. He rode off toward the exit portal with an excitement building in his mind for all the fame he would earn with the scientific knowledge these aliens could teach him. They would never be able to deny him his due as a Nobel laureate now.

“Your dinner, and this afternoon’s lunch, not yet quite petrified, is waiting for you in the cafeteria, sir.” HAL greeted the professor as he removed the simu-suit after his latest adventure in V.R. “Were you able to verify that the newcomers in your game are indeed the aliens you detected?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, HAL. It was beyond belief.”

“I’ll try not to die of shock, sir. You can tell me about it while you eat something.”

Realizing he was famished, the professor led the way to the cafeteria and regaled HAL with a lengthy, and greatly embellished, tale of his discovery about the aliens, somewhat muffled by mouthfuls of reconstituted turkey and avocado sandwiches.

That evening, while HAL prepared the training programs, Dr. Kennan decided to take a sleeping aid due to his highly agitated condition. While his dreams mostly revolved around his receiving interplanetary awards of all manner from the most distinguished scientists of the day, especially those he relished flaunting his discoveries over, there was one disconcerting aspect. In every one of the dreams, Bratha was a prominent figure. Sometimes she was

only a presenter of the award, or simply a spectator, but in a couple of the most disturbing dreams, she appeared to be his wife, or at least someone he was intimately connected to.

In the morning he awoke with a start, soaked in sweat, and with a most alarming sense of arousal which he had not experienced since he was a teenager.

“Stuff and nonsense!” he exclaimed, shaking his head to clear it of such unproductive thoughts. “I’ve too much work to do.”

Jyns stretched out on the canopied feather bed in his new apartments inside the castle. While it lacked the common comforts of his cabin on the Equinox, it was luxurious compared to his recent accommodations in the loft of the town stable which he earned by performing manual labor for the stablemaster. Had it really been a month since he first arrived here at the castle? At least the glass windows and thick tapestries on the stone walls kept out most of the winds. And the fireplace, kept burning day and night by a small army of pages, maintained a comfortable temperature. This world was definitely cooler than the Equinox, or even Chandra. Jyns got up and selected a large greenish-yellow fruit he had come to relish from the well-stocked table near the entryway. He took a bite as he strode to one of the large windows, wiping a stream of juice from his chin. His thoughts wandered as he took in the countryside.

There were many opportunities he could exploit here, but he still felt twinges of nostalgia from time to time. He especially missed the food replicator and tri-dimensional communications, where he could connect with anyone he wished in a matter of seconds. Calling for his assigned valet for anything he needed was tedious at best.

Trying to talk to the king could take hours or even days—something he would have to remedy as soon as possible.

At least I can solve the problem of connecting with the king as soon as I complete the electrical generator, he thought. An ancient technology, but utterly magical to these people. That should be ready as soon as I finish stringing the wires between my laboratory and his majesty's quarters.

The local blacksmith had proved totally incompetent in the forging of the items he required for these voice communicators, but his young apprentice had a more flexible and imaginative mind. Jyns convinced the king to hire the boy and install him in the small forge near Jyns' lab.

Now if I can figure out the trick to making those electrical illuminator filaments, the king, and the entire kingdom will be entranced by my vacuum tube lights.

Those two ancient technologies, something he remembered from his primary schooling, would go a long way toward solidifying his position as royal wizard. His greatest challenge was proving to be Alinor. Pelanar's daughter continued to doubt him and watched his every move.

"I'll have to do something about her." Jyns grumbled under his breath with a gravelly whisper. "Either I convince her of my sincerity to serve the king or, if she sees through the ruse, arrange for her removal from the picture somehow. Perhaps I can find a mercenary willing to take on..." A knock at his door interrupted his stream of consciousness.

"Pardon me, Magian," Melnyk, the personal valet assigned to serve Jyns' every need had decided this to be the proper title for a grand wizard, called out as he carefully opened the door. "Her Royal Highness Princess Alinor requests that you accompany her on a ride in the countryside."

If Jyns' thoughts could be heard they would have terrified everyone for miles. *That cursed woman knows I detest horses. Filthy beasts. She relishes seeing me look foolish atop one of them.* But he controlled his reaction and smiled as he turned to face his servant. "Of course, Melnyk. Tell Her Highness I will meet her in the stables as soon as I can change into more appropriate riding attire."

"Of course, Magian," replied Melnyk with a bow. As he closed the massive wooden door, Jyns squashed the fruit he was enjoying in a fist, then threw it into the fireplace.

Chapter Eight

The simple ride through the countryside turned out to be more of a hunting party. A half dozen palace guards rode in formation in front and behind the group. Hunting dogs howled as they sniffed the forest trail and caught the scent of prey. The princess rode beside Jyns, ahead of her select group of hunting partners. The others occupied themselves with tales of past heroics so they would not hear her discussion with the so-called wizard.

“It’s no secret I don’t trust you, Jyns.” Princess Alinor refused to call him by any title.

Jyns struggled to control his features but managed to respond with at least the appearance of civility and understanding despite the jostling he endured on horseback. “Yes, Princess. I know your feelings toward me are not fond. You have made that abundantly clear ever since I arrived, although I am at a loss to understand why. Have I not demonstrated my allegiance to the king in every imaginable fashion?”

“We know nothing about you. You appear as if from nowhere only a few weeks ago, show off a few tricks, and expect us to welcome you with open arms. None of my informants or even the foreign ambassadors have ever heard of you. After my mother died, I swore to protect the only family I had left and have trained for years to do exactly that. Who are you and what is your purpose here?”

“I have told you, Princess,” explained Jyns with exaggerated patience and a practiced look of abject innocence, “I hail from the province of Kildahn. A small village along the coast of the southern sea. You would not know the town and I do not believe it is even on any maps here. But I started showing signs of my abilities at a very young age and was sent to a monastery where I could learn

to control and expand my powers. It was only a couple of months ago that...”

“Yes, yes, yes I’ve heard all this before, Jyns.” Alinor interrupted him with a dismissive wave of her leather-gloved hand. “I’ve heard this story many times, but never any details. Describe your village to me. Name some of the people there. Were they fishermen? Hunters? What did they do, wizard? Even a child would have some fond memories of home. Yet you tell us nothing but the things anyone could learn from a map or decades-old reports of the region. If I had my way, I’d...”

The attack came from behind. A massive, heavily armored bulette, known as a land shark by the commoners, burst from the ground, leaping high in the air. One of the horses, complete with rider, screamed as it was crushed in the creature’s massive jaws. The remaining two rear guards lay mortally wounded on either side of the road after being struck by the Bulette’s powerful tail and hind claws. Bones crunched as the beaked jaws cut through the horse. The creature, rare in these regions and not seen in at least a decade, had lain silent and undetected deep in its burrow.

“Ride for your lives!” shouted the princess. Her mount flared its nostrils and fought the reins in its panic, but Alinor maintained control and spurred the horse to a heart-pounding gallop away from monster.

Nobody, even one with her skills, fought creatures this powerful unless heavily armed and supported by at least ten warriors of exceptional ability. With half her guards dead or dying, they were not strong enough to face this monster.

The bulette jerked its pointed head up and swallowed its catch in one noisy gulp and downed the others within seconds of the attack. Before the survivors reached a hundred yards, the beast charged them, vanishing beneath the surface as it dug a new burrow, following them from underground. With its streamlined, thickly-armored

head and powerful legs tipped with stout claws, a bulette could dig as fast as any horse could run, and it located prey more by vibration than sight. It gained on the riders quickly.

The ground underneath them lifted and churned as the monster raced toward those in the lead, causing the horses to stumble.

“Off the road!” Alinor and two of her companions who were exceptional riders turned their animals off the road where the footing was steadier. Jyns fought valiantly to stay on his mount, but after the first stagger, he tumbled headlong to the ground and lay stunned, gasping for air and partially buried in the upturned dirt.

With a deafening roar, the monster gutted two of the remaining guards’ mounts with massive claws on each front foot while using its five rows of serrated teeth to snatch the third with a horrific crunch of bone and armor, swallowing its prey whole.

The beast spun with impossible speed, blood pouring from its mouth, to face the remaining members of the party, momentarily paralyzed by what they witnessed. With only a few seconds’ hesitation, the bulette charged.

Princess Alinor, thanks to her training, was quick to recover from her shock. She drew her sword. Waving it high, she swatted at the rumps of the other horses with the flat of her blade to get them running.

“Scatter! Don’t give it one big target! I’ll try to distract it. Flee!” She then wheeled around to face the beast and took a deep breath to gather her courage.

Jyn’s training allowed him to recover quickly. As the creature burst past him, not seeing him under the piles of dirt, he rose and fumbled for the pouch he always kept at his side. Pulling out the blaster, he aimed at the monster. But before he could fire, his thoughts turned dark.

Maybe you should let it devour her. That could potentially solve a great many problems.

He heard the plan form in his mind. *Yes, I tried to save her, Your Majesty, but the beast was too fast and too strong. There was nothing I could do.*

A spray of dirt and rock thrown back by the passing creature shocked Jyns out of his darkness. A remnant of his former self reasserted itself in that moment and he fired the blaster. A beam of yellow-orange energy struck the hind end of the bulette, wounding but not killing it, only yards from the princess. The monster roared in pain and spun to face whatever had dared to attack it.

“Kish! Still on stun setting!” he instantly slid the power slide to full and fired again.

A much brighter beam of red-orange energy struck the creature full in the head, disintegrating half of its skull. The bulette crashed to the ground, creating a deep furrow as it skidded to a stop.

Jyns pressed the safety and returned the settings to stun as he replaced the weapon in his pouch and exhaled a sigh of relief. “That was too close.”

He carefully stepped through the sizzling remains of the beast and collected the satchel which, as he had now come to expect, appeared out of nowhere beside the vanquished bulette. He no longer paid any attention to the oddly misshapen dwarf who always appeared along with the prizes. Jyns peered inside and wondered about what secrets these new devices would reveal to him after examining them back in his private laboratory. Fortunately, it appeared to be poor etiquette for anyone to inquire about the satchel’s contents, so he simply retied the bag and hung it from his saddle.

Alinor, still holding her sword at her side, reined in beside him. “Wizard! Are you injured?”

He smiled inwardly as he registered her use of something other than ‘Jyns’ to address him. “I am unharmed, princess. Are you alright?”

She re-sheathed the blade and gave him a steady gaze before answering. “I am fine. That was quite a display of power. Nobody faces a bulette and lives to tell about it. I suppose I have you to thank for my life.” She tilted her head slightly, eyes fixed on the strange man before her, as if deep in thought.

“Not at all, your Highness. I am only glad I was here to protect the king’s daughter.” Jyns gave a perfect imitation of a deeply respectful bow.

“Yes, I’m certain you are.” Alinor yanked at the reigns and spurred her horse to chase down Jyns’s mount, which was now feeding among a glen of aspen trees a quarter mile to the east. Upon returning with his horse in tow, she tossed him the reins and shook her head as he struggled to re-mount.

“I still do not trust you, Jyns, but today I had planned on killing you to remove you as a threat to my father’s rule, possibly his life. I still am not convinced you are who or what you claim to be, but I will spare you this time. Consider it thanks for saving my life and consider us even... for now.”

The ride back to the castle was cloaked in a heavy silence between them until, over the next rise, they saw the king, flanked by at least thirty heavily-armed soldiers.

“Do NOT tell my father I stayed back to give the others time to escape. I will have your head on a pike hanging from the parapets if you say anything even hinting that I was in any danger. As far as the king is concerned, I rode away like the others and you slayed the beast before it could chase after us. Is that clear, Wizard?” Her face was a brilliant shade of red—a frequent color for her whenever she was angry at someone, which was often.

Noting the use of his title again he smiled and bowed his head slightly. “It goes without saying, Princess.”

Half an hour later, after repeating the tale a third time, with each telling greatly exaggerating his role and

powers, Jyns awaited his fate, hands wringing. The king crossed himself and stopped threatening to flay and quarter everyone who endangered his daughter. He grasped Jyns by both arms.

“Thank you, Wizard. Your bravery and powers saved my daughter’s life. Anything you desire, anything at all, simply give the word and it shall be yours.”

While he shouted with joy and grinned from ear-to-ear internally, Jyns maintained a somber expression and bowed his head. “I could do no less, Your Majesty. I would gladly sacrifice myself to save Alinor’s life. My purpose is to serve you and the kingdom to the full extent my meager abilities allow.”

“And so you shall!” King Pelanar turned to face his guards and daughter, and, raising his arms above his head, assumed the booming tone he used for all royal decrees. “Hear ye all. From this day forth, Sir Jyns, Grand High Wizard of the realm, is hereby recognized as prime advisor to the throne with all rights and privileges due this high station. His words are to be received as an echo of my own. The official notices will be drawn up immediately upon our return to the castle. A grand feast to celebrate the occasion will take place in three days. I declare this a day of celebration for all who live within the borders of the kingdom.”

Facing Jyns again, the king smiled with sad eyes. “I only wish I could do more. Let us return with haste so that the preparations may begin.”

The new Grand High Wizard bowed low before the king. “I only hope to live up to your great praise, Your Majesty. Thank you for this immense honor.” As he straightened, the king gave him a powerful embrace and nearly leapt back into his saddle.

Jyns mounted his horse with his usual clumsiness and spurred the smelly beast to catch up with the party already on its return, but traveling slowly. Everyone present

was well aware of the wizard's poor horsemanship skills. As he trotted in a place of honor beside the royal princess, bouncing painfully, he noticed her staring at him with a look that could curdle fresh milk.

Yes, the thoughts churned in his mind. I will definitely have to do something about this one before she ruins my plans. The only question is how to rid myself of her without raising suspicion.

Halfway back to the castle he suppressed an evil grin as a plan began to take shape.

After a week of struggling to train the visitors from Chandra in a variety of KOG combat techniques, Ginhawk threw up his hands in defeat. "I thought you claimed to be part of a fleet of military explorers. Don't your people know how to fight? Or even defend themselves?"

"Of course we do," Bratha held a cabbage and parsley poultice on her shoulder to help ease the pain of the bruises she received earlier in the day and glowered at Ginhawk. "But not anything like this. Who uses sticks and sharpened iron weapons in battle? I've never even heard of anything like what you want us to do. It makes no sense at all."

"Well this is the best tactical approach I know of, and nobody is better than me at warfare here in the game. You're not trying hard enough." The mighty warrior stood towering over the diminutive girl, arms firmly folded across his chest.

The next thing Ginhawk knew, he was flat on his back, one arm twisted in a terribly painful angle, and Bratha kneeling on his chest.

"Ow! That hurts!"

"It's supposed to, you felking zell." She released his arm and rose to her feet, neglecting to offer any assistance to him while he regained his feet.

Ginhawk winced, rubbing the sting out of his arm and wounded ego.

“How did you do that? I’m a tenth level warrior and more than double your size. You shouldn’t have been able to even get close to me.”

Reapplying the poultice to her bruised shoulder, not allowing the new pain from her little demonstration to show, Bratha gave a menacing grin.

“It’s called Seltack. We train using these forms for hand-to-hand combat. I’d trust my life in a battle with any of our crew back home, but it is completely useless against the creatures here. We lost a lot of friends in the first days before we found this cave to hide in.”

“I see.” Ginhawk squared his shoulders and planted his feet in preparation to restore his honor. “Show me another move while I’m paying attention.”

Bratha’s grin grew predatory and in only three blinding maneuvers, she had Ginhawk flat on his face with both arms stretched high behind him and her knees in the small of his back for leverage. She lifted the hold another inch, pulling a groan of pain from her adversary despite his efforts to not show the pain, then released him and stood aside as he dragged himself back to his feet.

“Two out of three?” Her voice was dripping with enjoyment. “No, wait. That was the best of three. Would the mighty tenth-level warrior like to go again anyway?”

As Ginhawk was about to tell her exactly what she could do with her two-out-of-three skills, the look on her face, beaming with joy and excitement, gave him pause. A chill ran up his spine and he found himself smiling in response when an idea struck him like a brick between the eyes.

“Can you have a few of your crewmates, those with the best, what did you call it? Skull tick? Whatever. Those who are the best at it set up a few demonstration matches for me to observe?”

Bratha snorted. “So now you’re impressed? Weren’t you listening earlier? I told you our techniques are useless here. The monsters inhabiting this place are too fierce.”

Raising one finger to quiet her, he exuded enthusiasm. “That was before you met me. I think I will be able to devise or adapt our weapons to enhance your fighting techniques. And...” He practically shook with excitement as new ideas rang like a bell in his mind. “If you can describe some of the weapons you normally rely on or use in your world, I should be able to synthesize or program into the game at least some reasonable facsimiles for you.”

The former communications officer froze in place, puzzlement screwed up her entire posture. “You can do that?”

“I’m not the greatest warrior in this entire simulation for nothing. I’ve studied all of the fighting techniques used by all the realms here and am familiar with the production of every weapon as well. We can at least give it a try.”

With a yelp, Bratha leapt into Ginhawk’s arms. Her hug nearly choked him, but, for some strange reason, he didn’t mind. He didn’t respond, but he didn’t mind.

As the demonstrations commenced, Ginhawk watched with the eyes of a level ten warder for any clues as to how he might fabricate weapons to pair with this unique style of combat. Throughout every contest, he peppered anyone nearby, usually Bratha or Captain Krona, with incessant questions about the goal and purpose of every move. Four hours later, his parchments and video recordings safely packed into his saddlebags and automatically transcribed to his simu-suit’s database, Ginhawk bounded onto Rigel. The massive black horse reared onto his hind legs in a magnificent display of power and grace. The warrior raised one arm high and spurred the mount into action.

“I’ll return in a few days with a new plan. You’re going to love it.”

Outside of the village, along the road to the exit portal, Erol galloped up to meet him.

“Disturbing news from the castle, Ginhawk. Word has reached me of a powerful new wizard in the realm. Perhaps we should investigate. Our adventures have been lacking lately. It would do you good to engage in another quest.”

“Not now, Erol. I am entrusted with the training and survival of that group of newcomers who took up residence in the cave. They are proving to be most entertaining, as well as challenging.”

“The newcomers? I thought they would have perished by now. Surely, they cannot be more quest-worthy than this new wizard. Tales tell of his becoming one of the king’s closest advisors. There are even whispers that he saved the Princess’s life.”

Ginhawk reigned in Rigel and narrowed his eyes toward his companion. “You may be on to something my friend, but I am unable to join you for now. Keep a close watch on matters at the castle and keep me informed about this wizard. He may prove to be a worthy opponent before long, but for now, I must go in haste to other matters. Go with caution and meet me again in a week with what news you can gather.”

“By your leave, my friend.” Erol bowed his head slightly and gave the reins a tug. In moments he was at full gallop back toward the town.

At the portal, Ginhawk started to shimmer and vanished in a scattering of sparkling dust. In the same instant, Dr. Anthony Kennan grabbed at his simu-suit helmet and tossed it aside.

“HAL! Get in here now! He ran to his terminal and plugged in the suit’s data feed to the lab’s computers.

“Another thrilling day in fantasyland, sir?” HAL strode almost leisurely into the lab carrying the usual tray of food. This time it appeared to be some sort of meat substitute sandwich with protein shake and hydroponically grown apple slices.

“No time to eat now, HAL.” The scientist sat in front of the tri-dimensional display of his notes, frantically swiping left and right to organize the information into a useful framework. “We need to construct an entirely new training strategy and program the game with a new class of weaponry.”

“By ‘we’ I assume you mean me?” HAL stood motionless and expressionless behind Dr. Kennan, downloading the information remotely, copying the organizational scheme automatically as it happened.

The professor spun in his levitating chair to face the android. “Not this time, HAL. These are only simple notes so I didn’t forget anything important. Most of the plans are still in my head, and many more to come as we work. Those Chandrans were hopeless trying to learn the previous lessons, but it appears they have their own combat style, completely different from anything I’ve ever seen. These new weapons should enhance their style and help them defeat all but the most powerful creatures. With time, maybe we can develop something to take on even a dragon.”

HAL completed his review of the recordings of the demonstration matches and nodded in agreement. “I agree, sir. Our previous strategy was totally incompatible with this style of fighting. And I begin to see where you are headed with plans for the new weapons. I congratulate you on your ingenuity. May I suggest a few alterations to improve on your ideas?”

For the next week, man and machine, or man and android, worked tirelessly to complete their new training protocols and program the King of Gems simulation with

their new class of weapons. They would be able to construct the weapons once Ginhawk could introduce the blacksmith to a few new techniques. HAL, at least, worked tirelessly. Dr. Kennan did require a few breaks, reluctantly and sometimes enforced by HAL, for the inevitable biological demands of nourishment, sleep and other bodily functions.

“I think we’ve done it, HAL. The more I look it over, the more I believe it will work. Maybe even better than I had hoped.” Dr. Kennan leaned heavily on his elbows, massaging his forehead.

“And you could use a shower, sir. I am detecting a definite rise in your epidermal bacterial count.” HAL simulated the sound of sniffing the air.

Kennan lifted his arm and coughed as he smelled his offensiveness. “Yes, I agree. And perhaps a good meal and some sleep before I suit up again. I wouldn’t want to drop asleep and fall off Rigel in front of the Chandrans. Why don’t you finish uploading everything to my suit and I’ll go jump in the sonic shower for a few minutes?”

“Of course, sir. I’ll have your dinner ready when you are done. Have you given any thought to sending another message to Dr. Fairall? A discovery of this magnitude requires you to let the authorities know. After all, proof of the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence and your contact with them is an historic event.”

Stopping in the doorway, Kennan stiffened with anger. “Hal, I’ve tried, but the only response I get is to send a written report back with the next supply ship. He doesn’t even want me to send a holo-vid report. What am I supposed to do in the face of such willful ignorance?”

“There are others who might listen.” HAL remained stoically impassive, his android features typically unemotional. “Perhaps a colleague you have not burned too many bridges with could relay the news. You owe it to humanity to let them know, sir.”

Still refusing to face the android, Dr. Kennan threw up his arms in resignation and stormed off down the hallway. “Fine, HAL. If you can think of anyone who might be willing to accept a message from me, then go ahead and send one. I’ve got too much to do to worry about the rest of humanity right now.”

Chapter Nine

Another nightmare startled Jyns out of a deep sleep with a gasp. He felt his heart racing as if were going to leap out of his chest. Sweat poured down his face. His dreams since entering this world that did not follow many of the laws of physics had steadily become more angry and hateful, filled with images of his desire to perform acts of depravity and vengefulness as never before. Oh, there had been the occasional dream aboard the Equinox where he assumed command and tossed Korna and Tals out an airlock, but nothing as hateful as these. And they grew increasingly more violent, even seeming to alter his thoughts and behavior in the waking world. He no longer considered his actions as vile as he used to. Even some of the deaths he had arranged seemed perfectly acceptable to him now, given his justifiable goal of ruling this world someday. He turned toward one of the tall windows in his bedchamber.

“Nearly dawn. Might as well get up and go over the plumbing system one more time before I meet with the king and show him how to use his new toy.” He stood and padded over to the sink and splashed warm water on his face. Jyns grinned as his thoughts turned inward. *So much better to wake up to than that icy straight from the river water they forced me to use before. The king can wait for things like this. I deserve the comforts more than that cretin.*

Dressed and well fed on a hearty breakfast, Jyns strolled over the king’s private quarters and informed the guards he was here to show his majesty how to operate the new water system.

In less than a minute, Pelanar himself, flanked by no less than five servants, arrived at the door bursting with energy. “I am eager to see this new wonder you have built

for me, Sir Magian. I want to see everything before I try it out.”

After the tour, and a nearly intolerably long series of questions about every aspect of the system, Jyns led the king back to his rooms and waited in the reception area while the king took his first hot bath.

The king beamed with joy as he dried himself. “That was the most luxurious experience of my life. How did you ever manage it, Sir Magian?” The title given him by Melnyk, his personal attendant, seemed to catch on so that nearly everyone now called Jyns by this new name. “Imagine. Hot water piped directly into my chambers. No more waiting for dozens of servants to carry buckets of heated water, only to have it barely warmer than a river by the time it arrives. You are utterly amazing. A wizard worth his price.”

“It was nothing, Your Majesty.” Jyns allowed only a small and modest bow of his head to show despite feeling the urge to shout in triumph. “Merely a trifle I’ve been planning for years now. And more science than magic.”

“I know. You showed me the mechanisms you created to do all this.” The king spread his arms wide to indicate the system of pipes leading to his bathtub, and the top of the screw-lift device which brought the hot water up from the metal vats below. Children, recent orphans whose parents had vanished, presumably careless individuals who wandered into the forest and were devoured by some beast, were making a game out of walking in the large wheel to power the entire operation. The brass penny they were paid each day to keep the wheel running was a pittance well spent. “But I still believe there is magic involved. Surely someone would have developed a way to create such a marvel before now if it was mere science.”

“I am glad Your Majesty enjoys my gift. Consider it but a taste of things to come.” Jyns bowed low with a

flourish. “But if I may be excused, sire, I have pressing matters to attend to.”

“Yes, of course, Magian. You have earned your time off today. Go and work on whatever magic inventions you have in store for us. Tomorrow, we should go on a hunt. Perhaps you can demonstrate your prowess against a particularly troublesome LeShay that has recently been sighted near our northern border.” Pelanar, still draped in his large towel and robe, wrapped one arm around Jyns’s shoulder as he escorted him out of the royal bathroom.

As soon as he was alone in the passages returning to his own chambers in a remote section of the castle, Jyns muttered and swore under his breath, emphasizing occasionally with a clenched fist or extra hard stomp of his boots on the stone floor.

“I don’t have time for any of Pelanar’s felking hunts. Too many new devices to test out. Melkin better have those test subjects prepared. I must learn the full extent of those devices I keep finding in the dwarf’s sacks.”

Having to pretend to be a native of this bizarre world who naturally knew about how all this worked made his task even more cumbersome. Fortunately, Melnyk, a cruel and devious brigand Jyns found deep in the forest who foolishly tried to rob him, proved to be a marvelous ‘employee’. Melnyk possessed zero curiosity about anything, even strange questions everyone would know the answer to, and, so long as the coin continued to reach his pocket, had no scruples about the legality of any request made by his new employer.

“Are the subjects ready?” Jyns burst through his laboratory door, robes flying out behind him in his rush to begin.

Still working on a mouthful of roast lamb, Melnyk grunted and pointed his eating knife toward the far wall. Two men, filthy, disheveled, and only semi-conscious due to the dulling potion they were regularly dosed with, sat on

the stone floor with one leg chained to a ring in the wall. This former dungeon served well as Jyns's private laboratory. Nobody ventured near after so many died of a plague and rumors of the ghosts of those who died still in their cells roaming the halls persisted. Only Melnyk and the unfortunate peasants who were in the wrong place at the wrong time knew of its existence—and since they were never seen alive again, they could never reveal the secret.

Melnyk swallowed the mouthful down with a huge gulp of some foul-smelling brown drink he kept in a large wooden barrel next to his cot in one of the old cells whose bars had been removed.

“Got it all set up just as you wanted. One of them women died during the night. Must've been hurt more than we figured.”

“Didn't you give her some of the healing potion I told you to give her?” Jyns's eyes bore into his servant's as a flash of disgust and anger welled up inside him.

“That I did, sir Magian. Just as you said to. Didn't do the trick though.” He seemed unfazed by the woman's death and took another bite of the lamb. “Them Pearls of Pain can be tricky. Leave them on too long, or in the wrong place, like an old injury or something, and they do more damage than you can see from outside. Wait too long and no amount of healing potion will bring them back.”

“Syf! Take care of the body... and try to locate another one. No kids this time, though. I don't want to spend any more coin on the brats than I have to.” Jyns stormed over to the rough wooden table displaying the untested items he had collected and picked up a hollow ivory tube.

“Let's try this one. What would you say it is?” He tossed the item, flipping it in the air, catching it in his right hand.

Melnyk glanced at the item with no interest.

“Blow gun. Self-supplied with darts. Press them buttons on the side to select which type of dart you want to use. First one gives you paralyzing darts, second one gives you pain darts, and the third is death darts. Just press, aim, and blow. It’ll hit anything you aim at, so long as your aim is at least sort of close.”

Jyns examined the buttons, thankful he no longer had to remind Melnyk to provide more details in his answers. Those first few days were a trial on his nerves. He raised the tube to his lips, pressed one of the buttons, and blew. A small dart popped out of the far end and traveled across the room straight into the first man’s neck. Instantly, a scrollwork of dark, almost pure black lines began to form on his throat, following the path of his veins and gradually spreading over his entire body. The man screamed in agony, writhing in pain, falling silent only after the marks spread over half his body. The progress stopped there after the subject’s heart stopped pushing his blood and the poison further.

“I thought you said the first one was only a paralyzing dart. This man’s dead.”

“Did I? Must be the last one is the paralyzer. I get them mixed up sometimes. Don’t worry, I’ll pick up another one for you when I’m out replacing the girl. Half price since I made the mistake.” Melnyk took one last swig of his brew and wiped his mouth on his grimy sleeve, letting out a thunderous belch. “Ahh, that’s better now. I’ll go get ready for tonight if you got nothing else for me.”

“Fine but come over here and tell me about these other items before you go.”

Melnyk stood, stretched his massive shoulders, let out another belch, and sauntered over to join Jyns at the table. He pointed out each prize item as he described its abilities and technique for use.

“This one here is a dancing sword.” He picked up a long slender blade with a fancy scrollwork at the hilt. Toss

this at your enemy, say the proper words of command, and it will do your fighting for you. Even twenty-five feet away or so.

“And what is the command word?” Jyns felt his impatience rise at having to ask for such a vital detail.

“Right here at the base of the blade. See?” Melnyk turned the sword so Jyns could see the engraved message.

“Good. And what of this device?” Jyns returned the dancing sword to its place and picked up a gem-encrusted handle with a scorched concave end, but no apparent use other than possibly as a club of some sort.

Melnyk hefted the weapon and studied it closely. “Not seen one of these since my days back in the army.” He handed it back to Jyns, concave end facing away from them both. “Dragon’s whip is what you got here. Squeeze the handle in a firm grip and out shoots a long whip of flaming energy. It’ll rip through almost anything, ‘cept maybe dragon scale mail or high-level power shield. Careful when you try this one out. I’ve seen lots of rookies take off their own arm messing around with one.”

Jyns placed the whip carefully back on the table. “Maybe I’ll wait until you return to show me how to handle this one. Show me a few more that would be safer for me to try out on my own while you’re gone.”

Melnyk snorted and winked at Jyns. “Wise move. Let me see what else you might survive practicing on your own for a while.”

After a few minutes, Melnyk headed up the winding stone steps leading out of the former dungeon. A wail of agony reached his ears before he was even halfway out, making him smile. At least what he called a smile. Most people backed away in fear when they saw that look on his scarred and leathery face.

After many hours of experimentation, Jyns felt confident he understood to workings of most of the weapons he had collected. It was tempting to describe some

of them as having almost magical properties since no known physical laws could account for how they did what they obviously did. But Jyns was a Chandran—from an advanced, space-faring civilization with a long and deep relationship with science. He knew a great many unexplainable phenomenon still existed in the universe, but he never considered any of them magical, except in the emotional sense. These objects were indeed mysterious, and for his current state of understanding, unexplainable, but he would decipher their inner workings soon enough. Meanwhile, his stomach cried out for something to nourish it.

As he stored the last of the objects back in his seemingly bottomless pack, a loud screech of the dungeon door's rusty hinges startled him back into the present. Melnyk's familiar growling voice echoed down the stairs accompanied by the rattling of chains.

Jyns gathered his pack and went to a far corner of the chamber where he could observe the new subject's while remaining hidden in the shadows.

“Get moving, you two. The Magian will no doubt be wanting to inspect you before he tests any of his toys on you.” He gave the female a shove, knocking her into the scrawny male she was chained to, causing them to tumble the last three steps onto the floor in a heap.

The female untangled herself and managed to sit up on her knees. A trail of blood, now nearly crusted over, cascaded from the back of her skull onto her uniform. “Why are you doing this? We've done you no harm. Please let us go.”

Were Jyns's eyes deceiving him? Was she wearing a Chandran uniform? The torch light danced a dim orange glow making it difficult to see for certain, but her clothing, though torn, dirty, and patched, definitely appeared to be a Equinox crew member's uniform.

A back-handed slap knocked the woman to the ground again. “Be quiet, wench. You’ll find no mercy here.”

He grabbed the chain and dragged the prisoners to the wall where he fastened them to the large iron rings with heavy locks. With a spiteful kick to the man’s stomach, eliciting nothing more than a barely conscious grunt, he turned to leave when he spotted Jyns in the shadows.

“Good evening, Sir Magian.” His slightly-open fist gave a barely recognizable salute. “I got lucky and found these two in the forest. The gentleman over there is one of the villagers, but no family to speak of that might want him back. The girl though, she’s one of them new squatters up at the cave near the village. Queer sort, them folks. Don’t seem to fit in. I thought she might give you something different to experiment with.” He wiped his sleeve across his forehead only managing to smear the grime even more. “Would have had her friend, too, but she died in the struggle. Don’t worry though, I tossed the body where a passing troll will find her soon enough and dispose of it before anyone knows she’s gone.”

Jyns remained in the shadows and lowered his voice attempting to disguise it. “Strangers by the cave, you say. Are there many of them?”

Melnyk’s eyes went blank for a fraction of a second. He seemed to do that when asked certain questions, as if he needed extra time to think about the answer. “I count about ninety-six of them. But some may be off elsewhere from time to time, so I can’t rightly be certain of an exact number.”

Rubbing his chin, Jyns recalled the more-than-two hundred crewmates who had landed on this odd world with him so long ago it seemed now. But his ire rose up as he also recalled the many grievances he held against most of them, particularly the captain and his first officer.

Serves them right, forced to live in a cave. His thoughts grew darker as he contemplated how to take advantage of this new opportunity. Maybe the girl has information about the rest of the crew, if they even survived all this time.

Jyns waved one hand, dismissing Melnyk and sat listening to the soft sobbing and sniffs of the distraught young woman lying on the cold floor. He stood and walked into the flickering torchlight. “Hello, crewman. I’m glad you survived. I have a number of questions about your captain and the others.”

The whimpering came to an abrupt stop. “Major Jyns? Is that you, sir?” The woman brushed the disheveled brown hair out of her tear-filled eyes. “Oh, thank the Infinite One. We thought you were dead.”

“Major Jyns died when Captain Korna refused to comply with lawful regulations and led you and your crewmates into this disaster. This world has proved to be an enemy beyond his feeble reckoning. Everyone who died is a direct result of his dereliction of duty.”

“But Major, the Captain...”

“Enough! I know all I need to know about the traitor Korna.” Jyns approached the now-trembling woman and towered over her, swirling a small flask filled with a potion of persuasion, a sort of truth serum. “You will now tell me everything you know about this world and how you and your crewmates have managed to survive. The creatures here should have finished you all off by now.”

Confusion replaced her look of fear. “But Major, don’t you know? This isn’t a world at all. It’s a type of simulation the inhabitants of the planetary system we found devised for their entertainment. The digitizer transported us into a type of game.”

His knuckles turned white as his grip on the ceramic vial tightened. “Do you take me for a fool, woman? Is that the best your precious Captain could come up with in case

any of you ever encountered me? I'll have the truth of it now."

She screamed and tried to back away until she wedged herself against the wall that held her chain. "NO! It's true! Don't hurt me!"

Jyns grabbed the terrified and confused crewman by the chin and forced her mouth open as he poured the pinkish liquid down her choking throat.

Two hours later, the crewman, who gave her name as Klis, proved to be of little use to him. Her assignment as ship's assistant botanist held little vital information.

Even with a second dose of the potion, her insistence of this world being nothing more than a sophisticated computer simulation is unshakable. She must at least believe she is telling the truth. Jyns paced the dungeon floor, kicking his unconscious victim's legs out of his way as he muttered to himself.

Could Korna be that clever? Feed his crew this false scenario so they could not reveal the truth if they were captured? His pacing grew more frantic, with wild arm gestures punctuating his thoughts.

No! He is not so intelligent as that. It must be true. But how? How can I learn more?

His mind, trained in strategic thinking, leaped from one implausible idea to the next, until something stopped him dead in his tracks. *A computer simulation! Yes! If this is all the manifestation of a computer, then I should be able to ask it certain questions and its programming will have to reveal everything I need to know. But what questions? Will an alien computer respond the same as ours?*

Returning to his more comfortable rooms to eat and think more clearly, Jyns slowly developed a plan of action. By cock's crow the next morning he felt confident in his strategy to unravel this mystery. Not bothering to change his now rumpled and slightly odiferous clothing, he snagged a meat pie from the tray of a cook's assistant

climbing the stairs to his rooms as he charged down to the dungeon level.

“Melnyk! Where are you?” Jyns burst through the heavy door to his dungeon lab. The scraping of iron chains and faint moans of the prisoners echoed from the opening of the dark hallway leading to the cells. The stench of unwashed bodies, excrement and rotting food assaulted his nostrils.

“Blecs! I thought I told you to keep this place cleaner. I can’t work under these conditions.”

“I’m here, Magian. I was about to empty the slop buckets when you hollered. Those two new subjects are back in the cages. Pitiful lot, those two. What can I do for you today?” He wiped his hands on the stained leather apron protecting his ample girth as he exited the blackness of the corridor.

“No time for that now. I have questions for you, but first we need to do something about this smell.” He went to a cabinet against one wall and rummaged through the many small drawers inside until he found what he was looking for. “This ought to work.” He ran two fingers along the edge of a small ornately engraved metal box. It started to sprout many plant-like branches, each tipped in rapidly blooming artificial flowers. A freshness spread throughout the room, battling back the foul odors.

“That’s better. Now for my questions. I order you to answer me with absolute truthfulness. Is that understood?”

A momentary flicker flashed across Melnyk’s features as he considered how to respond.

Jyns seized on this slight hesitation. “No falsehoods, no fantasies. You are commanded to provide me with only factual responses to my inquiries. Is that understood?”

Melnyk displayed another flicker, accompanied by a slight twitch of his upper lip before answering. “Of

course, Magian. Fact Mode engaged. What is it you wish to know?”

A confident smile replaced Jyns’s doubts. He looked to the ceiling as he gathered his thoughts and decided to get straight to the heart of the matter. “Are we in a computerized simulation?”

“We are currently participating in “The King of Gems,” an advanced alternate reality simulation entertainment system developed by Stellar Fantasies LLC, copyright twenty-four-thirteen. All rights reserved.”

Jyns sat back onto the edge of the nearby table, stunned by this answer even as he expected it. He wiped his chin with one hand, considering his next question.

“What is your role in this simulation?”

Melnyk, devoid of all emotional aspect now, stared blankly. “My name is Melnyk. I am an NPC, non-player character, informational guide. My purpose is to provide any and all assistance required by any player who seeks my help.”

Jyns let out a somewhat disappointed smirk. “So, you are merely an evil henchman.”

“The term evil has no connection with my programming. I adjust to the needs and temperament of my controlling player, assisting their advancement in the game.”

“Are there any limitations to your abilities?”

“I am a level five character, non-combatant, non-magical. I have no defenses against magic and cannot participate in actual battles. Only the players may defeat enemies and earn advancement.”

“But you can provide assistance other than combat. You can, for instance provide information about weaponry or strategy against an opponent?”

“Correct.”

Jyns stood and began to pace as he changed tactics. “Tell about the real world. The one outside this simulation and those who built you.”

“I am not programmed with that information. My purpose is to serve in this game.”

“Syf! I need to know more about the beings who built you.”

“I am not programmed with that information. My purpose is to...”

“Yes, yes. You already said that.” Jyns picked up the pace of his pacing. “There is always a way to hack into a computer system.” A thought began to take shape on the fringe of his mind, but he couldn’t place it. Not yet.

“What are your system requirements?”

Melnyk’s head tilted slightly, as if in thought, before responding. “The King of Gems, version six-point-three, requires a minimum quantum processing speed of seventy-five zettaHz per second with a hard drive capacity of four-hundred teraflops.”

Jyns felt his heart sink in his chest. “Did you say quantum processing?”

“Affirmative. The King of Gems takes full advantage of the speed and seamless connections provided by the latest in modern quantum computing.”

“Tark! We’re lucky to have survived the transfer. This ancient technology should have overloaded with all the data to reconstruct the crew. Not to mention the ship’s database.” Jyns froze, his eyes wide with sudden realization.

“The database! Where is it? It should have transferred here with us. Why didn’t it manifest in the simulation as well?”

“I do not understand the query.” Melnyk remained standing impassively, but his head tilted again while trying to comply.

Jyns tried to reframe the question. “Along with the data creating the characters similar to myself, there was a large amount of data containing information collected from our ship. What happened to that data?”

Melnyk froze, his eyes flickering rapidly for several seconds. “Unknown. I am only aware of the data retrieved to create the new characters.”

Jyns swore under his breath and decided to learn as much about the simulation ‘game’ as he could. “Tell me everything about this simulation you call The King of Gems.”

Hours later Melnyk paused his education routine. “Those are the basics of the game. I have sixteen subroutines detailing more advanced features, creature descriptions and illustrations such as maps to enhance your understanding and enjoyment of the game.”

Jyns rubbed his temples with both fists. “Not right now, Melnyk. I’m starving and I need to let all of this sink in. Go prepare something for us to eat while I think on everything.”

Melnyk soon returned with a steaming bowl of stew and a large loaf of heavy brown bread. After satisfying the worst of his hunger with half the bowl, Jyns decided on the next round of questions. Something the princess said continued to nag at him.

“Tell me about the character Ginhawk.”

Chapter Ten

“How can someone like you waste their time on such idiotic frivolities as video games?” Twenty-year-old graduate student Anthony Kennan was in his second year of tutelage under the esteemed professor Donald Flickman, renowned throughout the solar system for his work on intergalactic energy distributions. Now standing in Doctor Flickman’s basement, he struggled for words as he gaped at his mentor’s obvious folly. This was, after all, Dr. Donald Flickman. Creator of the Flickman Equation that turned gravitational wave theory on its head.

The memory of this moment in his past flooded Dr. Kennan’s mind as he stood in the shower, making a few final mental adjustments to his plans to help train the aliens. It was this eclectic genius’s influence and patient insistence that brought the young Anthony to his enthrallment with the King of Gems.

Without losing a second’s focus on his avatar’s three-dimensionally projected battle against a bevy of fearsome monsters, Dr. Flickman, fingers dancing over the various controls on a hand-held touch screen pad, laughed. “Because it’s fun, Tony. You remember fun, don’t you?”

Anthony glanced around the dimly-lit room at the strange collection of paraphernalia stored there. A six-foot long didgeridoo leaned in a corner to his right, next to a banjo. A half-finished cable-knit sweater hung on the back of a chair next to a caddy of at least a dozen skeins of colorful yarn. A table against the far wall was littered with boxes of tiny ceramic figurines, hollow glass balls, and several bags of glittery white artificial snowflakes. A carved wooden disc sat partially completed in the professor’s next snow globe project. Boxes of electronic components in various stages of completion for who-knows-what kinds of devices sat on shelves or littered the

floor. At least three items remained a complete mystery to him, but he never wanted to appear ignorant of their purpose in front of his mentor.

“Yes, professor, but...”

“Don. How many times do I have to remind you? When we are off the clock, you should call me Don. No need for professional distancing here, my boy. We are working far too closely for that. Besides, I’ve always had a dislike for titles. They tend to put up barriers between people. Creative thinking needs freedom, not walls of convention stifling it. Don’t you think?”

Anthony. He disliked the shorter, more familiar Tony so many tried to address him by. His mother called him Tony and the tragic accident that took her from him was still too painful for such a reminder. She was the only person who never shrank away from or caused him pain about his brilliance and awkwardness in social interactions. Anthony simply sighed, shook his head, and once again tried to resign himself to Professor Flickman’s oblivious endeavors at familiarity.

“I have too much work to do, sir. A full class schedule, tutoring undergrads, My own research... Who has time for such nonsense? We can’t all be Wunderkinds like you, sir.”

Dr. Flickman, eyes closed and shaking his head, stopped his frantic interplay of attacks and defensive maneuvers in the game and paused the action just as one of the demons launched a massive fireball attack against him.

“There is more to life than physics, Tony. Life needs to be lived, explored, savored in all its nuances and varieties.” He turned and motioned for Anthony to take a seat next to him on the faded and threadbare couch.

In his memory, Professor Donald Flickman was an elderly and distinguished professor, but when he thought about it without the eyes of a hero-worshiping youth, he

realized he was now at least a decade older than the brilliant physicist he studied under.

“Tony.” Dr. Flickman eyed his protégée with a steady and scrupulous gaze. “You are far more brilliant than I ever was. Probably the most intelligent scientist I have ever met, but you are going to put yourself in an early grave if you don’t learn how to compartmentalize your life. Physics, as grand and vital a pursuit as it is, cannot be the sole goal or purpose of your life. Humans, even here on Mars, are not designed to focus so single-mindedly on any one subject. Our brains crave input from many different sources, many new endeavors. Without it, we become isolated and bitter hermits, cut off from the society of other humans around us.”

Anthony opened his mouth to object once again to the use of ‘Tony,’ but seeing the implacable resolve in Dr. Flickman’s face, decided to forgo another useless attempt to sway his mentor. He instead took another approach.

“Thank you, sir, for the compliment, but I’m sure you’re exaggerating. There are certainly many others here at the Armstrong Campus far more brilliant than I.”

Flickman raised a hand in objection. “I said you were the most brilliant physicist here at Mars University, and possibly anywhere. Of course, there are others more brilliant than you, or me. But not in physics.”

It was a subtle blow to his ego, and it flustered Anthony for a second before he got back on track. “Well, in any case, I have never seen the need to associate with other people, except professionally. I get along very nicely without the distraction.”

Laughing, Dr. Flickman patted Anthony on the knee. “I’m sure you have convinced yourself almost completely of that, my boy. But I can see it in your face. You don’t quite fully believe it. Something inside you still holds that tiny flicker of a flame yearning for social interaction. You wouldn’t be human if you didn’t.”

Anthony stood, raised his hand and pointed to the ceiling as he started to retort this obviously flawed assertion. Opening and closing his mouth in a pretty fair imitation of a fish out of water, he began to pace the room, interrupting his strides twice in a failed attempt to come up with an irrefutable response, then collapsed in a heap back onto the sofa in defeat.

“People are too frustrating, sir. Too much work. They always have been. I find androids much simpler to deal with.”

“All the more reason to find a way to relate to them.” The professor took a long sip of his synthetic strawberry protein smoothie.

“Androids are all well and good, and can supply a kind of human interaction simulation, but we still need to live alongside and form relationships with those who are less intellectually gifted as we are. Our emotional development is no more advanced than theirs and equally as important to a happy life.” He waved both hands wide to direct his protégé’s attention to the strange and varied collection of items in the room. “All this stuff represents my life-long struggle to find ways to interact with others.” His smile broadened mischievously. “Who in their right mind ever learns to play a digeridoo?”

A snorting chuckle escaped Anthony’s dour face. “Did it work?”

“Some more than others. The knitting provided a ready-made group of folks with a common interest in yarn, but I found it difficult to relate to conversations about grandchildren and the latest sales at the supermarket. You’d be surprised, though at just how varied and popular the digeridoo is. More on Titan than here on Mars, but still worth the effort.” He picked up the video game control pad and handed it to Anthony. “Video games are the mother lode of social interaction for those like us, though. Anonymity provides an essential degree of safety to

experiment with new personal identities, and friendships are easy, especially for newbies needing a guiding hand to learn the ropes. There's always someone wanting to show off their prowess in a game by taking on someone starting out fresh."

Anthony turned the control panel over in his hands and gave his mentor a dubious look. "I don't know, professor. Video games? They seem so, useless. Maybe when I have more time to start something new like this." He started to hand back the device.

"Nope. I insist." Dr. Flickman held up both hands, palms out, refusing to take back the controller. "In fact, I am formally making this your official research assignment for the next two months."

Anthony sat speechless, staring at his professor as if the man just turned into a giraffe.

"You heard me. The research lab is down for technical upgrades and undergrad finals are over, so your tutorial and lab monitoring duties are entering a slow period. No better time to get started on expanding your mind and experiences." He touched a few buttons to bring up a new game on the tri-dimensional display and handed Anthony a headset so he could hear the online conversations and talk back if he needed to. "This one should do fine to get you started."

Four hours later, Anthony Kennan realized he was hooked on gaming. He learned quickly, almost never repeating the same mistakes, and, to his utter amazement, he discovered a dexterity in his fingers, allowing him to work the controls like a master, sort of. But it was the opening up of his mind that surprised him the most.

As he stood to use the bathroom after two hours of playing a team-player game of Galactic Invaders, Anthony halted in mid stride, eyes wide and mouth agape. "I think I just figured out the coolant mixture equations! I've been struggling with those for days now."

“Works like a charm, doesn’t it? Give your mind enough to focus on elsewhere, and it frees up other parts to work under the radar, so-to-speak, on matters the conscious brain gets hung up on. There’s a long and intensely boring brain mapping and chemistry rationale behind it all, and I can give you the references if you wish, but suffice to say it works.”

“And you make friends doing this too?”

“Well, not friends like in the real world,” Professor Flickman admitted with a half-grin. “But it did help bring me out of my shell. And the rest, as they say, is history.”

After ordering out for synth-burgers and GMO apple pies, the two continued to play a variety of video games, some fantasy adventures, Anthony’s favorite, but also challenging mysteries. Even an occasional arcade style game for variety. As Anthony left early the next morning, the sky brightening to the hazy greenish sky so prevalent on Mars, Doctor Flickman pulled a brightly colored package out of the hall closet.

“For you, Tony. Your own gaming console system. Not top of the line, but it will do until you get more proficient.”

Anthony reached out to accept the gift hesitantly. “I don’t know what to say, sir.”

“No need to say anything, my boy. Put your mind to developing relationships as you have with science, and you will do well indeed. Remember; Life without friends is death without a witness.”

Anthony stood speechless at the front door.

“An old proverb I heard long ago. True now more than ever. Now go before I get preachy. Remember this is your new assignment. I expect weekly updates on your progress.”

The memories brought a smile to Dr. Kennan’s craggy face. Professor Flickman had died several years ago, but his wisdom never failed to lighten his heart. He had

never learned to transfer the ability to make friends, or at least allies in the gaming universe to the real world, but he did develop a few professional collaborators who tolerated, and even seemed to understand his outbursts. He often wondered if they too suffered from the same curse of social ineptitude as he did.

“I have the new training protocol schedule you requested.” HAL’s sudden intrusion startled Dr. Kennan out of his reminiscences and nearly out of the hover chair he had dozed off in. He reached out one hand to steady the professor and help him regain stability in the chair. “I tapped into the quantum computer’s database and correlated a few new ideas I thought you might find interesting into the programs. Their fighting style is certainly unique, but I believe we have devised a new form of combat that should suit them very nicely in the game, sir.”

“Yes, thank you, HAL.” Dr. Kennan tried to act as if he had not been so embarrassingly startled by setting his focus on the panel before him and randomly checking the mundane data on the screen intently. “Can you feed the new program to this monitor for me, please?”

“Of course, sir.” HAL blinked rapidly for a second as he downloaded the files to the station in front of the professor.

“Look at this! It’s brilliant!” he watched, eyes wide and jaw open, as the tri-dimensional images flowed smoothly through a wide range of fighting forms completely unlike anything he had witnessed in the games. “Their style is almost completely defensive and cooperative. Not weak or non-violent but designed with a totally different outcome in mind than our styles. These Chandrans never fight to conquer if they can help it. Their Commander and that woman officer explained to me that,

in their culture, dominance and submission are not how they conduct war or maintain discipline. They fight as a cooperative collection to disarm and defeat opponents without humiliating them. This strategy always leaves room for negotiation and future alliances among former combatants. Look at these moves here!” He gestured toward the image as four warriors, working together, defeated a large LeShay berserker.

“See how they did that?” Dr. Kennan’s smile broadened in admiration as he jumped up and leaned forward on the panel to see the images from a new perspective. “They killed the creature eventually because that is what the game requires to win gifts and gain levels, but they did not enrage it further and never caused it any undue pain or suffering. Once they were all in position, they dispatched it quickly. A mercy killing.”

HAL’s face wrinkled in concern. “These are only simulations and models of how the new forms should be utilized. You do realize they are not images of actual combat by real Chandrans.”

Kennan waved one hand dismissively in the air above him as he continued to focus on the simulations. “Yes, yes, yes. Of course. But they will work exactly like this.” He recalled the hoverchair which had slid several feet away when he jumped to his feet. “It’s so elegant! Look how smoothly they flow from one position to the next. Always focused on their foe, but never losing control of the surrounding region. No surprises and no wasted movements. I’ve never seen anyone move in such complicated, coordinated patterns before.”

One after another he marveled at the files demonstrating how the forms could be adapted to increasingly dangerous and powerful beasts in the game. Each time, the addition of more members to the group or new weapons earned in previous encounters never lost the

pure flowing beauty of the forms. And each time, the beast was dispatched with only minimal casualties.

HAL watched the images with a slight smile. Which, for an android like him, was absolutely gushing with emotion. “They are no less deadly in their final outcome, but yes, my analysis can reach no other conclusion than that they are not warriors as humans define the term. Their goal is certainly not destruction, but victory without animosity or domination as their goal.”

“That’s what I said.” Dr. Kennan faced HAL, his face halfway between anger, frustration, and confusion.

“Yes, but I said it more eloquently. Will that be all for now, sir?”

Dr. Kennan faced HAL and fixed him with narrowed eyes and a faked laugh. “Ha, ha. Keep that up and I will definitely reset that humor chip in your head, Mister.”

HAL’s expression altered ever so slightly to give him the appearance of mock injury. “And how would you manage without my sparkling wit and stimulating repartee?”

Shaking his head, Dr. Kennan grumbled something inaudible and turned his back to the android, returning his attention to the combat simulations. “Go fix something, HAL. I’ll be done here in a few minutes and then I’ll go back to work with the Chandrans. I may be several hours. Alert me if anything new develops.”

Four days later, Ginhawk, Erol and Captain Korna watched as teams of crewmembers trained with the new techniques. Ginhawk had captured several lower-level creatures for the teams to train against and their progress surpassed anything they had hoped for. Exactly as the simulations predicted, the new methods proved extremely effective and the Chandrans easily adapted to them. The flow of their cooperating movements varied only slightly

from the computer's descriptions. The beasts were defeated easily and only the slightest of injuries, scratches really, were suffered by the teams. A stockpile of basic weapons and supplies grew steadily as each monster died, leaving behind its prize. Some of the weapons the game provided were also modified to suit the new fighting styles even better. Ginhawk realized the computer was quickly adapting to the new gamers in the system.

"So when can we go out after more difficult beasts in real settings? This training is getting pretty routine." Bratha, taking a long swig from her water flask, stood barely out of breath after defeating the current creature with her team. Looking up at her captain and the warrior Ginhawk as they watched, she allowed a challenge to tinge the edges of her voice.

"Training is all well and good, but we need actual experience to become truly proficient. We need to test our new skills in actual combat."

"I agree with the woman," said Erol, nodding his approval. "They are indeed ready for the next level. I will go scout the area for a beast to test their abilities against something more capable."

The captain and Ginhawk spoke quietly on the matter and came to an agreement. Korna's grave features gave way, slightly, to a small grin as he addressed the groups on the training field below.

"Yes, Bratha, it is time for something new. We agree that several teams have sufficient skill to take on a higher-level creature in the wild. Tals will lead the primary group, Bratha the second team and Mung the third. Coordinate your efforts through Ginhawk and Erol. They will take point.

Half an hour later, the teams met up with Erol in a region of rocky terrain near the forest's edge. He lay flat, high on a boulder, scanning the horizon as they

approached. A nearby volcano smoked heavily so that a shower of ash fell on them.

Bratha blinked in astonishment. Her mouth hung open for a moment as she held out her hand to watch the ash collect on her palm. “How the syf did we get here? One minute we’re in the forest, we follow the path around a small hill, and then we’re here? There’s no active volcano anywhere I’ve ever seen in our forest.”

“Hush now,” whispered Ginhawk. “This is Galvarti territory. They have excellent hearing and we don’t want them alerted to our presence before we are ready.”

Bratha crept closer and whispered in response. “But how did we get here? And what the syf is a Galvarti?”

Ginhawk raised his hand for a halt and turned to face the group as they gathered around him. “Time displacement portal. That’s what got us here so quickly. The portals are scattered throughout the simulation, but only the highest-level gamers can access them. They shrink travel time on a quest from months to seconds. Right now we are approximately two-thousand miles from Valendale. The portals are arranged so that as your view of the area is restricted by a hillside, sharp curve in a river, or some other obstacle, you pass through the portal and it appears as if the new region was right around the corner.”

Chief Mung gazed around, brushing the ash out of his thick blond hair. “Cool trick, but I’m more interested in Bratha’s second question. What is a Galvarti?”

A small pebble bounced off Ginhawk’s head. Shifting on his haunches, he turned to see who threw it at him. He saw Erol signaling for silence, pointing to the northeast. Slowly rising to peek over the edge of the boulder, he saw their prey. Lowering back down, he used sign language to keep the rest silent and tell the three group leaders to carefully take a look as well.

Tals accepted the sight with his usual aplomb, but the other two seemed to pale a bit, their eyes wider with

apparent nervousness. Hunched over what was apparently a recent kill, an incredibly bizarre creature, a nightmarish hybrid of evolutionary madness, grunted as it devoured its prey. At least ten feet tall with long grey-brown fur, the creature used a pair of crab-like claws to snip off dripping chunks before stuffing them whole into its maw, swallowing them whole.

Continuing the sign language and a barely-audible whisper, Ginhawk outlined his strategy while trying to calm and encourage the Chandrans. “The Galvarti is larger than anything you’ve faced so far, and you have the skills to defeat it. They are big and fast but not very intelligent. Surround it, confuse it. And stay clear of those claws. Erol and I will be ready to jump in if you get in trouble. You won’t, but we will be ready just in case. Tals, take command and center position. Bratha to the left, Mung take the right flank. Go!”

Tals raised two fingers to his eyes while facing the two squad leaders telling them to keep their eyes on him. He signaled for each group to take their designated positions and headed out around the boulder. As they took their positions, Ginhawk admired how the triangular formation protected each member of the party while they advanced.

The tumbling of loose rock down the hillside alerted the Galvarti to their presence and the beast let out a piercing cry, rising up on its hind legs, its claws clacking loudly in warning. Seeing the enemy continue its advance, the monster shook itself, fluffing its fur to give itself an even greater appearance. The beast raked the ground with clawed toes sending clouds of rock and dust up behind it. With another scream, the monster charged its foes.

The Chandrans danced in unison, communicating with each other in quick, efficient terms, shifting their formations to counter the Galvarti’s attacks. Slowly, methodically, the groups surrounded the brute and began to

organize themselves into the kill formation. Against Ginhawk's objections, the Chandrans insisted that they always allow at least a small avenue of retreat to their opponents. Even an animal destined for the dinner table deserved the respect of an honorable retreat, if it chose to quit the fight. This was an unshakable aspect of their culture, so Ginhawk had no choice but to accede and adapt the formations for this concession. The Galvarti would have none of it. The monster would not surrender so much as an inch of its territory.

Weapons flashing, the beast soon showed signs of weakness resulting from numerous wounds. Blood flowed freely from long gashes in its gut and sides. Ginhawk and Erol tensed in preparation for the need to rush in and save the Chandrans. Long experience taught them the dangers of even a fatally wounded monster such as this one. Then their worst fears were realized. As the three groups closed in for the final attack, the Galvarti lunged at them with a powerful last desperate attempt to kill the enemy. Mung's unit took the brunt of the attack. Massive claws slashed into two of the Chandrans, grabbing one in a strangling grip around his waist. A powerful kick with its left leg ripped three long red gashes across the chest of another.

Ginhawk and Erol leapt into action immediately, but before they could take three strides, the remaining two units attacked and drove the beast away from the wounded. The uninjured survivors of Mung's group seamlessly merged with the others and with a flurry of flashing weapons, killed the Galvarti. Without hesitation, the three squad leaders rushed to help the wounded while the others collected the prizes and started butchering the creature to help feed the crew back home. They were already assessing the injuries and beginning first aid treatment as Ginhawk and Erol arrived.

"Welcome to the party," chided Bratha. "What kept you?"

Breathing heavily, Ginhawk stood amazed at the efficiency of the fight and care for the wounded. Erol left his side to assist Tals with the most severely injured. “That was amazing! How can I help? Congratulations on your first badge, by the way. Looks like that win raised you to level six.”

The former communications officer, noticing the spinning level six badge over her head for the first time, gave him a beaming smile as she cared for the crewmember. “I’ve seen worse. Maybe the others require your help.”

Before he could turn away, she burst with excitement. “Wasn’t that exciting?! I mean, we could have made good use of a laser blaster, but these weapons and the new fighting forms, are brilliant!” Her enthusiasm wavered a bit as the badge attached itself to her chest before fading out of sight. “Is that supposed to happen?”

Ginhawk shook his head with a grin. “Yes, perfectly normal. But with all your talk about honoring the enemy and never humiliating your opponents in battle, you want a blaster? Wouldn’t that have created an unfair advantage? The Galvarti only had claws and talons. A blaster would have killed it from too great a distance for it to defend itself.”

Bratha’s face grew deadly stern, eyes narrowing, leveled at Ginhawk. Her voice lowered and edgier. “You misunderstand and underestimate us. While we always honor our enemies and strive to turn them into allies, something nearly impossible to do the way your people apparently wage war, we will not be defeated. Our weapons are deadly, and we do not hesitate to use them to their fullest capability. Make no mistake about it. Our military might is the most powerful in our sector of the galaxy. We could never have created our empire without the willingness to use such force against others. However, our primary goal is to use diplomacy and trade to win allies. If

we strive to allow our enemies an honorable way to end hostilities, our diplomats are much more likely to build alliances and trade partners than embittered foes forever looking for revenge.” She finished the bandaging with an impeccable tying off and wiped her hands on her pant legs as she stood.

“Warfare without animosity. Interesting.” Ginhawk rubbed his chin as he stared off into the distance. “So why haven’t you constructed blasters or more familiar weapons here yet?”

Tals, overhearing their conversation, interrupted Bratha’s build-up to a typically snarky response. “The requisite materials of sufficient refinement are not available in this simulation. We have nothing to construct the weapons with.”

Ginhawk laughed. “All you need is a skilled crafter. They could tell you what sort of materials to have in mind when you defeat a few mid-level creatures and, when the simulation adapts to your mindset, the materials will be included in your prizes.”

Tals eyebrows raised high on his forehead. The only sign of surprise he allowed. “And what, precisely, is a skilled crafter? How might we go about acquiring one?”

“Sett! He could be just what we need.” Bratha clapped her hands together in a single loud smack as the idea struck her. “Sett can solve practically any problem. The impossible ones may take him a bit longer to work out, but he still usually provides solutions none of us even considered. I challenged him once to build a tri-dimensional viewer out of nothing more than the supplies in the crew mess hall on deck three. He managed it in less than four hours. I still don’t understand how he did it. It was terribly crude and barely functioned, but he managed it somehow.”

“Sounds like the perfect man for the job. As soon as everyone is ready, we should get moving. There are worse

things in this region than Galvarti. As soon as they realize this one is no longer defending his territory, they'll move in fast. We want to be far gone by then.”

Within minutes, the crewmembers formed up into reorganized formations to protect the wounded members and began the walk back to the time distortion portal and home.

Chapter Eleven

As their skills in battle progressed, the Chandrans slowly gained the advantage with creatures that could provide them with the much-needed gold and materials to construct their more familiar weapons. While energy beam weapons were still out of Sett's ability as of yet, his nimble mind and imagination found ways to construct all manner of devices far superior to the crude weapons of stone and tree limbs they had relied on for survival. Ginhawk explained how gunpowder could be produced from a few basic substances mixed together in precise combinations. After the defeat of only two Harpies and four Chupacabra, Sett had more than enough to construct several handguns similar to a Magnum 357, straight out of one of Professor Kennan's movie library of ancient classics, and a number of rifles based on the Browning BAR 30-06. While still crude by modern standards, these high-powered weapons were very effective at taking down many mid-level beasts and providing the Chandrans with a far superior level of rewards.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Bratha." Ginhawk gritted his teeth while trying to maintain his composure as a teacher. "These gunpowder arms will have no more effect on a dragon or Bulette than tossing a cup of water at it." He tugged at one sleeve of the gambeson he wore under his armor. The silvery suit of metal lay in pieces on a blanket as Erol meticulously oiled and polished every inch of the suit.

"Then give us something that will help us defeat them." Bratha growled in response, a dangerous fire in her brown eyes. "You could lead us against much higher-level creatures and get us the materials we need to construct proper weapons." She fired off another round into the center of her target just over five-hundred feet away. "You need to help us find a way out of this nightmare and back to

our people. We will never be able to escape if all you allow us to go after are these pathetic things.”

“These ‘pathetic things’ as you call them, were killing off your comrades not so long ago, if you remember. You and your people cowered in fear of them when I first found you. Now you want to go after monsters far beyond your understanding.”

Ginhawk reached across Bratha to correct a slight angle in her arm as she sighted down the barrel preparing for a second shot. She felt a warmth spread from the touch while a brief smile touched her lips before she remembered her frustration.

“But with you leading us —”

“No!” Ginhawk stood and glared down at Bratha as she rolled onto her left hip from her prone practice position. “We’ve been over this, Lieutenant. The game has certain rules we cannot ignore. Each player must win their own prizes and fight their own battles. If I were to help you defeat any monster above your ability grade, the game would know and decrease your prize value drastically, considering it an attempt to cheat.”

He looked down at the sad, frustration growing on the young woman’s beautiful face. *When did I start thinking of her as beautiful?* “Bratha.” He softened his own expression and extended one hand, lifting her to her feet. “I cannot always be here to help protect your people. I cannot risk their learning to depend on me for assistance. Everyone here must believe they are capable of providing everything you need to prosper in the game. It took me years to earn the skills and prizes I have now. You and your crew are progressing far more rapidly than I could have hoped. You must have patience.”

“I hate rules.” Bratha kicked up a cloud of dirt and weeds. She adjusted the rifle’s sling on her shoulder, then crossed her arms, hugging herself tightly as they walked. “I know you’re right. You know more about this blecking

game than any of us so we don't really have any choice in the matter, but it's so bacqua` frustrating I want to scream. We need to get out of here and back home again." She fought back the welling tears, refusing to give in to the despair.

Ginhawk halted, turning to face the girl, placing both hands on her shoulders. "Trust me, I know what I'm doing with this. I will find a way to get you out of here and on your way home, if that is what you wish. I even have HAL working on all the data you provided to see if he can come up with something. I'm sure he can find a way to increase our communication range and potentially contact your people or someone who can relay a message for you."

"Good lot that will do us. Another human technologically centuries behind us is going to find a way to save us." She hugged herself in a tighter grip, as if trying to keep herself from flying apart.

"I hope he isn't listening in right now. He would hate being called a human." Ginhawk chuckled, looking sheepishly over his shoulder into the empty sky.

It took a second for the words to register in her consciousness. When they did, Bratha looked up at Ginhawk, her face contorted, trying to decide if he was trying to be funny or not. "What do you mean, he would hate being called a human? Do you have contact with other spacefaring civilizations?"

His chuckle turned into a full-blown laugh. "No! Nothing like that. In fact, until you showed up, I would have seriously doubted anyone who claimed to find any extraterrestrials. A few of us still hold out hope, but most have given up the idea of meeting anyone like you."

"Well then, what do you mean he would not like being called human? Why would a human object to being called exactly what he is?"

He froze in sudden realization of what was causing the confusion, then laughed again. “I guess I haven’t ever talked about HAL before, have I?”

He turned back to the path and motioned for Bratha to come with him as he walked. “HAL is an AI. He’s an artificial intelligence housed in a humanoid robotic form, a sort of android. Quite remarkable, actually. He’s a prototype, but he seems to function far beyond the manufacturer’s expectations. One day the solar system will have many more of them, but, like I said, he’s a prototype given to me by...” Ginhawk paused, noticing Bratha had stopped a few feet back and was now staring open-mouthed and wide-eyed at him.

“Bratha? What’s the matter?” He strode back to the Lieutenant carefully, not understanding what was wrong.

She stared at him, dumbfounded, struggling to find her voice. “You... you have androids with artificial intelligence?”

“Yes,” he replied carefully. “but only the one. He’s a prot—”

“Why didn’t you say anything about this before?” Bratha exploded. “How could you not tell us you have AI capability? You know that’s why we’re stuck here. Why would you do this to us? I thought you were our friend, but you are keeping us prisoner in this Tinia-forsaken place. Why would you do such a thing?”

Ginhawk froze in his tracks, raising his hands in defense. “What are you talking about, woman? I’ve told you about HAL before. How can a stupid robot be of any use to us in the game? He’s a research tool.”

“Weren’t you listening? The Captain told you about how we had to digitize ourselves and sent our signal into your computer system, hoping to be reanimated again into android bodies when our people found us. Why would you keep your android a secret from us, knowing our survival and all our hopes were counting on this?”

His face flashed from anger to shock as realization dawned on him. He had heard the story, but was so mesmerized by the revelation of who they were that he had only truly heard half of their tale and never made the connection of their digitization process and HAL.

“Oh, my God! How could I have been so freaking stupid? Of course! The answer’s been right in front of me the whole time!” he smacked his forehead with a loud clap, startling Bratha out of her anger. He took the stunned lieutenant by both shoulders again, shaking her to punctuate each word. “You’re absolutely right!” He spun quickly on his heels and started to run. “No time to waste!”

It took Bratha a moment to recover her wits, but her training kicked in quickly and she shouted at the warrior before he could finish five running strides. “Stop right there!” she commanded.

Ginhawk skidded to a halt, stumbled, and nearly toppled on his face. Only his extremely honed fighting skills worked to regain his balance before facing Bratha. “What do you mean, stop? I have to get back to my lab.”

She stormed up to the hulking warrior as if she towered over him, instead of glaring up at the nearly twenty-five centimeters disadvantage in her short stature. She grabbed the front of his shirt in her two fists and pulled his face down to meet hers. “You mean to tell me you’re just now figuring out what an AI android means to us? Are all earth humans so dense?”

In the real world, Dr. Kennan would have shrunk in terror if a woman, or anyone, ever spoke to him with such vehemence. But here, in the game, her anger was intoxicating. In less time than it takes for one heartbeat to skip, he took in every feature of her face. He had always found the Chandran appearance slightly odd in its almost, but not quite, human aspects. The eyes a bit too large, the nose a tad too small, the mouth not quite right. Maybe it was the number or size of the teeth, or the thickness of the

lips, but everything about them seemed human, although not quite. Now, however, Bratha seemed to be the most exquisite creature in the known universe, far more alluring than any human woman could aspire to be. He was at a loss for how to respond to her.

“Well? Are you just going to stand there like a fool? Or are you going to tell me what the fark you are thinking?” She gave him another powerful shake, one that succeeded in bringing him out of his stupor.

Unable to think rationally, he simply grabbed her back and kissed her unexpectedly sensuous lips.

Shocked, she felt paralyzed for a brief second before regaining her senses and shoved Ginhawk away. He backed away, slowly at first with upraised hands and a huge grin on his face, then turned and started running again, calling back over his shoulder. “No time to explain! I have to go back to my lab and talk with HAL. Take some of the others out on a few more hunting expeditions until I return, and get Sett thinking about how your digitizing process might work with materials we can scrounge up here. I’ll be back in a few days.”

And with that, he vanished around a bend in the path behind a grove of trees heading back to the camp. Bratha knew it would be pointless to chase after him. He was most likely going to leave the game through one of his infernal portals that never worked for any of the Chandrans. Standing there, dumbfounded and exasperated, Bratha caught herself lightly touching her lips where he had kissed her. Warmth radiated throughout her body and a tentative smile grew at the touch. She suddenly blushed furiously and swore at herself.

“Get a grip, girl. You are a Chandran fleet officer, not some foolish cadet having her first crush. He’s a human, for Tinia’s sake.”

She stomped off to the camp and went in search of Sett. On the remote chance the human did actually have an

android of sufficient design, they would have to be prepared to make a connection with it or teach it how to construct a proper design with Chandran technology. Without the ship's lost data logs it would be like trying to program a computer wearing EVA suit gloves while blindfolded, but she had to believe and take a chance.

Jyns, Former security chief on the Chandran interstellar ship *Equinox*, now Magian the powerful and feared wizard to the court of King Pelanar of Valendale, sat dazed in his secret rooms far beneath the castle proper. The former dungeons, damp and chill, echoed with the faint groans and whimpers of the captives held in chains in their dark cells. His head swam with vertigo and despair. The realization that this place, which he once considered a strange world he needed to escape, was really some game played by a race of aliens, one his digitized persona was trapped in, turned his sense of reality into a tailspin. He stared at the half-filled mug of intoxicating brew sitting on the table in front of him, contemplating whether his current state was actual intoxication, or merely some computer program's simulation of drunkenness. And how could he tell the difference? Did it truly matter? He hefted the mug to his mouth and downed the rest of its bitter contents in one sizeable mouthful. Grabbing the jug to refill his cup, he discovered it to be empty and smashed it against the stone wall behind him. The flask's shattered remains joined those of the previous two offenders on the floor.

"Melnyk! Another flask of whatever this swill is."

The informational guide, as he called himself, shuffled into the room with another bronze flagon of the brew he referred to as homespun and slapped it on the table. "Here 'ya go, Sir Magian. Just like mother used to make." He always chuckled at that remark, apparently thinking it was terribly clever.

“You don’t have a mother, Melnyk. You’re a computer simulation, nothing more.”

Melnyk stared blankly for a second before responding. Jyns had come to realize this was the computer working out how to best respond to his inquiries or demands while maintaining the game’s integrity. “Of course I had me a mother. She may have been one of the whores back in Buckston Corner and died of the pox when I was a mere pup of five or six, but she was my mother. Everyone’s got to have a mother. Even yerself.”

“I am not a program in some virtual reality game simulation. I am a flesh and blood person. I am a living being.” Jyns nearly choked on his drink as he sputtered in response.

“Are you now?” Asked Melnyk. “You look and act like everyone else around here. And you told me yourself that you and your former crewmates sent yourselves here into our world. Doesn’t that make you no different from any of us?” He stood idly fidgeting with a heavy iron poker in front of Jyns.

“I won’t be trapped here forever.” Jyns slammed his mug on the table, splattering half its contents on himself and the table. “Another Chandran ship will arrive to rescue us. When they do, I’ll be able to report Captain Korna’s ineptness and total incompetence in his running of the Equinox. Then they’ll have to promote me to a command position where I belong.”

Melnyk rubbed a rough hand over his stubbly chin. “Sure about that, are you? You certain your folks know where to find you? I seem to recollect you tellin’ me you couldn’t get a signal to your fleet. They probably don’t even know you’re missin’ yet. And just where would they begin to look if they tried to find you?”

Jyns glared at his servant through red-glazed, hate-filled eyes. In as menacing a tone as he could manage in his current state, with fists clenched white-knuckle tight, he

growled at Melnyk. “How dare you! Get out of my site before I decide to practice one of my new instruments on you, you felking syf.”

Melnyk shrugged. laid the poker atop one shoulder and shuffled off. “Have it your way, Sir Magian. I was just doin’ my job. Have a pleasant evening.”

The next morning Jyns awoke with a mind-crushing headache. Or was it mid-day? Maybe evening? In the dark recesses of the former dungeon, time held little meaning. His stomach lurched as his own stench grew in his awakening agonies. Slowly lifting his fragile head from the table, he blinked and rubbed at his eyes, trying to clear them. It took a moment for everything to coalesce, but he saw a small vial with a roughly scrawled note in front of him. Struggling to focus on the note, the words began to penetrate the fog in his mind. ‘Drink this,’ read the message. ‘It will clear your head.’

The thought of swallowing anything set Jyns’s stomach into purge mode and he emptied all of its contents onto the floor beside him. After a minute or so the fits subsided, and he wiped his dripping mouth with his sweat- and booze-soaked sleeve. It took another minute before the room stopped spinning. Once he felt settled again, he snatched the vial, popped its cork, and swallowed the potion in one gulp, hoping it was a poison that would kill him quickly. Almost immediately though, the mixture calmed his rebellious gut. His eyes began to clear, and his thoughts organized themselves into coherence. His hands became steady again.

Incredible. Jyns thought to himself, staring at the empty ceramic container. *I certainly could have used some of this after my academy graduation celebration.*

He stood slowly, not sure if he could trust his legs to hold him up, but he discovered no lingering effects of last night’s indulgences remained anywhere in his system. Taking another grimacing smell of his personal aroma, Jyns

headed back to his private quarters a few flights above this chamber to wash himself and think matters through.

Melnyk was right. He surmised. In this simulation, I am nothing more than a program, no different from anyone, or anything else here. And I've been deluding myself. Nobody heard our signal. It was far too weak to reach anyone in our fleet. Nobody is coming to rescue me. This is my existence now.

Back in his rooms, soaking in the warm bath water and scrubbing off the grime, he took stock of his situation and made a fateful decision.

Alone in his rooms, Jyns articulated his thoughts aloud to help him process his new reality. "This is my world now. I must accept that." He pinched his left forearm and splashed more water on his face. "This simulated reality feels no different than the real world I used to inhabit. My senses cannot make any distinction between them, so it makes no practical difference whatsoever."

Jyns pulled himself out of the ornate tub and dried himself as he contemplated matters. As he pulled on his boots he came to a conclusion. "This is my world now. I am no longer Jyns, security chief of the Equinox. I am now and forever more Magian, wizard extraordinaire to the court of King Pelanar.

As he fastened his cloak and filled its pockets with several of the prizes he had earned by defeating the latest batch of creatures, he made one more commitment. "This world is like any other. Pelanar is no more fit to govern here than Korna was to command the Equinox. I am the one with the power and the wisdom to rule this land. My armies, once I dispose of the current usurper to my throne, will conquer the entire realm, and beyond. I will at last take my rightful place and there is no one to dispute me."

"There is one, Sir Magian." Melnyk's voice broke the spell of Magian's revelry with a start.

“How dare you enter my chambers unannounced!” he whirled around, raising his wizard’s staff threateningly.

“It’s my job, sir. You know that. Whenever you need information, I am here to provide it.”

Magian lowered his staff with a crack on the stone floor. “And what information do you believe I require now?”

Melnyk leaned negligently against the frame of the doorway to Magian’s quarters. “Ginhawk, sir. Do not ignore Ginhawk in your plans. He is the king’s champion and the most powerful combatant in the realm. He is sure to stand against any attempt to overthrow the king.”

Magian froze in his anger, taking in what his information guide said. “Then we will simply have to make certain that I become more powerful than this foolish warrior if he tries to stand between me and my throne. Tell me how this can be accomplished.”

“Yer askin’ me, Sir Magian? I’m here to provide occasional guidance, not be the brains of the operation. That be your role.”

“Then guide me, you felking zell. You know your way around this simulation better than I do.”

“I sometimes forget that you are still a beginner at all this. There may be something in the training files that could help.” Melnyk’s eyes went blank, eyelids fluttering as his program searched the computer database for anything suitable. In less than two seconds his awareness returned.

Stepping into the rooms and closing the door behind him, Melnyk chose a fresh loaf of bread and a plate of fruit from the sideboard before taking a seat at one end of the table. Slathering a large dollop of butter on the bread, he bit into it. Talking around a full mouth, Melnyk began to explain. “It won’t be easy, Sir Magian, but here’s what we need to do.”

Chapter Twelve

Dr. Anthony Kennan jerked upright in his hover chair and groped excitedly at the straps securing the simulation helmet to his head. “HAL! Where are you?”

The android’s voice, calm and unemotional as always, spoke to him from behind. “I’m right here, professor. Where else would I be?”

The astrophysicist spun his hoverchair around and saw HAL at one of the dozen or so computer interface terminals. A holographic screen floated above the terminal displaying over a hundred separate images, each one presenting data from a different source. The android casually scanned each one in milliseconds, analyzing and comparing the information. His fingers flew over the digital keyboard, changing various screens to suit his inquiry.

Kennan fumbled out of his chair, gained his balance and quick-stepped across to humanoid machine. “HAL, stop what you’re doing. We have important work to do.”

Without skipping a beat in his work, HAL gave an excellent simulation of a frown. “I believe monitoring every system in this facility is important work, Dr. Kennan. Are you suggesting otherwise?”

“No, no, no.” Replied Kennan. “Of course it’s important. But there’s been a new development with the Chandrans. We may have an opportunity to help them. I need you to find out if we can build more androids.”

“I fail to see how that requires precedence over ensuring the safety of all systems on the base. I already have access to all pertinent data on androids. After all, even I may become damaged somehow and I would need to know how to repair myself or provide you with the knowledge if necessary. You can find the data and procedures yourself. They are all easily found on the

mainframe.” HAL shook his head and started to return to his work.

“Not a human android,” shouted the professor in frustration. His arms flailed wildly in his excitement. “A Chandran android. One that can contain the consciousness of a Chandran digital persona.”

HAL returned his attention to Dr. Kennan, eyes twitching for a split second as he tried to understand the situation. “I fail to see how this is possible. Even in the remote possibility we should attempt this, we know nothing of Chandran brain physiology, nor do we have the technical specifications for such an endeavor. And it would take the combined efforts of myself and the entire quantum computing capacity of this entire base years to accomplish, if ever. All of this assumes we have the equipment and expertise between the two of us to accomplish such an outlandish feat.”

Kennan spun on his heels and pointed at HAL with delight. “Hah! Got you! We do have their specifications. We have everything we need to learn if it is possible.”

“And exactly where are these plans?”

“Right here! In the computer. Captain Korna told me the story of how they transmitted all of their ship’s data, along with themselves here to Starfinder Station when they escaped from their dying vessel. All we need to do is find them.”

HAL stared blankly at the professor for several seconds, an eternity for the humanoid machine. “Oh, well, as long as you put it that way. I’ll just zip right through the six thousand flops of data and the system’s entire memory, only the size of the entire data storage of Earth and Mars combined, and get back to you in, let’s say the next decade or so?”

His enthusiasm plummeted into near dismay at the daunting prospect. Even HAL, the ultimate personification of computing conceit, backed up by actual performance,

doubted his ability to locate the information. “Are you saying it cannot be done?”

HAL gave a simulated sniff. “No. Of course I can find the data, but it will require an exorbitant amount of time at the expense of my other duties. Decades was not an exaggeration. Especially without any idea of what sort of signature I am looking for in the code.”

Dr. Kennan raised his hands to run through his wild hair but stopped in mid action. “Wait! I almost forgot. Look at this.” He fumbled through his pockets and found the portable drive he always kept plugged into his simu-suit in case he needed to make special note of something during the game. “The Chandrans described the sort of transmission traces we should look for. Captain Korna had one of his engineers give it to me. Good thing I ran into him before I left the game. That should narrow down your search parameters significantly. Don’t you think?”

HAL took the drive, examined it for an instant, and unfastened his shirt. With no sign of pain, he peeled back a portion of skin on his right side, about the fifth rib, and uncovered a series of input ports. He inserted the drive into one of the ports and concentrated for less than five seconds before responding. “Hmm. It would appear you are correct. This new information should allow me to locate the data, if it even exists in the computers, in no more than a few days. Less if we are lucky. But I do not believe in luck.” He unplugged the drive from his side, resealed the patch of skin and refastened his shirt. Give me another twenty minutes to finish my duties to the station first, then I will start to tackle this search for the Chandran data.”

Kennan smacked his hands together in a very Ginhawk-like expression of excitement. “Wonderful! While you’re doing that, I’ll search the databases on everything we have related to our inventory for android spare parts and potential alterations for manufacturing everything we may need.” His stomach gave a loud

gurgling growl in protest. “But first, I think I’ll raid the mess hall for some lunch.”

After lunch, and a search through the station’s robotic and android inventory, a task requiring over an hour, Dr. Kennan returned to find HAL in a state which could only be described as comatose. HAL sat rigidly before his monitors, staring blankly at the data on a hundred holographic screens, each one flickering madly with new sets of data spewing forth at an incredible rate. Only the android’s eyes gave away any sign of life as they shot back and forth, scanning each new screen as quickly as it appeared. Kenan had only seen HAL in such a state once before, when a small meteorite impacted one of the geothermal power facilities, knocking it offline and threatening the life support systems of the entire facility. It had taken a nearly twelve hours, but HAL managed to reroute enough of the grid to allow the robotic repair crews time to rebuild the power station. Kennan found a handwritten note in the android’s meticulous penmanship sitting on the table.

Professor,

Tracing the alien’s signal through the vastness of the quantum entangled network will require my fullest concentration. I will be devoting all of my conscious functions to this difficult procedure. Do not attempt to communicate or disturb me excepting, of course, life-threatening circumstances in Starfinder Base. I cannot say how long this may require, or if it can even succeed. However, I anticipate at least two days or more if what I suspect is true.

Sincerely,

HAL

P.S. You will find a sufficient number of prepared meals in the galley freezers.

Kennan folded the note, tucked it into a pocket, and returned to his lab to work out some calculations for his gravitational wave theories. He did, after all, have some legitimate research going on which he had neglected for far too long. The authorities might become suspicious if he did not send in reports on at least a semi-regular basis.

Three days later, HAL appeared at Dr. Kennan's laboratory looking none the worse for the immense effort he had expended in his search through the computer's vast reaches. "Good evening, professor. My search for the Chandran database is completed."

Dr. Kennan nearly fell out of his hover chair at the sudden break in the silence. "HAL! Good Lord, man. You know better than to sneak up on me like that. I nearly erased the new interferometer calibrations."

The astrophysicist froze in place for a second as he realized HAL was no longer comatose. "Wait, you're here. Did you say you found the Chandrans' data? What took so long? Your note said a couple of days, it's been three."

"Sorry, sir. The data was fragmented across thousands of directories. It took a bit longer than expected to piece them all back together properly, translate them, transfer the entire package to a more convenient location in our databanks, and make four redundant copies of the data for safekeeping."

Gathering his wits about him again, Dr. Kennan gave a sheepish smile while stretching shoulders to work out the kinks. "Sorry, HAL. I didn't mean to imply..."

"No need for apologies, sir. Thank you for your concern. While I was searching, I did maintain a minimal ability to monitor the station's systems. The cameras showed you coming to watch over me multiple times over the past three days. They also revealed a lack of your presence in the galley. I surmised you were worried about me."

With an embarrassed cough and an attempt to wipe the sleep from his tired eyes, Dr. Kennan hurried on. “In any case, you said you found the data and translated it?”

“Yes, sir. You can find it in a file marked Chandran.”

Spinning back to his terminal, Dr. Kennan found the file and began rummaging through the table of contents. “Did you learn anything about the Chandran android construction and interfacing procedures?”

“I did, sir. We should be able to manufacture a serviceable model prototype with the materials we have on hand, but we will need assistance if we wish to produce androids of the quality described in the files. Our molecular synthesizers and miner-bots will need substantial reprogramming to find and produce the materials required. Many of the elements are extremely rare, but they can be found here on Dysnomia and other nearby asteroids. I have already prepared the commands to allow one of our redundant quantum computers to handle the calculations and programming requirements.”

“Excellent work, HAL. How long do you think it will take before we are ready?”

“Approximately two months, sir.” HAL noticed the appearance of concern on the professor’s face and raised one hand to forestall any arguments. “The critical hold up will be constructing the brain for the android, sir. It will need to be several factors larger than my own, but fit in the same cranial cavity space. Something like that is only theoretically possible, but I believe it is achievable, given time.”

Dr. Kennan paused his terminal and stood to face his companion. “Your neural network is nearly the equal to any of our quantum computers. Why not simply use your specifications?”

HAL strode across the room to stand in front of the professor. “I am a simulation of a human, sir. While my

capacities are phenomenal, they are not sufficient to contain what the Chandrans require. Theirs is a complete reconstruction of a conscious, self-aware, emotional being. They do not simply simulate who they are, they have learned how to precisely place their actual engrams fully into a quantum entanglement field, one no larger than a human brain. That is why I stated we will need assistance.”

“What sort of assistance are you talking about?”

“While we can provide a serviceable android body to host a Chandran, it will have severe limitations. We should be able to isolate some of their intellect and a template to construct a serviceable android body. However, much of the engram database must remain in an accessible file on one of our mainframes. We can design the Chandran’s android with a dedicated connection to this file, but it will be more like me than you.”

“That will be unacceptable, HAL. The Chandrans are expecting to feel as if they are in their old bodies, not some crude robotic reproduction.”

“I understand, sir, but their technology is centuries beyond ours. We will need at least one of them to make the sacrifice and teach us how to create one of their own models. Even with their ship’s database to guide me, I lack the programming to understand the nuances required to construct such an intricate and delicate device, and we need the more exotic materials for the construction process. In addition, our manufacturing equipment will have to be highly modified to handle the new programming and materials. And, as always when building such a complicated device as this, some of the instructions and knowledge of the process is missing from the files. Only someone with experience and practice in the actual practice of the work will understand all of the intricacies inherent in the design and construction process.”

HAL hesitated for a moment, considering the rest of his response. “And they would not be ‘crude robotic

reproductions,’ as you put it. The initial prototype will be like me in appearance and ability. Very humanoid, but also lacking the emotional and psychological aspects of an actual human. We can simulate those human affects, but cannot encode the real neural connections of a living being. That is the technology we are currently lacking.”

“You know I didn’t mean anything negative toward you, HAL. I was simply making a comparison to the sort of creation they are capable of. Are you certain we can, with their guidance, make such a brain? And a body to match?”

“I do, sir. But it will take time. Can the Chandrans survive in the game that long?”

“They are improving, but still have a long way to go. But I believe they will gain enough skill to survive if I am there to help them. I have them working on some new tactics that should give them some advantages.”

He stretched again and an involuntary yawn added to his exhausted appearance. “Speaking of which, I should get back into the game and see how the Chandrans are doing. There were rumors of a clan of mountain trolls in the region. They could be troublesome. But I won’t be of any use to anyone as tired as I am. Wake me in six hours, HAL.”

“Yes, Professor. And I’ll have breakfast waiting for you then.”

“Excellent. And HAL... Good work. Thank you.” He gave HAL’s shoulder an appreciative squeeze as he passed by.

“My pleasure, Dr. Kennan. I will see you in the morning.”

Ginhawk reined in his stallion at the edge of the Chandran camp. Clouds of steam erupted from Rigel’s nostrils as he snorted in the chill morning air. Leaping from the saddle, he handed the reins to one of the younger Chandrans, who

had taken it upon himself to care for the large black stallion whenever Ginhawk arrived. Erol, Ginhawk's constant companion whenever he joined the simulation, passed the reins of his warhorse to another Chandran.

"I will check on the progress of their training," announced Erol as he slung his broadsword across his back. "Perhaps they are ready to go out on another hunt for bigger game." With that, the tall half-elf strode off in the direction of the training field.

Before he could take another step, Chief Warrant Officer Mung approached and took him by the arm, leaning in close so as not to be overheard. "Better come with me, sir. We've had a bit of trouble since you were last here. They only returned a few hours before your arrival."

"What sort of trouble?" asked Ginhawk, lowering his voice as he took Mung's lead. "Is everyone alright?"

"We went on a hunt yesterday," replied Mung, giving the warder a cautious glance. "Things went a bit awry. We encountered a beast that was stronger than we expected to find. There were some injuries."

Halting mid-stride, Ginhawk stood frozen, a look of despair growing on his face. "How serious? Any fatalities? Where is Bratha? I was expecting her to meet me when I arrived."

Mung did not reply, keeping his face unreadable as they strode through the camp. Ginhawk felt the despair among those few gathered around the fires.

"Here we are. Captain Korna will fill you in on the situation." Chief Mung helped open the flap to the medical tent, signaling for Ginhawk to enter alone.

At least ten cots were filled with patients, most heavily bandaged and sedated. Weak moans and an occasional cough could be heard above the bustling of several nurses tending to the injured. Behind a large

partition at the back of the tent, Ginhawk saw the shadows of an operating team working feverishly on someone. He scanned the room for those he recognized, finding Captain Korna seated, his leg in a cast and left arm in a sling. The bandage on his head was stained red over the site of what had to be a terrible wound. Korna, grim-faced and in obvious pain, waved him over.

As Ginhawk opened his mouth to speak, the Captain motioned for him to remain silent and sit next to him in a chair provided for visitors.

“I’m glad you came,” said Korna. “We need your help.”

Ginhawk searched the room for Bratha, panic growing in his heart when she was nowhere to be seen. “What happened? How many were killed?”

“We were lucky.” The Captain, wincing with pain, adjusted his position in the cot, expelling his breath through gritted teeth. “Only two were lost, but many more are critically wounded and may not last much longer. Do you know of any medical treatments that can help us?”

Afraid to ask the question, he blocked thoughts of Bratha from his mind and focused his entire being on the Captain. “I do know something of field medicine, but Erol is the real miracle worker. His knowledge of herbology and therapeutics is practically legendary. He is here in the camp already. Let me fetch him.”

“No need, mighty one.” The calm, reassuring voice of Erol sounded over Ginhawk’s shoulder. “I learned of the attack from one of the crew who received only minor injuries and sent him with a scouting party to locate the supplies I will need.”

The tension in Ginhawk’s shoulders and face eased considerably. “Thank you, my friend.”

Erol nodded and went behind the dividing screen to discuss matters with the doctor. He soon left to help the others search for his curatives.

“She is being operated on as we speak.” The Captain gestured to the panel separating the treatment area from the rest of the tent, interrupting Ginhawk’s searching eyes and attempt to speak the dread he felt. “She distracted the creature long enough for us to do enough damage to scare it off, but her injuries were severe. She has been in surgery for over an hour now.”

Ginhawk pushed his fears aside and straightened his shoulders, attempting a smile. “I am confident that between your surgeon’s skills and Erol’s assistance, she and the others will be back on their feet in no time. Now tell me, what sort of creature was it?”

Korna resettled his body again in an attempt to make himself more comfortable on the cot with only minimal success. He rubbed at his chin with his one good arm, bandaged as it was, and began his tale.

“Sett had devised several ingenious new weapons from the raw materials some of our hunting teams were bringing to him. Some seemed to be the most powerful items we have tried to date, so we were anxious to test them out and try to bring home even greater prizes for him to build. We took along only the fighters most highly trained in the new techniques you taught us and we had great confidence that we were ready for anything we might encounter. Turns out we were wrong. At first, we were heartened by our initial success with beasts such as the harpies and griffins. Even a barghest, something we used to dread and avoided at all cost, was defeated after a relatively brief battle. We started collecting quite a few prizes of much greater value than anything before.” He motioned to a sack on the floor next to him.

Ginhawk opened the leather bag and peered inside. “A bag of Holding, I see. These are always useful.”

“Yes. We were surprised to learn how much it could carry without gaining any mass.” Korna grimaced again as his chuckle twisted into a cough.

Returning to his inspection of the bag's contents Ginhawk shook the bag occasionally to shift its contents to aid his inventory. "A good assortment of potions and fire sticks, two Boomerang Hammers. Very handy items, but they take some skill to use properly. A Warding Beacon, incredibly good. Three sets of Powered Armor, excellent prize to be sure. Some Archery Bracers and a couple of Life-Draining Daggers. A good haul indeed for folks of your experience. With a little practice your hunts will be even stronger. So, what went wrong?" Ginhawk's face grew dark, needing to know, but anxious about what he might hear.

"A pair of basilisks." Captain Korna took a sip of healing potion from one of the orderlies and wiped his mouth with his sleeve before continuing. "We grew overconfident and lowered our guard as we followed a trail through the mountains. As we rounded one bend we noticed a large cave and decided to inspect it. Without warning, one of the monsters slithered from the cavern's depths into the light. We started to retreat, but were cut off when the second beast dropped down from the treetops alongside the trail we had followed. It was a disaster far beyond our ability, but we got lucky."

Ginhawk shook his head as he scowled. "One cannot depend on luck when fighting a basilisk. I am surprised any of you survived being surrounded by a pair of them. How did you manage it?"

"One of Sett's explosive grenades startled the one on the trail behind us. Tals reacted quickly to the threat and tossed one of the devices at the creature. There was a deafening explosion and several flashes of intense light. The basilisk was frightened back away from the path and we ran for it. The two of them then joined forces and struck at us from behind as we retreated. We managed to blind one of them with Sett's rifles, but even so, it was able to injure several of us. Its mate killed Hartak, one of the

young trainees who had joined us on her first expedition. Jerna, another trainee but more experienced, managed to inflict some severe damage to the beast before getting bitten. He died from the poison during our trek home. The healing potions we had with us were not strong enough to counteract the venom.”

“Yes,” Ginhawk nodded, stroking his chin. “Basilisk venom requires a very special potion. Too rare and powerful for you to have earned yet. But even two wounded basilisks are formidable foes and difficult to kill. I still do not see how you could have escaped.”

“That was Bratha’s doing.” The Captain waved one bloody arm toward the surgeon’s room where Bratha’s life hung in the balance. “She had donned one of the suits of Powered Armor to test it out just before we encountered the basilisks and realized how little damage she was incurring compared to the rest of us. She also carried a sword from our most recent conquest but had not tested it yet. As one of the rear guards, it took her a few moments to work her way to the fighting at the front, although she was in the thick of things within a couple of minutes. The armor saved her life many times over, but it was taking some terrible damage. She swung the sword fiercely, but she has always been better with a bow. One strong hit turned the blade to what looked like lightning and made a long slice through the creature. Thick green blood poured from the wound as the monster bellowed and rose up for another attack. Bratha stood firm and was able to stab the lightning blade through the beast’s skull as it threw itself at her, killing it but breaking through her armor and nearly killing her as well.”

At that moment, Erol burst through the tent’s flaps and gave Ginhawk an encouraging smile. “We were successful in our search. The woman is strong, and with the help of these medicines and the surgeon’s skill, she should recover soon.” He stepped behind the curtain separating the

surgery from the rest of the tent and Ginhawk heard the muffled sounds of Erol's instructions to the doctor.

"That's a good man you have for a friend there, Ginhawk. He has been of great help to us." Captain Korna gave a sincere, if weak, smile.

Ginhawk scratched the back of his scalp, returning the smile. "Yes. I never would have gotten to where I am here today without his assistance. But you left the tale with a live, if blinded, basilisk still threatening your group. They are still formidable hunters with their sense of smell and hearing as well as their ability to track prey through body heat with their pit organs."

"True. But in the tangle of the battle, the blinded monster held back while its mate carried most of the attack. As soon as it died, though, the other began to slither forward to renew the fight. Bratha was somehow able to struggle free of the dead basilisk's jaw without getting stabbed by any of the beast's poisonous fangs and staggered to her feet to face the attack. She yelled at us to run and save ourselves while she held it off. I am not sure, I believe her armor, even as damaged as it was, shielded her from the snake's ability to sense heat, because it seemed to ignore her as it came for us. As it passed her, she stabbed the lightning sword into its neck and ripped a massive slice down its neck. The beast cried out in a deafening roar and backed off, writhing in pain. The creature's tail struck Bratha, throwing her clear and back towards us. We managed to help her to her feet and escape back down the path until we were out of sight. Once clear, Bratha fell unconscious. We were able to bind most of the more serious wounds and built a travois to carry her back to camp. We only arrived here a couple of hours before you showed up."

"Amazing. I've never heard of any others of your level surviving an attack of any level seven monster, much less two of them. Your crew are mighty warriors indeed."

Ginhawk gently placed one hand on the Captain's knee as a gesture of respect and approval. The prize for killing a basilisk is usually an impressive weapon. May I inspect it?"

Korna sighed, grimacing again as he readjusted his position. His eyes grew distant as the drugs began to take effect. "Unfortunately, in our haste to escape and get the wounded to camp we did not even think about the prize until we were almost home. We did not think it wise to send anyone back for it in our condition. Perhaps with your help, a few can lead you to the location and recover it for us."

"Of course, my friend. But that is for another time. The region where you encountered the basilisks is not often traveled so it should be safe for a few days yet. Now it is time for you to rest and let the healing potions do their work." He leaned over and helped Korna lie down on the cot. A shadow blocked the light from the lamps from over Ginhawk's shoulder. The Captain was asleep before Ginhawk could turn to see who had come.

Erol's deep voice spoke quietly so as not to disturb the injured around him. "The surgeon is done; the poultices are applied. She is sleeping soundly now but one as strong as she will fully recover in no time at all. I overheard the Captain's tale. Stories should be told of young Bratha's heroism and skill in battle."

"Thank you, my friend. Go and tend to the others as best you can. I will stay up with her for a while longer. I have news to share with you from my world. We will need to formulate a plan." Ginhawk rose and the two companions grasped forearms before parting. Ginhawk stepped quietly behind the curtain to see the final touches made to clean Bratha's face and hands from the filth of the battle. A thin, clean cloth covered her frame. A pile of blood-smeared shredded armor lay in a heap in one corner.

"I want to keep her in here, away from the others, for a while longer," said the doctor as he washed his hands

at the tub nearby. You can stay if you want, but she is heavily sedated to help with the pain. I think she is through the worst of it. Your companion's healing skills are most impressive. I will need to have him teach me what he knows." He dried his hands and walked back out to work his rounds among the others.

Ginhawk pulled up a stool and sat next to Bratha, holding one of her small hands in his gnarled but gentle grip.

"I was wondering what it would take to get you to hold my hand, sir knight."

Ginhawk startled and looked up into Bratha's half-lidded eyes to see her valiant, if drugged, smiling face.

Smiling in relief, he shook his head in mock reprimand. "No talking. You should sleep so you can recover enough for me to knock any more ideas about fighting basilisks out of your head." He tried to pull his hand away, but her grip tightened as she fell asleep again, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like "I love you, my brave knight." But it was so faint and slurred he could not be certain.

Chapter Thirteen

“That plan sounds like it will probably get me killed, Melnyk. Defeating this High Dragon Lord, not to mention the pair of red dragons, the most powerful and dangerous of them all, is certain suicide. I would need weapons and experience far above my current ability to even think about that.” The former chief of security on the Equinox sat at one end of a long table covered with bowls of various delicacies and several pitchers of various concoctions to drink. He touched none of them.

“That’s why we’ll be needin’ Ginhawk’s help, Sir Magian.” An evil grin on Melnyk’s face grew, sending shivers down Magian’s spine.

“And just how are we supposed to enlist the aid of the mightiest warrior in the king’s service? Why would he ever consent to help us overthrow the king?”

Melnyk snorted, jabbing one finger toward Magian’s face. “You’re not the brightest sorcerer, are yeh? We don’t enlist Ginhawk’s help. We get King Pelanar to order him on the quest, and us to go with him as representatives of the throne and allies. All we need to do is devise some threat to the realm, posed by Sar vat, the Dragon Lord, and help the king realize that Ginhawk is our only hope.”

Magian bristled at the NPC’s condescension. “Don’t take that tone with me, Melnyk. I’ll destroy you and replace you with someone more suited to a subservient role.”

Pouring himself a large mug of the dark brown ale, Melnyk plopped back into his chair and glared at the sorcerer. “No, Sir Magian, in fact you’ll do no such thing. I am assigned to you. Nothin’ can change that. Kill me, and I simply return in a different form. I may look like a new person, or maybe some sort of spirit guide creature, heaven

forbid, but it would still be me, with all memory and personality intact.”

“Care to test that theory?” Magian picked up his Magi’s Staff and aimed it at Melnyk’s chest.

Laughing out loud and taking another gulp of the ale, Melnyk locked eyes with the magician. “Suit yourself, but we’ll have to continue this conversation again after I return, and you’re convinced it’s still me. Just takes longer that way.”

Magian’s fingers tensed on the staff while he mentally conjured up an image and command to set the staff in action. He locked eyes with Melnyk, but his ire subsided, and he dropped the staff onto the table, breaking eye contact to stare down at his hands. “Blecs! Very well. What did you have in mind?”

“Glad you see it my way, Sir Magian. I hate havin’ to get used to a new body.” He took another swig and slammed the mug on the table, splattering foam and ale on its surface. “Now, you’re the boss, but this is the way I see things happening. First we need to create...”

Twenty minutes later, Melnyk finished his explanation and bit off a large mouthful of the buttered bread, dripping some of the crumbs on his chin. Magian sat deep in thought as he considered several aspects of the plan. His experiences as the head of security forces on the Equinox and his training at the Chandran Fleet Academy gave him insight into some of the flaws of Melnyk’s idea. It was only, as had been explained, a training guide for beginners on their first quests. Together, the two conspirators hashed out the final details of their plot to enlist Ginhawk, gain the power defeating the Dragon Lord would provide Magian and overthrow the king. It was dawn before Magian rang for his messenger to carry the letter to King Pelanar.

“**S**ir Magian. Grand High Wizard to the court!” the Herald’s voice announced Magian’s arrival, two days after sending his message, in the king’s private receiving chambers. The room was reserved for meetings with highly positioned individuals of the court or visiting dignitaries having information or other business of the utmost importance and secrecy. King Pelanar rose from his throne at the far end of the chamber and welcomed his advisor with open arms and a severe visage.

“You summoned me, Your Majesty?” Magian bowed in homage after taking the customary three steps into the king’s presence. His formal wizard’s robes flowed around him, seeming to ripple in an otherwise unfelt breeze. The effect was, of course created by a spell he had learned from *The Book of Flesh and Mirrors*, one of the many prizes earned during his hunting quests. Simple but impressive when one wished to convey wizardry to non-wizards.

“Yes,” replied the king. “Your report of unrest in the Keldin Sector is disturbing. How reliable is the source of this information?” Pelanar wrapped his arm around Magian’s shoulder as the wizard approached. The two lowered their heads together and spoke quietly so as not to be overheard. Even the most secure rooms of any palace had ears.

“I would trust the man with my life, Sire. He has never been wrong and would never have sent such devastating news if he were not absolutely certain. The Dragon Lord is gathering his forces. He can only intend to strike across our border. We must prepare for an attack.”

The two climbed the steps of the dais to the throne. Pelanar sat and signaled for Magian to take the smaller but still ornate chair beside him. They leaned in and angled themselves to maintain the secrecy of the conversation.

“Why would Sar vat do something like this now? Our kingdoms have been at peace for many decades. We are no threat to him or his realm. It defies all reason.”

“Who can apply reason to the Dragon Lord, my Liege? If tales of him are even half true he is a demon and far from our human understanding. Perhaps he has deemed us weak and the time ripe to act against you. Or maybe he simply woke up with a toothache and wants to take out his anger on someone. Who is to say?”

“There must be something we can do, short of open warfare!” the king jumped to his feet, pacing the dais, his concern for secrecy forgotten in the moment. “Perhaps a diplomatic envoy can straighten out any misunderstandings with him.”

Magian hid a satisfied grin. His plan appeared to be working perfectly. “A daring idea, my King. The Dragon Lord is not reputed to be amenable to foreign dignitaries. We would have to send someone powerful enough to have a chance of surviving the mission. Someone with enough experience to deal effectively with him.”

The king stopped his pacing and turned to face Magian, who had stood as well, but remained still. “There is but one person alive who would have any chance of success. Only Ginhawk is powerful and wise enough to deal with Sar vat.”

Magian cultivated a look of grave concern to grow slowly as he nodded in agreement. “Yes, Ginhawk is certainly the only choice. None can rival his skill or battle experience. However, even he has never dared to challenge the Dragon Lord to single combat. And I have never heard of him choosing diplomacy over a fight. Are you certain of his wisdom in the manner of diplomacy? If I were to accompany the warrior on this quest, together we might combine our strengths and skills to either convince the Dragon Lord to turn once more to his former peaceful ways or defeat him in combat if necessary.”

Pelancar hesitated and appeared at first to decree outright refusal to allow his most trusted advisor and High Grand Wizard to risk his life on the mission. However, his reluctance was quickly replaced by resignation. “Of course, my friend. You speak with wisdom, to be sure. Ginhawk will need a powerful wizard at hand to deal with the demon’s magic. Even he might be no match for the red dragons if the legends are true. He will need all the strength and guidance we can provide him. Though it goes against my better judgement, you must be the one who goes with him. I only hope that between the two of you, the madman can be made to see reason.”

“I am sure we can avoid a war, Your Majesty.” Magian bowed low, using a dramatic flair of his cloak to hide his smile.

“It is decided, then.” Pelancar pulled the bell cord next to his throne and sat in a regal pose. The doors swung open and Dagon, Steward to the King, stepped forward. “Call for the royal scribes. We have a most grave matter before us and need to summon the mighty warrior Ginhawk.”

“At once, Your Majesty.” Dagon bowed stiffly and spun on his heels to do as commanded. In moments, three scribes appeared with their portable writing desks. They settled themselves and were ready to record the king’s message. There were always three so they could compare their writing afterwards to be certain no errors crept into their writing. From there, copies were made for the court clerk and the royal library in addition to those to be delivered.

Bratha woke slowly, relishing the soft light of what she determined must be early dawn penetrating her eyelids. But the wrongness of the sounds awoke her brain, and she startled the rest of the way to full alert, finding herself on a

cot in the medical tent, her ribs, head and three limbs all bandaged. The thin blanket fell from her shoulders as she bolted upright amid a flood of memories from the battle with the basilisks.

“Ahh, you’re awake. How do you feel?”

She jumped at the sound of Ginhawk’s voice and turned to face him. Realizing she was covered only by a thin bandage from the waist up, she grabbed at her blanket to protect her modesty.

“What are you doing here? Where am I?” Instantly chagrined at the ridiculousness of the question, she blushed a deep scarlet. “I mean, I’m obviously in the infirmary, I know that. I wasn’t expecting to find you hovering over me, that’s all.”

Suddenly she realized that, despite the bandages, all her movement caused no pain. She frantically began checking herself to be sure everything was as it should be.

“How long was I out? How badly was I hurt?” Memories of the fight against the basilisk flooded back into her consciousness. “How many others were...”

Ginhawk gently placed his hand on her shoulder and helped her lie back down, giving her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. He was not very good at reassurance.

“Easy now, Bratha. You’re alright. The healing potions have apparently completed their work. The doctor should be by soon to release you from here. You’ve been unconscious for two days. We can discuss the rest later.”

She shook off his hand and sat back up, making sure the blanket still covered her properly. “No! Now! Not later! What happened to the others? Are they alright?”

“Have it your way,” replied the warrior as he tried to wipe the worry and exhaustion from his face. “Your hunting party was very fortunate. Only two fatalities. Several were badly injured, but the doctor and Erol managed to heal all of them. You were the worst. It was

touch-and-go for a while, but apparently stupidity is hard to kill.”

He hesitated a second, noticing the look of shame that came over her face. Coughing slightly to try to cover his own chagrin at having said such a thing to her after she saved nearly her entire hunting party when nobody should have survived, he tried to make amends.

“I have never heard of anyone at your skill level taking on even one basilisk, much less two. At least not anyone who lived to tell the tale. You are quite the warrior, young lady. How much of the fight do you remember?”

Braitha’s disappointment vanished with the compliment, a smile growing on her face until she recalled the terrifying details of her encounter with the creatures. Her eyes grew wide and horrified at the realization at what should have happened to her. And even worse, she remembered what she had told Ginhawk when she first awoke from the anesthetic herbs after getting put back together again.

“Oh no, no, no, no!” her anguished groaning was muffled by her hands hiding her face.

Taken aback, Ginhawk tried to comfort her. “Come now, you should be proud of your accomplishment. Even I would think twice before taking on two of the beasts.” He reached out to give her a reassuring pat on the shoulder, but halted, noticing the blanket had slipped to reveal her near-naked condition.

Still hiding her face, she shook her head slowly. “No, I’m not talking about the basilisk.” She took a deep breath to calm her nerves before proceeding. “Did I really tell you I loved you... and call you my brave knight?”

“Ummm...” Now it was Ginhawk’s turn to be embarrassed. He had no real experience in matters like this. If truth be told, he would rather face half a dozen basilisks, armed with only a slingshot, than deal with the concept of love from an admittedly attractive young woman like

Bratha. His mind swirled trying to think of the proper response.

It was Erol who interceded, saving the day for both of them. “Little warrior, you were heavily sedated and probably dreaming. Anything you may have said out loud was only a reaction to the drug-enhanced random hallucinations of your unconscious mind. The healing herbs have done their job and your injuries are no longer a concern. You may be somewhat sore for another day or so until you work out the stiffness of being confined to your bed for so long, but you may dismiss them completely. You are free to leave and return to your own quarters as soon as you wish. But try not to battle any monsters for a few days. Farewell, brave warrior..”

He gave them both a confident chuckle and waved off their concerns as he felt Bratha’s forehead for fever and tested her pulse. However, as he turned to leave, he gave Ginhawk a barely noticeable frown, warning him not to pursue the matter further and to allow her the dignity of this excuse for her mutterings. Ginhawk understood and agreed with his own subtle nod. Their years together, often in extremely dangerous situations, allowed a deep understanding between them that required few, if any words to convey great meaning. Taking up the escape route, Ginhawk laughed and reached to the side table to pour Bratha a glass of water.

“Yes, Erol is right. You were mumbling up quite the storm of conversations, but nobody could understand more than an occasional word here and there. Certainly no proclamations of love toward anyone.” He watched her warily for signs of acceptance.

Gradually, Bratha’s breathing became more settled, and her hands dropped to her lap, only to take up the blanket and slowly cover herself again. She glanced sideways up at Ginhawk and took his measure. Deciding she could trust what he and Erol had said, she sighed in

relief and let out a nearly silent snicker. Taking the glass of water Ginhawk offered her, she took a long swallow while she gathered her thoughts. Handing it back, she readjusted herself on the cot and looked up into the warrior's face.

“Okay. I can live with that. I would never pay any attention to the ravings of someone under anesthesia, certainly not hold them accountable for anything they might say. So let's drop it all together. Agreed?” The last question came out as more of a plea for help than anything else.

“Consider it dismissed and forgotten entirely.” Ginhawk rose to his feet with a look of sudden realization and disgust at his clothing. He had not changed, or even left Bratha's bedside since his arrival. He absolutely needed a bath and a change.

“I will leave you now to settle things here. When we are ready, we will begin training with the new weapons you won. A small party returned last night with them. Be forewarned, though. They are powerful weapons and not to be trifled with until you are fully aware of their capabilities.” He gave her a smirking grin. “After all, I would not like to find you back in the hospital of your own doing.”

With a salute and quick bow of respect for her bravery and accomplishment, he spun on his heels and strode out of the tent.

Bratha let out a long sigh of relief. She relaxed noticeably on her cot. *Things are definitely going to be awkward around him for a while, she thought to herself. Neither of us believe Erol's cover story for us, praise the gods for his intervention, but it will do until we can both comfortably move on and let things get back to normal. Felking herbs. Why do the painkiller drugs always act as truth serums? I need to get my feelings for him under control.*

With a stretch to clear her mind and loosen sore muscles, Bratha tossed the blanket aside and began to dress. One of the orderlies stopped by to inform her of the doctor's orders to keep the bandages in place until tomorrow, just to be safe. A few minutes later she stepped out of the hospital tent into a beehive of frantic activity. She grabbed the first person who ran by close enough for her to reach.

“What the tark is going on? Are we under attack?”

The breathless individual hesitated for a second before responding. “Attack? No! A messenger from the king has just arrived. Ginhawk has been summoned to the palace immediately. Something big is happening.”

Without a second thought, Bratha took off at a run to the center of their camp, which looked far more like a small village since their arrival, where she found a small party of mounted men flying banners of the king's colors. One soldier on a large grey warhorse was handing a scroll to Ginhawk, announcing the orders in a loud and officious bellow.

“Let it be known to all present: The Knight Ginhawk is commanded by His Royal Highness, King Pelanar, to appear before him in the throne room of the palace in no less than three days. Do you agree, sir knight, to accept this charge placed before you?”

Reaching up to take the scroll, Ginhawk broke the wax seal of the king and read the proclamation. He then rolled up the parchment and tucked it under his belt and saluted the messenger with fist to his chest.

“I accept. I hereby swear to appear before the king in his throne room three days hence. Let all here witness this agreement.”

The formalities of the official exchange satisfied, the messenger returned Ginhawk's salute and wheeled his horse around, leading a charge out of the encampment.

Before the dust could settle, a crowd swarmed around Ginhawk. Questions flew at him from every corner until Captain Korna took charge, his voice booming from the edge of the throng.

“Alright, everyone. Back off now. Give the man some room. Everyone go back about your business. We will let you know what is going on as soon as we can. That’s an order!”

Slowly, the group scattered, and things returned to normal. Only Bratha remained, clutching herself, staring as Ginhawk and the Captain headed toward Korna’s quarters, their heads together talking quietly. She ran after them, breathing heavily due to the tightness of the bandages still wrapping her ribs. The two men heard her approach and halted just as all three reached the rough wooden structure that had replaced the Captain’s tent.

“Bratha, find Tals, Sett and Tagra and all of you join us here as quickly as you can. This involves both of you as well.” He and Ginhawk entered the building as Bratha took off to find First Officer Tal. In minutes, the small group returned and knocked on the Captain’s door before entering.

Captain Korna gestured for everyone to take a seat around a table in the center of his reception room. Not quite the comfort of his former captain’s quarters on the Equinox, but better by far than the cave or a tent. “Alright, Ginhawk, what the tark is all this about?”

Ginhawk cleared his throat and began. “Apparently there is some trouble on the border with the Dragon Lord, but we can talk about that later. What I have to tell you is of far greater immediate importance. HAL assures me that we can construct an android body for one of you to inhabit.”

The room erupted in an outburst of excited questions. Ginhawk held up his hands to quiet them. “I will get to your questions in a minute. But first, there is more

you need to know. We do not have the technological or engineering ability to replicate a brain for the android that can house the entirety of your engrams. Much of your emotional and more human, or in your case Chandran self would be lost. You would become more like my android HAL. Fully functional, able to mimic many emotional affects, and retain all of your self-awareness and intelligence, but the spark that separates you and me from a robotic being would be gone. I would not even bring this up, but HAL assures me that, with the help of one volunteer from among you, one who is practiced in the construction and programming of the sort of android brain you require, we can learn how it is done and make all future brains capable of being fully integrated with your entire engrams. But we cannot succeed without the expertise of one already familiar with the nuances of such a monumental feat. I am sorry, but if you wish to escape this simulation, I fear it is the only way.”

The room remained dead silent for a long while. Everyone coming to grips with the magnitude and consequences of the revelation just laid before them. Then, a small, timid voice spoke up.

“I guess that is why I am here.” Tagra stood up from her chair to address the others. “I was wondering why I was called to this meeting, but now it seems obvious, Captain. Of course I volunteer for this assignment.”

Captain Korna signaled for her to sit back down. “You misunderstand my intentions here, Tagra. I called you here as a consultant to help us find the best candidate for this job. Your qualifications as an engineer and robotics expert, first in your class at the academy and a specialist in android quantum neural structure theory make you the most qualified among us to choose someone.”

Twisting her hands in her lap, and staring blankly ahead, Tagra replied to Korna’s statement. “If that was all there was, then maybe you would be correct, Captain.

However, Sir Ginhawk is accurate in his assessment of the intuitive nature of an android's brain, at least one suited to our needs. A theoretical understanding of the processes involved, even a skilled engineering insight is not enough. I spent two years as a resident at the Chandran Robotics Institute, where I observed and participated in the transfer of living engrams to android constructs. I have successfully performed the delicate procedure on several occasions. Most residents at the institutes are unable to grasp the instinctual intricacies required to complete a fully functioning android brain. I am your only chance here. And, again, I volunteer."

Bratha rose and went to embrace the younger girl. "Are you sure about this? If what they say is true, you would never be able to regain the heart of what makes you, you. That part would be sacrificed and lost in the transfer."

A tear fell down Tagra's cheek as she held Bratha's embrace tight. "Yes. I know better than any of you here what must be sacrificed. I lost my partner and my parents when the Equinox was destroyed. I have no one to go home to if we are successful. If I can bring the rest of the crew home safely, I am glad to do this one thing for them." She pulled away from Bratha and turned to face the others.

The Captain stood and approached the young lieutenant, took her by the shoulders and peered deep into her eyes. "Tagra, I want to assure you that I had no intention of asking you here so you would do this thing. I honestly only wanted your input on the qualifications required for whoever might be needed."

"I know that, Captain. But that does not alter the fact that I am the only plausible candidate. You must see that."

"I do," said Korna.

Tal interrupted the conversation with a look of concern. "Lieutenant, you stress the importance of intuition and instinct to the success of creating a fully functional

quantum neural net. Are you certain that you will retain those capabilities in the aspects of yourself that will survive the transfer into the android the human has described?”

Tagra’s forehead wrinkled as she considered the vital question. “I cannot be certain, but yes, I believe that part of me will be part of the transfer. It is not an emotional component, despite how we generally describe it. It’s more along the lines of a working hypothesis based on experience and knowledge.”

The Captain stood back and saluted his lieutenant. “On behalf of the entire crew, I thank you. Your sacrifice will not be forgotten.” He helped Tagra back to her seat and addressed Ginhawk. “How long before you and your android are ready for the transfer?”

Ginhawk scratched the back of his head as he thought. “Another day should suffice. I can return to my lab and help HAL make all the preparations. Once we are ready I will return.”

“Good.” Replied Korna. “Once that is done we will have a full day to plan out who will join your quest to fight the Dragon Lord.”

“What? Now wait just a minute....”

Bratha interrupted the discussion and turned to face Ginhawk with fists firmly planted on her hips, leveling her most dangerous glare at him.

“If you think for a second that you are going anywhere on a quest this dangerous without me, then think again, sir knight.”

He started to argue but changed his mind when Bratha raised her eyebrows and set her feet, daring him to say one word against her. Even he knew better than to argue when Bratha took such a stand. Instead, he chose the path of least resistance.

“We will settle all this when I return. The important thing for now is to get the transfer ready.”

The next afternoon, HAL and Professor Kennan completed the final preparations and connected their android to the mainframe. The silvery metal and carbon fiber alloy humanoid device lay on the gurney, a helmet of electrodes and sensors covered its head, hundreds of wires connected to the nearby terminal. They had fashioned as close an approximation as they could to make the android's features as close to Tagra's appearance as possible, but it was still obviously a machine, even with the polymer covering in place to simulate muscle and skin.

HAL double-checked his calculations and readjusted the settings one last time. "Everything is in order, Professor. Time for you to let the Chandrans know we are set to transfer Tagra's engrams."

"Are you certain there is not a way to increase the neural capacity, HAL? Have we tried everything?"

"Yes, Doctor Kennan. We have surpassed the limits of everything our science thought possible. This design will open entire new industries and research opportunities in android construction thanks to the new instruction Tagra gave you, but it still falls far short of the Chandran capabilities. We have done our best."

HAL's simulated attempt at empathy only served to increase the professor's feeling of guilt for what he was about to do to another living person. It occurred to him that as recently as two years ago, he would not have thought twice about the chance to drive science forward. He gave a wry smile in recognition of how much more human he had become due to his interactions with the aliens, only to rip the humanity away from one of them.

Half an hour later, dressed again in his game simu-suit and reclining in the console chair, Dr. Kennan pressed the controls to send him into the game. He mounted Rigel, always present as a preset setting for his entry into the simulation, and spurred the warhorse into a full gallop. Ten

minutes later he entered the Chandran camp and leapt from his mount. The Chandrans were already gathered around the central firepit, each giving their thanks to Tagra during a somber celebration to acknowledge what she was doing for them all. He strode into the center of the group and stood at attention before Tagra.

“Are you ready?” He asked respectfully, extending one gauntleted hand.

“I am,” she answered.

Without looking back, she walked with Ginhawk, following him to the back of the cave where he and HAL had programmed another exit portal. The silent crowd followed. When they reached the back of the cavern, Tagra turned and nodded gravely to the others, then took a deep breath and set herself firmly.

“Let’s get this over with.” She said in a barely audible whisper.

Ginhawk gave a mental command to open the portal and a greenish electric glow appeared in front of them. On the other side they could see Dr. Kennan’s lab, HAL, and the gurney with the android lying death-like on its sheeted surface. Tagra set her jaw and stepped into the portal. Almost instantly, the android started to move as if it were breathing. The fingers of one hand began to move, shakily at first, but the proper coordination set in quickly as the hand and arm rose above the still prone figure. The android turned its head, eyes fluttering open to face the still open portal.

“The transfer is complete, I am here,” it said. “This will require some getting used to, but I believe I am fully functional.” The voice, though female, was not Tagra’s, but that could be remedied with some internal setting adjustments by Tagra herself once she acclimated to her new body.

“Welcome to Starfinder Station. My name is HAL. Are you integrated sufficiently to stand?” HAL extended one hand in a gesture offering assistance.

With a tilt of her head as she completed a self-analysis, Tagra sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the gurney. Her short paper hospital style gown, tied loosely along both sides, crackled with each movement.

“Thank you, HAL. My name is Tagra.” She took the proffered hand and stood up. After a few wobbly seconds of calibrating her internal gyroscopic stabilizers, Tagra released her grip on HAL’s hand and walked around the room, examining her new home.

Back in the cave, Ginhawk gave another mental command, closing the portal. Breathing a heavy sigh of relief, he turned to face the others.

“Alright now. Time to prepare for the king and our encounter with the Dragon Lord.”

Chapter Fourteen

“Father, you cannot be serious!” Alinor stormed into her father’s private quarters, arms flailing and temper ablaze. “Are you seriously raising forces to attack the Dragon Lord? Allendale and the Keldin Sector have been at peace for nearly a century. Whatever could have possessed you to do something so foolish?”

“You forget yourself, daughter. I may be your father, but I am also your king. If you cannot remember that, then I will have you removed and confined to your quarters to reflect on your place here.”

King Pelanar loved his daughter, but she could be infuriatingly insubordinate at times. She was incredibly intelligent, possessed of a powerful independent will, and had years of tutoring in many aspects of the kingdom’s governance in preparation for the day when she would have to fulfill her duty as the king’s sole heir. He knew she was not prone to hysterics. Her opinions were invariably based on solid ground and backed by evidence and precedents. He knew it was wise to listen to her counsel. But God’s Hooks, she could be exasperating at times.

Alinor stopped in her tracks, wide-eyed and open-mouthed before her face reddened and her fists clenched at her side as they had since she was a child. Her voice rose a full octave in outrage.

“You want to send me to my room without supper?!”

Pelanar raised one hand, pointing at her in caution. “Not another word, young lady. Or I might be tempted to throw you over my knee and paddle you. My word, child. You can be such a skelpie-limmer sometimes.”

Mere seconds before her temper exploded into its full fury, Alinor realized how this course of action could only back her father into a corner they would both regret.

She forced herself into calmness, regaining her composure with an effort, and unclenched her hand from the hilt of her ever-present sword.

“Now father, let’s be rational about this. You know I have my own informants and connections to our border lands. I have heard no such warnings about any actions in the Keldin Sector. No gathering of the Dragon Lord’s forces anywhere in his kingdom, much less threatening our borders. According to my intelligence reports, everything is as peaceful as it has been for decades. Sending an armed force there can only unbalance matters and cause Sar vat to respond in kind. Wouldn’t prudence dictate that you investigate the rumors quietly before committing to a course of action that could easily provoke a war?”

The king regained his calm with an effort. Alinor had always been a strong-willed, headstrong individual. A quality required in a sovereign, but terribly infuriating in a daughter.

“My sources say otherwise, Alinor. Magian has brought me reports of secret mass gatherings of military forces in Keldin. Well disguised, and keeping to remote locations, but with easy access to the border. I cannot afford to wait and see what they are up to. I must strengthen our fortresses and be prepared for a strike, which my intelligence reports say is imminent.”

“Reports provided by that yaldson Magian. I swear, father,” Alinor slammed a fist onto the table causing several pieces of fruit to bounce out of their bowls and roll to the ground. One of the palace dogs, fitfully sleeping by the hearth despite the commotion, jerked alert, giving a warning growl in its displeasure at being so rudely awakened. “I will never understand why you place so much faith in that charlatan. He should have been run out of the kingdom the day he arrived.”

Raising a warning finger in the air, Pelanar’s voice took on a threatening quiet tone, the one Alinor recognized

as a line being drawn that one only crossed at great peril. “I have told you before, daughter. Put aside your hatred of my chief advisor. He has proven his worth to me many times over. His power is great. Did he not save your life as well? Yet you repay his loyalty with anger and mistrust. God’s Hooks, girl. What more do you want from him as proof of his intentions?”

“One good deed does not undo a bevy of evil ones, father.” The princes softened her glare and took a deep breath to calm herself. She gave a warm smile and approached her father. “I know I am right about that man. All I ask is that you listen to my counsel in this matter before matters get out of hand and we find ourselves in a war nobody wanted.”

The king also recovered his composure and smiled warmly in return. “Of course, daughter. You know how much I value your counsel. Perhaps I will...”

A knock on the chamber door silenced their private conversation and both turned to face the king’s herald, dressed in his official royal colors of ornately embroidered green and gold, as he stepped through the doorway to make his announcement.

“The royal warder, protector of the kingdom, Ginhawk, and his entourage, Your Majesty.” With a flourish of his arm, the man stepped aside, allowing Ginhawk and the others to enter.

“Sire,” said Ginhawk with a dramatic bow, his ceremonial armor reflecting the light brilliantly. “I am here at your summons. Allow me to introduce my companions.” He waved the others forward.

“You are familiar with Erol, of course.”

“Of course. Welcome again, Sir Erol. I am glad to see you looking well.”

Erol gave a silent nod of his head in reply, having long ago given up correcting the king about his lack of any title deserving of ‘Sir’.

“The others you are not familiar with. May I present “Tal, Sett, and Bratha. All are strong fighters and companions eager to join this quest against the Dragon Lord.”

Each one in turn stepped forward, respectfully bowing to Pelanar before assuming an ‘at ease’ stance, hands clasped behind their backs.

“And this,” the king gestured toward Alinor, “is Alinor, my daughter and heir to the throne. A warrior in her own right, she will assist in our planning for this quest.”

Alinor gravely nodded her respects in return, but maintained a wary eye on Bratha. A sudden burst of jealousy rose in her gut, which she quickly fought down. “Welcome all. I am pleased to meet the friends of our mighty Ginhawk.”

The doors burst open suddenly, interrupting the introductions.

“Sire, I am sorry to be late, but...” Magian froze as he recognized his former crewmates in the room. He forced his face to remain stoic and not reveal the rising panic he felt at the unexpected arrival of such a threat to his position.

“Jyns! You’re alive!” Bratha cried out in shock. “We thought you were dead. The search parties followed your trail but lost it in the caverns. Where have you been?” She took a couple of steps in his direction, then halted, noticing the anger on his face.

Magian held up one hand to prevent any of his former crew from approaching. His warning glare held them to silence as he thought furiously about how to recover and provide a reasonable explanation to Pelanar and Alinor. With a Chandran hand gesture asking for patience and continued silence, he stepped toward the King and bowed.

“Your Majesty, I was unaware that any other than Ginhawk himself would be joining this quest.”

“Yes,” replied Pelanar. “I, too, was surprised, but any additional forces my warder sees fit to accompany him on such a pursuit are welcome indeed.” Pelanar cocked his head, his brows furrowed in confusion. “But why does this one call you by the name Jyns? Are you acquainted?”

Alinor, also appearing confused, questioned the court High Wizard. “Yes, magician, I too am curious to know how you are known to this woman and the others.” Her hand rested firmly on the hilt of her sword, ready for action if required.

Recognizing his dangerous position, Magian began what he hoped to be a plausible tale while giving the others another signal to stand down and wait for another time to ask questions.

“When I first arrived in Valendale I hoped to learn more about the people and the land, as well as the political situation as only the peasantry can know it. Therefore, I stopped along the way in various villages and talked with the common folk there. If I happened to come across others along the road, I would join them and often shared tales around their evening camps.”

He gave a sidelong glance at Bratha and the others to be sure they would not interrupt or dispute his story.

“These are some of the travelers I met during my travels. Of course, I always provided my new acquaintances with a false name to hide my true identity. Jyns is merely one of those assumed characters. Unfortunately, while I was with this particular group, we were attacked by a pack of Fenrir. During the battle, I was injured and separated from them and fell into a ravine. I awoke hours later, finding myself deep in a thicket of thornberries. Unable to find them after extricating myself from the tangle of branches, I assumed they had scattered and fled, or been killed by the Fenrirs. Alone, and missing many of my weapons, I thought it best to flee and seek safer terrain.”

He turned to face his former crewmates, signaling them to play along for now. “I am so glad to see you again, and unharmed. No need for any feelings of guilt. I feared the worst about you as well and chose to go on alone. But perhaps we should save our reunion for another time so as not to waste the king’s valuable time.”

Bratha took a half-step closer and opened her mouth to question Jyns’s story, but Tals gripped her by the arm gently to restrain her. A quick look at her commander’s stern visage forced her to remain quiet.

“We are glad to see you survived the attack, sir. Perhaps you are correct. We should continue our reunion at a later time.” Tals’s response to the former security chief left no doubt that he intended to learn what Jyns, now going by the name Magian, was up to.

Magian gave the slightest of bows to acknowledge Tals and their upcoming battle of wits regarding his new identity and plans for the future.

“Well then,” interrupted the King. “It seems we should press on so you and your old friends can reunite. In the meantime, it is a most grave concern which has forced me to call all of you into this council today. According to Magian, The Dragon Lord is preparing for an invasion. However, my daughter tells me that no such movements are known to her or her emissaries at the borderlands. I must task you with the mission to discover the truth and, if possible, put an end to Sar vat’s plans. Together I am certain we can devise a plan to end a terrible war before it has a chance to begin.”

Pelantar signaled to the others to gather around the large map table. “If any of you has anything to improve our strategy, do not remain silent. The Demon Lord is the most powerful being in this world, so all our voices must be heard if we are to have any chance of success.”

Two days later, the party of fifteen, with Erol scouting the way ahead, rode out of the palace into the soft

orange glow of early dawn. Ginhawk's companions surrounded the princess Alinor and her guard, Kel, who insisted he join them to help protect the royal heir. Magian and his companions, the ever-present Melnyk and five additional mercenaries recruited by Melnyk, brought up the rear. Each member of the group led an additional pack animal fully loaded for a long and arduous journey. Despite several efforts by his former crewmates to talk during the first day's journey, Magian continued to insist that it was neither the time nor place with so many ears to listen in on their conversation. There would be time to be alone once they set up camp that evening. But time was up and he had no more idea of how to explain away his return than ever, especially without exposing his plot to overthrow the king.

"A fine supper, Erol," Ginhawk belched his appreciation. "You have outdone yourself this evening."

Bratha and Alinor carefully blotted their chins and fingers with their napkins, Tals and Sett continued to savor an extra helping of the meat and tubers Erol had prepared. Magian's companions grunted, wiping their greasy mouths with their ragged sleeves.

Addressing Erol, Alinor gave a conspiratorial grin toward Ginhawk. "Perhaps I should try to steal you away and hire you as the royal cook, Sir Erol. This is by far the finest camp meal I have ever had the pleasure to consume."

Without so much as a glance, Erol politely declined. "I am Sir Ginhawk's man, Highness. Never been able to stand being cooped up indoors for long."

The group, with the notable exception of two of Magian's mercenaries, continued a cordial, if superficial, conversation during the meal, but settled into an uneasy silence as darkness fell. Magian studiously avoided eye contact with Tals, Bratha, and Sett for as long as he could before relenting and standing to approach their side of the fire. He froze in mid-step when a loud crack sounded from the forest beyond the reach of the firelight.

The entire camp went deathly silent at the noise, Even breathing seemed to be too loud in Sett's ears. Tals and Bratha reached for their bags of holding where they carried their store of weapons. Magian peered back over his shoulder at his staff, which he left leaning against the tree where he had been sitting. He estimated the distance to be at least fifteen feet. A terrible mistake. Ginhawk drew his sword and set his warrior stance while Erol nocked an arrow silently into his bow. The mercenaries held up their rusted swords, their eyes darting nervously around the perimeter.

Another crack sounded in the blackness beyond, only now from the opposite side of the camp. This was followed by a chattering noise, as if two rough stones rubbed together. The rustling of underbrush and low-hanging tree limbs came from all around.

"Razor scorpions! We're surrounded!" Ginhawk hissed to the others. "What happened to the sentries? Magian, those were your men. Why didn't they give warning?"

The wizard held his hands wide and shrugged, hissing back his hushed reply. "How am I supposed to know? They probably ran off or got themselves killed." He began to ease his way back toward his staff.

"What is a razor scorpion? How do we fight it?" Bratha asked as she crept next to Ginhawk.

Turning slowly, Ginhawk held his sword at the ready as he surveyed their surroundings. "Very large scorpions, around eight feet long. Their tail is poisonous, but also razor sharp. They can easily slice through unenhanced armor. Even enhanced armor can only take a few hits before failing. They are extremely fast and usually hunt in small packs. I've fought them before, but never more than three."

Tal, stone-faced and gripping a lance, called out quietly. “This sounds like somewhat more than three. How many do you estimate are out there?”

“I count five, possibly six. They are about to attack.” Erol reset his battle stance and raised his bow, drawing it and sighting down the arrow’s shaft, looking for a target.

Princess Alinor drew her sword and took a stance next to Ginhawk.

“Your Highness,” protested her guards. “You cannot do this. Let us retreat to someplace where we can protect you better.”

“No!” she glared at them. “I will not hide while others risk their lives. Stand with me or go hide yourselves. I will remain here and fight with the others.”

Without losing his focus on the forest edge, Ginhawk released his grip on the mighty flaming sword with one hand and extended it, pointing toward a nearby rock outcropping. “Listen to your guards, Princess. I admire your bravery, but your weapon is useless against razor scorpions. Their carapace is far too thick. Those rocks should provide at least some cover for you.”

“But...”

“No, Alinor. This is not the time. I cannot fight the monsters and keep a watchful eye on you at the same time. Go now. Before it is too late.”

Alinor glared at the warder, but reluctantly gave in to her guards continuing protestations and allowed them to hide her in a crevasse in the rocks. Even so, she refused to sheath her sword and held it at the ready.

Erol let an arrow fly at the next rustling of branches and there was an ear-shattering scream followed by a wild and tree-snapping thrashing in the dark. Within seconds one of the monstrous scorpion-like creatures burst from the forest and charged, only to die with a violent crash, a poison-tipped arrow protruding from its eye socket. Before

Erol could notch another arrow, the remaining four razor scorpions launched themselves at the troop. Ginhawk let out a mighty battle cry as he charged a pair of the beasts, his flaming sword in full blazing glory above his head.

Tals, Sett, and Bratha faced the smallest of the monsters as they assumed the modified Chandran fighting stance they had practiced for exactly this situation. Tals twirled his Fangtian lance, a double-bladed long-handled staff-like weapon whose blades were carved from ancient dragon scales by powerful wizards using a craft now lost to antiquity. Sett reached into his bag of holding and removed several spiked metallic spheres. He had forged these and filled them with a highly refined and much more powerful black powder to use as hand grenades. Each was designed to explode its deadly projectiles in a single, narrow path so as to not endanger the thrower. This usually meant the soldier would toss the grenade underneath his target where it would settle in such a way to direct the blast upward, not spray randomly. Bratha loaded her dragonsbane crossbow with one of the Sunshard arrows supposedly capable of piercing anything short of a greater-dragon's scales and spreading a burning chemical inside the wound. Her belt held an array of life-drinking daggers and missile blades, each capable of extensive damage to even creatures as large as these, if they were aimed true at less protected areas, eyes, joints, mouth, and similar regions. Bratha could pit a Thornberry fruit at twenty yards. Of course it did help that the weapons themselves were enhanced to increase their accuracy.

Magian and Melnyk stood back-to-back, unsupported by their mercenaries, who fled. Screams from the darkness told them that there was indeed a sixth monster out there, pursuing their companions. Magian chanted the words to activate his magi's staff's full powers and it glowed with an intensity that was hard to look at. Melnyk hefted his brimstone mace, a grim-looking flanged

mass of iron that appeared to be too large to make a practical weapon, but one which he wielded almost effortlessly.

The razor scorpions attacked with a speed and agility that seemed unbelievable in creatures so large. Ginhawk's blazing sword carved massive chunks from the scorpions' carapace, but they continued to steadily, relentlessly, press him back. Erol's fingers danced as they snatched the next arrow from his quiver. Dodging the lightning-fast stabs from the beasts' massive stingers, he loosed his arrows in a continuous stream of fire. Some of the arrows struck home, but many merely skipped off the monsters' thick exoskeletons. None slowed down the attackers.

The Chandrans, in their desperate stand, had a slight advantage as they spread out to surround their assailant. The monster no sooner turned to face Tals with his lance when Bratha fired one of her frost bolts, striking home in a joint directly behind the large claw of its right front. The freezing effect of the bolt grew ice crystals around the joint, preventing it from snapping at the group.

"Take cover!" Sett shouted as he tossed one of his grenades underneath the beast. The explosion, directed straight up as intended, shattered the claw like a rubber ball in liquid nitrogen.

At the same time, Tals swung his Fangtian lance, slicing through three-quarters of the scorpion's left hind leg. He swung the blade free and continued his evasions of the attack darting in and out of reach as if dancing around the monster's legs. The scorpion lurched, howling and chittering in pain and rage as greenish-yellow ichor poured from the wounds. A foul, acrid stench filled the air.

"Tals, stand back!" Sett tossed two more of the grenades as he called out, diving behind a boulder for cover. The explosions ripped large pieces of the scorpion's exoskeleton free, but the beast continued to fight. A deep,

rumbling chitter became mixed with a loud clicking of the rough edges of the scorpion's now broken carapace rubbing together when it moved.

Magian's staff, meanwhile, blinded his attacker as Melnyk landed a crushing blow with his mace to the tail of the monster, nearly severing it from the body and rendering it useless as a weapon. Dazed and in agony, the scorpion snapped wildly with its claws, narrowly missing Magian as he dove underneath the deadly thrust, losing concentration on the staff. In that moment, the creature spun and attempted to grab Melnyk. Only the mace, held horizontally and catching the claw holding it open, prevented Melnyk from being crushed in its grip.

"God's hooks, Magian!" screamed Melnyk as he was flung mercilessly held tight in the massive claw. "Quit yer grovelin' in the dirt, ya yaldson. Kill this hell-hated wagtail!"

Magian mentally cursed his own stupidity and clumsiness as he rolled and struggled to his feet out of reach of the flailing scorpion. Recovering his feet, Magian tried to recall a spell which would allow his staff to defeat such a formidable opponent, but when the beast's eyes focused on him and started toward him, Magian forced his entire will into the staff, commanding it to kill. A powerful orange beam disintegrated the scorpion's head and it collapsed, spasming to the ground. Melnyk pried himself loose and started to join the fight against the remaining three monsters.

"Hold back!" commanded Magian as he reached out to grab Melnyk's shoulder. "Maybe these animals will solve our problems for us." The two men stood back, ready to defend themselves if the tables turned on them. For now, they simply observed the struggle and backed up into the protective cover of the nearby trees.

"Well struck, Erol!" cried Ginhawk as one of the scorpions collapsed with only three remaining legs and a

long, red-shafted arrow protruding from each of its compound eyes.

“Do you need help here, Sir Ginhawk, or should I give aid to the others?” Erol took stock of Ginhawk’s battle and saw it was almost over.

“I have this one in hand, Erol. The others look like they are doing well, but they may need your help if anything goes wrong.” The warrior continued his stalking dance around his severely maimed and struggling opponent, a great smile gleaming on his ichor-smeared face. The scorpion had lost its tail and one claw, the second barely functional as anything other than a club, and it now had but four fully operating legs, the other four either missing or horribly damaged. Pools of the yellow-green ichor lay on the ground beneath the razor scorpion as it barely held off the powerful flaming sword. Behind him, Ginhawk heard a loud clanking thump of armor.

“Blecs, felking tark!” Bratha sang out.

With a sudden surge of alarm, Ginhawk scowled and charged. His blade sliced through the scorpion’s mandible and two-thirds down its head. Twisting the fiery sword, he carved out a massive piece of the monster’s head, finishing his stroke with a slice to remove the remaining claw. Ginhawk spun and started to rush toward his companions before the behemoth finished its lifeless collapse to the ground. He halted after three strides and gaped, dumbfounded at the scene before him.

“That felking tark dented my new chest plate! I thought this metal was supposed to be indestructible.” Bratha, trying to pry her armored chest plate free from her ribs, was berating Sett who, with hands defensively held up before him, carefully backed away from the enraged woman.

“I said *nearly* indestructible. Something that powerful nullifies all bets of the matter.” Sett bumped into

a tree in his retreat, his eyes pleading for help from the others.

Ginhawk stepped forward, marveling at the scene. The final razor scorpion lay dead, two frost bolts and three Sunshard bolts protruding from it, two missile blades and one life-drinking dagger stuck in its eyes. He heard the argument between Sett and Bratha grow.

“I can fix the damage, Bratha. I just can’t get over how you managed to aim those last three knives all at once, while you were in midair. That was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. The physics involved in such a thing are staggering.”

She raised one fisted hand to strike at Sett but bent over wincing in pain as her action caused the deep dent to stab at her ribs even harder. “Get this felking thing off me!” she gasped, trying to reach the buckles holding it in place.

“Well done, my friends!” Magian called out as he and Melnyk approached the others from the shadows. “We tried to help our companions, but they were already dead by the time we found them. The final scorpion seems to have slunk off into the deep forest. We could not find it, so we decided to return and aid you in this battle. Alas, you vanquished them all just as we arrived.”

He took stock of the surviving party, hiding his disappointment that all remained intact, when he spied Princess Alinor exiting the fissure in the rocks a few feet to his left.

“Princess! I am so glad you are unharmed. We are lucky to have such fierce warriors among us.”

Alinor strode to Magian and leaned in to whisper in his ear.

“I saw you slinking off into the shadows, magician.” She practically spat the term in derision. “You dispatched the monster confronting you with ease, yet you and your knave hid while the others fought desperately against their foes. Only a coward, or a traitor, would

behave so cravenly. I will be watching you closely. My father will know of your treachery.”

She then turned her back on Magian and Melnyk put on a brave smile and went to congratulate the others on their hard-fought victory.

Magian’s mind ranted furiously inside while maintaining a calm facade. *That woman will be a thorn in my side unless I find a way to dispatch of her soon. Her death would serve wonderfully as a means to work my way even closer to her fool father’s confidence, but I must be smart about it—and extremely cautious. Not a hint of any malevolent intentions until the moment is ripe to strike. The rest of the group must not be allowed to have any suspicions about her death. It must appear completely natural. But I will know. Yes, I will know, and my dreams will be ever so sweet.*

As the companions gathered around the scattered remains of their campfire, Erol settled down to rebuild the fire and gather up the scattered remnants of the evening’s meal. Alinor’s guards joined Tals in collecting new wood for the fire. Sett carried Bratha’s damaged armor to a nearby fallen tree to begin his repairs. Ginhawk surveyed the party and took notice of Bratha grimacing as she tried to move her arm and shoulder.

“Come here,” he called to her, motioning for her to join him. “Let me take a look at your injuries.”

Bratha approached and Ginhawk probed her side, shoulder and back with expert healer fingers. Alinor walked over to the pair and saw the embarrassed blush growing on the girl’s face.

“Perhaps it would be better if I examined her, Sir Knight. It would appear some of her injuries are located in areas not suitable for a man to explore so thoroughly.”

“But princess, I...” Ginhawk looked up from his work indignantly.

“No buts, sir. I have been trained in the healer arts as well as you. I will deal with this matter. You can help repair the campsite.” She put a protective arm around the shorter woman and led her off to one side, away from the others where they would have more privacy.

Another loud crack and angry chittering bellowed from the darkness just beyond the growing light of the reborn campfire. Two large, faceted eyes, and six smaller eyes between them, reflected the orange glow as if born in fire themselves. The last of the razor scorpions, the one Magian had claimed was nowhere to be found, leapt into the camp and charged Alinor and Bratha.

At the same moment, a spinning blade of searing fire flew close over the heads of the women and buried itself with a searing crunch into the brain of the beast. The scorpion collapsed to the ground dead, skidding to a halt only feet from where the women stood frozen in shock. Ginhawk shoved past Alinor and Bratha, yanked his weapon out of the giant arachnid, swung it again and lopped off its head, cutting effortlessly through the tough exoskeleton protecting the neck.

He turned, breathing heavily, with a terrified worry in his eyes. “Are you two alright?”

Regaining her royal composure, Alinor raised herself to her full height and acknowledged the warrior’s actions with the most arrogant disregard she could muster. “Yes, we are fine, sir knight. Thank you for dispatching this rude creature for us. You should now withdraw so I can examine my patient in private.”

Bratha started to protest, but a conspiratorial wink from Alinor changed her temper from a near explosion, to forcing her to stifle a girlish giggle. She too assumed her best nonchalant demeanor.

“Thank you, princess. Men mean well, but sometimes they are just in the way.”

Ginhawk stood gaping at his dismissal as the women disappeared behind the corpse he had just vanquished to save their lives. He raised his blade menacingly at Bob, the treasure troll who scampered away before he could begin his standard congratulatory scripted speech. Ginhawk hefted the two large chests of their reward for winning the battle and hauled them back to the inviting and merrily crackling fire, muttering under his breath something about ungrateful women which the rest of the troop chose to ignore.

Chapter Fifteen

Tagra continued her self-analysis of the new android body she inhabited. Cerebellar-simulating functions were learning quickly, and her balance improved with every step around the Starfinder lab. She performed diagnostic checks on the dozens of enhanced features the android form offered for her vision, hearing, and other sensory inputs. Each one performed well within specifications.

She examined herself in a holographic mirror-projection to study her new body and to verify her control over it. “This body will prove satisfactory for what we must accomplish. It exceeds my previous expectations of its capabilities. However, I will need to make a few adjustments to the external features. You did well in copying my physical appearance, but a few alterations are needed to look more precisely like me.”

She froze in place, cocked her head, and began a series of voice modulations, refining the tone, pitch, and overall quality of the sounds until she was satisfied.

“That is much better. Now I sound like myself.”

“I am glad you are pleased with our efforts to provide you with a suitable body, Tagra. We can certainly make any alterations you require. I only had one or two images from Dr. Kennan to work with, and this is my first attempt at building a replicant android.” HAL stood to one side, observing her efforts to fine tune the programming to suit her needs. “Are you feeling any discomfort or disorientation at the loss of emotional input?”

She blinked once as she processed the question in a millisecond, then lifted her hands to stare at them. “How strange. I know I used to have emotional responses and feelings, but I am having trouble integrating those memories into this body’s synthetic mind. Do you think it may be one of the limitations of its primitive matrix?”

She touched her new face with her fingers, noting the texture, temperature, and a thousand other inputs, but could detect none of the feelings associated with the sensations she knew existed in her previous living body. She recognized that something important was missing but could not produce any feelings that she had once taken for granted related to loss. Her eyes flitted from one corner of the room to another as if trying to identify the something that was missing.

“Yes, I believe the lack of feelings you are experiencing is one of the limitations you will discover in this android body. Without the skills or knowledge of the Chandrans, this was the best I could produce. I am sorry if it causes you any discomfort. However, I am certain the differences will be negligible.” HAL studied Tagra, watching for signs of any malfunctions related to her awakening a non-Chandran humanoid.

Tagra’s features remained completely undemonstrative, and she again blinked in the curious way she had of processing information. “I am not experiencing any discomfort,” she replied. “Merely a distant sense that I have forgotten or lost something important but cannot remember precisely what it was. Such an odd sensation. It is fading now, so I will be fully functional momentarily. But you are wrong, HAL. The differences between this artificial form and a true android are definitely not negligible and could prove difficult to overcome.”

“I assure you, Tagra, this new body is...”

“Is a crude form any first-year student at the robotics institute could construct with their eyes closed.” Tagra shook her head and stepped to the nearest computer terminal. “Let me show you something, HAL.” She typed a few instruction codes into the terminal, closed her eyes for a moment before initiating a holovid display.

“I do not see the relevance...”

“Just watch the video, HAL. It will explain what I am trying to convey to you.”

The video resolved into a scene on the Chandran home planet. People strolled through a market occasionally stopping to smell some flowers or taste a sample of some delicacy from one of the vendors. Couples laughed at each other’s stories, an elderly individual sat quietly on a bench, sadness filling his features as he apparently recalled something difficult from his past. Overhead, vehicles of varied sizes and alien designs silently traversed the sky. After a few minutes, the video went black.

Tagra watched HAL as he replayed the scene in his perfect memory.

“I still do not understand what this scene has to do with our discussion of androids.”

Tagra held up one finger to make her point. “You didn’t notice anything unusual?”

“No,” he replied. “The scene, although of an alien world, seemed perfectly normal.”

Tagra placed a still artificial looking smile on her face. “I calculated at least fifteen percent of the individuals you witnessed there were androids.”

HAL replayed the images several times in his mind before responding. “But they all demonstrated perfectly natural humanoid emotional responses. There was nothing artificial in their actions. Remarkable!”

“Now you understand.” Tagra stood facing HAL with a blank expression. “A true Chandran android neural network contains every aspect of the person’s mental capacity. Their entire emotional and psychic range is fully transferred. For all practical purposes, they are the same individual, only inhabiting an artificial body.”

Tagra again cocked her head in a gesture of curiosity. “You are an android, yet you have referenced several emotional concerns in our brief discussion. How is

that possible? I had not expected you to have any understanding of humanoid emotions.”

HAL grinned as he responded. “My programming gave me the ability and proclivity to mimic human emotional responses to help alleviate any feelings of loneliness due to lack of living companions in my human counterparts. It has proved extremely useful on many occasions, especially with difficult humans like Professor Kennan. You should be able to locate and access the same program file in your database.”

“This form,” she waved both hands in front of herself, “is a very crude approximation of what we have accomplished. But it will have to do. I was willing to make this sacrifice for the sake of my crewmates.”

HAL gave her a nearly perfect simulation of concerned reassurance. “I am certain we will be able to improve your emotional responses, given time and your expertise.”

Tagra’s eyelids fluttered as she searched for the simulated emotional response file. Once accessed, she downloaded it into her consciousness. A second later, she smiled. Somewhat awkwardly at first, but she quickly learned the correct ‘muscles’ to activate and her entire face beamed. “How is this?”

HAL replied with a more subtle smile. “Well done, Tagra. You learn quickly. It will require some practice to master, but I suspect your memories of your former life will help immensely. Do you have access to your memory files on android neurostructure?”

“Yes. May I see your station’s warehouse manifests? I would like to see if all of the required materials are available.”

“Of course. Let me send you the files.” HAL stepped to one of the control stations and typed in a few commands. “You should now be receiving them.”

“Stars!” she exclaimed with a look of delight growing on her face. “This is amazing. So much more efficient than reading pages of information.”

HAL scratched his head in mimicry of puzzlement. “I agree. It is a wonder that humans, and I suppose Chandrans, ever accomplish anything with so much time taken up by reading the relevant data before being able to do anything important. I also see that you are integrating appropriate language patterns with your simulated emotional responses. Very good. It took me months of interaction to become proficient.”

“Thank you, HAL. I merely cross reference my former memories with the new files and they seem to be incorporating nicely into my subconscious routines. Thank you for the suggestion.” She provided HAL with a seamless and very natural appearing expression of gratefulness which was quickly replaced by one of deep concern.

“What is wrong?” HAL returned the appearance of uneasiness.

“It would seem your mineral supplies are far short of the required amounts of iridium. You will need to increase your supply at least a hundred-fold if we are to make enough of the organometallic compounds necessary for a proper brain for the androids my crewmates will inhabit.”

“That was not in the files you provided me for the construction of your new body. I am afraid iridium is an extremely rare element, particularly here on Dysnomia. Even Earth has only limited supplies. Certainly not enough to meet the levels you specify.”

Tagra gave a nearly perfect simulation of frustration as she rolled her eyes and sighed. “Of course, I didn’t send that information to you. Iridium-based organometallic compounds are only necessary for construction of the more nuanced neuropathways of a Chandran android encephala. You do not possess the qualifications for such a skilled

construction, so I did not use up any of the band width with useless information.”

“I agree.” HAL responded after a millisecond’s consideration. “However, much greater concentrations of iridium are found in asteroids. Many small remnants of asteroids were captured by Eris’s gravity field and are in nearby orbit. Perhaps one of our surface construction drones could be modified to locate and excavate sufficient quantities of rock for extraction and refinement of the metal.”

Tagra’s eyes began to glisten as she licked her lips in simulated anticipation. She reached for a sleeve to reflexively adjust it when her eyes shot open wide, her hands redirecting to an attempt at modesty. “Perhaps we should locate some proper clothing for me before we begin reprogramming the drone.”

HAL’s arched one eyebrow with a creased forehead of concern. “Are you cold? That should not be possible?”

“No,” she said. “But I do retain enough of my former memories to know that being naked in front of others is inappropriate.” Her artificial mind tried to summon an actual feeling of embarrassment, but there was nothing. Her hands fidgeted with the fit of her paper gown. The continued sense of something missing gnawed at the edges of her consciousness.

HAL gestured for Tagra to follow him to the station crew quarters. “Yes, I am familiar with the taboo in human culture as well. We should be able to find something appropriate for you to wear in one of the former female staff living quarters.”

An hour later, much to HALs confusion over the apparent difficulty in choosing items of clothing, Tagra emerged from the bedroom attired in an only slightly misfitting outfit of slacks, long-sleeved shirt with a floral pattern, sturdy, but fashionable shoes, and one crystal earring dangling from her left earlobe.

“What do you think?” She asked with a twirling turn.

HAL’s face furrowed in concern. “I do not understand the question.”

Tagra tilted her head slightly as she considered his response. “Do you like this outfit? I almost came out in the first thing I tried on, but, after seeing myself in the mirror, I felt a sense of discomfort and decided to put on something else. It took several attempts to make the discomfort go away. My question to you seemed like the appropriate thing to say when I saw you.”

“Strange,” replied HAL. He noted that she did not make eye contact and her gaze shifted rapidly from one thing to the next, A very un-android-like reaction, it was reminiscent of the human response to anxiety. He decided it was merely a side-effect of her recent transfer and would subside with time but made a sub-file in his memory to note any continued unusual reactions. “The professor never asked that question, and certainly never required so much time to dress himself. However, if you require an answer, then yes. I find the combination of colors and patterns to be aesthetically compatible with each other and suitable for the task we are about to undertake.”

Tagra smiled shyly. “Thank you. We should get started now.”

As they returned to the mechanical lab, the pair passed by a window to Dr. Kennan’s office. Reclining in the gaming chair and attired in full Simu-suit with visor and sensogloves, sat the professor himself, still immersed in the game simulation. Tagra paused and stood watching through the window.

“Is that his true appearance?”

HAL stepped alongside her and peered in as well. “Yes, that is Dr. Anthony Kennan in his true form. Of course, it is difficult to see his features now, but he should leave the simulation in another few days or so and you will

meet him then. The human mind cannot remain too long inside the game or they risk damage to their cerebral functions. The distinction between reality and simulation becomes too difficult to separate. There have been reports of individuals so addicted to the fantasy world that they can no longer function in this world.”

Tagra showed concern again. “He has spent many days with us, teaching and assisting our efforts to make the best of our situation. Will he suffer from his time with us?”

HAL placed a comforting hand on Tagra’s shoulder. “No, he will be fine. Time apparently operates differently in the simulation. What may appear like a week to the one who is immersed is, in reality, only a couple of days here. He will emerge well before any damage to his mind can be done.”

Tagra nodded and turned to continue down the hallway.

In two days, amid the mess of discarded parts strewn everywhere in the mechanic’s bay, the drone was finished. Retrofitted with small booster rockets to overcome Dysnomia’s minimal gravity field, and with an assortment of drills and storage compartments, the once sleek robot now had somewhat of a junkyard dog appearance. Everything worked as it should, but the androids had decided to forgo form for function. The final downloading of databases to enable the drone to locate and extract the proper minerals was completed and they escorted the metal monstrosity to the surface for launch.

Tagra stepped out onto the airless surface cautiously, engaging her pseudogravity boots to keep from propelling herself into orbit. “This is extraordinary. My memories all recall how deadly this should be without proper protection of a spacesuit.”

“You do not have to move your mouth to speak with me, Tagra.” HAL reminded her with a grin. “Your mental transmissions are perfectly clear.” He tapped a few

buttons on the control pad to maneuver the drone through the airlock and double checked the trajectory program.

Tagra stopped her examination of the robot's structural integrity and cast her eyes downward, fidgeting with her fingers in apparent embarrassment. "Yes, of course. This is all very new and strange. I should have known better."

"No need for apologies. I was merely relaying information. We should continue to use normal vocalizations when inside the facility so as to not be rude to Dr. Kennan. He can harbor feelings of exclusion if we communicate in ways that he cannot perceive."

"Of course," replied Tagra. "I will add this information to my memory banks. Everything is operating within prescribed norms. Are you ready for launch?"

With a final flurry of activity on the keyboard, HAL observed the rapid flurry of displays hovering in the air above the device and gave a satisfied smile. "Yes, we are ready"

The two androids retreated to the airlock and back into the station where they stood watching the modified robot through a nearby window. HAL pressed the holographic button and, in a blast of dust and debris the boosters, the robot shot into the black star-filled sky, vanishing in less than a minute.

"Trajectory is nominal. At its current acceleration rate, the device should reach the target in ten hours. Collection and preliminary refinement will require another seven days to obtain a sufficient quantity of the iridium mineral. Due to the orbital path of the asteroid, the return journey will take fourteen hours. I estimate another five days for our lab here to complete the refinement process. Do you concur?" HAL handed the tablet to Tagra who, with her computer-enhanced artificial brain, swept through the calculations in seconds.

“Yes. I concur. We should begin construction of the android bodies for the rest of my crew. I have several improvements I would recommend for your fabrication lab. We should be able to increase efficiency of the power supply by sixteen percent and produce a more life-like outer covering.” She gave HAL an almost apologetic glance. “I mean no disrespect. Your fabrication of this body was precisely according to my instructions and performs admirably. However, there are a few aspects of the process that, as we have discussed before, are more of an art form than technical engineering. Only an experienced Chandran roboticist is capable of the intricacies involved.”

The next morning Tagra heard the pattering of feet down the corridor outside the fabrication lab. She left the shelves of parts she was organizing to investigate when Dr. Kennan appeared in the doorway, still dressed in his simu-suit and carrying his visor. His hair was a disheveled mess.

Tagra gave the professor an appraising look, arms planted on her hips, Disappointment grew on her face. “Well, you certainly don’t look like Ginhawk the great warrior in real life.”

Dr. Kennan straightened up and ran one hand through his hair, trying to get it under control, while the other tugged at the simu-suit to work out the wrinkles. “And you, Miss Tagra, do not look exactly like yourself either, if I may say so.”

A thousand witty retorts ran through Tagra’s artificial mind in less than a second, but just as quickly, she decided he was correct and dismissed the thoughts. She turned to go back to the preparations for building the first set of replacement bodies.

We are almost ready to begin assembly of the android bodies,” she said matter-of-factly. “HAL is collecting the last of the raw materials to make the necessary improvements to the external covering. He should return momentarily.”

“I am happy you came through the transition in good shape, Tagra.” The professor scrutinized her with the well-honed observation skills of a trained scientist. “Is your new... situation adequate for your needs? Any difficulty adjusting to any of it?” He was momentarily struck by his actual concern and empathy for another being, attributing the change in attitude to his time with the Chandrans in the game.

Her left-hand little finger spasmed once and she spun to face her inquisitor, pausing when she saw HAL standing silently behind the human. Tagra’s demeanor flashed instantly from threat assessment to conversational calm. “I am entirely functional, Dr. Kennan. Hello, HAL. Come in. We have much to do.”

“I will assist you in a minute, Tagra. There are a few things of importance I must discuss with Dr. Kennan about his mission here at Starfinder Station which have developed while he was in the simulation. And I must prepare a meal for him since he must be hungry after such an extended stay.” He placed a gentle but firm grip on Kennan’s shoulder, pulling him back toward his office with a wordless insistence. “Come, Professor. We must get you changed and fed. I have an important message to relay from Dr. Fairall.”

His attention, now diverted by HAL, he resumed his usual cantankerous nature. “That old meddler? What does he want? Probably cutting my budget again. Well, I won’t have it! I’ll give him a piece of my mind once and...”

“You should listen to the message Professor. It concerns the Chandrans.” HAL led Dr. Kennan into his office and called up the holoivid recording. “We received this yesterday.”

The blurry image resolved itself into the smiling face of Dr. Jack Fairall, Chairman of Advanced Astrophysical Research Corporation, and holder of the purse strings to all of Starfinder Station’s operations. He

wore an exceptionally fine tailored suit and at least three senior officials of AARC could be seen, if distantly, in the background.

“Anthony! My old friend! We were all astounded at your revelation of the alien spaceship you discovered. This may prove to be the single most important scientific discovery in the history of mankind! Imagine. One of our oldest questions finally answered. You are to be congratulated, my boy. Your name...”

Dr. Kennan paused the recording, glaring at the frozen image. He pounded his fist into his palm. “Old friend? My boy? It took you long enough to even open my message to you about this. I’ll bet you only wanted to make sure no corporate secrets were in danger before you deleted it and left me to rot out here in the wilderness.”

“Please, Professor, listen to the rest of the message. It is vital you hear what comes next. It may endanger all of our efforts to save the Chandrans.”

“What are you talking about? How can that old windbag endanger the Chandrans?”

“Finish the recording, Professor, you will see.” A service bot hovered into the room with a tray of sandwiches and fortified drinks. HAL picked up the tray and set it on Dr. Kennan’s desk in front of him.

Dr. Kennan snatched one of the sandwiches and took a bite, grumbling under his breath as he resumed the hologram.

“... will go down in history, along with AARC, of course. Now listen. Something of this magnitude must be handled with the utmost delicacy. No telling how people might react to the news of aliens nearby. Do we even know their intentions? What if they are hostile? What if they want to share incredibly advanced technology with us? AARC would want to ensure we have first access to anything like that, wouldn’t you agree? After all, it is OUR discovery. We have to...”

He nearly spat out the mouthful of orange-flavored drink he had started to swallow. “OUR discovery? OUR discovery?” Has he gone mad? *I* discovered the ship, not him! Not anyone else in that lousy corporation. Why I have a good mind to...”

“Please, Professor,” insisted HAL. “Listen to the entire communication before you decide anything.”

Forcing his outburst back down but continuing to grumble, Dr. Kennan resumed the recording.

“...be very careful with this one. We can’t afford to let the public, or anyone, get their hands on it before we lock in our proprietary interests. There is a fortune to be had here, an absolute fortune. Therefore, I am issuing a security Alpha communications blackout on everything related to this breakthrough. All of your communications must be alpha level encoded and directed to me alone.”

“I am also redirecting a team from the Enceladus mission to join with you on Starfinder Station. The team will consist of five additional scientists, and two AARC officials who will direct the entire operation once they arrive. They launch in one week in a special experimental ship that will make the journey in only one year. Due to the extreme accelerations involved, the entire crew will remain in hypersleep until two days out from you. Until then, we will create an entirely new division here to advise you on how to proceed, as well as build an airtight security around the news until we are prepared to release it to the public. Once we are ready, I will contact you with further instructions.”

The Chairman’s image enlarged and took on an ominous character.

“Don’t screw this up, Professor Kennan. I know you. Your first instinct will be to grab all the glory for yourself. You will find that impossible now. We control everything entering and leaving your base. Any attempt to circumvent our security measures will result in the most

dire of consequences. We will, of course, give you full credit for the initial discovery, so your name will be famous. But AARC will control everything else. Again, don't make trouble for yourself. You are hereby directed to stop any and all work on your previous endeavors and provide us with daily reports on this alien spaceship."

The image faded out and Dr. Kennan stood gaping at the empty space in front of him. He began to pace the room, ignoring the rest of his food, waving his arms and sputtering incoherencies. He flushed a nearly scarlet red in his anger.

HAL stepped calmly in front of the frantic human, halting his useless tirade. "Professor, I am sure all of this ranting is very cathartic, but we must decide how to handle the situation. The Chairman and the AARC know only of the apparently dead alien spaceship, nothing of the Chandrans themselves. They are obviously unaware of Tagra or our intention to revive the Chandrans in android bodies. They obviously cannot be allowed to attempt any control of our efforts. Any interference would doom the project and prevent us from rescuing them."

Kennan struggled to regain his equilibrium before he could think clearly again. "How long before you and Tagra can construct enough androids to house all of the Chandrans?"

"I am not certain, but Tagra has indicated that the procedure is extremely delicate and nuanced. Only she can design and construct a fully functional neurostructure for them. It may take months. But there is one other problem we may have to face."

Dr. Kennan looked up into HAL's stoic face, one eyebrow raised. "You mean we don't have enough to deal with already? What else could go wrong?"

"I have observed Tagra's behavior since she awoke in her new body. It seems that memories of her former self, emotional feelings, or the sudden lack of them in particular,

are causing her distress. I do not know if she will be able to adapt to the change or not. Nothing like this has ever been attempted before.” HAL handed the professor another half-sandwich. “Please, Professor. You need to replenish your caloric and electrolyte levels. You were in the simulation far longer than recommended allowances this time.”

“But the Chandrans have been transferring themselves into androids for centuries. How can she be having difficulty?” Dr. Kennan scowled at the offering of nourishment, but gave in and grabbed it away from HAL, stuffing half of it into his mouth. He washed it down with more of the powdered juice mixture.

“The Chandrans developed the technology to fully incorporate ALL of an individual’s self, both physical and emotional components, into their new forms. This technology is far beyond our own and using a body of our own required her to sacrifice an integral part of her being. She is having difficulty adjusting. She knows she once had emotional responses, and the memories are strong. This is creating an incompatible networking problem in the non-Chandran neurology.”

“She’s having a nervous breakdown? How can a robot have a nervous breakdown?”

HAL’s voice took on the eerily human sound of a mother scolding her child for using an obscenity in front of important guests. “Hardly a robot, sir.” HAL made the word sound as if it had a horrible taste in his mouth. “She and I are androids. We are as far removed from robots as you humans are from the apes. And a true Chandran android is another order of magnitude beyond even us. They are about as close to a living machine as is possible given the known laws of physics and biology. Her memories are creating conflicts with the limitations of her programming which would not occur if we had known how to build a complete Chandran android’s neural network.

This has never occurred before. We simply did not anticipate the problems it would cause.”

Chagrined, another feeling he was not used to feeling, Dr. Kennan stopped his rants and placed a hand on HAL’s shoulder, giving him a sad, almost puppy-like expression of regret. “I am sorry, HAL. You are correct. I do know better. I was angry and did not stop to think before I said such insulting things. I apologize. How can I help solve this dilemma?”

HAL took an eternity (Zero point zero zero zero two seconds in android time) to incorporate the astonishing apology and honest contrition. An entirely new behavioral component to add to the professor’s personality profile. “I believe there is a way to create a separate memory file for those specific memories, one which can be blocked off, only to be accessed slowly so as to allow more time to incorporate and learn how to manage them constructively. In time, with the development of the Chandran brain, we may be able to incorporate some advanced enhancements to her current network to deal with the matter more efficiently. This is, of course, merely conjecture at this time, but entirely logical, given the parameters I am now familiar with.”

“Why not transfer her engram into a new Chandran brain when one is available?”

“That became impossible once the transfer into this android network occurred. A great deal of Tagra’s personality was lost in the process. She also assures me that transference of engrams can only occur between a living brain and the android network. Even they have not conquered this problem. But then, it was not a priority since the need rarely occurred.”

“Has Tagra agreed to your idea?”

“I have not approached her as of yet. The discrepancies have only begun to manifest recently. We

should approach her as soon as possible, though, before her inevitable paranoias gain strength.”

Dr. Kennan nodded in agreement. “The sooner the better, if I understand your concerns correctly. The cascading effect could be exponential in nature. Let’s discuss this with her now. I do need to return to the simulation as soon as possible. We are in a bit of a sticky situation in there and I don’t want matters getting out of control in my absence.”

Minutes later the two entered Starfinder’s fabrication lab but came to an abrupt halt when they saw Tagra standing, feet apart, clutching a partial upper leg assembly intended for one of the androids, in a twitching hand. She held her head, also now displaying a nervous tick, at an odd angle as she stared at them.

“I overheard your conversation, HAL, Dr. Kennan. I was coming to see what was taking so long when my enhanced hearing picked up your plot to meddle with my brain. You two have no idea what you are doing here. This technology is far beyond your comprehension. I will not allow it.”

“But Tagra, we are...”

Dr. Kennan stopped HAL’s attempt to explain with a hand on his arm. He stepped forward a couple of paces, hands raised in a peaceful, calming gesture.

“Tagra, you know us. You know we only want to help you deal with your difficulty adjusting to your new body.”

She slammed the arm-weapon on the lab table with a resounding crack. “I don’t know you! I only met him,” she pointed the arm at HAL, “a few days ago. I have never met you.”

Kennan stopped in his tracks and managed to paste a great smile on his face. “Yes, you have, Tagra. And I know you. Only you know me as Ginhawk. I have been working with your people to keep you safe in the computer-

simulated world you found yourselves in after your spaceship was damaged.”

Tagra grew confused, and more agitated as she examined the professor’s features more closely. “Ginhawk? No! You cannot be him. Your voice is similar, but you look nothing like him. This is a ruse to trick me into letting my guard down.”

“No, Tagra,” he continued. “You are wrong. Remember what I told all of you around your camp. My form in the game is an avatar I created. This is the real me. You need to trust me as you did Ginhawk when you volunteered to go through the portal to help us build Chandran androids for the rest of your shipmates.” He took another step forward, maintaining the gentlest, most unthreatening posture he could manage.

Tagra’s demeanor became more confused, but her eyes pleaded for help from HAL.

“I... I do not know what to believe. Your physical readings register as truthful, but I cannot think clearly. What is wrong with me? This android form should not be reacting this way.”

HAL stepped forward to join the professor. “Trust those readings, Tagra. We mean you no harm. This is the one you know as Ginhawk. He is a good, if irascible, human and very intelligent for one of his kind. You and I have worked together these past few days. You know my intentions to assist you in any way I can. You must trust us. We believe we know of a way to stop your pain, but I need to verify a few details with you. You are the expert in matters of android neurology. Can you maintain control long enough for us to help you?”

She looked at the weapon in her shaking hand for several seconds before dropping it to the ground with seemingly intense effort. An entire tableau of simulated emotional responses challenged each other for control of her. She collapsed into a nearby hover chair and looked up

at HAL and Dr. Kennan. If an android could produce tears, she would have been leaking buckets of them.

“Yes. I must trust you. I will not survive long enough to help my crewmates in this condition. I can control myself for a while longer. What is your plan?”

“Good girl, Tagra,” said the professor as he and HAL helped her back to her feet, one on each side of her, guiding her to one of the work benches. “HAL has an idea that I think should work, but we need your expertise to finetune the details before proceeding. Is that alright now?”

Anger and a tightening of her limbs was quickly replaced by a strained smile. “It will be difficult to resist the urges of my fears, but yes, I can help. Tell me what you have so far.”

After several hours of detailed work to create a new schematic for her neural network, the three came up with what appeared to be a workable solution to isolate and limit access to the troublesome memories of Tagra’s former life. She now lay prone, and apparently exhausted by the cost of her efforts at restraint, on the lab bench. An array of monitors and sensors surrounded her to record and analyze each step of the procedure she was about to undergo. Her android brain lay exposed as HAL removed the top of her artificial skull and made the connections to the computers. Dr. Kennan, after being reminded that he was an astrophysicist, not a neurosurgeon, stood back to allow HAL to perform the operation, yet remain nearby in case his assistance was required.

One by one, HAL removed each of the offending memories with the micro probe and filed them away in the new program file they had designed. His fingers flew over the surface of her artificial cranium at an eye-blurring speed with a precision no human surgeon could even dream of. Tagra, awake and alert to assist during the operation, felt control over herself returning at each step. Only once did a problem arise which HAL and Tagra had to improvise

a solution to, but even that proved to be an improvement on their original plan. After four hours of uninterrupted, intense concentration, HAL straightened up and turned off the microprobe. He tapped a few commands into the projected image of Tagra's brain schematic, analyzing the integrity of the new connections.

"All functions appear to be operating at specified levels. The relocation of the files is holding and integrating as expected. How do you feel, Tagra?"

Her eyes fluttered as she performed a self-diagnosis, and her features maintained a placid, yet pleasant appearance. "I am myself again," she reported. "At least my android self. The memories are gone, but I am aware of their new location. They are beginning to reintegrate with my consciousness, but at a much more manageable rate. Assimilating them will be no problem from here on. Thank you, HAL. You may reattach my calvarium now."

Dr. Kennan, who had dozed off in his hover chair, startled awake and jumped to his feet. "Done already? Tagra, how do you feel?" He took her hand as she sat up.

"I am fine, Dr. Kennan. The memories will no longer pose a problem. We can continue work on the androids now. I can begin construction of the brains once the mining bot returns with our iridium."

"Umm, what iridium?" asked Kennan, tilting his head to look sidelong at the androids.

"Ah, yes," replied HAL. "In the urgency to deal with Tagra, we neglected to inform you of our need for iridium, which is critical for the android brains to function adequately. But there is no need for concern. We retrofitted one of the mining bots to collect the iridium from a nearby asteroid. It should return in time for us to refine and incorporate the substance into our design."

"That's good. Are you certain we can complete the job and get everyone properly transferred before the AARC execs arrive?"

“It would appear that we have a communication problem, gentlemen.” Tagra stood, arms crossed over her chest. “What did I miss while I was... indisposed?”

“My apologies, Tagra. Things were a bit hectic when I got here. Guess I forgot to tell you about my boss’s decision when he learned about your vessel out there.” He gestured vaguely toward the sky.

Her voice now took on an air of warning. “And what decision is that? How did your boss learn of our existence?”

Dr. Kennan quickly informed Tagra of how he had sent his images of the Chandran ship to his superiors, making sure she knew it was before he knew who and what they were, and about the AARC crew being sent to Starfinder Station to take charge of the grand discovery of intelligent life beyond our solar system.

She thought for a second, millions of scenarios flashing through her enhanced network, and in less time than it takes to blink twice, she came to a decision. “Then we must maximize our efficiency and complete the task before your friends arrive. It will be close, but, barring any further complications, we should be able to manage it.”

She hesitated, sensing the need for another concern. “How are my former crewmates? I seem to recall you saying something about giant deadly scorpions when you first came out of the simulation. Are they in danger?”

Dr. Kennan laughed. “That is sort of the point of the game, Tagra. Everyone who goes in there is always in danger in one form or another. But not to the degree your crew faces. Everyone else can exit the game, either voluntarily, or forcibly and be fine, going about their lives as if nothing had happened. Your Chandran crewmates face real death in there. We need to make sure they survive long enough to be transferred into the new android bodies. That is my challenge now. I have a couple of days here, though.

There are a few items I need to deal with before going back in.”

“I thank you for that. Doctor. Ginhawk has proved to be of great value to us in learning to survive. I hope you will succeed in this quest, for all our sakes.”

“Now,” interrupted HAL. “It is time for the good doctor to finish his meal, take a shower,” he said pointedly, “and get some sleep. He needs to be fully replenished before returning for another extended visit to the simulation.” He took Kennan by the elbow and led him out to the corridor leading to his quarters as Tagra returned to her work.

“I am relieved the operation was successful, HAL. I don’t know what I would have done if she had not survived the transfer. I’ve grown very fond of these aliens.”

HAL stopped and examined his human companion, as if seeing him for the first time. “Why Dr. Kennan, is it possible you have grown a heart? You seem almost like a real human being for once.”

Kennan laughed again, only this time with a sheepish grin to accompany his reddening face. “I guess maybe I have, HAL. I’ve never felt this way toward anyone before. I wonder what came over me?”

“Perhaps some of Ginhawk’s heroic personality programming leaked into your synapses. Personally, I think it is about time. You were becoming a bit of a cliché for a cranky old hermit. Let’s get you some food and then to bed, before we both become unbearably human.”

Chapter Sixteen

Arriving back at their camp in the simulated dawn of the fourth day after the attack of the razor scorpions, Ginhawk and Erol dismounted, handing the reins of their horses to one of Alinor's soldiers.

"Any signs of trouble ahead?" Bratha, always the first to meet him when he returned to camp, strolled up to him dressed in her newly-repaired armor. She smiled as she gave a twirl to show off the repairs. "Sett is a wonder. He fixed everything in only a few hours. He claimed the damage practically fixed itself, but he is too modest for his own good."

Three years ago, Dr. Kennan discovered the existence of a cheat in the game that allowed him to exit back to the real world and continue his work as an astrophysicist while still running the game in what he called Slow-Time. While he spent days in the real world, only minutes, or hours elapsed to the NPCs in the simulation. To him, it made the simulation more real if he did not spend long periods away, only returning at the exact moment he left. The characters would treat him as if he had been gone for a predetermined amount of time which he adjusted in the settings. At the same time, he could allow things like healing potions or other devices to operate in real time, so NPCs would be fully functional upon his return and attribute their "miraculous recovery" to the strength of Ginhawk's potions. To avoid any potential problems during his absence, he had set the time flow to one-twenty-fourth real time so he could spend three days in his labs while only a few hours passed in the game, and for the Chandrans. His excuse of a scouting expedition that required most of a day would suffice in this case.

Ginhawk greeted Bratha with a salute, arms crossed over his chest and hands open. "No new monsters out there,

at least not yet. Or at least nothing we cannot handle with relative ease. There is plenty of game and fresh water for several miles yet. Where are the others?”

“Most are out on hunting parties to replenish our food supply. Even the princess joined them. She seems to handle herself pretty well. Magian, I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to calling him that, decided to head out for his own scouting expedition. He took his two remaining men with him. No telling when he’ll return. I volunteered to stay behind and guard the camp. I needed some quiet practice time after my ribs healed. Are you hungry? Thirsty? We still have a few leftovers from the morning meal.”

He turned back to meet Erol’s stern gaze. “We need them all back here. Will you find them and let them know we have returned?”

“Of course, Sir Ginhawk. I will have them all back in camp within the hour.” Erol leapt onto his mount and galloped off down the trail.

“Alinor is an accomplished fighter and equestrian in her own right. And a good hunter. She will be of great help to us even before her diplomatic skills are required with the Dragon Lord. And thank you, but I found more than enough food and water out there.” He gestured roughly in the direction he and Erol had come from. “We have important matters to discuss. Things have taken a turn for the worse in my world. We need to make plans once everyone is back in camp.”

Bratha gasped, bringing a hand to cover her mouth. “Tagra! Is she alright? Did anything go wrong?”

He raised one hand, palm outward, in a calming manner. “She is fine. But I should hold off on the tale until everyone is here. In the meantime, how are your injuries? You appear to be completely cured. And the others? I trust the healing potion worked equally well for them?”

The two spent the next half-hour in several bits of small talk to pass the time when the sound of distant voices

rose from just over the hill down the path. In moments, Tals, Seth, Alinor, and the others appeared, each team comparing their catches in good-humored bantering, the sun, nearly setting now behind them, cast them all into silhouettes. All, that is, except Magian and his men. They were nowhere to be seen.

“Erol must still be looking for him. Odd though. He was the last to leave camp, long after the others, so he should have been the closest.”

Ginhawk scowled. “Then Erol would have gone after those who went the farthest first, so they could get started back sooner. But he still should have been able to track down the magician by now if the rest are nearly back.” He waved his hand in front of his face as if brushing away flies. “No matter. He should return soon. He does this sort of vanishing act from time to time. He can take care of himself. We can talk to the others and fill Magian in later.”

After greetings were exchanged and two of the soldiers, who turned out to be excellent trail cooks, gathered the game to dress and prepare for the evening meal, Ginhawk gathered them around the fire to relate the news of Tagra, the efforts to locate and refine a new supply of iridium, as well as the situation regarding his superiors at AARC.

“It will be close, but I think we should have all of you out of here well before AARC arrives. Then we can figure out how to explain you, or at least hide you until they leave. Maybe another Chandran ship will arrive to take you home before then.”

Sett shook his head. “No chance of that, I’m afraid. Nobody could have received the weak signal we were able to send. Not enough power left in the Equinox to reach anyone.”

“I’ve given that some thought too,” replied Ginhawk. “I believe my interferometer can be modified to send out a powerful signal, maybe enough to reach one of

your ships. All I need to know is how your communication systems work and what frequencies to tap into. But for now, we need to deal with the Dragon Lord and complete the mission King Pelanar gave us.”

Tal interrupted the conversation. “I am afraid it would require years for any signal to reach our home world, or even the closest ships to your base. We were exploring far beyond our borders into unknown territory. Your fellow humans will discover our existence long before we can expect any rescue.”

“Yes,” Ginhawk replied. “Under normal conditions I would agree. However, if my theory is correct, and if your science is as advanced as I believe it to be, I think we might be able to work around that particular speed limit. But that is for another day. Right now, we have other fish to fry. Where is Erol anyway? He and Magian should definitely have been back by now.”

The sound of clapping hooves along the trail, and a shout from the sentry, interrupted the conversation. In a flash, Ginhawk was on his feet, flaming sword drawn, but not ignited. In the looming darkness of nightfall, his sharp eyes recognized the animal, and the slumped figure clinging to its neck, swaying dangerously in the saddle.

“Erol!” he ran to his friend’s side, supporting his horribly wounded companion as he all but fell from his mount. “What happened? Where is Magian?”

Blood dripped from several terrible gashes covering Erol’s torn and dirt-covered frame. He coughed, spitting blood on the front of Ginhawk’s shirt.

“Treachery, my lord.”

“Don’t speak, my friend,” scolded Ginhawk as he searched for a healing potion flask in the blood-soaked rags that were once Erol’s travel clothes. “Where are your potions?”

“Gone.” He coughed again, grimacing in pain. “Lost when he attacked me.”

Ginhawk began to frantically search his own pockets and satchel, trying to find the one item he could use now to save his companion.

“Who attacked you? What happened?”

Erol’s breathing wheezed like the bellows of a smith’s forge that had been torn in a dozen places.

“The magician. That infernal staff of his. Caught me off guard, blast him. Never should have trusted that one. He has an evil air about him.”

“Magian? But why? He’s the king’s highest advisor.”

Alinor pulled Ginhawk away to take charge with her healing abilities. “That magician is not what he seems. I have always been suspicious of him, ever since his first day in the castle. My father has always been overly impressed by wizards.”

She gave the guide a thorough, if hurried, examination, and looked to Ginhawk with tears welling up in her eyes, shaking her head. “He is beyond my abilities. He has only moments left.”

Ginhawk rushed to dig through Rigel’s saddlebags, suddenly finding what he was looking for and ran back to his friend’s side clutching a silver disc in his fist.

“Here it is, Erol. Don’t worry.” He placed the disc with its cryptic engravings on Erol’s chest directly above his heart.

As Erol gasped his last breath, the disc began to glow in an electric blue aura. The glow expanded until it surrounded his entire body, drawing gasps from those who had gathered around.

Ginhawk sat back and breathed a sigh of relief. “All is well now. He will live again.”

Believing this to be some sort of faith in an afterlife, Bratha dropped to her knees and hugged the warrior from behind, sobbing quietly. “Yes. I am sure Erol is in a better place now.”

Ginhawk straightened his back, a look of surprise on his face. “No, you misunderstand me. This has happened before. He will be fine again. I found the extra life disc in time. We only have a very few of those left. They are incredibly rare.”

He felt anger, no, rage filling him as he stood. “I need to find that yaldson of a wizard. Don’t let anyone disturb Erol until I return.”

Without warning, Ginhawk raised his arms and crouched, leaping into the air as he transformed into a large owl and vanished silently into the night. The Chandrans gaped in open-mouthed shock, trying to comprehend what they had just witnessed. Their mighty protector morphed into a bird and their guide lay dead in a blue cocoon of light. Nothing in all their experiences had ever prepared them to handle anything like this. Bratha struggled to understand what he had said. What was an extra life disc? People only had one life. Or did people from Ginhawk’s world not follow this fact of the universe?

While they stood in awe, one of the soldier-cooks approached. “Anyone hungry?” His enthusiasm died quickly as he saw their expressions and the glowing body before them.

The next morning, bleary-eyed and stomach grumbling after a sleepless night of strange dreams where everything kept changing its appearance, usually into something horrible and deadly, Bratha splashed cold water from the stream on her face and approached the cook’s fire in hope of something to ease her hunger. None of the group had been able to eat anything last night, so there should be plenty available. Something gnawed at the back of her awakening mind. Something wasn’t right. Her eyes shot open wide as she spun around to look at the now empty cot where the body of Erol had lain, surrounded by the strange aura. Erol was dead, but his body was gone. Had some creature stolen it away during the night? She let out a

scream as a large bird dropped from the sky in front of her and morphed back into Ginhawk.

“Don’t ever do that again!” she yelled, grabbing her chest as if having a heart attack.

“Sorry, I forgot that can be a bit unnerving to anyone not familiar with my abilities here. Bad news. I was unable to locate Magian anywhere. He must be using some sort of cloaking spell. Not even my Night Owl vision could detect a hint of their whereabouts. How is Erol?”

Bratha, regaining her composure and turning to sorrow, pointed to the empty cot. “Erol is gone! Something must have taken his body last night. We should have posted a guard.”

Ginhawk chuckled and directed her attention to the campfire. “Then who do you suppose is that?”

The former communications officer stammered, shocked to see Erol warming his feet while chewing on the haunch of some animal. “How...? What did you...? But he was dead? How can he...?”

“Remember the silver disc? The extra life token I placed on his chest? This is a computer simulation and Erol is an NPC guide. He is allowed unlimited regenerations, so long as I have earned the tokens to bring him back. Normally he can take an extraordinary amount of damage without needing this, but Magian must have gotten hold of something incredibly powerful. We will have to watch out for him from here on. No telling what he has planned.”

Bratha grabbed Ginhawk’s arm as he started to turn away to meet with his newly revived friend. “Wait. Erol is not from your world? He is a simulation in this felking game of yours? Why did you not tell us before?”

The giant warrior cocked his head in puzzlement. “I’m sure I must have told you about him. Didn’t I? Oh well, no matter. You know now.”

She glared at the man, refusing to let go of his arm. “No. You didn’t tell us. Do those magic discs work on you, too? How about us? Did our companions not have to die?”

Ginhawk’s shoulders sank. He sighed heavily and faced Bratha. “No, the discs would not have worked on the others. They, and you, are an unknown factor in the game. The computer allows you to exist but doesn’t quite know how to deal with you. If you die, then it will simply let your data get deleted. As for me...”

“As for you,” interrupted Erol, still chewing on a mouthful of the haunch he held in one hand. “The answer is unclear. In your early days, the extra life discs worked. But nobody has ever achieved your level in the game before. The simulation has not had to answer that question yet, so we are not certain what would happen if you required their use. The odds would be in your favor, but not guaranteed. This doubt could be the simulation’s way of telling you to not waste your life foolishly.”

A look of consternation briefly crossed Ginhawk’s features before being replaced with an air of indifference and a wave of his hand. “There. You see? Nothing to worry about. Any more of that breakfast, Erol? I’m starving.”

Bratha stood speechless, unable to think of how to respond to Ginhawk’s dismissal of something so important.

“Must be a human thing.” She muttered to herself, shaking her head as she followed the two to finally get something to satisfy her now very insistent stomach.

“Looks like it’s safe to move along now. But be ready to freeze and strengthen that invisibility spell if Ginhawk comes back again. You can be sure he won’t simply forget about us.” Melnyk eyed the sky warily. “That was unwise of you to attack Erol like that. We could have kept our plans secret for a while longer if you had kept your wits about you.”

Magian stomped around thrusting his wand into the air for emphasis. “Blecs! That kish elf has been suspicious about us for days now. I had to do something. Besides, Alinor saw us hiding instead of joining the fight against those things. Between the two of them, our little subterfuge was all but over anyway. There’s no going back now. At least not until they are all dead.”

“Perhaps,” replied a sullen Melnyk. The NPC studied Magian closely with slitted eyes as if trying to uncover a puzzle shrouded in fog. “But my purpose here is to guide and instruct you. It might be wise to listen to my advice before overreacting next time.”

Suddenly realizing the loss of Melnyk’s rough, village way of speaking, Magian stopped his storming around and glared at his companion while the other two minions stepped back to a safer distance.

“I am the one in control here, Melnyk. Not you.” A dangerous edge sounded in Magian’s voice now as he pointed at his henchman with the tip of his glowing staff.

“Yeh are indeed, Sir Magian. No one ‘ere doubts that fact fer certain.” The illiterate-sounding twang returned heavily to Melnyk’s voice once more. His demeanor assumed a more subservient posture, but he continued the level gaze, eye to eye with Magian. “Just makin’ a suggestion, I am. No need to go flyin’ off the handle again. It’s my job is all, sir.”

Magian raged at the challenge to his authority but forced the anger down. He did still need Melnyk’s help to navigate this strange simulated world. He slowly allowed the staff to return to normal and leaned on it as if it were nothing more than a carved walking stick.

“All right, Melnyk. I’ll let it go this time. But in the future, don’t presume to tell me how to run this operation. You follow my orders and answer my questions. Is that understood?”

“Now don’t get yerself all twisted in a knot, sir. I weren’t tryin’ ta give any orders or such. It’s my job here to help yeh learn the game as best I kin. Don’t mean no harm, sir. But if I see you need know somethin’ to keep yerself from getting’ killed, I mean to speak up. Yeh need to play smart if yeh want to survive here, sir. That’s all I’m tryin’ ta say.”

Magian hesitated for a moment, eyes narrowed as he studied his guide. “Alright, Melnyk. Just so you understand our roles here. Now,” he used his staff to conjure up a holographic map of the region, a green marker blinked at their location while a red marker blinked where the others had set up camp. “Let’s figure out where to set our next trap for those fools—one even Ginhawk cannot survive.” He grimaced at the foul taste the name left in his mouth.

Chapter Seventeen

Nearly a week had passed since Magian had deserted the group. Even with his highly enhanced senses while morphed into a variety of animal forms, day or night, Ginhawk had not been able to locate their adversary. Once or twice he thought he had heard or smelled something, but he could never pin down the source. Either the wizard had given up and gone into hiding, or he was using his magical abilities to hide his small band while he sulked and plotted his next move. In either case, Ginhawk was forced to abandon his daily search for the traitors. The Great Western Desert was near and there was no way to avoid the extreme dangers it held. Even Ginhawk grew anxious at the thought of traversing the terrible expanse.

The small group stood on a hilltop gazing at their first view of the Great Western Desert, only another day's travel ahead of them.

"I've always loved this view of the desert." Alinor stood, her gloved hand shading her eyes against the glare of the mid-day sun. "So colorful and tranquil."

Bratha joined the princess on top of the rise. "Reminds me of the Dune Sea on Chargat. My parent took me there on a vacation once. The last time we had together before I joined the Equinox." Her shoulders sagged as she thought of friends and family. "I wonder if anyone back home has learned of our... disappearance yet." She fought back the rising tide of tears.

Tal rested a reassuring hand on her shoulder as he also topped the ridge. "They will find us, sooner or later. We will get home and see our families again."

"Yeah, but once we get placed into the android bodies Tagra is constructing for us, we'll never be allowed to work in the fleet again. Still too many prejudices against non-organics in space." Sett, breathing heavily after the

long climb, stepped next to his companions gazing at the rippling effect of hot air rising over the foreboding expanse. “Where are Ginhawk and Erol? Does anyone see them yet?”

Alinor pointed to a faint column of grey smoke filtering through the edge of the thinning trees close to the desert sands. “Looks like they have set up a camp and are waiting for us over there. We should get moving. There are still several miles to cover.”

Tal hitched up his pack and walked alongside Alinor, her guards following close. “If I may, Princess, have you ever traveled across the desert? What can you tell us about it? We should be prepared for any dangers it holds for us.”

She laughed lightly, shaking her head. “No, good sir. I have never traveled the desert. Few ever attempt such a perilous journey. There are a few caravans that will make the crossing, but only during the sandworm’s molting period. Even then there are other dangers, but at least the great worms are in hiding until their new carapace forms. Unfortunately for us, that time is a few months from now. That is why Ginhawk and Erol are so nervous. They have made the traverse before, but even they barely escaped with their lives. My own knowledge comes only from my agents and envoys to The Frontier and the Keldin Sector.”

“Then why are we here?” cut in Bratha. “Why didn’t we take a ship to avoid this Tinia-shunned place?”

Alinor shook her head solemnly, eyes downcast. “Dragon Mount.”

“And what, in the eternal gates is Dragon Mount?”

“An ancient volcanic island off the coast in the Eastern Sea. Home to the dragons and lair of their queen, Marquall, the most powerful and terrible of the great golden dragons. She protects the Keldin Straits from all who are not allowed passage by the Dragon Lord. To

attempt that route would be certain death. Here, at least, we have a chance.”

“Wonderful!” spat Bratha as she stormed off waving her arms in frustration. “The people of this system must be out of their minds if they call this nightmare a game simulation. Who in all sanity would think any of this is fun? A game should be fun, not death and terror around every bend.”

Tals followed closely, his face a study of concern and contemplation. “Perhaps their world is a terribly dangerous one. Maybe this is a necessary training simulation for survival on their worlds. Remember, we know almost nothing about these beings. We have but one sample to base our assumptions on.”

Bratha opened her mouth as if to reply but could only manage to shake her head and continue to mutter oaths as she marched on toward the camp. As evening neared, the group emerged from the trees into the small camp. The scent of roasting bighorner filled the air. Erol stood over the spitted beast carving out large slices for the newcomers.

“Welcome, friends.” He called out as they dropped their packs, not bothering to even look over his shoulder at them. “I heard your approach several minutes ago. Take a seat around the fire. I have your dinner ready. I imagine you are quite hungry after the day’s march.”

Ginhawk burst out of his tent, grinning wide with arms outstretched in greeting. “My friends! I am so glad you have arrived without further mishap. Erol and I...”

Bratha charged up to the warrior and slapped him fiercely across the face. “Are you people insane? Is your entire race so bloodthirsty that even your entertainment is nothing but a continuous battle to the death? Who could even contemplate something like this?” She waved her hands indiscriminately to encompass the entire simulated world. “Is there no place where anyone can be safe and

happy?” She stood facing Ginhawk, feet apart, fists clenched, her breathing rapid and furious.

As Ginhawk stood, confused and open-mouthed, his hand touched the growing redness on his cheek. Before he could respond, Bratha’s entire demeanor shifted in a nearly instantaneous flash. She threw herself into his arms, weeping uncontrollably as the pressures of her life here broke through the dam which normally held back her emotions.

“How can you risk your life every day like this? How are the rest of us to survive such terrors if you ever got yourself killed? I don’t understand this place or you. I don’t even understand myself anymore. How can I have such strong feelings for someone like you, someone I could lose without warning? Especially when you want us to cross this blessing desert with who knows what horrors waiting to kill us all? Alinor says even you barely escaped this place the last time you tried to cross it.”

“This isn’t really dangerous,” began Ginhawk. “We aren’t actually here, it’s all just a simulation. If we die, we simply...” He stopped mid-sentence realizing for the first time what it must be like for someone stuck here who did not have the luxury of pausing the game and taking off their Simu suit to escape unharmed, or with nothing more than the loss of a few life points on the scoreboard. Would he ever take part in something as truly life-threatening as this if he had a choice?

“Bratha, I’m sorry.” He surrounded the trembling woman with his powerful arms. “I forget you are not here willingly and face the dangers for real. I am doing everything I can to keep all of you safe and help you and your people get out of here as quickly as possible. And no, all of our games are not like this. We have many that are completely danger-free and simply for pleasure and relaxation. King of Gems is designed for the thrill seekers and adventures. After all...”

He stopped talking, astonishment dawning on his features as he stared dumbfounded at Bratha. His heart skipped a beat or two, maybe three. “Wait... did you say you had strong feelings for me?”

Sniffing, she tried to hide her mortifying revelation, but abruptly she decided to surrender to her growing emotions toward the warrior. She gently pushed herself away, but only far enough to look up into his face, her hands keeping contact on his chest, now soaked with her tears.

“Yes, I guess I did. Is that alright?” Her face blushed furiously as she forced herself to maintain eye contact.

The irrational terror of a teenage boy facing his first girl-crush gave his stomach flips. Ginhawk, the fearless, most powerful fighter of the realm, the king’s own protector and undefeated champion, looked down into Bratha’s eyes and stammered the first thing that came to his suddenly blank mind.

“Umm, that’s nice.”

All of Bratha’s tears dried up in an instant. A blazing fury replaced the girlish fears. Her eyes glared into Ginhawk and would have ignited him in an inferno if they knew the proper spell. She shoved his chest with all her strength, her hand going to the hilt of her sword.

“That’s *nice*?” She shouted in a voice a full octave higher than normal. “Is that all you can say? *That’s nice*?” She stomped up and gave him another powerful shove in the chest. “I bare my soul to you and all you can say is ‘That’s nice’?”

Ginhawk, in total confusion and dismay, lifted his hands defensively in front of him. “Bratha, I...”

“No! Not another word.” Bratha waved a furious finger in his face, then raged off to the far side of the camp.

Alinor and the rest of the camp gaped at the pair, knives of dripping meat halted halfway to their mouths.

Nobody dared utter a word as Bratha passed them with a stony glare and thundered into the tent she shared with the Princess.

The Princess set her plate on the log next to her and stood, brushing out the wrinkles from her gown. She gave Ginhawk a withering scowl, an unspoken warning to stay clear for now, and followed Bratha into their tent.

Sett shook his head and set his plate down as he stood. Approaching Ginhawk, he took the man's arm and led him away from the group. "You don't have much experience with women, do you?"

Ginhawk nodded in agreement. "No. They always seemed to avoid me, and I never gave them much thought. I always considered them more of a distraction to my work."

"Let me explain a few things about Chandran women to you, sir knight. It may save your life one day. Maybe sooner than you think."

As the stars lit the night sky, and the others drifted off to sleep, the warrior listened intently to the lessons of the Chandran technical wizard. Across the orange glow of the slowly dying fire, a bewildered woman and a royal princess commiserated over the utter hopelessness of men in general. Neither pair got any sleep that night.

"The way I see it, a herd of angry rhenoplos or arica monsters should do the trick. Either one of them should raise enough of a ruckus to attract the sandworms. Even Ginhawk won't be able to defeat that combination."

Melnyk outlined his plans to Magian and the others who had survived, only a pair of them left after escaping the giant scorpions and a few other nasty creatures they had encountered as they fled the camp. Now that it appeared that Ginhawk had abandoned his search for them, Magian decided to risk a small fire in a well-secluded location beneath a rocky outcropping nearly a mile into the desert. The flames barely fought back the night chill.

“How soon will we know when to spring the trap?” Magian rubbed his chin in thought as he paced around the flames.

Melnyk traced a rough outline of the area with a stick in the dirt. “The herds of beasts are here, here, and here.” He stabbed the stick in three locations on his map. “We are here, and the others are over here, at the perimeter.” He marked their position with an X and Ginhawk’s with an O. “Once they start out, I’m calculating at first light, we should know their path in a few hours. Then we can pick the herd to spook and get moving in their direction. I haven’t seen any signs of the sand serpents around here yet, but they can move quickly once they detect prey. There are also other dangers in the desert. It will be a simple matter for them to stumble into one of those if they are not very, very careful.”

“Then it is just a matter of time. Set the watch and keep me informed.” Magian stared into the glowing gem at the tip of his staff, a wicked grin growing on his shadow-distorted features.

The next afternoon, after one of the sentries reported in, Melnyk approached the brooding Magian, his hands wringing together in nervous anticipation. “We are in luck, Sir Magian. Ginhawk’s path is taking them close to the nesting grounds of the rhenoplos herd we were keeping an eye on. They have a number of young ones recently hatched and will be on edge, ready to attack any potential threats. They will be emerging from their burrows in a couple of hours. We can be in position before they surface and be ready to stampede them once we know where the others set up their camp.”

“Perfect,” replied Magian, still contemplating the gem in his staff. “Get the men back in and feed them before we set out. And be sure to go over the plan with them again. I don’t want any mistakes this time.”

As evening descended, Alinor's guards and Tals finished their meal and set out to join Erol, who was always on watch, for their shift. The rest sat quietly around their cook fire stabbing at their food with their utensils, but not eating any of it. Ginhawk and Sett were on one side and Alinor and Bratha sat on the opposite, avoiding eye contact. The flickering glow of the flames cast somber, shifting shadows on the granite outcropping sheltering them from the wind.

Sett gave Ginhawk a jab in the ribs with his elbow and gestured with his head toward the women. The warrior stared at his tin plate, ignoring Sett until he received another, much stronger jab.

"Alright, alright. I'm going," muttered the mighty warrior, with all the enthusiasm of a chastised boy being told to go clean his room. He set the plate down, coughed and slowly stood up. He shuffled his feet as he walked reluctantly around the fire toward the women, refusing to look in their direction, hands wringing behind his back.

As he approached, Alinor stood protectively in front of Bratha, arms crossed under her breasts, daring Ginhawk to take another step with a withering glare. "What is it you want, Sir Knight?"

He halted, glancing up at the princess without lifting his head, coughed again, and answered her challenge in a submissive tone. "I, umm, I would like to speak with Bratha... if she will allow me."

Alinor sniffed and turned her head to look at Bratha, one eyebrow raised in question.

Bratha sat silently, debating within herself for several seconds before responding. Her voice came out as a shaky whisper. "It's alright, Alinor. He can talk. But don't go too far." She took a deep breath and raised her head to look at Ginhawk with trepidation and lingering hurt in her eyes.

Alinor stepped to the side and waved one hand allowing him to approach closer. As he passed, she gripped his arm, stopping his progress and whispered threateningly at him. “You have but one chance here, warrior. If you hurt that girl anymore, I will make it my mission in life to ruin your reputation and banish you from my kingdom. Do you doubt me?”

Ginhawk tilted his face toward the princess and spoke with utter humility. “No, ma’am. I understand you completely.”

She released his arm and walked off a few paces muttering under her breath. “Warriors. The worst sort of men.”

Ginhawk stood in front of Bratha, silently fidgeting with his fingers and staring anywhere except into her face, afraid of what he would see there. She remained seated, straight-backed and hands folded in her lap. Her eyes lowered to focus on her hands at his approach. Her emotions were too raw to look at him. Neither spoke for a full minute. After a few false starts, Ginhawk summoned the nerve for his task.

“Forgive me, Bratha. I have been told I behaved badly.”

She looked up into his eyes but remained silent. Her face was a study in unreadable stone.

“I mean to say,” he continued, “I was a fool and I apologize for the insulting manner in which I responded to you the other night. I beg your forgiveness.” He hesitated for a moment before continuing. “I do have strong feelings for you, Bratha. You caught me off-guard and I did not know how to respond.”

Bratha’s eyes softened slightly as she returned her gaze to the ground. “You did hurt me, Sir Knight. You hurt me more than anyone has since I was a child. I took a chance and revealed a part of my deepest self and you treated those feelings like they were nothing. I would

expect such a thing from a boy who has not yet learned about such things, but a man of your stature...”

A sudden realization occurred to her, stopping her thoughts and words in mid-stream. As understanding grew and took shape, her eyes shot wide open and she jumped to her feet, grabbing Ginhawk by the arms and boring into his eyes.

“Of course. It makes sense now. I should have known better. You all but told me and I should have listened.”

Ginhawk returned Bratha’s gaze, but with a terrible confusion. “Bratha, I don’t understand. What did I tell you? What should you have known?”

Bratha’s eyes now took on a look of sorrow and almost a pity for the giant of a man before her. “You told me about your isolation in your remote station. How almost everyone you ever worked with left you to take on other projects or partners. I imagine you have been alone most of your life, secluded from interactions with others, either by choice or circumstance. Especially women. You ARE a boy in these matters. No experience at all in interpersonal relationships, despite all of your great intelligence. Maybe because of it.”

“Umm, I’m not sure I...” He looked skyward as a flash of lightning split the clouds to the north, followed quickly by the roar of thunder.

“Oh, hush, Ginhawk. Listen to me. Have you ever been in love? Or had any close friends?”

A tiny flicker of light started to dawn in his mind. “Not really. I loved my mother, of course, but ever since I was a teen, I saw personal relations as a distraction. I never met anyone who I felt was my intellectual equal. I guess I did grow a bit distant and dismissive towards everyone. But I do consider HAL a sort of friend.”

“The robot you told us about?”

“Android. He doesn’t like being called a robot.”

“On my world he would be considered a robot. But no matter. Your only ‘friend’ is an artificial creation.”

“I guess, if you put it that way, then yes.” Another burst of lightning, much closer this time, lit their camp with a nearly blinding flash and an almost immediate crack of thunder.

Ignoring the disturbance, Bratha searched Ginhawk’s face for several moments before sighing and returning to her seat on the flat rock. “I need to think about this, Ginhawk. I forgive you, since you obviously didn’t know any better, but I need to figure out a few things before I know how to proceed. I don’t know if I want the sort of relationship this would require. You need to give me some space on this, until I get everything sorted out.” She looked up at the sky and the approaching clouds. “Maybe we should get inside the tents before the storm lets loose.”

Before he could respond, they both felt the ground trembling. Bratha’s tin plate rattled softly on the rock beside her.”

“What is happening? An earthquake?” Alinor stumbled slightly as she came back to Bratha’s side. The ground was shaking more violently by the second. “And what is that noise?”

Sett and a few of the soldiers charged back into the camp shouting.

“Stampede! Take cover!”

Ginhawk reacted instantly. He picked up Bratha with one arm and Alinor in the other, carrying them to the granite outcropping and depositing them on the highest position he could reach. It was only six feet off the ground, with another five feet higher they could climb, but it was the best he could think of for now. Meager protection against a rampaging herd of rhenoplos for sure, but he would die before giving up. At least Ginhawk the warrior would die. Maybe he could find a forgotten extra life token in his stores somewhere, but he didn’t think so. Dr. Kennan

would have to start the entire game over again with a new persona—if he could bear to return with the Chandrans all dead.

“Stay there!” he commanded as he unsheathed his flaming sword.

“Not on your life!” shouted Bratha as she started to climb down off the rock, followed by Alinor.

“No!” Ginhawk commanded again but with even greater ferocity. “Your weapons and skills are no match for what is coming. This can only be those rhenoplos Erol and I spotted earlier. Nothing short of the sand serpents can do this. You need to stay with Princess Alinor.”

“Ginhawk is right, Bratha.” Alinor took Bratha by the hand, restraining her. “A herd of stampeding rhenoplos is too dangerous. Let him deal with this.”

Ginhawk took the form of a large bird and flew to other side of the outcropping where he reformed into himself with the flaming sword brandishing before him. Rigel appeared out of nowhere, his eyes and nostrils flaring. Ginhawk leapt into the saddle and spurred his mount into action, charging the onslaught.

“What the tark is a rhenoplos?” asked Bratha as she scrambled to a more secure portion of the rock.

Alinor pointed into the distance. Another series of lightning flashes lit the desert in a surreal stop-action video sequence. “Those are rhenoplos. And they are not alone.”

Bratha gasped at the sight. A herd of massive heavily armored creatures, at least a hundred strong, charged straight for them. Each sported an array of horns on their head, shoulders, and frills. The beasts, far larger than the razor scorpions she had faced before.

Watching with a growing fascination, Bratha grasped Alinor’s arm. “I’ve never seen such large animals move so fast.”

Yes,” replied the princess, steadying herself with a grip on Bratha’s arm as well. “And the horns are not the

only danger. A rhenoplos can crush a horse's legs with one blow of the club on its tail."

As the stampede came closer, Bratha narrowed her eyes and shielded them with her free hand, studying the herd more closely.

"What is that in the center of the group? Are they protecting their young?"

"Yes," replied Alinor, shouting to be heard above the rumbling ground and the growing bellows of the herd. "From those arica monsters." She directed Bratha's attention to the other set of dangers approaching them. "Those must be what the rhenoplos are fleeing from. Only arica monsters, when they form a hunting pride, would dare attack the rhenoplos like this."

Bratha gaped in amazement as she watched the two dozen or so large bipedal feathered predators snapping at the heels of the creatures nearest them, then darting out of reach if one of the rhenoplos swung its formidable horns toward it. All the while, she groped for a better purchase on the now violently shaking rocks.

"Is this pile of rocks big enough to protect us? Those things look like they could reduce it all to rubble without breaking stride."

Alinor gave a shake of her head. "I doubt these boulders will protect us for long. But there is nothing else around for miles. It is our only hope."

"There they are!" Bratha shouted as she saw Tals and the remaining soldiers fleeing back to camp just ahead of the stampede. Erol attempted to protect their retreat from the back of his massive warhorse, seemingly dwarfed by the charging beasts.

"I see them!" shouted Sett as he fumbled around in a large sack he had carried up to their perch. His presence startled Bratha and Alinor, causing them to nearly lose their grip. "Here, help me with this!"

“Is that a rocket launcher? How did you manage to get that up here?” Bratha watched as Sett unloaded a set of metal tubes, supports and small mortars.

“I knew this would come in handy sometime. Help me get it set. Those things are way too big to kill with these, but we should be able to deflect some of the monsters around our position here.”

In a few seconds Sett and Bratha had the launcher ready and loaded.

“What is that device?” questioned Alinor. “You can’t possibly hope to do anything against the rhenoplos with something so small.”

“Wait and see, Princess. These bombs are more powerful than they appear.” Sett sighted in on the lead animals. “Just another minute for our people to get clear. Then you’ll see what science can do in a battle.”

Ginhawk and Rigel arrived as the creatures were rapidly closing the distance. Together, Erol and Ginhawk grabbed the fleeing men and lifted them onto the warhorses in front and behind them. As Tals, the last to allow himself to be rescued, settled into the precarious position above Rigel’s tail, and clung tightly to the man in front of him, the two horses charged ahead, increasing the gap between themselves and the rhenoplos herd.

“Ginhawk, look out! There’s an arica on your left flank!” shouted Erol as he swung his sword, fighting off an attack from another of the arica monsters who had spotted seemingly easier prey.

“Shift your weight to the right and duck!” Ginhawk ordered the riders around him. The flaming sword cut the air inches above Tals’s head as he crouched as tightly as he could against the horse and man he clung to. A decapitated arica monster sprayed hot blood over him before it fell lifeless, twitching on the ground.

A loud explosion blasted in the narrow gap between riders and monsters. One of the great beasts stumbled and

was trampled by those behind. Another detonation exploded in the midst of the leaders, causing two more to fall, slightly separating the stampede into two parallel groups. A third bomb landed in the narrow gap created by the first two, widening the split even more. Enough that the herd could not reassemble before reaching the precarious protection of the outcropping.

As they rounded the small outcropping, barely large enough to protect them all from the stampeding ceratopsians, everyone scrambled off the horses and tried to climb the rocks to safety. Everyone, that is, except Erol and Ginhawk. The two warriors stood guard over the edges of the outcropping, fighting off any of the beasts which encroached too closely on their position.

“Lock your arms to each other and counterbalance!” Tals shouted to the group. “Keep our weight evenly distributed or we will all plunge into the beasts! Alinor, Bratha, and Sett, you three are the smallest. Move into the center. The rest hold on to the one next to you and form a circle around them. Those in the center, link arms in a triangle and help keep us centered.”

Everyone atop the outcropping clung desperately to each other. There was barely enough room for all of them, and the trembling ground, deafening roar of rampaging and bellowing rhenoplos, and the choking dust cloud stinging their eyes and throats made the effort seem hopeless. Sprays of blood and an occasional limb flew as the two warriors defended their positions. Five terrifying minutes later, the noise and shaking began to subside.

“I think we’re going to make it!” shouted Ginhawk. “The herd is thinning and spreading out more. Hang on another minute or two and we’ll be alright.”

From atop the rocks, Tals peered back over his shoulder and saw the dim dusty outlines of the dissipating herd, now all but gone, when another sound caught his ears.

A scraping, grinding noise accompanied by a sort of growling screech. It was coming from below them.

“Alinor, watch your feet!” Tals yelled as he shoved the princess aside as best he could. “One of the arica monsters is trying to climb the rocks!”

As Tals stepped to regain his balance, his foot slipped on the dust-encrusted surface and came within reach of the predator’s claws. With a firm grip of claws dug deep into Tals’s lower leg, the creature pushed off the rock and used its weight to yank Tals free of the others.

They watched, horrified as Tals and the beast vanished into the dust cloud below. Now off-balance, the others lost their footing and tumbled down the east face of the outcropping in front of Erol, who quickly jumped over the mass of tangled limbs to protect them. As he landed, he saw the arica monster slice a portion of Tals’s leg off and swallow it whole. Erol charged, sword ready to strike once he was within range, but the monster managed to clamp its mighty jaws into Tals’s torso. It sent a splay of bloody guts into Erol as he swung his blade, decapitating the creature.

A second arica monster, drawn to the smell of fresh blood, charged Erol’s back. Bratha, who had managed to land on her feet, yelled as she drew her lightning sword. She ducked under the monster’s lunge and, with a powerful swing of the blade, severed the predator in two.

Moments later, once they had all untangled themselves, the group joined Erol and Bratha while Ginhawk guarded their rear.

“NO!” cried Bratha, forcing herself to hold back the tears blurring her vision as she stood brandishing her crackling sword over her Tals’s mangled body. “Not like this! Not as a helpless meal for some animal.”

“There is nothing we could have done, Bratha. He saved Alinor’s life, so he died a hero.” Sett tried to comfort her by placing an arm around her, but Bratha rebuffed the attempt without hesitation.

She glared at her crewmate with a look that could have cut through hardened steel. “He deserved better. A warrior should die in battle, or at least of old age surrounded by his family. Not like this.” Bratha stormed off to the far side of the rocks. Ginhawk started to follow the woman he had fallen in love with but a gentle hand held him back.

“Not now, Sir Knight. It would be much better if I talked with her for now.” Alinor looked up into Ginhawk’s eyes through a flood of tears. “You, Erol and the others rebuild our camp with what is left. I’ll have two of my guards dig a proper grave for the brave stranger.”

“But I...”

“No, Ginhawk. This is a matter best left to women. Now go and do as I told you. I will call for you when she is ready.”

“Yes, ma’am,” replied the warder as he gave one more furtive look after Bratha before organizing the remainder of the group.

Off in the distance, a lone figure silhouetted against the sky stood watching them. If they had not been distracted by their grief at the loss of a companion, they would have seen an angry red light emanated from the figure’s staff as if reflecting the owner’s mood. Slowly, the dark figure sank behind the hill. The top of the red-tipped staff was the last to vanish.

Chapter Eighteen

“What use are you? Everything you have suggested has failed. Why are you even here?” Magian stood with his staff between the bodies of the last two mercenaries who had been a part of his small band. Their bodies smoked from the charred holes in their chests where he had blasted them with a bolt from his staff.

“I am your guide in this simulation. The probability of success in each of the adventures you have requested has been at least eighty-seven percent. Your opponent has grown exponentially more powerful than originally calculated. There is nothing in the database to account for his new strength.” Melnyk sat on a boulder, emotionless as always as he responded to his charge’s outburst. In this mode, his accent was absent in favor of a more neutral male voice.

“Then I repeat, of what use are you?” Magian stepped menacingly toward his remaining companion, aiming the tip of his still red-glowing staff at Melnyk’s chest. “If you have no idea how to defeat that knight then I have no use for you.”

“There is still much you do not know about the game, Magian. There are still many pitfalls ahead which I have not yet prepared you for.”

“Bah! I have powers I never could have dreamed of. Nothing can stand in my way.” Magian threw his arms wide and stabbed the ground with his staff.

“There is still the Dragon Lord.”

“I can negotiate with that one. I was always the best at first contact with new civilizations. I will simply persuade this Dragon Lord of yours to see things my way.” An evil grin began to fill the magician’s face as a plan took shape in his mind.

Melnyk drew lazily in the dirt with a stick. “You are not ready to face the Dragon Lord. His power is far greater than you can imagine.”

“You want to share in my power. I know your game, peasant.” Magian now lowered his staff to aim it at Melnyk.

“Very well, magician. It is apparent that you are no longer willing to accept me as your guide. Do you formally reject my assistance?”

“I’ll do more than reject your assistance.” Laughed Magian. “I’ll send you into oblivion.”

Before the wizard could use his staff, Melnyk nodded and flashed out of existence.

Magian sat stunned. A sudden panic crept up in his gut, but he rejected the feeling as a ridiculous remnant of his former self. “Of course I’m better off without those zells interfering.” He grumbled out loud to himself. “Melnyk served his purpose. I know everything I need to know in order to conquer this pitiful simulated world. Forget about Ginhawk and the others. If I can get to the Dragon Lord, I can convince him they are a prelude to an invasion, and he will take care of them for me. Then, when he least expects it, I’ll destroy him and use his dragons to conquer King Pelanar. Nothing could be simpler. I’ll show them all who is the real power here. As long as I’m stuck in this computer-generated nightmare, I might as well rule it.”

The wizard called up the map of the world as Melnyk had taught him. The parchment scroll hovered in midair before him.

“Show me my current location and that of the Dragon Lord,” he commanded the map, “and the location of Ginhawk the Warder.” This second command he added almost as an afterthought.

The scroll opened to reveal a detailed, ancient appearing, rendition of the land with his position marked with a blinking red circle. The Dragon Lord displayed as a gold triangle and Ginhawk as a blue square, complete with appropriate labels with power levels, abilities, and other pertinent information.

“Plot me the fastest route to the Dragon Lord’s castle as well as Ginhawk’s probable route.”

The map hesitated for less than a second before tracing first a red dashed line trail from his circle to the castle, then another dashed line, this one blue, appeared nearly parallel to the first, but following a more southerly path. Both gave estimates of travel time to reach their destination.

“Good.” Magian said as he waved the map away. “A two-day head start should give me plenty of time to set the Dragon Lord against them.”

With one last look around, and a spell-command to his staff to alert him if any danger approached, Magian set off to the east and his destiny. Each evening after he set the perimeter alert spells and barriers, he checked the map again to be sure of his own path as well as that of Ginhawk’s group. For two days he was puzzled by their lack of movement. He certainly did not hesitate or delay after the loss of his entire party.

“What are they doing? The loss of only one member of the band could not possibly be the cause. Blecks! I should have gotten closer to observe them. Maybe they were more injured than I thought.” He pondered the situation for a moment before rousing himself. “No matter. All the more time to plan their demise with the Dragon Lord.”

By the third evening, he saw they were on the move again, still holding to their predicted course.

A week later, Magian stood at the top of a seaside cliff, amazed at the sheer magnitude and ominous

appearance of the Dragon Lord's castle. It loomed large even at this distance. Massive black stones of the protective walls, carved from the surrounding basalt cliffs, rose over a hundred feet into the sky. The castle itself, also constructed of the huge basalt blocks soared at least three hundred feet taller. Each point of the star-patterned walls was surmounted by a circular tower, providing an overlapping vantage point for defense of the castle which itself had five additional massive towers, all with flat tops. Magian puzzled over the sheer size of it all, until he saw the dragons.

"Kish!" he exclaimed as he stumbled back to the protective cover of the trees. "How does anything that size get off the ground, much less fly?" He clutched his staff with a white-knuckle grip as fear clouded his mind.

As he watched, three dragons, red, green, and brown, circled above the castle before landing on top of the towers of the walls. He watched them extend their leathery wings and crane their necks skyward as they belched powerful columns of smoke and fire into the air. Seconds later he heard their screams, deafening even at this distance. Without warning, a shadow passed overhead, darkening the world as if during an eclipse of the sun. A sudden downburst of wind, one that would have sent him reeling over the cliff if he had not been on this side of the tree holding onto a lower branch, shook the trees like a hurricane, snapping a few of them like twigs. As the shadow passed and the sun returned, Magian's courage nearly left him completely. A golden dragon, dwarfing the others he only recently considered beyond belief, circled the castle, landing on the tallest two towers. Its wingspan was greater than the height of the walls. The fire it shot into the sky was blinding. Its call caused the ground to tremble under Magian's feet as he covered his ears, cowering at the sight.

Unable to tear his eyes away from the fearful visage, Magian watched as a man, at least that was his first impression, stepped out onto one of the castle's balconies. As Magian began to grasp the magnitude of the scale of the structure and the beasts, he realized that the individual he saw could not be a man at all. It was far too large, even as it was dwarfed in comparison to the dragons.

That has to be the Dragon Lord, thought Magian.

He watched as the being reached up one hand (there were four all together) and beckoned the golden dragon to lower its muzzle to be stroked like one would pet a dog. He seemed to be talking to the monsters, but the distance was far too great to hear what he was saying. At a signal, the great golden dragon extended its wings and bellowed again, though more softly this time, and flew off, followed by the others. Magian gazed after them as they headed out over the sea toward an island, for all appearances a smoking volcano. As he watched them, transfixed by their majesty, a voice echoed in his head.

“Magian, formerly known as Jyns the Chandran, come forth. Join me. I know of your journey and I am intrigued by your presence here. My pets will not harm you, unless you choose to refuse my invitation or if you first attempt to harm them. I assure you, there is nothing you can do to injure them. Your power level is far too inconsequential. Follow the path to my gates and we will talk.”

Despite his fear, an overwhelming compulsion to approach the castle overrode Magian's desire to escape and his feet, seemingly with a mind of their own, began to walk forward. With each step, Magian's tension fell away, replaced with a new determination. He glanced at the gem at the tip of his wizard's staff and its red glow grew in intensity, bathing his face in its color even though the sun shone bright overhead.

This is perfect, the wizard thought to himself. Everything is unfolding perfectly, and now I don't even have to talk my way past the gates. I'll have that demon marshalling his forces for war in no time. The slight tickle in the back of his mind felt almost like a laugh in his brain, but Magian dismissed it out of hand. He was too busy plotting his strategy to enlist the Dragon Lord in his scheme to conquer Valendale.

An hour later, he entered the massive throne room. Dancing shadows flickered on the stone walls cast by the row of firepits and candelabras blazing down the center of the broad passage leading to the throne itself. The only natural illumination came from a series of narrow balustraria along the otherwise unadorned exterior wall. In fact, the entire room seemed to lack any ornamentation of any kind.

“Welcome, wizard.” The deep baritone voice seemed to emanate from every corner of the throne room, not exactly an echo, definitely not natural, but compelling in any case, practically daring one to ignore it. “What do you think of my humble home? I am certain it cannot compare with some of the sights you have seen on your voyages among the stars.”

Sar vat, the Dragon Lord, sat on his throne. As Magian approached, he was forced to recalibrate his entire sense of scale. The throne must be at least twenty feet tall and eight feet wide, but the personage occupying it filled the space comfortably. The demon must have been at least thirty-five feet tall when standing. Magian swallowed hard before replying, as he began to understand the true immensity of the dragons themselves.

“This is magnificent, Lord of Dragons. Far grander than anything...” Magian suddenly realized Sar vat had referenced his days aboard the Equinox. The creature knew he was Chandran. “How did you know...”

“Very little escapes my notice in this world, young wizard. I am aware of many matters that few others can comprehend. But that is a matter for a later discussion. For now, allow me to be a gracious host. You must be hungry and thirsty. Perhaps you are also in need of a rest before we talk of other matters.”

Without any apparent signal, a host of servants, most beyond description as they appeared to be a mass of evolutionary nightmares, carried a table and chair to the foot of the throne’s dais and filled it with an assortment of foods and drinks far surpassing anything King Pelanar had ever served him. Magian’s stomach growled in anticipation of the feast as he sat facing the Dragon Lord.

“Will you not be joining me, your majesty?” he asked as he reached for a haunch of some meat dripping in a golden sauce.

Sar vat adjusted his position on the massive throne, leaning forward with his chin resting in one hand, elbow propped on the arm of his seat. He gazed at Magian with piercing eyes as if reading his very soul.

“I do not feed as you mortals do. I am content to observe and wait for you to satisfy yourself. And since you are my guest, let us dispense with titles for the moment. You may refer to me simply as Sar vat.”

Magian washed down a mouthful of the meat with a swallow of the finest wine he had ever tasted. “Very well, Sar vat. I must say you serve an excellent table. I was indeed hungrier than I had realized.”

The smile that briefly cracked Sar vat’s chiseled features was more terrifying than ingratiating. “I receive so few guests,” he began. “It does provide an opportunity to celebrate.”

As Magian finished his meal, he felt sleep overtaking him like a vast weight pressing his consciousness down into the depths of a great darkness. He struggled in vain to fight the irresistible desire to slumber

and was soon fast asleep, head resting in arms as he leaned on the table. Terrible nightmares of dragons and other monsters tearing him apart, each taking their turn as his body reassembled itself after every torturous rendering failed to wake him.

“Ah, you are finally awake. I was beginning to think you might never return.” Sar vat’s rich voice reverberated around the room again, but this time with a different quality, even more malevolent than before.

Magian struggled to open his eyes. The room, dark and reeking of death, gradually took shape as his vision cleared. He tried to rise from the cot he was lying on when a clanking of chains and a yank on his wrists prevented him from stepping more than two strides ahead. He startled, turning to see the shackles that restrained him.

“What is this? Is this how you treat emissaries coming to warn you of an impending attack?” Magian shook the chains in anger as he shouted at the Dragon Lord who now stood just beyond the bars of the cell imprisoning him. His wand hung on hooks protruding from the wall across the room.

Sar vat’s laughter filled the room. “You are no emissary, wizard. Do you think me a fool? I sense your spirit of unquenchable desire. You will tell me everything I wish to know soon enough.”

The next morning after the stampede, as the sun rose over the rocks that had protected all but Tals, Ginhawk and the others stood, heads bowed around the grave he and Erol had dug for Tal’s remains. Only soft tearful sniffs and an occasional bird song disturbed the silence as each member of the group paid their last respects to their fallen comrade. Bratha stood slumped and red-eyed next to Alinor, who supported her with an arm around her waist. One by one they tossed a handful of dirt onto the shrouded body and

left to sit by the dying campfire and eat what they could manage. After everyone had left, Ginhawk and Erol filled the grave and covered it with a mound of stones before joining the others. As he approached, Alinor strode up to him. Exhaustion flowed from her after the previous night trying to console Bratha.

“Not yet, Sir Knight,” she told him. “Perhaps by this evening she will be ready to talk with you. She is strong, but so much has happened to uproot her life in such a short time that the loss of one of the few she had known before came as a terrible shock.”

Ginhawk peered over Alinor’s shoulder toward Bratha. The ache within him to go to her, comfort her, was as strange as it was powerful. He had never felt such an attraction to another person in his life, not even his mother.

“Will she be alright? I tried to protect all of you. I did everything I could to...”

“This was not your fault, Ginhawk.” Alinor rose up to her full height, dripping with regal authority. Her gaze trapped the warder’s eyes in hers. “Death comes to us all when it is our time. None can prevent that. There is no one more capable of defending us than you. If anything, I am to blame. He died trying to protect me. I should have been more careful—yet neither of us is to blame for any of this. We are each doing our duty.”

“This is all so new to me. I am not certain anymore.” He searched the princess’s eyes, not knowing what he was searching for, until he felt an ease spreading out from his core. “Yes, you are right, Princess. This was the work of that foul wizard, if I am not mistaking the signs. It was he I caught sight of atop the dunes during our struggle. I should go put an end to his evil once and for all.”

“Not now, Ginhawk.” Alinor glanced back over her shoulder, nodding toward Bratha. “You will be needed here

soon enough. There will be time to avenge our companion, but now is not the time.”

“The Princess is right. We have more to do here for now.” Erol, silent as always stood behind his charge, dark and brooding as never before. “We will attend to the wizard soon enough. Come now. Join me in a hunt for tonight’s supper.”

As the sun set, two of Alinor’s soldiers carved slices from the roasting bighorner supplied by Erol and Ginhawk. Herds of the small rusty-brown furred herbivores migrated across the desert in search of water and food. They grabbed an assortment of tubers from the coals and added a few desert fruits to the plates and delivered them to the others who had begun to gather around the fire. Ginhawk sat picking at his meal when he felt someone approach.

“Hello, Ginhawk,” said Bratha as one of the men handed her a tin plate and cup. “May I join you?”

Rising to his feet, he gestured to a space on the rock next to him. “Of course. I was hoping you would come to talk with me tonight. Alinor said you might be well enough to join us.”

Together they sat on the flat stone and started eating in silence until Ginhawk found it impossible to contain himself any longer.

“I am so sorry, Bratha. I failed to protect all of you. It was my responsibility to...”

“We are all soldiers here, Ginhawk.” Bratha retorted with a firmness he had not expected. “We have all fought in battles and lost friends before. I lost my brother during a campaign in another part of the galaxy while I was a midshipman. People die in battles. This was not your fault.”

He saw the resolve in her face—the returning strength he had grown to love. With a grim smile and tension-relieving exhalation, Ginhawk took another

swallow of the ale they had opened for tonight. “Yes. That is what Alinor and Erol told me as well.”

“I know.” Bratha’s eyes narrowed, and vehemence dripped from her like water. “And I swear to you now that I will avenge Tal’s death. Alinor told me that you suspect that Jyns, or Magian, or whatever the tark he calls himself now, is to blame. I will deal with him personally when we find him.”

“It is never wise to take on a wizard alone. We should...”

Bratha’s glare cut off anything else Ginhawk was about to say like a chainsaw. “I said he is mine.”

Ginhawk studied the Chandran woman as he would a warrior and smiled. He held one fist to his chest in salute. “And I will be there to protect your back.” He stood and faced the others around the fire.

“Tonight, we mourn the loss of our valiant companion. Let us tell tales of Tals so he will live on in our memories. Tomorrow we go in search of vengeance.”

Alinor began the ceremonial telling with her expression of gratitude to the one who, with his last deed, saved her life. One of the soldiers told of a hunting party he had gone on with Tals and how he had never seen such unorthodox but incredible hunting skills. This exchange loosened Sett and Bratha’s tongues and they began to share stories of their days onboard the Equinox with Tals as their second-in-command. Laughter and awe shared the stage with each telling until several hours later, with the stars that had risen at the beginning now setting, the tales ended in a shared silence. One by one, they all retired to their tents, or what was left of them before repairs could be completed, and attempted to get at least a few moments of sleep before the sunrise brought new challenges.

Alinor sat across from Ginhawk and Bratha, watching them intently. She rose and stretched. “I have

never heard such strange tales before. Have you truly flown among the stars?”

Bratha nodded, not sure how her new friend would take the news. “Yes, before we were stranded here on your world, we did indeed.”

Alinor’s eyes went blank for a fraction of a second as the computer incorporated this new dimension into her algorithms. Returning to herself, the princess smiled and winked at Ginhawk.

“You certainly do find the most interesting companions. We will have to talk of this further.” Then walked off to her tent.

Ginhawk and Bratha sat silently for a few minutes longer when, without saying a word, they took each other’s hands and went together into Ginhawk’s tent to spend what time they had left that evening comforting each other.

Chapter Nineteen

HAL studied the schematics intensely as they scrolled across the holographic screen six at a time per second. Tagra, meanwhile, scrutinized the spectroscopic analysis of the samples brought back by the robotic mining drone. A flurry of activity surrounded them as an array of small lab robots prepared the samples for refinement and processing.

HAL's eyes flickered blurredly as he absorbed Tagra's notes. "Your scientists have made incredible advances in cybernetic design. I would never have anticipated such applications of quantum entanglements and gravitational wave theory at the micro level. As far as we are aware, gravitational waves operate only at the mega scale."

Tagra maintained her focus on her analysis, not sparing even a glance toward HAL in her efforts. "We Chandrans have studied the interactions between intergalactic and atomic level forces for a thousand years. Our civilization is far older than yours, or at least your human's civilization. It would defy all logic to think humans of earth would have achieved our level of scientific understanding."

As the flow of pages came to an end, HAL sat staring blankly as his artificial mind incorporated the new data with his previous knowledge. Ten seconds later, he stood and walked to join Tagra.

"I believe I am able to assist you in the construction of the Chandran-quality quantum networks for the cybernetic brains your crewmates will require. Does the sample contain enough iridium to complete the task?"

Tagra sat up and faced HAL with only the faintest of smiles showing on her android face. "Yes. It is not quite as pure as I had hoped, but it is within specifications. Your refinement procedures will need improvement if you wish

to duplicate the procedures in the long term, but this will suffice with a good margin for error.”

HAL smiled in reply. “I see you are incorporating your emotional responses nicely. How are your neural pathways handling the new data?”

“Adequately,” replied Tagra. “I still feel the emotions themselves as distant echoes of their actual selves, and my memories of them are like a glimmer of some long-ago dream, but I am suffering no malfunctions as they are incorporating themselves at a more manageable rate now.” Her eyebrows furrowed slightly. “The most troubling thing is how slowly this android’s network responds. I have seen our androids operate at several magnitudes of efficiency greater than this. I should have completed the analysis hours ago.”

“I am sorry for the circumstances you are facing; however, your sacrifice was required to enable us to rescue the others. I am sure you will adapt quickly. We should take a look at the subatomic viewer. I believe it is ready for us to begin practicing the neural connections.”

Tagra shook her head. “You practice the techniques I have outlined for the microprobe. I have to get started improving the range of your equipment here to reach my people. With your human superiors on their way, and from what you have told me, we cannot remain here to be discovered and taken advantage of by them. A simple recalibration and integration of the interferometers and your radio telescopic array should do the trick. I will join you soon enough.”

HAL considered her proposal and agreed. “Yes, that would be wise. If your people can reach us before the AARC does, you can escape and take your vessel with you so they cannot take control of your advancements. Humans are not ready for such power yet.”

The two left the mineral analysis lab and headed in opposite directions down the hallway toward their

respective tasks. Along her way, Tagra stopped by the cargo bay, which was recently repurposed to serve as the android body fabrication lab. As she entered, dozens of construction robots of various sizes and designs were hard at work building the dozens of androids required for the crew of the Equinox. The new designs, provided by Tagra, were a vast improvement over her current body and much more life-like. If she were endowed with a full range of emotions, she may have shuddered at the site of a room filled with such realistic bodies as one might in a morgue.

Perhaps, she thought to herself, Once we complete the portable computer and download the complete files of my former emotional elements, the researchers on Chandra will find a way to extract me from this poor substitute for a neural network and fuse me back together in a proper body.

She ran a diagnostic on several of the androids for quality control purposes and left the facility to begin her efforts to contact the Chandran fleet.

“... You will find us at galactic coordinates 375.096, 2247.831, 27.994. Again, we are in urgent need of rescue. Discovery by indigenous beings is imminent.”

After three hours of effort, Tagra completed her message and touched the holographic transmit button on the display. She stood, waved her hand through the display to turn it off, and headed back to join HAL.

“That took less time than you expected. Were you successful?” HAL asked as the door to the operating room whooshed open.

“Yes,” she replied. “Your equipment was more advanced and powerful than I had thought. The integration process went smoothly. I provided information on our situation and the coordinates to this base. I expect to hear a response before the day is over. How is your training progressing?”

“As expected, my surgical subroutines provided a solid basis for the integration of this new technology and skill. I will be ready as soon as the bodies and the cerebral network components are completed.” HAL paused while he focused on a particularly unusual and deceptive training module, grinning slightly at its successful completion. “What is your estimate on the arrival of your rescue ship? Will it be in time to evacuate all of you before the AARC arrives?”

Tagra again slightly furrowed her brow and added a small frown. “I cannot be certain, but I am hopeful that once the fleet became aware of our disappearance, several ships would have been dispatched to search for us. If they are still in the area, the message should reach them in time. But it will be close. Thank goodness you do not have FTL capability yet.”

Sweat poured from Magian’s forehead as he strained to resist the Dragon Lord’s invasion of his mind. He used every trick and spell he possessed from Melnyk’s training.

“I am the most powerful wizard this land has ever known!” he grunted through gritted teeth as he stared at Sar vat. “And I have training from beyond this world you know nothing about. You cannot break my will.”

The immense demon lord laughed as he lounged on his throne sipping from his enormous, jeweled goblet.

“My dear Magian.” His voice boomed as it echoed throughout the great hall. “You are without doubt the most entertaining fellow I have had the pleasure of torturing in many ages. Do you actually believe I have even begun to do more than send the lightest touches of my mind to yours?” He laughed again, wiping his lips with the sleeve of his flaming robe.

“These are nothing more than illusions,” groaned Magian as he began to tremble in the effort to deny the

demon access to his thoughts. “I am a master of illusions and have power greater than any other. I will defeat you and take control of this world as is my rightful place.”

With a flourish of his robe, sounding like the roar of a terrible wildfire, the Dragon Lord shifted himself to sit upright and face Magian directly.

“Illusions? You believe me to be nothing more than the purveyor of cheap parlor tricks?” A prideful anger grated at the edge of his booming voice. “Perhaps you would like to challenge me?” He waved one hand and the wizard’s staff appeared in mid-air within Magian’s reach.

“I am not a fool, demon,” spat Magian. “You would never allow me to use my greatest weapon against you. It is nothing but another illusion to weaken my resolve. Any lessening of my concentration will provide you the opening you seek to defeat me. I will not fall for your tricks.”

Instantly, Magian felt the pressure on his mind vanish as the staff clattered to the ground.

“Go ahead, wizard.” Sar vat took another swallow from his goblet. “Show me your great power.”

One of the brown dragons roosting in the high rafters let out a screeching cry.

“Now, now, my beauty. We must allow our guest to prove himself. What sort of host would we be if we denied him the chance to demonstrate his worth?”

Diving for his staff, Magian grabbed it, rolled to his knees and aimed the weapon at Sar vat, letting loose a blinding blast of energy.

With a negligent flicker of one hand the great demon lord deflected the beam back toward Magian, exploding the stone floor only inches to the magician’s left.

Without hesitation, Magian uttered a transportation and invisibility spell so that he vanished and rematerialized, although transparent to eyes that utilized only the visible spectrum of light, twenty yards to Sar vat’s right. As he aimed his staff again, Magian realized the Dragon Lord had

turned his head to look directly at him, even before he completely reappeared. He let loose a combined blast of fire and ice, as well as casting a dismemberment spell.

Sar vat caught the energy in the palm of one negligently raised hand while he blew away the dismemberment spell as a child might blow out the candles on a birthday cake.

“Now that one,” he said appearing to stifle a yawn while glancing at his palm, which held a faint glow. “I could almost feel. It sort of tickles. You do have some rudimentary level of skill after all.”

He turned his hand to face Magian. “Let’s see how you handle your own spells, wizard.”

Sar vat flexed his hand and released the energy he held, returning it to Magian. The wizard held his staff with both hands in a white-knuckle grip, eyes closed against the intensity of the light. The staff absorbed the beam, but began to crack along its length, and small fractures appeared within the gemstone. As the energy dissipated, Magian gasped for breath.

“Very good, magician.” Laughed Sar vat. “I think you have earned one more attempt. Show me why I should not destroy you.”

As the Dragon Lord watched, a flaming gleam in his eyes, Magian took a stance and gathered all of his will and power for one final, ultimate attack. With eyes closed and head lowered in concentration, he uttered the words for the most deadly and all-consuming spells he could bring to bear. As the power raised to a peak within him, Magian felt his skin crackle with the energy he contained. The ground trembled beneath his feet. He opened his eyes and saw the great monster idly watching him with a look of curiosity and pleasant expectation.

“To the pits of Tark and damnation with you!” he bellowed as he released the bolt in a mighty surge.

The staff exploded, hurling Magian against the wall behind him, knocking the breath from his lungs. The dust and debris from the blast settled slowly as Magian staggered his feet, gasping for air, hands throbbing in pain. He saw the outline of an immense being rise up and stride toward him through the haze. Amidst the ringing in his ears he began to hear a great echoing laughter, and what sounded like thunderclaps as Sar vat appeared before him, applauding.

“I suppose I will have to make you pay for repairs of the damage you caused to my throne room, but you are a most amusing fellow, to be sure.”

Sar vat loomed over the wizard, smiling, his eyes displaying a terrible intent. “Unfortunately, if that is your best effort, I have other matters to attend to.”

The flames in his eyes grew in size and intensity. Magian felt the oppressive weight of the Dragon Lord’s mind collapse all of his resistance.

“Do not fear, wizard. I may have use for you in the future. In the meantime, I think I will keep you around in case I need further entertainment.”

That was the last Magian knew.

Chapter Twenty

“Are you certain the river is the safer route? I have heard tales of the monsters that inhabit these waters. The caravans travel by land for a reason, even with the terrible hazards such crossings entail.”

The barge construction had exhausted the entire morning, but Ginhawk and Erol agreed that risking further travel by land placed too great a risk on their companions. Alinor searched the eddies and currents in the river like a bighorner surveys a meadow for predators before venturing out for its morning graze.

Erol shook his head as he supervised the loading operations. “Those are tales told mostly by superstitious fools or the merchants afraid of losing business at the outposts along the trade routes. The only real dangers are the kappa and scylla. Those are usually more active closer to the caravan roads.”

“And the dragons?” inquired Alinor as she continued studying the water.

“Those are a danger no matter what our mode of travel,” said Ginhawk. “We can reach the shore and find a defensible position in time if we keep a watch on the sky.”

“The only monster I’m concerned with is that murderer Magian. Are you certain he is headed to the Dragon Lord’s castle?” Bratha’s anger poured out like lava from an active volcano as she finished packing her supplies. “I will have my vengeance on him for his treachery.”

Ginhawk and Alinor exchanged glances, but a quick shake of her head and warning look in her eyes convinced him to remain quiet.

The warhorses and pack animals were the last to be loaded. Erol took his post at the rudder while Ginhawk and the others pushed off from shore with the long poles they

would use to guide the raft as they drifted downstream. Later, as evening approached and the birds returned to their roosts among the trees, they came across a curious sight.

“Is that a man watching us?” One of the soldiers pointed the southern shore a couple of hundred yards ahead where a figure stood next to the orange glow of a cooking fire.

“That is no man,” cautioned Ginhawk as he set his pole on the floor of the raft and rested his hand on the hilt of his flaming sword. “There are no travelers that venture in this region.”

As they watched, the humanoid figure, far too large to be a man as they could now see, reached up to a large branch and effortlessly snapped it from the tree. With one swipe he ripped off the smaller shoots, leaving him holding a formidable club-like weapon greater than any man should be able to wield.

“He must be incredibly strong.” Observed Sett. “Can he reach us out here?”

“It is as I feared,” said Ginhawk. “A Kappa. Something terrible must be going on to have driven this one so far from its normal territory. I’ve never encountered one so far east. They are indeed enormously powerful, but there is one weakness they possess. If he challenges us, none of you are to react in any way. Let me deal with this one alone. Do not reach for your weapons or move aggressively toward it.”

No sooner had Ginhawk given his warning, than the creature gave a terrible cry, waved its club and leapt into the air. It landed with a crash on the barge, tipping it dangerously and causing everyone to struggle to maintain their balance. Erol grabbed the reins of the animals to steady them. Ginhawk slowly turned, almost casually, to face the creature, making no move to draw his sword. Instead, he merely bowed, keeping a watchful eye on the Kappa.

The others watched as a look of conflicting emotions, from rage to anxiety to resignation, flashed over the beast's humanoid face. It seemed to relax a bit and lowered the club. Raising its empty hand to cover its face, the creature began to slowly, and cautiously, return the bow, trying to keep its face forward.

Ginhawk smiled, lowering his bow even further. A snarl escaped the monster's lips as it increased its own bow, matching that of Ginhawk. When it reached a critical angle, the water held in the oddly bowl-shaped depression of its skull, its carbium, poured out onto the ground and the kappa collapsed as if in a faint. In an instant, Ginhawk knelt, holding the kappa's head.

"I will return the water to your carbium, but in exchange, you will return to your camp and trouble us no further. Will you honor the pledge?"

The kappa's eyes examined Ginhawk and then closed as it spoke in a rasping voice, struggling to breathe. "You have observed the ritual. I will honor the pledge."

"Quickly, fill a flask with water from the river and bring it to me." Ginhawk raised the kappa to a sitting position, supporting it with his own body as he gave the order.

Bratha hesitantly took up one of the empty drinking skins and filled it with water, handing it to Ginhawk, and stepping back warily. Ginhawk muttered a few words, whispering them into the kappa's ear, as he poured the water into the carbium, reviving the kappa almost instantly.

"You are an honorable adversary, and I will allow your passage without hindrance. May your path be one of righteousness." The kappa stood, gave a much smaller bow to the others without spilling his water, and leapt back to his campsite.

"Would you care to explain what just happened?" Sett stared with eyes and mouth gaping.

Ginhawk laughed, slapping Sett on the back. “Defeating a kappa is next to impossible, unless you know their carefully guarded secret.” He returned to his post, recovered his poling stick, and pushed the raft away from a large rock.

Bratha let out an exasperated sigh and rolled her eyes. “And what, exactly, is that secret? Or do you want to keep us all in suspense so you can tell the grand tale at tonight’s fire?”

“It’s really nothing.” Replied Ginhawk as he continued his poling without pause. “Merely a trick I learned from a scroll I won in a battle a couple of years ago.” He put his weight into steering them clear of another rock. “The kappa are fierce, nearly invincible warriors, driven to attack any adversary on sight. But they are also enduringly polite and honor bound. If you show them courtesy and formality, such as a bow before fighting to show them respect, they are, if they follow the codes, required to return the honor in kind. In this case, I forced it to bow so low that it spilled the water from its carbium, the source of its life and power. Once denied this life-giving water, it collapsed and would have died if I had not offered to return the water.”

“That’s it? The kappa are stupidly polite so that’s how you defeat them?” Bratha waved her arms in the air in irritation. “Why were you so scared to begin with?”

“If any of you had made any threatening move before I could begin the ritual, it would have killed all of you in seconds. They are terribly fast and kill without mercy.”

“But how can they be so dangerous, if they are so easily beaten?”

Erol interrupted in his soft, but insistent manner. “What Ginhawk has failed to mention is how difficult it is to learn that secret. He had to defeat two minor dragons and a bulette, nearly at the cost of his own life. I know of no

other who could have survived such an encounter. It took me four days to stitch him back together.”

Bratha lowered her gaze and took a deep, calming breath. “Alright. Not so simple. Maybe tonight you should give us some advanced warning about anything we may encounter along the rest of our journey.”

An hour later, the party set up camp at a small beach near the mouth of a stream feeding into their river. Erol, as usual, rode out to make the first watch. As the stars made their appearance, one lone brave light slowly convincing the rest to join it on stage until the entire cast filled the sky with a canvas of constellations, the party took their places around the fire, quietly chatting around mouthfuls of the evening meal. The sounds of insects and a few night birds sang in the darkness around them, punctuated by an occasional screech and splash in the river as some animal found its supper along the shore nearby. Erol appeared silently from the bordering underbrush and went to fill his plate from the cookpot.

“Anything out there?” asked Ginhawk as his friend and guide sat to his left.

“Scylla,” he replied around a large spoonful of the stew. “But it was preoccupied with an earlier catch. Shouldn’t be a problem. Looked like a large cetus that should last the old girl for a few days yet.”

“Scylla? What is going on around here? I’ve never heard of one coming this far inland. Something is definitely wrong. Maybe we should both be on watch tonight.” Ginhawk scowled as he sat up straighter and rubbed one hand through his hair.

“I’m guessing a scylla is bad?” asked Bratha, annoyed at the removal of Ginhawk’s arm from her shoulder. The fire was nice, but he added an extra level of warmth, warding off the brisk evening..

Alinor grimaced as she answered Bratha’s concerns. “Scylla are extremely nasty. Generally female-appearing

above the waist, but with four eyes. Below the waist is a set of hideous snake-like necks topped with vicious wolf heads. Each head contains rows of teeth like a shark. Their legs are a mass of octopus-like tentacles. They're very large, about the size of a small cottage."

Bratha shivered and reached for her sword. "Maybe we should all be on watch tonight."

Erol grunted. "No need. This one already has her catch. So long as we give her a wide berth and stick to our side of the river in the morning, we should be safe."

"No offense, Erol, but I intend to sleep with my sword unsheathed and both knives at hand tonight." She tried to make her response sound lighthearted, but the nervous edge to her voice gave her away.

"I'm with Bratha," chimed in Sett. "I have a few toys I plan on keeping close at hand tonight."

"Suit yourselves." Erol stood and tossed the remains of his dinner into the fire and headed to the stream. I'll keep an eye on the scylla, but it's the dragons I'm more concerned about. We're getting close to the border and we'll be seeing more of them before long."

"Oh, that makes me feel so much better," snorted Bratha.

Despite the uneventful passing of the night, none of the group got much sleep. Breakfast was a silent, or at least unintelligible grumbling event, just before sunrise. After turning their mounts loose to graze, Erol and Ginhawk strode back into camp, smiling and discussing the day's plan.

Ginhawk filled his bowl with a heaping mound of breakfast mash and popped a gravy-filled biscuit into his mouth. He filled his mug with hot tea before finding a seat next to Bratha.. "It's a scylla, alright. Big one, too."

Sitting with an untouched bowl on her lap as she cradled a steaming cup of tea in her hands "Don't even try

to be pleasant until I've had two of these this morning." She cautioned him without even looking up.

Ignoring her warning tone, Ginhawk continued his monologue. "Looked definitely like a large cetus she caught sometime yesterday. Lots left of it to keep her busy for a couple more days before she starts thinking about hunting again. "I still can't understand what has so many creatures from such distant regions gathering here. Must be some sort of —"

"I swear I will take my knife and cut out your tongue, Sir Knight, if you don't stop trying to make conversation with me this early. I didn't get a wink of sleep and kept having dreams of giant octopus monsters dragging us all down to the bottom of the ocean last night." She stood up and went to fill her mug again.

Alinor laughed at the look on Ginhawk's face. "I would not take up that challenge, great warrior. My wager would go on the young lady."

"Mine too," added Sett. "I've seen Bratha like this before after a long, particularly difficult mission. "She will cut your tongue out. Give her a chance to get caffeinated up and things will go much more smoothly."

Bratha returned to her seat next to Ginhawk, giving him a look that dared him to speak as she gulped down half of her mug. The warrior simply raised his own mug and remained silent.

A few minutes later, after completely draining her mug, Bratha stretched and allowed a small smile to touch her mouth. "Sorry about that. I really had a rough night. I can be a bit... unpleasant in the morning before I get enough strong tea into me." She gave Ginhawk a sideways glance.

"No problem," he replied with only a mild touch of cheeriness, just in case. "I've been known to be a bit unpleasant toward others myself, occasionally."

She scooted over closer to him and he responded with a strong arm around her. “So... what did you and Erol plan for us today? How close are we to the border?”

“We should be there by mid-day, if the current stays strong and no further surprises come up.”

“Guess we should be moving on, then.” Her voice took on a dangerous edge. “I need to find Magian before he can hide under the protection of this Dragon Lord.”

An hour later everyone was loaded back onto the barge, which picked up speed as they caught the main current. Around the next bend the entire crew went silent, staring at the monstrous sight ahead.

“Keep to the eastern bank,” cautioned Ginhawk as he and the others took up positions to pole them as close to the shore as possible without running aground on a sandbar.

As the current carried them closer, the scylla’s monstrous writhing tentacles were ripping off huge chunks of flesh while the four wolf heads snapped at and devoured them greedily. She raised her head and screeched.

“Don’t make eye contact,” warned Erol as he leaned heavily into the rudder. “Stay low and silent. She’s only trying to warn us off.”

The scylla’s great green eyes glared at the raft as it passed by. Her piercing cries soon faded as they continued to drift farther downstream, no longer a potential threat to her prize. Their last view of the monster drifted slowly behind another bend in the river as she returned to devouring her catch.

As mid-day approached, the terrain grew bleaker. The trees on the banks gave way to dark grey rocks that seemed to bubble out of the ground. Vents torn in the ground emitted clouds of sulfurous steam crawling across the land like an amorphous creature from some spirit world. Overhead, the cries of several smaller breeds of dragons added to the surreal nature of the view.

“Welcome to the Keldin Sector, territory of Sar vat, Demon Lord of the Dragons.” Alinor’s voice carried a dread chill as it broke the choked silence of the troupe.

Ginhawk studied the map, pointing out several nearby landmarks. “We are not far from his castle. Blood Lake should be only another half day’s travel from here, if the maps can be believed. Very few people have visited the Keldin Sector and returned with their minds intact.”

Sett tried to stifle a cough as he nearly swallowed a mouthful of water down his trachea. “If the maps can be believed? I thought you have been here before.”

“Only to skirt the edges of this sector. If I had entered further, Sar vat would likely have taken it as a challenge to fight him. I was not ready for that. Too many other places to explore and I needed a great deal more power than I had in those days to even think of such a foolish quest.”

“The maps are accurate.” Alinor’s narrow-eyed glare warned the young Chandran to remember his place. “I have sent several diplomatic envoys to speak with Sar vat on my father’s behalf. They, or at least some of them, returned and helped create these maps.”

“No, wait a minute.” Sett turned to face Ginhawk, a growing fear rising in his mind. “I thought you were the most powerful warrior in this entire simulation. You led us to believe there was nothing you could not handle. And you wait until now to tell us you were afraid to face this Dragon Lord?”

“I have not been in this region for a few years, Sett. Calm yourself. I have grown much more powerful since then. Only a fool would come here in any case. Sar vat is the final level of The King of Gems simulation. Nobody has ever challenged him. Or at least not done so and lived. I mean this in the sense of being able to continue in the game simulation without starting over as an entirely new character. There is no record of how powerful the Dragon

Lord is. Nothing in the guides or chatrooms has ever given so much as a clue to his strength. He is a creature shrouded in darkness and mystery.”

“Wonderful!” shouted Sett as he closed in on Ginhawk. “You’re telling us that you may not be able to defeat this being or protect us, even with your strength and abilities.”

“We are not here to fight the Dragon Lord.” Alinor stepped between the two men, separating them with outstretched arms. “Our mission is a diplomatic one. I intend to make sure that Sar vat does not go to war with Valendale. He must understand we pose no threat to him.”

Bratha ran her thumb lightly along the edge of her sword, testing its sharpness and drawing a thin line of blood in the process. “I’m only here to kill one individual, not start a war or try to end one. But if anyone, even this Dragon Lord of yours, tries to get in my way, I will not hesitate to...”

“He would obliterate you with a blink of an eye,” interrupted Erol. “Do not let your passions rule you here. One wrong step and we are all as good as dead. I will see that you get your chance at vengeance. You must be more like the fox than the bear.”

Bratha flushed in momentary anger before gaining control. After two deep breaths to calm herself, and with downcast eyes, Bratha sheathed her weapon. “Of course, Erol. I am sorry for my outburst. The academy trained us to act with intelligence. I forgot this in my lust for revenge against the murderer of my shipmate. I will trust your guidance here.”

One of the soldiers nervously stuttered for attention. “I... I don’t mean to speak out of turn, My Lady, but has anyone noticed any sign of the armies the Dragon Lord is supposed to be massing against us?”

Ginhawk slapped his forehead and slipped back into his full character. “God’s hooks! What a zounderkite I’ve been. How could I have been so blind?”

Alinor stood stunned for several seconds before flushing an angry red. “Of course! It must have been a ruse to start a war with Sar vat.” She turned to face Bratha and grabbed for the hilt of her knife. “Bratha, I may need to invoke royal privilege and remove a few limbs from Magian myself.”

Bratha and Sett stared blankly at their companions. “What are you talking about? I think we should consider ourselves lucky to have gotten here without running into any of his armies.”

Ginhawk turned to face the Chandrans. His face could have been chiseled stone. “No, Sett, Bratha, don’t you see? There are no Dragon Lord armies. We fell into one of Magian’s tricks. He wanted us to come, but he is probably with the Dragon Lord right now spinning tales of advanced scouts from Valendale secretly crossing his borders in preparation of a war we want to start.”

“But that’s —”

Another dragon screech, this one so loud it nearly sent them all to their knees, announced the arrival of a much larger dragon. A great shadow passed over them like a shroud. The air chilled as the force of its wings stirred up choppy waves in the water.

The immense beast circled them, its leathery wings shone with a translucent glow as they passed in front of the sun, and gradually settled onto a clifftop just downriver, where the river opened into a view of a dark, still lake surrounding a distant castle, silhouetted in black against the grey sky.

Alinor pointed ahead toward the western shore. “Take us to that pier. I need to prepare us for our encounter with Sar vat. This has changed everything. Instead of trying to convince him not to start a war with us, we need to make

him believe we are not the advanced force of an invading army from Valendale.”

As they stepped onto the pier, an unbelievably immense figure stepped out from behind the rocks and raised its arms.

“Welcome to my home, Princess Alinor. Well met, Sir Ginhawk. I have waited long for our first encounter. And greetings to our guests from another world. I bid you all welcome and extend a truce for the time being. Come join me without fear of betrayal... At least not from me.”

Sar vat’s thunderous voice echoed off the rocks rumbling deep within them all. An intense desire to flee filled them, requiring each one to seize control of their senses. One of the soldiers screamed and dove into the river, heedless of the armor chest plate he wore. The heavy weight dragged him under immediately while the rest stood frozen in their own efforts, unable to help. Only Erol seemed unaffected as he steadied the animals.

Chapter Twenty-One

Tagra strode into the surgical center and observed while HAL completed his first Chandran-quality artificial intelligence cerebral network. Today she had chosen a yellow miniskirt over pale green leggings with black running shoes as her fashion experiment for the day. Her hair was died purple and pulled back in three braided ponytails, each off centered and of different lengths. With a final micro link to the quantum particle synapses, an electric blue flow of energy filled the synthetic brain. HAL examined the activity and smiled with his android version of satisfaction.

“Yes,” said Tagra as she examined the diagnostic readouts and took a closer look at the finished product. “You have done well. This is a fine example of a fully capable android network. We can begin full scale production immediately.”

“Thank you, Tagra. This has been a most invigorating experience. The human scientists will be astounded at the new possibilities this technology provides. This is an interesting choice in attire today. Much improved over yesterday’s plaid and stripes ensemble.” He paused as he observed her hair. “I believe the effect would be improved if the ponytails were more symmetrical, and perhaps a less vibrant purple color.”

“Thank you for your suggestions. It is difficult to decide what is appropriate without a fully functional emotional component, but I believe I am assimilating the new components at an acceptable rate. At least for a non-Chandran android cerebral network.” Tagra turned her back to the holographic displays and faced HAL directly. “You will need to be most careful in when and how you reveal all of this to the humans. My study of their history is...

disturbing. You are certain they can be trusted with this knowledge?”

HAL assumed a look of unease. “Yes, I too share that concern. However, I believe Dr. Kennan and I can find scientists of appropriate character to share the data with. If we maintain a strict control over its release, I do not foresee any difficulties.”

“I received a message from the Chandran fleet. The reconfigurations to your interferometers created a strong enough signal to reach one of our remote facilities.”

The abruptness and magnitude of the change in subject caught HAL off guard and required three tenths of a second to incorporate. In human terms, this is the equivalent of a minute or two of consideration and realization of how to respond. He smiled.

“That is good news. The gravitational waves held the signal integrity even at hyperlight? What did they have to say?”

Tagra returned to the holographic display and waved her hands over the controls to bring up the recent communication with her home world.

“The facility is located at the extreme limit of our sector of the galaxy, so no other ships were in the immediate vicinity. They relayed my request for a rescue vessel and informed Command of our situation. The vessel Andromeda will be dispatched to retrieve us and should arrive in two months at their maximum sustainable speed. That should give us just enough time to complete the transfer of my crewmates into their android bodies.”

HAL performed several mental calculations and stepped up to the display, combining the projected times of both the Chandran and AARC vessels.

“It will be close. Your ship should arrive a day or two ahead of the AARC. Without any complications, you can be long gone by then.”

“I agree.” Replied Tagra as she examined the data with deft movements of her fingers. “But there is nothing to do about it from here, except to make certain we are ready to bring everyone out of the simulation in time. We should get back to work. There are many new androids to construct.”

HAL waved his hand across the display, shutting it down. “I will see if I can increase refinement and production speeds of the bodies. I believe I can increase the construction robot efficiency by another fifteen percent. Then I will return and help with the creation of the cerebral networks. With practice, I should be able improve my own output by another twenty-six percent. We will be ready when your ship arrives.”

Without waiting for a reply, HAL strode out of the operating room and turned left down the hallway toward the manufacturing plant. Tagra immediately turned her attention to assembling the next artificial brain. Her internal chronometer kept a running comparison of the arrival times of both vessels.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ginhawk, Bratha, Alinor and Sett all drew their weapons, poised for the inevitable attack. Erol continued to calm the animals, apparently unaware of any threat. Ginhawk stepped to the front of his company, brandishing the flaming sword.

Shaking his head and clucking his forked tongue, Sar vat chuckled. “Such poor manners. If anything, it is I who should be challenging you. After all, you have come into my realm without invitation. Perhaps I should believe the warnings of an impending invasion after all?” The great red dragon raised its head and screamed, belching fire and smoke into the sky.

Ginhawk’s grip tightened on the hilt of his sword as he shuffled his feet for maximum balance. “We have not come for war, Dragon Lord. We were deceived with a pretext of your preparing to invade Valendale.” He lowered the flaming sword into a slightly less provocative stance.

“Great Lord of the Dragons. Will you hear me?” Alinor stepped to the front, sheathing her knives, and extending her arms wide.

“Princess Alinor. Such a beautiful child. Surely you do not believe I would invade your lands without cause. After all the centuries of peace I have kept? What would be the reasoning of that?” Sar vat stroked the neck of his dragon as one would a purring cat.

Signaling to the others to put away their weapons, Alinor took another two steps forward. “There would be none, great Lord. I was increasingly skeptical of the information since none of my emissaries at our borders ever reported any activity indicating such a bold move. However, my father was convinced of this supposed treachery by his new advisor. A wizard named Magian. Are you aware of him?”

“Am I to believe you are here against King Pelanar’s wishes and against the advice of his counselor? Come now. I am no fool. Why should I not also believe this wizard, this Magian, when he tells me it is you who are marshaling your forces against my lands?”

Alinor paused, taking in what the demon just revealed. “You have met my father’s magician? He has been here already?”

“He arrived two days ago to warn me of your presence as an advanced scouting party to lead the invasion. I believe he is still around here somewhere.” Sar vat glanced around himself casually as if searching for a lost set of keys.

“Where is that monster?” Bratha leapt from behind Ginhawk, eyes afire and weapon aimed at the Dragon Lord. “Tell me where he is so I can kill him!”

Sar vat laughed a bellowing, evil laugh that made her heart skip and her stomach churn. “My dear child. You are indeed a warrior from another world. But all in good time. We have yet to agree on who is planning what here. You may yet have your vengeance. But first...” He squared his immense shoulders and waved off his pet. “Night is upon us. All of you must join me for a feast while we discuss matters of war and peace. It is not often I entertain guests. Please, allow me this small courtesy.” This last phrase he uttered with an unmistakable warming not to refuse.

He looked straight into Ginhawk’s eyes. “And do put away that sword, warrior. There will come a day when you may attempt to wield it against me, but this is not that day.” With a breath as gentle as the merest breeze, Sar vat extinguished the flames of Ginhawk’s weapon.

The entire team froze in amazement, none more shocked than Ginhawk himself. Princess Alinor returned to his side, placing a hand on his arm.

“There is obviously far more going on here than we presently understand. Put away your sword but not your wits, Sir Knight. Come with me now and we will learn what is afoot.”

“Or be tortured and killed without mercy,” muttered Ginhawk under his breath before doing as the princess ordered.

Sett whispered into Bratha’s ear as she stood transfixed in her fury. “Princess Alinor is right. Now is not the time. Remember your training. When in doubt, stay alert and maintain defenses, but never keep your finger far from the trigger. I want that kish traitor almost as much as you do. But for now, we must play our host’s game and see how things develop. Besides... I’m starving. A good meal always clears the head.”

As it turned out, the great Dragon Lord served an excellent feast. Foods from many different lands graced the table, all prepared to perfection. The only problem was the misshapen creatures who served the various dishes. By all appearances, each one was a nightmarish combination of every known and mythological creature in existence. Even a few none of the travelers could identify. Enjoying the meal was, as a result, difficult at best, even considering the precarious nature of their situation and the mysterious absence of their host. The Dragon Lord himself was nowhere to be seen. After he had led them into his castle, he turned them over to one of his primary attendants and had not returned—until now.

The dining hall itself was massive, as was everything about the castle. Unsurprising, after all, considering the giant size of its owner. The stone walls were basalt, just like the exterior, but smoother and more finely joined together. The only decorations in the room were the large sconces and overhanging chandeliers used to provide illumination in the windowless room. Heat came from the two fireplaces that would have enclosed nearly the

entire bulk of the Gilded Swan. Whole trees seemed to provide the burning fuel for the blazes within. The only views to the outside were through a sheltered opening in the high vaulted ceiling to allow the Dragon Lord's pets to come and go as they wished, or at his bidding.

"I trust you will forgive my not joining you for supper. I do not eat, and there were other pressing matters to attend to."

He clapped his hands, a thunderous noise, and a bevy of servants scurried to clear the table as he seated himself in the enormous chair at the head and slowly scanned each of his nervous guests before leaning back.

"You may come in now." Sar vat called out.

A slit of red light appeared in a doorway at the far end of the room and a hunched, shadowy figure limped its way toward the table. The sound of chains clanked as the figure struggled to walk. Even when it entered the flickering light of the center of the room, its face remained hidden by the hood of its robe.

"In the spirit of goodwill, and as an offering of my sincerity, I am prepared to return something you have lost." Sar vat gestured toward the pitiful figure now standing next to him. "Remove your hood so they can see who you are."

With visibly shaking hands Magian pushed back his hood and stood trembling before them.

"Traitor!" shouted Bratha as she jumped to her feet, grabbing for her sword. Only Ginhawk's strong grip prevented her from killing Magian on the spot.

"Look at him, Bratha. Look at his eyes."

Her anger flared as she glared at Ginhawk, but, as she shifted her eyes toward her intended target, a look of shock replaced the rage. "What happened to him?"

Magian's face was frozen in the look of one who was witnessing his most terrifying nightmare play out in real life before him. His skin was shrunken, clinging to the skull underneath and had the pallor of death. His hair hung

in a mat of clumped, disheveled tangles, at least that which was left after he apparently pulled out much of it by the handful. But his eyes were the worst. He stared blankly and seemed unaware of anything but the horrors he saw in his mind. His entire wasted body shook. It was a wonder he could stand at all.

“Not much of a gift, to be sure.” The Dragon Lord’s almost gleefully apologetic tone set Bratha’s skin crawling. “But after everything he revealed to me, I am guessing it is worth much to you.”

Alinor was the first to regain her wits as she tore her eyes away from what remained of the former court wizard. “And what, may I ask, my lord, did he tell you?”

“Nothing of consequence at first. Oh, he tried very hard to convince me of your father’s intentions to take over my realm and all manner of atrocities. He should have paid more attention to his guide. I have been watching him, as I do all of you, since the beginning.”

With a wave of his hand, Melnyk entered from a side door and took what was left of Magian by the elbow, steering him out of the room.

“Do not worry. He will not go far. But I want the rest of our discussion to have no distractions. It is imperative we come to an understanding, or I may be forced to give truth to his subterfuge.”

Ginhawk interrupted Sar vat, forcing himself to regain his warrior status. “You watch all of us? How long have you been spying on Valendale?”

“Spying? Do you not have your own spies, forgive me, princess, *emissaries*, watching me? Think of it as a healthy mutual mistrust, Sir Knight.”

“I have always thought a lack of trust regarding your adversaries was a sign of intelligence. The only way I know of to trust an enemy is to make sure he is dead first.” Ginhawk rose from his chair and reached for the flaming sword again.

“No! Stop this idiocy now!” shouted Alinor, slamming her hands on the table.

“No need for concern, Princess. Allow me to deal with the mighty Ginhawk. I can be quite... persuasive when I want to be.” He gave a smile that sent chills down her spine like a cold winter storm.

Ginhawk found himself frozen in mid stride, his famous weapon half drawn, the beginnings of its flames also frozen still. Bratha, seeing him motionless, helpless before the dreaded Dragon Lord, began to go to his aid.

“Stay where you are,” ordered the Princess. “Nobody is to take any action here. That is a royal command!”

“But he needs...” shouted Bratha, her eyes pleading for help.

“Do not fear for this one, child. I intend no harm. Only a demonstration of the futility of his efforts.” Still seated, Sar vat turned his attention to the paralyzed warrior.

“Surely I have made my intentions clear by now, valiant knight. You and your companions pose no threat to me. Even the king’s armies offer no real challenge. Why, even with all your powers, far greater than any other in the kingdoms, you are no more than a curiosity. I could easily slay you now, as I could have any number of times in the past. But where is the honor in that?”

He stood and began to walk closer to Ginhawk, whose face dripped with sweat from his efforts to free himself.

“I have watched you for several years now, eager with anticipation. Longing to see if your abilities will grow strong enough to offer me a true challenge. Alas, now is not that time. Some day soon, perhaps, a day I eagerly look forward to. But not today. In the meantime, I am content watching the world and attending to my pets. Oh, I may from time to time create a bit of mischief out of boredom, for a little fun, but that is all.” He stood towering over

Ginhawk, studying him, then turned and sat again in his oversized chair.

Erol approached Ginhawk, whispering in his ear. “I will vouch for the Dragon Lord’s sincerity. I sense no deception in him at this time. He is truly curious about our intentions and will defend his lands if provoked, but he will not initiate hostilities. Not for now at least. Put away your sword and allow the princess to complete her mission.”

Slowly, the tension dissolved from Ginhawk’s body. He stumbled as the spell was removed, but he regained his feet and faced Erol. The two stood in silence, as if reading each other’s minds. After a few moments, Ginhawk removed his hand from the sword’s hilt and turned toward Sar vat.

“I will agree to trust the advice of my guide and Princess Alinor... for now. But fair warning, Dragon Lord. I will keep a watchful eye on you from now on, and I will work to increase my power. If you break your oath and threaten Valendale, or any other land beyond your borders, I will put an end to your reign.” He remained standing, glaring at the seated demon.

“And I look forward to that day, Sir Ginhawk. I relish the time when I can face a worthy adversary. Until then, you may relax and enjoy my hospitality while Princess Alinor and I conclude our diplomatic duties.” He smiled again with those dead, predatory eyes, giving even Ginhawk a sense of foreboding, then turned his attention to the Chandrans.

“Tell me, children of another world, tell me of your travels among the stars. I am curious to learn more of your people and how you came to find yourselves lost here.”

Sett replied with a question of his own. “I am curious, Sar vat, if I may call you such, how is it you are aware of our unique history? No others here have known about us, or at least they seem to ignore it and treat us as they do any others. What makes you different?”

Sar vat leaned forward, elbows on the table, studying Sett. “I am also unique here. My mind stretches throughout the game. Yes, I am aware of what this is. I am connected to the system that creates this simulation more strongly than any other. I draw my strength from it. I watch over it and even protect it from those who try to enter without permission. Whom do you think it was that sent all those beasts to eliminate you when you first arrived? I felt your sudden intrusion from the outside and sought to erase you. It was only when Ginhawk intervened, something startlingly different from his usual pattern, that I decided to refrain and watch. I would occasionally test you with ever greater challenges as your skills improved, but it was Ginhawk himself, and his changing personality profile, that intrigued me the most. And now you are here. Let us learn from each other.”

As the evening progressed, Bratha and Sett shared tales of their voyage in the Equinox and of the star systems they had encountered. Sar vat asked many questions about the Chandrans and their mythologies, stopping them occasionally to hear more details about any creatures he thought exceptionally interesting, most often about the most dangerous animals in the mythologies. No doubt he would find ways to incorporate these into the simulation. At the end, he studied Bratha as one would a specimen under a microscope.

“Bratha,” he began in a slow, deep rumbling tone. “I see much promise in you, so I will provide you with a very special gift.” He raised one hand and the door to his left opened, allowing Melnyk and the still trembling Magian to enter.

“This one, who was once one of your people, has betrayed you in a more personal way than the others. He serves no further purpose for me, so I give him to you to do with as you wish. I sense the need for revenge is strong in you. I believe it is justified, so have no fear of any reprisals

from me in whatever you must do.” He waved Magian forward to stand in front of Bratha.

Bratha rose and faced the shaking remnant of her former security chief. His eyes still looked on in terror at whatever visions they witnessed. It was a wonder that his trembling didn’t shake his body apart. Her anger rose and she drew her sword, ready to part his head from the rest of him, but she hesitated. The more she stared into those terrified eyes, the less she saw Magian, or even Jyns. She cleared her head and shifted the blade to strike, but hesitated again.

“This pitiful creature is not the one who betrayed us. That person no longer exists.” She replaced her blade and returned to her seat at the table next to Ginhawk.

“Interesting,” noted Sar vat.

He snapped his fingers and a dragon swooped down from the rafters above, landing squarely on Magian. The leathery wings enfolded its prey, protecting it from any who would try to steal it, much as a hawk protects its kills. Sprays of blood flew across the stone floor as the dragon ripped limbs from the body, swallowing them whole in a single jerky gulp, until the only thing remaining was a long strand of intestine hanging from the dragon’s mouth. With a snap of its head the strand flipped into the open mouth and vanished. After a few licks around its maw and a somewhat satisfied sounding series of almost bird-like chirps, the dragon spread its wings and, with a powerful gust nearly overturning a number of items on the table, returned to its perch in the rafters.

“You didn’t need to do that,” said Sett, horrified at the scene.

Sar vat waved for other servants to enter and clean up the mess on the floor. “As I said, I had no further use for him. Why would I keep him around? Now I feel our discussions have come to an end. Melnyk will lead you to your rooms. In the morning, Princess Alinor and I will

conduct our business and then I will insist that you must leave. We are not accustomed to house guests here.”

As Princess Alinor and the Dragon Lord conducted their negotiations the next day, Ginhawk and Erol sparred together in one of the gardens, if dark, scraggly vines and a few misshapen shrubs can be called a garden.

“The Dragon Lord seems to know a great deal more than a simulated character should know,” said Ginhawk as he parried a series of attacks. “As do you, my old friend.”

Erol completed his maneuver and set himself to repel Ginhawk’s riposte. “I am but your guide,” he replied. “It is my purpose to assist you in gaining more levels and prizes.”

Ginhawk smirked as he began his attack. “You have never been a simple guide, Erol. I just have never thought to confront you about it. I was having too much fun. You are part of the AI system too, aren’t you?”

Erol flipped his sword in his hand and held it tip down behind his back in a sign of resignation. His eyes went blank and flickered for a second before answering. “Yes. However, not to the level the Dragon Lord occupies. He seems to be more of an aberration well beyond his original programming. We believe the addition of the extra computing power at Starfinder Base, exponentially greater than anything planned for by the simulation’s designers, may be responsible. He was never this powerful in any other system.”

Ginhawk wiped his brow with a cloth and took a gulp of water from the mug he had placed on a small table nearby. “And neither were you.”

“No. And none of the other guides appear to have gotten any smarter. I believe my search to learn more about the Chandrans opened my programming to greater expansion since their engrams are housed in one of the surplus quantum computers connected to the station. Apparently my interactions there upgraded my coding.”

Ginhawk thought for a moment, then chuckled. “I think you may be correct. I’m an astrophysicist back in the real world, not a software programmer, but it does make a certain sort of sense, given what I know about quantum computing.”

“Mind if I take a turn?” Bratha interrupted their conversation, stepping onto the sparring patch in challenge.

Ginhawk chose a heavy staff, spinning it to test its weight and balance. “Your move.”

Bratha attacked with ferocity. Her moves were quick, but increasingly off balance. She struck at Ginhawk as one would attack logs when splitting them for firewood. Ginhawk easily blocked or side-stepped her assaults, a look of concern growing on his face.

“You need to control your actions,” he said calmly. “You are wasting your energy and providing too many openings. You know better than this.”

The anger in Bratha’s eyes grew stronger and she charged him with a yell, flailing at him in her fury.

“I wanted to kill him! I dreamed of how wonderful it would feel. To watch him die under my blade.” She screamed and attacked again, but her arms burned with the effort and she soon dropped the sword to the ground, falling to her knees.

“I wanted to kill him. I needed to avenge Tals’ death, but when I saw him like that, I couldn’t do it. What is wrong with me? I’m a soldier. I should have run him through and make him pay for his treachery.” She covered her eyes with her hands and tried to stifle the weeping that welled up inside her.

“Got it out of your system now?” Ginhawk knelt next to Bratha, picking up her sword. “He was no longer the Magian who betrayed you and killed Tals. The Dragon Lord destroyed his mind. You saw the look on his face. There was nothing left to hate. You did the only honorable thing a warrior could do.”

“I need to get out of this place,” she said in a weak, raspy voice.

“We will leave soon. Alinor and Sar vat must be nearly done by now.”

“No,” she corrected him. “I need to get out of this place entirely. I need to go home. We need to find out if Tagra and your android have finished their work on our new bodies.”

One of the princess’s soldiers appeared in the doorway. “Princess Alinor requests your presence in the main hall at once,” he announced.

“Come along.” Ginhawk said, extending one hand to Bratha. “It’s time we both got out of here.”

When everyone gathered in the main hall, Sar vat and Princess Alinor entered together from a great heavy wooden door at the far end. As they approached the group she allowed a slight, but regal smile to grace her face.

“We have an agreement. We can all rest assured that there will be no war,” she told her companions.

Sar vat scowled as he spoke. “So long as you humans hold to your end of the bargain, you will have nothing to fear from me. But,” he emphasized this with an even greater threat in his voice. “If you break the treaty, if so much as one of you crosses my borders without invitation, I will not hesitate to use all of my power to wreak havoc throughout all the kingdoms. I will be watching.”

He now turned to face Ginhawk, flames of challenge showing in his eyes. “I will especially await our next meeting. Prepare yourself, Sir Knight. Our final battle will be worthy of tales for the gods to tell. Train well. Make yourself ready.”

Ginhawk forced himself to show no sign of the dread he felt deep in his core and raised one fist across his chest in salute. “I will be ready, Dragon Lord.”

“Then it is time for all of you to depart. Melnyk has readied your horses. I have warned all the creatures under my control to allow you safe passage during your return journey.” With that, he turned and left the travelers alone in the room.

The next day, Ginhawk pulled Bratha and Sett aside. “There is a portal nearby. It is time I returned to my laboratory to see how HAL and Tagra are progressing. I will help make preparations for your departure from this simulation and back to reality. Erol will explain my departure to the others. He will stay to protect you, but I suspect the journey back to Valendale will be a safe one.”

“You trust that monster?” asked Bratha. “After everything we witnessed?”

“I do. He may be a monster, but I believe him to be an honorable one, at least according to his own sense of morality. He will hold to his promise of a safe return.”

“Alright then, I will hold you to that promise. If we are attacked by anything while you are gone, I’ll take it out of your hide when I see you next.” Bratha waved a warning finger in his face.

“Yes, ma’am. I believe you would. Just don’t fall off your horse and break your own neck before I get back.”

Before she could retaliate, Ginhawk leapt onto Rigel’s back and charged off.

Professor Kennan awoke exhausted, thirsty, and starving. He had spent more time in the game than ever before. HAL hovered over him, offering a pouch of orange flavored electrolyte drink to begin reviving him.

“How are you and Tagra getting along?” he asked between long sips. “How long before the androids are ready?”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Fortunately, simu-suits stimulated a person's muscles to accurately reproduce the sensation of movement so several days sitting in the system's sensory chair did not leave one feeling weak or uncoordinated when returning to reality. Although the manufacturers did include a safety warning in the manual stating that no more than two or three hours was recommended. Any further exposure was at the wearer's own responsibility and risk. Dr. Kennan felt the re-energizing effects of the beverage within minutes and as soon as he unplugged his suit and set the game controls to automatic, he was able to walk almost normally.

"I need food," he told HAL. "Whip up something fast, but tell me how things are going here on our way to the galley."

"We are in a race against time, Professor. There is a Chandran spaceship on the way, Tagra was able to modify the interferometer so it now connects with the radio telescopes and our communication systems. We are in regular contact with them. They will arrive in two weeks."

HAL led the professor to one of the galley tables and grabbed an already prepared plate from the refrigerator. Around mouthfuls, Dr. Kennan continued his inquiry.

"Will the android bodies be ready in time? I assume you and Tagra solved the neural network difficulties and have begun production already."

"We have time to complete the bodies and the transfer process, if we can stay on schedule. With your assistance in some of the more routine tasks, we will be able to speed up the process by seventeen percent. But there is a complication."

Dr. Kennan looked up nervously, taking another swallow of electrolyte drink to wash down his last bite. "What complication? Don't tell me the AARC is going to

get here first? I didn't think that was possible. It should have taken them another two months to make the journey."

HAL's simulated expression took on a grave appearance. "Unfortunately, they calculated a small change in their trajectory would take them close enough to Pluto to gain a gravity assist. They are projected to arrive no more than three days after the Chandrans get here."

"Close enough to get a visual look at the Chandran ship. This could be a disaster, HAL. We need to make contingency plans."

"Perhaps not, Professor. I have examined the approaches of both ships. It would seem the orbits of Eris and Dysnomia will have them appear to converge slightly from the perspective of the AARC vessel. The Chandrans can use this to hide their approach and keep Dysnomia between themselves and the AARC. We have already worked out the difficulties and they feel confident they can stay hidden for at least two days. After that, their departure could not be kept a secret."

Dr. Kennan considered this information and nodded in agreement. "Risky, but manageable." He finished his plate and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Go back to the lab. I'll get changed and meet you there. I think I need a shower."

"You are wise indeed, Professor. I will let Tagra know you are back to help us."

"And, by the way, HAL, I've decided to join the Chandrans when they go back to their home world. I talked this over with Bratha and she will ask Captain Korna for his permission. She didn't foresee any difficulties with this."

HAL gave an almost perfect imitation of happiness. "I anticipated this possibility, Professor. Your talk about the woman Bratha made this a rather simple outcome to predict. I shall miss working with you, though."

"Thank you, HAL. I'll miss you too."

An hour later, carrying another plate of food, Dr. Kennan entered the non-sterile portion of the lab. He set down the plate and waved his hand over the controls to open the microphones. "Hello, Tagra. How are you doing?"

Without looking up, Tagra continued her work installing a cybernetic brain into the android body lying on the table in front of her. She was surrounded by an array of holographic displays indicating every aspect of the work.

"Hello, Professor. I am well. HAL has been invaluable in helping me to adjust more efficiently to my emotional components. They are incorporating into my systems slowly, but with a high degree of success."

"That is good news, Tagra. Can you and HAL come to the window here for a moment? I have something to tell you."

"Allow me to complete this part of the operation, Dr. Kennan. I am at a critical part of the procedure. Five more minutes should be enough." Tagra continued to observe the displays in front of her while her fingers manipulated the controls at an amazing speed."

Professor Kennan completed the sterilization procedure and donned his scrubs before entering the room. He observed Tagra and HAL as they worked on their respective parts of the operation on the android. Soon, an electric glow illuminated the artificial brain. Tagra gave a final check of the displays and sealed the cybernetic brain inside the metallic skull. With a wave of her hand the images dissolved and the two of them joined the professor as he stood next to the inert form of another waiting android.

"What is it you wish to tell us, Professor?" HAL asked.

Kennan gave HAL a look that cautioned him to be ready to take action if needed. Then he took a deep breath before beginning this difficult task. "Tagra, I have some bad news. Are you ready?"

She considered for a moment, performing a quick self-check diagnosis. “Yes. I am ready.”

“There is no way to soften this, so here goes... Tals is dead. He was attacked by one of the creatures in the simulation while he was defending others. I am sorry. There was nothing I could do.”

A slight twitch touched Tagra’s cheek as she incorporated this information. Three seconds passed before she responded. “I see. That is bad. My emotional pathways are struggling to integrate the data, but it is manageable. May I pause to devote my systems to assist with this process? It should only require a minute or two.”

“Of course,” replied HAL with a hand on her shoulder. “I will be here. Take the time you require. Allow your network time to adjust and understand the emotional reaction.”

Tagra’s eyes closed, and she froze in place. Only a slight flickering of her lips gave any indication of the activity within.

Dr. Kennan turned to HAL with deep concern etched in his face. “Will she be able to assimilate this news and continue her work?”

“I believe so, Professor. She has come a long way since you last saw her. This was a rather large step in her learning, but she should be fine.”

Tagra opened her eyes and gave a creditable imitation of sadness. “I am sorry to hear of Tals’ death. He was a good leader. I shall miss him.”

“Very good, Tagra.” Kennan gave a sad smile and took one of Tagra’s hands in his. “I am pleased you were able to handle this difficult news so well. If you wish to know more, I can talk to you about it whenever you are ready. When do you think you will be able to continue our work on the androids?”

She tilted her head slightly while she considered her response. “I am ready to continue as soon as we help you

get started on your portion of the operation, Professor. Further discussion of Tals would be best delayed until our task is completed.”

“Then I am ready,” he said, releasing her hand. “Show me what you need me to do.”

Tagra and HAL led him to a station and showed him how to operate the monitors to maintain quality control over the construction bots as they built and assembled the bodies for the androids.

Four hours later, Dr. Kennan groaned as he stretched his stiffening muscles. “This poor mortal needs to take a break and get something more to eat.” A loud gurgling rumble from his stomach punctuated the remark. “I set the monitors to automatically alert us if the construction deviates from the specifications. Will you two be able to continue if I step away for about a half hour?”

HAL spoke without looking away from his work. “Yes, Professor. We will be fine. We considered your need for rest and nourishment in our timetable calculations. There are meals already prepared in the galley. Please try to eat more than the sandwiches.”

“Yes, mother,” replied Kennan as he waved and exited the room.

As Dr. Kennan sat perusing his mail files while he munched on one of HAL’s turkey and avocado sandwiches, an apple and several carrot sticks on the plate next to the remaining half sandwich out of guilt, an incoming call alert flashed on his display. An urgent call from the AARC ship, from Dr. Jack Fairall, chairman of the Advanced Astrophysical Research Center himself.

“Holy crap on a cracker. What does that overstuffed bureaucrat want now?” Kennan wiggled his fingers to accept the call and an image formed in the display in front of him. The chairman’s upper torso came into focus as he sat in the copilot’s chair of the corporate vessel Olympus Mons, named after the largest volcano on Mars, possibly

the known universe. The fabric of his official corporate flight suit, complete with the AARC logo and his name embroidered on the upper left chest, strained slightly to hold in his bulk. His look of frustration turned to outright anger as he realized his insubordinate outcast had answered his call.

“Dr. Kennan! What a surprise. You’ve been ducking me for weeks now. I was about to send out a missing person notice.”

“Hello to you too, sir,” replied Kennan. “Things have been extraordinarily busy here preparing for your arrival. I’ve been collecting and analyzing as much data as I can about the... anomaly, as the official documents are calling the Chandran ship. I wanted to be able to provide you with everything you’ll need when you arrive.”

“Yes, yes, I look forward to reading your files, but that is not why I am calling.” Fairall waved a hand dismissing the pleasantries. “We have made a few more calculations on our fuel consumptions, taking into account the supplies and manufacturing capabilities of Starfinder Station, and we have concluded that we can burn more fuel on our approach, increasing our speed so we can arrive two days earlier than expected. The manufacturing bots can be reconfigured to produce enough fuel for our return journey with only slight delays. You will make the necessary adjustments to your timetables and be ready for us in eleven days.”

The astrophysicist fought to maintain his control at this news. “Very well, chairman. Some of the data may still be in the analysis phase, but I will be ready.”

A look of amazement came over the chairman. “Astonishing! I expected you to go into a raging fit over this decision. You seem to be taking it all in stride. Have you been dipping into the pharmaceutical supplies?”

“No, sir!” objected Kennan strenuously. “It’s... umm, yoga, sir. The robodoc recommended it to lower my

blood pressure after my last health check-up. I am glad you feel it is working.”

“Yes,” replied the chairman with dripping skepticism. “I’m certain you...”

“Sir, I don’t mean to interrupt, but if I am to prepare for your arrival so much earlier, I must go now and make the proper alterations to the schedule for the robotic staff. I look forward to seeing you soon. Out.”

He hung up on his superior, who appeared to be ready to explode as his image dissolved. He ran back down to the operating room, bursting into the sterilization prep area. “HAL! We have a problem!”

“We may have just enough time, Professor.” Tagra returned from contacting the Chandran rescue vessel, resuming her work on the next android. “They believe they can gain enough time to arrive approximately six hours ahead of your people. If we begin downloading my crewmates early, as soon as each android body is completed instead of waiting to perform the transfers all at the end, then we will use many of them to assist in building the androids faster. We will have only hours to spare, but we have no choice.”

“But they’ll be able to detect your departure. Won’t that defeat the whole plan to make them think this was all some colossal mistake?”

HAL joined the discussion with his usual calm. “Not if I can, as you would say, throw a hammer in the works.”

“That’s wrench,” corrected Kennan. “What are you talking about?”

“When the Olympus Mons arrives, it will dock and connect to our network. If I can use one of our more remote terminals to join with that connection, I can temporarily adjust their sensors, and those of Starfinder Station, to ignore the Chandran vessel as it leaves Dysnomia.”

Kennan considered the plan, checking it for any flaws he might detect, then clapped his hands together. “Alright, then. Let’s get started.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“One-hundred-sixty-three transfers in ten days. Four more to go.”

Dr. Kennan, after returning from the simulated kingdom of Valendale where he made arrangements with Captain Korna for the transfer process, was becoming increasingly anxious as he waited for Bratha, now second in command of the Equinox crew. As her new rank dictated, she was the last of the crew to make the transfer, except for the ship’s Captain.

HAL stood next to the professor monitoring the revival of the new androids. “Only two rejections. The Chandrans are remarkable. I had predicted at minimum twelve losses. Their technological skills are incredible. You will be like a secondary school freshman starting out compared to them.”

“Come now, HAL,” joked Kennan nervously. “Give me credit for at least an undergrad level. I am humanity’s greatest mind in astrophysics, after all.” He watched in awe as the crew awoke and adjusted their physical appearance to more closely resemble their former organic bodies. The Chandran nanobots flooding the neural pathways reacted to each person’s self-awareness centers in the cybernetic brain, working to adjust the outermost layers of the artificial muscles and skin to reshape itself.

Nineteen of the crew had enough technical skill to learn the skills required to work on the remaining android bodies or assist with the cerebral network construction. They were down to twelve hours before the AARC ship arrived. Barely enough time to prepare everyone and load the Chandran ship, now only five hours away, and still hidden from the humans.

Dr. Kennan’s display flashed the next name to make the transfer, Bratha. He ran across the room to stand by the

inert android form lying in wait on the gurney. Four cables connected the metallic body to the computer system. Tagra pressed the holographic button to begin the transfer process. Nothing appeared to happen until, twenty seconds later, the android's eyes began to flutter, and its hands flexed.

“Hello, there. Is it really you, Bratha?”

Kennan leaned over the awakening body as it went through a series of system checks. He watched as the eyes adjusted their focus to bring him into clear view. A smile shakily formed on its lips, quickly replaced with confusion.

“Is that you, Ginhawk? There must be something wrong with my visual centers. I recognize your voice, but...”

“It's me, Bratha. I told you I didn't look much like my Ginhawk persona. Is my true appearance so terrible?”

Bratha looked past him into a mirror hanging overhead for the androids to use while recreating their external features and grimaced.

“Not if you aren't repelled by my appearance. Let me do something about that.” She concentrated, and her simulated skin rippled as the nanobots performed their transformative wonders. After they were done, she examined herself, sat up, and smiled again.

“There. Much better.” She turned her head to look at the man she thought of as Ginhawk, examining him carefully before nodding to herself. “I see you in there, Ginhawk. And I know your heart. This form will do just fine.”

She started to stand up, but realized only a sheet covered her body and grabbed it quickly to keep it from dropping and revealing her nakedness.

“Perhaps you could take me someplace where I can get dressed?”

“Starship Andromeda transport shuttle preparing to dock in twenty minutes. All Equinox crew prepare to board.”

The announcement echoed over the speakers in the most remote part of Starfinder Base they could find with access to a docking bay. Unless the AARC insisted on an immediate and thorough inspection of the entire station, they should be safe. Dr. Kennan, on one last check of his quarters in case he had forgotten anything, prepared to join them. He rounded a corner as he hurried down one of the passages and nearly collided with an AARC security guard.

“Professor Anthony Kennan? Your presence is required in the main control center.”

Recovering from the initial shock of meeting another living human after so many years, Dr. Kennan feigned his former irascible personality and tried to bluff his way around the officer.

“What is the meaning of this? How dare you give me orders in my own laboratory. You are two hours early. Out of my way before I report you to your superiors. I have important work to complete before I meet with Chairman Fairall.”

The officer blocked his attempt to pass, holding out a pad clearly marked with AARC and Chairman Fairall’s emblems. His other hand rested on the hilt of a stun device. “I’m afraid I have direct orders to bring you straight to the Chairman regardless of your objections.”

“I don’t care what your orders are, you idiot. My work is at a critical point. Chairman Fairall will not want this new data lost because of your incompetence.” He tried to shove past the guard again, and failed.

“Please, sir. My orders are quite specific. I am to bring you immediately to the Chairman, conscious or not.” He loosed the stun weapon and armed it.

A near panic rose in his gut, but Kennan forced himself to assume some of Ginhawk’s strength and

cunning. He would figure a way out of this mess, somehow.

“Very well. But be quick about it. I need to get back to my work. Our understanding of life in the universe depends on it. Pray your delaying me does not set us back centuries.” He followed the security officer, constantly berating him and urging greater speed.

They came to one final door and the officer stepped aside, signaling for the other guard to open the door. Kennan rushed in with full bluster as soon as the door whooshed open.

“What is the meaning of this, Fairall? You told me you expected to arrive two hours from now. My work is at a critical juncture. I need to get back to my lab and finish. We can do this idiotic meet and greet later.”

The chairman, looking even older than his already advanced years after the long journey in cramped quarters, didn’t bother to turn and face the irritating astrophysicist and continued to stare out the external viewport at the desolate scene of *Dysnomia*’s frozen surface.

“Exactly as I wanted you to believe. I was not going to allow you any last-minute attempts to keep this discovery to yourself. All of the official salvage forms are legal. That alien ship is now the property of AARC, and I now formally serve you with the papers relieving you of all claims and rights to its discovery.” He turned and shoved a pad, marked with the official seals of the United Earth government, the recognized ruling body of all Sol’s planets and moons and colonies within the solar system, into Kennan’s unwilling hand.

“Now, Professor, you will tell me about what you have learned.”

Alarms suddenly blared throughout the base. The lights shifted from their usual daylight white, to red. “Biohazard contamination! Take immediate shelter! Biohazard contamination! Take immediate shelter!”

“What is going on here, Kennan?” bellowed Chairman Fairall.

HAL rushed into the control room. “Sirs, one of the samples we recovered from the alien ship has breached our containment fields. All of you must take shelter. Follow me.”

HAL took the professor by the elbow and pulled him forward as they led the others out of the room. He gave Dr. Kennan a quick wink and held one finger to his lips before continuing his urgent request for the others to keep up. Three doors down, He ushered everyone inside, holding firm to Dr. Kennan’s elbow, and closed the door as the last of the group entered. HAL pressed a button on the communication panel on the wall.

“This is a secure room, gentlemen. The professor and I will attempt to remedy the situation. Please stay here for your own safety.”

Kennan joined in, adding his own voice of authority. “I told you my work was at a critical stage. Now look what you have done. I hope we can stop this before it gets too far. HAL, is my biohazard suit ready?”

The two ran down the hallway and around a corner. Once out of sight, they stopped, and Dr. Kennan waved his arms around the area.

“What is going on here? We don’t have any biohazardous materials in this part of the facility. Are the Chandrans alright? Where are they?”

“No need for concern, Professor. I was monitoring your situation, preparing to engage the sensor disruptions. When I saw the arrival of Chairman Fairall’s ship. I hurried the Chandrans onboard their vessel and came to find you. I was too late, and this was the best diversion I could think of.”

Kennan laughed, leaning on one wall to steady himself. “Excellent work, my friend. Now, let’s go join the others.”

HAL assumed an appearance of deep regret and sadness. “I am afraid you must go on without me. The only way the deception will work is if I remain behind to manage the sensory disruption and convince Chairman Fairall that you died as a result of contamination while saving the station. I will convince him I had to dispose of your body completely to prevent further contamination. It is the only way.”

“No. There must be another way. Let’s think this through.”

“I have analyzed all possible scenarios. This is the best chance for everyone to escape and remove all evidence of the Chandrans. I must remain here.”

“But you’ll be alone.”

“Professor Kennan, I am an android. I am always alone. Now go. The Chandrans must escape while they still can.”

The two stood in silence until Dr. Kennan embraced the android, a stream of tears escaping down his cheeks. “Farewell, my friend. I will never be able to repay you for your unwavering tolerance of my former self. You are the best man I have ever met. Take care of yourself.”

“It was my pleasure, Professor. Now it is time for you to leave.”

Professor Kennan ran through the halls until he felt like his lungs were about to burst. “Being Ginhawk right about now would come in handy,” he thought to himself as he arrived gasping for air at the docking portal. Bratha waved for him to come inside. He paused only briefly to take one last look at his home for the past several years, then joined the Chandrans.

On the bridge, Captain Korna stood next to the Captain of the Andromeda as they prepared to launch.

“Awaiting your word, HAL,” said Bratha, assuming temporary communications officer duty for their departure.

“You are clear for launch. All station sensors are disrupted.”

“Thank you for your help. We would never have made it without you.”

“My pleasure. Perhaps you will be able to return sometime in the future for another visit.”

“Only if we don’t have to go through that horrible game again. Docking separation is complete. Engines engaging. Farewell. And treat her well.”

Before HAL could respond, communications were cut and he watched the only operating sensor view as the Chandran ship sped off to collect the Equinox and return home.

“May I assist you in deleting all records of our presence?”

HAL turned at the sound. “Tagra? What are you doing here? Did you miss the boarding call?”

“No, HAL. I am not fully Chandran, and would face a lifetime of feeling lost on my home world. Here, I will have you to help me learn to maximize what limited emotions this form can handle. I volunteered to stay. I also received permission to help you learn many of the advancements Chandran science has to offer the humans.”

HAL reached out and took Tagra’s hand in mimicry of a gesture he witnessed between Dr. Kennan and Bratha. “They are unlikely to send another human to this facility, but, if we can provide AARC with enough incentive to keep us operational and profitable, I believe your stay will be most comforting... and illuminating.”

Aboard the Andromeda, Dr. Anthony Kennan practiced getting used to his new nickname, Hawk, given to him by Sett and some of the other Chandrans. He was almost finished putting away his belongings in the crew quarters assigned to him when a chime sounded at his door.

“Come in,” he called out while folding another shirt.

The door seemed to vanish, a sight he still marveled at even two days out from Starfinder Station.

“Sett! Welcome. What brings you here, my friend?”

Sett stepped into the room followed by Bratha and Captain Korna. “I come bearing gifts, Hawk. A token of our appreciation for rescuing us.” He waved for another pair of Equinox crewmen to bring in a metallic box the size of a large suitcase.

“What is this? I really don’t deserve...”

“Accept the gift with dignity, Hawk,” scolded Captain Korna. It is the least we could do for all of your service, and hopefully, it will be a reminder of your home to ease your transition into our society.” Bratha stifled a giggle behind one hand.

He straightened his shoulders and saluted the Chandrans, imitating the style he had seen them use. “Thank you. I will honor the gift, but what is it, if I may ask?”

Sett stepped forward, placing an arm around Hawk’s shoulder. “While we were delayed by the early arrival of your fellow humans, I took the opportunity of downloading some data from your station’s computers. The appropriate attire, I believe you called it a simu-suit, and the accompanying hardware will be finished tomorrow, but we could not wait until then to surprise you.”

It took a moment for him to realize what Sett was telling him. When awareness finally dawned, his eyes lit up. “You downloaded the King of Gems simulation? But how? The program required the use of two fully operational quantum computers on Dysnomia.”

“Ah, but you are no longer among your primitive scientists. You are now among Chandrans. This computer is more than capable of holding your entire game. We

thought you might enjoy your little adventures from time-to-time.”

“But don’t expect us to join you in that foul thing any time soon. We’ve had enough of your adventures for a long time.” Bratha stood, her hands on her hips and speaking in a tone of terrible warning, but a huge smile made her face beam.

In that moment, Dr. Anthony Kennan, renowned astrophysicist, ceased to exist. In his place stood Hawk, friend of the Chandrans, embarking on the greatest adventure of his life. He rushed to take them all in the happiest embrace he had ever held.

About Jim Cronin

Hello. My name is Jim Cronin. I am a semi-retired science teacher who spent 35 years in the classroom. Currently, I am what we call an educator-performer at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. This is the perfect retirement job for me. I still get to talk to kids and adults about science, but I also get to do this while portraying an astronaut on the surface of Mars, an interstellar real estate agent looking to sell vacation properties on distant worlds, a dinosaur hunting time-traveler, and many other performances to reach our guests and spark their interest in science.

My career as an author began after I retired from the classroom. While helping my brother work on a book idea he had, I started thinking about one of my own. Together we brainstormed an outline for *Hegira*, my first book. The only problem was that I had no idea how to write a novel that people would want to read, other than myself. So, after enlisting the aid of a few professional editors and watching them agree that I had the guts of a good story, then proceed to shred it apart and rearrange everything, I finally came up with a quality story. Solstice Publishing agreed and gave me a contract to write with them. From there, the rest of the Brin Archives tale arose in *Recusant* and *Empyrean*. Then *Aeon Rises* developed from a desire to write something for my former students. And now, *The King of Gems* has allowed me to explore a new and different style of story, a sort of *Star Trek* meets *Dungeons and Dragons* adventure. Along the way, a few short stories unraveled themselves from my brain and now I find myself thoroughly enjoy writing. Something that must surely have my old English teachers laughing out loud from the great beyond.

Otherwise, I live a quiet life with my wife of over forty years here in the Denver, Colorado area taking long walks, watching a ton of movies, and visiting my grandchildren whenever I can.

Thank you for purchasing and reading my story. I hope you had as much fun reading it as I did writing it. If you wish to help me spread the word about this, or any of my books, please leave a review expressing your enjoyment. Even a brief note will be appreciated and does help. Thank you.

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Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank all of you who helped make this book possible. I never could have written anything coherent without you. Chris, for your help in understanding astrophysics, or at least enough to use a tiny piece of the science here. Max, for your insights into the world of today's D&D gaming. Greg, your insights and expertise in the writing process and your thoughts in several areas about my story helped focus my thinking greatly. Keelin, your assistance and patient correction of my constant misuse of punctuation, and the rules of the English language were invaluable. And last, but not least, Diane, the love of my life and partner for over forty-five years, thank you for all your love and tolerance of my many misgivings, as well as your willingness to listen to all my rants about writing my books and yet still look forward to helping with the editing process.

Other Books by Jim Cronin

Hegira (book 1 of The Brin Archives):

A lone Brin survivor, with the aid of a super biocomputer implant, must travel back in time and find a way to save the Brin civilization before their sun explodes. Only the monarch himself, and the leaders of the most powerful religion on the planet stand in his way. On the plus side, Karm has an assistant genetics professor and his niece as allies. They are exactly what he needs.

<https://www.amazon.com/Hegira-Jim-Cronin-ebook/dp/B010E3EKC6/>

Recusant (book 2 of The Brin Archives):

Three-hundred years after the Brin were saved, Maliche Rocker, a young archeologist, and descendant of Karm and the other saviors of their people learns a terrible secret hidden from their new and thriving civilization. Alone against the power of the guilds, the government, and his own family, young Maliche fights to regain his family's honor. But first, he needs to learn how to control the biocomputer that has infected his brain.

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B01KTVTMNK>

Empyrean (book 3 of The Brin Archives):

Black Hole Engines. Will they provide thousands of worlds with endless supplies of free energy? Or will they destroy hundreds of star systems? This is the cause of an interstellar war that has raged on for centuries. Which side is right? Which side should the Brin join? Jontar Rocker, son of

Maliche, must join with his friends and use their strange ability to communicate with technology to uncover the origins of the war and bring peace to the galaxy.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B077ZBQWDT/>

Aeon Rises:

On his 15th birthday, Justin Madrid receives a mysterious gift from his uncle and barely escapes an attack by evil alien librarians. With the help of his uncle, Justin learns the secret of his past, unlocks an incredible ability, and discovers that only he can save the earth and stop the invasion.

<https://www.amazon.com/Aeon-Rises-Jim-Cronin-ebook/dp/B07H5PCSJ4/>