

Chapter 01 Exodus

2088

He watched the egg move, his Wife beside him. Bulging out at the unhatched infant inside pressed to get out. A doctor and nurse were in the room with them, a normal tradition for their kind, just in case the newborn needed assistance with it's first breaths or hatched with some form of medical emergency. Suddenly a tiny white spike burst from the leathery prison, causing a split to form in the egg. They both smiled as we were about to lay eyes on their first son or daughter. But that feeling would be short lived. The snout that spike would be attached to would present itself, and to their horror, it would be clad in purple scales. His wife gasped and covered her mouth. He turned her away from the abomination. The doctor seemed to be unaffected, perhaps even curious. When she saw their reactions she tried to console them. However there would be no circumstance in which they would acknowledge this as their offspring.

"Get rid of this" he growled at the doctor in Draconis. She looked at them both in surprise, the nurse observing us as if trying to tell what to do next.

"Sir, this is your child, we came this far to abandon these stale ideas for our new society, your really should-"

"This THING should be culled, and we won't have it. Kill it and tell people it died in the egg" and with that he took his sobbing wife from the room.

By then the hatchling would emerge and crawl into the doctor's hand. Not a word was spoken between the two left in the room for quite some time. A purple dragon a one in a million chance, but the hatred from the child's parent had shocked them both. Not only was it purple it was very small. Still wet, the doctor took the abandoned infant and proceeded with the normal. Weight, measurements, and responses, eventually laying it down on small pile of cloth meant to be it's first bed. Other than being small and purple it was perfectly healthy.

"What do we do with this little one?" asked the doctor, finally breaking the silence some 20 minutes after the hatching.

"There is a woman near the edge of the colony" the nurse sighed "She's been taking care of any children that are orphaned. She lives there the edge so that human missionaries have easy access to her. She listen to their ramblings about their gods then takes the free food they offer for the kids. I can take this one to her tonight, under the cover of dark" He paused "This might be perceived by some as a bad omen, we've already had a tough time here on Earth, I don't want to worry people more"

"Oh that's just superstition, we flew a long way to drop old thinking, but" the doctor sighed "I think you're right. Just keep it quiet, may be for the best"

"I'll take it to her tonight. But, I can't quite tell from here" the nurse leaned in "is it male or female?"

"I hadn't checked yet" the doctor picked up the infant again and held it steady for a moment as they contemplated, "It seems almost a useless point to check" and placed it back onto the cloth. This time pulling a heat lamp above. "Keep the little one warm for a few hours to make sure it's stable and healthy, then take them to this place you spoke of." She stood up from the stool and thought for a

moment “Perhaps it’s best if you take them to my office, keep them warm and hidden away” The nurse looked a little puzzled “For it’s safety, we don’t know who else around here may be a little too superstitious as well”

That evening was warm, it was late summertime and the heat lingered in the air. It was 11 pm at night but still slightly light outside from being so far north. The nurse, clad in a cloak, the infant held against his chest, approached the shack and knocked on the door silently. He knew there would be children asleep. Several moments later the thin woman dragon opened the door gently. She immediately tilted her head as she recognized the nurse.

“Please don’t tell me, another one?” she seemed exacerbad “I haven’t a lot of space left”

“Darla, this one is special okay”

“What’s so special?”

“Please, let me come in”

She opened the door fully and the nurse stepped inside

“Close the door” As she did the nurse pulled aside the cloak, revealing the sleeping infant against his chest. Darla grasped and held her muzzle

“Is this real? It’s so beautiful!” she looked back to to the nurse “there’s less than 90 thousand of us here, what are the odds?”

“Astronomical!” he silently shouted “listen, I’ve been with this one all day and all evening, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it, let alone all those old tales. In fact I kind of get the feeling of just pureness, like any other whelping, but, I can’t explain, also great? Or maybe I’m just memorized by the vibrant color, I don’t know”

“I-I can’t always protect it” She interrupted, very concerned. “I’ve got nearly a dozen other kids right now, and this one is going to have a tough life.”

“It’s okay, do what you can, just keep this one alive” He handed over the whelping “Good luck, and I ‘ll be back to check on it. If there is any health concerns me and the Doc are close by okay” The nurse walked out the door, closing the door behind himself. Once outside he took a deep breath. And thought to himself, maybe I should just have taken care of it? No that would never work, I’m so busy with the doctor and the clinic, this is for the best. He took a long reflecting walk back to his hostel, slightly regretting his decision, but, it was a better fate than it’s own parents offered.

2092:

The purple dragon sat crying on the grass, the other dragon children being gathered, they were crying as well. A group of adults had come to pick up what she left behind. Darla had left the colony to trade for some food and items the care home she made needed from the humans. There was a protest that day at the gate, like many other days. But today was a different day. She didn’t fall victim to the crowd, in

fact she freely walked past them. But there was a vehicle accident in the nearby town, unfortunately she was too close to the street when it happened...

It watched through it's tears as the other children, who relentlessly bullied them, even at such a young age, was carefully and solemnly taken away. But this child sat alone, throughout it's short life so far it just wanted to be alone, even now as it cried, it wanted to grieve in peace, as the one person it knew cared for it so far was never coming back. There it sat, alone, ignored, oddly, just as it wanted.

It was as if every adult there did not hear it's cries, not that it wanted to be heard. They walked past within a few centimeters at times, never noticing the crying child.

2098:

The purple child sat against the side of a shack in the shade. Spring time finally meant warmer weather. They experience it's 6th winter outdoors and it was a rough one. They sat and relaxed for a moment, pulling a few nuts from a satchel at their side. This was one of the peaceful moments they rarely get to enjoy, but it wouldn't last long.

"Hey guys!" The purple dragon turned to see another dragon, slightly older than him and typically green, had come around the corner "I found the purple demon!" They immediately jumped to their feet and started to run, the boy and several other of the child dragons followed. As soon as they were clear of the building they spread their grayish purple wings and leapt into the air. Flapping hard as a couple of the bullies did the same. Still too young to fly far, but able to outfly those slightly older than them, they made a clean get away. This was one of the situations that their small body came in handy. No one ever taught them to fly, they just sort of figured it out. Like swimming but in the air.

They looked behind them self to see the bullies had fallen behind, already gliding back to the ground. They began to glide them self and landed in what could be described as a dirt street. Landing on it's feet they were met with some stares and couple tsk's from a some adults. They slide into an alleyway between two shacks. Sat back down, and started snacking again.

2100:

Taller now, the purple dragon wandered into a shop, darkness and swelling around one eye and blood still seeping from one of it's nostrils. Filthy from being taken to the ground, and they were holding back their tears. Luckily the assailants had no clue they actually had some coin on them today, given to them by a local who had, discreetly, let them clean up around their shack. One of the very few allies they had, along with this shop keeper. They walked past the vegetables and meats, straight to an old human cooler with a rounded lid. They slide the cooler open, reached in and grabbed an ice cream cone, wrapped in paper, a brand name one, rare in the dragon colony, and walked to the front counter. They had had a rough day and damn, they were going to treat them self.

As they walked to the counter the shop keeper spoke up "Hey Purple, looks like you're having a hard day" They nodded in agreement, sniffing from tears and a bloody nose. They place the ice cream on the counter. The Shop keeper pulled a box of tissue from under the counter. The purple dragon was surprised at such novelty and luxury, being able to clean it's blood on this instead of it's hood or loincloth again. They nodded in appreciation and thought, it sure would be nice to have this ice cream for free after what I've been through today.

“Hey” the shop keeper spoke up “you look like you’ve had a rough enough day, take this, and get some food tomorrow okay?” he paused “Just, don’t hang around, you know how it makes the others uncomfortable”

Delighted by the free treat, but a little stung by the last bit, though they were used to it, they nodded in agreement and quickly walked out. They walked a few meters away and sat down between two buildings and enjoyed the ice cream. Enjoying it a little more knowing they could now eat tomorrow too!

2102:

Today was going to be a good day, They knew because their intuition was never wrong. They walked all the way to the colony gate. The bottom of the simple chain link frame now slightly buried in the ground from being open for so many years. They waited there.

They did not have to wait long. The human missionaries, the same ones that used to come see Darla, came to the gate. They had unbiased love for the purple dragon, because they did not know, they had no prior experience with dragons, and did not know they were supposed to hate it for being purple. Samuel was their leader, and he instantly recognized the purple one, well, how could he not, there was only one.

This was one of the very few things that could make the purple dragon smile. They immediately greeted the human, and pulled from a satchel on his tail a couple of novels.

“I’d love to trade for more again!” they nearly shouted in english

“Haha, calm down, I thought of you and brought a couple more you might like! More important, little one, have you been eating well?” He took the books and placed them in his shoulder bag, pulled out two more and handed them to them.

“I’m 14 now! I know how to take care of myself! But if you’re offering I shouldn’t refuse” The purple dragon looked down and shyly kicked a rock. Samuel chuckled and pulled a bottle of water from his shoulder bag and gave it to them.

“I’m sure you do, but I know you have it rough, so,” He grabbed a small box from atop a stack of three another human was carrying, and handed it to the dragon “Here, some more nuts, I know you like them, along with some fresh vegetables, and, there’s even a chicken breast in there, I hope you can find a way to cook it. Now we need to make our way to the orphanage again. I’ll see on the way out okay?”

“Yes, and thank you so much!” the dragon was gleeful and genuinely thankful.

As the group of humans walked into the colony the young purple dragon made his way behind some abandoned shacks. They knew about a grill, they had used a few times, that still had some gas left in it. Old human BBQ’s either brought in by the missionaries or traded for by dragons but forgotten behind, they were left in very poor shape. Dragons have a different digestive tract chemistry than humans, they could have eaten that chicken raw, but the purple dragon preferred the taste of cooked chicken.

They unwrapped the chicken, surprised it was still chilled, kept cool in their nearby vehicle, which was not allowed into the colony. They placed it on the grill, nearly burning their hand. Turning it, they did

burn themselves slightly, but the end result was worth. Keeping an eye over their shoulder for would be attackers, thieves, or just more bullies. Once cooked they enjoyed on of their finest meals in months, one bland, plain, grilled chicken breast. To them at this time it was the happiest they could ever be, and even then the prospect of fresh entertainment in their pocket to read. They could now read write and speak english better than their own language, draconic. They had even read the bible, given to them by the missionaries, but the bullies had recently taken it from them, tearing it up just to make them feel bad. They didn't have the heart to Samuel what had happened to it.

2104:

Now 16 and having learned to survived on their own, and one thing they learned, was to trust their intuition. They woke up under the blanket between two shacks as usual, looked up into the clear blue sky, and somehow they knew, today would be awful. The feeling was accompanied that something or someone new would come around from this, and it felt odd how specific it was. They knew to trust this morning intuition.

They got up and shook out the blanket, and stuffed it behind some pallets for the sleep tonight. They had thought for a moment for some reason to take it with them, but it was a going to be a hot summer day.

They walked towards the colony gate, and to their surprise it was closed. Human soldiers stood on the other side. It was very early in the morning, not even 8 am, but outside the closed gate was a lot of activity. Something was indeed wrong, very wrong.

They began to walk calmly towards the center of the colony, wishing not to be noticed. They had only walked a few steps when the telltale sound of the gate being violently opened came from behind. The sound of the chain link rattling against the tubular frame made the dragon run. They ran a few meters then dove in between two of the shacks. The roar of rubber tires coming down the dirt street echoed in their ears. They lowered themselves flat onto the ground, and wished so hard not to be seen. After a what sounded like a dozen of the large military human trucks drove past they heard soldiers. Yelling and kicking down doors, yelling in english and a few broken phrases in draconis to "come out".

They didn't want to be seen.

The soldiers moved on, walking past the alley they laid down in, none of them looking in their direction. They could also now hear screams and roars in the distance, then a gunshot. Screams and roars grow louder and the noise grew.

They wanted to be hidden, but had to know what was happening.

The young dragon lifted itself from the ground and turned slowly and crawled out to the corner of one of the shacks, and looked into horror. The humans were pulling the dragons from their homes and forcing them onto the trucks. Already a single dragon lay in the street, blood pooling around their head. Their stomach churned, and the got up, and ran down the alleyway. They ran north towards the farms, hiding as they went along. More trucks had entered the colony and the rate they were invading was nearly as fast and they could run. They ran between two shacks again but when they emerged on the other side they nearly ran into a human soldier. He reached out and grabbed their hood "Come here you slimy little alien" and pulled. They backed out of the hood and it came off. The dragon turned and ran. Now topless and exposed as the purple dragon they are.

They ran a few more meters when another soldier darted out from behind a shack and cut them off. He wrapped his strong arms around the wings and body of the smaller dragon and started shouting "Here, I got this one!" The soldier turned and took the dragon to the ground, landing on top of it. It knocked the breath out of it. Unable to move the felt cuffs put on their wrist and ankles and straps around it's wings.

A truck pulled up and they were thrown into the back. The tailgate closed behind them. The looked up to see one of the other dragons who regularly chased them down, took their money and assaulted them. There was seating on either side of the bed. They managed to wiggle to sit up against it, but could not get up into the seating by themselves. The tailgate opened again and other dragons were thrown into the back with them, others helped them up and into seats, but not the purple dragon.

"Look there it is! It's that one's fault!" screamed the other kid

"NO! I don't even know what's going on!" they yelled back.

The other kid spit on them, none of the adults batted an eye. Suddenly the tailgate was closed again and the truck started moving. For an hour it drove to an unknown place. This was the first time the dragon had ever been out of the colony, and they didn't like it.

They arrived and were pulled from the truck. Other trucks were already there and also being unloaded. To the dragons horror and surprised, three fenced pathways, somehow already packed with dragons, lead to 3 large ships.

A large sign in draconis read "Anyone trying escaping will be shoot and kill" The dragon chuckled at the bad grammar, and out of nervousness. A human soldier walked up behind the dragon and removed the restraints, and in english said "If you try to escape or fly you will be shot dead!" and they nodded.

A few moments later a hard shove came from behind. The other dragon kid who had spit on him had found 3 of his friends and wanted one more chance to ruin the dragon's life. The dragon swung back for once, landing a fist into the bully's snout, but the other quickly started punching and kicking into the purple one.

Suddenly another dragon they had never seen before came from no where and kicked one of them in the gut, hard, and it sent them tumbling. Then they swing at a the second, and they fell to the ground as well. They took advantage of the distraction and punched another one of them attackers in the stomach, to very little effect. The human soldiers starting laughing. The dragon who they had punched returned a fist to their face, knocking them to the ground.

As the dragon who came to their aid was swinging to punch the forth attacker a shot rang out.

They all turned to the human soldiers who had now taken a much more serious stance "Okay! That's enough now!" His gun now pointed at as. "Now get your gross alien asses on that fucking boat" as he waved the end of his riffle towards the middle ship.

The dragon who had played hero began to walk back towards the direction they cam from but the soldier stopped him. "This way smart ass" The new dragon looked towards his family, his father pushing to come get him, but met with a riffle to the face, and forced to rejoin the other line. The purple dragon grabbed his arm, their gaze met and they whispered "Thank you".

The soldier who broke up the fight pressed his rifle towards the pair “okay it’s time to move on” and the two started into the middle line. In the loud chaos the other dragon was unable to yell to his family but could see them disappearing into the crowd. He then turned back to the smaller purple dragon hanging on his arm.

“Where is your family, or whoever you are with?” He asked, the smaller dragon’s gaze went to the ground.

“I’m alone, I always have been” they replied

“what is your name?” He asked as they started down the line to the ship

“I don’t have one” they said “No one has ever bothered to give me one, I’ve only been called by purple thing or demon. Can I... can I follow you, at least until those assholes are far away?” they asked.

“Yes, of course” he replied, but obviously very distracted by concern of getting back to his family.

“You’re purple, why are you purple?”

The purple dragon gazed back down to the ground, obviously hurt by the question.

“Look I’m sorry I shouldn’t have asked that right now, there’s a lot going on” he put his hand on their shoulder “That’s not important. What is important is keeping us both safe, I may have screwed up and now I’m getting on the wrong ship. My family is getting on that one, we’re heading for this one”

“I’m so sorry, you shouldn’t have stopped to help me, no one else ev..”

“Don’t think of it like that! It was my choice to help” he cut them off “What was happening to you was bullshit. If I can keep those guys away from you I will”

The line started progressing and dragon were stuffed into the ships, more, many more trucks came in behind them, and over the next two days roughly 30,000 of them were loaded into each ship. Each ship, later would be revealed, to be design for only 25,000 each.

Chapter 2; Prison

Earth, 2104

Dad didn't like us flying, and I never knew why. Come to think of it, I also never saw him or Mom fly. They both had wings, but they just stayed there, static on their backs. One time, my brother Jake and I flew onto the barn and started goofing off up there. Dad was so pissed, and told us we'd fall. How could we? I'd argue, we can fly!

When they landed, Mom and Dad chose to raise crops for the colony, so we had a farm. I don't know why, Dad was terrible at it. Mom took care of some earth animals, chickens and some cattle. Our kind doesn't drink milk, we mostly breed them for meat, but we could trade that milk and any extra eggs for cash or barter with the locals. Most were only interested in money, though sometimes some local farmers and residents would trade us some seed or farm supplies.

The big year was when we finally got some big equipment. A few years after they had us. But it was a big headache. I remember Dad working on it for weeks. He said it needed a subscription to work, I was young and had no clue what that meant, but I know I liked it because it was green like us. One of Dad's friends made a new controller system for the whole thing so it would work for us. I remember sitting on it's front tire kicking my feet and being bored while he tried to fix the thing.

The inner colony kids could fly too, but not as well as us. Jake and I had the entire farm to spread our wings, they only had limited space, and for some reason, the adults there didn't like them flying either.

Both parents I would later learn were very selective about what they told of about our heritage. He never really gave a straight reason about why they left dragon territory, nor would ever really give a hard description of it. In fact, Dad would go exceptionally cold when we asked him about his past. Eventually I just gave up. He was an active member of the colony though, he know most of the population, and would frequently walk into the center to trade or share the crops.

I was 20 though, starting to get ready to lead my own life, Jake was 22, still living with us too. Our kind live with family until we would become mated and start our own family. Maybe at that time he would start a homestead of his own. I wanted to learn, I wanted to build things, if that made any sense. But a major hiccup was going to cancel our dreams.

Dad come home one evening looking very worried. He told us there was a rumor that humans were planning something nefarious, but no one knew for sure what. They had shut the gates into the colony that afternoon and weren't letting anyone in or out.

We found the next morning.

Mom would cook us all breakfast, often not even dressed yet, as with our kind nudity is no issue. Often we'd come to breakfast before putting on our clothes as well. We normally wear decorative loincloths, often with poncho like tops when out in public. Tho no laws about it, it's a loose rule. The times I've been to the colony center it was normal to see the less fortunate without anything. We did have some slick hoods for bad weather, and being in this part of the world, we also had heavier things to wear in the winter months. But in the heat of summer it was nice to let the air help cool our bodies. Besides, even when one of our kind is nude, you can't tell who's a guy or a gal. I think this annoyed humans for some reason. To be fair, our "stuff" is on the inside, unlike humans with stuff just waving about. That

must be painful.

When I awoke that morning I looked out the window, it was a beautiful clear summer morning. My stomach growled, breakfast was most important to me. I decided to forgo my usual outfit and to go to breakfast with nothing. I knew it would be hot later in the day, and I'd be going without anyways. As I made my way to the kitchen the familiar smell of chicken eggs filled my nostrils. My stomach growled again. My mother was at the table, Eggs already made. I walked over to her and pressed the side of my muzzle to the side of hers, our version of a sign of affection. (direct kissing is reserved only for mates)

"Good morning Mom!" I said as I slid into my chair.

"Good morning sweetie" she said, like any normal morning, almost.

I started helping myself to pile of scrambled eggs and some toast already made. It seemed to be cooked earlier. That's when I also noticed she was fully dressed.

"Going somewhere right away?" I asked

"Yeah, your father and I are going into the colony center this morning to find out more about what has the humans worked up" She replied, then smiling, trying to hide her worry.

"Do you think it's trouble?"

"I'm not sure, they haven't closed the gates on us like this in years" she replied "Not since before your brother was even hatched."

As if summoned by his mention, Jake walked into the room, and threw one of my nicer loincloths at my face, my favorite blue one, and noticing he was also dressed up.

"Get dressed, you heathen, you don't want humans to see you like that after all" he joked "We're going too"

"You just want to try to find a mate!" I shot back "You wanna see them girly inner colony ones who like to party huh?"

"So what? I can't do that with my comical little brother to take the attention away when I get awkward right?" He smiled "Besides, you also really want to know what's going on. Don't you?"

"Yeah, I do" and I went back to my eggs.

But that was when Dad hurried into the room "I'm going to skip breakfast, I'm really want to get go-" he paused and his ears raised slightly, he looked out the window and I heard him cuss, not abnormal for him but it got me concerned. That's when I heard it too, the sound of tires crushing dirt, and moving fast.

I got up and as I did I clipped the cloth around my waist and looked out the window of the kitchen door as a military truck raced up to within a meter or two of the house and human soldiers with automatic riffles climbed out.

“Dad! What in the hell is this?” I yelled, starting to panic.

“I don’t know, but do what they say, we don’t need to make it worst” he sounded very worried.

They ran to the door and kicked it in. They started yelling “GET DOWN GET DOWN” as several of them entered and pointed their guns at us. We all complied and we laid face down on the floor of our own home. Two of them started putting cuffs on our wrist and ankles while another two started strapping up our wings. 4 or 5 others started searching the rest of the house. The entire time a couple of them yelled over “DON’T RESIST!” and after the other soldiers swept the house they bluntly asked my mother “Is there anything else left in the house?” she shook her head. Any”THING?” I thought. We were grabbed off the floor and stood up, one by one, then taken outside to the waiting truck, and thrown in the back.

“We got 4, going to the next target” one said to the radio mic on his shoulder as another slammed the tailgate of the truck up. It immediately started moving and we were trucked to the next place over. A family we knew. Also a mother and father and two young kids, a decade younger than us. They were woken up by the same treatment, but no truck was waiting for them, just a few soldiers in a black SUV. Evidently we were the first. We made more stops at a few of the local farms until the truck was full. About 20 of us in total.

Then the truck then headed out of the colony. On the road Dad was sitting beside me, Our mother on his other side, and Jake on my other side. “Dad what is going on? Is this- is this it?” I asked, so afraid for my family.

I could tell he was lying, he didn’t know, but he shook his head. “No, no son, this is just a political move or show of strength. They wouldn’t kill us all” His dark face spikes told the story, but I tried to comfort us the best he could “Just do what they say and we’ll be okay, alright?”

I nodded but couldn’t calm down much at all. It took the truck an hour of driving to get us where we were going. As we pulled up there were 3 large ships. We were pulled off the truck not so gently and the cuffs were removed from our ankles and wrists and straps taken off our wings. As each of our restraints were released we all got the same speech. “Do no try to fly or try to escape, or you will be shot.”

But that was I first laid eyes on them. The sun was shining down on us brightly, a strong breeze blowing around the nearby foliage. Even in their current situation, they were one of the most beautiful things I eve laid my eyes on. I had no idea our species was capable of producing such a vibrant design. I had seen a few with red scales, and a few with blue scales. Dad had told us about white, black, and gold scales, but I had never seen any. But this strong purple, brought alive in the sunshine, a wonder a nature that I was drawn to as if staring into. I was so mesmerized by amazing color that I didn’t immediately realize the danger they were in. I bolted away from my family, my father attempted to pull back on my wing but his grip didn’t hold. He started to follow but a human placed his riffle in front of him.

I was filled with anger, I had the last hour for it to boil up and a fight breaking out a few feet away. This short purple dragon was being attacked by our own. While we were being rounded up and herded like cattle and placed on these three giant ships our own kind was attacking one of our own. A couple of human solders looked on laughing. It looked nearly they were trying to rob them, but they obviously had nothing to be robbed for. They were wearing nothing but a tattered cloth and a small pair of tail

bags. There was 4 of them, and one of me. I don't know why I did this, whether I was full of adrenaline, or just really pissed off about the entire situation, but seeing our own kind fighting at a time like this was not okay. They all looked about my age as well, nearly fully grown but maybe a couple years left to go.

I pushed one down as I bound to the rescue. The second, still surprised by the sudden interruption took my foot to his gut and he fell to his knees. As was was turning to rush the other two the purple one had taken advantage of the situation and tried to punch the third one, but their weak punch landed with very little effect, as the assailant returned the punch with one to the purple dragon's face. The first two were already regaining their composure and were getting back up. Just as I started to direct a punch into the fourth one's face when a shot rang out.

We all turned to the human solders who had now taken a much more serious stance "Okay! That's enough now!" His gun now pointed at as. "Now get your gross alien asses on that fucking boat" as he waved the end of his riffle towards the middle ship.

I turned back to go back get into the line with my family but that line had already progressed. Looking towards the ship I could see my brother, Jake's wings far up ahead, Dad was trying to push back to me, but with no luck, as he was pressed along with others, and then a riffle met his gaze. I started walking towards them but was met with another human, pushing me into the second line with his gun, "this way smart ass" he snorted.

The purple dragon had followed me the few steps away. They grabbed my arm and I turned and looked down to meet their gaze. "Thank you" they whispered.

"Where is your family, or whoever you are with?" I asked, their gaze instantly going to the ground

"I'm alone, I always have been" they replied

"what is your name?" I asked as we started walking to the ship

"I don't have one" they said "No one has ever bothered to give me one, I've only been called by purple thing or demon"

I was confused. Our parents never taught us some things, apparently some things about our own culture, perhaps our race had more hatred than they were trying to teach us. Maybe they were trying to bring an end to thinking poorly. But now was not the time to contemplate my own upbringing. I was separated from my family and apparently had just made a new friend during this emergency

"Can I... can I follow you, at least until those assholes are far away?" they asked.

I was becoming more concerned for my own situation, knowing I can't get back to my family, their question seemed trivial. Mom and Dad raised us to help one another, my answer was nearly automatic "Yes of course" I replied "You're purple, why are you purple?" I don't know why in that moment I asked, my brain was being pulled in so many directions. As I looked back I saw the question might have been a bit much too soon, their face was downward again

"Look I'm sorry I shouldn't have asked that right now, there's a lot going on" I put my hand on their shoulder "That's not important. What is important is keeping us both safe, I may have screwed up and

now I'm getting on the wrong ship. My family is getting on that one, we're heading for this one"

As we were pushed along the line. I tried to yell to Dad and Jake, but I heard nothing in reply. "I'LL FIND YOU!" I shouted, and never heard a reply. The ships were large and the fenced in pathways diverged greatly very quickly. Armed guards were placed every few meters outside the fence. The top the fences, about 8 feet tall, were made of coiled razor wire, more of which was also stretched overhead between the two fences every meter or so, preventing a flying escape. I looked forward to the massive ship we were heading for, and that's when it dawned on me. This was not some impulse decision, this was planned, over months, probably years ago. Yet somehow mankind managed to keep it secret. There were humans who were friendly to us, they never told us. They likely never knew, meaning this was kept secret even from the human population.

It was all irrelevant though, it was happening. As we reached the front of the line and I stared up this ship, likely 10 stories tall, very boxy, the exterior looked like a shipping container, but on a massive scale. There were no windows or portholes. A few humans were at the entrance doing something to the dragons before being shoved into the single wide door. A large 2 printed over the door. To my horror we were also now being tagged, like cattle. The dragon in front of us got a red tag with a QR code in his ear, and I overheard some of the speech given to him, something about ration dispensing. But then came our turn. Without consent or every saying anything the one of the humans grabbed my ear. I instinctively pulled away

"If you want food the next 5 years you're going to need this" He said "This bar code will dispense your daily rations, without it, no food" I hesitantly leaned in, and let him pierce my ear. I winced as he attached the red tag "As I said this will allow your daily rations, it will be active 1 day after launch, and we launch in 2 days"

"Wait, why the ear? And no food for 3 days? How do I-"

"You'll figure it out, now get on before you get shot" I looked to the other side as my new purple friend got the same treatment and speech. They walked through the door first and I followed. Inside one guard pointed a gun up a steel staircase

"We're filling the upper levels first, up that way, top level for you" and motioned the with the gun.

We walked up, I counted, 20 sets of stairs. Each level was 2 pairs switching back. Every level was exactly the same. Rows upon rows of bare beds, bunked 3 high, and every level was only dimly lit. WAIT, did that guy said FIVE YEARS in here?!? Initially I was glad I had got to eat what eggs I did get this morning, but the sickening feeling of my future made those eggs spin in my stomach.

We reached the top level, and just kept walking, straight ahead, past so many of these 3 level bunks, I tried to count as we walked. The entire interior painted white but still hard to see with the low lighting. But as we kept walking, we reach and open area. 3 large red arrows pointed to to 3 individual pockets with some sort of screen and small alcove. These must been the food dispensers they spoke of. We weren't the first ones on the ship, but maybe pretty close. There only seemed to be about 50 others in this open space, and over the next couple hours it would close up. I looked behind myself and did some quick estimates. The rows of beds, 3 high, looked about 20 rows wide, and I walked past about 45 on the way to the this area, looks like about 3000 of us per level. No that's no 3,000, that's not enough. I tried not to do a bunch of math at moment, but I was sure there was going to be of us than there were of these bunks.

As I was thinking someone took advantage of my distraction, and pulled the purple dragon away from me. I heard them yelp and turned to see the same crew of 4 who attacked us outside.

“Let’s finished what we started huh? You still going defend this piece of sh-” as he mouth edoff a taller male came up and grabbed his horn like a whelping, obviously his father (or mother?) and pulled him away.

“No right now you little shit. Are you stupid? Look at what’s going on, and we’re not getting food for 3 days. Save your energy” he scolded, and dragged him away. The other 3 looking a little surprised, as the one in middle shrugged and the remaining 3 parted ways. The small threat made me realize, I may have really gotten myself in trouble for this stranger. I looked at them again. Even in this low light, their purple scales still impressed me. They appeared darker now, but still. My mind started racing again when the suddenly spoke to me, oddly, in english this time

“Don’t worry okay? I’m sure these ships will go to the same place, you’ll be reunited with when we land” They looked down again “Again I’m sorry”

I had decided I picked my side, and something drew me to this purple dragon, I suddenly felt less concerned for myself, they were right, I’d see Mom and Dad and my joker of a brother Jake again, even if it is in 5 years. I grabbed this younger dragon by the shoulder, this time realizing how thin they were and lead them to the corner. I sat on the floor and leaned against the wall, I pat the floor beside me, opposite of the way my tail lay, and gestured for them to sit with me.

“Come on, let’s get to know each other a little, we’re going to spend the next five years together” I said. They hesitated but then sat down. As they moved and sat, wearing nothing but the tattered loincloth with a couple satchels around the belt, and two small bags at the base of their tail, I noticed the tiny muscles they had, and a sudden concern hit me “When did you get to eat last?”

“Two days ago, how about you?” They replied in english again

“I had about half my breakfast this morning. Do you got anything in those bags for yourself to eat?” I asked in draconis.

“No, I ran out two days ago, that’s when I ate last” again, they responded in english

“Why are you talking in human?”

“Sorry” this time they replied in draconis this time “I talk to humans more than I did our own kind”

“Is it because of the way these dragons treated you?” I asked

They nodded

“It’s okay, I think maybe I was raised a little different than they were, my Dad was kind of an idealist, you know? Honestly, I think a little smarter than average too” I sighed and looked at this purple dragon, their chin buried in the chest now, staring down again. “So how old are you”

“16, in human years anyways” they replied

“Oh” I was shocked, they seemed so small I thought they would be younger. I was kind of thinking I was defending a little kid. “You’re kind of small”

“I know that!” they looked up into my gaze “I’m also purple too! In case you’re not observant”

I chuckled lightly to myself “sorry, I don’t mean anything by it” I took a deep breath, as my curiosity was growing more as I found out more “Hey I don’t mean to be rude, but I also can’t really tell, and before I ask, sometimes I can’t tell with adults, but” I paused, trying to be gentle with this one “Are you a boy or a girl?” But their answer really surprised me

“I don’t know” they replied

“What?” This purple dragon just kept surprising me “How do you not know?” this baffled my mind

“I don’t know the difference, I’ve been alone my whole life remember?” they seemed very embarrassed.

“Oh, I guess that’s a talk for another day, maybe, when we’ve gotten to know each other a little better. Well, a lot better” I bet my face spikes were red with embarrassment, I tried to think of a change of topic “So where did you live? I’ve never seen you around before”

“I lived outside,” our embarrassment was fading now “even in the winter.” They looked up and around at the ceiling, plain white paint, same as everywhere else “In fact, I think this may be first time indoors other than at the one shop that would let me in, and that was only a few minutes at a time” their face spikes darkened slightly, suddenly they seemed anxious “this is the longest I ever remember being inside”

I could tell they were getting uncomfortable, well more uncomfortable than our situation already made us “Hey it’s okay, I’m indoors lots, my Dad told me I spend too much time indoors” I laughed “sometimes he’d call me lazy”

“You don’t seem lazy! In fact you look very strong!” They looked me up and down for a second “so how old are you?”

“I’m 20, and I’m a boy” I offered “I grew up on a crop farm, right now I’m kind of thankful I got to eat well and work hard, it might have made me prepared for this”

They looked up at me, worry in their eyes “I’m not so sure I’m prepared” They paused “I never asked you your name”

“I’m Deakon” I reached my hand out to shake theirs, they paused, no idea what I was doing, then reached up and lightly batted my hand. Making me chuckle again “no like this” I reached down and grabbed their hand, and gave it a handshake “I know it’s a human thing, but nice to meet you”

“Ship 1”

Jake scratched at the tag, nervously more than the pain

“Don’t pick at that Jake” his mother scolded “If that gets infected here there will be nothing we can do.”

“Sorry Mom” Jake replied, turning his attention to his father “Are you okay, Dad?”

His father looked stern and deep in thought, his face spikes a very dark gray. A moment later he finally spoke “Deakon, I’m worried about your brother, Deakon already. I think we raised him a little too well, jumping in to help a stranger like that” his gaze turned to his mate, then his son, then back off to nowhere “I just hope we’re all going to the same place” his tail swished in annoyance “Two days, then five years to find out”

He let out a long sigh

“I never thought this, I thought this was going to be a mass grave, but this, isn’t where I thought they would take us”

As the ship filled up the family of now 3 put a claim on a stack of 3 of the beds together. Jake’s father insisted his mother sleep between them, for her protection. The crowd in that part of their ship was mostly from the same area. They knew many, there wasn’t much to worry about. But again their father warned, if food or water ran low, dragons can turn on each other pretty quick. He spent that next two days pacing in the small space they could manage. Angry.

The next two days felt like an eternity, until suddenly the dim lighting just turned red. Jake’s father instructed him and his mother to sit on the bottom bed, while he stood and held onto the post the beds were welded to.

The floor began to shake, the floating feeling of being airborne took the ship and everyone could feel it rise. The next hour everything was shaking as the massive steel beast left the atmosphere, but it would be the jump into warp that shook everyone up the most. This was definitely not made for comfort or was it even tested prior it seems. When the jump happened several around them were injured from being slammed towards the back of the ship. Their father took the edge of a bed to his ribs, possibly breaking a couple. Jake and his mother were thankful he made them sit. After the ship evened out, the lights returned to their dim normal state.

As told, 24 hours after take off, the ration dispensers light up. The dragons rushed them on every floor, it took the first few a couple minutes to figure out, but pressing the tag to the screen did make a ration pack appear. It wasn’t reading the code on the tag, but there was a NFC chip inside that activated the release. Like rats hitting a feed bar, all throughout the day they would be there. The rate of 10,000 dragons getting a single serving a day was alarming, where all this food would be stored in the ship, was there enough for five years? Thousands on every ship pressed their ear awkwardly to the screen for food.

It was only a week into the flight about the prison ship when Jake’s father sat him down and came clean. Jake was shocked the whole time, it was like he was lied to for 22 years.

Their father was horrible at farming, because he was never a farmer, he was a fighter. He knew so many in the colony because it was his idea to lay low among them. But he had no idea the ship would not be returning. He described the planet where he left, a world called “Titan’s world” a hyper capitalist

dystopia where everything was owned by one, and only one dragon, a white scaled tyrant named Titan. He was deeply saddened by how dragons lived, he felt deep inside that they were meant for a better purpose, and that it was being suppressed by the sociopathic few. He had actually started a small revolution, which caught on rather quickly, and it didn't take long before word reached Titan himself, and a price went out for his head. Money was hard to come by, so many lowlifes were looking for him. The plan had always been to return. He took his mate with him, their mother, and while they were on Earth and thought they were stuck there forever, they decided to have a family. This journey's most dangerous part would not be from the humans for them, but it would be from whoever is waiting on the other side.

Jake took it all in. At first he felt betrayed by his father, and didn't talk for several days, only eating, and sitting on the bed he claimed. As his mind digested the lies in his life, he began to understand it now. His father never lied, he just never told the complete story, and he did it to protect him. He contemplated it more for another week. Never talking to his parents only a meter away. On the third week, he finally spoke again.

Sitting beside his father, who was a little surprised

"Well I thought you'd never talk to me again" he muttered

"Dad, it was a lot, listen, I forgive you okay, you kept us safe, you did what you had to"

His father looked into his son's eyes

"I think you're right, if it's really anything you described, it's the most horrible conditions any species should ever have to live through, and you thought you were free from that, and when we get there, if you're still going to fight, then so am I, I was born free on Earth thanks to you, and I'm going to life free the rest of my life"

Jake leaned in and hugged his father, tears were running down both their faces. Jake pressed the side of his muzzle against his dad's, then turned to his mother and hugged her, doing the same sign of affection with her.

His father spoke up, a little choked "Okay Jake, I'm going to keep us all safe when we get there, one way or another, and you can help" he nodded quickly "We are going to stay free"

A moment later he chuckled "Jake there's one more thing I need to tell you"

"What is it, Dad? It can't possible get worst"

"No, it gets better. You're mother is one of our best fighters too. You're on the top because WE are protecting you. She could shoot a bug off a cow from a kilometer away" he started laughing "honestly, between us, she's the real bad-ass"

Jake looked his mother, who placed her hand on his cheek "Just remember that next time you feel mouthy" She pulled her hand away, making a finger gun gesture and smiled at her son.

They of course had no idea for sure where they would be dumped, but they had about 5 years to come up with plans and ideas, and ways to find their missing family member.

Ship “2”

It was 6 weeks into the trip when I made that mistake for the first and only time. We were all already losing our sense of time, the light just stayed the same all the time, no light cycle at all. Everyone began sleeping at random times. I left them just to go use the facilities, which by the way, were already very gross. They were fast asleep, and I didn't want to wake them. As I returned I heard the scuffling and knew how I had fucked up. Those same 4 kids were all on top of them, throwing punches, I hope it just started and it wasn't too bad. I ran to them and jumped on the pile and started throwing punches.

Luckily I did surprise them. I got the upper hand and the first two went down and yelled, staying down. The other two managed to land blows to my right eye and my snout. I relentlessly threw punches back, as fast as I could. The strong farm kid had the upper hand against two alone. After a few minutes they gave up. As they backed off I had to resist the urge to go after them.

“Watch your back, we're going to kill that purple freak” one of them said, spit blood on the floor and then calmly walked off.

I turned to the purple dragon, still balled up and crying. I felt horrible, I thought for a few minutes they would be safe. I sat down beside them, my eye swelling and a couple drops of blood from my nostril hit the floor. I put my hand on their arm, and they cowered.

“It's okay, it's me, I'm back, I'm so sorry, I just had to piss, I didn't know they'd be so quick to jump you like that” They turned to me, and rolled into my chest and started sobbing. Blood and tears ran down their face and ran down my body. I wrapped my arms around them, then slowly, I hid them in my wings. It was strange, maybe it was because I took a few punches to my own face, but I felt I feel like in this moment I shared their pain. I could feel it, down to my heart. I don't know how anyone could hate this gentle creature. I had gotten to know them well over the last 6 weeks, heard their stories. How an ice cream cone made their day after getting beat up. Their excitement when Samuel arrived every week to the colony. I didn't just hear the bad, somehow every story ended on a positive note. Despite knowing nothing but hatred from our own kind, this dragon only thought of the good moments in their life.

But this was a dark moment. Something to leave behind. Like it was time to let go and leave. An exodus of the hate.

Exodus.....

“Exodus” I whispered, in English

The sobbing stopped and they looked up from under my wings to meet my eyes, my right one swelling shut now.

“What?” they whispered

“Exodus” I repeated, in English, but then changed back to Draconic “it means to leave, a mass exit” for some reason this random word seemed to fit “The exodus of our people from Earth, and the Exodus of your life from living in the shadows and living like this” I pulled my arms tight around them “You're too wonderful for this. This is your exodus. This is you”

Their tears kept flowing, but I could feel they were coming from a different place. Tears began to flow from me as well.

“Thank you” they whispered in english. They leaned up and pressed the side of their muzzle to mine. “Exodus, I won’t let this happen again” I pulled them in tight and I began to lose consciousness.

I woke up a few minutes later. Exodus was standing in front of me, yelling with someone. As I came to I lifted their purple wing to see what was going on. That kid’s father, I’m assuming, the same one who grabbed his horn the first day, now holding him against my the same horn. Was arguing with Exodus about something.

His father was about to start yelling at me until he saw my face, I couldn’t open my right eye, things were a little blurry, but he spoke, oddly calmly.

“I came here to tear you a new one for beating up my kid, you’re older and should know better, but I see someone already taught you something today”

“Yeah, your kid and three of his friends”

He turned his attention back to the kid and pulled hard on his horn “Larx, you little shit! Look at this purple thing! It’s half your size! Stop picking on it! You’re getting too old for this childish bullshit! If there weren’t a thousand witnesses I’d kick your ass right now! You got what you deserved on this!” and with that he pulled the kid off by his horn and stomped into the darkness around the beds.

“I hope that’s the end of that for a while” I muttered, I pointed my head straight up to lay against the wall fully. Exodus looked around then took their place sitting beside my and leaned on my shoulder. We drifted off to sleep.

That was no the end of the violence of the next 4 and half years.

About a year in, a large dragon cornered us with a shiv, he believed that Exodus’ bad luck was the reason for all this. I kept backing up, but were in the corner, I kept my wings spread, trying to hide Exodus behind me. My arms extended in front of me to try to keep him away. Two more dragons came up behind him, I thought we were done, that they decided it was our time.

To my surprised one of them wrapped his arm around the attackers neck and pulled him down, the other grabbed his wrist of the hand holding the shiv and started prying it out of his hand. 3 more noticed the problem and came to help, pinning the large dragon to the ground. “No! We have to kill it!” he yelled as the other subdued him. The shiv was taken, I don’t know who took it, nor where it went, but I never saw it again, thankfully. The group decided to bar him from this level, I also never saw that dragon again.

One of those who helped introduced himself after, he was the shopkeeper, one of the few who would be let Exodus just exist. He told me he was helping me more than Exodus, and advised me my life wasn’t worth it. Next maybe just let it go. I told them I couldn’t.

I helped Exodus grow as much as they could in the last of their growing stage. They were 16 when we boarded, they were 20 now, and wouldn’t grow anymore from now. I gave them every second ration for

4 years. They often protested. It did work a little, I know they ended up a few centimeters taller now. This came a small price for me, I did lose a lot of muscle mass. I was still stronger than most, which was saying much. 4 and half years on low quality rations made everyone much weaker.

We had picked a corner as our space, out of the, but no beds. Not that the bare beds would have been any more comfortable. Our presence eventually wore the paint of the wall and floor, a bare metal spot where we sat marked out spot.

Exodus did have something in his tail bags, a pair of novels. One about “the great west” a human cowboy novel. Another one about a murder mystery in a mansion. Very cliché, but it was our only entertainment. We must have read both about a dozen times over the trip.

But the worst was at the 4 and a half year mark.

We were next in line to get our daily rations, the dragon in front of us put his ear up the screen, the screen beeped confirmed the tag, but then suddenly the screen just turned red and nothing came out. It didn't take me long to know what happened, they had run out of food for us.

Our last few months would be when all hell broke loose.

Chapter 3 Landing on Your Feet

“Ship 1” 2109:

I admired my parents, even in this moment of crisis, they were calm, collected, and it was contagious. They stood in the center of the only open space we had, directly in front of these food dispensers. Other dragons had gathered around to listen to what they had to say, as none of the other nearly thousand of us on this level of the ship had very little to offer in solutions.

We have been deported from Earth 4 and a half years ago, and have been forced to live on this mass prison ship since. Every day our kind would press a tag the humans had forcibly pierced into our ears against a screen to retrieve food. But today, that stopped working, the ship had ran out of food. It was as if my father knew this was coming, and he announced his secret, with all honesty, still bare naked from the day we were captured, as if proving he had nothing to hide;

“I had only been eating every second day, along with a quite few of us. The food lasted much longer than we expected, so that’s a good thing.”

Then my mother stepped in, just as versed in survival as my father as I had found out over the past 4 and a half years. He once gorgeous clothes now tattered and worn.

“We have hidden away these rations over time, in our beds. Not just Darus and I, but several of us. As of now we have a count of these rations, and we know how we can divide them to survive, as bleak as it may seem.”

She took a long sigh and ensured we have everyone’s attention

“We have 25 children on this level under the age of 12, they will be the priority, and will get to still eat every day. We have 31 kids between 13 and 18, and they will get to eat every other day, prioritizing the younger ones.” She took a pause, she knew the next part was not going to be popular. “For adults 19 and over, the remaining eight hundred or so we have left, we will eat once per week”

There was a murmur among the crowd, as she paused to let to information sink in before continuing

“I know this isn’t ideal, but that’s enough to ward off starvation, or at least death, just barely. Those of us who were on the colonist ship 50 years ago know what this is going to be like. We are not going to arrive healthy nor strong, but we will arrive in a living state”

That’s when Dad stepped in, his hand in front of him.

“We need to keep what food we have left, I’m going to ask those who stashed some away to bring it here now. We’re going to place some of those who are still strong on a guard rotation, and we are going to keep this food very safe, but very public. Also the stairwell.” He pointed towards the back “We are going to barricade it off. If you have loved ones on another level, I’m sorry, but this is the only way. Over the last 4 years I talked to people on other levels and encouraged them to hoard away food as well for this time, but there is no guarantee they did. We only have enough to get everyone on this level through, and when food runs out on the other levels they will try to come and steal ours. You’re free to leave to another level of the ship if you wish, but know that if you leave we will not let anyone come up those stairs”

Over the next few hours dozens of dragons made their way up to the front of our level. We piled the packets neatly in rows and layers, because without pen and paper we could not have any sort of running inventory other than what we kept in our heads. One it was all piled up, impressively some quick math was done, and we had roughly 30,000 of these packets of food. The math worked, at least for now, we could survive for another 6 months.

Those of us who were still strong went to work, including myself and my parents. We tore apart some of the beds closest to the stairway leading down to the other levels, and were able to create a crude barricade. Strangely but proudly, we noticed a the next two levels down were following our example. My parent had not only inspired the dragons on our level, but seemingly the entire ship. I hoped for them, if they were even remotely as smart as this, we would all survive, all 30,000 of us. At least those 30,000 who were still alive.

All this planning ahead would prove to save us, but wasn't entirely needed. Dad had planned for the full 5 years, but 3 months later, while I was doing my part to guard the food, the lights turned red again, and a few seconds later everyone was hurled towards the front of the ship as we finally dropped from warp, 4 years and 9 months after our odyssey began.

“Ship 3”

The human Captain stared in slight shock as the two dragon warships that intercepted them floated so closely he could nearly see into the command deck of the opposing ships. He was taken off guard at the size of the ships.

“Send the message again, on all the frequencies this time, not just the ones in the intelligence files” He paused “Manually check the translations as well”

“Yes sir” said a crew member behind him as he started tapping away at a keyboard while reading the message aloud “We have 30,000 of your kind, we only wish to return them to their home culture and leave peacefully”

“Yes, try resending” he ordered. The small bridge stood silent and waiting a response

On the surface of the city planet below, the Guild Leader of this territory, Chen, was walking briskly to his next meeting. This one was about profit shares from one of his many large companies. He was dressed in very nice and very expensive business attire. A gray jacket, almost resembling a blazer of a human suit, lapels on his shoulders of his holding company's logo. Straighten pants leading down to the traditional bare talons. His wings in large sleeves with the top portion and claw poking from the top. He wore the tassels from his horns proudly indicating his position of Guild Leader. One of his many assistants ran up to him.

“Chen, sir! Sorry to bother you, but this is important and happening in orbit now!” he said as he handed Chen a rectangular device. As Chen took it, a holographic display popped up and draconic text started scrolling down the translucent display. He read the words intently, and started asking questions.

“We don't know this race that brought them?” He asked

“No, sir, we don’t. In their first message they called themselves ‘yu’man’” he mispronounced, assuming the H was silent.

“30,000 isn’t very many, keep this very quiet for now. Does any one else know there are there yet?”

“No sir, only the 2 warships we sent to intercept”

“We have no idea what they have as far as disease, and a pandemic would be terrible for my markets, do NOT let that ship land. Engage any assets you need”

“yes sir”

“And keep me up to date, you may enter this meeting is anything develops” as he handed back the device. “If they do try to land, blow them out of the sky and make sure it’s hot enough to kill every last cell”

The assistant nodded and walked from the direction, opening the display again and started typing something out with his finger into the display

The entire human crew of the ship watched the display, waiting for something to appear. They were becoming sure the attempts to contact had failed. But patience would prove fruitful after 20 minutes text began to appear. It came through as draconic, but the computer translated the text underneath, it simply read “You may not land, we do not want your disease”

The captain of the prison ship stood up straight and then turned to look at the warships pointing guns at the vessel. He spoke, firmly, and decisive.

“Prepare to release the pod, we will leave it in orbit”

One of the crew members gasped as one spoke up “Sir, we can’t just leave 30,000 to d-”

“Not one of us on this ship are going to give up our lives to save 30,000 of these reptiles” he stood firm and turned to the crew member in question “They’ve likely been out of food for days or weeks now, we certainly can’t take them back. Carry out my orders and if you wish I’ll note your objection in my logs”

“Yes sir!” the crew member sat back down in her chair and started tapping at her screen.

“Comms send a message; ‘since we cannot land, 30,000 of your kind will be left here in orbit, they are your responsibility now, you better be quick, there is only enough air for 24 hours’”

“Aye sir” As the comms officer started typing away on his keyboard as well.

Moments later the ship shuddered as the pod was released, floating in orbit above the city world, powerless, completely dark inside for the dragons who were left behind. The remaining frame and propulsion of the human vessel turned and quickly jumped to warp directly back to Earth.

Chen sat in his meeting with several of his elite business partners, delighted at the results and even more pleased with the projections. Graphs showing upward trends displayed in a hologram coming from the center of the table. The assistant from earlier opened the door and walked silently to Chen, handing him the device once again. The room was silent as Chen read the text. His expression went from the happiness of more profit to an irritated state. But that was when he got an idea and looked across the large table at one of business disciples.

“Saros!” he said loudly, as if the attention of the room wasn’t already on him and him alone.

“Yes sir?”

“One of your companies, I believe the one that makes mobile devices, the current operator is caught up in some sex scandal isn’t he?”

The other dragon looked puzzled, unaffected by the accusation as it was normal “Yes, he killed a prostitute, but what relevance does th-

“The people might boycott your brand, you’re hanging in by a thread last I looked at the reports on your companies, people aren’t buying your brand, so, I’m going to throw you bone here” Chen slid the device across the table. “Save these mere 30,000 from orbit, make you and your companies look like a hero, and you’ll regain some ground”

The other dragon picked up the device and started to read. After a moment he looked up, puzzled, at Chen “Why are you doing this?”

His answer was blunt “I can’t be fucked to, it’s an expense that’s not necessary and does me little good. But it could help you, and if we’re all rich then I’m richer, it’s that simple. My only order is one of the Guild Leader, you quarantine those workers for a year before they can be in the general public, we don’t need an illness outbreak affecting productivity” He paused waiting for the other dragon to say something. “Well? Get to it to!”

The other dragon got up and left the room. The prisoners of ship 3 would be rescued, and after a year would be put to work in the general population.

Ship “2”

I crawled as quickly as I could along the beds, Deakon was right behind me. Hiding as I went along as another outbreak of violence had taken hold among the dragons. Food had run out months ago, and those who were smart enough to hide some away were trying to defend their small hoard to their death. Often when these huge fights broke out multiple dragons would also come after me, blaming my purple scales for their bad luck. Deakon would always defend me, but he had become weak with starvation now, barely able to follow along. I’m not sure how at this point I was stronger than him, perhaps because he gave me so much. Over the past 6 months he would come to the defense of those who were smart enough to hide food. They would often but not always reward him with a ration pack, then he would share it with me. As we crawled along and came out between two rows of the now wrecked beds, a dragon hit the floor beside us, knocked down and bleeding, his assailant looked down at him. “FOOOOOOD” he screamed at his victim before diving down onto the body and sinking his teeth into the victim’s neck. Deakon pulled my tail and gestured for me to come back.

We retreated into a relatively calm area where some arguing was still happening, but that was not far enough. Forever etched into my memory is the sickening wet sound of that dragon's flesh being torn from their bones. I glanced in that direction and saw two more had joined in the murder. Deakon grabbed my face and turned me to meet his gaze and whispered "Don't look"

I felt fear, the strongest fear I had ever felt to this point in my life. It was as though I could feel the fear of every dragon on board this prison ship. I knew our kind had a darkness inside them from the way I was treated on Earth, but this was true nature of our kind in an emergency. I sank my face into his chest, pressing my eyes closed and trying to ignore the sounds. Tears running down my cheeks as I reflected on my short life, certain that my short stay alive would be over very soon. My thoughts turned dark, wondering if it was really worth it, wishing I had been killed as a hatchling as people said I should have been. I could feel the ribs on the front of his chest and that moment I knew there was no one left to protect me. He had fallen too weak, I was too small to defend myself.

I felt a tug on my left wing but I kept my face buried in Deakon's chest, but then it pulled again, much more violently this time. I turned my head and here I was face to face one more time with that bully, Larx. He was nearly just as skinny as Deakon now but still somehow had the energy to try one more time. My vision was blurred from my tears but I looked at his hand and he had a shiv of some kind, made from metal from somewhere.

I stood up and turned to face him. I thought I would have given up, I thought for sure I was about to die, possibly Deakon as well for protecting me all these years. I didn't know why but instead of my heart sinking, instead of accepting my final fate, something welled up from within. My eyes stopped watering and something strong came up from my very being. This wasn't just for me, it was also time to protect Deakon. I stared deep into his eyes, and uttered a single word;

"Go" I said calmly

"Wh-what? I'm going to kill you now, your think you can just tell me to g-"

"Go now. Drop that weapon, and go now" I ordered him and something came over his expression. It wasn't fear, it wasn't laughter, it was nothing. His face, his eyes, his entire body took a sudden turn. Instead of threatening he was now calm. I breathed in as deep as I could and let out a sound, nearly roar but also screaming "GO!"

Larx dropped the shiv. His expression stayed blank.

"And never bother us again, Larx" I said as he turned his back and walked away seemingly in a daze.

I turned back to Deakon, his head now slumped onto his shoulder, and the fear returned. I rushed down in front of him and shook his shoulders "Deakon?" and he didn't move. I grabbed his muzzle and lifted it to face me "DEAKON?" I yelled, fearing the worst. He stirred and his eyes opened to meet mine.

"I'm so tired, Exodus" he whispered.

The crying started again as I leaned against him. He felt so limp and I was so afraid.

"I just need some sleep" he whispered into my ear, but something told me this wasn't about to be sleep,

and my intuition was never wrong...

But then without any warning the lights went red.

Ship “1”

It took several hours just to locate a site to land. This gave Titan’s military a chance to mobilize. The ship has sent out the message like the others, and it was received. But no response was ever sent. The humans took this as permission to land and Titan saw it as gaining 30,000 more slaves. But there was someone on that ship he would want.

In the middle of a large overgrown construction site, where a building was to be put up but construction was never really started, the large prison ship set down on the ground. It released the prison section underneath it as planned, but as the ship lifted to take off back to Earth, two small but heavily armed military craft opened fire on the part of the ship that was taking off, driving it back to the ground in a fiery crash, luckily toward the opposite side of the pod from the door.

Soldiers and equipment swarmed in. As some of the soldiers and equipment started putting out the flames of the crashed ship, others started on working on the door to the prison left on the ground beside the dying vessel. The surviving human crew of 4 left alive was taken captive, however one died shortly after from injuries.

The prison pod was a different situation. The door initially opened as planned by the humans, but the opening was immediately barricaded by Titan’s military to prevent escape. A processing area was set up first to ID every dragon stepping off first. Then an area the length of 3 buildings was fenced in for the arrivals to be herded into. Armed soldiers were placed along the perimeter to prevent anyone from leaving until they were allowed.

A few hours later the barricade was opened. The first one off the ship was Gar, who had pushed his way to the front knowing he would eventually be rewarded for “Bringing the escapees back”. As he stepped into the light he immediately submitted to the retinal scanner they were using to ID everyone.

Gar’s information came up on the nearby screen being monitored by a low ranking soldier and Gar stopped in front of the station waiting for them to realize who they had.

“Sir, come take a look at this!” yelled the soldier behind the screen

A higher ranking dragon came over and read the screen. Only his name and rank came up on the screen, the rest reading “Classified” The officer took a moment to process then looked at Gar

“Welcome home sir!” he stood at attention.

“Get me some fucking food and a uniform” he ordered.

We had no idea which world we had landed on, but Dad did say he had a bad feeling, almost as if he could smell the air before he could even get outside. We were overall in good shape, though a bit thin and very hungry. We were patient and took our time getting off the ship, making sure everyone else on

our level had left. Dad even took the time to walk around and make sure there was no one alive left behind.

20 hours after we landed we stepped out the door and Dad's biggest worry had become reality. He recognized the place instantly, it was the very world he had escaped from along with the other colonists. As we stepped off our eyes were met with the scanner, but before Dad's information was even on the screen someone pointed him out. It was Gar, on Earth he was a neighbor from a couple places over. He was always kind of a creep. I knew something was off about him and now it made sense.

"There, that's Darus, and his mate Sorah beside him!" he shouted "That one!" he pointed at me now "One of his sons!"

The soldier scanned my eyes and a moment after the one behind the screen shook his head and said to the superior "No info on this one"

"Of course not!" Gar butted in "He was hatched on Earth, he wouldn't even be thirty yet" Then the other soldiers nodded in agreement.

All three of us were grabbed and they started putting restraints on our wrist and ankles, but oddly enough, not our wings. As this was happening Gar approached us, asking me first "Your brother, where is he?"

"Fuck you!" I yelled and was met with a fist to the face from the officer beside him. Gar turned his attention to my father

"Where is your other son?" he demanded "I know you have two, where is the other?"

Dad looked down at the ground, Mom followed "Lost, we lost him on the way, you won't find him" It wasn't exactly a lie.

Gar had a disappointed look on his face, he was hoping for four to turn over, not three. "You're being detained, for conspiring against our Guild Leader, and leading away his property." Gar said proudly "You'll be taken to prison while Titan decides your fate" and he signaled for the other officers to take us away. "Same place where you are taking those humans you captured"

We were pushed away and gunpoint towards a sort of armored vehicle. As we were pushed along I glanced back at the crowd now vacated from our prison. Strangely some were being handed water and food from our own kind. Dad noticed this as well and he whispered to me "Someone is going to be in trouble for letting them have food"

"Shut up" yelled one of the soldiers pushing us along.

As we approached the vehicle the door was opened and to our surprise 3 humans were already sitting inside, chained up, their uniforms burnt and one of them bleeding from their head. They looked very afraid as we were stuffed inside with them. The door was closed and we sat there inside for a couple hours, seemingly waiting in case there were more prisoners to take along with us.

After a few moments, my mother, annoyed for having to sit with our own captors of the last 5 years

spoke up. “So how does it feel?”

“Please, don’t hurt us” one replied out of fear.

My father looked up at the human, “Don’t worry, we are better than you”.

Sandpit;

The ship came down on the outskirts of a small city. Landing in a wide open space, crushing some small brush and cacti looking plants and stirring up a mini sandstorm as it landed. Some shacks stood nearby, a couple of homes made from cement or mud. The inhabitants coming out the doors or hanging out the windows to watch everything unfold.

The ship had sent its message as intended, but they received hundreds of responses from various gang leaders and groups. Confused by the torrent of text the human crew decided to just find a place and drop off the pod.

The ship touched the ground, the loud engines never slowed down. A few moments later it released the pod and then rose again. It went back to space and headed back to Earth. To the crew on board, ship one was the only ship to have been deemed a success. To the dragon prisoners it transported it was the largest failure. Of the nearly 30,000 that were forced onto the ship, only 20,000 stepped off.

This pod would sit here until it decayed and became part of the ground centuries later. The first year the horrible stench of death and decay constantly seeped out. It was so powerful the nearby residents would move away. The monument to human hatred now existed on an alien world where no human had ever set foot.

Among the last to leave the ship, from the top level, was the purple dragon now named Exodus, and Deakon who tried to protect them. Deakon was too weak to walk far, but slumped over Exodus’s shoulder they made it to the outer edge of the city. This would be Exodus’s turn to save Deakon.

Chapter 04 Mom and Dad

Titan's World, 2109;

The metallic sounds of Sampson's artificial feet hitting the marble floor echoed off the huge glass panes along both sides as he approached Titan sitting on his throne in the large room. Once a couple meters away he went down on his right knee, it also making a metallic *clink* as it hit the floor. He would bow if he was any other person, but he was unable. His head was supported by a large brace apparatus connected to his chest and spine. He could not lean over.

Beside Titan, their sister stood adorned in the same white scales as her brother. Tall, slim, even to a human's eyes she was female. Her thin waist led to slightly wider hips. Adorned in a long loincloth that hung only a couple centimeters off the ground, a well decorated round top covered the upper half of her torso, leaving her flat but defined midsection exposed. Her arms were across her chest as she also waiting for information about this alien ship that dared to land on their planet.

Titan sat, appearing bored, his head leaning on his left fist while his right fingers idly tapped on his armrest. Dressed in his religious robes on his upper body while a long white loincloth similar to his sister's but wider. It was draped from in front of him down his throne and onto the floor. It had been 24 hours since it landed, but he still didn't really care.

"Rise Sampson" He gestured up with his hand. "What do you want now?"

Sampson took a moment to speak, not because he was thinking about what he wanted to say, but because he did not naturally talk. He had to start moving his throat as if he could speak to trigger the electronics that spoke for him. The voice that came out was natural but the echo of robotics were the main tone. Most of his body was robotic, the organic parts between were also white like his family members'. "The ship was found to be from the colonists that escaped 50 years ago. It was not built by them however, the species that lived on the world they landed on had deported them back to us. However there is only 26,000 of the 50,000 that left. Furthermore half of the dragons that were on the ship were less than 70 years old, meaning this accounts for less than one third of the revolutionist that escaped"

"So we only have 26,000 more to add to the population." Said the white dragon from his throne. "On this world we at a billion, this was a waste of time. We need to replenish the population and this is a waste of time."

"Not entirely, Sir. Among those returned to use were the dragons who conspired to start the revolution itself."

Selena herself was suddenly interested as she spoke up. "You mean Darus and Sorah? Do you have them?"

"Yes, they are in custody, along with one of their sons"

"One of their sons?" Titan lifted his head, delight was beginning to fill his face as he knew he could plan a public example of this family, one of his favorite things to do to exert his rule over the people
"When say one of their sons, you mean there are more?"

“Were, Sir. It seems they had two, but one expired on the journey back. The conditions were nearly just as one of your own prisons. Those on board told us there were initially approximately 30,000 at the beginning” He paused to try to control his voice again “The ship seemed to split after landing, as if to return a crew to where they came from. It was shot down and 8 corpses and 4 living samples were recovered, however one of those 4 expired on the scene. The remaining 3 are also now in custody, I await your consent to question them, as this is a foreign race and requires your involvement”

Titan waved his hand away, as this was beneath him “Yes yes, do as you will with them. But keep them alive, I will execute them myself for allowing my property to hide for so long”

“One other thing, Sir” Sampson turned toward the door he came, and waved a signal to the guards. A moment later the doors opened and Gar walked in, now cleaned up and clad in a ceremonial uniform. “This is Master Commander Gar of the stealth operations section, he followed the Revolutionist by infiltrating their ranks. He was responsible for finding your traitors, Sir”

Gar walked towards as Sampson explained his role, and knelt where Sampson had a few moments earlier.

Titan, was now in a great mood. He would have 6 heads to cut off soon, and 3 more sets of wings to have bronzed. He stood from the throne and stepped toward Gar.

“Congratulations Gar, Recently I lost the Master General of, what ever it was, your section of my military. He couldn’t keep his head about a mission.” He nearly chuckled at the joke he made for himself “You are that new Master General”

“Yes, Sir, Thank you, Sir” Proud of himself, and internally happy but showing no emotion in front of the Guild Leader. “I shall make sure you are pleased with this decision”

“I had better be” He walked back to his throne and turned but did not yet sit. “Your first order is to get as much information out of those aliens as you can before I kill them.” He sat down in his throne, his wings hooked onto a part near the head where the “thumb” would hang from to relax his wings. “I want to know where this planet is and who this race is. You have one week. That will be all you can both leave” and he waved his hand at the door. Gar bowed then turned and marched out.

“I shall confirm the condition of those prisoners.” Sampson waved his one organic arm before himself as if to gesture a bow he could not make, then turned and left, the rhythmic sound of his metal feet hitting the floor then fading away.

After the two left, Selena sat down on the arm of her brother’s throne and threw her arm over his shoulders and leaned in.

“I know what you’re going to do, Brother, and I am telling you now it’s not the best time.”

“It’s not your choice to make is it?” He kept his stare forward

“No, Brother, but I never steer you wrong. The population is nearing the breaking point. Your economy has collapsed long ago, there’s little left here but your strong army. It’s still somehow the strongest among the guilds but there is nothing for it to protect. Killing them in front of everyone may breed more sympathy for this revolution and gather more support. More people will try to leave” She

reached out and gently turned her brothers face to her “What good is ruling if there is no one left to rule”

“They won’t leave. They cannot leave. I don’t allow it”

“They are escaping. Revolutionist are regularly taking your people off world, and of the other worlds as well. I want to see those traitor’s blood on the ground as much as you do, and in time we will. We have them and they are going no where” She turned on the arm and placed her thigh over her brothers then placed her hand on his chest and slowly rubbed it. “Patience Brother, will be virtue. Patience comes with it rewards. You won’t beat this revolution with brute force like you think you will.”

Titan grabbed his sister hand from his chest. “My mind is made up! You won’t seduce me into making another decision in your favor this time”

She stood up in a huff “Your mind, is LOST!” and she straighten out her top before storming off. Titan watched her tail sway as she left. Remembering he is never alone in the room he quickly looked at one of the High Honor Guards in the corner, clad in his red and gold armor. The Guard quickly diverted his gaze back to the wall in front of him as Titan scoffed.

They took us to a cell, with steel walls and heavy steel door, there was definitely no escape. It’s strange to say this, but at the time, I could only think of how alien it was. The steel was rusted with an old layer of green paint peeling off, the door had so little gap, as it fit so tightly it could never be opened. On the second day is when I learned just how important Dad really was.

The slot in the door slid open and a pair of eyes gazed in.

“Ah, Sorah! Darus! First off, here take this for you and your son” the stranger slid 6 packs of dragon food rations through the slot and they fell to the ground. “I’m glad I found you, we can’t get you out of here but we’ve found out that Titan is planning on publicly executing you so-” He was interrupted by a human scream coming from down the hallway behind him “As yes, I haven’t much time. Everyone is distracted as they torture these humans for information”

Mom picked up the packages and threw on to me and another to Dad the she and my father went to the slot to talk.

“Have they tried simply asking them? I going to bet not” She asked.

“I’m unsure, I’ve only gotten in here the last hour” the mystery party said, completely missing the dark joke “Anyway, as I said, some time in the coming days Titan plans to execute you, heads off, wings bronzed, you know, the typical. But we’ve got a pretty good force in the city already to facilitate your escape”

I ripped open the package and started stuffing the food in my maw while slowly stepping closer to hear things more clearly.

“He will likely start with the humans, which will give us some time. There will likely be a security fence between him and the crowd. With enough of us we can tear away at it then rush the platform. The problem being likely all twelve of his High Honor Guards will be there, along with their Captain. They

are too deadly for us to take care of, so it will likely be grab and run sort of situation.”

Dad spoke, and for one more time he showed his compassion, even for the human that held him captive for 5 years “Are you sure there is nothing we can do for them? The humans?”

The eyes on the other side of the door seemed confused “Didn’t they hold you for 5 years and get you into this? Why would you wa-”

“They are people too, they are alive, and albeit misguided, but are living beings who don’t deserve to die at this tyrant’s hand” Dad looked at me, then back into the door. “Make our son the priority, if only one of us makes it please let it be him, he is ready for greatness”

My jaw dropped, it was the nicest thing he had ever said about me, with me in earshot anyways “Awwr, Dad, you really do lo-”

“Shut up, Jake” He said smiling and turned back to the hole in the door “If we can think of a way or see any opportunity to distract those guard, even for a moment, we’ll take it”

A rhythmic clanking on the floor started to approach. The mystery party slid the slot closed and turned away from the door pretending to be on guard duty. Sampson drew closer but stopped in front the guard. Incapable of emotion on his face due the missing parts he motioned for the guard to step aside. Sampson slid open the slot and looked inside.

This was the creepiest thing I had ever seen, two glowing red robotic eyes suddenly staring into our cell. I stopped eating and stared back. Mom and Dad gasped and held each other close, shocked that someone this high up were checking on them. After a couple seconds the slot slid closed.

On the other side Sampson stood back, turning his posture to meet the “guard”

“Very good, keep them alive, as Titan wants to keep them that way for now” He leaned in near the soldier’s ear, his face now visibly nervous as the second in command was centimeters away. At the lowest volume his voice box was able to make he uttered a few words.

“I’m sorry, I can’t be of any help right now.”

Sampson turned and walked in the direction of the humans cells as another scream came from that direction.

One the rhythmic clanking on the floor left earshot the soldier turned and opened the slot again.

“I’m sorry, I may be compromised, and now I need to deliver a message”

“Give us a moment” Mom replied

“Mom, Dad, what the hell was that?”

“We’ll tell you shortly” said Dad.

Mom turned to the guard behind the slot “Titan’s satisfaction comes from our deaths, we need to deny

him that. We need to challenge his ultimate authority” She looked firmly in the eyes of the soldier through the whole in the door. “Anything we can do to show solidarity and give him a show of our strength. His satisfaction will come from killing us but we need to deny him that.”

“We’re dozens strong, more are arriving over the next few days. We have thousands if not tens of thousands of sympathizers and supporters in this city alone. They are not soldiers obviously but they plan on putting on a large show of discontent, and massive protest.” He explained with urgency, he just wanted to leave now. “The plan is the rush, if we can get a few close to the stage and get you out that’s the first plan, if someone can happen to shoot or stab at Titan that’s the secondary goal.”

He closed the slot but it stayed open a tiny amount and I could hear his scaly feet hitting the floor as he ran.

The next two days felt like weeks, or months. Eventually soldiers came to collect us, and they were not on the side of the revolution. Thick leather bags placed over our heads, chained in every way you could think of, and dragged away. But as we were dragged, I heard the murmurs of a crowd. It grew louder and louder, and I realized this was it. This was the event that would change everything. For some reason in the tension my stomach hurt. I hadn’t eaten much in weeks, since we were running low on food aboard the prison ship. Even those two rations that were sneaked into us was not enough.

The bag was ripped off my head, the light was blinding. I squinted my eyes and tried to see as my eyes adjusted to the daylight. Looking around we were on a what seemed like a stage. I looked behind us to a row of 12 highly decorated soldiers. Dressed in vibrant red and gold ancient looking armor, and to our right, three dragons. One massive muscular dragon, dressed in near religious garb, holding a large blade, and behind him stood the other two. The one to his right, feminine, dressed in the most elaborate decorations, in another situation I might think she was beautiful. She looked pissed. To his left, another dragon, dressed in what looked like a human lab coat, the collar extending up to nearly the bottom of his, well he had only one horn, it appeared the other was missing. That’s when I noticed the eyes, the same red robotic eyes that stared into the cell two days ago. He was also missing his wings as well as his tail. Three of his four remaining limbs were artificial. They were metal with a black material around the joints. He looked like he’s been through hell several times. All three had the same white scales over their bodies.

The three humans recovered from the crash were also on their knees, two males and one female. They were still in their charred uniforms. The one who asked us not to hurt them looked at us. I could see the despair in her eyes, as much as our relationship with humans was rough, I truly wanted to help her, but I couldn’t. The feeling of uselessness made me sick.

To my right, someone I always felt odd about. Gar, in a military uniform. I didn’t know the symbols for ranks, but I assume with how many symbols were on him, his rank was quite high. Large tassels hung from his horns, now covered in some gold sheathing. He had such a smug look on his face, I wanted to just punch it off him.

Behind us all was a very tall building. The only clean building around us. Surrounded by a wall, the front gates directly to the rear of this stage. The ally was right, we were on public display. I looked around, everything was gray, the sky was orange, this was a filthy world.

Before us a huge crowd of thousands. They were loud, they weren’t here to witness some execution of a criminal, they were here to protest everything, this was one pissed off crowd. In front of the crowd, a

6 foot tall fence of thick steel bars planted firmly into the concrete ground.

Then his voice boomed, speakers, or some sort of public broadcast.

“These traitors have dared to defy me! I’m going to kill them, and make no mistake, that I will kill ANYONE who dares to conspire against me again. YOU ARE MY PROPERTY!”

He spoke with purpose, his voice deep, but somehow, a sense of low intelligence. Perhaps I was imagining that last part.

His words angered the crowd. The drone of jeers and boo’s filled the air, the dragons at the front started pushing on the barrier placed between him and the crowd. I thought to myself, why don’t they just fly over it? It’s barely 6 feet tall, I could easily hope over that with a single flap. Why don’t they just fly?

“These are humans stole my property from me, and they will be punished”

One at a time Titan rose his large blade and swing, cleanly taking the heads off the three humans, they rolled as blood spilled over the stage.

“You are all my property!” he started shouting again, his voice seemed to echo for mile through some PA system “You are all MINE to do with as I please. If you anger me, I WILL kill each and every one of you!” He turned to my father, and raised the blade, the human blood dripping from the edge.

Dad’s head hit the floor.

I screamed for my father.

Time became nothing.

I know I was screaming, but I could no longer hear myself

Somehow I still heard the crowd

“WE’RE NOT YOUR PROPERTY!” they started chanting

Why don’t they fly? They could be up here in seconds. Why won’t they fly?

The tears building in my eyes made things blurry.

But there was Mom

Staring back at me

Staring and not moving

Her eyes filled with fear, but not moving

You’re on the ground, Mom

It's going to be okay, Mom

But why are you on the ground, Mom?

The rest of her fell a moment later

I screamed again, I think

The crowd broke through, but it was too late

Why didn't you all just fly?

I can't hear anything anymore, am I still screaming?

Suddenly my wings hurt, like fire. They stung, I turned to look at my left wing. Oh yes there it is, why does it hurt? Where is it going? I'm not telling it to move. Someone just grabbed me, all of me, and is pulling me away. But my wing, ah yes, I can see the other one now. This white dragon, the one they call Titan, he's holding them. His blade is so bloody now.

I hear them again, still chanting "We are NOT yours"

I looked at Mom again, her eyes, so full of fear. I need to protect her... I need to protect

I need

to avenge

MOM AND DAD

The pain stopped

The sound came back

Suddenly things moved at real speed again

And I was pissed

I try to run at him, but whoever had a hold of me, and was dragging me away had more strength.

"TITAN!" I scream, with every bit of energy I had left "TITAN I'M GOING TO FUCKING KILL YOU" the decorated guard, holding him back, trying to protect him from the crowd now rushing at him "I AM GOING TO BE YOUR DEATH I SWEAR ON THEIR LIVES!"

Some of the crowd was now on the stage, feet from Titan. Then the gunfire broke out.

Some of the solders in the red armor made a line while the rest dragged the three elites away.

"I'M GOING TO KILL YOU" I screamed on more time, as everything around me started to turn into a tunnel. "I'm going to kill you" I said, as that tunnel started getting darker and darker "I'm going... to

kill.... You” the tunnel closed. And nothing but black. The last sound I heard was more gunfire.

I wasn’t even from here. I wasn’t hatched here. This isn’t my world. This had nothing to do with me.

Why didn’t they just fly?

Where did you go Deakon?

You had to stop and play hero to that purple one.

Why didn’t they fly?

Why do my wings hurt so bad?

I love you Mom.

I love you Dad

Chapter 05 Street Rats

“Sandpit” 2109;

I struggled under Deakon’s weight, but eventually we made it to the out edge of the city. I laid him down between two shacks. He was barely conscious and fading fast. I looked down the walking path and into the city. I noted there seemed to be no vehicle marks, I didn’t know enough about an ancestral culture to really know for sure, but It seemed everyone walked or flew here. We were among the last to leave the prison, and as the sun was setting on this planet, I knew tonight would be a small wave in minor crime, as about 20,000 of us were hungry, weak, and seeking food and shelter. This would be to our benefit, I was in my element right now. I was back to street life.

“Deakon!” I said getting his attention. He looked up at me but not for long

“Exodus”

“I’m going to leave you here, not for long. PLEASE don’t go sleep okay? Just stay awake okay?”

“I can’t sleep, Exodus, I need to watch over you!”

“It’s my turn to watch over you, you need food in the worst way, I know I can find us some pretty quick okay?”

He nodded and struggled to keep his head up. For the first time in 5 years I left his side and ventured down the paths. There was a market area up ahead, seemingly it was closed and it’s inhabitants scattered early today. The booths and stand varied greatly from one to the next, some were modern, cables ran to nearby buildings for power, some even had solar panels on top of them for the refrigeration. Others were poorly made, simple planks spread across crates. I’m sure I would find something here.

I started searching, dropped food was my plan, it always happened. Those selling fruit would drop something under their stall and never see it again until it rotted and smelled. Then they go looking for it. Obviously I was looking for something fresher. After looking under several booths I found something. I’m not sure what it was but It seemed like a fruit of some kind, orange and firm. It looked relatively okay, at least okay enough to eat.

I kept looking.

One thing I learned in my life was just how strong the dragon digestive system was. Food poisoning wasn’t in our vocabulary. We could eat rancid meat and digest it. Of course it tasted horrible, it was disgusting, but that’s how I survived on Earth. I had eaten enough rotted food to know where the line was.

I kept looking under booths and stalls, even in items I thought might be garbage cans. Almost as if it were fate, I found a top, a hooded caplet similar to what I used to wear on Earth. It was solid yellow. Bright and attention getting, but at least it would cover me up a little, I threw it over my head and put up the hood, my horns fit perfectly through the holes in the hood.

As I searched there was a few booth owners still around. Closed up early today but staying nearby to

protect things while this crowd from the prison ship wandered into town. I kept looking, soon I found another thing. Long and green, some sort of skin on it. It seemed edible too. I felt the urgency surging to get back to Deakon and give him what little I found when suddenly one of the dragons sitting behind the booth shouted at me.

“Hey you! Come over here!”

I approached in the fading light, very cautiously, it wasn't until I closer they noticed my purple scales.

“Oh, I didn't know you were purple” she said. “If I had noticed I wouldn't have called you here” I sighed at the remark “But that's okay, you're here now. What are you doing? I see you found yourself a couple things under the stalls here, but you haven't even taken a bite!”

I was quiet for a moment, but that intuition kicked in, something told me she was safe to talk to.

“It's for my friend, he's green I promise! He's in a really bad way. He spent so much of his energy defending me and helping others when he ran out of food, I don't think he's going to make it through the night”

“He is on deaths' door from defending YOU? That says a lot about him! Where is he?”

“I had to leave him, I think you can tell I'm small, I couldn't carry him any further. He's only a few hundred meters away” I pointed in the direction I came “I left him between a couple shacks”

“Show me what you have” She said, sitting up as if sensing my urgency. I showed her the round orange thing and the long green thing. She examined them and then told me something important “That green thing is called a payka, don't let him eat the skin, or it'll come back up. The last thing he needs right now. That orange thing is called a torla, it can be eaten whole. But hang on one second.” She reached over and opened a box, some fog came from within indicating it was very chilled inside. She pulled out a raw cut of meat “This is raw fish from one of the moons a few systems away. It's kind of a delicacy but still fresh, it can be eaten raw and it's got a lot of good vitamins packed into it, he'll need this the most. It's from my personal stash so don't make me regret this”

“I promise, I know I'm purple, I know everyone fears me for some reason, but I'm nothing to fear, and he is really nice too! I promise, you won't regret helping him!”

Then she pulled a bottle from other side. It surprised me, a water bottle, plastic, nearly just like earth but shorter and fatter. “Let him have this too, it's pretty cheap, kind of tastes off. One more thing, feed him slowly, if he is close to death as you claim, too much at once might make him vomit. If he does that might also mean his digestive tract is shut down and he is already a lost cause. There's not a lot of medical care here and the only way to save him that point it be fed intravenously and that's not likely to be found around here”

“Thank you! Thank you so much!” I was so happy I was nearly in tears “What's your name?”

“I'm Sorah, nice to meet you. Now please take good care of Deakon!”

I nodded and turned to go back to him, but suddenly I felt strange, I wasn't sure I ever told this woman his name. I stopped and turned to look back. She was picking up her things and seemingly getting ready

to leave for the night. I decided not to bother her any further.

I ran off to Deakon. I got to him only a few minutes later, and he had fallen asleep. I had hoped it was only sleep. I started shaking his should and calling his name. He didn't respond the first few times making me start to panic, but finally he did stir.

"Who are you?" he stared at my yellow hood for a moment "Oh Exodus it's you. Sorry, you told me not to sleep but I think I might have a little"

"It's okay Deakon, I got you some food okay? You need to eat this, but only a little at a time."

He nodded. I started with the fish, it was a small cut but I held it up to his muzzle. For a moment he tried to reach up but didn't have the strength. Slowly he took a bite from my hand and chewed slowly. It seemed to take for eternity to chew but after about 40 times chewing he swallowed it. He leaned forward and took another bite, again chewing forever. Eventually he ate the entire cut, but it would take time to recover, and time to see if he would keep this new food down. With something in his stomach he shortly feel asleep again. I was much less worried now that I knew something was in he finally got eat. As he sleep I started tearing the skin off the payka. It took me about an hour in the dark but when I was done, and I woke him up again. He still seemed very exhausted though something was a little different, a little more conscious when he woke up. I fed him the pakya and gave him some water.

"That was good what is that?" I explained the name of it, the other fruit I had. And told him about the dragoness who gave me the meat.

"Sorah? That's my mother's name! I really miss her right now"

"I hope you'll see her again soon. I'd love to met her, the stories you told me made her sound lovely"

As he drifted off to sleep now the urgency was gone. He was keeping everything down, so he could be saved. I was convinced he was safe between these two shacks and walked back to the market in search of more food. It was very late at night now. I went back to Sorah's stall to tell her the good news only to find the stall was not only she was no where to be seen, but the stall was now completely gone. She had packed up and left now I supposed. I hoped to see her again someday soon.

I spent a couple hours savaging for food. Found some coins under one stall even! I found another torla and a few more fruits. A cut of meat I found under a stall I took for myself. It seemed close to the border of making me sick, and I'm sure Deakon would not be able to handle it. After a couple hours later I walked back to Deakon, sleeping away in the alley, thankfully unbothered by anyone else.

I woke him up and tried to feed him. He already seemed more sensible and ever reached up to feed himself. I felt like this was going to be okay. He was on the road to recovery.

This continued for two days. Deakon sleeping in between small meals. While he slept I would search nearby places for food. Cities were so wasteful it was wonderful! I even found a half eaten meal seemingly like a sandwich in the top of a garbage can. Deakon was apprehensive on that one, but he got it down.

On the 4rth evening Deakon finally stood up again. I was so happy to see him moving, but he was still

weak, but least he could move on his own. 4 days down really stood out to me on how close he was to the edge. He walked into the city with me, very slowly, skinny and defeated. We walked into the market where I had been hunting for food. I had hoped Sorah had returned, but her space was deserted, it seemed like it had been way for some time now.

I showed him to check under stalls and the tops of the garbage for anything fresh. At first he was very grossed out, but I told him this is what saved his life, then he became a little more open to the new ideas. We both sort of feasted that night. Wandering through the city and eating whatever scraps we found. We took to sleeping during the day, we learned quickly that riff raff like us was not welcome in the markets during the day. But we learned the layout of the city and locations of a few of these places.

We also discovered the restaurants where waste would be put out in trash cans every night. They would be collected by some of the few vehicles overnight. We learned to stay ahead of them, scavenge what we could before they were taken away. After a few weeks, I had lost count of the nights by now. We found ourselves behind some pub or bar, I'm not really sure what kind of establishment it was. Then a fat dragon wearing nothing but his grease stained apron flung open the back door. He didn't know we were there and was caught off guard by two homeless skinny dragons eating from the trash.

"Well that's not something I see every night, and I usually see a lot" He voice was nasally, a breathing apparatus was hanging off his chest and two hoses ran up to his breather over the end of this snout covering his nostrils. "A skinny green one with a purple one. PURPLE! I'd never though I'd see the day a purple dragon is going through my garbage!"

"I'm sorry, sir!" Deakon started pleading, worried we would be in trouble "We don't mean to bother you or anything we're just so hu-"

"I'm not worried, if you're hungry enough to eat the rotting food from my garbage you can have it. No one is going to pay for this shit anyways. Just, don't leave a mess or I will start chasing you off"

Deakon nodded, and the stranger left a large bag of trash next to the cans and waddled slowly back inside.

We would return behind this place regularly after that, knowing the owner didn't care about us.

It took several weeks for Deakon to really have his strength return, but that's when brought up a small problem. One ever I hadn't thought about. He pointed out it had been now over 5 years since we flew at all. He mentioned his wings felt weak from being on the ship for so long. I felt the same.

So early in the mornings between the sun rising and us falling sleep for the day, we started walking out to the desert, maybe about an hour out and an hour back. And we'd try to fly. The first few tries were pathetic for both of us. Deakon had so much confidence in his old flying abilities I couldn't help but giggle when he fell flat on his face on his first attempt. My first attempt wasn't any better but at least I didn't fall on onto the ground.

It took days of trying just to get our wings moving again. A lot of food to build wing muscle, and a lot of attempts. I was able to get up first, a short flight, only a few meters. Deakon was a couple days behind me. We kept training our wings, early in the morning, no one in sight. One morning I brought up something that I had noticed that was bothering me.

“Deakon?”

“Yeah?”

“have you noticed no one else flies either? I haven’t seen single dragon in the air since we arrived”

He put his chin on his fist for a moment “Do you think maybe we shouldn’t be trying?

“No, it’s natural, we have these wings for a reason, but no one uses them. Back on Earth I used to fly away from danger all the time. But here we’ve even seen people getting mugged and they never flap their wings.”

“Maybe it has something to do with just never using them? Look at us, after 5 years in that ship we basically had to relearn all over. Maybe it’s just too much of a bother for the others?”

I thought about it, but maybe he was right, over 5 years ago flying was as natural as walking, but after so much time my wings had atrophy and flying right now seemed much more trouble than it was worth. But Deakon and I, we kept doing it. Eventually we were full out gliding again. Jumping from anything we could find that was high enough and gliding down to the ground. Running and flapping took a while. Eventually though, after weeks of practice. Filling our bodies with literally garbage, we had enough strength in our wings again we could both leap into the air and fly some shorter distances. It wasn’t much, but now we could out fly anyone that tried to chase us.

We were making our usual evening rounds, skimming form trash cans, grabbing fallen fruit under market stalls. We made our way down the back alley where we had met the fat dragon before. Surprisingly he was outside, sitting on a crate, smoking something like a cigar. He seemed to be waiting for us. I followed closely behind Deakon and as we approached he actually greeted us.

“I was wondering if you two would show up tonight.” He took another puff from the stinky thing he was smoking “It’s busy tonight, I can’t keep up by myself, and one of my regulars needs something taken to her.” He pointed to some tall buildings barely visible over the roofs a couple kilometers away. “She’s over there in one of those buildings. She loves my food but she hurt her leg and can’t walk for a few days. She messaged me asking me to bring her something, she’s willing to pay, but it’s too busy for me to leave. Take it to her and I’ll pay you a little” He paused “I’m also not interested in walking that far myself”

Deakon looked at me then back at the dragon “Can they stay here with you? We don’t like to be separated much and ma-”

“Oh they need to stay here, I don’t want my customers thinking I’ve employed a purple dragon, they’ll never come back again! But don’t think I’m babysitting it or defending it if anyone shows up. I’m too busy for that.” He lifted his breathing mask, snorted and spit on the ground “You going do this for a few coins or no?”

Deakon nodded

“Okay good, maybe when you get back I might pay you some more to wash up some plates and glassware for me too, like I said, it’s very busy tonight” The fat dragon struggled to his feet, threw still

burning cigar into the alley and walked inside, reappearing moments later with a paper bag, the building number and unit written on the bag. “Be quick, if it’s still warm she might even give you a little something extra”

Deakon took the bag and ran off, leaving me alone next to the trash bins with this bar owner. After Deakon disappeared around the corner of the building he looked at me.

“Well, like I said, it’s busy, so I have to go back to work. Don’t come inside purple thing” he walked back into his business.

I sat beside the trash bin, and snacked on a moldy stale piece of flat bread. About 20 minutes later Deakon came back with a smile on his face.

“She gave me enough we could eat an entire meal ourselves!” He was so pleased at the thought of fresh food. I smiled at him.

“What are you going to get yourself?”

“I’m going to get US something from this place, the trash is good imagine what the real food is like! You don’t get fat like him eating like we have been, it must be so good!”

As if he heard himself mentioned the door opened and the dragon stuck his head out.

“Good you’re back, it’s gotten busier, come in here help me out a bit and I’ll give ya some coin at the end of the night” We started walking towards the door and he put up his hand “Uhp uhp uhp, just this one, purple”

I stepped back and Deakon looked at me and I nodded.

Deakon stepped inside and as the door started to drift closed I heard the dragon speak to him “My name is Clay by the way, this sink over there” and the door closed itself.

I sat down in the alley for most of that night, at some point some other scavengers came along, digging through Clay’s bins just as we did. 3 of them, and not one had a shred of clothing, they might have been having a harder time than us. I hide behind the bin, wishing not to be seen, and as usual, staying still and quiet, I went unnoticed. A few hours passed by then the door swung open. Deakon came out with two plates in his hand, both full of steaming warm food.

“He gave me mine for free, but when I said I’d give it to you he made another but said he’d take that plate for my earnings for tonight. I was fine with that” and he handed me the plate. Some meat layered on top of a large round piece of bread, on top of that some sauce and topped with vegetables and lettuce. Deakon grabbed his off the plate and sort of rolled it up and started eating it like that. I followed his example and did the same.

I bit into the food and very quickly realized how that dragon got so obese. I lived my entire life on trash and human food rations, and this was the best thing I had ever tasted in my life. It was hot, not just temperature, but spicy, the right amount of spicy. The flavors danced around my tongue. This was so amazing I had to savor every bite. Deakon chowed his down quickly though, eager to help Clay out more.

He wiped his mouth and stood up “He still wants more help, but told me to take a break for a few minutes and have a meal, have you been okay?”

“Yes! Some other street people came by and dug through the bins, but I stayed hidden”

“Must have been hard in that bright yellow top” he teased. But then he looked on his face, the one when he gets when he has an idea.

“What is it?” I asked

“I thought, and idea we can try soon, but I’m going to back in for now”

He walked in, taking our plates with him. My belly felt so good being full of grade A food. Nothing else happened for me but now several hours later, very late into the night, Deakon appeared again. This time with more food but a different kind, strips of some fried vegetable, nearly like fries from earth but made from some sweet vegetable instead. We walked towards the desert as we ate to do our daily flying ritual, talking along the way about what it was like inside Clay’s bar, whether we’d get this lucky again, and he told me how much coinage Clay paid him. Enough for a few days food for both of us, in one night. But pointing out the blue tattered loincloth he was wearing, I suggested some new cloth for him. He seemed a little sad, it was the last thing he had to remind him of his family, but I reminded him he could keep it, just wear something a little newer.

That morning we flew our furthest yet, rejuvenated by the good food, and we got our exercise. We flew probably more than a couple kilometers. Took a break, and flew those couple kilometers back. Then walked to one of our usual sleeping places in the city for the day.

That evening when we woke up, I had to ask “So what was your idea you had last night?”

“Oh! Clay’s respirator, it gave me an idea! It covers a bit of his face, so I don’t really know what he truly looks like, but, what if we covered all of you? People won’t know you’re purple, probably assumed you’re a common color, and maybe they’ll treat you normally!”

I sighed, I didn’t like the idea of covering up, but he suggested it because he cared “You’re probably right, I just don’t want to be ashamed of myself for this”

“It’s not shame, Exodus, I’m not ashamed of being around you, and you shouldn’t be ashamed of who you are either, but they should be ashamed of who they are. I know it maybe a little odd but if it works why not try it?”

“Well okay, if it makes life easier we can try it”

We started our routine, but a little different, along with food scraps we gathered anything we thought that could make things to cover every inch of my body. Our current lifestyle actually helped, we tended to sleep through the heat of the day, the evenings when we would awake would be still be warm, but as soon the sun set, it would turn cooler. By the time we had made our way up the alley to the back of Clay’s place, I was nearly covered. We had found two sheets over my wings, a discarded body suit of some kind, covered in paint. And a pair of tinted goggles over my eyes. Just my hands, feet, and face were left exposed now. We had even found a discarded pack to store our other things like my original

clothing. My horns poked out the back of the hood, but they were white, just like everyone else.

As we walked up to Clay's bins we found he was already outside, sitting on a crate and smoking again.

"It's a slow night tonight, I won't need any help tonight, but I got some extra fried torla for my favorite street rat" He stared at me for a second and looked up and down. "You know that's a good idea! Covering it up like that"

Deakon nodded, "We just need to find something for their face, and a way to sew those blankets to the suit to keep the wings covered.

"I might have something for that" He went into his place and emerged a few moments later. He had two servings of the fried vegetables he talked about in one hand, and one of his respirators in the other. He handed Deakon the food and sat on the crate as he started prying the hoses off the nose piece. He grunted and spoke as he pulled on them "This one broke down a while ago, this will cover a lot of the face, but we'll have to whip something up to cover the rest, like a mask or something. You can grab a pair of gloves from the kitchen, and tomorrow you can look for a pair of work boots. I'll need you the next two nights, that should make ya enough to buy a pair."

"How do you know it's going to get busy?" Deakon asked, curiously

"The wet season is coming soon, a lot of the locals have a little, kind of a festival, maybe a party, about the rain coming. The dragons that have been on this world also tend to have themselves sync up with the climate. It's probably for the best you've got your purple friend covered now, some males are going to be aggressive for the next few weeks"

"What do you mean sync up?" Deakon realized as he said it, what it meant, and the spikes on his face turned a little rosy from embarrassment for not catching on right away "Ooooooh"

"It won't be just the next two nights really, it'll be slightly busier the next few weeks, dragons mingling and looking for a good time ya know" Clay finally popped off the second hose and handed me the now fake respirator plate. I put it on and instantly I could smell Clay's breath on it, cigars and alcohol, some hint of the spicy food he makes. I took it off my face and handed it to Deakon.

"Can we wash this?"

"Oh! It does speak!" Clay, a little surprised, also surprised myself, forgetting I hadn't said anything around him yet "I thought you were mute" Clay nodded towards the door Deakon "Go wash it in the sink" he chuckled, and Deakon slipped inside for a few minutes. Clay, oddly enough, turned his attention to me.

"How come you've never spoken before?" he asked.

Feeling very awkward by the situation, it took me a moment to speak "Can you imagine being like me? Having every dragon you meet just suddenly wish you were dead, like you were bad luck? I don't talk until I know someone isn't going to hurt me."

"Hmmm, so you really aren't some demon are you?"

“What?”

“There’s the old ways. Purple dragons were thought to be demonic. Giving people horrible nightmares and making people do evil things under their control. Giving people horrible thoughts. All kinds of bad stuff”

“NO! I could never do anything like that, as far I know, I’m just a normal dragon that happens to be purple!”

The dragon chuckled to himself “Well, I guess it’s my fault for believing in fairy tales huh?”

“Yea, but at least now I know where all this stuff comes from.” Mind mind started to process this new information. I knew my scale colors were very rare, I’ve yet to meet another one like me, even in this city of nearly a million. The thought of some old superstitions and childish stories were the reason behind my social out casting this whole time seemed so backwards. Our kind really was stuck in the past, yet somehow also far in the future.

Deakon came back out the door, the mask now slightly wet but clean, also a pair of dark gray kitchen gloves. I put on the mask, it smelled a lot better, then slipped on the gloves, now aside from some of my face around the mask and my feet, I was covered.

“We can get some fabric from the market, and make sort of a fabric mask to cover around the respirator and find something for you feet”

Deakon and Clay talked for some time into the night, thinking of plans for around my face, talking about the upcoming festival, surprising Clay stayed up late that night, even talking to me a little, getting to know my history, how I learned to survive so well. I think he felt a little sorry for me, now the he knew I wasn’t some demon.

When it got near the early morning hours, we departed for the desert again, a little later than usual, the sun already up by the time we got to the usual place. I stripped down the costume we made until I was nude, freeing my wings for our daily exercise. I looked over to Deakon, his face spikes had turned slightly red.

“Synced up to the climate already are you?” I teased

“N-no it’s, it’s not like that” He stared at the ground “it’s just, you know, we’ve. It’s. HEY it’s time to fly okay?” he fumbled, it was sort of cute.

We flew our usual kilometer out and back, then we went back our stuff, and I put the suit back on. We walked slowly into town talking about what this party would be like, about whether this suit idea would work. I told him what Clay told me about purple dragons. Deakon was annoyed that this whole time it was about silly old superstition. We found one of our sleeping places and slept for the day.

We awoke a little early that afternoon mostly due to the noise. Clay was downplaying the event. It was a full on festival. Colorful string banners where now across all the streets. Flags with lightning bolts hung from stands, Dragons wore tops adorned with various lighting decorations. The market stalls all decorated or closed as their owner chose to partake in the celebration. As we where walking we saw a

large banner that read simply “ Happy Lightning Festival”. The timing of the suit worked out well, even though I wasn’t yet fully covered I could tell it was working. Most dragons walked past me without a thought, instead of staring me down as I passed. I hated that this worked, but this worked.

“I had better go to Clay’s right away” Deakon said “I think he’s going to be a little busier than he let on” and we made our way directly there, skipping our usual hunt for scraps.

Deakon was right, Clay wasn’t outside waiting for us but Deakon walked in the back door. I stayed in my usual place and thought about looking for breakfast. I didn’t have long to think at all when Clay pushed open the door and said something that surprised me.

“I’m going to need you both today, don’t worry, I’ll pay you the same, you get on washing dishes, I need Deakon to help me with the crowd”

I jumped to my feet, a little nervous about going inside but then Clay stopped me with his hand “Stay in the kitchen, keep that suit on, and don’t let anyone see a single purple scale okay? You know it’s nothing personal with me anymore, just my customers” I nodded, happy just to be given the opportunity to try.

For hours I stood in front of the same sink Deakon did and washed plate after plate, glass after glass. I could hear the crowd on the other side of the wall, murmuring all night, sometimes randomly cheering and yelling as someone would do something funny or some sort of trick. I could hear my kind for the first time enjoying themselves. A part of me wanted to be there too, just to know. But I did promise to stay hidden. Clay would come and go, cooking and taking the food out to his customers, Deakon staying out front the tire time just getting drinks for people.

The second night was the same, lot of partying and crowds having a good time, forgetting all the problems they had for a short time. Clay did very well those two nights, and in return he paid us both plus a little extra for helping so much. The third day we took our earnings and bought some boots as Clay suggested, not some common work boots, some really nice black ones with nice straps instead of any laces. I’m no going to lie, they were kind of sexy. We also bought some black comfortable fabric, and crudely cut it up and sewed it into a face mask to cover up the scales around my face not covered by the fake breather. We even had enough left over to buy a new bodysuit. We found it in a place that sells tools after asking around where we might find another. Folded up in a tiny package we had a clean version of what I was already wearing, so now I was not only fully covered, but no longer covered in paint and gross strains from the garbage version, although we had to cut off the sheets from the old one to sew to this one for my wings.

The third night was when things turned from a party to something truly incredible. As the sun set there were clouds on the horizon. As it got darker you could see the distance flashes. Tonight was the busiest of the 3 nights at Clay’s. Now completely covered and having less fear of being seen, I peeked from my place in the kitchen. The place was packed, but everyone was dressed so nice. Decorative tops and fancy loincloths. A few were even in costume with paint on their faces and bodies. A large portion of the were there more for the drinks and good times than the food. Barely anything was ordered to eat, leaving my life a little easier on cleanup duty, but the place was nearly dry after only a few hours. Suddenly I felt a huge boom and the place shook. That’s when the place suddenly emptied out. I was afraid, worried when something was wrong. But then Deakon pushed up the double door and with a smile said “Come on Exodus, you need to see this”

I started following him, a little nervous about what was going on. As I walked through the bar and out the front door for the first time, I was in amazement in what I saw.

The storm was nearly over the city. Nearly constant flashes of beautiful lightning as if this planet was showing off what it can do. Dragons were lighting off fireworks and carrying on. Many of them having had a few drinks, but what surprised me was the nudity. Nearly everyone had nothing on, not a big deal among our kind, but all the decorative clothing and fun costumes I had been seeing earlier were now all gone, replaced with mostly body paints, depictions of lightning bolts and other primitive designs. A bolt of lightning struck nearby followed by the loud crash of thunder, making everyone cheer. No one was seeking any cover from incoming storm. A slight breeze started blowing, cool air from the storm started flowing in. I looked for Deakon and found him a few seconds later. He was staring up into the sky and smiling, he had an energy I had never seen before.

“Exodus, I’ve always LOVED a good thunderstorm! Look at this! It’s going to be amazing!”

I swear his face was glowing, it might have been my imagination. Other dragons danced around, cheering, having a great time. The dirt street was full, a low cloud of dust from all the moving feet hung in the air, there was nobody inside a single building at this time. Another bolt landed nearby and the crash of thunder was nearly drowned out by the cheering. Nobody had any fear of this lightning, instead they celebrated it. We had been on this world for months now, and this was first weather I had seen other than hot sunny dry days.

The raindrops started to fall, very large as if they could turn to hail at any moment but never did. Instead, within 30 seconds it quickly developed to a heavy downpour. Suddenly the lack of clothing made sense. The crowd went silent but the noise was far from gone as the nearly constant rumble and roar of thunder driven by the frequent lightning kept going. Every dragon in the street, hundreds just around this area, stood still, folded open their wings, held their arms up in the air, and held their faces toward the sky. Each and every dragon enjoying the feeling of the rain on their bare scales, almost as if they were soaking the pure rainfall up through those scales. I retreated under the awning over Clay’s front door to keep my suit dry, but I still watched with intent and happiness. I raised my goggles off my eyes to take this in with my own eyes, a risk I know, but to take this all in felt important. Everyone is distracted by the storm, no one will notice, I thought to myself.

My entire life I only saw my own kind in a violent and hateful state. I knew from the prison ships just what every dragon can be capable of to survive. But in this moment I realized my kind also had a beauty to them. Together and peaceful they enjoyed the rain as one. Still and facing upwards as if to pray to the clouds that soaked them. Mostly silent but some sighed happily or moaned in delight of the cool wet rain provided relief after months of heat. After a few moments some of them started to move again, back to celebrations, to dancing in the rain, as the raw power of nature provided its own fireworks show. It felt primal and instinctive but also somehow important. Together everyone celebrated the changing season.

Deakon came up from behind and draped his arms over my shoulders. I noticed muscle had returned to those arms. Still nothing like the farm boy I met 5 years ago, but no longer the skinny dragon clinging to life he was a few months ago. I’m not sure what came over him to hold me like this, I like to think it was energy from the crowd, it was contagious after all, for once I was feeling happy. We watched the storm our people celebrating it, and the first true feelings started to float from my heart. Even though I couldn’t go and dance naked in the rain with them, I was at least here, and for the first time I felt like I was sort of one of them. But something else started to flutter inside me, as my friend and protector

leaned on me with his arms over me like this. I enjoyed our close moment and continued watching the storm together.

Chapter 6; Stitches

2110 Base C, somewhere in the Wastelands.

I winced as the doctor poked at the massive wounds on my back. It had been 6 months since I lost my wings to Titan, and it took 2 surgeries after the initial emergency care to make sure the wounds and stubs healed properly. The latest took place only 12 days ago and it was time to take the stitches out for the final time. Humans used ones that decayed naturally and fell out after time, but our medical facilities out here where the revolutionist forces were hiding were a little behind the times and very stretched for resources. It was at least clean here, the walls and floor sterile and white, bright lights everywhere.

The doctor grabbed some scissors and tweezers from the tray beside me and started talking, either to try to keep me comfortable or just let me know how things were in his eyes back there. "This is healing up very nicely, Jake. We tried to make things as clean as we could, but there is going to be two large scars back here. The nubs of the wing arms and two thick lines where the membranes had attached." I heard a snip then felt a stitch slid out. "Everything is healed closed now, the risk of infection is low if not gone." Another snip followed by a tug "I'm going to get you some antibacterial cream" a snip and a tug "This will completely remove what little risk of infection" snip, tug "and it will also act as a scale healer, hopefully keep this scar to a minimum" a snip then a tug from the other side now "Your next two or three sheds might" snip, and a tug then he paused "will be painful in this area. It's going to sting a little"

Fuel for the fire to me, a gentle reminder the next couple years of my goals in life now.

I sat awkwardly on the bed as the last stitches came out, the doctor caught the attention of a passing medic "Medic, are you busy?" he asked, the medic shaking his head. "Good, can you run down to medicine and get us a can of benoryzine, the natural stuff I think will be better if they have it. If the pharmacist asks give him my name and tell him it's for the.." he paused, realizing he didn't want to say it in front of me but already opened his mouth "the execution survivor" The medic nodded in affirmation and walked away, nearly running into Sodin.

A General, but in a militia this small it didn't matter much as of now. He was humble and personable, and had been a friend of Mom and Dad and came to visit me several times during my stay here. I told him I wanted to fight, he wanted to wait how things played out for me. He walked toward us and took a stand in front of me, crossing his arms in front of his chest but smiling. The bright ring light above us lit up his orange eyes and his black uniform so well lit the cheap dye was making the fabric appear dark blue. The doctor snipped another stitch as I felt the tug of it coming out.

"I've got some good news for you" he spoke "I've pulled some strings, and by pulling strings issued some orders. You've been accepted into the militia," he paused briefly as the expression on his face changed to some slight concern "despite your disability"

"How is it a disability if I lost limbs no one around here knows how to use?" I retorted back, I already had grown weary of being treated like I was disabled. I only lost a skill that apparently only I knew how to use. Even the best trained soldiers around here didn't know how to fly. The doctor snipped one more time, barely noticing the final stitch being removed, then standing upright behind me.

"Easy, Jake, I don't mean to offend, I did come to give you good news after all" he grew a little more

disciplined now “Technically, now that you are in our militia, I’m not a friend anymore, I’m your General now, and going forward, I’d like a little more respect”

“Yes, Sir, sorry” Sheepishly I looked down, realizing I had already overstepped. The General turned his attention to the doctor.

“Will he be cleared for boot camp in one week?” As he asked the doctor as the medic returned, handing the doctor a small can.

The doctor grabbed my arm and squeezed it, then poked at my side before turning his attention to the wounds in my back. “The amputations are healing nicely, but he’s also still thin and pretty malnourished from his time on that human ship.” He thought for a moment, being sure he was making the right choice. “If he can have double rations for another 6 weeks while doing basic training, he should put on more muscle and be in fine shape. The first two weeks he has my consent to sit out training if he passes out, for the rest of that day. If the wounds happen to open, which I don’t think they will, he will have to be pulled out of training. Without wings he’ll have to skip any training that involves using them, some of the exercises and stretches some trainers have them do in the morning. It also goes without saying he will never be a pilot” That comment caught me off guard, I didn’t know how a lack of wings would keep me from moving a control stick, but I was still thinking a little like a human perhaps. “He’s good to go in a week, and I think getting out of here would do him some good. He’s been in our ward for months now.” The doctor turned his attention to me handed me the can of medical cream for my scars. “You’ll be fine now, physically anyways. As far as I’m concerned you’re released as of now. Apply this once per day after you shower until it’s been used up”

The general nodded to the doctor “Thank you, Doctor, I’ll be in touch” He turned his attention to me. “Walk with me Cadet” It was strange, my military career was only moments old, but this was the first time being called any rank, even if it was the absolute lowest rank that existed.

“Yes Sodin- err, General sorry” I stood up, my balance was off for a second, my body still used to the weight of my wings and it was still training itself to balance without them. My lower back and the base of my tail would hurt if I stood or walked too long as both learned to adjust for new balance. The doctor had told me that would go away after some time. I walked out the door of the ward behind the General, but once in the hallway I walked beside him.

“First off I know you have no where to go, so the last string I pulled is getting you into the barracks a week early. The barrack officer is already aware, but there is a class graduating today, so you won’t be able to give you a bed until tonight” The all too familiar scent of disinfectant filled my nose again as it had the last 6 months, honestly I was pleased to learn I could sleep elsewhere tonight. “I see you’re actually very able bodied, so I want you to help the barrack officers prep for the next class as well in return for you week of free stay” He reached out and pushed open the door at the end of the white hallway we had reached. We stepped outside and the bright sun took me a little by surprise, the air filled with musty wood from the jungle surrounding the base. It was hot, and it was humid. We started walking down a path towards what I assumed would be the barracks. “Tell the line cooks at the mess hall that you’re on double rations, they’ll have a list of who else may be, some dragons arriving from Titan’s domain are usually a little thin, so I doubt you will be the only one. But imagine some of the other cadets might get jealous.” he walked in silence for a moment “Which brings up another point. Your parent’s very public execution as well as your own unfortunate events have really pissed off the public. Dragons have been sneaking off all Titan’s worlds and even from some of the other Guilds and many of them are lining up to fight with us. In the last 6 months we’ve had record amounts of dragons

signing up, we were doing a camp of 50 every 6 weeks before. Now we're doing a camp of 100 every second week."

As we walked along the sounds of training soldiers started becoming louder, mostly yelling from the trainers, and the path we were walking along was becoming more heavily used. We approached 4 large buildings. "These buildings are the barracks, you'll call that home the next 6 months. Not really an upgrade from the hospital bed." He sighed and stopped and turned to me. "Your parents, Jake. I knew them well, even fought shoulder to shoulder with them a few times. In their absence we lost ground. Things didn't exactly go as planned your parents didn't mean to be gone as long as they were." He paused, stared off to space for a moment before remembering where he was. "People are going to know who you are, your commanding officers and your fellow cadets. I thought about listing you under a pseudo name, but with your physical appearance now people would catch on pretty quick anyways. You're going to be treated different from others here in both favoritism and jealousy, between your missing wings and who your parents were. As a friend and not as a General in this second, please, do not take advantage of this, and don't let it get you down." He reached out and patted my shoulder. "As a friend, good luck, but as your General, get your shit together" He pointed to the 2nd barracks.

"Yes Sir! Thank you, Sir!" He nodded in approval of the now professional address, and turned and walked away in the direction we were traveling. I took a moment to adjust, remembering this was the path I chose, the path I wanted to get myself back in reach of that tyrant someday. The cadets grunting and moaning behind me as the commanders barked out orders. I took a deep breath and walked into the barracks.

I walked in the door and I instantly hated it, I wish I had stayed in the hospital. 4 rows of double bunks stretched about a dozen deep, everything was gray. It reminded me where I had just spent the last 5 years. It was tight too, but no where as tight as the prison ship, and at least everything was painted gray instead of white. It was still full of dragons, packing their few belongings and extra uniforms into duffel bags. Each one wearing the same black pants, gray top, and some had tact vests over top of that. I slowly walked in towards the back, getting some weird stares and awkward gazes. The wingless dragon walking past in just a plain white hospital issued thin cloth hanging down from my waist. I must have looked like a lost animal. About halfway down the rows of beds I stopped and asked one of the dragons packing "I'm looking for the-"

"WHAT in the FUCK is that?" a voice yelled down the row of bunks "Who the hell are you and what are you doing in my barracks?" I looked in the direction of the voice as the dragon I tried to ask went back to packing. A tall dark green and very pissed off dragon stared me down and started stomping towards me "I asked you, who the hell are you?" he yelled as he walked up. Wearing a slightly different uniform from the rest, he also had a wide silver band with a thin gold one above it on his left horn. Obviously I had found the one in charge.

"I'm Jake, I was told I could stay here until I started my training if I he-"

He imitated a buzzer "Wrong meathead, wanna try that again?"

I was taken back, perhaps I walked into the wrong barrack? "I'm Jake"

"EEEEEEER WRONG AGAIN!" he poked me in the chest "Who the hell are you? I'll give you a hint, it starts with 'Cadet'"

Suddenly it made sense, he was looking for rank along with the name maybe “Cadet Jake, I am Cadet Ja-”

“You don’t need to fucking tell me twice meathead!” He raised his arms to gesture to all the dragons packing around me “All these fuckers are done training, they’re privates now!” he spoke up to the room “Hey Privates! Looky here, it’s the one turd you useless fuckers all out rank!” The group chuckled, a little forced from some, from being sick of this guy for the last 6 months. “You’re a week early meathead!” He looked behind me “The rest of you coming in a week? Two part shipment? Where’s the rest of you?”

“I’m told, bronzed and put on display in Titan’s tower palace” I said trying to get this guys angle, surely he knew and was expecting me.

“Oh you’re THAT meathead!” he looked around to make a point then looked at me, a couple of murmurs came from the packing soldiers. “You’re too early, the previous tenants have barely been evicted and aren’t even out yet! You weren’t supposed to be here until tonight. And what in the flying fuck are you wearing?!?” he pointed at the thin cloth on my front “Hospital shit? Wow the really are scrapping the bottom now!”

“I did just walk over from the hospital” I said

“From the hospital what?”

“From the hospital, SIR!”

“That was fast, you might be a quick learner! We’ll still have to drill that into you stupid head won’t we. Don’t worry, six months and we’ll have you barking like the dog you are.” Wait, do dragons have dogs? I they were from Ea- “I’m Lieutenant Skro, I’ll be your nightmare for the duration of your training, it’s my job to show you how not to shoot yourself in the head, how to shoot others in the head, and how to keep them from shooting you in the head!” He looked me up and down “This look makes me want to puke! Head up front and my supply officer will get you your first uniform.” He pointed towards the opposite direction from where I came in. “Move!” I walked briskly in the direction he pointed as he went back to yelling at the other soldiers to “Hurry up and get the fuck out!”

I walked towards a hallway when a soldier, one with a just a single wide silver band on one of his horns, stepped out and put his hand up “Here, heard the whole thing.” He chuckled “Meathead” gesturing me towards a room off the hallway. Inside where racks all holding folded up identical clothing, He grabbed a gray thing off one of the shelves and threw it at me “Put that on, these caplets are one size fits all” As I unfolded it and found the center whole to slid my head through, it was a tradition poncho like top, oval instead of square and larger than civilian wear, it also extended down the body more than a civilian top, not leaving the midsection exposed like most do. I got my head through just as he threw a pack at me, the same one the other soldiers were packing their things into “That’s your house okay? Keep everything in there unless your washing it or wearing it, open it up.” He started digging though some black clothes on another rack “You can take that hospital cloth back to them later. What size are you for pants?”

Suddenly I was dumbfounded “I- I don’t know, Sir” He swore to himself, grabbing a length of some plastic strip of the corner of a rack as he approached me and threw it around my waist and muttered to himself before returning to the rack.

“Medium!” he glanced at me then reach over one pile “Medium, tall” and grabbed the item and threw it at me “Try those on, Cadet”

Now I was really embarrassed, I never had worn pants before, I didn’t know what to do, he looked at me slightly annoyed “WELL?”

“I’ve never worn pants before, sir”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, how are you that stupid? Where the fuck did you come from?” He barked

“Earth, Sir” as I told him his face changed, as he suddenly knew what I had been through.

He walked over and grabbed a corner of the strange article of clothing. The leg parts fell towards the floor but a third section lay oddly open. “One leg goes in here, the leg hole, the other in the other leg hole.” Speaking to me as you might teach a child to dress “Then button up this part around your tail” he pointed at the part hanging off the back. As he explained I looked at his pants, and figured it all out. Unlike human clothes that buttoned up the front, dragon pants button up the back, above the tail, making the third section almost as if a short “tail sleeve” As I slid my legs in and buttoned up the back more items came flying at me.

“Belt” It hit me in the mid section and fell on top of the pack as I struggled to button up pants for the first time “Tact vest” he threw it hitting my leg as I got the last button done. “Bad weather caplet” He threw another top, this one had a hood, was black, and was made out of a soft but rubbery material. Then he looked at me again “How do those fit?” He looked at my pants “Alright, use the belt they’re a bit loose, you skinny fuck” He went back to the rack and grabbed two more pairs of pants from the same pile as before “You get 3” and dropped them on my pack, he grabbed two more of the gray tops and threw it on the pile. He turned to the other rack and grabbed some gray things and threw them at me as well, seeming a set of 3. “Fatigues, you aren’t allowed to wear those yet though, only when we say so. Be in uniform at all times! Pack all the shit up then after these privates leave you’re going to help us change 100 beds.” He looked at the clock “Did you eat yet?” I shook my head now “Mess hall is down the path, go eat something then get back here. You got 30 minutes, everyone should be out by then. You can leave your pack right here for now”

“Yes, Sir!” I knelt down and started shoving the items into the pack then shocked it under one of the racks out of the way, I stood up and instinctively wanted to thank him but before I could say a word he looked me in the face and barked “Dismissed” So I turned out and walked past the thinning group in the barrack and outside to walk further up the path. Some of the newly promoted privates were heading in the same direction but I stopped when I faintly smelled food in front of one of the buildings and started inside. Pausing and looking up the path I could see the new soldiers were loading themselves onto some sort of craft, I assumed it was taking them to their first posts.

I walked into the mess hall, it was also painted gray inside, same color as the barracks, rows of tables and stools filled most of the space. They were mostly empty at this time but a few soldiers sat around eating and talking. It got quieter as I entered and a few looked at me, a little surprised to see a dragon without wings enter and in a uniform, but after a few seconds the talking returned, most not really caring. I walked to the back where there was a pile of trays and two cooks standing around. Wrong time of day for a meal but there still was food to be served. They noticed me and one grabbed a tray, threw

down a very square cut of meat of some kind, obviously very processed, and then grabbed a scoop laying in a serving tray slapped a glob of white mushy stuff beside the meat. He handed me the tray and said "Enjoy" rather sarcastically.

I sat down at one of the tables alone and started putting this strange looking food in my mouth. I think the taste surprised me, maybe my reaction even surprised the few noticing me. To them it was gross military food, but after 5 years of freeze dried human rations, this was delicious to me. I cleaned my plate in minutes, returned the tray to a pile of dirty ones, and made my way back to the barracks.

The officer who gave me my uniform was already waiting just inside the door, he had a clipboard in his hand. "That was only 20 minutes, I'd have taken my 30 but I guess you're eager to prove yourself." Before I could respond he talked more "You're in bed 32. Grab that pack you left in supply and throw it on your bed for now, then we'll show you how to make up a bed military style. Then you'll do it probably 50 more times tonight"

"Yes, Sir!" I said and walked back to the room where I left the pack, brought it out looked for the bed labeled 32. I found it, a bottom bunk, and threw my pack on the empty bed.

"Hey meathead!" I turned to see Skro, who threw some bed dressings at me "Do the bed up like this" and he expertly pulled a sheet over the bed next mine, folded the end under the end, then the side under, not a single wrinkle left when he was done. "Do it just like that, and I don't want to see a single fold or lose bit" I tried to do exactly as he did, and I thought for a moment I did okay, but a roll was diagonal towards the bottom corner. Skro pulled it off and threw the sheet back in my arms "Again, and make it tighter" After a few moments I had it down again, tight, no wrinkles this time. He didn't smile, or say anything positive, just "Now do it about 50 more times" as he pointed around the empty bunks.

At least I wasn't alone. Although I did half the beds myself, two officers under Skro's command helped too. Skro himself mopped the floor, making the barracks floor spotless. I think being early meant I got to see a couple things the others might not see. These officers were meant to be cruel, to toughen us up for whatever we might see in our career, but I carefully watched them as I made the beds, they carefully watched me too, and I noticed they had a certain amount of pride in this building. They weren't very highly ranking themselves, but this space was theirs and Skro was in charge, and they made sure it represented them, clean, ready for action, and perfectly organized.

After making all the beds we washed every inch of every wall. Ever doorknob, every light switch, anything that could get wet was washed. Other than some wear marked in and out of doorways the entire space was spotless, and the scent of strong cleaners filled the air. It wasn't until everything was clean, late into the night, nearly 2 am, the Skro himself spoke to me again. This time also nothing positive, but blunt "You can sleep now meathead. But the next two days we are all on leave between classes. Keep this space fucking spotless until we get, the first of the other cadets show up in 4 days"

"Yes, Sir!" I replied, and he walked down the hallway towards the front of the building. Once they were out of sight I went to the showers and cleaned myself up. I put on the ordered cream and made sure I had left the showers spotless. I made my way to bed 32, turning out the light along the way, and laid down on my stomach to sleep. Faint noises and shouts came from the distance as a camp was doing some night training it seemed. I think most dragons sleep on their stomach because of our wings tails and spikes, but I used to prefer sleeping on my sides and back. But for the last 6 months I've been forced to sleep on only my stomach because of the wounds on my back. I think I drifted off to sleep quickly, but thoughts shifted to my brother as I feel asleep. I hoped he had survived, but there was no word yet

where the ship with the big “2” had landed. Maybe it hasn’t even landed yet, it could have fallen behind. What about that purple kid he was helping? Curious if that dragon survived too, had the two become friends? I had too many questions in my head, but eventually I feel asleep.

The next morning was uneventful, I went to the mess hall and got my breakfast. When I asked for my double serving they did check a list, and informed me I was on it for 8 weeks. A little surprised, the doctor must have extended it or there was a clerical error. I wasn’t going to argue, this food was substandard to everyone else but a meal for kings to me. As I took my tray to a table I passed a stand with two large dispensers with a label that only said “Char”. There was a third stand beside them with mugs. I took one and put it under the spout and pulled the handle, causing a steaming hot dark liquid to come out. A little lacking in my own culture I assumed this was the dragon version of coffee. I continued with my loaded tray in one hand and the steaming mug in the other and sat down to begin eating. The mush this morning tasted faintly like eggs, they probably were but from some “alien” form of avian. It tasted amazing. The meat was similar to what I had yesterday, but now I had two squares instead of one, for my doubled calories as ordered. But my surprised was this hot drink. I only had coffee once on Earth, it was hard to come by for us, but this tasted as if someone had melted chocolate into coffee. It didn’t need any sweeteners or cream like some humans liked, it was already sweet. It was delicious, and as I learned as the morning went on, also had a large caffeine content.

After I ate I decided to walk around, get to know the base and give myself an advantage over the other new recruited once they arrived. Also to give my body more exercise to account for my missing counterweight. I passed a couple groups doing jumping jacks and push ups, Other body weight strength exercises specific to dragons, but nothing involving the wings. Like everyone else in my ancestral culture they just hung on their back, useless and unmoving aside from their own swinging momentum. I had found the range a small distance from the base by following a path, but didn’t venture too close. I could hear the gunfire from practice and training going on. There was a large landing pad, well actually several in a small network, on the north side of the base. Was it the north side? Was there even a north on this planet? It sort of “felt” north. I found the armory, between the range and the main part of the base, it was another point I decided to keep my distance from for now. I did also wander back to the hospital to return the thin cloth I left with. If the militia was so short on resources I could at least help by returning this one item, to be washed and reused. I did return to the mess hall for a lunch and again at dinner, in the evening I was thankful there was many latrines and facilities around. I showered, applied my medical cream to my scars with the help of a single small mirror in the shower room.

Again I drifted off the sleep, thinking of my family. Was my brother still alive? I was alone in this barrack, and suddenly I didn’t want to be. The image of my mother’s head staring back at me from the floor flashed in my mind and the deep anger started to return. I had a hard time falling asleep that night.

The next day was much of the same, I think other cadets and some officers were concerned with how much I enjoyed the food. Walking around the base and watching the other Cadets being trained, maybe sort of studying them to learn what I was up against. So far everything I had seen was nothing that I couldn’t handle. I walked to a couple new places in the afternoon and found an obstacle course. At the end there was a 5 or 6 meter tall wall with a thick rope hanging over it, the Cadets were required to climb over. That part seemed so strange to me, if they were trained to use their wings they could jump and with grabbing a couple wingfulls of the air they would be over it without touching it.

That evening was when I learned I was maybe seeing too much. Skro and his officers returned to the

barrack late at night, I was already in bed when they stumbled in, 4 of them, I got out of bed to greet them, which was a bad idea. As I got closer my nostril were filled with the scent of alcohol and something else. Something I wasn't used to smelling, one or more of them had also been with someone else's company, to say it lightly. "Meathead!" Skro yelled when he saw me, slightly slurring "The fuck are you doing awake!" he stumbled to one side "You're not sup-supposed to be awake Cadet!" he stumbled towards a bed, a single bed not a bunk like the others, the bed where he was meant to sleep. "Meathead you dumbass go to bed!" and he turned and fell face first onto the bed "You didn't see tonight, meat-" He belched "Meathead" What a neat nickname he had picked for me. The other three officers turned out the lights, leaving me in the dark to find my way back to bed 32 as the officers climbed into bunks across the room from Skro.

I slept easier somehow, know there was at least others in the building, even if I wasn't meant to talk to them. Maybe deep inside somewhere we were pack animals, or maybe I was finally distracted a little from my thoughts, but morning came quick for day 3. I was awake to someone kicking my mattress. I opened my eyes for Skro over my head, the smell of the alcohol from the night before was still on his breath, but somehow he was showered already, cleaned up and full of energy. "Wakey wakey sunshine" he said sarcastically, pausing for a second "GET THE FUCK UP CADET!" he yelled and I jumped out of the bed to my feet, the shock throwing my still recovering balance off for a second. "The first group arrives tomorrow and your sorry ass has been selected by fate to get the place ready!"

"Yes, Sir!" But then I paused "But didn't we already clean it up, Sir?"

"I could slap that stupid out of your head" he sounded annoyed "You got more than a clean bed didn't you? A uniform, a pack, weather hood! Now we got to get ready to do this 100 times!" He pointed towards the room where I got my uniform from "The supply officer is going to make 99 other kits, take them to each bed in preparation for the other arriving cadets. Nice and neat, all arranged the same, make it look like you know what you're doing" after a brief pause he barked "What are you waiting for, a kiss? GO!"

"Yes sir!" and I nearly ran over the supply room. The one who had given my uniform was already at work, piling everything but a pair of pants into neat piles, he grabbed a couple and handed them to me.

"One kit for each bed, this is the bulk of what each cadet gets, aside from pants and fatigues. We need to size each cadet for that." he smiled at but not in a friendly way. "You and this one down, 98 to go"

I spend the next hour or so walking back and forth between the supply room and the bunks, taking two kits at a time, and arranging them neatly near the foot of each bed. Skro walked through the beds a couple times to make sure every kit was neatly arranged. After a while he sat on the edge of his bed with his nose buried into a tablet like device. I assumed he was either reading personnel files of the incoming recruits or looking at porn. I couldn't tell with this guy. Eventually every bed, except for my own and the officers', each had a kit laying on it. It was still quite early in the day but was told to go eat breakfast.

I came back with a full stomach again but was surprised when I entered the barrack and 20 or 30 new dragons were inside. Most were skinny, wearing very little, listening to Skro who was already rambling on about making beds and keeping this barracks cleans. The supply officer got between me and the crowd and started quickly adjusting my uniform, making sure it was perfectly straight, then told me to go stand next to Skro. Once beside him he pointed me out in front of everyone, "You got two hours to get yourselves in uniform, and be as proper as this one, I want you looking just like him! But of course

you will all have you wings!” I don’t think I could hid my annoyance of darkening spikes at that remark. The new recruits murmured a bit “SHUT UP!” Skro yelled “You’re going to find most of your uniform on your bed, that’s the one size fits all, and on you skinny lot it’s going to look extra big. Your Pants and fatigues are sized to you, my supply officer will get those to you shortly, one by one. There’s only 25 of you so it better not take 2 hours. In the meantime get those civilian clothes off” He paused and looked around, realizing some had showed up without a single personal item, not even a cloth around their waist “Well those of who came with civilian clothes. You’re not civilians anymore, you’re fighters now! Totally untrained useless soldiers, but in 6 months who knows, maybe one or two of you might know how to load a gun or throw a punch.”

I made my way to my bed to digest breakfast. I was sitting on the edge when a light blue dragon came up to the bunk I was sitting on. He looked the numbers and muttered “33” and started picking at the kit on the top bunk above me, throwing the top on first. He pulling it over his head, catching for a moment on his horns and awkwardly adjusting himself, it was a little obvious to me this one was not used to wearing tops at all. He went through the rest of the kit realizing nothing else was of interest then finally looked down at me sitting on the bottom bunk and awkwardly got an introduction out of his mouth. “Hi, I’m Jude” I could see his eye already twitching, I don’t think he had many manners.

“Hi Jude, I’m Jake” I started to reach out for a moment, oddly to give a handshake, I don’t know why I kept doing this, it wasn’t even a dragon habit, just something we picked up on earth, and placed my hand back down. But I did notice his face nearly contorting as he held it in, I could tell what he wanted but he was being to polite to ask. “It’s okay, go ahead.”

Almost like a child eager to ask a stupid question he blurted out “What happened to your wings?!?”

“Cut off by Titan, about 6 months ago.”

“So you’re THAT guy?”

“Yup, it seems news of what I went though has gotten around” It still wasn’t a topic I liked talking about, so I decided to steer the conversation away “ So where are you from?”

“Industry” he replied

“Like, you work in industry? I mean, where?”

“No, Industry, it’s a planet in Titan’s domain not even really worthy a name, it’s full of factories and pretty much everyone is a slave”

A female voice suddenly came from the bed across from us “We’re all from Industry, 25 of us on this transport that came this morning. It’s been a tough time, they tried to shoot us down as we left. I think more coming in a couple days though. Hi, I’m Larice” She greeted as she unfolded her top from her kit and threw it over her head “So if your wings were cut off by Titan himself, and you’re THAT Jake, does that mean you’re from ‘Arth’?”

“‘Earth’, and yea, my and brother Deakon. Our parents gave up human names in hopes that it would later make life easier for us for dealing with them.” I told them a little but, but I didn’t want to say much yet. “Dad used to say it was a peace offering.”

“You looked skinnier than we do” Jude noticed “Was that human ship really as bad as people said?”

“I don’t think it was, at least not on our level, but we did run out of food for 3 months. I only ate once a week during that time, and the 4 years before that I didn’t eat much to begin with” I sighed “But, I don’t really want to talk about that” The two lowered their heads for a moment, before Larice stood up

“I guess I better get in line for those pants”

“Yea, me too” said Jude, they walked towards the supply room.

Once every had their uniforms on a standing inspection was made by Skro, he looked over every recruit and corrected anything wrong, along with an insult. Then he stood in front of us all and gave us an outline of how the next 6 months would go. Every morning would be exercise before breakfast. Probably the same group push-ups and jumping jacks I saw earlier. The first week would be theory, leaning about weapons and learning proper protocol and rankings, and a lot of physical training. Then on week 2 we’d dive right into learning to fire and take care of a gun. Skro said the first two weeks were most important. Then into physical training, the hardest, requiring to pass that obstacle course to continue. The last couple weeks were about formations, battle tactics, advanced weapons like grenades and bigger guns. Then at the end, ship gunning, and life aboard ships in space. Then our fates would be decided, finding out which role we would be best suiting for. He didn’t use such nice words though, he said things like “how to shit in space” and “Which way dumb asses like us should look down a barrel of a riffle”

“You still have 3 days before the rest of the camp shows up, but that’s not going to stop me from harassing your asses until then! Tomorrow morning we’re waking up when the sun rises and I’m going to run you all hard! If I’m feeling nice I’ll let you eat breakfast, then I’ll run your asses more again! Other thing! This is MY fucking barrack, and if you so much as leave a single shed scale on the floor you’ll be cleaning every inch of this hall with your tongue! KEEP IT FUCKING CLEAN! Any part of of your uniform that isn’t on you is in your pack, your pack goes under the bunks. No personal effects left out at any time!” I stood at attention with the rest as he droned off the rules, mostly about keeping the place clean and tidy, keeping ourselves clean and tidy, where the important things were like the showers, shitters, and linen cleaners, the typical housekeeping stuff.

The next morning we were all were all awakened quite violently. Skro and his officers started marching through the rows of bunks hitting metal sheets with ladles stolen from the mess hall. Every single one of use was up and at attention in seconds. Mostly everyone still in full uniform, but a few it seems chose to sleep in the nude, as the humid hot night from the nearby jungle made it hard for some to sleep. Jude slid nude from the bunk above, nearly toppling on top of me before we both scrambled to stand at attention at the foot of our bunks. Skro noticed and quickly marched up to him, he voice so loud it nearly hurt my ears being next to them “WHAT IN THE FUCK IS THIS CADET?!?! Who the hell said you could take off your uniform?! This isn’t kiddy care! You don’t get to show off those pretty blue scales whenever you want! You can take your uniform off on 3 occasions and these 3 occasions only! When you shit! When you shower! And when we say you can! HURRY THE FUCK UP AND GET DRESSED!” His attention diverted to a pair a few bunks away, who had also stripped for a cooler sleep, and began yelling at them. Jude turned and grabbed the parts of his uniform and started sliding into them.

Larice stood at attention at the foot of her bunk beside. Suppressing some laughter, hoping not to get Skro’s attention, I glanced at her, she looked back at me and whispered in a joking voice “Kiddy care”

Skro wasn't kidding about the running, within a few minutes we were all outside in the big open space in front of the bunks running laps, everyone was in uniform now. The sun of this planet not even completely risen, the dark jungle surrounding us. It didn't take long, maybe 10 minutes, before the first dropped. A skinny dragon who was struggling to keep up. I expected Skro to start yelling obscenities at them, but instead he ran up to them with a couple of officers, they said a few things back and forth and the officers helped them to their feet, walked them to the center of the parade, and made them sit down. I thought to myself, he wasn't running us to be a prick, to instead to see where our physical abilities were, to know who would need extra attention and who would just need to get in better shape. I ran for 20 minutes, slowing to a jog after the first few. A few of other dragons had dropped in that time, including my bunkmate Jude, but Larice was still going strong. This was when I learned I wouldn't be going any further. About 12 of us were still jogging after 30 minutes when as I was running my head started feeling very light. The tunnels started in my vision. I Stopped and put my hands on my knees as I leaned over. One of the officers ran up to me "Nope! Not you! You go down and we lose you for the day!" he grabbed my arm and started walking me to the center, the tunneling slowing but still present as he sat me down. I was panting heavily as I sat down, but after only a few moments the lightheadedness and the narrow vision started going away. As I rest with the other I noticed Skro with his tablet, marking up who was doing what I'm assuming.

After an hour of jogging, only 3 dragons remaining running around the field. Larice, and two others. Those 3 were in great shape it seemed, and Skro called them to the center.

"OKAY! We know who the weaklings are now!" He looked at me "And who might be a little better than I thought! I thought this meathead would be the first to drop for sure!" Looking at the small group he had a momentary look of worry, between myself and the other dragons who had been forced to work themselves skinny, there wasn't a lot of room for improvement until we put weight on. More than half of use where gaping our maws open, trying to cool off in the morning air. "Catch your breath then head to the mess hall and eat breakfast!"

I made my way to the mess hall behind the group, letting them get their food first, I was day 4 into double rations and some of them looked like they hadn't eaten in days. One of the last to get my try of food, my double rations, I sat alone at a table. To my surprise Jude, Larice, and two others moved to the table and sat with me. Larice sat beside me spoke first "You surprised me, 'Earthian'" she said and patted my back "I with how skinny you are, I though you'd be the first down"

"Earthling" I said

"Huh?"

"Someone form Earth, is called 'Earthling'" I turned and smiled at her "Just so you know"

"Well, either way, you did good"

"I'm surprised you outran me" Jude said after swallowing a bite "You got more stamina than I do, but I'm probably stronger" He wasn't wrong, he wasn't as skinny as I am, but his stamina would need some work. I nodded to imply agreement and started shoving more of the breakfast meat into my maw. I think I must have smiled or something subconscious as he spoke up again "You like this stuff?" I nodded and swallowed the meat, taking a sip of char form my mug

“Best food I’ve had in 5 years!”

“Wow, you’ve really had it bad then” Jude said, idly turning his food with the spoon-fork thing they had us eat with “This is going to take some getting used to”

“Well, I you don’t want it, I’ll have some more” I joked, as Jude slowly pulled his tray back. He definitely wasn’t interested in sharing, even if he didn’t like it. We chatted some more, the 5 of us, the asked a few question about Earth as we ate, I asked a few question about Industry.

I noticed Skro and his officers sitting at a nearby table as we spoke, they weren’t really eating, despite having tray of food before them, rather they were all chatting and pointing at their tablets, sometimes pointing at someone randomly from our group at tablets, planning out more undoubtedly fun things for us to do. He looked up and nodded at his officers and then stood, and yelled out “COMPANY 2! Breakfast is over be back outside in 3 minutes!” I think most of us had no idea we were called that until Skro yelled it at us. I guess it made sense, since we were staying in Barracks 2

The few that hadn’t finished their meals shoved what they could into their mouths as everyone got up, returned the trays to a messy pile on a table near the food and we all walked out to the parade where we had just spent our time. Skro and his officers were already impatiently waiting. My full stomach was not looking forward to more running but is was as if the officers knew already it was a bad idea in the quickly warming morning. Skro started his usual shouting “Okay listen up! You’re all pretty worst off than we thought, so instead of making you run and barf up breakfast like we had planned, we’re going to start a little early. More are coming this afternoon and two more groups of the next two days. We’re going to teach you basic drill and formation right now, then when those late lazy fuckers show up it’ll be your jobs to make sure they fall in line!” First off, properly standing at attention! There’s 25 of you, get in 5 lines of 5 facing me, then stand straight up as you can, tall and proud, arms at your sides, hands in fists, and stare straight ahead” It took us a few minutes, fumbling around, before arranging ourself in 5 crooked lines and stared ahead “Well that was pathetic! We’re going to come around and fix you all up” Skro and his officers walked through the group, straightening out the lines, our uniforms, our postures, where our hands were, everything, taking some time to do so before he stood in front of the group again “This is shit, but we can work on this.”

The next few hours was pretty boring, learning a proper salute, the right hand placed on our chest and a slight bow, not like humans with their odd hand thing to the side of the head. Learning how to fall in line quickly for a formation. Properly standing at attention, all the basic drill stuff. We didn’t skip lunch, they obviously wanted most of us to put on a few pounds, then back to much of the same of the same for the afternoon. We were moved form the parade in front of our barrack as another company needed the space for their own training, and ended up closer to the jungle on the far side of the field. The hot sun and humid jungle air added to the difficulty in standing still that afternoon.

We were saved from the heat by the arrival of the next group. We were ordered into the barracks with the new arrivals, most of us being new themselves, I was the only exception now here for 5 days. We were ordered to help them “Get their shit together” Help them into uniform, get their things arranged, and this time with our help this group was only given an hour. I noticed of the new arrivals had his top on sloppy and a little sideways, but as I approached to help I was met with a very rude “Don’t fucking touch me, cripple!” I stepped back, greatly surprised, the first time I have been something so harshly, but he would almost instantly regret it.

“WHAT?!?” The second I heard Skro’s voice I knew it was going to get very serious and very nasty very fast. “WHAT IN THE FUCK DID I JUST HEAR?!?” Skro stepped toe to toe with him, pushing me out of the way, he stood silent and surprised for a moment then Skro tore into him again “I ASKED YOU A FUCKING QUESTION, CADET, WHAT IN THE FUCK DID I JUST HEAR?!?”

“I said ‘don’t fucking touch me, cripple’” he replied, pretty quietly.

“DON’T TOUCH ME, CRIPPLE, WHAT?” this guy was caught off guard “I SAID DON’T TOUCH ME WHAT? EVERYTHING YOU SAY WILL END IN ‘SIR’ WHEN YOU TALK TO ME, SHITSTAIN!”

“I said, ‘Don’t fucking touch me, cripple’ SIR” His reply was still low

“THIS ‘FUCKING CRIPPLE’ OUTRAN HALF THE COMPANY THIS MORNING AND I’M WILLING TO BET EVEN WITHOUT WINGS HE COULD KICK YOUR SORRY ASS FROM HERE TO THE END OF TRAINING, What is your name cadet?!”

“Parith, sir!”

“Pareti?!? Fucking shitty name! A shitty name for a shitstain!” Skro grabbed my arm and pulled me in front of him “Cadet Jake, help this useless shitstain fix his uniform, cadet Jake!” Awkwardly I reached out and started straightening his top as I had originally intended as Skro went off again “YOU’RE SUCH A STUPID FUCK! SOMEDAY YOU MAY BE IN A TRENCH PINNED DOWN BY THE ASSHOLES WE’RE HERE TO FIGHT AND THIS FUCKER GONNA BE BESIDE YOU, YOU WANT HIM TO LEAVE YOU THERE TO DIE? OR WOULD YOU WANT HIM TO PULL YOU BACK AND STAY ALIVE?!?” There was a silent pause as I let go of his now straight uniform “WELL?!?”

“Alive, sir” he said quietly

“I’m hard of hearing, shitstain, speak the fuck up”

“ALIVE, SIR!”

“How old are you, cadet?”

“25, Sir”

“You’re still a baby, but it’s time to grow the fuck up, you’re brother in arms with everyone in this room now” He leaned in even closer and put his mouth nearly up to his ear, nearly whispering, but loud enough for everyone to barely hear “I hear shit like this again, and you’re going to be flunked out and put on your ass on the street with no way home faster than you pick your asshole, you got that?” Parith nodded obediently and Skro walked back to attend to other new recruits, yelling about crooked tops and pants too low. Then Parith turned to look at me for a second before turning his back and pretending to busy himself in the pack. I walked back toward my bunk and Larice put her hand on my shoulder

“Making great friends already, look at you go!” She chuckled

“Yeah, I feel a little better about my nickname too” I laughed with her, as I got to my bunk Jude’s feet

were dangling in my way, I looked up at him and he stared down at my face and smiled before playfully putting his left foot up on my shoulder and pushing gently.

“Yeup, you could totally kick that guy’s ass” His tone changed to a little mocking “Just look at this big beefy shoulders” as he moved his foot around on my shoulder. I pushed it off “Love ya princess” he joked. I was a little surprised how close we were getting already

“I bet I could, but that guy isn’t who I’m here to fight”

The next day was more of the same, running until most passed out, breakfast, then drill. After that the 3rd group showed up, and we went through the process again. Someone would say something stupid, not about me this time, and get chewed out by Skro, then in the evening more formations drills.

The last day before training officially began came and the last group showed up in the afternoon again. We were now 100 strong, but strong would be the wrong word for what we were. Thin, untrained, useless soldiers, just as Skro had told us.

Chapter 7, Fire and Mind;

Sandpit 2111 Clay's Bar

I was happy, the happiest I had been in my life so far. Here I was, washing a plate, INDOORS! I've been eating well for the last couple years, it's making me feel strong, the strongest I've ever felt. Deakon hasn't even had to defend me for a while now. Mostly because I've been staying hidden here, Thanks to Clay. We've gotten along pretty well since I opened up to him. He's almost as nice as Deakon, but maybe I think that because he isn't yelling at me or hitting me. Maybe he's just too fat to throw a punch....

"That's not very nice"

I know that's not very nice, I shouldn't have thought that. Wait, that wasn't my thought.

I paused, completely still, looking at the wet plate in my hand through the goggles in my suit, my bare purple hands exposed. I waited to see if my brain said it again.

"Come see me, I want to talk to you, about you, and your companion" I heard it again, that's not my voice, but it's my thought? I looked around the kitchen, I was completely alone, and now a little afraid. Clay was out in the bar welcoming an old friend, Deakon had taken some food and bottles out to deliver, I was alone.

"Don't be afraid, I can feel it, and you don't need to be afraid" the voice said again, and after a pause it continued "I know you are here, I can feel you, I felt you as soon as we set down outside the city. Your hidden power radiates for a long distance for those can sense it. Come to me, it will be okay"

I dropped the plate, a little more afraid, and suddenly did not want to be alone. I grabbed the gloves to my suit and slipped them on, clipping them to the rest of the suit. I started walking into the bar out of the kitchen. I stopped near the door, I was scared, but for some reason I could not resist this urge to go and find the voice. Clay had put a mirror there for me to double check before serving customers, I made sure my suit was all done up, covering every inch, no purple scales exposed, and after the safety check, I walked into bar.

"Ah there you are. You're quite small, I wasn't expecting that" the voice said, overcoming the murmuring of the patrons of the bar. Clay and his friend laughed in the corner. I couldn't help but think this was crazy, why am I hearing thi- "You're not really hearing anything, Exodus." the voice said. It knew my name now, and I was very freaked out "Look at me, I'm harmless, I'm not going to hurt you, I just need to know if you're who I'm looking for" Look at me? Who am I looking at? My mind Is playin- "a little to your left, the dragon in the hood, look closely, the gold dragon" that's when I finally noticed him, in the dark booth, alone, eating a meal. Only his hand and snout were visible from under his clothing and hood, and yes, both of which were gold in color. "Yes that's right, here I am, come talk to me, purple one"

I panicked, no one was supposed to know that, I started checking my outfit, obviously he knew, but how was he projecting his voice as he ate?

"Come over, let me see you with my eyes, I need to give you a good look over to see if you are who I've been seeking" I was again overwhelmed by a strong feeling to just do as the voice was telling me.

I was scared but not so much so I wasn't thinking straight. "You really don't need to be afraid, I can still feel it" Telling me not to be afraid was not going to make me less afraid. "I suppose you're right, but you'll soon see I'm right" Hesitantly, I walked over to the booth and slid my small frame into the seats across the tablet from this strange dragon, lowering a spoon to the bowl and lifting it back to his mouth, taking in one of Clay's less popular food items. He didn't look up, or even really acknowledge physically I was there. "I think maybe you are the one I've been looking for, or you wouldn't have come out here, you won't have come and sat down, you'd have heard nothing. You would still be washing dishes in the back. Working just to stay alive"

"At least Clay is nice to me" I spoke to his defense, I felt as if he was about to say something bad.

"He has a good heart yes, and is doing what he can to get by, just as we all are. It was kind of him to take you and your companion in. Thinking of whom, where is he? Your companion, I was sure you would not be alone" The voice in my head that wasn't mine was now frightening me further. What does this have to do with Deakon, what does he want with us? He should be back soon, maybe he can save me from, whatever this is! "Ahh yes, Deakon, thank you for his name. I could feel him close to your heart, the rumblings of something strong have started, a good bond of friendship can be very powerful for you both." Suddenly the Gold dragon put down his spoon, grabbed his hood and pulled it back, looking me in the eyes. I was lost in them, as if I was staring into the universe itself, as if this dragon had lived a million lifetimes. Finally the voice spoke again, this time it was real, it came from his mouth, a little relieved when I could hear the words in the real world again.

"You can safely remove the hood and mask, Exodus, please, let me look at you" But as his words left his mouth something else felt different, surreal. I felt as if we were somehow alone in the bar. It eerily silent but as I looked around the bar nothing had changed. Dragons were still talking among each other, carrying on, busy as normal. There were even a couple non dragons around tonight, seemingly in the city to trade or get whatever they needed from dragons. It should be loud, but instead of the constant noise of talking and music it was perfectly silent. I looked back at the gold dragon.

"I can't take anything off, people will know I'm purple, Clay would never let me inside again, someone might even hurt me-"

"You need to learn to trust me, and in time you will. I know you're good at staying hidden, you've done it before, Exodus, without even realizing it. But trust me now, trust me when I saw no one can perceive you right now, no one will even see that you are here, let alone that a purple scaled dragon sits among them." For a reason I could never explain, I did in this moment trust him. I started with my goggles, lifting them over my head and off my horns, placing them on the table in front of me. Then as I kept eye contact I pulled back my hood. Last I removed the respirator mask from my muzzle and the cloth mask we had that goes behind it. I was exposed now, one purple dragon staring this gold on in the face. He studied me in return, the smile on his face growing stronger. "It has been many years since I have felt the true and raw power that someone like you contains." He studied me for a moment longer "Now, that I have you, I need to ask about your companion again, Deakon"

"What about him? You haven't even told me who you are. Information for information now, I'll tell you what you want to know, if you start answering my questions as well!" I was being a little demanding, but in my fearful state I needed some answers myself. He nodded in agreement. "How am I exposed and no one has saw me?"

"Your personality is quite a bit stronger than I anticipated, you've had a rough life so far, so I guess it's

understandable. I have some abilities, Exodus. Our kind has a natural affinity to be attuned with the energy around us, but these abilities have been lost in time. We are both going unseen by the others right now by my own control and design. My turn now. I have an odd question, your friend Deakon, does he play with fire?"

"Like some sort of pyromaniac? No he's normal. Well as normal as I think we can be." I looked up into his eyes again, there was a sense of seriousness that was not there before. "My turn now, who are you?"

"I'm Glavous." He paused and looked deeply into my eyes. "Hasn't anything strange ever happened to you, Exodus, things you can't explain, time when things just went your way with people when they really shouldn't have? Times when you went unnoticed despite being in plain sight?"

"Yes" I was feeling even more uncomfortable now, flashbacks of hiding from bullies popping into my head.

"There, yes, that wasn't chance, that was you, instinctively using the power in yourself" His smile now gone, he wasn't being friendly anymore, it felt more like he was going to show me something, but before he could go any further I needed to know some more to trust him.

"What do you want with us?" I demanded.

"I merely want to show you two are capable of. After that I may make an offer to help you both expand on your talents over time" He explained, kindness began coming over his face again.

"What kind of offer?"

"No, Exodus, it's my turn now remember?" His point had be sink back into my seat a little, he was right "Now, do you think you can call out to Deakon?"

"I can't, no, neither of us can afford our own devices to communicate wi-"

"No, not with technology, you can call him the same way I called out to you to bring you to me" as I looked into his face I had noticed the spikes on this snout, chin, and cheeks had darkened slightly, normally a sign that I had annoyed or angered the other dragon slightly, but they weren't really darker, that had taken on a slight hue of purple "I can help you this once, just to learn, so that I can show you how to do this. Now, give me your hand, your bare hand"

I removed my left glove, and extended my purple hand across the table, both of his gold hands reached out back, sandwiching my own. I had a sudden realization of how naive I was possibly being, this might have been some strange trick to rob me, but I'm broke. Maybe a weird way of luring me outside so that others can "take care of me". I looked around the bar, partially for possible help, and no one had taken any notice of still.

"No, Exodus, I am not going to hurt you in any way, you can rest those thoughts." He said calmly. To anyone else I think this would have ended long before it got this far. He closed his eyes, that small act helping me trust him a little more. "Now, think of Deakon, picture him in your mind" I closed my eyes and did as he requested, my heart fluttered a little bit as the image of Deakon came to my vision. "There! Yes Exodus, there is a strong connection with him, that will make the next part easier for us" My concentration broke, the image was gone, I opened my eyes and looked at him with concern.

“What is going to happen next? What are you trying to make me do to him?”

“Exodus, it’s okay, we’re just going to call to him just as I called to you, but you are weaker than I, your message will only appear to him like an idea or worry, depending on what you tell him. I need you to trust me for this to work”

“I think you’ll find my trust is hard to gain”

“I know I can with time, and if you give me the chance” Without opening his eyes he gripped my hands to bring my attention back, I closed my eyes and began to concentrate again. “Now, we can try again, picture him, and embrace the connection you have made with him” His words stopped flowing into my ears and coming from my mind again. “Yes, I see it, I already feel it, you’re connected so naturally with him. Now, think of what you would want to say that could make him come back, think of that and speak it in your mind to that image of him, I am helping you now, this will work, just tell him what you need to tell him”

“Deakon, I need you back, I don’t feel safe, something weird is happening, I’m afraid, Deakon, I need you as soon as you can get back” I felt silly, but the message was truthful, I was still quite uncomfortable with this gold dragon I had just met playing mind tricks with me. I opened my eyes and looked at Glavous, his eyes were still closed but slight disappointment was over his face, obviously he heard the whole thing in my mind, and the thoughts afterwards. I glanced down at the cup beside his soup, one of our very well polished metal ones. In the distorted rounded reflection I noticed something strange. I broke contact with him and picked up the cup and brought it closer to my face, confirming the concerning image I thought I saw. The spikes on my snout, chin, and cheeks had changed color, now a deep purple nearly matching the rest of my scales.

“What have you done?!?! what happened to my face?!?” I panicked

“Relax, Exodus, this is a good sign, this means it worked!” he opened his eyes, the disappointed look gone and replaced with a little pride “When an elemental master uses their abilities, their spikes will change color to that color associated with that element. It will be gone in a moment” I looked in my distorted reflection in the cup, and he was right, they were already turning lighter and back to normal. “I feel as he might have been nearby, but it’s hard to tell with your strong link to him. I think the fire will be here any minute now”

“Okay, Elemental master? The Fire? I am starting to think you’re just some weird-” As if to prove a point at that second the front doors into the club swung open and Deakon came through, looked around the bar, and ran into the back. “See? You’re a nutcase, he wasn’t even looking for me! I should go check on him.” I reached for my gloves and other gear to put on but Glavous places his hand over mine. “I need to cover back up before someone notices me!”

“He can’t see us here, remember? No one can. I’ve put a veil over this booth, light is reflecting over us right now, we are here, but nobody is perceiving us, just like your bullies, just like the soldiers, just like when you hid away behind Deakon on the prison ship” His explanation wasn’t really cutting it, but how could he know all this? “I will lift it now, just for him, he will be the only one who will see us”

“This is crazy, I better get back to work before someone catches me out of the-”

“Exodus!” Deakon ran up the to table, whispering to keep attention away “What are you doing? Someone is going to see you and Clay will be pretty pissed off!” He started fumbling over my gear on the table, trying to help me slip it back on. “I had this funny feeling something was up, you needed me or something so I hurried back and you’re out here and exposed, what happened?”

“Your friend Deakon has a pretty strong willed, even if he is hard set only for your safety now” Glavous spoke and Deakon noticed him now, he froze for a second, not knowing what to do, surprised at the gold dragon, and worried about him seeing me openly. Glavous gestured into the booth beside me. “Please, Deakon, have a seat with us” As Deakon slid into the booth with us, Glavous reached to his hip, the sound of rustling came as he pulled something from one of the satchels around his waist. I moment of fear came over me, not knowing what he was pulling out, but I was relieved when his hand appeared again, holding a simple low flat candle. “I would appreciate it if you would light this for us, this booth is a little dark and it would be night to have some more light for this conversation” as he sat it down in front of Deakon.

“I haven’t got anything I to light this with. Sorry, who are you?” he asked, greatly confused

“I’m Glavous, nice to meet you. And as for this candle, you don’t need anything to light it, you are all that you need for this task”

“What are you talking about?” Deakon asked. Glavous picked up the candle and brought it to his mouth, as he did so his face spikes turned a faint orange, and almost seemed to glow. Then just as effortlessly as someone would blow out a candle, he blew a little puff and a flame came from his mouth and lit it. He looked past the candle at Deakon, who did not look impressed, then puffed the candle out and placed it on the table.

“Now, it’s your turn”

“That was a nice little parlor trick, but you’re going to have to teach me.” He said, a little defiantly and seemingly now a little annoyed.

“Sure, but a little handshake to get aquatinted first, a little Earth tradition” He smiled and extended his right hand to Deakon. Surprised of his knowledge of Earth, Deakon apprehensively reached out to shake the gold dragon’s hand. But as soon as their hands made contact I saw Glavous’ face spikes change again a hint of the purple from before. Deakon stopped moving for a moment. I’m smart, but very new to what was going on, but I’m 100 percent positive Glavous just put an idea in Deakon’s head, I could FEEL something between them. After the handshake, Deakon changed to a much more serious demeanor. To my surprised Deakon silently sat back down and picked up the candle. He picked it up and gently blew on it. Nothing happened...

“Deakon, what just happened, what did he show you?”

“Just images, dragons like us, but breathing fire, and making fireballs form their hands, a flaming sword, dragons who had some sort of control over fire” he sat stunned still, as if still processing the information, he needed another moment.

“I call it opening the third eye, Exodus” Glavous started to explain while Deakon seemed blank for a moment “There’s no actual third eye obviously, but rather what I call it when someone is aware of our elemental abilities. You were hatched with yours open, but the rest of us have to learn. I simply SHOW

them what is possible, it's up to them, or him in this case, to process it, and decide if he can do it" As we talked, Deakon picked up the candle and tried to blow again, the spikes on his face to my surprised changed to a very faint glow of range like Glavous's did. He blew, but again nothing happened, but he stared at the candle, almost as if having himself in a trance. All on his own he seemed to be close, I could almost feel it.

"Deakon" Glavous also sounded very intent now, like this was a defining moment, and it would be "picture the flame, and give the energy from within you"

Deakon paused, seemed to concentrate even more, his face spikes now obviously orange, and he blew again. Yet again there was no flame.

"Deakon, you're close! Look at your face!" I picked up the same shiny cup I had seem myself in and showed it to him. "Orange, just like his was a few moments ago! You're doing something, it's so close I can feel it too"

Glavous sighed, worry appeared on his face, very subtle but it was there. Deakon took a short breath in. His face spikes now glowed strongly, and when he exhaled a small flame came from his lips. Surprising himself he missed the candle and dropped it onto the table.

"Whoa" was all he could mutter, his face spikes were already fading back normal when he picked it back up without being told again. I glanced at Glavous and realized he had started to smile. I looked back at Deakon as his face spikes changed quickly and were now obviously glowing strong. That last time he had it figured out, and he blew one more time. A flame flew forth from his lips, lighting the candle, which he slowly placed on the table as his face changed back to normal.

"Exodus" I turned my head to meet Glavous' gaze "how did you know I showed him anything?"

"Your face spikes changed just as they did before, I know you did something" I put my hand behind my head sheepishly "I think I also felt it too"

Glavous raised an eyebrow "You have the potential to be very powerful" but as he turned to Deakon "I worry that you may be a challenge to train. But I'm willing to try" He picked up his mug and swallowed the rest of his drink. I noticed his bowl had also now been empty, and it made me wonder, how much he actually talked. He leaned back, his wings pressed against the back of the booth, "Now, for the offer I mentioned. Come with me, I will train you to use these abilities, and show you how to achieve greatness, and guide you to use them for the progress of our people. I know this is completely out of the wild, so take tonight to consider a decision. I'm traveling with dragon named Duke. He's simply put, a recycler of sorts. Hes the loud one who's been talking Clay's ear off all night. But he travels a lot and that helps me search. We are on the planet for another day, as he's waiting for some parts to be worked on, and leave tomorrow night."

This offer was deep, but I didn't know what he meant by the "use them for the progress of our people" I looked at Deakon, who was still shocked that he just learned how to breath fire. I thought hard for a moment, Glavous could sense how deep in thought I was. We had started building a life here, but aside from saying goodbye to Clay there wasn't much to stay for here either. I for one, was already willing to go, but Deakon, would need more time to decide, and I was staying with him no matter his decision.

"We will decide by morning" I responded

“Great, I’ll come by shortly after sunrise to hear your choice” He looked into the bar then turned his head back to me “I will wait until you’ve disguised yourself again to lift the veil that has us hidden”

The odd comfort of not having things mask my face became apparent knowing that it was about to end, but there was one more question I had.

“Glavous, you seem to know more than most people. Have you seen others like me? Why are we considered bad luck? Am I some sort of demon?”

He sighed, but realized the answer might help sway my choice. Deakon sort of popped back to reality hearing me ask this dark question and started to speak before Glavous put his hand to interrupt and to explain. “Exodus, yes, your purple scales are a result of your power. Science taught dragons that our color morphs are simply a genetic dice roll. You are one in a million, very rare, but not unheard of. I believe they are a result of the universe choosing where the energy is needed. I have worked with other purple dragons over the millennia, and masters of the mind, which is your power, can do some very dark and sordid things. Some users of that ability has given some people much to fear unfortunately.” His words shook me to the core, that perhaps the other dragons were right, but then he took another moment to comfort me “But the ones I have worked with over time, are anything but evil or bad luck, in fact they are often the opposite. Exodus they are always like you, passionate, emotional and look at the positives even in the darkest of times. There is NOTHING evil or wrong about you, the last word I would ever use to describe you or any of the others I’ve trained would be a demon!” He looked at me in the eyes and somehow his gaze brought some comfort, but knowing others had and maybe still do exist like me brought a moment of peace within me. “Now, even for someone like me, holding a veil over such a large crowd for such a large time while also teaching others to use abilities is in fact very tiring”

I nodded and started putting back on my masks. Deakon helped with my gloves and as soon as I was hidden again, the noise of the bar returned, breaking the silence almost violently as I remember this entire interaction did occur in a busy place. Glavous stood up, raising his hood as he got up, seemingly not wanting attention on himself. A golden yellow dragon like him was uncommon but not unheard of, I was unsure why he would want to hide.

As he left we returned to our duties in the kitchen, our absence was unnoticed at least by Clay, but a small pile of plates and cups had formed for me next to the sink somehow. Deakon helped me wash some, still sort of processing things himself, he had no idea he was capable of such things. My own processing was different, I realized through the last hour of events that maybe there was some part of me that already knew. I remembered things, events that made no sense at the time, but make perfect sense now. An Earth ice cream cone came to mind, the good ones, and the free one I got. What bothered me more was the stories at the end, that other purple ones like me had existed before, and how some were maybe not as nice as I was.

The rest of the evening went as normal, washing plates and Deakon serving up drinks, having become something of a bartender of the last couple years. I think it was good for him, his personality and people skills had become very serving. He listened to stories that bored him, but entertained the guests to tell, helped Clay remove the trouble makers, and knew how to entertain a little as he made drinks now too. He had become something of a people person. But the rest of the night he was mostly quiet.

After Clay closed the place we found ourselves in the back alley as usual. Even after 2 years we slept

outside. Clay had offered several times to let us sleep in the bar, and did during the rainy season, we even frequently used his shower now, we did essentially lived here but still chose to sleep the heat of the day away outside, staying up all night, still going to the desert every morning at sunrise to fly. Some things simply didn't change. But they were going to end.

I looked at Deakon, he was obsessing over making a flame, and piece of broken wood from a crate in his hand as he kept concentrating to breath fire again, but was struggling to do it a second time. I lifted my goggles from my eyes and took off the masks.

"Deakon" I paused "I'm going to go with him, I'm going to go with Glavous. I know he's a stranger but I think he can help me know about who I am, why I'm like this" He stopped with the wood and fire attempts for a moment and glared at me, nearly angry looking.

"You're Exodus, you're my friend, and that's all I'll never need to know" He said quite seriously, but then relaxing a little "I sort of thought you would, and if you're going, then so am I!" I ran into his chest and wrapped my arms around his waist hugging him as tight as I could. He hugged back tightly and kind of choked "You didn't think I'd just leave you that quick did you? Besides, I haven't seen anyone breath fire before, I want to learn too. The things he showed me, I want to learn to do that, I feel like it's.... it's my purpose"

"Yes! Deakon we're going to do great things now! I just know it, and my intuition-"

"-is never wrong" he smiled down and released me from our hug "Yes, yes I know"

As if on cue, Clay pushed open the back door and stepped out with a large bag of trash and a cigar hanging from his mouth. He launched the bag into the larger bin and sat on his usual crate. He started patting himself for matches or his fire but realized he had left them inside. Deakon noticed and I saw him inhale, his face spikes turned orange and when he exhaled a small fire came from his lips setting the piece of wood on fire. It seems that maybe having a purpose better than practice helped. Clay witnessed this and the cigar dropped from his mouth. I picked it up for him and handed it to him, staring at Deakon and without looking at me picked it from my hand and put it back in his mouth. "What, the, fuck?"

"It's okay Clay, you don't need to get your matches now" Deakon said and leaned towards him helping him light the cigar with the burning wood. Clay sucked a few puffs to get it going then leaned back as Deakon shook the wood to extinguish the flame.

"Look, Clay, we need to talk" I said suddenly, he popped back to reality.

"You're leaving aren't you?" he immediately guessed

"Yeah" Deakon piped up "I'm so sorry to leave you with such short notice, you've helped us so much and I really don't like how sudden this is" Deakon looked down.

"You're okay, both of you, and as far as replacing you" He chuckled "There's lots more street rats like you two I can give chance to, now that I know how" He paused, before saying one of the deepest things I ever heard him say "Think of it as giving a new chance to some other okay? I'm curious though, what's going on?"

“We’re going with someone named Glavous” I said

“Oh! He travels with Duke!”

“Duke? That guy you hung out with all last night?” Deakon asked

“Yea! The old gold guy, he’s a bit eccentric but I don’t think he’d ever mean anyone harm. Listen, if ever does anything just go to Du-”

“I’m not worried about that” I butted in “Like we said, I think we were worried about leaving you high and dry, but you don’t seem concerned, but before we go, I do want to thank you as well, for letting even a purple dragon in, even though I was hidden”

“Hey, Exodus, you really changed my thinking on that topic, I kind of hope if I ever meet one again they are as honest and hardworking and pure as you!” He was nearly blushing, but I could tell the goodbyes were maybe getting to him, he definitely had his eyes watering, but maybe that was the smoke from his own cigar. Something came over me, and for the first and only time I leaned in and hugged this wonderful chubby bar owner, and he put his thick strong arm around me and pulled me in and hugged back. He gestured to Deakon who leaned in and hugged him on the other side. “You two are going to be just fine, and if you’re around Duke, this isn’t goodbye at all, we’ll see each other again, he loves the lightning festival!”

His words made me all warm and fuzzy inside, we all let go of the hug, and kept talking through the night, remembering the last two years fondly, made plans for when we saw each other again, and promised us there was always a warm plate of food for us here. Deakon kept setting fire to the piece of wood on and off throughout the night as we talked, Clay still amazed at the trick. The sun eventually rose, but for the first time, we didn’t make our way to the desert to practice our flying, we stayed, waiting for Glavous to come collect us. As if he somehow knew we’d be in the back he walked up the alley.

“So, what have you decided? Shall I call you students, or passers by in the night of life?”

“We’re coming with you!” I said “We both want to learn what you have to teach us” And Glavous nodded in approval.

“Have you said your goodbyes to your friend?”

“Yeah!” Clay spoke up “Now, I trust Duke, but you need to take good care of my two street rats here, I better see them again in good condition”

Glavous laughed at him “Next time you see them, you’ll be shocked and who they’ve become” He paused and put his hand on Clay’s shoulder “And thank you for finding and taking care of my Champions” he said cryptically. “Thanks and goodbye, until we see you again”

He gestured for us to follow, we walked poetically back down the alley towards the rising sun, on to the next chapter of our lives.

Chapter 8 Soldiers

Base “C” Somewhere in the wastelands 2111

I stood in front of our barracks with a couple dozen of my classmates. We’ve been here for 5 months and what we woke up to this morning had shocked all of us, even me. Every day had been over 30 degrees and humid training in the middle of this warm wet jungle, but this morning we awoke to find a thick layer of snow on the ground. I looked to be about 15 cm of now melting, heavy wet snow. It was so incredibly strange, even this morning shortly after sunrise it felt like it was already 20 degrees again. A layer of fog was forming above the cold snow it was so warm. One of the officers pushed passed us and stepped in front of us. “Have none of you seen snow before? Common! Off the range you go we got firing drills to do!” Having lived the first 21 years of my life in the northern hemisphere of Earth so of course I’ve seen snow before. I’ve seen a LOT more snow. I’ve seen snow up to my waist! I’ve never seen snow in the middle of a hot jungle, this much, overnight. We started heading to the range.

I caught up and walked beside the officer, she also seemed rather annoyed at the icy arrival, but almost equally annoyed at the fact that I had cough up to her, but I thought maybe she might know, what the hell? “Sir?” I got her attention and she looked at me as she walked “I grew up where it snows every winter, I’ve seen lots of snow, but not from 30 degrees to snow and back to 30 degrees overnight! Does anyone have an idea what causes this?”

Annoyed by the question but she did respond “We don’t know exactly what causes it, but we think it’s random pockets of cold air that form on this planet. Strangely enough it only seems to affect this region. If we knew this happened we might have put the base elsewhere. This was one of the smaller events. The first year the base was here we got 2 meters of snow in one night, like this. It took almost a week to melt. Strangely it doesn’t even follow the seasons, tends to happen at random. Just a heads up it happens in groups of 3 or 4, so it’ll likely happen again now in this last month of your before you go.” she paused “What are you now meathead? A meteorologist?”

“No, Sir, just a curious guy I guess”

“Well stow the curiosity for now, it’s time for us to play with our boom sticks!” I did like her better than Skro, but honestly I wish the nicknamed hadn’t have stuck. We walked up to the range and half our class walked up to the tables. 25 of them, and we would take turns for a couple hours. Then switch with the other half of the class, who was left at the parade to do some hand to hand combat training this morning. I learned I did like the range. I had never fired a gun or even picked on up before this boot camp and my first few times at the range were pretty pathetic, but I caught on pretty fast, and was now I had a pretty good aim and excellent grouping. Half of us stepped up to the tables, and stood at attention. We were not allowed to touch the riffles until we were ordered to. Dragon guns were not equipped with a safety like humans ones are. We’re taught, that if you’re holding a gun, it’s because you’re going to kill something. Our guns looked somewhat similar to human assault riffles, but also seemed beefier. The casing was thicker, the end of the barrel was also thick and round, the last 5cm had large holes through it to dissipate the gases and muzzle flash. The clip, instead of going in near the middle, went in at the butt.

The range officer started the usual speech. “When handling a gun it is only ever pointed at two things. The ground in front of you, or what you want to kill. You do NOT point it at your feet, your fellow soldiers, your mom, my mom, or civilians! Pick up you riffle now and put in a clip, do not chamber a round until the go ahead to begin firing has been given!” That was our safety, we removed the clip, and

pulled charging handle to remove the round inside, shoving it back into the clip if possible. We don't chamber a round until we intend to kill something. plain and simple. "Arm yourselves!" the range officer yelled, those of us in the first group picked up the rifle and held it in front of our chest, pointing the muzzle at the ground. "Load!" we each picked up a magazine from the ammo box on the table, and slid it in the bottom side of the butt making a satisfying click. I looked around, a couple of the others were still having trouble getting it in quickly and fumbled somewhat, but after a couple seconds we were all ready. "Chamber!" he ordered again. 25 simultaneous sounds of the lever on the side of the butt being pulled and released. The fun part was coming. "Fire!" We all aimed down the range, a paper target was 20 meters away, I pulled my trigger and a single shot came out, the casing ejected away from my face. The thunder of 25 rifles going off filled the air, explosions of dirt flying into the air from the large dirt mound at the end of the range. Holding steady I fired again and again, forgetting to keep count, about 30 times until the last time I pulled my trigger there was nothing but a click. I ejected the clip and placed both the gun and the empty clip on the table beside me. A few more rounds were still going off, I was usually the first to empty out now. After the firing stopped the range officer ordered us to pull back our paper targets, the hung on wires that pulled them back. Both the range officer and extra barracks officer started making their way along the way the line, picking at our aim and giving up tips, or somethings just insulting the bad aim. 30 holes were in my paper, down and to the left, I guess the sight on this one might have been a bit off. "Good grouping" the range officer said when he got to me "But you need to get better at compensating for crooked sights" I nodded in agreement.

Our line did this 3 more times, before swapping out with the other half of the group. We would get some theory and gun maintenance training as the others shot. We've been doing it like this for a few weeks now, early morning was exercise, then after breakfast was weapons and combat training, then afternoon was usually more of the same unless we did some practical theory. The evenings were interesting, learning about ships and life in space and a simulator for the ships' guns. Those of us who also excelled in the evening courses were likely to get a place on a ship crew rather than infantry, though it was all the same army. Even ship crews would sometimes get sent into a ground battle if they were short, well, as we were told, I didn't know anything yet really.

Parith was in our group as well, but in the firing team opposite to me, I couldn't help but watch him. We hadn't gotten along and did mostly avoid each other but every once in a while we did end up close like this. I watched as the Range officer gave the order to load the clip, and he was one of those still fumbling this step a little. The order to fire came and he emptied out his clip. The targets were brought back and I looked at his. His grouping was just as good as mine and little closer to the middle. He made up for the fumble with the handling of the gun with good aim. That dragon was a dickhead, but was also turning into a good soldier.

After a couple hours it was times to switch with the other half. Along the walk on the path we passed the other group, it was split up differently every day, today Jude and Larice ended up in the other half. As we passed Jude playfully bumped my shoulder and Larice smiled and pushed me. We got back to the parade and Skro told it was disarming drills today. Him and another officer handing out 25 toy guns, plastic stand ins for the real thing. Actual children's toys, I guess our budget was kind of low, which got me thinking, who was paying for all this? I shook the thought from my head, none of my business for now and the officer handed Parith a toy gun. I guess we were both a little distracted and didn't realize we were next to each other. A little demonstration from Skro and his officer on how to grab the gun and push the "assailant" over your leg to trip them to the ground. We had all been through this before over the past few months, I think everyone knew what to do.

I turned to Parith and his spikes were a little gray, obviously also annoyed at this accidental paring, but

also looking a little silly holding the plastic gun. I followed through as we were expect, but quicker than he had expected. I pushed the gun into his chest as I placed my right leg behind him, he toppled to the ground, the toy gun now in my hands. “Good!” a passing officer barked. Parith stood back up. He quickly performed a nearly identical move, except pushing with every bit of strength. He strength did catch me off guard a little. He was pretty skinny and I did expect a little less force. I tumbled on his leg and hit the ground hard. My wing stubs hitting first and taking all my weight, pain shot through my upper back. Now the toy gun was in his hand. I got back up, a little slower than he did, trying to ignore the pain in my back. I grabbed the gun and did things a little different this time. Instead of pushing I twisted myself and managed to get my shoulder towards him and shoulder checked him. I kept twisting, my tail instead of my leg ended up behind him and he tripped, landing on his ass with an audible thud. This move was also taught to us, it worked better for me with the lack of wings, letting me get more force behind the shove.

Parith got up again, quickly, his face spikes were jet black. Expecting another disarming move he grabbed the gun but pulled, catching me off guard, and his fist started hitting my ribs. I let go of the gun and stepped back, the toy clattered on the dirt ground and a fist landed on the left side my muzzle. My fist instinctively came up and I blocked the next blow from the other fist, but the next blow came too fast and landed back on my muzzle again hitting the same place. The militia training was working well as I ignored the hits, but he was just as well trained now too. A fourth blow came at my face, but now I was no longer off guard, I ducked low and started to turn on one foot quickly, my tail came around and hooked his feet and pulled hard. His feet came out from under him and he landed on his back. I stood and dove onto him, landing a fist to his muzzle. I threw a couple more blows into his muzzle and cheeks. My other hand grabbed his top and pulled it toward me, winding up for another punch I stopped myself with a low growl behind my voice I yelled in his face, “YOU HAD ENOUGH?”

“WHAT IN THE FLYING FUCK IS THIS SHIT?!?” Skro’s voice boomed from behind me. I scrambled to my feet and stood at attention, the left side of my muzzle started throbbing. Parith slowly got up and stood at attention. “MEATHEAD! YOU’RE BEING A FUCKING MEATHEAD AGAIN!”

“Sorry, Sir, He swung at-”

“I DON’T GIVE A FUCK HOW THIS STARTED BUT YOU TWO NEED TO GET YOUR FUCKING SHIT TOGETHER! IF YOU END UP IN THE SAME FUCKING UNIT YOU’RE GOING TO END UP FUCKING DEAD!” He looked at Parith “I saw the whole fucking thing Shitstain! 30 fucking laps around the fucking parade you piece of shit!” He looked at me as Parith started to run “You should have left if after you tripped him! 10 laps for you, keep half a field I don’t want you two fighting again!” He turned and walked back to the other cadets, all of whom staring now “Young dumb and full of cum those two fucking idiots. BACK TO DRILLS! He yelled”

I waited until I saw Parith opposite the field to myself, and I started running, maintaining the distance away as ordered.

I chewed, slowly, my face still hurt. Jude sat beside my, Larice across from me, and a couple more we were friendly with had sat to hear my side of the story. “What a fucking asshole” Jude said “Just out of the blue, for what? Knocking him down like you’re supposed to?”

"I don't get the guy, he's always pissed about something. But what Skro said, about getting assigned the same unit as him, that's kind of ruining my mood." I said, then eased another spoon full of much into my sore maw.

"I wouldn't worry about that" Larice said, after swallowing another bite "If he keeps that shit up they might turf him. He's a great shot and knows few things, but he's been a pain in everyone's neck"

"You might be right" I glanced over at the table where he sat, with three other dragons, telling them his side, likely about how I was too aggressive or something. It's military training, the point is to be aggressive, it'll save our lives someday!

Skro Stood up and yelled, top of his lungs as usual "Company 2, simulator time! First ten numbers with me!" My ears perked up, I loved the simulator. It was a chair with real gun controls, a ship's cannon. I was excelling at this, my good aim translated with these big machines. They would throw scenarios into the system, target orders would come from the imaginary command deck, just like a real ship, and we were to shoot shit down as ordered. It was like a big video game. I think Larice noticed my swollen face light up.

"You really like going pew pew in space huh?" She joked

"Yea I think I'm good at it, well, the simulator anyway, we'll see about real life, I hope!"

"Me too" Jude spoke up "I really hope you and me both get gunner on a ship, maybe even together!"

"We'll know in a few weeks!" I thought about it, Skro told us about 10 or so from every class that excel are taken right to the ships, and get to skip infantry duty, the militia was really short staffed and people were moving up the ranks pretty quick as the military filled out. He told us we had new ships coming, not even captured ships like most of our fleet was now, but one of the planets in the wastelands had our backs. Our intelligence had apparently gotten a hold of warship plans from one of the guilds and were making the same ships with some modifications. Apparently newer power cores designs and an extra set of guns.

My mind wandered as my friends spoke, fantasizing about maybe having my own ship someday, taking the giant right down onto Titan's tower palace and ending it all once and for all...

"WAKE THE FUCK UP!" Skro and his officer were playing the same trick, pounding on metal sheets with ladles again, as I opened my eyes something felt different, The light had been turned on but the air still felt cooler, I looked out the window, and it was still dark. **"I SAID GET THE FUCK UP NOW! NOW! NOW!"** something definitely was different, there was an urgency in Skro's voice **"GET THE FUCK OUT OF BED AND GET TO THE PARADE RIGHT FUCKING NOW! MAKE SURE YOU ARE WEARING YOUR TACT VEST AS WELL!"**

That was an odd request, our tact vest was just a vest, thrown over our tops, for holding ammo but notably our ranks were on the front, a velcro patch, all of ours simply read "Cadet" in Draconis. I stumbled out of bed and pulled my pack form under our bunk, Jude stepped down doing the same, we pulled those vests form our packs and stood up throwing them over our heads. One of the few benefits of having no wings anymore was that I could through one of these on in less than a second, like a

human with a shirt. But the others had to fumble behind their backs to clip the vest on under their wings. In groggy fog of just waking up we made our way into the night air.

It was close to the end of training, VERY close, we only had today left and tomorrow, but something had changed some plans. Skro's officers scrambled, putting up a folding table and bringing out some containers and setting things up quickly as we were ordered to fall into formation. Things were hastily put together but some sense of importance and respect was among the officers. Skro threw a container to the ground and stood atop of it. Things suddenly felt surreal.

"As the power given to me, by this militia and it's commanders, I hereby grant you all the rank of Private! Congratulations! You have all passed and are now officially part of the Revolutionist Militia" The crows started to murmur, it was a full two days early "SHUT THE FUCK UP PRIVATES I'M NOT DONE!" Skro waited for the talking to stop "Normally we have a bit of a ceremony, you all get good treatment and a pat on the back and a fucking snack baggy before being sent off to kill, but shit is FUCKED RIGHT UP! We've had a good retention this class, 4 drop outs and only 3 turfed! It's been a good group, and I think some of you will go on to greatness. As I told you before our manpower is spread thin, and you're lucky enough, if you don't get killed, you'll climb the ranks fast! NOW!

"Onto our urgency, there will be no graduation ceremony! Our intelligence reports that there are military forces already en route to fuck some shit up, one of our base locations was found out by Titan and his military. We need to evacuate that base right fucking now! If those ships reach the base before the evacuation is complete, we need to defend it until everyone is out! Also, as I've told you, we got 5 new ships, 2 of them are there and 1 more is coming in 2 days. The other 3 are already headed to that base. Those of you assigned to the 2 new ships over our heads now will need to grab your pack, and get the fuck into orbit!" Skro looked into the black sky, as if pretending to tell time from the moon or something "We got 2 hours to get through this! The 'Defiant' and the 'Wild' are now in orbit, originally they were planned to stay until after you pussies graduated but the plans got changed!. Your lieutenants are waiting in the lading pad for their new recruits. The 'Rebel' will be here in two days. This class has been split between those three ships. I will now start reading out your assignments starting with the Defiant. When your number and name is called proceed up here to get your private ranking patch on your tact vest, then go grab your shit from inside, and head to the landing ports north side of the base! I haven't completed sign off on all of you yet, be aware of that if your CO asks, but I will forward it your ships along with your personal file in the next 24 hours!

"I'm going to read out the infantry first!" Skro started listing out numbers and names, the first we were assigned to and each name, followed by "Infantry!" These were to be our front line people. There was no shame in this, the strongest and best fighters were chosen here, even if they excelled in other areas, they were chosen to be our front line, everyone else's job was to protect them and have their backs. He read off 20 names, the first did as they were told, going to the front where the supply officer ripped off their "Cadet" tag off the vest and replaced it with a single bar, and telling them "Congratulations, private"

The next part surprised me.

"As I've told you, we are short people to man these new ships! The following 5, please come forward and obtain your rank of Crewman and position!" He read off 5 names, each followed with "Crewmen, Gunner" their new rank and position within that rank.

Those 5 proceeded to the front, among them, Parith. Despite his behavior he had proven himself worthy with both handheld and ship guns, a great aim and did amazing on the simulator. I hated his

guts, I knew that crew was getting a good soldier and a good gunner.

All 25 recruits had hurried inside the barracks to grab their packs and anything else they needed to before running off the landing pads.

“Next, the ‘Wild’, the following are assigned to this ship as infantry!” he proceeded the same, 20 more recruits were listed off, went to the front, received their patch as private, a short congratulations and ran off to grab their stuff. Next he listed of 5 more names, again followed by “Crewman, Gunner” and Those five went to the table, had their cadet patch torn off, and replaced with a patch with two thin bars.

28 of us remained, in a broken formation full of holes from the others leaving suddenly. Skro took a calmer position now. “You lucky fuckers can get a couple days of R and R before going to war, There’s little point in doing much more, we were essentially done anyways. Now fall into closer formation!” We expertly closed the group into 3 rows of 6 and the two rear rows of 5. Skro Picked up his tablet again. “We can do this last group with a little more dignity now.” He and his officers made their way through for formation, ripping the Cadet Tag off and slapping on the Private rank. After a while the entire group was done. But he wasn’t. “This group is a little bigger, and the Rebel is also a little short staffed, so there’s 5 more promotions in this group!” He looked at the small screen and then back at us. “Number 18, Private Din, come to the front!”

One of the privates from the back row marched to the front, Din had done well, great aim, and nailed the obstacle course. One before Skro he ripped off the fresh Private tag. “I hereby grant you the rank of Crewman Gunner, to serve aboard the Rebel” and he grabbed a new tag with the two bars from the table and pressed it ceremoniously on her vest” He put his hand on his chest and she followed, saluting each to other, something the others who had to run out of here had to miss. He waited for her to fall back into formation and read the next number. If was past mine, my heart sank a little, but was quickly replaced with excitement. “Number 33, Private Jude, please come forward” Jude stepped out of formation, making his way to the front. He received same treatment, a new tag indicating his rank. He fell back into formation when another officer leaned into to whisper something to Skro. I could barely make out what he was saying but I heard him from my position. “I’m going to take my time okay? Do the award at the end.”

“Next, Number 34, Private Larice, come forward!” I was happy for her, she really deserved it too. She marched to the front and again the same act, The private tag was ripped form her vest and replaced with the Crewman rank. She got her Salute, and fell back into the formation. “Number 87, Private Gily, come forward!” Once more the act went through it’s paces, a new tag, and salute, and fell back into formation. I wasn’t expecting what was next though. “Number 21, Private Weathers, come forward!” I thought he was doing this in order! The private came from formation and marched to the front. But this time was a little different. Ripping his Private rank from his vest he started to speak “I hereby grant you the rank of Crewman Gunner, and in addition you are recognized for your exceptional marksmanship on the gun range.” One of the others handed a small square plate to Skro, who then in turned handed Weathers the award “Every class there is someone we choose who shows exceptional skill with ranged weapons, you are this class’s recipient the Marksmanship award. Congratulations on your rank and award, Crewman!” he gave his salute and with a smile on his face, Weathers fell back into formation. Skro seemed to busy himself for a moment until another officer leaned in. Openly he waved his hand away “Yeah yeah, I’m doing this in my own time” He repeated, then looked up at the formation

“Number 32, Cadet Jake, Come forward!” I’ll admit I was filled with pride, but I didn’t know my

treatment would be a little different as well. I stood attention in front of Skro, he ripped off my private tag and reached for a Crewman Tag from the table. He actually seemed a little proud himself as he pressed the tag onto my vest. "Private Jake, I hereby grant you the rank of Crewman Gunner!" But then I noticed his supply officer slip something into his hands. "Also in every class we recognize the dragon who shows exceptional skill as a ship gunner, your total scores actually set a new record!" He handed me the plate. "Congratulations on your rank and award, Crewman!" he paused "Crewman Meathead" He said quietly, as so only I could hear, but with a smile. We saluted in I took my place back in the formation, the trophy plate in my hand.

He turned to the formation to give a little more of a speech "The rebel will be here in two days to pick up my trash, I mean you fine soldiers! She's going to be late to the party, so you all might be seeing action in as little as 4 days. She's getting both our award winners and some fine additions to her crew. DON'T MAKE ME LOOK LIKE A DUMBASS, SOLDIERS! SHOW THEM EVERYTHING WE TAUGHT YOU!" he took a breath "Like was previously said, you got a little time for R and R unlike the others, use that time wisely. The rebel is due here at 18 hundred in two days, roll call will be fore 6 am that day." He paused "Help my officers clean up our impromptu ceremony then off to breakfast! DISMISSED!"

"Sir?" one of his subordinates asked as he turned.

"Sorry, I got to get these personnel files in order, the ca- privates will help" He turned to his tablet and started walking away.

As we fell out of formation there was warm congratulations from all our remaining classmates, Jude and Larice congratulated me on the award and we turned to congratulate Weathers on his. After a few minutes of chatter one of the officers cleared her throat, indicating clean up time. We helped put everything back in the barracks at the sun rose, the other barracks cadets coming out to be chased around the parade. After that was all done we all went to the mess hall for some breakfast, our minds spinning...

"I heard there's a club there Jake!"

"So? We don't have any money, Jude!" We had heard there was indeed a small town nearby, I would have guessed that right from the drunk officers coming back the first week I stayed here before training. It was early in the evening now and were frankly bored, and wanted to get our minds off the fact we could be at war in 4 days.

"No, Jake, YOU don't have any money!" Jude smile, and pulled his pack out from under our bunk, reached in and pulled out a satchel, jingling it to prove the existence of coin. "I saved the last year on Industry, every coin I could, then withdrew it slowly over the last few weeks to not raise suspicion! I've got more than enough to buy everyone here a couple round!"

"Is that money even good here? I'm not even sure how it works with different guilds and cur-"

"If you privates are going into town..." We looked up to see Skro standing over us, issuing on final order "You fuckers make damn sure you represent the revolutionist militia with honor, no drunk bar fights, no puking on the sidewalk, and don't be cunts to the locals! I fucking mean it!"

“Of course, Sir!” Larice retorted “We will be perfect soldiers!”

Skro scoffed and walked away “You’d fucking better be”

“That doesn’t answer if that coin is any good he-” I started to point out but Jude already knew, and so did Larice

“Physical coin is good everywhere, Jake. They’d be insane not to take this money!” Jude said

“Yea, gold is gold!” Explained Larice “Every guild respects it, there’s no reason those townsfolk wouldn’t!”

I think maybe I was looking for an excuse, something felt off, not really with the situation, or getting some R and R, but I felt off, something in my lower gut, nearly like I was catching something. Maybe it’ll be fine, if I only have a couple drinks.

“Well, okay, if you guys are going so am I! All 28 of us though?”

“Count me out! I’m too stressed out!” said one of the privates from behind us

“But I’d love to celebrate!” Gily came up behind us “I’m pretty proud, would love a glass to celebrate, nothing extreme though, we are going to war in two days after all”

Jude Nodded, “That’s 4!” and soon we had invited more, until a group of about a dozen of us had gathered, some with coin, some without, Jude offering to buy mine and Larice’s drinks. We all straighten up and started walking in a direction we never had gone before. I guess we could of asked but maybe finding the town would be more fun?

We walked through the path in the jungle for about 40 minutes before we came to some buildings, and another 10 minutes of walking past those until we found this mysteriously close town we had lived next to for 6 months but never got to see. It was an odd mix of basic wooden buildings but also modern ones with signs, some stores, concrete would give way to a wooden building, giving way to another concrete one. It didn’t take long before we found this club, a strong looking dragon stood out front to keep out the riff raff, but saw the proud military crew coming and stepped aside. “No fighting and no touching the performers without consent!” he warned us as we entered. Wait, Performers?

We walked into a dimly light club, my eyes taking a second to adjust to the darkness. The place was far from packed, but it was also definitely not barren. There was indeed a performer. A effeminate red dragon was dancing on a round stage in the middle of the club, long ribbons following her (or his?) hands. They were wearing a satin see through cloth with gold jewelry around their waist. A second cloth on their face, giving just a hint of their muzzle and drawing attention to their eyes. They were BEAUTIFUL! Their well practiced movements were nearly memorizing, and very attractive. Suddenly a glass was at my chest, full of a dark liquid, being held by Jude’s light blue paw.

“Stop staring at the stripper and cheers to finishing boot camp!” I took the glass and drank, it tasted awful! Like Earth beer but worst! The alcohol content tasted about same luckily. I had have a few drinks on Earth before we were taken away. I had a moment about not knowing for sure if I could handle my booze, I better only have a couple drinks. “Drink up Jake, I got you!” Jude said cheerily

I took my time, enjoying the socializing, and loosening up with my new friends. We had spent months just a few feet apart most of the time, so it was refreshing to see them in a relaxed state. We celebrated and got to know each other. I watched as the ‘performers’ switched out, now a light green dragon was slowly dancing around on the stage, smooth slow music with low bass played, I couldn’t describe in human terms, a little slower than typical human music. We found a section that had some seats and sat down.

The drinks kept flowing, I wasn’t keeping up but I also wasn’t trying, the feeling within me was growing, I really hoped I wasn’t coming down with anything. Jude was a little concerned, he mentioned I was only on my second while most the others had 4 or 5 in them now.

“I don’t want to make a fool of myself Jude, I’m not very experienced with drinks”

“OH! YOU DON’T WANT TO MAKE A FOOL OF YOURSELF!” he yelled, he was a little tipsy now, maybe a little more, but there was a giant smile on his face “THEN LET US MAKE YOU A FOOL!”

I don’t know what he was planning and I’m not sure I liked it, he waved at someone and suddenly a performer appeared, the red one who was on stage. Jude just let it out, no shame, no worries, no embarrassment “Give our award winning gunner here a night to remember!”

“Sure thing you blue cutie” she said, now in range her voice was definitely female. At first I laughed but she came up to the chair I was sitting in and she placed her arms around my shoulders. I caught my own reflection in a piece of chrome trim on a nearby pillar. My spikes were a rosy pink, I was somewhat embarrassed. She put her legs over the arms of the chair and lowered herself into my lap, Suddenly it was a little more serious for me. She was definitely attractive, her body was gorgeous, and I was definitely noticing.

<addendum starts here>

She started grinding lightly, suddenly that feeling from earlier was strong, very strong, but not like I was sick, like something else was happening. “So what do you like, hot stuff?” she asked, I was starting to shake. I caught my reflection in the chrome trim again, my face spikes were now a deep blood red. Suddenly I realized what was wrong, something ignored, something that hasn’t happened in a long time due to my poor physical health until now. Something I was completely out of sync with from the others due to my time on Earth. I was starting my reproductive cycle!

I gently pushed her away, she seemed offended at first but I think she suddenly caught on. I ran out the front door. There was a railing at the front door just outside, I grabbed it and held on, panting hard as I tried to suppress the intense feelings. The bouncer came out the door, worried I had too much to drink already asked me “Hey, you okay bud-” but as I turned to look at him he saw my red spikes, “Oh, they’re that good aren’t they!” he proudly exclaimed.

Jude, Larice, and a couple others came out the door a moment, worried the same as the bouncer. “Hey, buddy, how you doing?” I panted and held on tight to the railing. I looked at him “Dude, it was just a lap dance!”

Embarrassed to admit it, it took a second “Jude, I didn’t know, I’m in heat, I can’t go back in there”

“Comon! We’ll tie you to a chair to keep you form touching them or something!” he tried to convince me

Larice was a little more sympathetic “Did it just start? How is it so sudden?”

“I felt funny earlier, but, I’ve been starving and skinny for the last 6 years, but now I’m in the best shape of my life, and it’s so strong!” I swallowed hard “I only had 3 prior on earth, and I don’t remember them being this strong, and so fast!” The bouncer behind me laughed.

“Yea, you’re healthy now!” Larice patted my back “You going to try to tough it out in a few minutes of resting or are you going back?”

I thought for a moment, I was having fun, a LOT of fun, but considering the nature of the club, and how strong the feelings were, I thought it best to go back and concentrate on ignoring things. “I should go, yes, I should go back to base”

“Okay dude, listen I’ll have a couple more for you okay?” Jude patted me on the back

Then Larice surprised me “I’m going to walk with him, make sure he doesn’t get caught by an animal or fuck a tree on the way back. Once he’s back on base I’ll come back! The night is still young!”

“Okay, take care of our best gunner, and see you soon Larice!” Jude said as Larice pulled my arm and started walking with me towards base.

I wasn’t aware her plan was not to take me back to base at all. We reached about halfway, talking about things to keep my mind off it. Mostly small talk, like about things in Industry, how training went, even that mysterious snowfall. But suddenly she pulled my arm and whispered “Follow me!” She pulled me into the jungle in the dimming light, removed her uniform, and she took away my virginity, helping me to relieve my heat at least for now. The look in her eyes told me this would not be our only time.

Relieved and cleared in the head, she did convince me to return the club with her, and I did. Funny enough Gily was receiving the lap dance that I ran out on! There was some murmurs of suspicion from our brief disappearance, but otherwise the party went on, I enjoyed a few more drinks with my friends, including Larice!

<addendum ends here>

We stumbled back late at night, the officers were still awake, Skro still working on personnel files but seemingly calm. He didn’t say much as we all stumbled to our beds, some more than others, I didn’t personally drink much, just in case the feelings returned.

The next morning was rough for a few, luckily not me, strangely not Jude, considering the shape he was in last night. Larice only complained of a headache.. I found it strange that Skro didn’t wake us all at dawn, but around 8 am he did make those who slept in that late get out of bed. There we waited for another day. It was eerie and silent, and I wish I had been assigned to one of the ships that had already left, the suspense and boredom was so painful. Some of use made one more round, walking around the parade, grabbing our last meals from the mess hall. I sort of felt like my first few days on the base, but at least now I had friends to talk to.

We slept one more time, and 6 am took it's time getting to us. We were all nervous, about what we would see, how things would go. We had our breakfast and did what little packing for what we had that afternoon. Solemnly at 18:00 as scheduled, we lifted off from the landing pad, and headed for the Rebel now in orbit waiting for us, leaving our training grounds behind.

We arrived near the end of the battle, the base had been evacuated but the ships were still being attacked as they tried to make their escape. Our ships have 4 forward and 2 rear facing guns on each side. As we were fresh we weren't yet trusted with the front guns until we proved ourselves. Better experience does the main shooting. As rear gunners our job is to fend off followers or fire off rounds from the rear as we passed the enemy ships, as ordered by the lead gunner on the command deck. I was on the left outer gun, Jude on the left inner, and Larice on the right outer. Being rear gun did mean less action, we were only engaged for 15 minutes, just long enough for all the ships to scatter. Being the freshest we were also the last ones to run. I got off a total of 5 shots, but 100% accuracy. Jude got off 6 but missed 2. Larice never got the opportunity to shoot, and was rather annoyed about it.

The Wild took heavy damage to the right side, seemingly the attacking ships tried to take out her new warp coils so she couldn't run, they knew she was faster. Luckily she was able to escape on one, but would be down for repairs for months while her brand new armor and drive was restored. Thankfully, this small skirmish was 100% success for us. We lost zero personnel or ships, and all people and important equipment was removed from the base. As for us, we took a hit just above the command deck, but the Rebel held tight, and no major damage was done, only her first scar.

Chapter 09 Apprentices

We walked through another market, one we haven't seen in the two years we lived here. There was no real public transportation aside from a sort of light rail that ran through the busier parts of the city, and we had no reason to leave our little section, so there was much of this city we never explored. This included the space port on the north east corner, and the route to get there, and where we were walking to. It was busy, dragons bartering at market stands and going in and out of the many stores. Just like the market near where we lived, it was also a mix of old and new, basic and complex. Stands next to each other seemed to come from completely different worlds. We got a few looks from passers by, Glavous was wearing a long hooded caplet, even in this heat, but much of his gold scales were exposed. Exodus in their mixed up suit, almost more of a costume at this point.

Glavous wasn't really that out of the ordinary, rare, but not unseen, not unheard of, in fact, of a city this size there would like be several other dragons adorned in gold scales like him, But Exodus was the odd one, completely covered from head to toe, only their horns were visible, white, like every other dragon's horns. It was them receiving the majority of the looks, but not disrespectful or a look of slight fear or superstition, but more looks of curiosity. Why were they covered? A burn victim? Or maybe they were really ugly or had some sort of deformity? Our conversation was very little, something that worried me, as I had hoped to have more conversation, get to know this golden dragon who was taking us away, of our own will of course. We wandered through the market at a slow sort of browsing pace, a thought came over me, why are we taking our time? Didn't we have a ship to catch? But I didn't get to contemplate this for very long before Glavous walked toward a market stall. Drawn to some small animals in cages. They looked like smaller versions of raptors from Earth's prehistoric record, but instead of feathers or feathery fur like they were depicted on earth, these were mostly bare scaled, except for a furry mane that ran from the top of the head down their back an onto their tails, and smaller, standing less then 40 cm tall. They were stacked about 3 high with a couple stacks on each side of the stall, but as we walked closer I noticed the stall was selling meat, laying in ice but covered by a glass barrier to keep them cool and the dirty stealing paws of others out. That's when I figured it out, these were for food! It appears the vendor was selling a choice, still live, or be freshly butchered by the seller, or you could buy cuts from him as well, ready to cook.

Glavous leaned into Exodus, telling them something that I the time seemed very strange to me, "Exodus, you're going to need a pet"

"A pet? Why a pet? We can barely support ourselves.."

"It isn't for you enjoyment, though that would be a secondary perk, it's for you to train with!" Glavous explained, somewhat quietly as the conversation was weird "You need someone to practice making a link with, someone to give ideas to, and the sort" The two walked up to the stall and I followed them. The small raptor looking animals were all alert, clawing at the cages they barely had enough room to turn around in, the stall owner noticed our arrival and heartily shouted.

"Oh you three look hungry! How about some nice daoma meat to fill you up!" He pause to take in the reaction, he could tell we were interested but not quite in what, then pointed into the ice fill display of cuts "The cuts are only 2 coins, 3 for the top quality and bigger cuts, and 8 coin for a whole fresh if you got a big meal to prepare!"

"We're interested in live" responded Glavous

“Oh! Enjoyers of the freshest of meat I see! Well I got several left as you can see, the live whole are 6 coin”

Glavous turned to Exodus “Take your time and pick one” He pointed to his head “Make sure it’s one you connect with!”

The stall owner clued in, and chuckled “Oh! A pet for your kid! Yea they make okay pets, but can be a little disobedient”

Exodus glared at the seller for a moment, a death stare he could not see being shot in his direction from behind their goggles, Glavous stepped in to correct him as Exodus starting checking out the small lizards. “They are an adult” he chuckled “Just looking for a little companionship, that’s all” and he smiled back.

A few moments later Exodus had made their choice. They pointed to one in the middle of a stack, slightly darker than the rest, a grayish color, the fur on the mane matching in color and slightly shorter in length, there was a tint of purple around it’s brown eyes. It trilled back at Exodus. “For a pet I’m not sure you’d want that one! Hatched this spring and it’s been a pain in my ass, knocks over the feeder and clawed through the fence four ti- You know what if you really want that one I’ll even let it go for a discount, 4 coin!” Glavous dug his fingers into a satchel on his hip and pulled out 5 coin and handed it over. Was this guy secretly rich?

“Have an extra coin for your day too” He smiled, but as he did so Exodus opened the front of the wire cage.

“No! Don’t!” The seller yelled “That one will run before you can even know where it went!” It did in fact run, but not away, it leaped from the cage and into Exodus’ chest, as they caught it and held it tightly. The stall owner paused then laughed. “I’ve never seen it do that, but oh well, it’s out of my hair, good luck with it okay!”

“Take care and I hope your day is energetic!” Glavous stated, and odd goodbye, but we started our walk toward the spaceport again. After a few steps Glavous pulled a device from one of his other satchels, like a small tablet similar to one that humans would make, but this looked thicker and sturdier. I’m really starting to think this guys is secretly rich. Other dragons around had similar devices, used to communication or personal organizing. I’ve heard some can even take pictures. He tapped at the screen of it a few times. Then spoke to us “Our transportation is nearly ready, but they are also impatient, we have a couple more stops to go then we will be there.” He looked me up and down “Deakon, the next stop is about you, I wish not to train someone in such ragged things”

He was referring to my now completely tatter cloth, and imaginary top. I had replaced the one I came from Earth in a couple years ago, but now this was was worn, torn, and stained as well, but I wasn’t rich “Sorry, Glavous, I don’t have a lot of money to buy anything new, I’m assuming what little I have I’ll need to keep myself fed for a whi-”

“I didn’t ask you how much coin you had, I said I cannot train my master of the flame in such a poor presentable state” He sighed “It’s nothing to do with being poor I assure you, the universe doesn’t recognize coin when it distributes it’s power, it’s about being proud and confident in yourself, and trust me, the little bit helps” He pointed to a stall, outfits, cloths, tops and the like hanging from it’s shade and lay on the table. “I’ll buy you something new, it is also to help with making an impression with

Duke”

Fine, I’ll let this suspiciously rich dragon buy me some new clothing, if things go wrong in the next while at least I’ll have some new cloths to wear. “Okay, I’ll pick something” I said and walked to look at the selection. I took a few moments to decide, ignoring the price tags, partially on purpose in case I chose something with a high price tag, to see if I would be asked to make another choice. I picked a red cloth, and a hooded top in a matching color, a little longer than most, I was tall after all. “How’s this?” I asked Glavous

“Red is a fine choice, really!” He smiled in approval “The color of flame!” I hadn’t even thought of it, I was just drawn to the vibrant red. He didn’t even look at the tag, and asked the seller a total, which he didn’t even haggle with, and just handed over the coin. I was rather surprised.

I was also happy, it did look nice, I took the bag off my shoulder, the one Exodus and I found a long time ago to keep our few belongings in, I opened it up and stuffed the top inside, to which Glavous tilted his head. “It’s hot, I do like it, I’ll wear it when it cools down” and he nodded. I took off my cloth, stuffing it into the bag as well, and threw the new red one around my waist. It was nice, square, and hung to my knees, a little lower than I was used to, but it did look nice.

We continued on and Glavous did have one more stop to make. To our surprised he quickly stopped to buy a bottle from a stall, alcohol was widely available of course but considering the nature of Glavous I was surprised to see him buy some. “You drink?” I asked

“No, this isn’t for me, it’s a fine bottle to bribe Duke with!” He explained. I nodded slowly, wondering just what sort of bribe, but I took the opportunity and grabbed a cheap bottle for myself, well, maybe for me an Exodus. I gave the seller the coin from what little I had, then slipped the bottle into our bag. I don’t think either of the noticed.

We walked more, slowly the stalls and market gave way to more modern buildings and stores, as we were walking Glavous suddenly stopped, and stared into a window. A gray two toned flight suit stood in the display, held up by a fake dragon inside of it, it looked as if it covered the entire fake model inside of – oh no, how rich was this guy?!?!

He walked in, I read the sign above the door as I followed, ‘Sond’s Space Supply and Surplus’ in Dragonis, simple. As we entered it was like a small hardware store, various tools and items on shelves, a couple of small displays. There was a teller behind a counter, she smiled at us as we entered “Hello! Welcome to-” She paused and noticed the daoma in Exodus’s arms “Oh, I’m sorry, we don’t allow animals in the store”

“This one is well behaved!” Glavous spoke up, how the hell could he know that we’ve had it for 10 minutes “We’re here to inquire about the suit in the window!”

Realizing there was a big spender in the store suddenly made Exodus’s pet no longer an issue. “Oh! Of course we’ve got quite a few in stock in the back as well! Which one of your is this for?”

Glavous pointed at Exodus, and they pulled a hand from under the animal to raise it, they already knew “This one!”

She looked at them slightly puzzled by the current outfit, but smiled “Sure! Let’s get you sized up!”

She opened a drawer under the counter, retrieved a coiled up length of tape, and let it roll out from her hand, it had markings along its length, plain and simple measuring tape, but in Draconis units. As she walked out from behind the counter she said something that made Exodus and I tremble “Lets get you out of that costume so we can take a measurement!” We looked at each other nervously, Glavous picking up on the problem.

“It’s fine Exodus, it’s only one person, and we’re leaving right away, it’ll be of no issue, okay?”

“Issue?” she seemed puzzled “What could be an issue?”

Exodus sighed, and handed the daoma to me, I held it in my arms for the first time and looked up and me and chirped, seemingly already comfortable with me. Slowly Exodus lifted their hands in front of them and removed a glove. The clerk gasps when she saw their purple hand come out of the glove, but after a moment of visible discomfort she collected herself “It-it’s fine, sweetheart, I’ve seen lot of things working in a spaceport” She really wanted her sales commission today.

“And it’s okay, I won’t give you nightmares, okay?” They tried to nervously joke, but I noticed their face spikes starting to turn a little purple.

She helped Exodus strip down, and she took measurements, kicking the suit-costume thing we made aside as she moved around the short purple dragon. Measuring their arms, inseam, chest, waist, tail length, then coming to their side “Okay, I need you spread” Exodus nodded and extended out the wing on her side, she looked at the tape and for a moment was puzzled “You’re going to be a small in everything, but your wings are going to need a large!” She shrugged it off “Okay, I’ll be right back!” She disappeared for a moment towards the back room of the store.

“Well this is a little uncomfortable” Exodus said, standing nude, and blatantly purple in the middle of a public store, the daoma trilled in a response.

I turned to Glavous “Okay, Mr. Moneybags, time to fess up!” He looked at me puzzled “Are you secretly rich or something?”

“Oh, well technically yes, I have access to nearly unlimited coin and currency” He said, nonchalantly, making my jaw drop “I could buy one of the ships in the spaceport right now” His tone turned “But it’s meant for my purposes, and my purposes alone. Luckily, as my students, you are part of that purpose” He turned to Exodus but spoke to us both “Unfortunately my goals cannot simply be bought” he smiled “That’s what you are for!”

The teller returned with her arms full of various parts of the flight suit. Suddenly I felt the urge to stay quiet, I knew being rich on this world was also a good way to get robbed, it was better to stay quiet about the topic of money. She started helping Exodus into the new suit, “Tail first” she held the body portion behind them, and their long tail slipped into the sort of sleeve meant for it. Next the legs, they stepped in and pulled them on like pants. Next was the wings, they had to contort a little here, but got their wings through the two large holes in the back. Then their arms were put through the sleeves. The next part was different, well, it was all different. She pulled a large piece from the pile and started sliding them over their left wing, pulling it tight to the body, and starting zippering it to the hole in the body suit. She repeated the process for the other side but explained as she went along “I’d recommend you just leave these attached, it’s easier to get it on alone rather than zipping up behind yourself” She stood in front of Exodus, she was obviously more comfortable now, realizing that purple was just

another color morph, rare as it may be. “Okay, Sweetie, spread them out! Let’s make sure this fits!”

Exodus spread inside the suit, their wings nearly the width of the small store. That’s when I noticed she was right, Exodus had a small frame, but big wings, all the times I flew with them in the desert I never really studied that hard, or perhaps the enclosed space of the store made it more obvious. Perhaps in the last couple years I had been busy looking at other parts. Exodus shook their wings, making the fabric fall into shape with their wings, somewhat stretching with the wing. “I don’t know what it’s supposed to feel like, but it feels okay until I’m fully spread, then it gets tight.”

“That’s exactly how it’s supposed to feel! Lose to allowing freedom of the wings for flying a ship, but tight enough to prevent catching on things” She explained “So sounds like it’s fitting good, let’s try the gloves and helmet next!” She helped Exodus into he gloves, they fit, surprisingly, like gloves! Then after Exodus slipped the helmet over their horns, the front sliding over their muzzle and the underside require a zipper to close to accommodate going over a dragon head, then the neck sort of snapped to the collar of the body, she gave it a twist and it locked into place.

Exodus stood, covered again, only two purple feet standing under the suit, The face consisting mostly of a one way visor, appearing black to us. “I can see actually pretty good now too, better than the goggles!” they announced.

“Good! Now for the boots!”

Exodus pointed at the black boots with the straps next to the pile that was their costume “But I like my boots!”

“You can wear them sure! But the boots are included, so you may as well try them on to have some spares!” she explained. Exodus sighed and reluctantly shoved their foot into one as she held it, then again for the other side.

“They are comfy, you’re right, good spares!” but then they started pulling their feet out “But I do love my black boots” and they pulled their boots over and started slipping their feet back into their ‘sexy boots’ The teller chuckled a little but once they got back into their own boots they actually did somewhat go with the outfit.

“Okay! Well there you are sweetie! A new suit, and I think it looks much better than what you came in with, well a LOT better!” and she actually smiled at them, knowing a purple dragon was hidden underneath. “Now about payment...”

“Here” Glavous spoke “I’ll be paying, but, obviously I’m not carrying enough coin in my pocket, I hope you have-”

“Connection to payment? Of course, that’s an expensive suit but we also sell even more expensive tools and things, so of course we don’t expect our customer to pay in raw coin. Over here at the counter please, Sir” and she guided Glavous over as she made small talk “It would be dangerous to carry 10,000 coin on a person in public” I overheard as she walked away, my jaw dropping. “would you like me to take care of this trash?” she asked pointing at the old costume.

“NO!” I was surprised at Exodus’s response “No, please, I lived in there for 2 years, I’m a little attached”

“Sure thing, sweetie! I get it!” She produced a cloth tote bag from behind the counter as Glavous fumbled with buttons on a pad “Normally this would be for carrying out the suit, but you’re going to wear it out anyways, you can use it to carry your old one” An affirmative beep came from the computer, till, magic payment machine thingy sitting on her counter.

Exodus stuffed the old costume in the tote with the new boots then took the daoma from my arms “Give my back my Chickadee” they said calmly.

“Chickadee? Like the little Earth birds? Also that’s it’s name?” I asked

Exodus nodded “I remember seeing them a lot as a kid, and I really don’t know our own zoology much yet. He’s full of energy and ready to hop around like those tiny birds do all the time”

“He?”

“Yea, we know each other pretty good now okay?” I couldn’t see their face, I knew they were smiling.

“Time to go, Duke is nearly ready, and he will leave without us, just out of spite” Glavous came up behind us and gestured us out the door. The next customer passing in through the door just we went to leave, a tall fuzzy creature with yellow fur, black spots, and a feline like face, wearing what looked like their version of the same thing Exodus now had on, but just the body portion. The teller gave them a warm welcome like she did with us as we left.

“You did good in there Exodus, I know what you did” He said, after we only got a few steps away.

“What did you do?” I was rather curious, I noticed their spikes had changed, but still didn’t have a clue what really happened.

“I just gave her comforting thoughts, just to help her relax” They explained “I promised no nightmares right?”

We didn’t need to walk far, we were very close to the space port. That made sense considering the space supply store we just visited. We came around a corner to an open field, various landing pads held multiple craft. Almost all of them dragon vessels, but a couple here and there we from other species or maybe just designs that weren’t traditionayl similar to ours. Dragon craft and ships are shaped generally like us in flight. Wide triangles, usually, but not always with a tail section sticking out the back with thrusters on it, to help with maneuvering. We only walked past 6 of this ships before we found the one we were looking for, I recognized Duke, working with 3 others to push a large crate on a flat wheeled thing into a small ship. He looked up and noticed Glavous and us walking towards them.

“Oh you made it, come give us a hand would you? Hey are those Clay’s employees?”

“They were, yes, they’re coming with my as students now”

“Nooooo, no no no I can’t just feed mouths for free” he protested.

“They will be my students and your apprentices, they can earn their place” He retorted, this was news to me.

“What can they even do? This one looks like a pilot, please tell me we have another pilot” he pointed at Exodus

“Hey! I’m so good you don’t need another!” shouted one of the dragons who was helping, she was rather annoyed at potentially being replaced it seemed.

“Don’t you seemed overworked!?” Duke yelled back “Just for the busy times, we need 2! You’re still number one, Valthy!” he turned back to us “Well, let’s have it, what did Glavous bring me?”

“We’ve never flown before, no” Said Exodus “Not a ship or craft anyways” and Duke looked at them suspiciously wondering what that meant.

I was caught off guard, I stumbled, I didn’t have any skills really, but Glavous interrupted, the bottle he bought was shoved into Duke’s chest, and Glavous spoke before I did “We will find out what they are good at, then teach them, then in a couple years you will have masters in those crafts”

He growled but then looked down at the bottle to study it for a moment, realizing it wasn’t a cheap bribe. “Okay, apprentices, help get this crate on board! It’s the reason why we’re here, it’s the inner assembly to small warp driver coil, and it’s really heavy!” I walked towards the ship, dropped our bag just inside this cargo door so it wouldn’t get forgotten and got behind the crate, a red dragon patting me on the back as I took a place.

“Okay Apprentice, let’s see what you got! We’ll get it rocking, push with us, and on the count of three push with everything you got!” The others started pushing it in rhythm, getting it rocking, and I joined in, and as they got a rhythm going suddenly she yelled in time with the rocking “ONE! TWO THREEEEE!” and we all pushed with everything. The cart popped up in the front into the ship and slipped into tracks made for it “GO GO GO!” she yelled as the back wheels hit, the momentum carried it over the lip and into the ship. We could fly through space faster than light, and communicate with other aliens, but we had to push this part weighting several tons by hand.

“Okay, let’s get it strapped down and let’s go!” Duke looked at me “At least one can push!” But looking at Exodus his expression turned somewhat angry “No pets though!” he pointed at Chickadee being held against Exodus’s chest

“This is a service animal, Duke” Glavous always knew just what to say it seems “It’s meant to help them, and it’s required, I will take full responsibility for it if you wish”

“That animal AND these two then, if they prove to be dummies and can’t do anything you can pay for their space okay?”

“Duke, you have my word, it will be fine. Believe me in time you will be glad you have let these two join your station” Glavous put his hand on Duke’s shoulder “It will be fine”

Duke growled a little before turning away “Rrraa you two are lucky you’re friends of Clay! Anyone else I’d leave here on the pad! OKAY! Let’s get this thing strapped in and ready to go!” preempting his order the one he called Valthy early hit a button beside the door and it started to lower closed. After throwing some straps over the crate and making them tight They walked up some stairs going up to

another area above and towards the front of the ship. I followed them to the flight deck of this small ship.

I got my first look at ship operation, and it really surprised me what I saw. Of course I had heard from others about flying ships, some only briefly mentioning it was with their wings, but I never imagined this. Valthy laid tummy down on some sort of padded mount. It looked maybe similar to a human motorcycle, the handlebars having some of the basic controls, a couple panels to either side holding switch and knobs for operating some of the more complex stuff. She put her wings to each side, into two devices sticking out from each side of the stand holding up her wings and her tail lay into a channel coming out behind the stand she mounted. She threw some switches and the small ship started coming to life, whirring and groans as various things fired up, atmosphere propulsion and hydraulic pumps for some controls. She started saying some things as she ran the controls through it's paces and checks, random words to me, things like "flight surfaces, good" and "run up test is good". She lifted up a screen in front of her, and started typing and hitting buttons then stopped. A few moments later some more text came up on the screen. "Okay, we're third up, maybe 5 minutes"

"Alright, that's a good lineup to get out today!" responded Duke

Exodus's curiosity got the best of them, very curious about what was happening, a bit surprising to me they asked "What does that mean?"

"Which part?" Valthy asked

"All of it really, but 'third up'?"

"Oh, it means we're third in line to take off! We can't all do it whenever with so much traffic around or someone will crash into someone else, so there's a controller that says who comes in when, and who goes out when." As she explain a box of green text popped up "Oh! That's us! Have a seat okay, leaving atmosphere can get rough!"

Exodus scurried to a seat and sat down, clutching their daoma tightly, two rows along the back of the flight deck, more seats than there were of us. There were straps but Glavous was the only one who put any on. This is when I got to witness something really cool. Valthy pushed up on the handles in front of her, and the ship responded nearly instantly with a groan that quickly turned to a roar. Just like that we were airborne, moving straight up. It wasn't her hands controlling anything but the throttles, her wings and tail were actively controlling the craft as we lifted. She wasn't just flying the ships, she WAS the ship! Once we were a few meters off the ground she slowly tilted her feet forward, changing the direction of thrust from down to back, and we started flying forward, more like you would expect, more like a dragon. She started to climb, more and more upwards, I watched out the large window in front as slowly over the next few minutes the sky grew less and less blue and darker and darker, stars started to become visible, and sun shining into the cockpit growing brighter. Finally, 40 minutes after we left the ground, I was in space again for the second time. Valthy punched in some things on her keyboard again, but then suddenly turn to Duke.

"We're free of atmosphere, Duke, this one in the pretend flight suit was pretty curious, why don't we let them have a go?"

"What? Just like that? You're pretty trusting with your ship! I wouldn't let a stranger fly mine so quickly!" He did consider though, for a moment "It may not be a bad idea, to see where they are both

at” Both? I was going to get to fly it too?

Exodus bolted out of their seat, I hadn’t seen them this excited in a long time. They turned and put Chickadee back into their seat “Stay here a minute” and the small reptile looked up and remained suspiciously obedient. Valthy leaned up and stepped off the control mount as Exodus walked over first, nearly bouncing.

“Okay, just lay on it just like I did, you’re a bit short so we might have to adjust a couple things but we’ll see how you reach things first” Exodus climbed on and put their wings into the same rests that hers were on, grabbing onto the rest with their wing “thumb”, a small protrusion we have from our wings, and yes, they’re like thumbs. Next they settled the bottom half of their wings to the other end of this skeleton cradle, the wing “fingers” nesting into place naturally. Lastly they wiggled their tail, but it was already nestled into the same channel behind the control mount. “Get comfy” She said as Exodus wiggling, their new flight suit was perfect timing, allowing their wings to be used without being seen. “Okay, if you screw up really bad I’m going to throw it into autopilot to recover while I kick you off the mount and then take over” She took a deep breath before telling them the secret and pointing to a switch “The controls are locked straight, that’s where I left them, pull this toggle down on both side to unlock the controls, and the ship will resume responding”

Exodus took a deep breath themselves and then flicked the toggles on both sides. Suddenly the ship lurched up and to the right, responding to where Exodus had the controls when they activated them. Valthy started to yell something to help them correct, but before the words left her mouth Exodus already had it corrected, just like that, even I was surprised!

“Wow! It IS really just like flying! It’s a bit off but I can get used to this!” Exodus exclaimed, their voice full of pure joy.

“What do you mean just like flying? You corrected it instantly like you’ve done this, I thought you said you never flew before!”

“I said we’ve never flown a ship before, we’ve flown ourselves before! A lot!” They answered.

“That’s a joke, no one can really fly!” She retorted, I think she was feeling like she was being teased.

“Valthy, it was Glavous that brought them here, and he’s a weirdo, so maybe they are weirdos like him!” Duke butted in, now standing behind the control mount “Time will tell I suppose. Well go ahead shorty, show us how you fly around then!”

“Maybe, hold on? I’m not sure how this works yet” After the brief and sudden warning Exodus threw the ship into a barrel roll, ended up perfectly level from where it started, then went again the opposite direction, and started giggling. Oddly we could all feel the roll, but where no were close to tossed around.

“I have a question” I spoke up, suddenly everyone but Exodus was staring, as they were busy trying out different direction and fun maneuvers. “Why are we flying in all different directions but not really feeling it?”

The red dragon spoke up, before Duke could start “It’s called inertial dampening, it leaves just a little like we felt, for feedback to the pilot. It’s a feature in the gravity plating in the floor.”

“Can you show me how that works sometime?” I was already curious myself, when I was a kid, before the prison ship, I used to watch Mam and Dad fixing things when they had to, helping out when I could. I suddenly felt like that kid again, just wanting to know how it all works.

“Sure, it’s a bit advanced though, it actually works a bit like warp coils, similar tech” She answered.

“I uh, don’t actually know how that works either” I admitted to knowing nothing, but instead of annoyance her face actually showed some interest, I was wondering why, perhaps she liked to teach, or was some nerd that loved to ramble on about these things. Maybe she saw me a fresh clay to mold. I didn’t get to think on that long before Exodus spoke up.

“Deakon, you need to try this!” They shouted

“Okay! Okay I’ll try too!” and I stepped toward the mount, expecting to just switch places but Valthy butted in.

“WAIT wait wait!” she exclaimed, pressing on Exodus’s back to keep them there “NEVER EVER get up from a mount without the controls locked or autopilot engaged okay? The ship could fly out of control instantly then we all get squished into the walls, there are some moves even the inertial dampeners can’t compensate for!” She pointed at the toggles again “Make sure you’re going perfectly straight, then switch the toggles to lock. Okay, gently, yes, like that. Okay now is a good time” Exodus flicked the toggles, moved one of their wings to make sure the ship didn’t respond, then got up. Valthy was a little surprised “What made you want to check to make sure it’s locked like that? I didn’t tell you to!”

“It just seemed like a good idea? Is that okay?” They seemed shy now, like they had done something wrong.

“No! Actually you kind of saved me there, that’s an important thing to check before dismounting” She smiled at them “You kind of are a natural!” Valthy turned to me “Okay, Deakon is it? Your turn! You’re a bit taller than me and lot taller then your friend, take a moment to adjust here okay?” I laid myself down on my tummy on the mount, put my wings in the same mounts the other two did, my tail resting into the channel to the rear. I put my wings as straight as I could as if I was gliding. And nodded to Valthy. “Okay, when you’re ready, those two toggles beside the throttles, those in front of you. Flick them both at the same time to unlock each side.

I took a deep breath and flicked the switches, instantly the ship leaned in the opposite direction than it did for Exodus, and a little down for me. But I instantly picked up what exodus said, I pretended I was gliding! I accidentally over corrected at first, moving my tail up slightly brought the nose back to level, but I wasn’t expecting how responsive the giant machine was to my input, and leaned again but to the right. I quickly regained that oversteer and got her level again. After a few seconds of the nerves to go away, it felt natural, just like I was flying, I was the ship, the ship responded to me.

“Well, looks like we got a couple pilots here!” Valthy announced

“Hang on” Duke interrupted “We are going to find out what else they are good at, but we’ll take a week or two when we get to let them decide and see what the are good at”

Then Glavous also stepped in “I also insist that I get a large percentage of their time, they are after all here for my purposes!”

“We’ll see about how that all works out, Glavous”

That’s when I looked over my shoulder that them “Hey, do we get a say?!?”

The both looked at me, both smiled, and both joked “No!” I laughed and turned my haed forward again, realizing a the screen in front of me seemed angry “Valthy, what’s this?”

“Oh, you’re just WAY off course is all, I had already pre-loaded our trip back to the station when we took off, you can ignore it for now, have some fun with her!” While having some fun, doing some of the same silly stuff Exodus did, including a big loop, Valthy started talking to the others, mostly Duke, “It would be nice to have a couple more hands moving the ships around, Some days I can’t keep up even when Micah helps out!”

“Okay, if they want, you can have them a few hours a week, but I don’t want them learning on my good ships, we’ll get one of the ones in the junkyard up and running for training when we can” he explained

“Seems like a fun side project we have time for!” The red dragon spoke up, she seemed a little annoyed to have more put on her plate, but I took my chance.

“Show me how, and I’ll help get it going!” I said from the control mount “I know nothing right now but I’m a fast learner!”

“Sure! We can figure it who’s doing what when we get back though” She smiled at me, I think she’d make a great teacher.

“Okay, speaking of getting back, let’s get going” Valthy said, so I started getting straight, assuming I’d be giving up control. “No you’re fine, but you see that screen you made angry? Let’s make it happy, turn to your left until it goes green, then a line should appear, you’ll have to finesse it until that line is centered, then we can jump into warp.” I nodded as the instruction, and turned. After a few seconds the screen started fading to green, then the line appeared as she said, I eased it into the middle but it was above the spot I intuitively thought it should go “Okay, bring down the nose a little, you can do it by wing or by tail” I pressed down my tail, pretending my spade was steering us a little, just like in the air, and the ship responded. “Get her nice and straight now, then lock the controls, ALWAYS lock before going to warp okay?” She watched the screen, and my wings “Good! That’s straight enough for the autopilot to take it, lock your controls” I flicked the two toggles beside the throttles back to where they were when I got on. “There’s an autopilot switch on the panel to your right, flick that up!” I did as she instructed. “Okay, now to go to warp, there’s a big toggle between the throttles, go ahead and throw that thing in the up position” I took my right hand off the throttles, not that I got to use those much yet, and pressed up on the big red toggle, it took a surprising amount of effort to flick, probably to prevent accidental engagement. The ship groaned from both sides, and we started gaining speed, very quickly, and a lot of speed, the stars started turning into streaks, then into a tunnel around us as we broke the light barrier. The groan from the ship increased in frequency as the coils loaded harder, pushing up our speed. “Okay” She read from the display “We’re already at factor 2, we’re underway! Technically you can still fly at superluminal speeds, but it’s better to let the autopilot keep it nice and straight. Congratulations, you just flew us into light speed! The control mount is dead now, you can get off if you like”

I got off the mount and walked over to sit with Exodus, but the red dragon stopped me. “I thought you wanted to look around?” she said.

“Yes! I’m really interested to see how things work!”

“Okay, follow me, My name is Kelly, by the way”

“Deakon” I nodded and followed. She explained it would be a 5 day trip back to the space station. It was a place Duke had built mostly himself at first, just to repair some ships for business partners. He asked Kelly to join, to help fix things and build the station. After some time they had started recruiting more help. Oddly they didn’t get paid directly, rather they were fed by Duke and given a place to live. They shared the earnings from repairing the ships, spending very wisely at first, only on food.

She also explained how our faster than light drives worked, making a very compressed gravity wave in front of the craft or ship, and generating an equal anti gravity wave behind the ship. This used a lot of power. One thing dragon technology was good at was generating and using too much power. Fusion power cores have been miniaturized, and instead of heating steam to spin turbine like human fission, the cores had a direct electrical output, making them insanely efficient and powerful compared to other species. Technology wise, dragons were somewhat behind everyone else (especially in compute), except in this one part, no one could replicate our power generation. On the 5 days back to the station she talked my ears off, along with her electrician, Lask, about ships systems, how things worked, different techniques to fix them, all sorts of things. By the time we reached the station I think I had found my place with them, I was going to learn under Kelly, eventually working along with Lask and her other two mechanics who were waiting on the station.

Exodus spent most of the trip back training and playing with their new pet, and talking with Valthy about flying, they had found their interest, and Duke needed another pilot who could go and fetch parts and move the ships into dock at the station to be worked on. But also said, to Valthy’s annoyance, that more would be beneficial to have other skills, “You can’t just move ships and shuttles all day, we don’t have enough going on, you seem smart, I’m going introduce you to Pike when we get back too” he said a couple times.

Five days with very little privacy was hard for Exodus, but they did figure out with their wings free to move into the new flight suit, they could hold them up around their head and slip up the helmet to eat and drink without anyone seeing them. Eventually we arrived at Duke’s station. It was elongated and not very big. But also there looked from the outside at least to have plenty of room for 12 to live in comfortably. A large dragon ship was at one end of the station, surrounded by some extensions of the station itself, one of the ships getting some sort of major repair. I guess it wasn’t just small ones he worked on. As we got close I could see several more ships floating close to the station, they were awaiting their repairs, but off in the distance I could see more floating in a group. Duke explained that was his “junkyard”, a collection of broken crafts and ships for scavenging parts from. Valthy expertly docked the nose of the small ship to one of the connections to the station.

The others went through the airlock first, being greeted by their friends, we walked through last. Noticed by a tall green dragon with nearly yellow under scales and wings they spoke up first “Oh, I didn’t know we started a passenger service, or, are these new workers?”

“New workers!” Said Duke “Drito, if you could be so kind as to take them to the upper deck and show

them their new quarters, we need to get this coil unloaded and over to the shop”

“Sure! That’s my job after all” they playfully bowed to Duke “Come with me and bring your belongings, I’ve got a couple free places still” I grabbed our bag of our only possessions, Exodus carried Chickadee and the tote bag with their old costume in it “I’m Drito, I’m in charge of, well I guess you can say ‘hospitality’ around here. I cook and serve the food for the others and our guests, along with some other duties I like to help out with.” We walked along a corridor “This way is our living section” they pointed into an open area as we passed. “We usually eat here, our common area.” There was a table and some stools, a counter with some appliances and a bar like area. Drito paused at some stairs in front of us “Down this way is where guests stay, sometimes they need to hang around while their ships is getting the work done, so this level is like a hotel of sorts, but those of us who live here reside on the upper level” They started up the narrow stairs and we followed to the second level. It did seem nicer, some personalized decorations from the others were on parts of the walls. They walked to down the corridor in front of us, pointing at doors as we went along, telling us who’s room was who’s, names of dragons I hadn’t met yet, but Duke’s was first just off the top of the stairs. We went about three quarters down the corridor, and Drito pointed to a door. “Glavous has a big suite, he said he needed the space for study and exercise. We weren’t using that room for anything so he got it” We walked a little further “These two rooms on the right are free, you can have them both.”

Exodus paused, I knew why, because I felt the same, but they spoke up first “Can we both have the bigger of the two? We’ve been together so long it wouldn’t feel right sleeping in separate rooms in a new place”

“Oh! Oh of course! I didn’t realize you two were a couple!” They grinned

“Oh! We’re not, we’re just very close” I said, noticing Exodus’s head dropped a little towards the floor.

“Well, we’ll have to move a second bed in, there’s enough space for two in the second room” Their expression had changed a little, almost disappointment “I can help in a little while, I do need to get to the kitchen soon though, so after we all eat, that’s when I’ll come back and help, show you both were to get things and where to put your used blankets. You do your own washing around here though, so I do ask you make an effort to clean up after yourselves” They started to walk back but turned back to us for a second “Oh, there’s is a bathroom between every second suit okay? You’ll likely be sharing it with a couple others. And I’d recommend locking up anything important, I trust our crew with my life but sometimes we get some shady characters around. I’ll see you in the common area for food in about an hour, okay?” Drito walked back down the corridor and as they left we walked into the larger room of the two choices we had. It wasn’t a lot of space, and would be a little less once we had a second bed in here, but there was enough space to stretch our wings without hitting the walls

OUR WINGS!

“Exodus! How are we going to practice flying?”

They though for a moment “I think we should ask Glavous, I bet he has an idea!”

“I hope so, I don’t want my wings to weak again like they did before” I was suddenly worried about that, but having food around as well may mitigate that. “I hope this bathroom has a shower in it” I walked back out into the corridor as Exodus placed their daomo on the floor, the little raptor followed us around. I found the door to what I thought was it and opened it. Inside, a hole in the floor with a

button on the wall above it, yup, typical dragon toilet. But there was also a small sink and the entire inside of the room seemed to be made out of some sort of plastic. There was a water head hanging in the corner and it dawned on me, this is what humans would call a “wet bath” a toilet, shower, sink, general hygiene place all built into one, the water when you showered would drain into the toilet. Though this was basic space stuff, it seemed so luxurious to me, probably to Exodus too, we did just spend 2 years on the street, and 5 years before that on a prison ship with no shower at all. I looked forward to using this!

We didn’t really have anything to unpack, so decided to explore the station, little Chickadee following us around. We found the kitchen, Drito was busy making food for 15 of us, but gave Exodus a little piece of meat of their pet. It wasn’t long after before everyone had gathered for the food. We chatted as we ate, getting to know the crew. Of course had just spent 5 days with Duke, Valthy, Kelly, and Lask, and met Drito earlier. But there was now Pike, a short thin dragon, his specialty was anything software or systems related. Olto was a tall thick strong dragon, I actually thought she was male until she corrected me, then her voice made more sense. She was the welder and fabricator here, also a pretty good machinist. Olach, Sond, and Micah were Kelly’s mechanics. They could work on anything but Kelly was in charge, she delegated who fixed what, and knew each of their strengths. Then there was Shash, she was the administrator for the entire thing, and did billing to the customers, handled the accounts and money, and coordinated the coming and going of ships. She was probably the busiest of everyone here. Argin was an average sized blue dragon, he was in charge of getting and growing food, yup, growing. There was a small hydroponics operation on board, and this was where a large portion of the food came from, fresh fruits, berries, and vegetables. Dragons are omnivores not vegetarians by nature, so meat still had to be brought in. That was something else they did, leaving the station often to get food.

We all actually talked for a few hours after, I told them stories of Earth and our time as street rats, they told us stories of funny or strange things that had happened at the station over the years, Exodus remained mostly silent but opened up a little and said a few things towards the later part of the evening. Soon everyone started to make their way to sleep to start the next day’s work. Duke and Glavous stayed behind though. They of course asked Exodus about the suit, they simply said they needed to be covered completely at all times.

They seemed to start negotiating our time between them, at least with our input now. We agreed to 4, 8 hours days with Duke’s, then 3 days to ourselves. In return for this, we would get the free food and our room. Glavous argued even though we stayed in one room we should get a second for extra space, Duke argued the others worked 6 days to keep a room to themselves. Duke won that one. I don’t know why Glavous wanted us to have extra space, we had nothing, but he told us later it would have been for training. After our 8 hour days, Glavous would have us for 2 hours every day we worked, alternating between Me, while Exodus took a break one day, then we switched, then both of us on a 3 day cycle, but on our days we didn’t work for Duke, he wanted the full day. I didn’t know what our training with him entailed yet, so I was apprehensive to accept it, but promised him I would try, and so did Exodus. Duke had opened his bottle from Glavous during this negotiating, though he wasn’t drunk he was enjoying it, but by the end Duke had one more condition. Chickadee, was our responsibility and ours alone, he really didn’t like an idea of an animal on the station, and the idea of it making a mess was even worst. “If I step in that thing’s shit even once, I’m having it for dinner!”

The next morning were woken up by a knock at the door, apparently we had slept in, we didn’t know, we had no clock! “I’ll fix that right now!” Duke said with his authority. He took us to the administrative area, sort of an office off the main docks where his clients would pay and be briefed

about repairs and such. He unlocked a cabinet and pulled out two white boxes, locking it back up behind himself and set them down. I was shocked at where this went. "Here, two devices for you both. You can set alarms in these, tell the time, and most important, I can message you and send you things that you need to know. Set schedules and all kinds of goodies. These ones have cameras so you can send me pictures of repairs or parts when you need to. These things do NOT leave the station though! And be very careful we can't just afford to give these away!" We opened the boxes to the shiny new devices, I felt like I was in the future, well, at least caught up to everyone else? They were thick, built for the sturdy duty of being a rough repair specialist. Pike came along, luckily, the tech specialist, and helped us set everything up, get our names into them, and there was a group feed for the station, where everyone could just openly send messages and pictures. Pike bragged it was a program of his own design. Exodus caught on pretty fast, opening programs and finding out where stuff was, a scheduler and the messaging program. These were more like a tablet than a simple communication device. Though Glavous's was of a different origin, he was in Pike's messaging program as well. "Get an alarm set for 6 in the morning, we have breakfast and get to work by 7, you'll be done at 4 with your hour lunch break"

"Seems kind of early?"

"You're in fucking space, Deakon, it's really irrelevant" he laughed "Oh, Pike, you should take Exodus for today, and see if they can help you out, you're one of the busiest here and really need someone to help take some of the work!"

Pike spoke softly, kind of a quiet guy, but also firm "You're right, I'm very busy, too busy to teach someone right now!"

"Think of it as an investment! Sure you'll be backlogged a bit for a while, but if they work out you can get twice as much done and be caught up in no time!"

"Well, okay I can try, but understand I'm already behind, and this will make things even slower at first" Pike explained

"Yea I know, if you need time to catch up let me know and they can also go find other areas to work in. Valthy wants to flight train them too" Duke explained. I was a little jealous, I want to fly too. Duke turned to me "Kelly is waiting for you in our shop, the large place down the end of the corridor, don't make her wait any longer!" I nodded and walked off to the part of the section where they referred to as the 'shop' a large open area full of tools and machines where they were working on parts that had been removed from ships, and kept their tools. Pike took Exodus to their lab.

"We'll need to set you up your own terminal, that shouldn't take long" Pike's lab was spacious but the large amount of clutter made it feel small. There were shelves of open circuit boards, a space for micro soldering but cluttered with test leads and random parts. The space was mostly dark, except for bright lights above the working areas. Just inside the door however there was a terminal, four displays in a grid with a draconic keyboard in front. Oddly this space was clean and free of distraction. "First I want to see if you can even understand what it is I do. I'll teach you a little program to write and see if you grasp it" He pulled out the chair in front of his terminal, it was worn, but had a hole in the lower back for a tail, and shaped to accommodate wings "Have a seat!"

Exodus sat down, a little confused on what to do, they've never been in front a screen before, but was going to keep that to themselves. Pike starting walking them through what a function was, the basic layout of how to program in the most common program language he used, there were others but this one was easiest to start out. He told Exodus exactly what to type, and they slowly got it out, fumbling though the gloves.

"Don't you think you can be faster without the gloves on?" he asked, getting somewhat impatient

"I can't, sorry, it's too much for most people" Exodus explained "everyone is scared of me when they know."

"What, are you a ghost inhabiting a flight suit or something?"

Exodus laughed, but thought about it for a moment. Pike seemed trustworthy despite his current impatience. "Okay, can you keep a secret?"

"If you can type faster you can tell me the secrets of the universe and I won't ever tell a soul"

"Well, okay" Exodus got up and pressed the button beside the door and it slid closed. They slowly tuned to Pike and took a deep breath "Okay, no going back on your word okay?" And piked nodded in agreement. Nearly shaking, Exodus slipped off a glove, exposing his purple scales.

"Oh good, you've got all your fingers!" Pike said a little confused about what the big deal was. Exodus was surprised but confidently removed the other glove while sitting back down, but turned to other green dragon for a moment.

"You're not freaked out or worried?" They sheepishly asked

"What? Like some superstitious old weirdo? No of course not! Wait is that why you cover up all the time? Just because your purple?" He asked and Exodus nodded "I'm smart, I know better than to believe in all that stuff!" He thought for a moment "If you take the helmet off you could also probably see the screens better too!" Pike walked over to the door and pressed a second button, a red light indicating it was locked. Exodus took a deep breath again and reached up to unlock the ring keeping the helmet attached to the body suit and clipped it apart, then unzipped under the neck and chin so it could be lifted of their head. They took it off and looked at Pike with their own eyes.

"See, you're fine! Lets try typing it out more!" Exodus typed away, it was much easier and they quickly caught on to where the letters and syntax was laid out. "Yea, that made a big difference, but I can still tell you've never typed before!" Pike pointed out.

"I'll work on it, in my spare time too, okay?" Exodus said and Pike patted their shoulder "But Pike, please don't tell anyone, I've put up with a lot of abuse in my life over this, even if the other don't care like you, I'm not ready, okay?"

"Sure! You have my word, our little secret! Does anyone else know?"

"Deakon does of course, and so does Glavous" They told him "No one else but those two and you"

"It's safe with me!" Pike looked at the door "I hope people aren't thinking something weird is

happening with the door locked all the time in here, we're not making out or anything" he laughed. "Oh, I don't mind if you bring your daomo either, a little more company could be great for us too!"

"Noted!" and exodus went back to typing things out again, while they did so Pike started setting up a second terminal for Exodus to use regularly, meaning he liked what he saw and would teach them.

Pike seemed to blush for a moment "You've also got pretty eyes, it's a nice orange!" Exodus smiled, it's very rare to get a compliment about their appearance.

I flopped down on my bed, we had moved one in for Exodus like we had planned, They laid on their own beside me, goofing off with the daomo. The others had decided I could learn some things, but in the meantime they did need a general laborer, so I got to a lot of physical work and learn along the way. I was okay with this, learning by doing, and even though it was my first day, I did learn quite a bit. We had left the door open and Glavous poked his head in. "I hope your not forgetting your time with me!"

"Of course not! I said "I just need to breath for a moment" and I got up off the bed.

"Exodus, I'd like to start with both of you today, and bring Chickadee!" Exodus nodded in their suit and came with us, the daomo closely behind. We went to Glavous's suite, and it very much was a suite. He had a large soft gray rug in the middle, his bed off to one side, with many simple decorations depicting what I assumed were the elements he trained in. Some symbols I didn't understand, like a flexed arm and one that looked like a ghost or upside down raindrop, among others. "Have a seat you two!" he said talking with his backs to us for now while he fiddled with things. "First off, the people on this station are aware of my abilities and do not fear them, so you can openly practice here without any sort of need to hide it. That's one of the reasons I chose this place. The second being a chance to learn other trades and skills." He turned back to us, a candle in his hand like before "I'm actually surprised they haven't asked either of you anything yet, as they do know you're associated with me. In fact Drito is a lesser mage in one of the elements, I did ask them to train with us as well but they declined, and insisted it wasn't their fate"

"Which element?" Exodus asked

"That's up to them to show you, if they so choose" He handed the candle to me "I think you know what to do" and he smiled. I did, I took a breath in, concentrated hard, and now knowing how to do it, I breathed out a small flame, lighting it. I was happy it didn't take multiple tries, I hadn't done anything in days but the power was still there, it appears it didn't atrophy like a muscle. "Very good! Just so you aware I did have Kelly disable the fire suppression in my quarters, when the time comes, you can exert yourself without worry! Now, keep that candle with you, and light it multiple times through the day." he instructed "Once you can do it with little effort we can move onto bigger things, within a week I hope"

He turned his attention to Exodus "Your task is one that will please the entire station!"

They just just finished taking off the helmet but was intrigued "Oh? What is that?"

"Your daomo, you're going to potty train it!" He explained "Make sure it doesn't leave a mess for the

other to unexpectedly find with their feet!” Exodus looked a little taken back, but agreed “Good, it’s easy, I know you’re already bonded so it should be easy, simply show it was to do in it’s mind, it’s a creature, and animal, so it doesn’t think in words. Show it how to do it, and do it without any physical interaction, this challenge should take less than a week to accomplish” Exodus kind of laughed but after a moment of thought they agreed. “Your daomo, Chickadee, will be a very useful tool in you education with me, eventually you will learn to control him directly, and even be able to see through his eyes.”

“It’s not going to hurt him is it?” The asked, concerned about the pet’s health

“Heavens no, of course not, if anything it may absorb some of your power over time, and it will become more than just a pet, more like a familiar” Glavous explained

“But I’m no witch!” they exclaimed

“Well, not like the terms you are thinking no” Glavous laughed at the thought “One more thing, your wings, I know you’re concerned about losing the ability to fly again, so I’m going to show you how to prevent that in this place.” He stepped back between two ropes hanging from the ceiling, I had assumed they were some sort of decoration but they did have a purpose after all. He hooked the tops of his wings into two loops at the ends of the ropes and leaned forward, using his wings to prevent himself from landing on the floor. “Find yourselves two cables or ropes similar to this, and every morning lean into them as I am now, then use your wings to pull yourself back” He proceeded to do so himself as an example. “Do this 20 times every morning, then 20 times in the reverse direction. This will keep the muscles in your wings developed and ready for use”

That’s when it dawned on me “Glavous, you can fly?”

“Of course I can! I could very likely outfly you both in speed and distance! This is one of our talents that has been lost to time.” he paused “I do hope time will return this ability to our people” He seemed to be lost a thought for a moment before coming back “Remember these daily exercises, Deakon, your candle, and as I said, don’t be shy around the others here! Exodus, your pet, in 7 days will be trained well. And to you both your wing exercises. Furthermore my door is always open to you both should you need assistance or advice in your practice. I know I said two hours a day, but for today we are done while you can concentrate on your task. Tomorrow I would like you, Deakon, and Exodus the day after.” He smiled “You are free to stay here to practice or go back to your own room, I am now going to take some time to exercise my own mind”

A week later, Glavous was right, Chickadee would use the washroom just like and of us dragons, only it couldn’t reach he flush, but it was better than finding random shit on the floor. Duke was pretty impressed. It didn’t stop there though, in the following months it would learn to bring Exodus items or take items to other as Exodus wanted. It followed them anywhere on the station they went. Pike apparently really enjoyed the company. Exodus did learn a lot about systems, and together the two of them eventually caught up on that side of the work, and were able to get ahead and work on extra things. Exodus also taught themselves about servos and motors and was able to create a few new things. A better system to help Argin with the growing food.

Exodus took a strong interest in the hydroponics. They did a lot of reading and helped in their spare time. Eventually convincing Duke to expand on it so we could all be more self sufficient and cut down on trips to other worlds for food. We built a second bay onto the station just for growing food and a few

months after that we actually had more than we could eat. The leftovers being composted and used to fertilize the plants.

As for becoming pilots, Valthy did get the chance to teach us both. Exodus because an exceptional pilot, it seems they were talented in so many things. I was pretty good too, Valthy at the end saying I'd be better than her with more hours, but she was always amazed and how naturally Exodus just flew. Exodus was the second choice after Valthy to fly, moving ships into docks. I got to move a few around too and often did the run-up tests on freshly repaired ships. Micah knew how to fly ships but I found out was a pretty awful pilot, smashing up a few customer's ships before we ever arrived, but he made up for it by being a great engineer like Kelly.

As for our powers, Glavous was correct about Exodus, within a year they could possess Chickadee directly, see the world through their eyes and control exactly what the animal did. Myself, however, was a sadder story. Three years of trying and I hadn't progressed much. I could breathe a larger flame now, and Glavous did teach me to throw fireballs from my hands. I kept practicing every chance I got, oddly Kelly and the others did see me practicing often but didn't comment much. Sond was actually pretty interested, eventually asking Glavous if he could learn, but sadly he was turned down. Glavous did let him down easy, telling him it would be possible to train under someone else someday, but now was not the time for him. Glavous was concerned, he kept saying he knew there was great power inside me, he could see it directly, but it seemed as though something was blocking me.

I never lost track of my goals though, I thought often of Mom and Dad, and my brother Jake, with everything I knew now I should find them soon. I can transport myself if I had a ship, I knew how to fly it now!

3 years after we joined the team, Duke came to tell us something, something that would change my life forever.

"I got a message from a business partner, there's an alien ship adrift only a couple dozen light years away, it just crossed into dragon territory. No body else knows about it yet. I want you and Exodus to take my ship and bring it back. We can either scavenge it for parts, or if it's in good enough shape we can fix it up" There was a pause "Fix it up for you two, it's time you had one of your own, the extra ships would really help us out"

"For us?" Exodus exclaimed

"Yes, It's been very busy here again, I want to increase the size of our little commune, meaning I need more space, if you two had your own ship to live in then we can give that space to someone else! Plus you can do more parts runs, Valthy isn't able to keep up." Duke had a look of ambition on his face "I have big plans!"

Duke gave us his personal ship, the "Talon" a smaller craft, we loaded it up with tools and food. The plan was to search for one month, if we didn't find it, come back. The position we were given was two weeks away. His ship was faster than the cargo ship we came here on, giving us a better chance of getting to it first. We left Chickadee behind on this, Drito, in his typical friendly manner, offered to feed him. We left and headed in the direction we were given, I felt kind of excited, our first big solo adventure!

Chapter 10: The Phoenix

San Francisco, Earth, Early September 2105;

Captain Singh was a man of science, a man of exploration, not a man of speeches. He was oddly nervous, out of character for himself, soon he would be required to give a speech about his mission and his crew. Being the intelligent man he is, he had one prepared of course, he just didn't want to give it. He stood next to the chief of operations for sciences of Castle Corporation, the mother corporation that was funding this mission. Sonya Chaplain was a wealthy woman who had no idea what she was doing. She was not a scientist, nor a good business woman, luckily Castle Corporation had grown too big to ever fail. She had never been on a ship, nor did she want to, yet she was here, christening their new vessel. She gave a small speech about exploration and the betterment of mankind, but Singh was no fool, he knew when they returned their records would be searched, simply for resources to take advantage of. He also knew, that he could use this mission along with his fellow scientist that would be on board to discover new exciting things about our galaxy.

The time had come, Sonya grabbed the champagne bottle suspended by a thin rope, and released it toward the nose of the ship. Everyone raised their hands, preparing to applaud, but to everyone's shock, the bottle bounced off of the fresh brownish red paint. The crowd gasped, a sign of bad luck in maritime days, it had translated to to space travel, a tradition to christen a ship for good luck and the bottle failing to break was a bad omen. Ms. Chaplain chuckled, and played it off as her fault, she didn't put enough force into the throw. A shipyard employee struggled with a long two by four from the ground, eventually pulling the bottle on the string back to the platform. Ms Chaplain released it again, this time with a hearty swing to it, the bottle smashed against the nose of the ship, and as everyone applauded as the canvas covering her name dropped. In large black letters it read "U.S.V. PHOENIX" with her registry number printed underneath. The Mythic class science ship stood proud in the sunlight, about 45 meters wide and 10 meters tall, to both sides of her bridge long the front of the ship were dozens in scientific instruments, not a single weapon.

Harmon Singh gave his short speech then was thankful that part was over. The 12 crew members that were leaving tomorrow on her gathered and had a toast to successful mission. It would be 5 years to the "Eagle Nebula", 5 years studying and taking samples, and 5 years to return. She was meant to learn about star formation in famous 'Pillars of Creation'. The Phoenix was a long range science ship, designed for this 15 year mission. On her return she would likely receive another. She was the 5th of her kind and there were more of her sisters nearly complete, heading in all directions of the galaxy to explore for science. Sandra McCormick, the head astrophysicist for the mission gave a short interview for a website. Some cake and some champaign marked the beginning of their journey. Aside from the incident with the bottle, it was cheerful and uneventful.

Dukes Repair Station, 2114;

"Tell us this again, Duke?" I said, rather shocked again.

"Deakon, it's easy, there's a ship. It's not dragon, but it's adrift, go get it, and if it's suitable make it your home. That way we've got space to make for these upgrades and renovations to the station we need to do!" Duke was acting like it was no big deal, I had been on a couple salvage missions with them already, but it's usually 4 for 5 of us, not 2! "Look, if you find it, and it's too much, send us a

message and we'll come help! Besides, we're behind again, 6 ships are waiting some work so we need as many to stay here as we can." He slowed down "This is a great chance to get a fresh ship!"

"Okay, we'll do it!" I said, not looking forward to this myself, but I looked over to Exodus, we were relaxing together for a moment before Duke barged in, they were laying in the other bed in their flight suit. The thought of being able to move freely was appealing though. "When do we leave?"

"Well, as soon as you can, the sooner the better, if it's been spotted there may be others heading that way to scavenge what they can off it. Except us, we can salvage the whole ship!" Duke explained "I got the coordinates already, if you want it I'll send them to you now!"

"Okay, and which ship can we take?" I asked

"Well, that's the other thing, we need Valthy's ship to fetch some larger parts. Normally I take Drito and Argin for food in my ship, but we can have hers doing double duty until you get back, so take the 'Talon' and make sure you don't scratch her! You're both pretty good at flying, you can take turns during the search too"

"How far away is it?" Exodus asked

"About a week out if you take the Talon, but two if we gave you Valthy's ship, which is another reason why I'm giving you mine"

"And what about Glavous?" I asked

"Go and check it out!" I head from one room over. Glavous had a certain intuition like Exodus, though his was somehow different, so if he said it's a good idea, it's probably a good idea. My thoughts didn't go for long though. "Make sure you are practicing while you two are away!"

"Okay, I'm down to check it out" I looked over to Exodus and they nodded affirmatively. "Let's get ready!"

I went the 'shop' and packed up my toolbox, Duke had gotten me a large storage box and my own collection of tools a year ago when he realized I was actually catching on and was becoming excellent at repairing drives and other things, calling it a good investment. Exodus went to Pike's lab, well really it was theirs now, and grabbed a terminal and some basic repair stuff for their own work. Really I think between the two of us we could probably get any ship up and running, provided the parts were there.

Glavous met us at the airlock where the Talon was docked. "Please, be careful" He said. Chickadee was at his feet, hopping into the air making little squeaks and chirps. Exodus looked down at their pet, and Glavous spoke again. "I feel like this is a great opportunity to gain your mobility, but I get the sense that one wrong move could end in catastrophe" His warning was very ominous, and even with how weird he could be sometimes, a little out of character.

"Okay, Glavous, we will, and we'll return to you" I stated

"I feel like we should leave Chickadee here, I don't really know, I just have a feeling" they explained.

"You've gotten powerful Exodus, you don't need you familiar to train anymore, but I know you won't

abandon him now you've outgrown him." Glavous tried to comfort Exodus, but then Drito emerged from the ship.

"Hey! I've got some freeze dried rations in there, and filled the freezer chest full of fresh stuff for you, Duke told me you were leaving for a salvage so I went ahead and got you stocked up" Drito watched the daomo jump for attention "Are you taking him?"

"I'd prefer not to, though I feel like leaving behind is mean" Exodus said

"Don't worry, I can take care of him for you for a little while" Drito was always so quick to help. I still wondered what element they could use, we asked but they never told us.

Only two hours after Duke told us about the ship we pulled the Talon from the airlock and departed. We were efficient like that, because we learned the hard way if we didn't get to a salvage quickly, someone else would beat us to it. Lost ships were like corpses and dragons looking to turn a buck were like vultures, and that included us.

There's a part of space travel that isn't talked about a lot. Humans have a lot of sci fi in their culture, ships that fly seemingly instantly from place to place. We have a little too in our writings. We never really made movies like humans, but writing was once a great part of our culture. Even some of the other races I've read up on had some sort of stories about space, before they could even travel through it. The one part that no one talks about, not from any species, not in any story, is the boredom.

Along the way a thought did occur to me again, that made the whole situation a little more exciting for me. "Exodus, if we do find this thing, then we'll have to freedom to leave the station whenever we want! Maybe we could find out where ship number one landed, and find my Mom and Dad and my brother too!"

"I sort of thought you had already considered it" They replied back, rather happily "We could find them, but also take trips for ourselves too, and have our own little vacations and adventures!"

It took 7 days to reach the coordinates Duke gave us. We did all kinds of things, read on our devices, I did homework on textbooks about warp coils and our fusion reactors. Read specs on ships I've yet to see, researched hull designs. Exodus worked on subroutines and made new designs for more hydroponics. An idea they were working on was large stand alone space pods, solar powered for warmth, to grow food, basically fields in space. It was a nice idea in theory. Someday I'd love to see such a big project get undertaken. Together we also played cards, well dragon versions of cards, we talked together, spent some time reminiscing about Clay and our time on Sandpit. One evening Exodus pulled out a book, and rested their head on my stomach to read as I read up on theory on driver coils and warp drives. It was nice, honestly, after 10 years together we were still close, and I'd have to say, closer then ever. If I didn't know better, I'd say was developing feelings for them. Well, I did know better, I WAS developing feelings, but I didn't want to risk the great friendship what we had.

Now, for more boring space stuff. We arrived, and there was nothing, so we took the direction it was thought to be adrift in. Five more days of boring space. We entertained ourselves while we let the ship's local scanners do most of the work. Reading, playing cards, another evening Exodus randomly laid with me, resting their head on my chest as they lay beside me, and I had to think of other things while they read about programming in their device. Surely technical information about fusion containment fields would keep me from having the thoughts about the purple dragon snuggled up to me. They had

taken advantage of being away from the others, and worn very little the entire trip so far, ditching the expensive flight suit for the opportunity to let their scales get some air. I had to make sure my cloth lay straight down, to cover up my developing feelings.

I'm going to be honest here, this was long term boredom of looking for a needle in a haystack. I had time to think. These were not new emotions. I remember the time they pointed out my face spikes turning red when we flew in the desert together. I've felt this way for a long time. I loved Exodus, their cheery personality they had around me, how sometimes the most simple things in life made them happy and brought out their personality. And I'm not going to lie, I was attracted to them physically too. Their beautiful purple scales that few dragons got to lay eyes on, and their slim and now fit physique. I thought about telling them now, while were alone, with no interruptions to disturb us, I fantasized about telling the truth. Honestly I was opening my mouth, without my control, my emotions were taking over, then a beeping came from the console in the front of the small ship. Saved by the bell.

Unknown location, close the dragon territory border, 2108;

"So how long will it divert us?" Singh asked, there was a round table meeting in the common room near the back of the ship. Sandra had found a planet, possibly with life.

"It's only a 3 week diversion from our course, it's that close!" She explained. They had plenty of authorization to make such a diversion without permission, a simple note in the logs would suffice for this. "Spectral analysis shows a lot of complex proteins, I'm pretty sure we'll find something there!"

"Easy choice, let's go and take a look!" He decided "Does anyone object?" 10 others in the room shook their heads, no objections. "Great, I'll note the diversion on our next transmission in 3 days. Until then, Ayan, head to the helm and change course! Let's go find some life!" One of the crew got up, smiling, she left for the bridge to carry out the order. A human man, Dax, sat across the table smiling.

"I thought I was going to be bored this whole mission!" He was the only exobiologist on board, and was sent along as more of a 'just in case'

"Well, I'm glad you're here now too, not just dead weight" Singh teased.

Singh was a man of science, and he might be finding exactly what he set out to find, he was proud of decision, but he didn't know this was the decision that would seal the fate of the Phoenix. She would live up to her name, but he was blissfully unaware. The ship shuddered, momentarily dropping from warp, and changing direction, before her coils groaned again, bringing the ship back to speed. Human ships could not turn at warp, they were less maneuverable.

It was 24 hours later, the 3 day transmission had not been sent, and the Phoenix was diverted off course at a high rate of speed. Singh was enjoying a cup of black coffee on the bridge. One thing that's never talked about was the boring parts of space travel, the long times between destinations. This was one of those times. He was not expecting anything to happen. But this morning would show him how wrong he was. One of the screens started beeping and flashing. Sandra perked up, barely awake herself and looked, taking a moment for what she saw to sink in. Once it did it alarmed her.

"Singh! Another ship! It's heading for us!" She yelled

"What?!? Out here? One of ours?" He panicked a little internally, he was prepared to see the secrets of

the universe, not to battle aliens ships. “Drop out of warp to send a message”

“Yes, it’s human, looks to be a Savanna class cargo ship, but what the hell is it doing way out here?” She asked. The ship shuddered lightly as it slowed.

“That’s a good question” Singh thought. “Savanna class, that’s one of ours, Castle Corp ships, long range transport. Ping it, see if it needs help”

“Okay!” There was no ‘sir’, no military style command, this was a science ship, not ready or suited for battle. “Oh, it’s responding! Voice coming through, Singh”

“Okay, play it!”

“Unknown Vessel pinging me, what do you want?”

Singh nodded, ready to record a response “We noticed you’re out in the middle of nowhere alone, do you need any help? We’re on a long range science mission, and didn’t expect anyone else out here!” He nodded, and Sandra sent the message. There was a delay, it was far out, or least they thought.

Before they got a response the ship was in front of them, dropping out of warp itself. It was indeed Savanna class, smaller than them, likely only one occupant. But Singh noticed something different right away, something terrifying, it was armed, something this class of ships didn’t have was guns, but this thing had cannons, two long barrels protruded from either side of the cockpit.

The ship E.M.B.E.R. came up on screen, it was an AI designed to assist in science, but it had control of most of the ship as it felt it needed to, except for vital systems like propulsion and life support. “Captain, I pointed the telescope on the port side on it. It’s called the ‘Argus’ and I’ve got it’s registration.” A photo of the ship’s identifying marks came onto one of the screens. “I’ve already logged it”. A transmission came through and played on the speakers.

“Sorry, Phoenix is it? Your ship is so new it’s not even in my registry records yet. Well, you probably know I’m not supposed to be here, but the company wants what the company wants” As the transmission played the ship shook, it shook hard.

“What was that?!” Singh yelled, Sandra was at the screen, she panicked.

“I think he just shot off the long range transmitter, we can’t reach home!”

The transmission continued to play “There are things worth more to Castle than lives, and that’s what I’ve got, things the law doesn’t allow people or companies to have. They are paying me a very nice price to obtain these items.” There was a long pause as if whoever it was was contemplating, but in fact the attacker was taking aim. “You must understand, you being here, right now, at this place at this time, is astronomical in chances.” The ship shook, violently this time, the lights on the bridge turned red and alarms started blaring. “I’m sorry, but this is how it is”

Kelly McCarthy was the head engineer for the ship, in charge of anything mechanical, and a nuclear specialist, she sat at a console, it was red, blaring, flashing, the screen itself was in panic, she was almost frozen in shock, but still alert enough to yell out one thing. “He just hit the fucking core! We’re losing coolant!”

“SHUT IT DOWN!!” Singh yelled, Kelly had already hit the button, the fission core was already dying, even if it could be repaired, it would be dead for days now before it could be restarted.

The attacker had one more line for the crew “Good luck, I know it’s not going to play out for you, but at least my mission will be a success.” and the transmission ended.

Kelly stared at her screen, the coolant levels were still dropping, The Phoenix was losing her blood into space, her assailant jumped back to warp and ran, leaving her and her crew to die.

Unknown location, one week upspin from Duke’s repair station, 2114;

I looked out onto her, she was drifting mostly straight, but had a slow pitch roll happening. She was in fact dead, no light, no movement, no sign of anything. It’s slow rotation indicated no had else had gotten to her, otherwise they’d have stabilized her before raiding her for parts. Exodus stood beside me as we watched her slowly tumble, I reached down to a panel and flicked a switch, bright lights coming from the front of the Talon lighting her up. Slowly she exposed her tummy to us. I noticed a large hole, the lights illuminating the inside as she rolled, it was empty inside.

“There, Exodus, the core is gone, they ejected it for some reason.” I took a moment to think, followed by along sigh as I realized a possibility. “I sure hope they got off before they died”

“I’m not so sure” they responded to me. “First things first, we have to straighten her out. Just like that second ship we helped Duke with, or the airlock could break, remember?”

“Yea, you’re right, we got straps but I think it’s a little bigger than we expected, but then again she’s not turning hard or wildly out of control, I think a couple gentle tugs should bring it back to center” I thought about it for a moment, we had been through this before, Duke’s ship was equipped for this. Before I had a plan together Exodus was on the control mount. I knew exactly what they were thinking and sat at a console behind them.

“Good thing you’ve got the best Pilot with you Deakon!” they teased, bringing us close expertly.

“Good thing you’ve got the best technician with you too” I shot back. Exodus got within a few meters of the turning dead ship and I hit a button. A metal piece shot from the nose our or ship followed by a long strap and clung to the other ship. The magnet engaged as it hit, grabbing onto the exterior of the hull near the rear. Exodus applied a very small amount of reverse thrust while I retracted the line, bringing the ship to line with us. It went a little past then the line brought it back. Duke had done this a few dozen times and his ship was equipped nicely for these recoveries. His extra tools were proving invaluable. Slowly I brought the line closer, pulling the ships together as Exodus used their pilot prowess to bring the ships together the final couple meters. And just like that, after only about 10 minutes of careful work, she was under our control, and no longer rotating out of control.

Conveniently grabbing her from the back brought our airlocks in line. Dragon ships’ airlocks were usually on the nose, where this alien ship was to the rear. Exodus managed to perfectly line the two ships up, and I hit another switch. Our airlock was designed for dragon ports, but also had a feature to magnetically lock to most surfaces. Again, this was something none standard, a thing that Duke and the others had designed over the years of recovering ships. The locking ring on our ships was larger than the other ship’s airlock and managed to seal around it. A moment later I got a green light on my panel,

we were locked, and it was sealed as far as the computer could tell.

I stood up and Exodus locked the controls and dismounted “Well! Let’s go see what we got!” I said.

“I honest didn’t think we would ever find it, you know how lucky we are?!?” They were excited, as far as we were concerned this was now ours, but now was time to see if we could fix it.

We went to our airlock, Exodus grabbed a couple of tools along the way. An air scanner and some basic things to check out the ship with. We put on the spacesuits just outside of the airlock, before venturing in and the door slid closed behind us. Slowly the air was vacuumed out of our airlock then an indicator turned to red, noting it was at vacuum, or at least the same vacuum as the space around us.

Our outer door opened, exposing the door to the other ship. I slipped a pry bar into it and surprisingly it opened rather gently. Without power to force it back, or keep the locks engaged. It seemed a little unsafe to me, but what do I know, I’m just a spaceship technician? What really surprised me was the blast of air that hit us from the airlock. Even though it had a gaping hole on the underside, she was holding air, that’s a great sign!

I stepped into the airlock of the other ship, and slipped my pry bar between that crack. OH! There’s the locked door. It didn’t budge, not in the least. I turned to Exodus, they were pointing down, and in a mild bit of surprise visible through their visor. I looked what they were pointing at, and became very shocked myself. There was an arrow, with words pointing to it. Words I hadn’t read in 10 years. It was English! I took a moment to soak it in, this was for sure a human ship!

I was a little rusty too, but after moment my brain figured it out, it was a big word in my defense. “MANUAL RELEASE”. I pulled off a cover and inside there was a crank. I started spinning it and just like before as the door cracked a burst of air was blown into the airlock, refilling what had been lost a few moments earlier. Exodus looked at the screen on their scanner and shook their head, then their voice came through over my headset. “No good! CO2 levels are over limits” They took a moment before breaking the news of what they thought “It looks like someone suffocated in here already”

I kept cranking, the door slowly opened wider, I kept going until we could squeeze through. I wish I had opened it all the way, but I didn’t know what was happening. We stepped into the ship and started floating, it was pitch black, not a single watt of power anywhere. We turned on the lights on our arms and started looking around. Give me something to work with! Frustrated and not really knowing what to do, I turned my light to Exodus, they were frozen still, they looked like they had seen a ghost. I shined my light in the direction they were staring, there was nothing there.

“Exodus! Exodus!” I yelled though my mic. They looked at me, and said the creepiest thing I’ve ever heard.

“Deakon, they’re still here”

2108

“Okay, the core is gone, what are the options, how much thrust do we have in the capacitor bank?” Singh asked the now panicking crew. This wasn’t a military ship and in the moment of crisis it was showing. Kelly looked at her screens and starting thinking, fumbling.

“We got enough for warp 1 at ten minutes!” She was stuttering “But we also need to eject the core, as soon as we can, it’s already begun to melt down, the fuel rods are out in the open!”

“Okay, Kelly, stay calm, and get on kicking the core out before it kills us okay?” He said calmly “Just think it through, you’ve got time” Singh looked over to Sandra, staring at local star charts “Okay, Sandra, we still got photovoltaic on the top, is there any stars close by we might make it to?”

Tears were running down her face, she already knew “No, nothing within 10 minutes at warp one, there’s one about an hour away at warp 4, a yellow giant”

“Okay, Ayan, set course for that star and get ready to run with everything we got left, that’s our only chance right now!”

She nodded from behind the controls and started fumbling with buttons. She already knew what the Captain did, this was a last ditch effort, and it wasn’t going to work.

“Let me get the core out before we jump!” Kelly yelled Singh nodded to affirm. Kelly hit buttons in a hurry, and a few moments passed before the ship violently shook again. The ship had opened it’s bottom beneath the core like an aperture and emergency rockets permanently attached to the melting core drove it out of the bottom of the ship and into space, leaving it now no longer a threat to the crew.

E.M.B.E.R. came up on the speakers “Core is away, Captain, I’ve also shut down every scientific instrument and everything but bridge power and life support. The Super capacitors on the warp coils are all the power you have left. I’m going to shut myself down next.”

“Thank you Ember, hopefully we will see you very soon” He nodded

“Godspeed, sir!” and her voice was gone, screens around the ship went blank along with most of the bridge.

“Ayan, engage the warp coils, make a run for it, and don’t let the computer shut them down then the power drops, every damn inch matters!” He ordered.

Ayan turned to her controls, tapping on the screen as the Phoenix jumped to warp for one last time. Making a run for the nearby star that was much too far in hopes the solar panels on the top of her would keep them alive until a rescue.

A few seconds after she disappeared from her last know location, the melting core, ejected from her belly, exploded violently.

The speed of light is warp 1, and relative to space, is very, very slow. After just 11 minutes and 23 seconds the Phoenix fell from warp, extremely short of her goal. The Phoenix shook violently again as she lost the energy from her legs. The capacitor banks on the warp coils were exhausted and she dropped to sub luminal speeds. The drop was not a gentle one, leaving her in the slow rotation she would be found in. In the darkness of space between stars is where she died. As if poetically, her name would leave her with no ashes, no flame, nothing, just silent death. Contained within her the crew that would sadly soon expire. Out of power, she was now adrift on the course where she would be found 6 years later.

I shined my light on the corpse, 6 years of decomposition had left him a skeleton, this beard still clinging to his jaw bone. I was lost, I had no idea what to do, we never encountered this on previous salvages.

“That’s Captain Singh” Exodus said through the speakers in my helmet, they had tears on their cheeks when I turned to look at them as they swallowed hard, holding back breaking down. “The others we will find in their quarters.”

“Did he tell you that?” I asked, Exodus nodded, still shocked at their new discovery. Glavous had warned them this would someday happen, but this isn’t what they expected. Exodus could see the spirit of Captain Singh, clear as day. I couldn’t see a damn thing, other than something was scaring my friend nearly to death.

Captain Singh was a man of science, even in death. He learned quickly he could communicate with Exodus. They were aliens to each other, but Singh managed to talk sense into Exodus and bring them from their initial panic. Now calm and realizing their power had just naturally progressed with all their training, they were now upset for the situation. 12 dead scientist were aboard the ship.

“Exodus, is he aggressive? Should we be worried?” I asked, the worst case scenario was in my head, we found a ship full of really pissed off ghosts.

Exodus floated silently for a moment, as if conversing with spirits, well, they were. “Hes okay, he says rescue is better late than never, but he’s saying more, he knows we want the ship.” As Exodus paused I shined my light around some more, suddenly noticing a plaque on the back wall of the this command deck.

It read “U.S.V. PHOENIX 2105” a year after we were forced off Earth. Some feelings of angers came to mind.

“He wants us to help, to take them to their destination” They sniffled, this entire situation was upsetting to them.

I was suddenly alone with them. I was on board the ship with them, all 12 were sitting around the table looking to me. Their Captain sitting the closest to me, turned to talk to me. The lights were on, the air was breathable. We sat in normal gravity. It was surreal, it was a dream, yet, I was awake. I looked at my hand and noticed I was now naked, my suit was gone, my purple scales were out and open. They all appeared alive, and for some reason they gave me their undivided attention.

“What humans did to you kind does not reflect our race. The general public was not aware of the plan, we were not aware that some parties in secret conspired to remove you against your will and treat you so poorly for so long. Exodus, on behalf of man kind, please, accept my most sincere apologies.” Exodus looked at the spirit of the captain, tears in their eyes, as if receiving some sort of closure, to know that their experience with humans was not a mistake. Some humans, perhaps most humans, were capable of compassion, capable of more than hatred, and capable of knowing when something wrong

has transpired, and knew when to take steps to correct it. Exodus knew this, they knew humans were not all evil, just like he now knew this about their own kind. Evil and hatred was not a trait that was specific to a species, but neither was tolerance and love. All 12 of the crew stood up, saying nothing, they bowed their heads in silence as the captain spoke again. "Once everyone learned the conditions in which you were forced in to, it was assumed there would be no survivors. The news that you and many others are still alive would fill a hole in the hearts of those who are not driven by fear and hatred. However the events you and the others survived will forever scar the name of humanity."

"What can we do for you, Harmon Singh? To lay you to rest?"

"I failed in my duty to protect my Crew, Exodus. Please repair our ship and take us to the world we sought when we were killed, take us there to fulfill our thirst for knowledge, our spirits will lay to rest, and you may have my ship as thanks and as retribution for the horrible things mankind did to you and your lover."

"Captain Singh, we are not mates"

"Not yet I suppose, but we all felt it, as soon as you came on board."

I saw Exodus pass out, suddenly and without warning. I was shocked for a moment but then I grabbed them. Thank goodness for their small size. I pulled us along the walls back to our ship, closing the airlock and waiting for it to turn green. I pulled them inside and removed their helmet, fearing the worst, having no idea what happened. I removed their helmet then I ripped mine off and started shaking them. "EXODUS! EXODUS WAKE UP!" thankfully their eyes opened "Exodus, what was that?"

"I think, I think it was too much. Glavous said there's a limit to our power, and I think I hit my limit for now, that's all." They sat up "I'm already feeling better"

"What the hell happened?"

"I had a conversation with the Captain" They sit in silence for moment, digesting what happened "He said, if we lay them to rest, we can take the Phoenix, as retribution"

"For what? Retribution for what?"

"For the exodus" The tears came back "That man in death, is as wise as most of the human race"

We took some time to rest, Exodus slept, regaining their power. I ate and came up with a plan, then slept a few hours myself.

Once they awoke, I told them my plan, and we were in agreement. We were going to drain all the air from the Phoenix. It was stale and toxic now, filled with rot from their corpses. After it was drained I would close the ejection port in her belly, then we could use reserve air from the Talon, another one of Duke's secrets, to refill the Phoenix, then boost it with power from the Talon. Exodus was with agreement with one addition, while the ship was drained, they were going to gather the corpses, wrap them, and place them in their quarters, leaving that section to the vacuum of space to preserve them for now. Exodus also warned me to bring a seal kit, but couldn't quite explain why.

We ate breakfast, put on the spacesuits again and made our way back onto the Phoenix. This time, Exodus had no fear, and seemed a lot more cheery.

“He says good morning, Deakon!” they said over radio. “Also your plan is okay, but he warns the ship might take longer to drain than you think!”

“I’m not planning using the life support system to drain it, all this toxic shit in the air will get into the system then we will have to replace a bunch of things in there we don’t have parts for!”

“Wait, what’s your plan then?”

I stood at the door to the engine room, through was a window in the door, I could see through the engine room into the empty space beyond the floor. “My plan is, maybe you should hang onto something.”

“Wait! WHAT?!” They yelled over the coms.

“You heard me, let me know when you’re secured!” I responded. I looked at the wall beside me, there was a hand hold conveniently placed. I pulled a strap from my suit, meant for space walks, and tied it off on the hand hold.

“Okay! I’m ready!” Exodus said over the speaker. I knelt down and found the manual override, I pulled the panel off and there was a crank, just as before.

“Here it goes!” I grabbed it and cranked, VERY slowly, Sure enough, the door cracked, and the air from the ship started gushing through the crack. I left it just a little. Something science fiction gets wrong, is a small hole like this isn’t going to suck you through. I left it at a couple millimeter crack which let the air flow out, rather quickly, but not some dramatic sucking that was going to turn us inside out. Of course there was a strong breeze, but I left it like this, the ship should drain given enough time. As the pressure lowered the wind eased off, I gave it a couple cranks and opened the door some more, allowing the final air to escape faster. After a few moments it died down again and I started cranking it all the way open. The last of the breeze whooshed past my in my suit and I was left standing in the now open doorway, staring out the hole with nothing between me and open space. PERFECT!

I floated into the empty reactor room, there were two generator rooms to each side of me. I noted there was more than enough room in here for a dragon power core, and those generator rooms could be gutted! Oh this would work out better than I imagined. I started looking around for a way to close this hole. After a few minutes I found a hatch, labeled plainly ‘MANUAL EJECTION’ I opened the hatch and in side was a large wheel, much bigger than the cranks on the door. Luckily it had instructions. And by instructions an arrow that pointed in both directions with “Open” and “close” at each end. Simple enough! I grabbed the wheel and spun it in the “close direction” but I was dissapointed as it spun freely, seeming as though it wasn’t connected. A little annoyed that there would be an extra step I spun it again idly while thinking, but suddenly it stopped. I grabbed it and turned and it seemed to have caught on something, hopefully the gears that close it!

Exodus emerged form the corridor leading to the reactor room floating in the airless ship. They looked a little sad. “I moved Singh to one of the crew quarters and sealed that section off. What did you find?”

“I think this is how to close the hole!” I started turning the wheel more, and as I did points appeared around the hole and started closing in. It must have taken 200 turns, but eventually the points met in the center but the wheel had more play, so I kept turning the triangle sections the closed in were now moving up to make a seal. As they moved up, that’s when I saw it. There was a large hole in one of the sections, right below where the reactor would have been, this ship was shot!

“Captain Singh says there’s a lock, to make sure it stays shut you need to engage that too!” Exodus explained.

“Did he say where it is?” I asked, Exodus pointed into the hatch, below the wheel there was a lever, it was pointed at “unlocked” so I grabbed it pulled and it went pretty smoothly and engaged into the “locked” position.

I turned my attention to the hole, I could still see into space, but as catastrophic as the one shot that killed the ship was, the damage to the hull was minimal. The hole was rough and the edges bent inward, a mild problem, but one I could easily fix. Exodus had already grabbed the seal kit from the corridor and flung it towards me. I caught it and laughed as it’s momentum pushed me into the wall. A pipe coming loose above me. I clawed my way back to the hole and pulled a hammer from the kit and started bashing the bits bent inward to point the back to the outside. After I was satisfied the pointy bits would no longer interfere, I pulled one of the metal patches from the kit, the largest one it had. I laid it down over the hole and it covered it with some excess, perfect. I pulled out the sealant, a thick rubbery black stuff from a tube that turned hard as it cured, but also stayed soft enough to remain air tight. I ran a bead around the circular piece of metal then pressed it over the hole.

“Well, Exodus, does Captain Singh know of any more breaches that we need to patch?” I asked

Exodus was quiet for a moment, assuming they were asking. “Nope, it was just the one shot that killed them.” They replied sadly. “But their long range transmitter was also shot off”

“Okay, let’s try airing up!” I reached to grab the patch kit but then I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye, there was no sound in the vacuum to get my prior attention. Apparently there was an air pocket in the pipe I knocked, and it was released, breaking the pipe and sent it flying at me. It took my by surprised and before I could grab it, it smashed by helmet’s visor.

I tried to scream but nothing came out, yet everything came out, sucked out by the vacuum inside the ship. I had the thought to push off the floor towards the corridor. I felt my saliva beginning to boil and my vision was blurry. Then, everything went dark.

I screamed inside my helmet, I saw the whole thing as the pipe shattered Deakon’s visor, the glass being sent flying as the air inside his suit blew out explosively. I saw him push off the floor towards me but by the time he reached me he was already unconscious. For some reason without even thinking I grabbed the wall then grabbed his suit as he floated within reach, I pulled, pulled with every bit of strength my small body had. I flung his body down the corridor and clawed along the wall following.

I had to keep up with his body, a single mistake up now and he might not make it! We reach the stairs leading back up to the upper level where the airlock was, but now it was the other direction on this level. I grabbed the wall again, grabbed him by the foot and pulled, every bit of strength I had, and he started floating back toward the airlock. I clawed along the wall and grabbed him again, giving a boost

of speed. I managed to do it one more time, he had a good speed going now. His body actually beat me to the airlock. The gravity plating of the online ship taking over as he arrived, pulling him to the floor. I was a couple seconds behind. As soon as I was in the airlock the gravity grabbed me too. I pulled his wings in, they were across the threshold, same with his tail. I was about to hit the emergency button when I saw Captain Singh, He was frantically pointing at boxes on the wall of his own airlock. I looked, one simply had the letters AED, another had the human first aid symbol, the third said "Exposure kit" I took a second and got back into the gravity free ship, grabbed all three, and flung them into our airlock.

I hit the panic button in our airlock. The door slammed shut and the space rapidly pressurized. Faster than I could get my own helmet off. The inner door opened and I grabbed Deakon's arms and tried to drag him in but all I managed was to straighten up his body on his back. I knelt down and quickly got his broken helmet off. Suddenly Captain Singh was with us. "CHEST COMPRESSIONS!" the spirit yelled!

I moved and straddled his torso and started pumping. "Slower" Singh said. After a few moments of this he yelled again "EXODUS THE AED!" I looked the box, I knew what it was and that it was a last resort, often they didn't work, but I opened it. Some wires and pads fell out attached to a box, instruction with simple pictured detailed how to apply this to a human. "It should be close enough to use the same way for your kind!" he said. I unzipped the front of his suit and spread it open, exposing his chest and quickly slapped the pads on. My vision was getting blurry now as I realized I was crying. I hit the button like the last steps on the pictures said to.

The box spoke, in English "Analyzing rhythm, do not touch the person!" and a small semi-circle on the screen started spinning. After a moment it talked again it's words scared me even further "SHOCK ADVISED!" I pressed the red button "STAND CLEAR, DELIVERING SHOCK" and after a second it beeped loudly, Deakon body jumped. "RESUME COMPRESSIONS" and I started pumping his chest again, now crying so hard I could barely see. I was so scared but I wasn't going to give up until I either passed out or he came back to life! After a couple moments it spoke again "Analyzing rhythm, do not touch the person!" a few seconds passed "SHOCK ADVISED!" NO! NO! Let this one work PLEASE! I hit the button. "STAND CLEAR, DELIVERING SHOCK" and a second later a beep and his body jolted again. "RESUME COMPRESSIONS"

I screamed as I pumped into him again. An animalistic sound I didn't know I could make came from my throat. I wasn't going to give up, I was in despair, I was desperate, I couldn't lose him! No no not ever! I haven't even told him! I CAN'T LOSE HIM! "Analyzing rhythm, do not touch the person" I got off him, after a second "NO SHOCK ADVISED, CHECK BREATHING" Wait! What? I started pumping him again. "WAKE UP DEAKON!" I kept going, I was getting tired, but I couldn't give up "YOU CAN'T LEAVE ME NOW!" I was pumping, not counting, but then his jaw moved. I stop and sat up.

He gasped, he wasn't conscious but his body was trying to get air, HE WAS TRYING TO BREATHE!

"Exodus, the exposure kit! He needs oxygen now!" ordered Singh

I flipped open the box, inside was a bottle of oxygen and a tube, already assembled and ready. I pulled it out and found the end, there was a problem! The end was designed for human nostrils, not our wide dragon nostrils! "Shove both ends in one side! It's better than nothing!" Singh said. I took his advice and awkwardly shoved both in the closer side and cranked open the valve on the bottle. He gasped

more and coughed, some blood splattering out, but his chest rose, he coughed again and sucked in air.

I sat on the floor beside him, and let it out. I was sobbing, he was was alive, but not conscious. “He should make it now” Singh said, the relief overtook me, I broke down and leaned over him, resting my head on his hip, bawling and watching his chest rise and fall.

It had been 24 hours, he still wasn’t awake. I hadn’t slept. I don’t think I could until he woke up. An hour ago I came to my senses and sent a message back to Duke’s station. “We have the ship, but Deakon was exposed, but he’s alive!” They replied right away, but their answer reminded me “Keep us up to date and let us know if we need to come get you! Come back immediately if you can!” I thought about abandoning the salvage, I really should have, but something told me this was something we couldn’t pass up, and my intuition was never wrong.

I sat beside him, slowly rubbing my hand on his chest hoping the stimulation woke him up.

48 hours had passed now I was exhausted. I didn’t leave his side, I wasn’t going to. Watching his chest rise and fall, over and over. Something came over me, I picked up his hand and held it. That was it, that was finally the thing that brought him back to me.

“Exodus, what happened?” he whispered.

“Your helmet got smashed, you were exposed to the vacuum, your heart wasn’t beating, Deakon, I was so scared I lost you!” I cried.

“I almost died?” he whispered

“Yes, I had to shock you back to life”

I had two days to think about what I’d say right now, two days to consider the consequences. I couldn’t stand the risk of losing him again. I was trying to figure out how to say it, when he surprised me, his own near death experience forced out what he couldn’t say before.

“Exodus, in case of the worst, I need you know, I love you, I’m in love with you” His voice strained for the words, damaged from the accident.

“Deakon!” I planted my face on his chest and cried, like I had so many times in our lives “Deakon! I Love you too! I can’t live without you!” His arm came up and cradled my head on his chest. I looked up and his eyes were open, looking back at me. We stayed like this for a few hours, I could hear his damaged lungs rattling in his chest, it made me worried.

After a couple hours he spoke again. “Can you help me? Get up of the floor and onto something softer?”

“Yes, yes of course!” I pulled on him as he leaned forward and surprised as he got himself to his feet with my help. The walk was brief, but was a sign of improvement. I took him to a bench we had pulled out for sleeping on and helped him lay down.

“I mean it Exodus” he said, after the hours long silence “I love you, and I want you as my mate”

After he laid down I leaned in and kissed Deakon on the lips for the first time in our lives “Deakon, you have me, I am your mate, and you are mine” I pulled back and he was smiling, his hand was suddenly on the back of my head and he pulled me back and kissed me deeply, my heart raced. It was a long kiss, but after a few moments he stopped. “Deakon, you need to rest, we can talk more in a bit okay? You need to heal up!”

“Okay, Exodus, if you can, some water, and maybe some food, please?”

“Yes of course! It’s been a couple days you must be dehydrated!” I walked back to the cockpit, taking a moment to send a message back to the others ‘Deakon is awake, we will be okay!’

I brought him back a bottle of water and a ration, he sat up and drank, and after eating some energy started to return, but he now had a nasty cough. “Exodus, do you think you can pressurize the Phoenix if I walk you through it?”

“Right back to work huh?” I teased “Yeah, I’m sure I could get through it!”

“Well, we’re going to need it now, I nearly lost my life for this ship!”

“I nearly lost my mate for this ship!” I replied

He smiled back at me “My mate” but we went back to thinking as he sat up completely now, paws on the floor for the first time “All you got to do is put on a suit and go into the airlock, there’s a hose and a valve, it’s pretty automatic, pull out the hose a little and open the valve, it automatically goes until it reaches pressure. But on a ship that size it might take a few hours” A moment more of thinking, as if the starvation of oxygen might have gotten a few cells “Once it’s pressurized we can just leave the airlock open and then I can run some jumpers in and power her on, see what we’re dealing with!”

Singh appeared beside Deakon and nodded in approval “Okay, I think it’s a good idea, and so does the Captain!”

“Oh? Still here huh?”

“Deakon, you owe him your life, he walked me through reviving you while I bawled my eyes out”

“Tell him I am forever grateful to him for being able to set my eyes on you again”

“Oh your such a romantic, Deakon” I teased. He lowered his head and coughed into the inside of his elbow, some blood splattering onto his arm. “We need to get you some help though!”

“Once we have the Phoenix secured we can take both ships back to the station and find some treatment. I’m okay for now, Exodus, at least I think I am. We’re almost ready here we can’t leave it now!”

I put on one of the space suits and went through the airlock. I pulled out the thick hose as Deakon explained and turned the valve. The air came out in a fast white cloud fanning out into the space and disappeared. Deakon’s math was a little bit off, it took 3 hours, but he kept me entertained through the radio and giving me silly signs through the windows of the airlock. He was up on his feet now, that was a good sign. He had also given me a pressure sensor to leave in the ship for a while, we needed to make

sure it was holding the air before we started other things.

Eventually I came back into the Talon and we sat down, remotely watching the pressure sensor, for several hours it didn't move, it was pretty sensitive, it would detect the smallest leak. So we figured it was all good. We opened up the airlock and stepped into our new home for the first time without a suit. It was very cold, but the warm air from the Talon helped make this room bearable. Next Deakon looked for a way to feed her power. He was the tech here and I was out of my element. He noticed there was a hatch in this main room that lead to the reactor room below. He opened up and ventured into the cold darkness below with a light, back to the room that almost killed him. He floated around before coming back up.

"Okay, human tech, blargh. It looks like I can hook onto the outputs of one of the generators for now, the ship systems should just see it as the generator running naturally, though the systems might get confused without the core present" He explained, he started pulling on the cables in the airlock. "I'd love to get some heat going, it's really cold in here!"

Deakon fished them through the hatch and down into the guts of the ship. Coming back a moment later taking a minute to warm up. He grabbed the controller for the power, a wireless thing he could use to control the power. Or something, I don't know, I program and grow plants and fly things. He was screwing around down in there for a few minutes until suddenly I heard him yell "WHOA THERE! Way too much!" but another moment went by and the lights suddenly came on. I could see the inside of our ship clearly now and it was... sterile. It needed a dragon's touch for sure!

The life support started doing it's thing, warm air started blowing from a nearby vent. THANK YOU! But I was still floating, the gravity plating wasn't working yet. Wait, did this ship have gravity plating? "Singh? Is there gravity?"

"Not without enough power, I don't think she's getting enough to turn it on, or your mate shut off the breakers."

As if on cue I heard Deakon yell from below through the hatch "OKAY! Breakers on!" and I suddenly found myself on the floor. Deakon climbed up through the hatch a few moment later. "Okay, gravity, lighting and life support are all I turned on, I don't know what these systems are going to do when the boot up, so I want to wait until we're back at the station before we boot them up. But it seems like aside from missing a power source and that one hole it's in really good shape!" He looked around "Okay, let's go check out the command deck!"

I followed Deakon "The bridge!"

"What? Like over a river?"

"No! At least I don't think so, but Singh says it's called a bridge, not a command deck"

"Oh, I think could get used to calling-" Deakon froze as he got onto the bridge

"What? What is it?" I looked where was staring and froze up as well. Dead ahead was a dragon warship, 3 rows of guns on each side, and it was pointing right at us.

Chapter 11 Reunion (The Phoenix Part 2) 2114;

Captain Vink looked forward out of his command deck at the two small vessels floating in front of his ship. A boring mission they were sent on during a time of war, the Militia leaders had somehow heard a ship was wandering into the wastelands, and it was potentially human. Having little experience but knowing the human race was nefarious, they sent a ship to check things out and make sure there was no threat to their efforts. His ship, the Rebel, was chosen for being the closest, but it would end up being the perfect choice, there was one dragon on board who could speak and read the human language. “Second Commander Jake, what do you think? Is it a human ship?”

Jake stood up from behind his console, two slim gold bands on his left horn, he had climbed the ranks over the past 3 years as Skro had anticipated, a lot of his class had as the Militia filled out, he was third in command already, the ships lead gunner, which also made him head of security and intelligence for this ship. Jake looked out the front of the ship as well and studied the reddish brown vessel. “Yes, sir, the first one is definitely human, there’s English on it. The second one, that’s an older shuttle class though. It’s not used in Titan’s military anymore, it might be third party surplus. I don’t know why it would be all the way out here.”

“If it’s English, you can read it?”

“Yes, Sir, it says ‘U.S.V. Phoenix’ and underneath seems it’s just a serial or registration number” He squinted to read the text and look at the symbol on it’s right side, starboard the humans would call it. “The other side says ‘Castle Sciences Group’ and that’s just the company logo I would think”

“What’s a Phoenix?” the captain asked

“I’m not an expert of human mythology, but, essentially it’s a bird that dies in a great flame, then rises again from it’s own ashes” Jake explained “Like us, the humans like to give their ships names, though they tend to use animals or locations rather than words.”

A dragon from across the command deck spoke up “Sir, there’s still no response from our request to communicate on any channel, Sir” But as she spoke the Phoenix’s lights came up, illuminating her name, and white lights to her sides began to strobe.

“Well looks like the situation for whatever is going on is still evolving” The Captain said “Okay, Commander Jake, take a team over, check it out, make sure the humans aren’t robbing our people, or our people aren’t robbing them, and make sure these humans are not a threat to our operations. Maybe offer some help if it’s a life threatening failure” He was working under the assumption that both ship’s crews were still alive.

“Yes, Sir!” and Jake left the command deck, already making a roster in his head. He left to gather Jude and Larice, the two he trusted the most. Also a medic and a secondary engineer, to offer any help if needed if this was just a simple failure that lead to humans floating into our space. The team of 5 boarded a small shuttle, normally meant for boarding raids not rescue missions. The medic had brought a duffle of supplies and the engineer a bag of simple diagnostic tools.

The shuttle floated towards the pair of small ships. Jake noted the lights on the human ship had shut off now, which seemed a little suspicious but not entirely out of the normal if the ship was encountering some sort of failure and they were progressing on trying to repair it. The pilot of the shuttle spoke up.

“This is going to be weird, since both ships are docked together the only option we have left is to mag lock onto the emergency hatch on the older military ship on the top. So when you go to get inside their gravity is going to be perpendicular to ours, so watch that you don’t fall!”

“Okay, stay here and keep everything running for now” Jake ordered “Just in case whoever is in there isn’t exactly friendly” The worst case scenario running through his head was an armed salvage crew had killed the humans and taken the ship by force, but he kept hoping for the best, just one crew helping another in the middle of space.

Soon he would get his answer, the shuttle locked around the escape hatch and the door opened to the bare spaceship it was now clinging on to. Jake put his fingers under the latch and pulled it out.

“How do we know if there’s air in there, Jake?” Jude was a concerned but Jake knew the answer already.

“Then the pressure of our air will keep me from opening this door, and we’ll have to think of another way to go inside” Jake smiled back at his friend and twisted the latch. Turning his attention to the door with a much more serious look, he took a deep breath and pulled on it. To everyone’s relief, the hatch opened, and no one was sucked into space. Jake slowly put his head through the port, his balance taken by surprise as the top half him felt the gravity of the second ship, pulling him “forward” while the shuttle kept him on the floor. “Is anyone here? Do you need assistance?” he spoke into the ship, not shouting to alarm anyone. There was no response. After a moment he looked at the other four and nodded his head toward the inside of the ship. “Okay, let’s go” He held onto the door frame and swung himself into the gravity of the other ship, expertly landing on his feet. Larice followed, landing gracefully behind him. Jude was not so lucky, thrown off by the change of direction in gravity, he comically landed flat on his chest, but quickly regained his composure and stood up with his riffle to his shoulder as Larice stifled a giggle. The engineer and the medic followed, landing much like the first two.

Jake looked up first, into the cockpit area of the small ship, evidently empty. Looking around the main level there was no one in this ship. Perhaps they were all inside the human ship, helping to make repairs or hiding the bodies. Straight ahead was the airlock. Jake remained unarmed, aside from the pistol strapped to his thigh. He gestured for the other four to follow and ventured into the dark ship, taking a small light from his tact vest and turning it on to light the way ahead. Inside he shined his light around. English text labeling various things, shiny dead computer screens, a table in the middle of the room they were now in, seemingly had a few empty packets of food. He pointed his light to the left and right, through two large windows into two rooms at either side, both filled with computer terminals and odd devices he didn’t recognize. The doors to both were closed but through the windows, so far, no one was around. But he thought he heard a cough from down the corridor. Someone was alive at least?

He started down the corridor ahead as the 4 followed, Larice and Jude were the only ones armed, their riffles pointed ahead ready to go after anyone or anything that leap out at him. They were about halfway down this corridor when suddenly a fireball came at the group.

“FLAMETHROWER!” Jake yelled “EVERYONE BACK!” the group retreated, taking cover behind the wall at the beginning of the corridor in the first room they were in. A few seconds later Jake yelled down the corridor “HOLD YOUR FIRE! WE’RE ONLY HERE TO HELP!” realizing he was on a

human ship, he repeated the second part in English “WE’RE HERE TO OFFER HELP!” He pulled the piston from it’s holster on his thigh, not yet loading it, but having it in hand in case of the worst.

A few minutes earlier;

“I’m going to kill the lights!” Deakon said, and started down the stairs near the bridge as Exodus followed. “Maybe they will think we’re dead and just carry on without a second thought” He made his way back to the electrical control room he found earlier, and started pulling down every breaker except life support sections. The ship went dark. They made their way back up the narrow stairs, Deakon coughing a couple times along the way. Once they reached the top he looked down the corridor, and could see the flashlights shining around the main room at the end. Deakon grabbed Exodus’s arm and the two slipped down the remaining free direction towards the left of the ship. A moment of panic came over them both before Exodus finally whispered. “There’s 5 of them, I can’t get into any of their heads, they’re all too strong willed for me, I don’t know what their intentions are”

“We’re going to have to defend ourselves, maybe I can scare them off the ship” Deakon whispered back his face spikes started to glow orange in the dark. As the lights started coming down the corridor Deakon inhaled and quickly darted his head out from behind cover, throwing a breath of flame down the hallway at them. Pulling back he sputtered and coughed as the group seemed to retreat from them. Listening to the one in charge yelling “FLAMETHROWER! EVERYONE BACK!” There was a pause as the group took cover “HOLD YOUR FIRE! WE’RE ONLY HERE TO HELP” But the next part shocked Exodus and Deakon both, hearing English words for the first time in a decade “WE’RE HERE TO OFFER HELP!”

The two looked in surprise at each other, even in the darkness they could meet each other’s eyes. Exodus was the first to respond. “Who are you?” they asked down the dark corridor in English.

“We’re the Revolutionist Militia!” Jake replied in English “We just wanted to make sure there was no threat and offer any help if needed!”

“There is no threat!” Exodus replied.

Deakon was lost, as if something was awakened deep within his mind. That voice, he knew it, but it had been 10 years since he heard English.

“Then why not put down the flamethrower and come have a chat with us! We’ll put down our weapons too okay?” Jake tried to negotiate, but his team mates were becoming concerned, unable to hear the conversation.

“What’s going on Jake?” Larice whispered

“I think we just surprised them” Jake said Calmly, “I think we’re going to diffuse this quickly” He looked at her, then Jude.

Deakon sat behind the wall, processing, as if his brain was looking for old records. He coughed again, then yelled back in English “No, who are YOU?!?”

Jake was clear in the head, he knew that voice, but the odds were astronomically against the situation. This had to be a mistake, he thought his own judgment was clouded by the constant thoughts he had in

the back of his head. But there was someone, possibly a dragon, yelling in English, who sounded just like his little brother.

Deakon was on the other side of the wall, his tired brain was finally putting two and two together. A dragon, who could speak English, with a familiar voice. This was impossible odds, but the reply he got confirmed his theory.

"I'm Sub-Commander Jake" He replied "And we're not here to hurt you!" He added.

"JAKE!" Deakon stood up quickly and ran down the corridor, Jake shined his light, hearing his brother say his name, and now seeing him run towards him.

"DISARM YOURSELVES!" Jake ordered and got up and started to run down the corridor towards his brother. The two nodded, and nervously disarmed their rifles, putting the magazine back in their tact vests and slinging the rifles over their shoulders. Jake was nearly in tears with happiness, the random chances of the universe finally bringing him some good luck and his brother back to him. "DEAKON!" he yelled.

The two met halfway down the hallway, Deakon wrapped his arm around his older brother, holding on as tight as his weakened state allowed. His own eyes were watering, he coughed as he noticed something was different, not all of his brother was there. "Jake" He said as he pulled back from the hug, Jake noticing his eyes were not fully focusing, he was not in great shape "What happened to your wings?" But before he could explain, Deakon coughed again, this time blood sprayed across the front of Jake's uniform as he collapsed against him.

"Me- MEDIC! NOW!" Jake yelled as he lowered his now unconscious brother to the floor. The excitement had been too much for his injured lungs. "HELP NOW!" The medic ran over and started opening the duffel of supplies as Jake lowered Deakon to the ground on his back. Jude and Larice ran up right behind the medic. Jude shined his light down the corridor, the purple dragon had followed behind Deakon, now standing alone in front of the soldiers, naked, unable to hide their purple color. It was Jude who spoke up, surprising Jake with the words that came from his mouth.

"What did you do to him!? You did this didn't you!?" he yelled, he wasn't normally superstitious but in the heat of the moment it slipped out, the assumption this was somehow the purple dragon's fault.

"Jude!" Jake yelled. He looked at Exodus, into their eyes, a moment of flashback in his mind, the day they left Earth, the purple dragon Deakon ran off to save, this had to be them. The fact the two were still together was probably a good sign, they likely had no ill intention towards Deakon. He looked at Exodus and asked in English to test his theory. "What happened to him?"

Jake got the answer, Exodus, answered in English, there was no other purple dragons on Earth, they were definitely the one. "Two days ago we had the ship drained of air, his visor got smashed in an accident, and he was exposed to space. I was barely able to revive him." Tears welling up in their eyes as they switched back to Draconis so the others could understand "Please! Please help him, Jake!"

By then the medic was already at work, holding a stethoscope to Deakon's chest "What did they say" He asked. "He's alive and breathing but he's not in great shape, I need to know what happened"

"Two days ago he was exposed" Jake translated

“He’s lucky to be alive then! We need him in our med bay ASAP, I’m not equipped for this but the doctor can help, I think he’s got some severe lung damage”

“Get him on the shuttle now!” Jake turned back to Exodus “Is there anyone else on board?”

Exodus shook their head “No, the human crew has been dead for about 6 years, their bodies are in their quarters”

“So why were you here?” Jake asked

“We needed a ship, the other one isn’t ours, it belongs to our freind” Exodus explained “We were going to bring it back with us and fix it up and live in it, together”

“Scavenging then.” Jake assumed correctly, Exodus nodded “There isn’t a law against it, but it’s not really the safest line of work”

“We normally do this in a bigger group, but the others were overwhelmed with work, and this ship was meant to be ours, so we came out alone. Our usual work is much safer than this. It’s sort of a one off type of thing we’re doing.”

“Where is the weapon? The Flamethrower?” Jake demanded “We have to secure the scene, for the safety of my crew”

“You’re holding him in your arms” Jake seemed confused “If you don’t believe me, look around! I’m obviously hiding nothing unless it’s up my ass!” Jake nodded at Larice, who got up and started searching around. Jude and the medic got Deakon ready to move, while the engineer stood watching on, their skills not required at this time.

A few moments later Larice reappeared. “I didn’t find any weapons, Jake”

“We’ll figure that out shortly, for now let’s get Deakon to med bay!” Jake lifted with the other three, carrying Deakon back to the shuttle, awkwardly up the ladder. Exodus and the engineer following. Once aboard Jake ordered the pilot “Call the Rebel and tell them we have one causality, a civilian, and one more coming for questioning, we need to hurry so let loose and head back as fast as this thing can go!”

“Yes, sir! The pilot started flicking things on the panels, still laying on the control mount. The engineer closed the hatch then the airlock before shouting an affirmative word to the pilot indicating they’re good to go. The shuttle made it was back to the Rebel where Deakon would get some medical attention.

I thought I was dead, I woke up to bright lights, everything sterile and white. Obviously I had hallucinated meeting my brother in my dying breaths, or maybe his spirit was there to take to me to the afterlife. I struggled to adjust my eyes to the bright lights of the afterlife. Damn, the afterlife was too bright, this is bullshit, all that just to be blinded once I die? What a rip off. Everything was blurry but I heard voices talking. Familiar voices, Exodus’s voice. Oh no! They died too?!? This is complete bullshit, what happened to them? I took in a breath, my chest rumbled, it still hurt. Great, now I get to

spend eternity in the state I died in, with a sore chest! Finally I decided get some relief, and shouted out to angels or demons or whatever our kind believed in. “Turn down the fucking lights!” I tried to yell, but I think it came out as a hoarse whisper.

“He’s awake!” I heard Exodus first, then a few more murmurs.

“Exodus, I’m sorry, I think we’re dead!”

“No, Deakon, we’re far from it! Look! Jake is here too!” They exclaimed. I tried to focus my eyes, damn it was too bright, but after a moment I saw him, I laid eyes on my big brother. He smiled down at me. It was almost as if the past decade apart didn’t happen, but he was in a military uniform. He teased me just like he would have when we were kids.

“Wakey wakey sleeping beauty” His face was a warm smile. Things started to sink in. I turned to my head and on the other side of my was my mate, Exodus. Two of the most important people in my life were in the same room together, where is this room?

“Where am I? Where are we?” I asked, things were still blurry but getting better quickly. I lifted my head and felt a hose in my nostrils. I instinctively reached up to pull it out then Jake stopped me.

“Leave that in there, you need oxygen and steroids to heal up your lungs. You’re on the Rebel, it’s a ship in the Revolutionist Militia, in the med bay, and our doctor is taking great care of you for me” A light blue dragon and another green one stood behind him, they were smiling as well. Waiting for Jake to introduce them. He sighed picking up on their anticipation. “Deakon, This is Jude and Larice. We’ve been together since training, my best friends”

Jude was first “We’ve heard so much about it over the years! We’re pretty excited to meet you finally!”

“Hi, Deakon, you look just like your brother!” She took a moment “So this is what you’d look like with wings, Jake?”

That’s when it dawned on me a second time “Jake, what happened to your wings? Did you lose them on the prison ship or something?”

Jake took in a deep inhale, there was lots to catch up on it seems, but Jake was ready to tell all. He turned to his friends “Do you mind giving us some time?”

Surprisingly they both declined “It’s going to be a rough ride, we’re here for you, Jake. Let us stay and help you both through it” Larice said, Jude placing his hand on on Jake’s shoulder. The fear was taking hold, the next question I wasn’t sure I wanted an answer to. Exodus picked up my hand and held it.

Next he looked at Exodus, who stood firm, realizing they would go no where to provide any support to their mate. Jake sighed a little frustrated, he wanted us to be alone, an officer of the ship shouldn’t let their crew see this side of them that was about to come out, and he had no idea who Exodus was as a person. “Anything you need to tell me, Exodus can hear to, they are my mate” Jake looked a little surprised, maybe annoyed at the new fact he learned.

“Jake” I felt like I knew from the look on his face, the fact he wanted the room. His friends already knew as well. “Jake, were are Mom and Dad?” I choked, my lungs still hurt, but now it was harder than

ever to breath. “Jake, where are they, can I see them?”

“Deakon, take a moment for me to tell you everything okay?”

“Jake”

“Our ship landed on Titan’s world. It’s not a very nice place and the tyrant in charge wanted them for their history, there was a reason they never talked about it here. Titan took us prisoner, then on public display he took my wings.” He took a deep breath, stumbling and trying to hold back himself, just to get it out. “He took my wings from me, Deakon, and he took Mom and Dad from us.”

I tried to shake my head, this was a lie, telling stories again like when he was a kid. He wasn’t a kid anymore though, neither was I. The room became blurry again, the lights smeared into multiple copies of themselves. I could feel Exodus squeeze my hand. Jake leaned down, his face blurry but I felt a tear hit my shoulder as he leaned in. He hugged me tightly. It wasn’t a story, I would never find Mom or Dad. They were lost to us forever now. Only Memories.

I sobbed, I felt like a child in the moment, a little boy who couldn’t find his parents. Luckily my older brother was here to comfort me. Somehow I got the sense he never properly grieved himself, as he let it all go at once and cried with me. He had been alone from his family for years, and now here I was, he could finally grieve with someone and share the loss. We held each other in an embrace of sorrow for several minutes, tears covering my face. Finally he leaned up, his face pale as jet black, and imagine mine was as well. Looking around the room the other three were also feeling the sadness, dark gray on all their faces.

We took our time, eventually the sobbing stopped. Jake’s face wet with tears from sorrow and anger. “So what are we going to do? Where do we go from here?” I asked.

“I don’t know about you, Deakon, but I’m going to kill that fucker. I’m not going to rest until I see his head off his body. That’s why I’m here, to fight for the dragons who are still alive, and to avenge Mom and Dad and everyone else he has taken.” He paused “You should join us, Deakon, we need good people like you, people like us, who had a strong purpose.”

I thought hard. I was overwhelmed, and an invitation to join a military was the last thing I wanted. My thoughts strayed quickly to Glavous, my abilities. Jake had found his path to revenge, and now I wanted my own as well, but I already had started a way to achieve it, even if I didn’t know it at the time. I would return to Glavous with a renewed source of vigor and energy over this, not point guns and command ships. “We have different paths, Jake.”

“Different paths? What do you even mean? How else could you ever get close enough?”

“I’m going to show you, privately though, later, but trust me, brother”

Jake nodded, wiping the tears from his eyes, purposely keeping his face away from his friends. Our conversation was cut short, the Captain of the ship walked in, along with the Doctor who had been treating me in my previously unconscious state. Jake, Jude, and Larice stood up straight and forward ahead briefly before the Captain said “Ease” and the three relaxed.

“I see the patient is awake. Deakon is it?” I nodded as the doctor started listening to my chest, noticing

my face was covered in tears “Are you okay?”

“I just got some bad news, hopefully you’ve got some better for me”

“I’m sorry, son, but yes I do have some better news, you should be fine in a few weeks. Your lungs got torn up a little when you got exposed. I’m assuming you tried to scream or hold your breath?” I nodded “Obviously you haven’t had and real space training of the sort. Well, for future reference, don’t do that if you get into a vacuum state again, just expelled everything in your chest. Better yet, don’t get exposed ever again. You need to take it easy for a few more days, maybe give up on your salvage mission here or your...” He looked at Exodus with a look of displeasure “your friend here can finish the job without you.”

Captain Vink spoke up next, seemingly he was in a hurry “I don’t mean to be rude, but we are at war, so as soon as the doctor clears you, we will return you to your ship and we need to be on our way.”

“Sure, I get it” I responded, nonchalantly, still obviously rather upset from the new I had gotten moments before. I think the civilian reply might have annoyed the Captain slightly, but not as much as Jake annoyed him next.

“Sir, why are we suddenly in a hurry?” Jake asked, sensing something was going on.

“There’s some reorganizing to do, which means we’re going to need to be on the move for a while. I’m calling a staff meeting in 10 now that you three are back on board.” Vink ordered. “Doctor, how long before we can let our guest go and be under way?”

“Well, if you let me send him away with some medicine, and he promises not to exert himself for a week, we can send them back now” he replied.

He turned back to me “So that ship is dead, you have a plan for getting it back to where ever you are going?”

“Oh! Sure! We get things back by expanding our warp bubble around things like that. Our head engineer modified the coils a little to accommodate that quite well!” Kelly was pretty good with such things.

“Son, don’t you know how dangerous that is?” his words were firm, oddly caring about the civilian riff raff in his med bay.

“Yea, I’m something of a warp tech myself, so I get it, but we’ve done it’s lots of times, we have lots experience with it!” That was a lie, we’ve done it 3 times.

“Okay, we’ll get you back right away and leave you to it. I need to get this ship moving!” The captain walked away in a bit of a huff, I think he was more upset at the fact he was losing two of his best than angry with his officers themselves.

“Okay, you heard the Captain, easily, up and gone” The doctor took the oxygen form my nose “You’re going to be light headed while you get used to normal air again.” He handed me a small device “This is a puffer, plain and simple, put it to your lips, and while inhaling press the button. Do it three times a day until it’s exhausted, it should be about 2 weeks worth”

“Okay, thank you doctor, really!” I was happy to get good treatment, but I was curious about the meeting they were about to have, I wondered if it was because of us or something different, it was a warship after all, it could have been about anything.

10 minutes later Jake, Jude, Larice, The Captain and his first officer were in the Operations room, just off the command deck, a few more officers were present too but not everyone, so the meeting wasn’t extremely important, or it only involved those present.

“First Order of business is a pleasant one. The First Officer of the Wilds has taken command of his own ship. The Lead gunner took a promotion to First Officer to fill that slot, Usually a gunner on board the ship would take the Lead Gunner role, however the Wilds currently has a pretty green crew, they were refreshed after the last time she was getting repaired for 3 months straight. So to help with the experience level, one of our gunners is getting a promotion.” Vink turned to Larice. “Congratulations Lieutenant Larice, as one of our best gunners, you are that choice.” Vink picked up a small package off the table and handed it to her, containing her new ranking rings for her horns along with patches and orders. “You are hereby promoted to Sub-Commander and ordered service aboard the Wilds. We are going to Base ‘G’ when we are done here for your transfer. I’m losing one of our best but our sister ship is gaining a good leader!”

There was a round of applause in the small group, then the Captain turned to leave, but Jake stopped him “Sir, if I may have a minute?”

“Sub-Commander? What is it?”

“Normally I’d ask this privately, but time is essential now. I need a leave of absence!” Jake asked. “I just found my brother who I’ve been seeking for 10 years and had to give him some very bad news. I need some time with him!”

“And leave me without a head gunner?”

“Jude has proven to be an amazing gunner, Sir, I think he is more than perfect for the task while I’m away”

“I’m already losing a good gunner here to the Wilds, Jake” he was not pleased, but something told me he wasn’t going to fight it, I think he was well aware what was going on here.

“Sir, we’re fighting for freedom, and right now I need that freedom, I can’t let my brother grieve alone like I had to, I need to be there for him.” he paused “I need to properly grieve with him, it’s family!”

The Captain took in a big breath, and lowly growled as he let it out. “Okay fine, you’ve got 3 months, if you need more get in contact with the militia, if you can return sooner I would appreciate it. Your service is exemplary and the ship won’t be the same without you.” He turned to Jude “Lieutenant Jude, you are hereby given the rank of Sub-Commander and the position of lead gunner” He looked at Jake for a moment then back “Effective immediately! Sub-Commander Jake, once you have your replacement settled in with command access you are relieved. Jude, see me in my office when you are done for your ranking rings and patches.”

“Yes Sir!” Jude, a mix of emotion of Jake going away for a bit, but proud of his new promotion as well.

“Jake, 3 months, or sooner!” Vink turned to Jake, his own face spikes a little gray, annoyed at the situation, but Jake had a good point.

“Yes Sir! Thank you, Sir!” Jake replied He took Jude to the command deck, getting him access to the lead gunner’s console for the first time. Sometimes there would be a small ceremony on the command deck for changing of officers, but time was short. Jake did notice the murmurs among the command crew, those he had worked closely with and looked forward to working with in the future, he made a short announcement.

“I am taking a short leave of absence, It’s been an honor to serve with you all, and an honor that I’m looking forward to continuing! In my absence, my friend and our best gunner Jude will be taking my role, I trust you all to give him the same respect and camaraderie that you’ve given me, Thank you!”

We where hurried along to the shuttle which took the three of us back to the ships and departed, once it got back to the Rebel they took off. All of this happened so quickly, with military precision.

“So what is left to get back on our way?” Jake asked

“We were testing it to make sure it holds air, and it does. Then I powered up the life support, and that’s all working. We wanted to make sure it would be worth all the trouble before going though the effort of bringing it back with us” I explained “She’s in great shape, still nearly new really, aside from missing a power source. Our leader is Duke, maybe leader is the wrong word, more like a mentor?”

“I’d call Glavous our mentor!” Exodus interrupted

“Oh, yea, I think that’s more accurate” I looked at Jake, his face was puzzled “Don’t worry, you’ll meet everyone else soon, there’s 12 others on the station.”

“12, that’s it?” he was surprised

“Yea, but there’s usually some others as well. We fix ships, which is why we salvage, getting parts. Often the clients stay at the station while we fix their vessels.” I realized I was rambling “But, yea, back to this. The Phoenix is well worth the trouble. So all that’s left is to uncouple the ships, strap them together, and do the double warp bubble to get us back!”

“Vink said it’s dangerous though.” Jake was worried about ended up smeared across a star system or two.

“It can be! Kelly is my master engineer, I’m her apprentice, though I’m catching up! She taught me all kind of things about warp drives and I study often in my spare time. I know exactly what we’re doing!” That was not a lie, I’ve only done it three times, but I had a firm grasp on what was required. “The down side is it’s going to take us twice as long to get back because of the extra power it’s going to need” I explained

“Okay, when you say ‘strap the ships together’ what do you mean?” Jake asked

Exodus was pulling out the long wide straps from a storage compartment, struggling with their small size. “We mean, to actually strap them together! Want to go for a space walk? With Deakon down I’m going to need some help!”

Jake sighed, he wasn't comfortable with everything yet, it had only been hours. But he did want to get going and into a bigger space. "This station, it's bigger than this ship I hope?"

"Oh, yeah! It's like a hotel plus a repair port. There's lots of space!" I went to the airlock and started cracking back the door to close up the Phoenix, preparing for our two weeks back. Exodus sent a message back to station.

'We're on our way back with the ship plus one, two weeks out.'

It was tough for Jake to be out alone with this dragon he hardly knew, mag boots keeping them attached to the surface of the Phoenix. Exodus was keeping the line taught against hook in the Talon, while Jake walked around the ship's exterior and hooked up the strap on the opposite side. Suddenly Exodus spoke over the radio. "You know, I thought you'd be more talkative like Deakon, you too are brothers after all."

"I'm a dragon of few words I suppose" Jake was annoyed at the purple dragon trying to engage in conversation.

"Well, we should get to know each other!" Of course Exodus's intuition was picking up that Jake was being abrasive, but Jake was important to Deakon, and therefore important to them.

"Look, for now, I think you should leave me some space." He sighed through the mic as he walked along with the strap, reaching the hook. "Okay, it's on, you can tighten it up"

Exodus started pulling on the strap until it was tight, then pulled on the handle ratcheting in the last little bit. It didn't require a lot of strength, just enough to keep the ships from floating apart, the warp bubble would handle the rest. "He talked about you a lot you know, I almost feel like I know you with how much he went on about you!"

"If you think you know me, then you should know I'm rather pissed off with you." he blurted out.

Exodus started making their way to the other side of the ship to strap the other side, rather hurt at what they just heard, but they had a job to do. "Pissed? Why? You only just met me, don't tell me it's over my scales aga--"

"No, not at all. I didn't know about purple until I asked around after seeing you on Earth. What I'm pissed about is you took him away from me for a decade." He was blunt, maybe honestly was the best, to get it all out.

Exodus was equally as armed though, retorting "Maybe it was better for him, sounds like if he hadn't come to save my ass, he might have ended up under Titan's sword too!"

That stung, but Jake couldn't really reply, the other dragon was right, Deakon's head could have just as easily ended up between their parent's. The thought made him shudder. He walked up behind the smaller dragon, they had the second strap hooked into the Talon, and handed Jake the coiled up length. "Maybe we can work things out in time, Exodus, but right now, I'm just interested in helping my

brother through things. He took it quickly, I don't think he's processed things yet" Jake started to walk around the bottom side of the Phoenix again, releasing some of the strap as he went around.

"I think you're right about that. He was already pretty injured when you showed up. But you need to know I care a lot for that dragon, and I'm not leaving his side when he needs support the most. I'm going to be there whether you want me there or not!" Jake was surprised by this small dragon's fierce personality, a moment of pride caught his mind.

"I'm glad he found someone who has so much fire in their heart. So how long have you two been mates? Since you left Earth?" Jake was conceding a bit, he didn't want to cause friction in his brother's relationship.

"Oh, hell no, I was only 16 when we met, that would have been icky" Exodus stuck their tongue out and shook their head. "I'm 26 now, we've been mates for" They paused, Jake though they were calculating months or years and was surprised at the answer "3 days!"

"What?!?" Jake walked along nearing the other hook "Were you two separated?"

"No, we've been together since the day we left Earth. But that near death incident, really brought us both back to reality, better not to leave loose ends" Exodus took a deep breath "I thought I lost him. I felt strongly for him for a long time now, and when I thought he was... well while I waited for him to wake up I promised to hold nothing back. Funny enough, he said it first!"

"Okay, hook is in!" Jake said as Exodus started pulling the strap tight "So, you've both had a very exiting few days then?"

"Maybe a little too much excitement. I'm looking forward to setting the autopilot on the Talon and sitting back for two weeks." They tightened down the last of it "Okay, we're secure, lets go back inside"

I helped Exodus with inputting the modified warp field. I was the tech, they were the pilot. They didn't even need to lay down on the mount, the autopilot would handle most of this, as it was a straight line. A special command that Pike wrote long ago would keep an eye on the expanded warp bubble, if anything came up it was direct the autopilot to immediately stop. As dangerous as this process was, Duke's crew had made it almost entirely automated once you got it going. That way would could sleep and rest, I could heal myself.

I bet the setup looked pretty silly. The Talon was small, typical dragon triangular design, but only 15 meters wide. Strapped to this huge 45 meter wide rust colored ship, it was actually the driving force. Like a small bird making of with an entire cow as it's prey. Finally hours after were underway and made sure things were stable, Jake cornered me. "We're brothers, no lies, nothing stands between us for the rest of our lives, Deakon"

I was taken back by the sudden confrontation "Of course not Jake, but what is this about?"

"You attacked my team with a flamethrower, which by the way if a less level headed officer was there, you'd be dead right now. But then when we looked for it, nothing was there. What did you attack us

with?” He was dead on getting the fact straight. Exodus stood a few feet away, frozen, there was no way out of this. “Not even a can of aerosol or anything flammable that Larice found, I grilled her while you were passed out, I didn’t like having to ask my... friend like that. Obviously you picked up some self defense tricks in your travels”

“Yea, it’s a bit more than that, Jake” I nodded to Exodus “You better sit down, I was pretty dizzy when I found out” Jake sat down. I gathered my energy, I was still rather weak but I wanted to prove my point without also putting myself into a coughing fit and delaying my healing. It was when my face spikes started to glow orange when his face and posture changed from slight anger to bewilderment. I inhaled, but not too deeply, and standing facing perpendicular from him, I shot a tiny flame.

“What the fuck is this?!!” his initial reaction of a childlike amazement quickly turned to fear.

“The element of fire, Jake” I looked at Exodus, they nodded as a go ahead “Exodus is the element of the mind, they can do some amazing thi-”

“It’s really a demon?!?”

“JAKE NO! SHUT UP! DON’T EVER SAY THAT ABOUT THEM!” I screamed at him.

Jake withdrew a bit, knowing he just crossed a big line. Exodus hung their head low, obviously hurt. “Jake, the one we called Glavous, he is our teacher, he showed us how to reach the power within ourselves, and he’s trained us the last 3 years. I do want you meet him, okay?”

Jake was silent, embarrassed for overstepping and insulting Exodus by mistake, but digesting what he just saw.

“I told you in the moment, you were holding the flamethrower” Exodus spoke up “And call me a demon again and I’ll make slap your own face!” Jake didn’t know the threat was empty, his will was too strong for Exodus to do anything to at their current level. I pulled open a nearby drawer though, something I had hidden at the beginning of our trip, a nice bottle. Exodus noticed right away “Really? Now?”

“It’ll help us loosening up. Exodus you may be the master of the mind here but even I can sense the tension between you two. I also wish I had a shot when Glavous opened my third eye, so I’m sure that Jake would-”

“Absolutely!” he spoke up. “A shot would really be amazing right now!”

“Fuck it, pour me one, honey” Exodus asked

“Honey?” I asked teasing

“I’m trying out things okay?” they laughed as the retrieved 3 small metal cups. I poured out some of the drink and handed the other two to my mate and my brother. We raised our drinks and took the shot. I grabbed the bottle and offered more. Exodus shook their head, they rarely drank to being with, likely feeling a lot off this one shot in a few minutes. But Jake raised his empty cup. I poured us each another one and we took the shots together, but then put down the cups.

Jake laughed after 'trying out names', "Exodus told me you haven't been a couple very long"

"No, we've been together for a long time though. Maybe it was just an eventuality but I'm glad we're not hiding anything anymore"

"We haven't even gotten a chance to consummate our relationship yet" they blurted out. We both turned to them, their face spikes a rosy color and they were giggling, evidently the shot had taken it's hold already. Jake turned back to me and raised the glass again, but I didn't pure him more.

"I think we should hammer shit out before we get drunk" I said to him, he lowered the glass and nodded in agreement.

"I just found out my brother can breath fire, and he's mated to a... well what do I call you?"

"Exodus!" they smiled. "Call me my name, your brother gave it to me after all!" after a second they clued in "Oh, I guess the closest word aside from 'Mage of the Mind' that Glavous calls me would be psychic"

"Right, a psychic and a fire breather" He took a deep breath "Any other secrets?"

I thought for a moment and shook my head, but then Exodus spoke up "When we get back to the station, the others, they don't know I'm purple" they grabbed the body of the flight suit hanging nearby "I always wear this when I'm there, I'm always covered!"

"I see, I was beginning to wonder if you ever wore anything" he joked, Exodus had been nude this entire time after all.

"We would both be grateful if you didn't say anything about it to the others. As you're probably aware some dragons aren't so nice and believe in fairy tales." They said, staring at the floor.

"Of course, I think it's silly really, our parents brought us up a little dif... You know it's funny, they never mentioned purple scaled dragons. Maybe they just though it would never happen on Earth with out small population." Jake suddenly became withdrawn "There was a few things they never taught us, to be honest, about our own kind, and their own history" He took a long sigh "The shots are sinking in Deakon, sit down, it's my turn."

"For what?" he asked curiously as he sat on the bench across from his brother.

"Mom and Dad, well, they never lied to us directly, they had a history they never shared as well. I understand now it was to keep us safe, but, while we're talking about honesty and keeping secrets, you need to know" I sat for the next couple hours as Jake told me everything. Our parents were among the founding members of the militia he now fought for, it started as protests for a better life, against Titan's rule, but over time it got stronger, eventually Titan turned his military against the movement, and they fought back. Exodus climbed behind me, draping their arms over my shoulders, holding me tight as I learned my true history. Eventually reaching the bad part, Jake gave us the first hand account of our parent's public murder at the hands of Titan.

Of course I cried, I think that's when it finally and truly set in. We did stop there for the night and got some sleep. I cried again as we feel asleep, an anger rising up inside me. Eventually after some time I

was able to get some sleep.

I learned the next day there was more to go, but the worst was over. Jake told us about his time in the hospital, his training and his rising of the ranks on the Rebel. His main goal was vengeance for our parents death, but the fighting for the freedoms and breaking the grip over our people was also a high priority now.

About halfway through the day, the tables turned. Exodus and I started giving Jake our story, he listened intently to our tales, no matter how grim they were. Exodus vividly describing the tearing of flesh while they witness our kind eating their own aboard the prison ship, but when they got to our initial night on Sandpit, that's when some pieces came together for me. The female dragon who gave Exodus the cut of fish to save me, her name was Sorah, as was our mother's. She was passed at that time without me ever knowing. I know the name was likely coincidence but I chose to believe. Her sudden disappearance after, talking to a purple dragon, giving away her best food. I wanted to believe, that was Mom, caring for me one more time. It had to be, and it brought a small spark of joy to my mourning heart.

The next few days of our journey was much more lighthearted. Mixed with moments of grief crying into my mate's chest or solemnly hugging my brother. I slowly started to let the mourning process happen. Jake as well. He hadn't allowed himself the chance to properly grieve and now he could, clearing his mind, so that can later press onto his goals.

The rest of the trip slowly became less solemn over the two weeks. I broke out the bottle a couple more nights, and the three of us bonded. Jake told us tales of the battles he had been in so far, funny stories about shore leave, even the nature of his friendships with Larice and Jude. He was sad knowing she wouldn't be on the Rebel when he got back, but they Wilds was a sister ship and the two would still see each other frequently. We told Jake our stories of Sandpit, our time with Clay and mostly the lightning festival and how beautiful the ritual of the rain was. It should actually time out for him to come see it with us before he returned if he took his 3 months!

After two weeks of crying, laughing and some bickering between Exodus and Jake, we did arrive back safely. We left the Phoenix floating near the station, Micah and Sond came over in one of the smaller shuttles we used for going into the junkyard and unstrapped the Phoenix from us, congratulating us on a good job, then we docked with the station.

I was quite surprised at the welcoming party at the airlock. We couldn't even directly get in as everyone was blocking our path! Kelly was up front, worried about how everything went, and about my health after being exposed! Little Chickadee ran passed everyone's feet and leaped into Exodus's arms. Jake was last to come out, a couple gasps as the wingless dragon came through the airlock.

"Everyone, this is my brother, Jake!" I introduced him, but before I could start naming the other for him, Glavous was approaching him, quickly, as if on a mission.

"I felt your power the moment you dropped from warp nearby, come to me!" Before Jake could react Glavous had his hand on the side of his head, his spike turned purple as he fed him information and after a moment contact broke. I knew exactly what had just happened, the same thing he did to me, 'opening his third eye'. Maybe it was because we were brothers, being related, he held the same power. What I saw next though really surprised me, maybe even made me a little jealous. Jake slumped to the floor, taking it all in. Glavous, Exodus, Drito and I watched, we knew what was going on, even though

I STILL didn't know what Drito could do. The others gasped even starting to protest the sudden assault. Glavous pulled a candle from his satchel, held it front of Jake and simply said "I believe you know what to do"

Effortlessly and without hesitation, Jake blew a perfect flame from his mouth on his first try, his face spikes glowing brightly and strongly, he already had control over it, immediately and instinctively. He lite the candle with next to no effort, where I took several tries my first time. My jaw had dropped.

Jake looked around, to the stares of the other, they had of course seen what I can do and the weird things Exodus got up to with their daomo, they weren't overly shocked but still very curious. After a moment he spoke "So, is that what my brother has been up to?"

Chapter 12 Retrofit (Phoenix Part 3)

We shoved the phoenix with two of the little shuttles, they had rubber bumpers specifically for this purpose, we not only used them for fetching parts from Duke's junkyard, but was also used them for finessing disabled ships like the Phoenix into position. We backed her to the dock, using an adapter ring to make the airlock safe and semi-permanent. She was in place now and secured, I re docked my shuttle along with Micah to the shop's airlocks where these small local vessels were kept.

I went inside and made my to the Phoenix, opened up the airlock, and thankfully I wasn't sucked in, she had held every bit of air the last two weeks. We docked her furthest from the reception area where clients where meant to dock, the last few along the docking area where reserves for small repairs, ships that might only be docked a few hours or maybe a couple days to repair, otherwise client ships where moved to the shop docks for large repairs. Phoenix would be the furthest, maximizing my inconvenience for getting her back up and running but making it the most comfortable for everyone else. Duke wanted this, and I understood.

I pulled two long cables from spools at the airlock, our booster power from the space station and lead the cables back down to through the same hatch between the upper level and the reactor room below floating along the way in the powerless ship. Instead of going to the generator this time I floated to the electrical control room and found the input bus, connecting the power directly instead of on the generator like before. I had planned to rip that out anyway, since our reactors where direct to electricity. We didn't need the extra machinery. It was fucking cold in here! Before retreating I checked the breakers on the nearby control panel, there were of course dozens, but I only wanted 4, 'Interior Lights', 'Gravity Control', 'Environment Control' and 'Life Support'. I made sure everything else was off for now, but noticed one more 'Power Control' and flipped it on as well. I figured it control the power flow off the generators and I think I was connected to the same bus, hopefully that would prevent the frying of things.

I floated my way back to the airlock, and stepped back into the station for a moment. After taking care to turn it to close to the same settings I had before on the 'Talon', I turned on the power to the leads and the Phoenix came back to life, well, mostly. Her lights came up and the life support rumbled from the vents, the ship should start warming now. My tech senses where right! I left for a while, the airlock wide open, between the heat from the station and the environmental controls on the ship it would still take at least an hour or two to warm up.

I ran into my mate in the hallway to our room, dressed in their flight suit they grabbed my hand and without saying anything lead us back to our room. Chickadee was resting on their bed, but with an unsaid requested the daomo woke up and left the room, trilling as it walked down the hallway, Exodus closed and locked the door behind them.

"Is everything okay, Exodus?" I asked as they started taking off the helmet. Their face said it all, deep red spikes and a sexy little look, my chest was suddenly pounding as they said the words I've wanted to hear for over two weeks now.

"It's time, I love you, and I want you!" They unzipped the body of the suit and it hit the floor. "We're finally alone! I know we both want to!" They were right, I was just surprised. They reached up and wrapped their arms around my neck pulling me into a long kiss, soliciting the proper response from my body. I turned with my back to my bed and laid down, pulling them on top of me, without breaking contact with my lover's lips.

It was our first time, not even with each other, for both of use, the first time ever. Nature took it's course however and we knew what to do. It was clumsy and awkward at times, but that first time was an experience I will never forget, when I finally expressed my love physically for this beautiful purple dragon.

<addendum here?>

We lay cuddling for a short time after, when the novelty took over, we did it again, 4 times actually, a great way to pass the time while I waited for the Phoenix to warm up. After a few hours, most of that morning actually, I finally told Exodus I needed to go back to work on the Phoenix, there was lots to do! I stripped the sheets off my bed "Looks like we're sleeping in yours tonight!" and dropped them in the cleaner near the common area on the way, turning the machine on. They stayed and rested in our room, a little worn out.

I walked through the airlock into the Phoenix. Pleasantly surprised at how warm she was now I took a moment to take her in now, not pressed for time and able to think as long as I needed to. Exodus had mentioned how bland the interior was, they were right, if we were to live in this, it needed some dragon touch. I was standing examining different things when Duke walked in, bringing me back to reality.

"So, what does it need?" he asked, taking notes mentally.

"Well, there's no power source at all, There's some solar on the roof, in theory I could enable that and it would maybe do life support and lighting, but it's not meant for any sort of travel" I explained

"Other than missing a power source?"

"Well, she's really new, she only saw 3 years of service before she was adrift. Her long range transmitter was shot off, but that was linked to human space anyways, so we don't need that." I paused before breaking the creepy news "The crew is still on board, Duke"

He looked shocked for a moment, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle "Okay, where are they?"

"We kept the crew quarters in vacuum, preserved in there. We're going to lay them to rest once we're mobile" I explained

"Okay, and just how do you think you're going to get it mobile?"

"I've been thinking" I looked around the ship "You have that half destroyed Rapier class in the junkyard" I started

"Ohhh no I've been saving that core, it's perfectly fine even though the rest of the ship is scrap!"

"I know! For this maybe?" I was fishing for a bone here. Duke's face went into deep thought mode, or smooth brain mode I'd tease him when I saw that look.

"Okay, three conditions!"

"Hit me, Duke, what are they?"

“One, this ship is yours, but if we’re giving you a core, it’s the station’s secondary, so if we need an off station part and Valthy isn’t available, you’re going to get it! This ship is now the biggest, so if a lot of us need to go somewhere, you’re taking us there.” he explained

First one was easy, we can do that! “Yes, sure that sounds fair!”

“Good! The lightning festival on Sandpit is in two months, and we all need a little break! Secondly, we’re still behind on work, so you have to do this in your spare time, without making the others tired, you can ask for help on their time off, but you can’t bother them during working hours, and they can’t work and make themselves tired!”

Second seemed fair as well “Okay! Done! I can even retrieve the reactor myself with no problems!”

“Good!” he replied.

“What’s the third?” I asked

He started smiling at me, his face spikes turning pink then progressing into red, his eyebrows lifted up. I had just lost my virginity a few hours ago and now he was propositioning me for a fucking power core?!?! Duke was a shameless flirt, this wasn’t the first time he made advances at me, and even if I said no it wouldn’t be the last time either! But this was completely beyond his normal harmless flirting!

“Duke, WHAT THE FUCK?!?” I yelled

“How bad you want that core?” he turned and walked away.

I marched back in forth in our small room, ranting away as Exodus listened!

“He wanted what? To fuck me? Make me suck his dick? The fucking nerve!” I had told Exodus the entire thing, I agreed to the other two conditions but this crossed the line. Exodus was actually laughing, they thought it was funny! But then they got serious for a moment and their mouth said something I could not believe.

“So we’re getting the core, right?” They smiled up at me

“Excuse me?”

“We need that core! You have a chance to get it, so you’re getting it right?”

“Exodus have you even listened to-”

“Yes! Deakon! Shut up a second!” They paused “Most dragon couples are not monogamous, one way to know for sure if we are is to test the line and see how we feel, I’m curious!” They let it soak in “We can use this to get our core, and also to test our new boundaries so we know. I promise if I feel jealousy or badly about it, I won’t hold it against you, and if you feel shitty, I’ll know to keep it between us too okay?” They explained.

I hated that they were right, but I'd prefer this 'test' to be a little more intimate and less of a sexual favor in return for parts.

"Go on! I'll be waiting here after and we know what to feel!" They playfully slapped my ass "Go get our core you stud muffin!"

Apprehensively I walked off, bothered by them thinking this could be a good idea.

Duke was sitting at the communal table, I thought alone, having a small meal and enjoying a drink. I took a deep breath and walked up to him, putting my hand on his shoulder. "Okay, Duke, I'm ready to get our core."

He spit out his drink and started laughing, laughing VERY hard "Holy shit! You thought I was serious!" He started laughing so hard I thought he was going to fall out of his chair. "You're funny as fuck!" after a few moments he settled down, still laughing under his words "The core is yours of course, but like I said, on your days off. You work the next for 4 and I don't think you've got enough time left today to pull a core!" He patted my shoulder "But good to know just how desperate you are to have your own ship!" He got serious for a moment "Wait, do you really think I'd be so creepy and gross?"

Drito spoke up, they were going through the cabinets and I hadn't noticed them there "Really? You've been here 3 years and though Duke would be a that way? I mean, he's flirted with all of us at one point but to hold your needs over you for sex? That's nothing he could ever do!" They started to laugh too.

I walked away in a huff "You're weird, Duke!" I yelled behind myself as I walked away, his laughter filling the room behind me. I started up the stairs but then I got an idea. Exodus was right, were we open like most dragons or not? This was a small experiment on our end, why not carry it out? Instead of going back to our room I went to the Phoenix and screwed around with stuff for an hour, taking notes of where things were and exploring the rooms we hadn't yet. Turned out the two rooms off the main room where the airlock was were meant to be labs, but we could gut them and have better purposes. The two generators and the huge rooms they occupied could also be better used. The captains suite was bigger than our current space and even had it's own washroom and shower. We really had a prize on our hands!

Eventually after what I think would be the right amount of time for bribery sex I made my way back to our room. Exodus was laying on the bed in their suit, idly reading and petting Chickadee. "So! Do we have the core?! Also what you took you so long!"

"How would you feel if I said yes?"

"I already know the answer and I'm fine" They paused and looked up to me "I think we're open, if you're okay with that!"

I sat on my bed and sighed, I thought about if positions were reverse, though I don't think I'd be so quick to slap their ass and tell them to go get our power core, I'd be fine if they explored new things, though the idea of exploring new things together was more more appealing.

Exodus started giggling.

“What? What is it?”

“It was a joke wasn’t it?!?”

“You little shit!” I walked over and slapped them with a pillow as they laughed. They got up and pushed me onto my bare bed.

“Good to know where we stand anyways!” they floated in front of me for a minute, unable to see their eyes through the visor “I hate this suit even more now, I can’t kiss you!”

Glavous was excited, he seemed to move around his suite gathering things for Jake as he sat in the middle of the plush rug on his floor. If Exodus and Deakon had seen him like this they would be asking questions or becoming a little concerned. He had gathered several candles and some scrolls, placing them in a bundle and giving them to Jake

“Your training kit! Light the candles several times through the day, to keep your practice up! These are copies of the ancient scrolls to give you hints and tricks to practice your training!” He told Jake

“Glavous, I haven’t agreed to train about anything, I’ve only discovered this yesterday and now you’re trying to alter my life course to devote myself to this?” Jake was exasperated, he agreed to meet up with Glavous to learn more, not to give his life away.

“You’ll want to train when you realize what you are capable of! Your power inside is so great! Like your brother, but you are unblocked! Whatever inhibits your brother is not inside of you! You could be one of the greatest in generations! I could FEEL you when you approached!”

“Glavous, I’m a soldier, I have commitments and my own goals! I cannot drop everything to learn to breathe fire!”

Glavous fiddled with some trinkets on a shelf, absorbing the words from his new student, at least, in his eyes, he already was his new student. “Okay then, Jake, Tell me, what are the goals and path that you have chosen?” Glavous already knew the answer, all that was left was to convince him.

“I want to avenge my parents, first off!”

“By killing Titan? Correct?”

Jake was shocked, how could he have known that? “Did you know? Why didn’t you tell Deakon?”

“Jake, I did not even know you existed until yesterday, I knew Deakon had a brother, I had no idea you held so much power, it radiates the truth like a volcano spreads its lava, but I can see through space and time!” He smiled “Deakon told me last night during a private conversation. Tell me, what are your other goals?”

“I want free our people from the oppression of the elite few that hold us back!” Jake got fired up, he

was his parents child, he also now knew dragon kind was meant for greatness.

“Jake, what if I told you, our goals in fact, align! I wish for Titan to be removed from power, if that requires taking his life, so be it, he has murdered hundreds by his own hand, let alone the millions that have died under his rule!”

“Okay, so you wish for me to be a tool of your goals?” Jake was feeling defiant.

“To a degree yes, but if it attains your own goals, what is the difference after all?” Glavous was nearly floating with his energy “As for your second goal, we are also the same! I KNOW our kind is meant for greatness, as you learn my own power and what I am capable of, you will see what we are meant for on a large scale!”

“What? That we are meant to rule the universe or something?” Jake was concerned at this guy’s god complex

“No of course not, no one is meant to ‘rule’ the universe!” But the next words did speak to him “We are however, meant to protect it! We are stifled by the chains of a few sociopaths, we are designed to break those chains and create a space of energy and activity, not this stagnant state of depression we’ve found ourselves upon!”

Jake sat for a long moment, considering his choices, he did want to continue to fight with the militia, and this could develop into a useful tool for that. He broke the long silence “Okay, I will train on two conditions!”

“I don’t think placing conditions on training would be a wise choice, I think what you’re saying, is you are willing to train if I could satisfy your concerns, would that be a more correct way of putting it?” Glavous was a little peeved as the way Jake said it, but this way did sort of make more sense

“Yes, that’s a nicer way of saying it.” he replied

“Go one then”

“I will continue my career in the militia, and return to them in two and a half months”

“Will you continue to train alone once you are there alone?” Glavous pressed, he knew he could make this work.

“Yes”

“And the second concern?”

“I may use these abilities for the revolution” Jake said

“I believe at first, you should keep these abilities private, at least until you’ve reached a stronger point, but in the meantime, I believe it wise to use these abilities only in self defense. I can accept that concerned should you accept mine” Glavous bargained, it was a good agreement.

“Fine, I accept, self defense only, for now!”

“Then we start your training now, we need for you to learn as much as possible in the two and half months I have you! Your brother as a practitioner of the same power can be your sparring partner. This is great he has been needing one of his own. My own power is too great for him right now.” He sighed “Your brother is jealous of your power, I feel it. He has great power within himself, as much as you do. I thought he was a master of the flame same as you, but I see now his thoughts of you clouded my view, it may not be his element. Already since finding you I see his aura evolving into his true element but it may yet to be seen. His grieving for his parents now holds him back. He may still be an element of fire, or something else.

“Your mind however is clear, and this will allow us to progress quickly, which considering our time constraint is very important. So your training begins now! Today we will teach you to clear your busy mind to focus solely on the element to control. If this progresses well then tomorrow we shall learn more ways to control the element. Does this make sense to you?”

“Yeah, it does, Glavous”

“Then let us begin, but tomorrow, please bring a different set of clothing. The military uniform does not bother me in the least, however in your studies you may, well, accidentally set fire to yourself. Drito may have something he can lend you”

Glavous began on simple meditation, clearing the mind to concentrate more on the power. Less clearing the mind and more about controlling it. For several hours Glavous taught Jake just how to think clearly about the element and to focus on it. Periodically he would ask Jake to blow a flame, noting how each time it was in greater control.

After a few hours a knock came at the door. The concentration was broken, but Glavous had even lost track of time. Exodus was at the entry, adorned in their flight suit to hide from the others.

“Where is Deakon? He should be with you!” Glavous seemed slightly annoyed

“Glavous, Deakon said he’s not training anymore, you’ve got your master of flame here. I tried to get him to come but said he was just going to start work on the Phoenix instead!” Exodus explained gently but Glavous was a little angry now, storming out of the room towards the airlocks. Jake got up and followed and Exodus trailed behind.

Glavous found the Phoenix, seeing the spirits but ignoring for them now, “We will talk another time” he said to no one from Jake’s point of view. Singh wasn’t offended, he knew the new dragon who could see him was on a mission. Glavous found Jake in one of the labs, under a console pulling out wires. “Deakon, it’s time to train now, the Phoenix will still be here when you are done!”

“Glavous, I’m not going to continue!” He didn’t even come out from under the console

“Why? Why is my master of flame no longer tr-”

“I’m not your master of flame, my brother is! It’s fine! I brought him to you, although by mistake, and now you’ve got someone stronger!” He pretended to do something under the consoles but it wasn’t fooling Glavous

“If you think you’re the first champion I’ve grabbed by the horn and dragged to training like a whelping you’d be greatly mistaken. Your power is as strong as you brother’s and once we unblock whatever is holding you back you will see how great you are! It’s likely this low confidence now!”

Deakon stayed silent under the console, still pretending to be busy “So be it!” Glavous reached under the console and grabbed Deakon’s horn, dragging him out from under with a surprising amount of strength and pulled him to his feet. “Now are you going to come, or am I dragging you kicking and screaming like a child today?”

“Yes Yes fine! Just let go of my horn!” Glavous did as he asked and walked back to his suite, the three following closely. Jake snickering slightly as they left.

Today was simple, a guided group meditation, now that were a group. Jake was little bored having done similar already all day, but after a few hours things were returning to normal.

“Deakon, stop being jealous like a child, trust in me when I say I see great power in you as well, if I hadn’t I wouldn’t have bothered to take you this far. You’ve been a pain in my neck to train!” Glavous was a little more relaxed at the end, but still annoyed.

“Yes, Glavous, I’m sorry, but I do feel useless” He said

“Something is blocking your power but I see it now lifting, soon your power will likely exceed your brother for some time, as you have been training with me for longer!” He sighed, annoyed at the low mood of someone meant to be a master of their abilities “Put your faith in me and this process!”

“Yes Glavous, I will, I’m just having a bad day”

He took a deep breath “I want you tomorrow evening alone, I wish to council you more about these feelings” Deakon nodded “You three may go now, and have a meal!”

Everyone had gathered for one of Drito’s nice meals, spicy tonight, delicious food before sleep. Chatting and getting to know Jake, knowing he would only be around a short time for now. It was nice for Jake to feel so welcome, the next couple months would be a nice break from the militia. Tomorrow would be yet another busy day as the group struggled to keep up with the workload and Jake would need to train more, everyone retired somewhat early.

The Rapier class was twice as wide as the Phoenix, when it was complete anyways, nearly half of of this one was missing, the remaining warp driver was already taken for a repair long ago, this ship had been here longer then Exodus and I. She died in a battle at some point, the right side ripped to shreds. Duke and his group found it and dragged it back, after finding the perfectly fine power core inside, leaving it in his floating “Junkyard” in space. I had already ran the measurements, it would fit through the ejection hole in the Phoenix, just barely. A little surprising, since a complete Rapier class was twice as wide as the Phoenix

From the power input I was giving it at the station though, there was another odd problem of using a dragon power core in a human ship. Our output power was very high, I was worried if the Phoenix could handler her new heart, but maybe a simple power regulator would be a good solution. I had

thought of an elegant solution, leaving the power output from this core to a new power bus directly to the warp drivers, and split the original power bus away, putting a large power controller between the buses.

I had set a vacuum to decompress the Phoenix overnight, once she was empty, Olto agreed to patch the hole in the reactor room permanently while I pulled the core from the destroyed dragon warship. It took the better part of the day just to get the core loose by myself, I simply cut a hole in the bottom of the ship's corpse and use the local shuttle to pull it out. It was time consuming, but it went without incident. I will admit I was nervous, after what happened during our recovery of the Phoenix. Perhaps it was time to start a "no working alone" rule out in the junkyard here. I just took my time, being extremely careful, which did make it take longer.

Once I used the shuttle to bring the core back to the station I shoved it up the ejection port Olto was kind enough to open for me with it's 200 turns, and let it float inside. It was very tight, I think within a few millimeters around it, but it did fit. The next issue was getting it mounted up inside, but that would wait until the next day. It was later afternoon now and Glavous was already calling me to come for my day off training.

His counseling a couple nights ago really did help me feel better, there was lingering feelings of uselessness but he assurance convinced me enough to continue with him. Today was strangely fun, sparing with Jake for the first time. Glavous had taught him to throw fireballs from his hand like I could, but weakly, and being his first day trying it, his were still about the same level. We used the control over the element to defend ourselves, learning that we could become immune to at least small fire, we had a fireball fight like human children in winter would have a snowball fight. We were both laughing and enjoying it by the end, while Glavous shook his head. He now had several burn marks on his walls.

The next day I went back to work on the Phoenix. Working with Kelly previously we had come up with rough designs to hold the new power core in place. I started welding in the frame to hold it, realizing this would be the time consuming part. I welded for entire day. I was no where at Olto's level but I could get it done, eventually. In the evening I trained with Glavous and Jake, with Exodus around this time too.

This became my life over the next few weeks, working for the station, helping with the workload. My evenings and days off spent training with my brother and getting the power core installed. Overall it took a month, mostly alone, but I got it mounted into place. The Phoenix had a new heart, now it was time to get her running.

I waited for the work week to pass by so I could concentrate on this for the whole day. Even Glavous agreed to let me have a day off! Exodus helped me hook up a control system to the core, under Pike and Kelly's supervision. Finally we could start the core. The power for start up came from the warp coil's capacitor banks, they had inadvertently recharged while we had her boosted from the station. It was more than enough to fire up the reactor, which was a good thing for us, if for any reason the core shuts down while we're away from the station, we would have a means to get it restarted after it was repaired. I loaded in a bar of the fuel for the reactor, a 50KG bar of Deuterium hidden within a protective sealed shell. The core would eat away at until it was ready for more, likely at idle a year, but for long warp usage it would likely last a couple weeks. I made a rack in the corner of the room to securely hold more of these interchangeable cartridges for the core, they are pretty standard for dragon vessels, scavenging the junkyard I had found a few more, but they were partially consumed, we had

fuel for likely a few months maybe a couple of years now too.

Exodus grabbed my hand, and I took a deep breath and pressed the start, the core did come to life to our relief! We switched from station power over to her own for the first time in 6 years. Now came the fun part, where Exodus's talents would take over. This was a stand alone power source with a control system, we had a ship with it's own systems, now they needed to talk to each other! I went into the electrical control room and start pushing up all the breakers. There were so many, but I wanted to make sure EVERYTHING worked! There were even a few labeled for things we planed to removed, labeled 'Lab A' 'Lab B' but the 'Comm' immediately tripped, maybe a piece of the damaged long range transceiver was still there, shorting out the circuit, it didn't matter. I did leave off the breakers relating to the crew quarters for now, we could deal with that after we follow through on our promise.

Exodus and I made our way to the bridge, the screens were still booting but only a few moments later things started coming to life. Different displays started showing various data, a couple of screens turned red to our right. I stepped over and looked, making sense of them. These were screens relating to the core, and the ship was simply recognizing the core was missing. Suddenly we heard a female human voice speaking in English, we turned and in the center of the bridge was a console, a holographic human woman stood in it, translucent and wearing a uniform that was identical to the ones the corpses where wearing.

"Captain Singh! Did we make it?!" she asked. I forgot humans used these AI's, dragons simply did not, we didn't have the computational power for it.

"Oh hi! Who are you?" Exodus asked, of course they assumed it would be friendly

"Who are you?!?" she demanded, suddenly the lights on the bridge went red "Security alert! There are intruders on the bridge!" she yelled. But received no response from any crew.

"I'm sorry, your crew didn't make it" Exodus explained "We found your adrift and recovered the ship" The AI seemed to pause, she was studying records, but the ship was dead the entire time, except apparently a single circuit had some sort of backup.

"Real time clock indicated it's been over 6 years since I was last online" she stated. "Accessing logs" The light turned from red back to normal. There seemed to be a few minutes, the AI was still staring off into space, we waiting intently until she finally spoke. "I have reviewed Captain Sing's final logs, and the logs of the rest of the crew, and none mention any dragons on board. Did you steal me?"

"No" I said "Like I said we salvaged you, brought you to our home, and gave you a new power source"

She seemed to check out for a minute again "That's a lie, I cannot communicate with any fission control software, from my point of view the core is offline and the generators are at zero RPM"

"It's not a lie, you've got a new core, but you can't see the power yet" Exodus explained "If you're an AI, it would be nice to have your help to connect the new core system to the ship!"

"I am the ship, and I'm not going to help thieves take me over!"

I sighed, I was instantly going to make the threat "If you're not going to help, we can power down the ship and rip out every one of your circuits and throw your processor in the sun, we have more than

enough parts around to make a completely new control system if we have to” It was a nearly empty threat, this would set us back months.

“Stand by” she disappeared from the projector for a moment. I guess we would soon learn if this AI had any sort of self preservation programmed into her. A moment later we got our answer as she reappeared. “I’ve done some calculations and projections. I can confirm the death of Captain Harmon Singh and the entire crew, and I can also confirm you had nothing to do with their deaths. Considering I no longer have a crew to protect, I can acceptably take reasonable steps to protect myself. Therefore I can give you information you require as long as you keep me online”

“Okay good! So you can tell us who you are and your functions then correct?” I asked it.

“Yes” it replied, not smart enough to complete the answer perhaps

“Well, who are you and what are your functions?” I demanded

“I am E.M.B.E.R. Experiment Monitoring Bot for Employee Research. My primary function is for helping with observation and calculation in the astrophysics research this vessel is designed for. My secondary functions include ship maintenance, security, health monitoring, mission advice and planning, course planning, and communication control. Noting of which, the long range quantum transceiver is not reporting either”

“It’s been shot off, we haven’t replaced it with one of our own yet.” Exodus said “So tell us, how do we gain complete control without following through with my partner’s threat here, you obviously seem to want to continue being around right?”

“Sorry, I can’t complete anything relating to that without command codes. I’m sure you understand, and hopefully you don’t delete me for this. I know Captain Singh was an intelligent man, perhaps he left the command codes so-”

“I have the codes!” Exodus said. I couldn’t see through the damn helmet but I’m willing to bet their spikes were purple, talking to Singh himself”

She disappeared and a blank line showed up in her display “Please enter the command code phonetically”

“Echo, X-ray, Papa, Lima, Zero, Romeo, Three, Romeo, Five!”

“Command code accepted!” but she did not appear back, the line stayed in the hologram. “I assume you wish to transfer command, based on the information I have and you have given me?”

“Yes” Exodus replied “But can we have two in command?”

“Stand by” she was silent for a moment. “Two party command mode engaged, you will both need to enter command codes, and in the absence of one officer from the ship only one will be required to complete commands, excluding deleting the other’s code, do you accept?”

“Yes” we both said

“Very good, please enter the first and last name of the one of the co-captains”

“We don’t have last names, we’re dragons!”

“Enter your name, I will default your last name to ‘Dragon’”

“Okay, my name is Exodus and my code will be” As they spoke, the phonetic alphabet conveniently showed up in her hologram “Sierra, Lima, One, Tango, Lima, Zero, Victor, Three, Romeo” I snickered as I saw it on the screen.

“Co Captain voice print and code registered, Next Captain, please state your name and enter a command code”

“Deakon, and my code, Three, Four, Tango, Mike, Yankee, Alpha, Five, Five”

“Co Captain voice print and code registered.” She appeared on screen again. Standing still before speaking. “I’ve reasserted your command in all systems now, please excuse me I must reboot to make final changes” and her display turned off.

“I sure hope she’s not deleting everything or something!” I said

“I think she’s not lying, but it’s weird for me now, to talk to someone without feeling something” Exodus didn’t have experience with AI, they have no real emotions and their thoughts were digital, they were a device, immune to their power.

A few moments later She reappeared “I am back online, and confirmed, the U.S.V. Phoenix now in command of Captain Exodus Dragon and Captain Deakon Dragon.”

“Can you just called us Exodus and Deakon, please?” I asked it

“Name preference set! Sure thing!” she seemed much happier now. “Now about this power source I am plugged into”

“You’ve got a dragon fusion core now, it’s probably a lot more power than your old system made. The steam turbines and generators are still in place, but we will be removing them to make space. What we need from you is a way for the original systems you control to control the reactor throttle of sorts. Right now it can only idle unless we manually update the power.” I explained

“Security protocol prohibits me from direct control over power and drive systems as well as life support and environmental controls, only monitoring. But I can tell you the protocols the ship uses to request more power from the old reactor, you use those data paths to create a way to control the reactor directly to drive the steam turbines and reactor control rods” She explained

“Uh, our reactor is direct to electricity, it’s output is instant” I told her

“Oh, then we’re going to have a little bit more work, can I recommend a large capacitor bank between the reactor and the main power bus to absorb large loads and power spikes?”

“There’s already one in place, yes”

“Then it seems like you’re right, the last missing link is a control system, I’m sure working together we can come up with a solution. I would recommend Lab A as a good place to start, as there is going to be some programming and circuit development involved”

“Which one is that?” Exodus asked

“Port side, off the main community room, I’ll illuminate the lab green so you know which one, and I’ll see you there” She disappeared. We turned and walked to the rear of the ship, sure enough the one on the right side of ship was light up green now, turning white as we entered.

“Deakon, maybe it’s for the best we leave one of these labs alone, it may turn out to be useful!” Exodus said.

“I agree, but the other one, we don’t need two, it’s not a science vessel anymore. We’re going to reduce her weight quite a bit removing those generators too!”

It was Exodus’s turn now, my work was mostly done, I could relax while Exodus worked with Ember and Pike to make that control system, but I had one more trick up my sleeve. One thing I gathered was finding the nicest control mount of all the ships in the junkyard, and planned to put it in the Phoenix for Exodus. But not how it was, I had gathered some really nice purple fabric and purple metallic paint with metal flakes in it, sparkly! I reconditioned the whole thing in my spare time over the next week, Re-upholstered the soft parts of the mount and snuck it to the bridge and mounted it near the front, where the humans had a small “observation” area in the nose of the ship. She was a science vessel after all, so a place to stand and look at the pretty things they were studying made sense. I convinced the AI and Pike to make a connection to it to control the ship. It was really easy for those two, the control mount just emulated joystick input from the original pilot controls. It looked really nice, the first of our personal touches and I even managed to fit it in without removing the original pilot controls, now we could leave both operational! I threw a cover over it for, to surprise Exodus later.

There was a tiny detail I wanted dealt with sooner than later, but it did involve a space walk, making me nervous again. I got some paint and went out through the airlock next to the Phoenix, using mag boots to stay attached, I painted over the Castle logo and the text below it. Then I made my way to the other side and painted over the “U.S.V.” part of her name, and her registration number. She wasn’t a human ship anymore! The painted wasn’t a perfect match but I cared more about getting rid of those markings and corporate logo than having her paint perfectly match.

One more modification I wanted was replacing the maneuvering thrusters. Human ships were not really well known yet, but already they were known for being stiff and slow to turn and control. This was a thing I think a little dragon technology could fix. I wandered out to the junkyard one afternoon, pulling some thrusters off another larger ship and brought them back. I was able to replace them all in a day, but made the power and fuel connection later that week. Once she was up and running she should turn a lot faster now. Luckily they worked nearly the same way as human thrusters did, ionic argon driven, easy to get propellant for, we even had a large supply of it at the station.

Weeks had passed in total, we were running low on time, the Lightning Festival on Sandpit was in two weeks, and Jake had to be returned in a month. But the day finally came! We moved what few belongings we had into the Captain’s suite on the phoenix. Singh had told Exodus that his belongings could be disposed of, he couldn’t use them or needed them in the afterlife. It felt wrong, so we did keep

some of his finer possessions, a couple plaques and awards, some interesting human artifacts, and distributed them around the ship, paying honor to his life and the beginnings of the ship. One we could retrieve the belongings of the others we planned to do the same for them. This room however, we made it ours. The two books from Earth we managed to keep safe all these years, we read 100 times on the prison ship, my blue cloth from the day I left earth, even Exodus's now horribly tattered tail satchels they were wearing when I met them, the last iteration of the costume they hid in on Sandpit, we hung them around to remind ourselves where we came from.

The second half of the day was the exciting part, I invited Jake and Glavous along for this. Once they were on board I closed the airlock behind them. We went to the bridge, the release was there and nervously I flipped the switch.

Ember made herself known "Hello, Guests, welcome aboard!"

"Thanks" Jake replied in English, awkwardly, he wasn't used to AI's either.

"What did this thing say?" Glavous asked in Draconis, we forgot he wouldn't understand her.

"She's welcoming you aboard!" I said, walking to the front of the bridge "But before we take off I have a surprise for you Exodus!"

"Oh? Is that the thing you've hidden under that sheet?" They laughed "You don't hide things very well, what is it?" I yanked the sheet off the control mount, they shiny fresh paint and fresh purple fabric looked really nice in this light. "OH! I LOVE IT!" Exodus stripped off their helmet and flight suit and crawled on "And you've adjusted it perfectly! Thank you!"

"Of course! We said we would give it our own touch, and I think this is perfect for you! For us even!" I walked back toward the Captain's chair, which I had also modified with a hole for dragon tails, and sat down in it. "Are you ready, Exodus?"

They were thrilled to finally be able to fly the Phoenix, after the long process of retrieving her and retrofitting her with dragon technology "Yea, I'm more than ready, let's see what she can do!" They wiggled into the control mount, making themselves comfortable, then put on the mini display over their eyes. I got up, realizing the controls I need were on another panel, releasing the airlock. Eventually we should take the time to reorganize the bridge for two instead of how many it was designed for. It was inconvenient right now, requiring to go from station to station, but I went to the airlock control, and released it. There was an audible metallic clang from the rear as the Phoenix let go of the station.

"Impulse thrust is online" Ember stated "Ready for departure" Exodus pressed up gently on the throttle controls and she moved under her own power for the first time in 6 years. Once we had a little distance from the station so our engines didn't burn a hole in it, Exodus pushed the throttles and moved their wings. The ship responded, rolling to one side and picking up speed rather quickly.

"I didn't expect her to be this maneuverable, for a human ship!" Exodus told us as they leveled out again "I think we should have some fun! Test her out!" but before we could even respond the Phoenix rolled 360 degrees to the left and leveled out again. "Oh! Oh wow!" They took a moment "There's some calibration needed for the control mount, but she handles like a small ship!" They Pushed the throttles all the way forward now, the ship lurched forward "She got some kick too!" Exodus had a few minutes of fun, performing more rolls and a couple loops, the Phoenix was getting to stretch her wings

and her modifications were really showing. Glavous was smiling while Jake held his arms across his chest. He had seen excellent pilots so wasn't impressed yet.

"Okay Exodus, let's straighten out and test out the warp drive!" I stated

"Good idea! We don't know how well this even works yet" Exodus took the time to get the Phoenix perfect straight, the locked in the controls. Then they leaned back and put their hand on the large heavy switch. "Ready?"

I sat down in the original pilot seat, we decided to leave FTL controls there for now, except for engagement, which was moved to the big red switch on the mount like other dragon ships. "Ready!" I answered back

"Coil capacitors are charged, the ship is ready!" Ember butted in, no one asked, but it was good information I guess.

"Ember, can you call out speed every half factor?" I asked her

"Sure!" she replied "Currently warp 0" We were going to have to work with her about telling us information we didn't need.

"Okay" I nodded at Exodus "Flick it!" Exodus pressed up on the switch, the sound of the coils working started to echo off the hull, but stayed at a low groan. We did start moving but barely at what the full impulse jets would have us do.

"Wait, Deakon what's going on?" Exodus looked worried. Jake looked down at my screen and laughed, he knew.

"I left the core at idle, just to make sure it works before we-" I was explaining but got interrupted

"Warp 0.5" Ember stated That was a good sign, picking up speed at idle.

"Well, everything works, so let's go!" I put my finger on the silly human touch screen, though it was nice and felt futuristic, I'd prefer a throttle handle for this, we would add it later perhaps. I moved the finger up slightly on the "Power request" and the ship started picking up speed. The tunnel forming in our view and as it flashed as we broke the luminal barrier and Ember spoke up again

"Warp 1"

I looked at my screen, I was only at 15% request, and there was a speed readout there too it was climbing still.

"Warp 1.5"

I pressed by finger on the screen and increased to 30%

"Warp 2"

"How does everything look to you, Ember?" Exodus asked

“All systems are nominal! I will note power into the coils is nearing what the original power system was capable of, but the coils were designed to handle more. Warp 2.5. Coil temperatures are stable”

I slid my finger to throttle request to 50% and she soon spoke again “Warp 3, this speed was the ships original cruising speed specification, but I see we’re only at 50% power request.”

“Correct, here come some more!” I slid my finger up the screen, 75% power.

“Warp 3.5” and only a short pause “Warp 4, we are now 1,000 times the speed of light and climbing, We have exceeded the original specifications for max speed!”

“I think this is fastest we’ve ever gone ourselves, what is it?” Exodus asked, getting worried

“Deakon, I think you should back off, this can’t be right!” Jake said

“Warp 4.5!” Ember seemed excited herself now.

“I think we’re okay, remember, I built the specs!” I said, I pressed it up to 100%

“Warp 5!” after a short pause “Coil temperatures are now rapidly climbing! Warp 5.5!”

“Something is wrong with your sensors! It’s not possible to be going this fast!” Exodus yelled.

“Warp 6!” there was about 30 seconds of silence as we rode it out. “ALERT! COIL TEMPERATURES ARE APPROACHING CRITICAL!” I nodded and throttled down, maybe a bit too much too fast. I pulled it down to 20% and the ship lurched back as we slowed. “Coil temperature is stable, but not dropping, I recommend disengagement until they cool down” Exodus looked at me, I looked around the room, everyone else seemed concerned, even Glavous, but I was VERY pleased.

“Okay, Exodus drop us out!” I said, They turned and pulled back the switch, and we dropped back to sub light speed. They laid into the control mount and used their wings and throttles to bring us to a dead stop. The bridge was silent, I seemed to be the only one not scared. “Ember, confirm our location and compare it to speed recordings and confirm we moved as fast as you said.” While the others were worried we just created a monster, I was convinced it was a calibration error.

“Standby” and Ember took on her thinking pose.

“Deakon if those are real readings you just made the fastest ship in the known galaxy!” Jake exclaimed

“I think it’s an error, we just fed a ton of power to human coils and there’s no telling what went wrong here. Once she gets back to us we can figure out what happened. But the good news is we have a working ship!” I explained, I was getting excited!

“That was in English again.” Glavous spoke up “How fast was it?”

“Warp 6” Exodus looked back, still in a little shock “1 hundred thousand times the speed of light”

Glavous raised his eyebrows “Oh, how nice, you can get anywhere in dragon territory pretty quick, that

is very great news! What do you think Singh?”

“I didn’t know she could do this” the answer only heard by Glavous and Exodus.

“Calculation results have returned. Base on our current position, the speed readings were correct” Now I was concerned like the others, this didn’t seem possible “I also created a handy chart, using this trip as calibrations, of our maximum speed time ratings. We can maintain warp 6 but only safely for 32 seconds. Our fastest cruising speed is safely warp 4.5, and most efficient speed is warp 3.8. I recommend an hour cool down before we engage the coils again, both for safety and for temperature calibration. The previous power source was not capable of overheating the driver coils, and these specifications were never imputed”

“Where are we exactly?” I asked, Ember’s display changed to a local start chart, showing the location of the station and our patch of how we got here.

“Deakon, it would take the Talon 4 hours to get here at full speed, we got here in 10 minutes!” Exodus told us.

I thought hard for a minute, there was more testing to do to confirm everything, and I didn’t want to get people excited or have the ship taken away. “It seems human coils driven by dragon power makes something really special. Let’s keep this between us for now, at least until we can confirm everything. If this turned out not to be some sort of mistake, we can retrofit other ships like this!” All 4 nodded in agreement. “Good, as soon as Ember says the coils are cooled enough, we’ll head back!”

Glavous spoke up “So, does that mean we have a little down time here?”

“It looks like it, while these coils cool down, yeah” I said, realizing afterwards I knew what I just got us into. Glavous pulled two candles from the satchel on his hip.

“You two know what to!” He smiled.

Chapter 13 Secrets

Our routine became morning and evening. We'd often make love and fall asleep cuddling each other, then wake up and make love again before showering and starting our days. Once the Phoenix had her power core up and running I could finally shower in privacy without worry about the others finding my purple scales. Finding this ship was one of the best things that happened to us, Duke was right, I'll give him that!

We did trust the others on the station, after 3 years we had no reason not to. Some of our clients however were not so trustworthy. There was an equine race from down spin that would frequent the wastelands looking to trade or sell their "products" among the lawlessness the area provided. They were not so trustworthy, I once caught one on our living level checking the doors, luckily everyone knew to lock them. Normally I locked the airlock door to Phoenix while we slept and during the day when we were away, or Deakon would remember to, but evidently last night we both forgot.

I was awake first, I opened the shade to our one window ever so slightly, letting the star we orbited shine in. Deakon stirred so I kissed him awake then getting up on my knees while keeping face to face with him I wiggled my hips. "I love fucking love you, and I love the way you wake me now" I giggled as he got up, and got behind me.

The best thing about living in the Phoenix now was the privacy, I could be a bit loud! Now that our relationship was physical I realized Deakon had awoken something inside me, I was insatiable! Deakon had told me more than once already he didn't know if he could always keep up. I was being loud, a little too loud, we didn't hear the footsteps coming, not that bare dragon feet on metal grate floor made much sound to begin with.

Even with the ship to ourselves we often kept the door to the captains suite closed when we slept, most out of habit. Suddenly it slid open and Duke just started talking. "We got a lot to do, there's two more arriving to- WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS?!"

Never mind the fact my mate was inside me, Duke could see I was purple, plain as day! I pulled forward and pulled my wings tight against myself and started rolling up in the one sheet we had trying to hide as Deakon started yelling back "DUKE! THE HELL MAN! DON'T YOU KNOCK?!?"

"Well I didn't think you'd be fucking! Hell I didn't even think you'd still share a room with this entire ship you have!" Duke was trying to defend barging in, but he knew he made a mistake.

"The other rooms are 'occupied' anyway, remember?!?" Deakon reminded him

"Well you two lied to us! You said you weren't a couple!" Duke looked down Deakon's front and said something completely in character for him, the shameless flirt "I see why they like you tho, that's impressive!"

"Duke! Stop looking at my dick!" Deakon grabbed a pillow and held it in front of him.

Duke laughed "Sorry, it distracted me with all that... ANYWAY you two lied!"

"No we didn't! We weren't together when we arrived!" Deakon explained "This is sort of recent!"

“How recent?” he asked

“When we found the Phoenix, we were alone for weeks, remember?” Deakon told him “Things just evolved”

“You should have told me! Deakon I wouldn’t have played that prank with the power core” He stifled some laughter “Though it’s still really funny” Then he just instantly got back to serious “Were you two just going to keep your relationship secret from us all?”

“Well what business is it anyone’s?” Deakon said

“It’s not really anyone’s business! But running this place as long as I have I’ve learned one thing, secrets fester into problems!” Duke explained “People get resentful when secrets are kept from them, they feel they can’t be trusted, then it grows from there!”

That’s when I spoke up, I was rather confused, there’s no way he wasn’t seeing me, even though I tried to cover up, my head was poking out of the sheet the whole time, and since he had surprised us and already saw, I wasn’t going to bother trying to use my powers to convince him I was green or not even in the room. “Seriously, Duke, this is what you’re pissed off about?”

“Yeah, why? What other secrets are you two keeping?” He looked at me, then back at Deakon, then back at me. “Well?!” I gestured at myself. “You? What about you? Tell me!” he said sternly. I gestured at my face “WHAT?!” he yelled

“Duke, I’m fucking purple!” I yelled back

“I can see that! But I want to know what else are you keeping from us? Tell me!” he was annoyed, thinking we were playing some game or something. But after a moment his famous realization face hit him.

“There it is, the smooth brain look” Deakon teased

“Shut up, Deakon” he retorted, his brain soon after finished processing “Exodus, is that why you hide in your flight suit? Because you’re purple?” I nodded “Why?”

“Don’t you know Duke?” I asked

“Know what? That some old people think you’re weird just because of your color morph? I’m not fucking old or think so narrow minded, and neither do the others on this station, I hand picked everyone else here and I did that for a reason, I wanted smart people, and they are! And they wouldn’t be bothered in the least!” his expression was changing, from the flirtatious lovable hardworking idiot we knew into just for a moment, sort of a father figure “Exodus you are loved around here, you should come clean about this too, then you don’t have to be restrained in that suit anymore!”

I took a long sigh, really considering it. “I don’t know, Duke, let me think about it, okay?”

“Please do, you won’t regret it” Then the flirtatious idiot came back out “You have really pretty eyes too, I’d like to see them around more!”

“Duke!” Deakon got his attention back, seemingly he was a little defensive of his mate, “Why did you barge in to begin with?”

“OH! We got two more ships coming in today, small repairs thankfully, I’d like you to take care of.” He paused “We’re all getting tired as hell. The lightning festival on Sandpit is coming up in a week, and it takes 5 days to get there, as well as everyone needs a break. So what I came here to ask, is did you speed test this ship, and can we take all 15 of is to get there, well 16 if your brother comes?”

“Yes, we speed tested it, we can definitely get there in 5 days” Deakon answered, keeping our speed a little secret for now, in defiance of the conversation we just had “I think the ship is definitely big enough for us all, but with the crew quarters being used as a morgue it’s going to be floor and hammock space like when a lot of use the Talon go somewhere”

“That’s fine!” Duke said “I’ll let everyone know you two are taking us”

“What about the station? Is it going to be okay with no one here?” I asked.

“Well, someone might have to draw straws, as much as everyone wants to go you’re right, someone should stay behind for security and to keep the place together for the time we’re gone” Duke thought about it for a moment “Okay, we’re going to stop work early then, get the two quick repairs done and call it a day, then we’re going to have a meeting, take it easy tomorrow while everyone prepares, then head to Sandpit the day after”

“Okay, we’ll get the ship ready tomorrow for the trip” Deakon replied.

“See you in a bit then” Duke turned away and left the ship, returning to the station. Deakon started putting on his cloth and top while I got off the bed and started messaging Pike. I was going to be late, I needed to talk to Glavous about something.

“So it’s finally begun then?” Glavous was busying himself at one of his counters, his back to me “I honestly thought it would have happened longer ago. I felt the drop in your power after your mission to retrieve your ship, but I thought maybe it was just exhaustion from events”

“Drop in power? What do you mean?” This surprised me, I hadn’t even noticed anything in myself.

“It wasn’t extreme, you loved him for a while now, but a relationship does distract from your powers. If it had happened sooner it may have held you back, but now you’re quite powerful, so it doesn’t make a large difference, but it does still have an impact” He turned and brought two mugs, one for me and one for himself. Glavous really enjoyed his morning char. He made it better in his room than the machine in the common area did as well. “You will also feel your love much stronger than a typical dragon, it’s an emotion that strongly connected to the powers of the mind, over time you may notice things that other relationships don’t experience. If he is in pain, you will be as well, when he is happy, you will share in that happiness.” I accepted the mug and sipped, Glavous sat down on the rug in front of me “Which brings us to an awkward conversation now” he looked into my eyes, his spikes were rosy pink, a little embarrassed which was very strange for him.

“Glavous, look, I don’t need ‘the talk’ I’m an adult!” I laughed

“Oh, I’m already very aware you two have discovered how physical love works, remember, your old room was not far from mine.” I blushed, I didn’t realize “But there is a certain ‘problem’ that arises when a master of the mind finds themselves physically involved.”

“Glavous, please don’t tell me I’m even more abnormal”

“I’m sure you’ve noticed by now, Exodus. All your emotions are extreme for you, you do feel them much stronger than others normally would. You are quick to become happy, but also quick to anger, and you cry very easily. It’s not a sign of weakness, it is in fact, a sign of your strength.” He took a deep breath, this was awkward for him, I could tell “It’s something I’ve seen happened to every master of the mind or soul that I’ve trained, who has also ended up in love” He looked around “You may already be experiencing it” he looked into my eyes then away again, this gold dragon was really fighting to tell me this, and I was becoming worried as he was becoming more embarrassed. “Your stronger than normal emotional connections will awaken things inside of you. The connection to physical touch and stimulation from your lovers is extremely heightened for you. The emotions of lust and love will become like a drug, calling to you constantly.

“So I’m horny as fuck?!” I exclaimed, I much more open about the topic of sex than Glavous.

“Exodus!” He paused “Although your correct, your wording is a little distasteful”

“Sorry, Glavous, but you’re right, I have been feeling it. Since the first time, I can’t keep my hands off him, I think it’s already getting to him. Although so far he is very receptive”

Glavous raised his hand to me “Exodus, I know the topic of sex is normally an open topic for other dragons, however I am not interested in the details between my students.”

“Oh, I’m very sorry Glavous, I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable, but I did come to you with this question, I had a thought it was related to my powers and it seems it is”

“In my experience, yes, yes it is. Though most have been more discrete, you’re also not the first to open up and ask for my guidance in the topic.” He took another long breath “However, even with my many years of experience in life, sexual interactions has not been a topic that I am thoroughly wise or invested in. This is a very ‘different’ interaction for me, but it’s also necessary for you to know going forward, this intense sex drive can and will distract you at time from your training”

“So, how do I overcome this?” I asked

“From what the others told me in the past, they really don’t. You will lean to control these emotions and feelings with time, and you will regress in your abilities until you have control over them, but they will always be there. They will require either an outlet or great concentration to eliminate.” He took a sip of his char “Knowing you as well as I do, I feel like the first is the better option, Deakon helped you awaken this state within you, for now, only Deakon can help you deal with it”

I thought deeply about things for a second, we had briefly talked about being open, what if at some point I become too much for him? Would he want me to seek a second “outlet”? Would it damage our relationship? Would I have to just learn to ignore it completely? I think from here it was a personal talk between Deakon and I. I finished my char with him and stood up. “Thank you for your time, Glavous,

it means a lot to me you endured this conversation to help, I feel now how awkward it was for you”

“Of course I wish to help, even if it’s hard for me” He smiled and sipped from his mug as I left.

“Deakon, the others are busy finishing up, I know you’ve got this!” Duke said, before sending me off to fix the two new arrivals nearly along.

Duke was mostly right, the two repairs of the day were mostly easy. The first one was a little more complex than originally thought. A small dragon cargo ship had lost her right coil drive, they limped her in to us. It turned out to be a blown up capacitor bank, not a big deal, and we had one of the same spec around, but it was a bit of an involved job to get it replaced, it took Lask and I 3 hours.

The second job did turn out to be easier. The other ship belonged to some Orions, an equine like race I had seen before, they caused trouble around the station before but luckily these ones didn’t even need to dock. They told us they were having a hard time getting the ship to turn, one of their thruster groups wasn’t responding. Our inspection found a group of thrusters had somehow been mysteriously damaged. They claimed they had no idea but it was obviously shot. They paid ahead for the service, they had a habit of negotiating after the work was done Duke had had enough, their species always paid before work now. We replaced the thrusters quickly, and away they went.

I went back to the common area, it was nearly time for Duke’s little meeting. I was assuming it would be about the trip to Sandpit, but oddly there wasn’t a big meeting before with previous years. Maybe it was only because of the fact nearly everyone was going this year. Usually their ship could only handle half the group, so I figured that was the big deal. Oh how wrong I was.

Duke and Drito were already in the common area, a couple bottles were brought out onto the bar and a lineup of shot glasses. This was different for sure. A few moments later Glavous and Jake appeared, Jake appeared a little tired, I guess they were training him on his flame. Exodus and Pike came next, coming from their joint Lab, Exodus hidden in their suit as always. Sash and Kelly showed up together “Oh, it’s been a while since we did this, things must be a little rougher than I thought!” Kelly said.

“Did what?” I asked

“Oh, Deakon, you’ll see, it’ll be refreshing too, I hope” Sash added.

Over the next few minutes the rest would gather, sitting around the long rectangular table. Duke standing at one end. Drito placed shot glasses in front of everyone, Glavous declining his. Next he placed three bottles along the table, so everyone could reach them as they wanted. Exodus and I sat at the corner furthest from Duke, Glavous and Jake sat across from us.

“Okay, everyone is here!” Duke starting going off “There’s been some friction lately, it’s been a while since we’ve air our grievances together like this, since before Exodus and Deakon came around. We all know this is going to go one of two ways, we’ll be at each other’s throats in 10 minutes, get it all out of system, and we’ll be fine in a couple days, or we’re going to talk it out and be fine by the end of the night.” I was really surprised at the topic, I thought this would be about the trip or plans for the station, not to get things off our chests. Duke raised his small glass and took his shot, after swallowing he asked “So, does anyone want to start?” Surprisingly he didn’t look at us, he looked at Kelly, then around the

table. Apparently there were a few things going on the station Exodus and I weren't aware of"

After a few seconds Exodus stood up. "I know over the last 3 years some of you have been curious about me, why I'm always covered. I want you all to know over this time I've come to trust all of you. After consulting with Duke earlier today, I think it's time you met the real me." Their voice was shaking as hard as their hands now. "I think he's right, no one here is going to be afraid of me."

"Exodus" I grabbed their arm "Are you sure?"

"Of course, we all care about you, and each other, Exodus" Olto spoke up "Tell us what's on your mind!"

Exodus nodded at me "It's time" they said, and I let go, nodding back.

"Okay" I said softly

They raised their hands in front of them the backs facing the group, and with their other hand unclipped the glove from their suit. They switch sides and unclipped the other glove. Jake, Glavous, Duke, and of course myself already knew what was under there, but finally after 3 years so would everyone else. They all leaned in over the table looking past each other to watch as Exodus removed their gloves, shaking the whole time. There was a couple gasps as their purple hands were exposed first, but so far nothing bad. Exodus could of course read a room very easily now, and they kept going. They twisted the ring holding the head of the suit to the body now and unzipped the bottom of the helmet, and slowly removed it. They looked into the group with their bare eyes for the first time, expecting scowls or looks of disgust they were greeted with smiles and trust.

They sighed a breath of relieve and unzipped the front. They leaned down and unstrapped their boots, now faded and worn from the last 3 years of use. They slipped out their feet and stood back up, pulling the body suit off their shoulders. They pulled out their wings and tail, dropping the suit to the floor then stepping out of it. They picked up the body and draped it onto the table, moving their boots under the table out of the way. "Hi, I'm Exodus!"

The table erupted, but in a very positive way, everyone had something to say, all talking at once.

"Wow, you're actually quite beautiful!" Olto started

"Your eyes!" Kelly said.

"Really? I though you were a burn victim or something!" Said Micah

"Oh wow they're purple who could have ever known I most certainly didn't" Pike said, poorly trying to cover up the fact they knew.

"You could have shown us this long ago!" Sash told them.

"You really are so pretty!" Valthy declared!

"I really had no idea." Pike tried to reaffirm, badly.

Everyone kept talking at once, it was hard to understand it all but Exodus put up their hands. "Thank you so much for not judging and being so welcoming. As you can imagine after hiding for 3 years from you all this was very hard for me. I trust each and every one of you now, and this is my proof of that!" They sat down and the room got a little quiet. I could tell by the faces there might have been more questions but nothing serious.

"We're proud of you, Exodus, we're your friends and you can always trust us all!" Drito said. I thought about things for a second, and figured the big secret was out, we may as well come clean.

"Are you good?" I asked Exodus, I could tell their heart was still pounding and the newness of finally being able to be exposed around them was still sinking in. They looked at me and I could see in their eyes they would be fine. I stood up "We have another secret, we recently became a cou-"

"No way!" "naaaaaaww" "oh really we had NO idea" the group interrupted me before I could even finish. I slowly sat back down blushing, Exodus leaned over and kissed my cheek and a few started with "aaaawwww"

Exodus filled their shot glass and took the shot, able to ingest ANYTHING in front of the group for the first time as Kelly stood up next. "Look, I know it's been weird around here lately too but Sash and I we're also-" She was met with the same sarcastic 'naaaawwws' and 'no ways' I was. She was rather annoyed though "Wait, who told you all?" Sash was burying her face, her spikes were pretty red.

Olach spoke up "You two need to know, when you have bad days so do we. Your bad moods affect us all as you're both sort of more in charge than the rest of us. On the bright side when you two are having a good time you're both pretty easy to please!" He started laughing "Oh, and Sash's room is next time, apparently fixing driver coils isn't the only things you're really good at!"

"OH MY GODS!" Sash buried her face into the table in embarrassment. Kelly came around, laughing a little and tried to comfort her mate. "Well, on the bright side now we don't need to hide it either!" She said into the table as she wrapped her arms around her face.

Jake turned to me while everyone else was distracted "You met Larice, what did you think of her?"

"She seems great! Are you two a couple?" I asked

"No. Well, not yet, I'd like to be honestly. We're friends though, really close." He paused "We have a little agreement about our heats. But I have some feelings for her, I'd like to make it happen, but military life, you know?" He poured a second shot and took it. "Then there's Jude, a year after me and Larice started having sex I found out they had a similar agreement. Which is okay, I'm not really jealous, I'm glad our little circle is close." He paused "Me and Jude had a few drinks one night and screwed around once, but it's nothing romantic between us" He chuckled, not realizing the others had stopped teasing Sash and Kelly to listen to him. "Sorry, I know you probably don't want to hear about your brother's sex life, but I guess as my only family I think you should know someday I hope you'll see Larice like how I should see Exodus"

"What do you mean 'should'?" Exodus butted in.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it like that. We had our talk, but after getting to know you, I think I'm over it" Jake defended himself.

“What talk?!?” I asked

“When we first met, while were strapping the two ships together, I told Exodus I didn’t like them very much. I guess I was resentful that they took you away from us. But then they said something that I’ve had time to think over. It was probably for the best.” He looked at Exodus and back to me before saying something dark “Your head could have been with Mom and Dad’s, if you hadn’t run off to save them”

Exodus walked behind Jake and put their small hand on his strong shoulders, The size difference between them was so obvious even with Jake sitting. They rubbed Jake’s shoulders for a second then leaned in and hugged him. “Brother in law!” they said.

There was an outburst of “AAAAWWW” from the group, making us realize they had been listening.

Sond was next to stand up. “Hey Olto? Remember that 15 Kilogram Sledge I said I had no idea wh-”

“YOU ASSHOLE I KNEW IT WAS YOU!” She yelled

“I KNOW! I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have lied!”

“That was my favorite hammer!”

“I’m going to replace it when we go to sandpit okay?! Out of my own vacation share!” He explained.

“Wait, what’s a vacation share?” Exodus asked.

“You don’t think we just keep all the money we make to ourselves do you?” Duke started explaining “We take the profit and keep it aside, whats left after giving everyone their needs we keep in a community pot for our own extra wants.”

Sash spoke up “Right now there’s 10 thousand coin worth for everyone each to-”

“TEN THOUSAND COIN!?!” I yelled “When were you going to tell us?!?”

“Well, now.” Sash said

“It’s been extra busy, you didn’t think we’d be going the Lightning Festival flat broke did you?” Duke added. “We don’t keep all the profits for ourselves you know! After feeding everyone and getting the supplies we need we put the extra funds in a pot, then when things like this happened we can divide out some spending money!”

We didn’t go the previous years, just the way things worked out with ship salvages or just generally being too busy and not enough room on the ship. We didn’t know there was a spending fund associated with the little vacation they all took turns taking!

Argin stood up “I ate most of the junk food. We’ve been out for weeks and it’s my fault!” There was a couple boo’s “Sorry, but after looking at vegetables all day in the hydroponics rooms they start to look less appetizing!”

“That’s fine” Drito stepped up to defend him “You’re keeping us all healthy, both by feeding us and keeping the junk food away!” They laughed Argin sat back down.

Olach stood up “I leave my char mug on the counter, that’s me, I forget a lot”

“I’ve washed it 100 times” Said Valthy “Get better!”

“Sorry, I’ll try” she said and sheepishly sat down.

“Well, this is healthy, no one wants to kill anyone else” Said Duke

Drito was next to fess up. “Sometimes I mess aorund with our clients. Not all of them, just those who are seeking it. Honestly I’ve gotten a soft spot for those Orions”

“So that’s why they keep coming back!” Duke explained. “Tell you what! From now on it’s your responsibility to keep them out of trouble when they are staying!”

“But Duke, it sort of already is!” Drito snapped back.

I stood up, a little fuzzy from the shots “We hit warp 6 in the Phoenix” Exodus and Jake stared at me in shock.

“I though we weren’t telling them yet?” Exodus said.

“Warp 6?!? No there’s no way you did that!” Kelly exclaimed

“100,000 times light speed?!?” Duke cut in “That’s not possible!”

“It is, I don’t know what human coils do differently than ours, other than being much more efficient, but with the dragon fusion core, we his warp 6 for about 30 seconds before the coils over heated. We can cruise at nearly warp 5”

“So we can get to sandpit in what, a day?” Pike asked

“Yea, but if we’re taking the Phoenix, I do still want to leave sooner. We need to lay her crew to rest” I admitted. “It’s a planet three days away at her speeds, then two days back to Sandpit for the festival”

“Wait a minute” Kelly said “So the human crew that’s dead, is still...”

“On board, yes, that’s why the crew quarters are closed off” I explained. The room when quiet. “We promised we would lay them to rest, instead of just blasting them off to space. We’re going to keep our promise.”

A few more moments of silence passed before Olto spoke up. “Please don’t expect me to sleep in the crew quarters after we drop off the humans!”

A little more light hearted, I replied “No, of course not, it’ll still be closed off until we get back here and give that section a really good cleansing, both spiritually and physically”

“Oh good, I don’t want to nap with ghosts on later trips” Sash said.

“You won’t!” Exodus said “They’ll be at peace soon!”

The rest of the evening went on, stupid little confession and little tiffs as everyone got things out on the open. Duke was right, it was healthy. A couple hours later Exodus, Jake, and I retreated to the Phoenix. Jake wanted to try sleeping there with us, giving Glavous some space.

I walked onto the bridge, something was bothering me. E.M.B.E.R. told us the planet they diverted to was not the ship’s full mission. We knew already knew where to lay them to rest, but why not go all they way for them? “Ember?” She appeared on screen, Exodus stepped up beside me “What was the Phoenix’s original mission?”

“The original mission was exploration of the ‘Eagle Nebula’, M16, for planetary and stellar formation research.” Her holographic display came up, showing the location of that nebula, my heart sank. Exodus saw the same thing.

“Singh, your mission was doomed from the day it was planned” They said, speaking to the spirit.

“We know that now, and that is why we requested to go to the planet, not the Eagle Nebula. I wish I could lay to rest at the Pillars of Creation, but I know it is a task you can never complete. I know that is not meant to be my final resting spot.” Singh said to Exodus, I was unable to hear it.

The Eagle Nebula was inside Lycan space. The Phoenix would have been torn to pieces like an animal at their border. Ember told us the details on how another human ship was the demise of the crew, but if they entered Lycan territory, there would have been nothing left. The wastelands bordered their space, periodically taking attacks at random. There was a reason Duke’s station was closer to Titan’s border than the far one. It was safer.

Titan’s Throne Room, top floor of his sky scraper;

His rhythmic footsteps echoes off the panes of glass, as they had hundreds, maybe thousands of times before. Metal feet hitting the marble floor. Sampson approached his brother, placing a hand on his chest and tried to lean forward. Selena stood beside her brother, his large muscular body filled the throne he forcefully had made by the hands of the finest artisans. Two High Honor Guards in bright red armor adorned with gold trim stood off to his side, distant, nearly against the glass panes themselves. Their traditional long gold axes with gold tassels stranding straight up in front of each of them.

“What is it now, Sampson? We were busy!” said Titan.

“My Liege, intelligence has located another revolutionist base in the wastelands. It is small and insignificant, however since it is in another Guild’s territory, your authorization is required to seek it out and destroy it.” His robotic voice echoed in the cavernous room, well lit in the setting sun.

“You know better than to annoy me with such small matters!” he yelled.

“Yes, but I do not wish to risk the anger of the Gold Council in your name, Brother. If I err it could

mean significant trouble for-”

“I don’t fear the council! You know this!” He announced

“Then your consent is given!”

“Yes, Send a Longsword and two large support ships!” Titan ordered.

“Brother, I think a single Longsword would be more than sufficient to send the messa-”

“SEND 3!” Titan yelled “Our military is idle as these revolutionist gain ground! Show them total domination!” He paused “And address me properly!”

“Yes, my Liege” Sampson obliged

“Make my will done! You are excused!” and Titan waved his hand away. Sampson Walked away, his metal feet echoing off the glass again. The large door closed by the guards in normal uniforms behind him, two more in the vivid red and gold armor stood to the side, door duty was beneath those two.

Once “alone” Selena leaned down, and whispered into her brother’s ear. “I find your authority arousing, your rule, your might, your iron will!” She turned and crawled into his lap. “The decision to send the extra ships was right, but I think you underestimate our brother’s devotion to you.” She was lying. “He has learned his lessons, you made sure of that”

Titan bared his teeth at her “Get off my lap, we are siblings, this is not right!”

“So were our parents, Titan.” She leaned closer to his face “And their parents” She whispered into his ear “Someday, you will need an heir to this throne” she whispered, getting even closer “You had no arguments about it two evenings ago, did you, Brother?”

“I will not make our father’s mistake! Giving himself an heir just to betray him!” He stood firm. “I will take you now, but any eggs will be destroyed!” Titan stood up with his sister in his arms, carrying her away with his abnormal strength. For now, this amount of control over him would be all she needed.

Chapter 14; Lightning

We were in orbit above the 5th planet. Their long range analysis was correct. It looked from orbit anyway there was life down there. There was a single large continent and the rest of the planet's surface was covered in an ocean. It was a beautiful place, a peaceful place to lay to rest for eternity. My thoughts were broken as Deakon came up behind me, wearing a space suit and carrying the last body. I broke my stare away from the glass of the outer airlock, glimpsing my purple scales through the visor in my reflection. We had evacuated the air between the corridor between the crew quarters, along with the main room in the center where the airlock was located, to prevent the stale smell of death from lingering after we finished our sad task, and to keep everything sterile. All 12 bodies were now in the airlock in a pile, wrapped in sheets. Deakon and I stepped out and locked the inner door.

The other 12 were split among the two labs at the side of the main room, some watching through the windows as we completed our work to fulfill our promise. Not everyone was here, Olach had a ship of his own he was trying to get up and running to live in, like we now had, and was taking the time to fix it up while he also watched over the station with Argin. Argin said he got to go places more often, so it was more special for everyone else to go.

"Ember, you can re pressurize now" Deakon said over his mic.

"Yes, Deakon" She replied and the room started filling with air again, along with the airlock and corridor. Once we were back in an atmosphere we removed our suits and the others left the safety of the labs to join us in the main room. From my perspective it was now packed, shoulder to shoulder was the other 12 dragons and the 12 ghosts of the Phoenix. The dragons stood around solemnly with their heads low, while Deakon and I stood at the head of this large table in the middle of the room and gave a short eulogy. It's strange, you know, giving a eulogy when you can see the people you are speaking for.

"Thank you for taking time from your trip to be with us while we lay to rest the spirits of the humans who allowed us to keep this blessing of a ship, the Phoenix." It was strange I had thought of the words before hand, but I really wanted her crew to be proud. "We have brought them to this destination so that their spirits can quench their thirst for knowledge. We will release them into the atmosphere of this planet, where they will be cremated as they fall, as per the captain's request, and prevent any contamination for this planet's future life. I will read their names and roles now." I paused for a moment, picking up a notepad I had found on board where I had written all their names.

"Ayan Choi, Pilot,

"Min-jun Park, Ship Mechanic,

"Dr. Dax Bass, Exobiologist,

"Dr. Cynthia Cortez, astrophysicist,

"Dr. Jacop Hensley, astrophysicist,

"Dr. Zhruai Sheppard, astrophysicist,

"Tekpreet, Kanpur, onboard communication and software specialist,

"Mavis Owen, warp drive specialist,

"Micheal Burke, life systems and controls specialist,

"Dr. Kelly McCarthy, nuclear physicist and engineering lead,

"Dr. Sandra McCormick, astrophysicist and mission lead,

"And Captain Harmon Singh, Ship Captain and mission command"

“E.M.B.E.R.” Deakon spoke up after a moment of silence. “Unlock the outer door and remove safety protocols”

“I release you all to your goal, and wish for you the eternity of knowledge you seek” I added “Thank you, and goodbye”

“Airlock is now under direct the control” said the ship’s AI

“Release your first crew, Ember” Deakon said, his voice cracked.

The outer door snapped open, the explosive decompression carried their corpses into the planet’s atmosphere. Then a moment later it closed back up, leaving the airlock empty. One by one the ghosts of the crew gave us a bow and disappeared until only Singh himself remained.

“Thank you, and may God protect you” He bowed to me as he faded, and my face filled with tears.

“May the universe welcome you back with open arms.” Glavous said, I think I saw his eyes also watering.

Another moment passed, aside from my soft sniffles, then Deakon put his hands on my shoulder “It’s time to go, and let them have their peace” We made our way to the bridge, pausing to open the large door we had closed to keep it pressurized. Chickadee was bounding around excited we were back. I mounted the controls and we took off from orbit toward Sandpit.

Captain Harmon Singh was a man of science, in life, and even in death. He was correct in his assumption, the bodies burned up before ever getting to the surface, reduced to sterilized dust, their light mass added much less than space would add in dust and debris to the planet that day. Their presence would never make any sort of difference to the developing world they sought to study in life.

The crew of the Phoenix was now at rest.

A day later were entering the atmosphere of Sandpit again. The Phoenix was rated for atmosphere, but her front was covered in scientific instruments, not heat shielding, meaning we had to enter very slowly compared to other ships. We flew over the monument to human sin, it still stood in the desert, now small dunes against it and desert plants growing from under it. It’s giant roof had some sand blown on top of it now, making it blend in more with the planet. I tried to pay no attention to it, I didn’t need more bad memories coming back. Something did occur to me, and I suddenly veered away from the city for now.

“What are you doing, Exodus?” Duke was the first to ask.

“Deakon and I need to stretch out okay?” I put the Phoenix down for the first time, there was a little bump, but it was a first, room for improvement, but overall not bad! “Something I can’t do in the city” I explained as I got off the mount “I can’t fly with my flight suit on!”

“Oh not this flying stuff again!” Valthy tried calling us out “No one can really fly!” I would think another pilot would get it, flying a ship was just like gliding after all!

The Phoenix had a second exit, down the front of the nose, where most dragon ships had their airlock, the Phoenix had a secondary internal airlock on the lower deck, then a stairway that lowered, I assumed it was for planetary exploration should the opportunity arise. Deakon and I were the first on the ground, both of us stretching our wings wide. The others followed us out, Jake and Glavous knew what was about to happen, it was time to find out if three years of wing exercises helped us keep the ability to fly. I ran about three steps while spreading my wings then leapt into the air as I leaned forward and pulled down, going airborne for the first time in 3 years.

Deakon stepped up to his brother and placed a hand on his shoulder “Sorry you can’t come with us anymore, Jake”

“Don’t worry about it, it’s been long enough, I’m used to it now” Then he chuckled, “Go on, piss off Mom and Dad for us both okay?” Deakon nodded and took off behind me, flying into the air as nature intended.

The group stood in awe, realizing we weren’t lying about flying all this time. Just to surprise them more, Glavous came from behind them, turned back for a moment and smiled at the group, before turning away. Unlike us Glavous didn’t need a running start, he stood a standing leap spread his large golden wings and took to the air following us up.

Valthy was the most bewildered, she regained her composure and walked up to Jake. “So, before you lost them” She nodded to his back “You could too?”

“Yea, since we were kids, all the dragons hatched on Earth learned to fly for some reason, Mom said it was because there was nothing to hold them back” He paused, fond memories filling his mind “Deakon and I used to fly up onto Dad’s barn and goof off up there. We’d play with wooden swords and take turns seeing who could glide the furthest without flapping before hitting the ground. Mom and Dad were so worried about us hurting ourselves” He was smiling, instead of being sad he couldn’t join us, he chose to live a moment in those happy memories.

The three of us flew around for nearly half an hour, laughing, diving, doing little tricks, enjoying the open air. It was fun to see Glavous carry on like us, even though he was always so serious he was a dragon like any of us, and giving in to the primal skill of flight was bringing him into a joyful state. Finally getting the sense the others had seen enough, it was time to move onto the city, I glided down, landing beside the Phoenix. Valthy ran up to me, the first words out of her mouth were “Teach me!”

“Sure! You already know how to fly a ship! You’ll see, it’s really similar, but you need to strengthen up those wings first!” She tried spreading wide like us, but even though she was the only other one in the group that used her wings for anything, she had trouble getting them all the way open. “See? Atrophy!” I explained to her gently “But don’t worry, we can work that out, it happened to Deakon and I during the Prison ship!”

Glavous and Deakon came down a few seconds later, Deakon landing next to Jake, who placed his hand on his brother’s shoulder this time “Had fun?”

“Yeah! That felt really nice after being in the station for so long!”

We had found out the space port was full, seems like the lightning festival was catching on! The city authority, whoever that was, designated an area for overflow for the week, luckily it was close to Clay's, but unfortunately it was the same side of the city as the prison ship. Once we landed and I put on my flight suit to cover up for our stay, and ventured out the front of the ship. Sadly, I could see the container that brought us here in the distance again.

We headed into the city, using the same road we entered it in for the first time 5 years ago and started immediately to Clay's as a group, even Chickadee bounding around my feet. Everyone from the station knew and loved the guy, and we were all excited to see him again. We passed by Sorah's stand, or rather where it stood on that night. I stared the space, I was even more powerful now, just to see if I could sense anything. The space was still empty, but I could not feel anything otherworldly. If something supernatural did happen that night, it was long gone now. I decided not to say anything to Deakon or Jake, I would leave it up to them to decide what happened that night.

We all made our way to the first place every one of us wished to go, off to Clay's! Duke had given him a heads up we landed and once we reached his place we were greeted out front by the cheery large dragon. He gave his round of hugs to his "favorite bunch of scrappers" and when he made his way to us we got extra strong hugs from him, lifting Exodus off the ground.

"How's my favorite street rats huh?" He looked at Exodus "Must be doing pretty good to get a suit like that. I must say it's a great improvement over how I saw you last time!"

"Yeah! We've got to learn a lot too!" I said, following everyone into his place. It was busy, just as it always was before the lightning festival. "Clay, when are the storms supposed to come?"

"Oh, any day day Exodus, I wish we had better ways of forecasting, but the air is heavy, I think it might be tonight or tomorrow night!" He explained as he walked behind the bar. He pulled out a lot of glasses then a couple bottles. "HEY!" he shouted to our group "As always, first round is on to me! Welcome back!" They cheered along with Deakon. The doors to the kitchen swung open and a skinny green dragon came out, whispering something in Clay's ear. "Okay! Bring it out then!" he looked at everyone as the dragon went behind the doors again.

"Who's that?" I asked

"Well, since you've been gone, I've adopted a few more street rats like yer selves!" He smiled "You started a trend, giving young dragons down on their luck another chance to make it in this mean universe" He shouted again to the group "I got some food ready too! You must be so hungry!"

Fried torla, just how we remembered, a giant plate of it for me and Deakon. I couldn't resist! I wrapped my wings around myself, making a my own little private booth, unclipped the helmet from the body and unzipped the bottom, just enough to get a few of them in my mouth, then chased it with some of the ale Clay set down in front of me. This was enough to get some food and drink into me, I just have to be sure to get everything done back up properly! After two ales and finishing the plate with Deakon, that was becoming harder to accomplish.

Catching up was nice, once Duke had some time with Clay, then he sat with us for a while. He wasn't surprised to learn we were now a couple. "I could see it in your eyes back then, young love!" he said. We learned about his new employees and even talked with them for a but too, but they were trying not

be distracted, helping out during the busiest time of year.

I'm a small dragon, and drinks hit me hard! After three of those ales I was ready for a nap! It was really busy and it had grown late into the night. We all wandered back to the Phoenix to get some sleep, and wake up for more adventures the next day. I watched the sky to the west, where the storm always came from, hoping to see some flashes, but the stars were out, the sky was clear, it wasn't tonight, but you could feel it in the air, likely tomorrow night!

The next morning I poked my head out of our door of the captain's suite. I had been a little loud during our morning "routine" and was a little embarrassed after the fact. I slowly made my way to the large center room to find the others already awake, some had also already left, to ventured into the city. Nobody was saying anything, I guess the Phoenix was more soundproof than I had thought. I started making a morning cup of char as I greeted the others with a simple "Good morning", smiling.

"Had a good sleep?" Asked Valthy

"Yeah! And a nice wake up" I studded "Fo-for the hot morning char!" She winked at me "So where did the others go?"

"Some of them went to get new cloth" Duke spoke up as he leaned back, cracking his spine "Next time we do this, I hope those crew quarters are cleaned up, these hammocks and floors are killing my back!" He leaned back to normal "Kelly and Sash went for a private breakfast together, Olto wanted to look at new tools" He chuckled "Even on vacation she needs to check out tools"

"New cloth sounds like a good Idea!" Deakon came from behind, getting himself some of the hot char before turning to me "Why don't we go get a few things today while we wait for the storms?"

"That's a good idea for you! But I only wear the flight suit!"

"How about around the station?" Duke butted in "that way you can have something other than the suit tied around your waist!"

I thought about it, maybe it was a good idea. After a some food along with the Char we made our way back to the market. Deakon found a nice blue top that had a lightning bolt embroidered into it. A fine choice for the festival! I found a special place. It was set back behind the market stalls, and as I approached there was a sign on the door labeled "No kids". A little odd but once I opened the door I suddenly understood. The outfits in here were not meant for public wearing! I found a couple things I liked, well, a few. Things that were just for me Deakon! I paid, packed the things into a cloth bag and got out. Another good reason for wearing the helmet, my face was likely red the whole time!

I did shop around for some normal things to wear around the station as well. Basic things, simple cloths for around my waist a couple tops in vibrant colors that matched. I was excited though when I found more bags for my tail, just like the ones I had on Earth! They had fallen apart long ago, but these were made of a sturdier material. I actually put it on as soon as I bought it, right over my suit!

After a few hours we made our way back to the Phoenix to drop off our new collection of belongings. Deakon had a great idea while we were there. "Let's go enjoy the desert again, just you and me, just like the old days!"

“Old days?” I laughed “We’re not even thirty yet!”

We walked out into the desert, it was busy in the city but quite out here. I stripped down out of the suit and we stashed our things just like we used to. I noticed Deakon’s face spikes turn a little pink “So, synced up to the climate already are you?” I teased

This time his response was honest, maybe he wanted to say this back then? “You’re so sexy and I fucking love you” He smiled. We took off, spending nearly an hour in the air together. Gliding and touching wing tips, doing rolls around each other, laughing something getting closer in the air than we likely should.

Being up in the air gave us a good look to the west, and I saw the clouds first. Barely visible in the distance. “Deakon! Look!” and I pointed, in case he couldn’t hear me over the wind in his ears.

“YES!” he yelled in excitement “Let’s go back and tell the others!” We flew back to our stash, I put my suit back on, we hurried back to the Phoenix to find she was empty, so we ran off to Clay’s place. Sure enough everyone was there. Deakon broke the good news first “Clouds to the west! It’ll be tonight!”

The bar erupted in cheers, not only our group, most of the place heard him too. I could feel the energy building from them all, and it made me excited. This was one of the benefits of being a mage of the mind, feeling the positive energy in a situation like this, the raw unfiltered excitement, no one was holding back! It was still early afternoon, the storms were far off, but not long after Deakon said it, the body paints were out, clothing on the floor and on the tables.

Just as the years before we left, the place was nearly drank dry, but there no fights, nobody excessively drunk, there was just that many dragons celebrating the new season. I watched everyone from a seat in the corner, Deakon was getting excited, telling Jake all about the ritual he was about to see for the first time. He had chosen his new blue top with the lightning bolts on it, hoping it would bring the storms, and well it seemed to be working. I stepped outside a few hours later, early evening now, and peered to the west. Dark clouds were on the horizon, but very much closer now, it was still too bright and too distant to see the lightning, but I could feel it in the air.

I thought about the rain, and how I wished I could enjoy it with everyone. Maybe I could cast a veil like Glavous did the day we met, I knew how, at least in theory, but doing it over such a large crowd for the first time might be tiresome, if it was even successful. I went back inside to let everyone know it was close. Jake and Deakon together as brothers, Duke and Clay chatting it up as usual. Others from the station mingled with the local dragons. I sat with Jake and Deakon, the three of us talking about the future, things to do to the Phoenix, Jake aspiring to climb more in rank. We all talked about our power, and what we might someday be able to do. Jake was enjoying a few drinks again, aware that only in a few more days he would be returning to the militia.

A couple more hours of chatting went by, then the first rumbles came. Not a single big boom like the first time, it was distant rumbles. Still, the place cleared out quickly. Everyone poured into the streets, fireworks and cheering, the excitement level was so great! I was hyper myself from it, absorbing everyone’s energy.

“You guys really weren’t lying, this is one hell of a party!” Jake said, a little tipsy he held up a bottle and cheered, where he found it outside the bar I don’t know.

The breeze was next, the suddenly flow of cool air from the front of the storm rolled into the city, much to everyone's relief, the desert heat would be gone for the next week as the rains replenished the lands. The thunder was growing closer, every boom and rumble was growing louder and the crowd grew louder with it.

"This is it, Jake!" I told him "It's coming soon!"

It wasn't longer than 30 seconds after I spoke, the first large heavy drops started dropping. The crowd grew silent, wings and arms spreading, heads all pointing up. Jake took to it naturally, spreading his arms and facing up, letting the first few drops hit him. I wished I could do it, but I retreated under the awning as I did every year, hiding to keep my suit dry.

There was a loud boom, lighting striking very close by, and a couple seconds later the true downpour started. The silent ritual of renewing themselves in the rain had absorbed everyone. The lightning seemed to be picking up, the roar of the thunder was now constant. Jake opened his eyes and smiled at me. It was very sweet to finally be on his friendly side. Someone hollered down the street, and within second the crowd was back to party mode again. Fireworks were being set off again nearby, igniting in the rain and adding to the beautiful lightning.

I don't know what came over Deakon, if he had a couple too many drinks, or was just feeling energetic from all the partying going on, the festival itself. But out of the blue, he decided to jump, and with two flaps of his wings he was on the edge of the building across from Clay's. There was some shocked gasps from the crowd, but then followed mostly by cheers at the athletic feat. Deakon stood at the edge, stretching out his wings and arms, absorbing more of the rain. Clay chuckled at the feat "Wow, I didn't know he could do that!"

And then the lightning hit him.

Suddenly everything was white. Really? Is it the afterlife THIS time? You know I experience a LOT of near death experiences, so it would be really nice to know what the afterlife is REALLY like, so I know whether or not I'm dead. Pretty sure I am this time. The top of my head stung where the lightning hit, at least, that's what I think happened.

I turned and looked around, 360 degrees of the same. White, nothing else, no horizon, no light source, no up, no down, this wasn't natural. Definitely dead, yup.

But then there was a voice behind me. "Deakon!" I turned to meet the gaze of a white dragon who wasn't there a second ago. He had no cloth on him, yet he was adorned with piercings on his face and body. He had nothing except a bow, which was glowing with ethereal blue, to which an arrow was nocked, and pointed right at me. "How have you been breathing fire? That's not what you're meant to do!" He released. I was expecting an arrow to pierce my chest, but instead a bolt of lightning came from the bow, hitting me square in the chest, knocking me back, but now down. "Oh, you ARE very powerful!" He paused, lowering the bow for a second. "Any other should be dead now, even an advanced mage!"

“DEAKON!” Both Jake and I yelled in unison, I expected him to drop dead off the side of the building, but instead, he kelt in pain. I don’t know how he was alive, and I could see from here his spikes on his face were glowing brightly blue.

Glavous pushed his way through the still crowd towards us and then started up at Deakon. “I’ve been such a fool!” he exclaimed as we all stared in shock.

As the words left Glavous’s mouth, and another bolt of lightning hit my mate, I yelled out for him, the crowd gasped, and there was a couple growling screams.

“OKAY! I get it! I’m dead!” I yelled at the white dragon “You don’t need to shoot me again!”

He nocked another arrow “You’re not dead, young champion to be, but I do need to knock some sense into you.” He let it fly, lighting hitting me in the chest again, pushing me back and hurting a LOT. “This has been a big mistake on his part, never in my centuries have I seen him make a mistake this big” He nocked another arrow and let it fly, lighting hit my chest again. “Aside from his mistake with me”

I saw him struck again, the crowd gasped, how was even alive? He tried to stand up, but as he tried another bolt hit him. He didn’t scream, he just struggled to move. That was 4 now. “Glavous, what the hell is this?” Jake yelled

“I was wrong about him, that’s what this is! And now someone has taken the lead to show us both how wrong I have been” His face was turned to concern “We need to stop this or find who it is before they kill him!”

“Who?!? Who made this mistake? What is the mistake?” I yelled at this blue dragon in this white void. “What even is this?”

He nocked yet another arrow “How can someone this powerful be so obtuse?” He let it fly, hitting me again in the chest, but this time I didn’t move back I was defiantly ignoring his shots now. The assailant smiled at me “There you are!” he nocked another arrow and pulled back, but didn’t fire it. “I think you’re starting to get the point”

“Who are you?” I asked

“I’m Sar’Dorin, the First Champion of Lightning” He let the arrow fly, this time laughing as the lightning hit me, it still hurt, but I could stand my ground. “Ask your teacher about me, Glavous probably thinks I’m dead, or abandoned him.” He drew the bow one more time. “In fact, if he asked about me, let him have this!” he released, and a final bolt hit me in the chest.

I watched Deakon try to stand again, but another strike of lightning took him to his knees. “Deakon! If you can hear me, get down from there!” I couldn’t tell, it was almost like he wasn’t in there. He tried to stand again, and again as he did a bolt struck him again, but this time he didn’t fall back to his knee.

“I can’t believe I’ve done this to him!” Glavous shouted “I have been such a fool!”

“Glavous! Tell us what’s going on!”

“The fact he even could learn the fire element speaks to his true power!” Glavous was lost in his own mistake. He stared as Deakon stood again, taking one more bolt, but this time completely unaffected.

Deakon raised his arms and suddenly his eyes opened. They were glowing, electric and alive! He dropped his hands in front of him as the clouds around the city came alive with lightning all at once. Cheering from others streets nearby erupted from those who were not witnessing what was happening here. Deakon raised his arms again, and when he dropped them down quickly another show of lightning erupted. This time a few cheers from around us filled the air.

“YES!” He yelled, barely audible over the thunder. He raised his arms and spread his wings, this time when he lowered them quickly the clouds erupted and bolts even struck nearby. The crowd went wild, I think many believed this to be some sort of show or act now!

“Deakon!” I screamed up at him. “What is going on!?” He looked down at me from above, expecting him to come explain or at least say something, he suddenly took off and flew to the west. Glavous jumped out of the crowd and took flight after him to many oooos and aaas from the crowd, leaving Jake and I behind.

“Let’s go!” Jake grabbed my arm for me to follow him and started running through the crowd. I couldn’t fly in my suit, and Jake just couldn’t fly. We ran out of the city, I thought for sure he had gone back to the Phoenix, but when we reached her, she was unlit, empty, and still closed up. What we did see was lightning in the nearby desert. Striking over and over in the same place. That definitely wasn’t natural.

“Over there, Jake!” I pointed and he nodded. Jake’s military training had him great shape, I was having trouble keeping up in my short body and flight suit now heavy from the rain.

We reached the place the lightning kept striking. Deakon stood on a large rock and Glavous stood beside the rock smiling up at him. The lightning wasn’t coming from the sky, it was coming from Deakon’s mouth!

“I’m so sorry, Deakon! We spent 3 years training you improperly! This is why you struggled!” Glavous proudly spoke. “Look at your true power now! I knew you had it inside you!” Glavous turned to us as we approached “Jake! You and your brother together are the strongest champions I have trained in centuries!”

“Glavous what happened? What is all this?!?” I asked

“I think it should be obvious now!” he smiled gleefully, he was nearly giddy “I first saw fire in Deakon, because his mind was blocked by his worry for his brother! Once he found his brother the mourning of his parents clouded his mind next! Now someone has taken it upon themselves to fix my mistake.

Deakon's true element was never fire, it was the element of electricity, lightning!!" He laughed "The fact we got him as far along in fire as we did speaks to the powerhouse that he will become!"

"He called himself Sar'Dorin" Deakon spoke up from on top of the huge boulder. "he said you'd probably think he was dead." Deakons paused and smiled, thinking wrongly that was he was told would have been a tease "He said to hit you with lightning for him."

Glavous's happiness left his face, his face lowered to the ground in the rain "I did think he was dead." His shoulders slumped, his voice deepened. "Training you in the wrong element was not the first mistake I've made in my life, but, hopefully my experience will make it one of my lasts" He stood up straight and suddenly started walking back.

"Where are you going? Glavous?" I asked him.

"To bed!" he said calmly. "Deakon, your training in the element of lightning begins tomorrow, try to be well rested!"

"Glavous, don't you want to find Sar'Dorin?" Jake asked

"No, if he is on this world, that is all of him I need to know" and with that he walked off in the rain, leaving the 3 of us with even more questions. We changed looks in the heavy rain as flashes of the natural lightning from the storm illuminated the world around us.

I woke up next morning to an empty bed. Deakon had woken up before me, but instead of waking me up he had left. I made my morning char and ventured out the front of the ship, staying under her nose out of the rain. Duke was sitting on the step watching the spectacle. Glavous was leading about half the crew in wing stretches, naked in the rain. Even when it was raining, it was still warm in Sandpit. The warm rain made it feel muggy, you felt like you could nearly drink the air. I sat down on the steps with Duke. "What's going on?"

"He laughed "Glavous said he could teach them!" Valthy was front and center in the group, excitedly stretching with Glavous's lead.

"Oh, I see, but why is everyone naked?" I asked

"Glavous said learning to fly is primal, and it's important to be in a primal state" He laughed again "Then he said 'no one likes wet clothes anyway' and dragged them all outside"

"Where are Jake and Deakon?" I asked, noticing their absence from both inside the ship and out here.

"They went into the city, Deakon said he's getting something pierced" Duke laughed at that thought too.

"WHAT?!" I nearly dropped my char

"Something about lightning and metal, I don't know for sure" Duke said, getting a little more serious now "By the way, how did he do that show last night? Everyone is talking about it!"

“Turns out he’s not supposed to be a fire breather like his brother, he breaths lightning bolts” I explained. “When I get struck he had some sort of vision”

“So that wasn’t some effect? People thought he was just putting on a show! They hoped for even more next year!” His voice had some worry or fear to it now, but I found it a good excuse.

“That just means we need to make it back next year!” I sipped on my char, it was nearly gone now. “We need to think about leaving soon, Jake only has a few days of leave left, so we need to get him back.”

“You’re right. Besides, it’s only rain from here on out. After Glavous is done we’ll gather everyone to go say our goodbyes to Clay and get any last minute things we need.”

We watched silently as the others get their wings nice and wide. Watching gave me an idea. “Duke, you wanted to expand the station right?”

“Yeah!” he suddenly took interest. “Why?”

“We should fit a gym in there. Get some exercise for everyone who doesn’t work the physical stuff, like me and Pike, Sash too!”

“That’s not a bad idea actually” He paused “Oh, I bet you want wing exercise stuff to huh?”

“Yes! That would be a great addition!”

Another hour went by of simple wing exercises before we all made our way into the city to say our goodbyes to Clay until next time we had business on Sandpit, or the next festival at the latest. The pleasant thought that we now had our own way around meant that we could really come see him anytime we wanted now came to mind.

It wasn’t long after we got to Clay’s Deakon and Jake showed up. He now had a ring in his Left nostril, one in his eyebrow, and a large one in each wing, near the top where the “fingers” started. I think the one that was most fitting was the ring in his ear where the food tag was attached on the prison ship. Those had left a scar in our ears, and this was a way for him to mark that he was moving on from the past, decorating his scar to mark it as a part of who he was. I of course thought my mate was handsome before, but the metal did add a certain appeal in my opinion, but the additions would take some getting used to. I was also surprised he got it all at once!

The two brothers sat with me. “Why so much at once?” I asked my mate.

He lifted his hand to his nose, resisting the urge to touch the new ring that was there. “Sar’Dorin had even more than this! Glavous told me the metal helps a master of lightning attract the power, then he said it might also be a placebo effect. Either way, it’s something I wanted to do for a while, so I just got it all done while we were here!” That made sense I think. It may be a few months or even next year before we get back, though there was likely other places to get more piercings on other worlds we’d be seeing too.

Clay's server suddenly came to our table with a tray. One more serving of our old favorite, the fried torla, and three ales. "For the road, Clay says!". I did decline mine, I'd be flying a ship soon, Jake and Deakon drank theirs as we all chatted. Once Deakon finished his, he drank mine as well. It was early afternoon still! I was honestly becoming a bit concerned for the amount he drank during our little vacation. I also knew for a fact he had stocked up a little with the money from his "vacation share".

We did convince the server to sit with us. It was quiet today, the steady rain had most of the public staying in their homes. The festival was over now, the streets quiet except for the steady pattering of the rain. We got his life story out of him, all three of us were becoming interested in knowing people's stories. His name was Sidi, and like a lot of dragons in our territory, not just the wastelands, he was struggling just to keep himself sheltered and fed. Just like us Clay caught him in his garbage, but after the experience with us, he offered him help right away. He live here now with Clay, like we did. He was about our age too, maybe a little older.

The time flew by! Clay and Duke spent most of the afternoon getting caught up on the stories of the station and things that happened around Clay's bar. Before we knew it was time to take off. Jake needed to get back to the militia, and we needed to get back to work with the station. Jake told us of a base orbiting Solaris, a planet not far from here. From there he could get in touch with his ship and be picked up.

We made our way back to the Phoenix. I hung up my now wet flight suit to dry, and took off my polished black boot that now needed a good cleaning, the rain had made them a little muddy. Then I put on one of my new clothes and top I found at the markets. Once I was on the bridge we did a quick roll call to make sure everyone was on board and got ready to go. Valthy had brought a portable radio, since we didn't yet have a system to talk with the spaceport authority. We were in the temporary "overflow" but just to be sure, and to not cause any accidents, we did call, and then patiently waited our turn to leave. The Phoenix lifted flawlessly, and after an hour of climbing we were in back in space. I pointed the Phoenix roughly towards Solaris and let the autopilot take over, then I pushed up the large red switch. We were underway.

After a few moments Ember popped up "At current speed, we will reach Solaris in approximately 22 hours" Great! We could all get some sleep along the way.

"We're about halfway there" I said as I sat down with a hot cup of char. Jake, Deakon and I had gathered with Glavous in the right side "Lab" for one more group training session before Jake left us for now.

"You have your Candles, Jake" Glavous asked him.

"Yes, of course"

"Light them three times a day as I instructed! Your power can atrophy just like yo-" He caught himself "Our wings. So you also have the copies of the scrolls to study?"

"Yes. Glavous don't worry! I've taken a keen interest to this and I'll continue to practice and study while I'm away! Keep in mind it may be a long time before you see me again, maybe even years!"

“Very good then. And remember Jake, it may be for the best to keep this power secret for the time being. This world is more modern than when these powers were common, and it may not be so well received!” Glavous explained his worries.

“Don’t worry, I’ll only practice and study in my quarters” Jake assured him.

Glavous nodded once slowly in affirmation, but then spoke again, he had one more idea. “Before you leave us, Jake, would you help me test a theory?”

“Sure! What is it?” Jake asked. “I’ve seen so much the last 3 months, I’m genuinely curious”

“Deakon, I’ll need your assistance as well!” He said as he looked over at him.

“Of course, but what is it?” Deakon replied.

“I know you only learned your true power a day and a half ago, but your ability to use your brother’s element to great power surprised me.” Glavous glanced between the two “A long standing theory of mine, is that as blood relative with a strong bond has given you both the ability use the other’s element, though to a lesser degree than your own.” He reached beside himself, picking up an object on off the floor beside himself and set it on the lab’s table. It was a piece of metal, crudely glued or stuck somehow to a small sheet of rubber, to insulate it from the surrounding metal. Then he looked at Deakon. “We are going to build you a better version, but this will now be your version of a candle. Several times a day you will breath an arc onto it, instead of lighting a candle as before.” He slide the object towards Jake, then looked at Deakon. “Deakon, you and I will guide him. I have more experience with lightning, but you will be stronger.”

I hated to butt in, something was getting to me. “Glavous, if each dragon has only one element, then how are you able to practice them all? Do you have an element that is stronger than the rest?”

Glavous took in a deep breath and contemplated for a moment before speaking. “Yes, though I will not yet reveal my true element, I am indeed extremely powerful in a single element. Over centuries of studying and practice I am able to control every element to some degree, some better than others. But my talents in the other elements will never reach the level of a champion in their own element. I trained myself so that I could fully understand each element to train champions such as yourselves.”

“CENTURIES!” I explained “Glavous how old are you?!”

He chuckled. “There’s a great deal I have to reveal about myself. But this is a topic for another day. We have limited time now before Jake leaves us, and I would like to try this before he disembarks” I nodded in agreement, the Glavous turned to Jake. “There is no need to open your third eye again, you have seen the abilities of your brother, though only briefly and without discipline. You are already a mage of the element of fire, now the only difference is to reach withing yourself and envision the lightning. Now close your eyes and concentrate, control your mind as we have before, but instead of flame, see the powerful bolts”

Jake slowly nodded as he closed his eyes. The room was silent. After a moment Glavous slid the piece of metal closer. “Now, when you are ready, envision a bolt form your mouth to this metal.” Jake stayed silent again as a few more moments passed, but eventually he leaned forward, opening his eyes and brought his mouth close to the metal. He opened his mouth, yet nothing came out.

“Don’t worry about it, Jake” Deakon came in with some encouraging words “It took me a few times to breath fire the first time, and even a couple tries the next time I tried! Just don’t give up!” His brother gave him a thankful look and nodded. He closed his eyes and tried again, this time was a little more exciting for us all. Jake’s face spike took on a hint of the electric blue color that Deakon was displaying that night. Jake leaned forward again and opened his lips, displaying the same face he had when blowing a small flame. But again nothing came out.

“Perhaps a demonstration may help” Glavous Slid the metal towards Deakon.

“Sure!” Deakon leaned towards the ‘thing’ Glavous made, his face spikes instantly starting brightly glowing the electric blue from two nights ago. He exhaled and a huge powerful arc came from his mouth and struck the metal, the loud bang making all of us in the room jump. “Ops! I guess I’m still getting used to it” He said as his spikes faded back to normal.

“You are simply not yet disciplined in your element, we will fix that very quickly. But your power is also very intense, just as I have told you.” Glavous pulled the metal thing towards himself. “Observe, both of you” Glavous inhaled, his face spikes turned the same electric blue and as he leaned forward a small controlled arc came form within his mouth and reached out to the metal, making a small zapping sounds. As he leaned back he slide the metal back to Jake, his face spikes quickly fading back to their natural white color.

Jake leaned forward toward the metal, he closed his eyes and concentrated hard. After a moment his face spikes started taking the hue again, he opened his mouth and tried again. This time a small bolt, not much more than a static shock from a dry environment came from Jake. It actually took him by surprise as he jumped back, but after realizing he did it, he smiled at us as his spikes faded back to white. Glavous jumped out of his chair.

“Yes! This is very good news!” He looked around and regained his composure, sitting back down. “I learned a long time ago, that anyone can train in any element given enough time. But it may take weeks or months before the element they are not natural to presents itself. Like Deakon, you were able to do it on your third try! That proves at least a small amount of a link to the element!”

“So what does this mean?” Jake asked.

“It means you are both very powerful, perhaps even someday you may learn to gain power from each other.” Glavous smiled with sort of a cheeky look “It also means my theory is correct. I’ve trained a lot of champions in my time, but you two are the first blood related brothers.” Glavous paused for a moment to think but then continued “Jake, your first priority is indeed fire, please practice that element first! If you feel up to it, you may and perhaps try to grow yourself in your brother’s element as well, but only after fire!”

“Okay” Jake said, seemed like he was maybe a little overwhelmed, he was quiet now, just like when Deakon learned to blow a flame for the first time. “Fire first” he confirmed.

The four of us spent the next few hours in the lab, Deakon and Jake taking turns shooting arcs a the piece of metal, it was slowly becoming charred and melted as time went on. Jake was trying to make 5his arcs bigger, Deakon was having the opposite problem, his bolts were large and almost out of control. His years of channeling the wrong element was tricking him into putting more effort into it

than he needed to. Eventually, Glavous brought out his famous candles, and also had them both lighting and extinguishing them. I mostly took the time to meditate, much to Glavous's pleasure, he didn't even need to tell me what to do anymore. Taking breaks to observe my mate his brother practicing.

Several hours went by when Ember interrupted us in the lab. "We are 10 minutes from our destination."

"Thank you Ember!" I said, I think I was the only one nice to the alien AI that lived in our ship. Deakon talked to her too of course but used her more like her purpose, a tool for running the ship.

We arrived in orbit of Solaris to be greeted by a mess. Militia ships were indeed everywhere, they seemed to be gathering for something. There was a large station in orbit. Jake asked for Valthy's handheld radio, luckily it had the right frequencies! He got a hold of the station's docking coordinator and explained who he was and who he was looking for, we were given permission to dock, but no enter the station, except for Jake of course. It wasn't any sort of warm welcome, but soon we would learn why the situation we arrived on was very dangerous.

Chapter 15 First Battle of Solaris;

I stood in front of the airlock in full uniform, my bag at my feet. As the Phoenix lightly bumped the station and latched onto the airlock of the military station. I could already see two other soldiers. I had already said my goodbyes to the others but my brother suddenly grabbed me and gave me a strong hug. "Please be safe, Jake!" he said as he held on for a moment.

His purple mate, now free of the duty of docking the Phoenix to the station came into the room, squeezing their small frame among the others to get to me, and grabbed onto me as well. "Jake, it's been nice getting to know you, we will see you again soon!" they said. I'm glad we had gotten onto better terms, Deakon really did pick a good dragon to be a mate.

A light next to the airlock door turned green, indicating everything was pressurized. Deakon let go of me and pressed a button to the side of the door, it slide open, along with the outer door. The station's door was already opening, freeing me into the base floating in orbit. "Sub-Commander Jake, Captain Vink is waiting for you, the Rebel is docked further up the station!" Said one of the soldiers, a certain urgency in his voice.

I turned back to the others, waving "I'll see you all again soon, I promise!" Then I walked through the airlocks.

The other soldier spoke into the Phoenix "You don't have any comms system, we couldn't communicate other than that small radio. We recommend you go to the planet's surface until the dangers is over! I would recommend checking out the vendors down at the spaceport on the surface, they would likely have something for communication with other ships and stations, and a transponder too! We almost shot you down!"

Deakon affirmed with the soldier "Okay, we'll check it out, and sorry for sneaking up on you like that!"

I hurried along with the first soldier. "What's going on?" I asked him "There's something happening isn't there?"

"Intel says there are three ships coming this way, We don't have time to abandon the base like we did in the past. From what I hear the generals also want to start 'standing our ground' as a show of defiance. Vink needs you back on the Rebel, I guess the ship is a little short staffed" He paused for a moment but kept walking. "Intel also says the lead ship is a Longsword."

I fell silent but kept pace with him, a little shocked myself. 'Longsword' class ships were Titan's biggest. 1000 meters wide with 24 forward guns, they were pride of his fleet, and were only brought out when he wanted to really blow something up. We arrived at the airlock to the Rebel, I could see her through the window next to the airlock, nosed on and giant compared the Phoenix. The soldier gestured with his hand to embark. "Captain Vink is waiting for you on the command deck". I entered and made my way as quickly as I could.

I reached the command deck, dropping my bag temporarily at the entry, hoping the Captain wouldn't notice. I walked forward, he was on the command platform. Dragon ships had a central platform raised about a meter off the rest of the command deck, with a small console in the middle for quickly viewing

status of the ship, a small grab rail around it to hang on when things got rough. This would be where the ship Captains and First Commanders would issue orders to the command deck from. It was elevated to give the commanding officers a view of everyone's screens and their situations. I've heard on Titan's ships there was even a railing surrounding the platform to remind the crew they were segregated from the commanding crew. On our ships however, there were steps surrounding the platform so the crew could easily interact, to promote a more productive crew that works together. Captain Vink was standing at the center of the platform. Jude was at the Lead gunner console to the right and forward. There was a pilot on the control mount, straight ahead of the command platform.

I approached, placing my hand on my chest and bowing slightly, I hadn't been noticed yet when I spoke up. "Sir! Ready to resume duty!" I stated. He turned to me, his face seemed to be relieved a little upon seeing me.

"When I said I hoped you could return early, I had hoped it be more than two days. But your timing is perfect, I need you!" He looked at Jude for a moment, then back to me. "I need to know before you take your post, is your head clear? Did you get everything accomplished you needed to?"

I didn't really need to think, between being reunited with Deakon, and the meditation that Glavous taught me, "I'm likely more clear and level headed than ever, Sir! I'm perfectly fit to resume my role as lead gunner!"

"Well that's great news, but you won't be returning to the post quite yet"

"Sir?" I was concerned, had I been demoted in my absence?

"First Commander Zho is still on the surface, and there is no way for her to return quickly enough. The Wilds and the Defiant are already en route to the edge of this system along with 5 Dissident class ships. We need to leave here right away. You're acting First Commander" He stated. "I hope you didn't get rusty in the past 3 months!"

"Oh, I mean, Yes Sir!" I was surprised. I looked at Jude who nodded with a little pride. We made a good team, and suddenly the urge to kick ass together again rose inside of me.

"Good, I don't know what you heard so far, but these are the facts. One Longsword and two Cutlass class ships are coming at us. The high ranks tell us it's time we start standing our ground instead of running. I happen to agree with them. We're going to meet them at the edge of the system and hold them back. There are 5 more Dissident class of ours holding back in case we need backup and to protect the surface should one of the ships break through.

"You've seen enough I think you know what we're going to do. Take us out there, the pilot already has coordinates. I need to review the mission brief a little more closely. Once I have a good understanding I'll have you read it for yourself." He paused, then said the words I've wanted to hear for years now "You have the ship! I'll be in the briefing room until we get closer. Get her moving, Commander"

"Yes, sir!" I replied. Captain Vink walked off the bridge leaving me in command. I looked at Jude, he smiled back to me.

"Welcome back, Sir!"

“Thank you Jude, I’m glad to be back on board.” I turned my head to the other side, starting to issue the orders to get going. “Ops, take a roll call, if everyone is on board that needs to be, declare our intention to leave and let go of the airlock as soon as the station gives us clearance”

“Yes sir” said the dragon as she turned to her console.

“Pilot, you have coordinates, confirm?”

“Yes, Sir. We are meeting just past the orbit of the outer gas giant, course direction is already inputted”

“Very good. All stations confirm status!” I ordered, one by one each station repeated back “Ready”, Jude last as lead gunner.

“Roll call all on board” Said the dragon at the ops station. “The Station has cleared us, releasing clamps” The hull of the ship echoed a loud thunk as the docking clamps released.

“Pilot, we’re loose, take us out and go to maximum FTL as soon as we’re turned”

“Yes, Sir!” he replied, his wings tail and hands went to work, backing out the ship and turning her outwards away from the star. As we turned I saw the Phoenix, she had only let go of the dock herself a moment or two prior, but was making a sharp turn toward the surface of Solaris. She seemed so small among the larger silver ships, her reddish brown exterior made her seem even more out of place. Our hull groaned as the coils at her wingtips came to life, taking the ship to super luminal speed.

“Underway, Commander, ETA 43 minutes”

The gravity of the situation started to sink in for me. I had had several simulated training sessions as lead gunner in first command roles. Command deck training requires it, but it doesn’t replace experience. To make matters worst we were facing a Longsword, the biggest of our enemies, and I had not actually seen one with my own eyes before. Up until now we weren’t worthy of such big resources from Titan. The fact he was now turning his big ships on us actually brought a fire inside, we had his attention now.

About 20 minutes of silence was interrupted by the Vink returning to the bridge. He handed me a device, the text on the screen in Draconis laid out the details. Our two sister ships were already waiting, along with 5 smaller ones. Two more Defiant class ships were on the way, the Uncivil, the newest of our sisters, was 3 hours away, the Adamant was 7 hours. The battle would likely be over by the time the latter arrived, provided things went well. All other ships were more than a day away. It was just us 8, but felt like it was enough. The plan was to disable the two Cutlass class ships before going after the Longsword. Its massive size made it less maneuverable leaving it actually easy to stay out of the line of gunfire it could make. Something else caught my attention as I read over the brief. The First Commander of the Defiant was now listed as “Commander Parith”. I’d have to congratulate that asshole sometime.

The battle plan was simple enough. We, the three larger ships, would take on the Longsword, taking out the drive coils first so it couldn’t make a run at the base or planet, then try to take out her heart, running at the engine area until it would lose power and be disabled. Once it could no longer move or fire, we’d help the smaller ships finish up with its two escorts if needed.

“Approaching the location, Sir” the pilot said, as he pulled back a large switch, dropping us to sub

luminal speed and his wings going back to work. We slowed and lined up with the other ships on the right.

“Hold and stand by” Vink issued his order. The Pilot lined up perfectly with the others. This was a new pilot, he wasn’t here when I left, I hoped he was half as good as it turned out Exodus was. But then I turned my attention to our gunner.

“Jude, we’re going coils first, then the reactor on the Longsword” I told him.

“Sure, Ja- I mean, yes, Sir!” he smiled a little, I could tell he was happy to have me back. He typed away at his console then replied a few moments later “Targets pre-loaded” I nodded to confirm. Then turned to the Pilot.

“I see you’re new, we haven’t met, I’m Sub-Comander Jake”

“Lieutenant Trit, Sir” He leaned back a little and looked me in the face. “I transferred on 2 weeks ago”

“How long have you been flying?” I asked him

“4 years with the Militia, but 85 years before that as a civilian, Sir” He replied, the answer gave me a lot of relief. He turned back and leaned back onto the mount, like everyone else on board, he was preparing himself mentally for the battle ahead. But for an hour it was nothing, Silence and waiting while we waited for our biggest challenge yet to show up. I was beginning to think it had somehow already slipped passed us, but comms was silent, they would have called for us if had made it be before now. Eventually I turned to Vink.

“Sir, is it possible it’s gotten past us?” I asked

“No, we would know, at least one of it’s support ships wo- THERE!” He pointed out the large windows at the front of the command deck. I set my eyes on one of these behemoths for the first time. It was as large as it’s legends proceeded it. A kilometer wide and a row of 12 canons on each wing. Less than a second after I turned my head, the two smaller escort ships dropped instantly into view, to each side and lower then the main ship. The escorts were the same size as us, but had more armor plating. A pair Cutlass class, closely related to the same class ship the plans of our ship was based on. “Combat level 3!” Vink ordered “Engage them!”

“Lieutenant Trit, Start your run on the left coil!” I ordered, the ships was already lurching forward before I could the next orders “Try to keep us out of those guns’ firing range!” Like ours, I assumed it’s guns only had a certain level of rotation before the ship itself would need to turn to attack us. Keeping out of these imaginary cones in front of these ships was key. “Jude, try to hit the coils before the armor closes in on them!”

“Yes, Sir!” he replied. Armored dragon warships had a layer of armor that opened up while at warp, allowing the coils less restriction to travel faster. When in battle, these giant covers would close to protect the driver coils. A ship could still jump to super luminal speeds in that configuration, but the speed would be greatly limited. I noted as Longsword appeared, it’s armor was open, likely the crew assumed they would make it all the way to the station as with all attacks before, and left the armor up until it was closer. This was also a great sign, we caught them off guard and had the upper hand.

“Jude, have the rear gunners try to take out any thruster banks as we fly by too, we can limit it’s ability to maneuver it will give us the advantage.”

He smiled, we were already in sync, he had already been inputting those targets” Already done, Sir!”

We swung in very smoothly, the hull echoed as our guns started firing off, the gunners in each seat across our wings showing us what they could do. Each of our 6 guns fired twice on our first run, directly hitting the Longsword’s left coil as the cover closed, one of those shots straying and hitting the outer armor beside the closing covers. I’m not sure it was on purpose or not, but the stray shot exploded and made a hole in the armor, destroying the mechanism that closed the upper half, leaving it’s coil partially exposed.

“Jude! Did you see that?” I exclaimed

“Yes! That shot came from number 3, Ensign Berso. We’re all going to owe her a drink after this!”

“She just made the rest of our first job easier!” Vink spoke up “Bring us around and make a second run, make sure that coil is done!”

“Yes, Sir!” I turned to the pilot “Bank us right and come around again, Trit!”

“On it!” he replied as the ship leered to the right, we made a large semi-circle and came around again, coming at the ship’s left side straight on. As we ran at the ship again, I could see the Wilds and the Defiant taking turns on the right coil.

“Fire as will when in range!” I said.

“All guns firing!” Jude replied. Our hull echoed again with the large booms of the Rebel’s 6 forward guns fired again. Each hitting the still exposed driver coil as the last few shots broke it apart in a fiery mess. As we got close to the Longsword, Trit pulled up, the rear guns now fired hitting key thrusters on the enemy’s left side.

Shooting the thrusters wasn’t enough yet, the Longsword could still move, and as we made a retreating move to get ready for another run, the ship turned up at us. It’s canons starting firing, Trit expertly dodging the first few shots, but then the ship violently lurched, rotating to our left.

“Direct hit to our left coil!” Ops announced, and Trit leaned to the right, trying to get us out of the danger zone of the guns’ range.

“We lost some thrust on that side too!” Trit said while struggling with the controls. “Nothing major, I can still control her well!”

“Wilds and Defiant report one more run should take care of the right coil, Captain” Said the dragon as comms.

“Good! This is going very well so far!” Vink said before giving his next order “Make a run at the reactor!”

“Trit, get above the ship, as far above as you can, then take a run at the very center!” I said, then turned

to ops. "Get the intel on the ships plans and give Trit a target to work with!" She nodded and started typing at buttons.

"Got it! Trit sending to your console!" She said

"Try to give me 30 second runs Trit!" Jude asked.

"Got it!" HE replied. He flew from the ship, flying straight away from the top of it, then made a large upward loop and pointed the Rebel right at the heart of the Longsword. Immediately All 6 guns started firing again. 30 Seconds was enough time for 3 shots each this time. As we made our run 18 total shots tore away at the armor, it made a great deal of damage, but didn't penetrate yet into the hull, it would take more than just one run to make the hole. As we reached the ship, Trit dived down, taking us under the less dangerous back side of the ship. The 6 rear guns guns did try to take shots as we passed, but Trit expertly dodged as we fly past.

"Defiant and Wilds report the right coil destroyed, Defiant is now joining us in runs at the reactor!" The dragon at comms informed up. "Wilds is going to continue at disabling thrusters!"

I looked ahead as one of the smaller Cutlass was being assaulted by three of our small ships. The second Cutlass suddenly disappeared in a streak towards Solaris.

"Sir!" I pointed it out.

"Comms, send a message to the station warning of one incoming!" Vink ordered

"Should we go after it?" I asked

"No, Commander, we left ships behind for a reason. Our job is this Longsword!" he replied. "Line us up for another run!"

"Yes, Sir!" I turned to Trit. "Take us above again and line up for another run!"

"Pulling up!" The ship turned upwards and flew up past the front of the ship this time, a risky move, but it would put us in better position for our next run. Jude had his gunners fire at the forward canons of the larger ship as we zipped past, taking out two of it's 24 guns. As we flew above the ship, we passed the Defiant, making a run of it's own at the middle of the ship.

"Another 30 second run!" I told Trit.

"30 seconds sir!" he confirmed. We flew upwards away from the ship, then made a hard turn, pointing the Rebel's nose at the enemy's heart again, just as the Defiant pulled out of it's run. I could see the wilds, circling the massive polished silver ship, now showing it's damages. She was firing at it, still taking out the last of it's maneuvering thrust, leaving it a sitting duck for us to finish the job. We took our dive at the center again, firing 18 more shots again. The ship still didn't relent, but as the last could shots hit and we got closer, there was an explosive decompression from the center. Debris flew into space, and, making me turn my head, I could see the bodies of a few of it's crew being flung into space from the ship's engine compartment. It was tough to watch, but this was war. As we pulled out I could see it's reactor, it was exposed now. We had punched out hole.

It was the Defiant who started out run behind us, that would deliver the death blow. Her shots dived deep into the hull, and after only two rounds of firing the center of the ship exploded. The reactor blown to bits, blowing mostly out of the whole we made at the top, but the massive explosion also blew a new hole out of the bottom. The Longsword went dark, what little lights were visible went out, the ship started listing to the left while starting to drift to the right. I couldn't help but make a fist and pull it down in excitement, gritting my teeth and holding in an excited yelp. Just lightly pounded his fist on his console.

"It's not quite over yet!" Vink spoke up "Jake, the Cutlass class!"

"Right, Sir!" I came back from the sense of victory. "Trit, take us around the left wing of the Longsword and take a run at the Cutlass!" Even though the huge ship was adrift, it would have capacitor banks attached to the canon like us, it was disabled, but still dangerous if we passed it the wrong way, at least for a few hours until the power ran out.

We ran at the remaining ship, it was already looking pretty beaten, but it was putting up a strong fight still. Two of the smaller Dissident class ships of our own were adrift, disabled by the larger cutlass. We were the same size as it was, and still in great shape. The support ship remained distracted by the 3 smaller ships as we approached. As we got close I issued my command. "Fire at will"

Our hull echoed the deep thumps of the 6 forward guns firing into the Cutlass. Those 6 rounds were all that was needed, as a couple hit the center, penetrating the weakened armor to its core, the ship exploded in the center. It broke in half as the left side continued to burn and explode into smaller pieces. I frowned a little, the goal isn't always to completely destroy ships, but to disable them, like the we did with the Longsword, with hope to salvage the ship into our own fleet.

"Great job!" Vink announced and patted me heavily on the back between my wing stubs. I did feel proud but there was more to do. "Comms, message the Wilds and Defiant, request voice" The dragon nodded and typed things out on their console.

"Booth Responding" They replied after a couple seconds

"Open mic!" Vink said, the comms officer nodded to confirm it was open "Rebel here, we're down one coil and some thrust but otherwise in very good condition. We should send one of the larger ships back to the station to ensure the other Cutlass is taken care of, what are your status's?"

"Wilds here, we have both coils but lost all the canons on our left and all on the rear, we took a lot of damage to our maneuvering jets as well, we can't really fight more move a lot but we're far from disabled still."

"Defiant here, we took hits to both coils, I'm not sure we even have warp at all right now"

"I would recommend you stay here then, and help deal with the aftermath and taking the Longsword. We're going to go back to the station and ensure that Cutlass that escaped is dealt with before it gets an upper hand" Vink announced. "We will return if needed."

"Good luck" Both ships responded as their channels closed. The Defiant and Wilds would stay here for hours, waiting for the Longsword to completely run out of power, making it harmless, then board the ship, taking the crew, hopefully peacefully, rather than letting them suffocate and freeze to death.

“You heard our Captain!” I announced “Set course back to the station, maximum FTL!”

“Yes, Sir!” Trit started turning the ship

“Yes, Sir!” The dragon at Nav made a course, not very far, so would only take him seconds to feed the target to Trit’s panels.

“With one coil down, we’re at 75 percent speed” Ops spoke up, I didn’t understand warp field theory like my brother did, so I never got why losing one coil only lost a quarter of the speed, all I knew is that coils don’t scale up linearly.

“Understood” Vink said “Take us away when ready, Trit”

“Yes, Sir!” After only a few more seconds on controlling the ship into a perfect line back towards the station, the familiar groan of coils working echoed off the wall, however it was notably heavy on one side this time, as one of them was not working.

It took over an hour to get back, greeted to sight of a heavily damaged but still fighting Cutlass taking on the 5 remaining smaller Dissident class of our own. 2 more from the previous battle had followed us back to the station, and all 3 of us immediately joined in.

“Comms, Message the station and check to see if they’ve been hit” Vink ordered.

“Yes, Sir!” she replied

“Lead Gun, have your targets set, Commander Jake, Take us back to battle, It looks like they have her coils down already, so aim for the guns and reactor now”

“Yes, Sir!” I replied “Trit, take a run at it, Jude, have you-” I didn’t get to finish my orders before the ship suddenly ran, but not towards us, or towards the station, but instead it headed towards Solaris, behind the station.

“After it!” Vink yelled.

Trit worked his wings, and pushes the throttles fully forward, The Rebel rumbled and we started chasing down the other ship. After only a few minutes, It started skipping off the atmosphere, not firing a round, and showing no signs of stopping, suddenly it nose dived, and I looked at Vink as his face realized the same thought as mine. This ship was going to crash itself into a city!

“JUDE!” I yelled “START SHOOTING! BREAK IT UP!”

“I-” Jude scrambled at his console “I can’t get a lock, the atmosphere is making it jump around too much!”

“Ops!” Vink started “Is our hull in good enough condition to go after-”

The comms officer cut him off “SIR! You really need to hear this!” Vink nodded and she started playing a message over the speakers.

“MAYDAY MAYDAY This is the first officer of the ‘Decay of Chaos’. We’ve killed our Captain, He tried to crash us into the planet to kill us and millions but we’re out of control and we can’t pull out! PLEASE HELP!”

This resonated with my soul, this sudden look into the dissident of Titan’s own military, where leaders would throw themselves to death while the crew are helpless dragged into oblivion. To my very core, I was shocked, so shocked I couldn’t speak for a second. I looked around, and for a second, it seemed like neither could any one else.

But there were people down there, and also people on that ship, even if we were enemies moments ago, they were lives, just like we were. I thought for a second, how we could pull this ship out of it’s decent. There was only one idea I had, how we took the Phoenix home.

“Ops! Start modifying our warp field parameters!” I ordered, “Wrap our bubble around that ship we’re going to pull it out!”

“Jake, it’s dangerous!” Vink Snapped back, shocked himself at what we just heard.

“I know, but it’s our only choice!” I looked at Vink, his worry was mainly for his crew, but rightfully so, but this ship was also headed down to crash into innocent lives.

Captain Vink thought about it, but with little time to think, he agreed. “Okay, let’s do it!”

I continued with my plan. “Trit, get down as close as you can to the ship! Jude, lock down your guns we’re a rescue mission now! Ops, let me know when your modifications are ready!”

Trit pointed the nose down “I can get us within a few dozen meters, but the rough atmosphere is going to keep me from getting closer!”

“Do what you can!”

“Ready on our one coil, Sir!” Ops said, I had forgotten for a moment we only had one left, it would have to be enough.

“Start it off easy when we fire it up, remember the goal isn’t to actually go to warp, just help this ship pull out”

“Yes Sir!” A few more taps on the console “Trit, I’m ready here!”

“Get in nice and close Trit, and get ready to flip that switch on my command!”

“60 meters and closing!” Trit said, his wings and tails now rapidly correcting for the atmospheric drag, especially on the left side, where the damaged coil was slowing us, trying to throw the Rebel into a spin. “50 meters!” a few more second pass, the ground getting closer. “40 meters! 30 meters!”

“NOW!” I ordered. Trit threw the switch, the ships violently shuddered as the field grabbed us and his wings rotated back, his tail lifting up the rear control, the Rebel rotated up but continued to fall with the Cutlass under us.

“Comms! Get us a voice connection on their frequency!” Vink ordered

“Open sir!” She replied

“Titan ship, we’ve got our warp field around you but it’s not strong enough, you need to pull up too!” Vink commanded. The Cutlass’s right wing started breaking up, it’s coil heading for the city below.

“We’re trying! We had little control thrust left before we were throw into this! WE’RE PULLING AS HARD AS WE CAN!”

“We’re Changing!” Trit shouted “Not much be we’re pulling up! I need more!” The dragon at ops moved some controls at their console, the one coil at our side groaned more, but it sounded wrong, straining to do what it wasn’t designed to. She analyzed her screen.

“Keep trying! We still have along pull ahead!” he shouted.

I looked ahead out of the large windows of the command deck, flames crept over the glass, we were out from over the continent now, over open ocean. The population on the ground was saved already.

“Captain, it’s course is clear of the city!” she stated. That’s great, but it wasn’t enough for me.

The coil sound suddenly changed, instead of a loud groan it changed suddenly to a high pitched whine, then cut out completely. The Rebel lurched violently to the right as the field collapsed, we no longer had a grip on the falling ship. The voice channel was still open, we could hear panic let loose on the command deck of the other ship. “PULL UP! PULL! UP!” along with other yelling and commands. Our command deck fell silent as there was nothing left we could do listening to the final screams and words of the ship that would have killed us only moments ago.

The Cutlass hit the water at a couple thousand kilometers per hour. Even with it’s extra armor it was no match for the hard water at that speed. It disintegrated on impact, spreading across the surface in a violent long white splash, breaking into thousands of pieces that skipped across the surface. Parts slowed on the water then started instantly sinking as the friction brought them to a stop. Some parts briefly ablaze before being taken into the ocean. There would be no survivors.

Trit strained at the controls, trying to keep the Rebel from experiencing the same fate, slowly but surely he was able to somewhat slow us down and bring the noise up, taking us back up and into orbit. Several long moments of silence passed as the sky turned back into the familiar field of stars in space. Finally, Vink broke the silent.

“End Combat status”

24 hours had passed, from the safety of the station I looked onto the ship I was second in command of yesterday. The Rebel already had workers in spacesuits crawling all over her on the outside. Repairing the damage we had done in saving all these people yesterday. I looked down the row of docks. The Wilds and Defiant were getting the same treatment, but they were worst for wear, it might be months before they were battle ready again. Out newer sisters had arrived shortly after the battle. Patrolling as fresh ships in case a second wave we didn’t know about showed up. But what as truly shocking was the

corpse of the Longsword, brought to the station for inspection, intelligence and most of all, to see if it could be rebuilt, renamed, and put back in service under our flag. Larice broke my concentration, placing her hand on my shoulder.

“Hey stud! I heard you fucked those ships as acting first commander yesterday!” She said. Damn, it was so good to lay my eyes on her again.

“Yea I-” I didn’t even get to really start my sentence when Jude Came up, slapping my on my back

“THIS GUY!” he boasted “Deserves his own ship! His ideas might have saved millions of dragons yesterday!” He laughed and started pulling me along. “We owe you a drink! Hell this whole station owes you a drink! All of Solaris even!”

“I know I’d like to reward him too!” Larice said “A tall ale for the biggest hero in the system today!”

“Guys, Come on! It was our whole ship!” It wasn’t a lie, Jude was amazing in his post, And seeing Larice’s action on the Wilds form afar. “Really, we’ve made a good team! Not Just us, but the three ships!”

Larice laughed “Hell yea! A few around the station started calling our ships the ‘Slayer Sisters’ for bringing down a Longsword!”

“The drink will have to wait though!” Jude interrupted “Vink wants to see you! Larice, you’re going to want to come as well!”

“What’s going on?” I asked him “Is everything okay?”

“I’m not sure entirely. Other than he wants you in one of the large common areas.”

We walked along, chatting and catching up. I felt really good to be between my best friends again. They asked me about my brother, and how everything went catching up with him. I told them I’ll tell them all about it with a few drinks after this meeting with Vink. We were all really feeling good about meeting up again. We quickly ended up where the Vink wanted to see me, a rather large crowd had gathered. What surprised me was a small round of applause when I entered. Vink was gesturing me to come over rather frantically, so I hurried to him.

“What is it, Sir?” I asked

“We don’t want to keep the General waiting!” HE said. I was rather shocked. Which General? Vink pulled me onto a temporary platform where Sodin, and our ships first commander Zho was already standing.

“About time, Jake!” Sodin said lowly, smiling at me.

“Sorry, Sir, if I had know I would have been quicker!” I glanced and Jude, he was smiling as if it was some prank.

“If I may have a moment of your attention please!” Sodin shouted out over the murmuring crowd. It silenced after a few seconds “Thank you!” He paused “As some of you know, we have yet another 5

ships completed. We have chosen the captains for these new ships, one of which is here today. Usually these promotions are taken care of by my the Colonels or other ranks, but sometimes I can take that pleasure for myself!" Suddenly Zho's absence made sense yesterday, they were likely taking the tests required to become a Captain, when the attack broke out. Sodin turned to Zho. "Commander Zho!" He smiled at her "Congratulations! I hereby promote you to the rank of Captain, and order you to service in command of the Maverick!"

"Yes, Sir! Thank you sir!" She couldn't help but smile, as she ceremoniously lowered her head. Sodin removed the three narrow bands from her left horn, and placed one broad gold band in their place, indicating her new rank of Captain. Afterwards he lifted his head, placed his hand on her chest and bowed forward. Sodin returned the salute.

"I know you will make us proud, Captain Zho!"

"I will, Sir!" She replied.

Then Sodin marched towards me. I stood at attention, even more rigid than usual. He paused, and inspected me, up and down. I hadn't had a chance to straighten out, I really hoped my uniform was up to standards.

"Sub-Commander Jake" His voice changed "Your heroic actions saved a large part of the population yesterday, I know you wanted to save the lives of that crew aboard the Cutlass as well. You show a devotion to preserving life that inspire many of us to keep fighting for!" Another soldier walked up to him, handing him a plaque and a small package. "In recognition of these actions, I hereby awards you this metal of Valor!" Sodin pulled a metal pin from the package, very polished red emblem, and pinned it on the left side of my uniform top. As he did so, he leaned into me, privately speaking to me, and only me, to my ear. "Your mother and Father would be proud of you. You truly are their son" He leaned back upright as I fought to keep a tear from forming in my eye, and handed me my the Plaque, this one was heavy, not made of cheap material, and highly polished. He spoke aloud again "This is one of the highest honors in our ranks, and I am proud to present it to you!" He placed his hand on his chest and bowed. Smiling, I returned the salute to the General. Then he stepped aside as the crowd applauded, talking to Vink "He's all yours Captain Vink"

There was more?

Vink stepped forward and in front of me. "As you just heard, I'm losing my first officer aboard the Rebel permanently. I was considering you as her replacement, but your actions yesterday confirmed my choice was solid!" He paused "Sub-Commander Jake, I hereby promote you to the rank of Commander, and order you to service as my first officer aboard the Rebel!" The soldier brought him two new gold bands. Vink gestured for me to lean down, placing those rings on my left horn along with the one that remained. He placed his hand on his chest as the General before and bowed, I happily returned his salute as well. I was honored to be this dragon's first officer on a permanent basis now!

"Lieutenant Jude!" Vink called from the platform. Jude walked towards Vink and stood at attention beside me. "You have been acting as Lead Gunner for the last three months, that position is now your permanent rank and station. I hereby promote you to rank of Sub-Commander" The soldier handed Vink yet another gold band. He turned to Jude, who was already leaning forward for him. Vink removed the silver bands of his Lieutenant rank and placed the one gold band, and they two saluted each other.

“Thank your for your attention!” Sodin announced and the crowded applauded again. Larice came onto the platform, giving me a strong hug then the same to Jude. Zho also approached, my former commanding officer. “Congratulations!” I said as I saluted her, Jude and Larice doing the same.

“To you as well, Commander! I look forward to working with you, Vink, and the Rebel!” she turned to Larice “And the Wilds as well of course!”

Sodin bid his farewell, Taking the two Captains with him “We have some more planing to discuss, Congratulations both of you, again!”

“Yes, Sir! Thank you, Sir!” We said, accidentally in unison. Sodin chuckled and walked, the two Captains following.

“NOW!” Larice shouted “It’s time for that ale! Follow me, there’s a bar about three pods down the station!

We walked down the station, carrying on and chatting, but along the way we passed some of the crew from the Longsword, being processed. Some would remain prisoners, properly treated of course. Others would be “Freed” and rleased to the general population, but under close scruitiny for some time. They were knelt on the floor, heavily armed guards surrounding them, only about 10, they were being processed in groups. A couple lower ranked soldiers walking around, gathering names and ranks. But up front was the Longsword’s Captain, at least as far as I could tell, from his one wide gold band, if they used the same rank markings as we did. He looked defeated, as he should, but also something else in his eye, desperation. I slowed, I had a sick feeling in my gut. Larice and Jude stopped, noticing my change in mood.

“Jake, what is it?” Larice asked. But before I could answer, the Captain had quickly grabbed the sidearm from a passing Ensign, who had carelessly left their holster open.

“DOWN DOWN EVERYONE DOWN!” the guards started ordering the group. “DROP THE GUN!” one of them ordered the Captain. Suddenly every gun in this section of the station was pointed at him, this included mine, Larice’s, and Jude’s.

He swayed and shook, aiming from one guard to the next nonsensically, he was obviously no longer stable. One of the Commanders in charged holstered his gun, trying to talk him out of the situation. Extending a hand slowly. He tried talking to him.

“Captain, we told you, no one would be harmed if you cooperate. Please, put the gun down, no one is going to hurt you.” He pleaded.

“NO! NO! It’s not you I’m worried about!” He shouted, in a state of sheer panic now.

“We told you, we’re not sending you back, even if you wanted to go back, Titan isn’t going to kill you if you’re here with us!” The Commander tried to calm him, from the words he was saying I’m guessing this wasn’t the first outburst. I had sympathy for him. My new rank, though not in command, I would feel pretty terrible for my crew in his situation too. But even then, it didn’t seem to be his crew he was worried about.

“You’re not going to win this war! And when you lose, he’s going to find me! It’s going to be worst

than death! I can't go through that wrath!" Before anyone would react, he suddenly pulled the gun back, placed it under his jaw, and pulled the trigger. His staff behind him now covered in his blood as they all gasped, and his corpse fell forward.

Twice, in two days, I had an intimate look into Titan's armies. It was not like ours at all. It was just a job to them. However instead of enduring the punishment of failure, they would rather die. Two Captains in two days ended their lives rather than accept failure, and this was truly frightening.

I holstered my side arm back to my thigh as did my friends. There was a quiet solemn moment, before I spoke, darkly.

"I can't decide, if no longer want that drink, or want it even more."

Chapter 16, Strength:

Exodus walked down the stairs of the Phoenix behind me, clad in their flight suit. I was on a strange planet with my mate, we've never been here before and thought it be safer to cover up, just in case. We were met by two dragons in uniforms at the bottom, one had a military riffle with him, which kind of gave me uneasy feelings.

"You almost got shot down!" The unarmed one stated "You have no radio, no transponder, nothing! We didn't know if you were Titan's military or unknown aliens! In fact, this IS an alien ship!"

"Okay! Stay calm!" I tried to diffuse the situation. "Yes, to you it's an alien ship, form a species called human. But it's safe!"

"Oh? If it's so safe what are all these things on the front of it!" he retorted

"Just scientific instruments, telescopes!" I said "I can prove it if you want!"

"No" He sighed "I'm not going in there. But you do need to pay your landing fee!"

"Landing fee?"

"Every ship that lands pays a small fee. It's for upkeep of the space port, it's not much, only 20 gold each time" HE told me

"I've got an account here!" Duke strolled down the stairs behind us, interrupting, but also saving the day. "We're going to go get a transponder and a radio, and I'll add that transponder to my account!"

"Okay. You need this straightened out before you can leave. And by the way, all ships are grounded until the Militia clears it with the port authority, you're stuck here for a few hours at least anyway" And without any more, and ignoring any questions he walked away with his partner. I turned to Duke

"What do you mean you have an account here?" I asked

"Deakon, Sandpit isn't the only place we go to, you just ended up landing in the very port we also use when we come here for parts we need. I, well we, land often enough, our transponders are linked to an account, I've got dozens of landings pre paid for. So all we need to do, is get you a radio and transponder so we stop almost getting blown to oblivion!" He smiled at me, but I could tell he was annoyed and the second time TODAY we got threatened. "I know where there is a good tech shop, and a really good fried torla place too! Besides, it sound like we'll be here a while while your brother saves the world anyways" He sounded a little sarcastic on that last part. "So how much coin you got left?"

"I got lots still, about 6 thousand" I replied "How about you, Exodus?"

They seemed a little sheepish "I uh. Well I spent a lot on clothing and some interesting things. I've only got about 2 thousand left"

"That's a lot on clothes!" Duke said "I'd be happy to see you in all of that when we get back!"

"No offense Duke, but about half of it is stuff you're not going to see" They replied

“Oh, now I am really curious” I laughed.

“Huh, shame!” Duke seemed disappointing “Well! Follow me, you have more than enough for the radio anyway. I’ll buy the transponder for you. You’re ship first, Station’s ship second!” he reminded us. A few of the others had started coming out of the Phoenix as well. “Kelly, Pike! Let’s go tech shopping!”

Pike got an excited look, while Kelly, just sort of rolled her eyes, not wanting to do work on her vacation, despite being a huge ship nerd. We started walking down the row of landing pads, passing other ships, many of which had dragons lounging or standing around talking, waiting for the battle to pass so they could take off. This spaceport was bigger than the one at Sandpit, and more than just dragons too! We passed an Orion ship, they were out talking among themselves in their language, their long mule faces staring at us as we walked passed. Exodus waved, oddly friendly with them despite the problems we’ve had at the station. A couple of them actually brighten their expression and waved back. Towards the end we passed a Karthan ship, the thin feline like race we saw the day we got Exodus’s flight suit. They waved at us first, lazily lounging about in folding furniture they placed in front of their ship.

As we walked passed a large hanger there was a pop up tent set up, 4 dragons serving ice water. There were about 5 children playing nearby, likely only about 10 years old. One of the dragons caught my eye. They had the fur morph. A rare morph where the row of spikes that start on our head and go down our backs and down the tail, is replaced with a fuzzy mane. She was build a lot like Olto, it gave this strong looking dragon a really nice appeal. I stopped and said hello, and was greeted with pure pleasant personality.

“Hi there!” she said “Ice water?”

“Sure!” I took a the small paper cup she handed me. After I took a sip I asked “What’s all this about?”

“Well, everyone is stranded here for a little bit, we though we’d keep everyone hydrated!” She replied, smiling.

“Oh! How nice of you, are these kids yours?”

“No, but for some reason they got left with me!” she laughed “Their parents are from that ship over there” She pointed to a small dragon vessel not far away. “Farmers, I think the kids are just enjoying playing in the shade” She paused for a moment. “Hi, I’m Melinda!”

“I’m Deakon!” I turned my head to introduce the others but realized they had walked on without me. “Oh! I’m sorry, I do want to chat more but my friends have moved on and I should catch up!”

“Oh! Of course, have a great day, Deakon!” She said smiling, I set the cup down and raced after the group.

The tech shop Duke talked about was pretty close, only about a 10 minute walked once we were off the pads. This place catered specifically to ships, so it made sense to be nearby. All 5 of use walked through the door, treated to a jet black heavier dragon with her feet up behind the counter.

“Yea what do you want?” She said without looking up.

“Radio and transponder” Duke said, but when the dragon heard his voice she perked up

“Duke!” She looked at the group “Kelly! And oh my, if it isn’t the little cutie, Pike. Off station, a rarity for you!” She put her feet down and leaned over the counter “And hows this little cute stud?”

“Easy Guin!” Pike frowned “We’re here on business”

I was still lost in her scale color. She was hypermalanistic, when a color morph goes extreme and creates too much color, making them appear black, the exact opposite of white dragons, just like, well I don’t want to say his name. I had seen a few around sandpit but never interacted with them. Between her and Melinda, I was meeting the interesting looking of our kind today!

“Okay okay!” she said “What model you looking for?”

“T-37b I’m thinking!” Duke spoke up

“No!” Kelly butted in “Get the T-39, it’s got better range!”

“The K-82 has a better interface though!” Pike also butted in “I can make an interface for that AI they have!”

“AI?” The black dragon spoke up. “Like a science fiction book?”

“Yeah!” I said “It’s an alien ship, well technically. Nothing anyone around here has seen, but it’s tech I grew up with!”

“The K-82 is known to have problems though, Pike” Kelly said

“The T-37b has no interface connection though, it’s voice only!” Pike argued

The four argued for 10 minutes on which radio to get for OUR ship. I leaned against the wall while Exodus shrugged.

A shadow went past the glass door at the entry to the little shop, and suddenly, Exodus seemed attentive. “Hey, is everything okay?” I asked them. The others still bickering.

“Yeah” they seemed apprehensive “I just had a feeling, but it’s gone now” They said.

“OKAY! The T-39, with a data interface, and a transceiver!” Guin said “Is that final? You’re not going to make me look up a bunch of other stock?”

“No, that’ll work” Kelly confirmed.

Guin picked up a clipboard and flipped through the papers. “Okay, yeah! I’ve got those in stock. 6,200 coin for that stuff”

“That’s good, we can cover that!” Exodus said. We started pulling out the coin from satchels on our

waists. Exodus gave her 1000, then I handed over the rest.

“Perfect! These boxes are rather big, we can bring them to your pad if you are at the port?” Guin sort of half asked half stated.

“Yeah” Duke said “Pad 59! Now about that transponder”

Kelly, Duke, and Guin went on for another 5 minutes about what model to get. Settling on the cheapest option, since they all did the same thing. Pike didn’t really have much input on this item. “You’ll be replacing it in 5 years likely, these ones are so cheap!” Guin warned.

“We have a couple at our station too, we just didn’t think to put on in, did we Deakon?” He turned, glaring at me.

“I had no idea we even needed it okay?” I shot back.

“Ookay!” Guin butted in. “I’ll send the transponder to your pad too. You going to be paying for this too?”

“Put that part on my account!” Duke said proudly.

“Duke, you know we don’t do that here!” Guin said suspiciously.

“Oh, right!” He said and started digging for his coin, paying for the part. “Okay, Guin we’ll see you again soon of course”

“Of course Duke” She said, smiling, unlike the poor personality we entered the shop to “And be sure to bring the cutie patootie back with you!” She turned her attention to Pike as she blew a kiss then waved with her fingers. Pike wasted no time leaving.

We left and started our way back, but once we reached the corner of the building. Exodus became apprehensive again.

“Is everything okay?” Kelly asked.

“Yes, I think so.” Exodus responded. “You guys go on without us, I just want to check something.”

“Don’t get yourselves robbed!” Duke warned “We’ll meet back at the Phoenix, okay?”

“We won’t!” Exodus let the others walk a few steps away “Deakon, come with me?”

“What is this?” I asked, following them down the alley between the buildings. “What is going on?”

“I can feel him!” Exodus exclaimed. “Another one, like me, here!” I was rather surprised, but in what way did the mean ‘like me’? Exodus slowly walked ahead of me, I followed closely. They slowly approached a large crate in the alleyway and stopped. To my surprise, Exodus took off their gloves and removed their helmet, handing it to me. Then they whispered “It’s okay, we won’t hurt you, please come out”

To my complete and utter surprise, and dragon slowly stepped out from behind the crate, completely covered, but what I could see, the snout sticking out from under the hood, their fingers sticking out from wraps on their wrists, their bare feet, they too were covered in vibrant purple scales. I was told it was a one in a million chance, the purple scale morph, yet here I was in a dank alleyway with two of them. The second one lowered their hood off their head. Exodus had strong orange eyes, this one had beautiful blue eyes. He looked young, likely a teenager, a street kid, likely rejected like Exodus was at a young age.

“Hi there, I’m Exodus, this is my Mate Deakon” They spoke very softly “You see, you’re just like me. We’re not going to hurt you. What’s your name?”

“Thatch” the kid spoke, his voice full of utter fear. I can’t relate to what Exodus went through as a child. But this kid seemed to be having a very similar experience with early life. “My name is Thatch. I never thought anyone else in the whole universe would be like me.” He talked so silent, fearful of what was going to happen next.

“Thatch” Exodus was so careful here “We can help you, please, let us take you away from everything that’s wrong. I promise, not every dragon is evil. My mate here is a fine example of that. We can help you.” Their voice was soft and pleasant. Thatch did reach out his hand, but we were interrupted.

“DEMONS! TWO OF THEM!” We turned to see a random stranger, pointing down the alley. I was suddenly filled with anger, but Exodus would beat me to the first line.

“You narrow minded fool!” They turned and yelled. Their training had made them confident now, they were not afraid anymore, and it made me proud. I started to charge the green dragon, but he ran off. When we both turned back, Thatch was gone. “That asshole, he ruined it!” Exodus was frustrated as they reached for their helmet “That poor kid, I bet he has it worst than I even did.” They pulled the helmet over the head and zipped the bottom. “It’s no use, Thatch is gone now” Exodus reached into their satchel, grabbing a few hundred of the coin they had left, and threw it behind the crate. “Thatch, that is for you, please take it when we leave, before someone else finds it!”

“Are you sure he will find it?” I asked

“Yeah, I didn’t just tell him verbally” And with that Exodus walked off in a huff. “I could have had that guy picking his own ass in town square in front of everyone!”

The crates beat us back to the Phoenix, I was impressed with the fast service! I could see why Duke liked the shop. Getting the transceiver onto the roof of the Phoenix was less easy. I got up on the top of our ship rather easily, a jump and a few flaps and I was up there, gaining some attention from some surrounding dragons. Getting Olto up here was a different story. Thankfully Exodus being nice to the Orions paid off, and they had long ladder, they said it was for doing their own repairs. Together we pulled up the transceiver with a long rope onto the roof. Olto took some measurements, marking them down on some paper she found, and went back into the ship to make a mount for it, using the existing mounting places for the human transceiver that had been shot off.

I took a moment to look around from high up on the Phoenix, I could see Melinda by the hanger, still handing out the ice water. The kids were still playing around beside her tent. Glavous was meandering toward her, I guess he was a little thirsty.

I checked out the wiring. The transceiver needed 4 wires, there was 6 sticking out. I could make this work with the existing human wiring! I had sat down for a moment to relax, but a moment or two later I heard a lot of murmurs and yelling from the surrounding the ships. I stood up, waking towards the edge of the roof to see what was going on. Exodus looked up at me then pointed up. I looked where they were pointing and two fireballs were hurdling towards the city. I stared at them, slowly realizing they were ships, much to my relief, I was sure they would steer away.

I might have been wrong, the two ships kept getting closer, the fire did somewhat die down as they slowed somewhat, but they were still leaving smoky streaks as they headed in our direction. That's when I noticed something came off the first ship and just seemed to stop moving. It stopped moving but was getting bigger? My brain struggled to comprehend this more a moment, why would it stop moving but get big- IT WAS COMING DIRECTLY TOWARDS US!

I dove off the roof of the Phoenix as the huge piece of ship flew only meters over where I was standing and crashed into the hanger I had walked passed less than an hour ago. I ran in that direction, my instinct was to help anyone caught in the fiery crash. Screw running, I leapt into the air and flew over there. Landing not far from Melinda's tent. Just as the outer wall of the hanger started falling. I looked at the ground, the children were running but they weren't going to make it. I wasn't going to make it in there and pull them out, Melinda stood beside her water tent. As the wall came down she threw her arms up in the air. As the steel wall came crashing down, for a moment, maybe a split second, maybe a little longer, I swear, she caught that wall. The wall stayed up, just for a moment, one of the children crawled out, but then the crushing weight came down. Suddenly the area was surrounded by dragons, Orians, Karthans. Everyone ran up to the wall and together the group started lifting, hoping for a chance those kids and the other adults would be okay, or at least someone survived!

Suddenly Glavous was behind me, surprising me. "Did you see that Deakon?"

"Yeah" I choked. "I just watched Melinda and those kid die!"

I turned and looked at him. There was something different, something I had never seen before, his spikes were glowing a bright gold color. "Glavous! What are you doing? We have to get this off of them! Some of them might still be alive!"

"It no longer matters, Deakon" He replied, simply.

"Glavous you heartless son of a bitch!" I screamed "What the fuck do you mean it doesn't matter now?!?"

"Oh, Deakon, haven't you learned by now?"

I stood in a white void, nothing around me. Those poor children I tried to save, gone. The city, gone. All the people I had met today, gone. Just white nothing. I was dead, I think. I turned, more white, more nothing. I thought I was chasing my purpose in life, escaping to here, but I came here just to die.

“...haven’t you learned by now?”

I turned to see a gold dragon, for a second he seemed distracted, but then he turned his attention to me. “Sorry, I was having another discussion” He smiled “Melinda is it?”

“Yeah, Melinda. Who are you? Am I dead?” I asked.

“You are! I’m glad you so observant, Melinda, you see I have a lot to teach you! I’m always happy to have a student who is smart and observant, it makes my work easier! My name is Glavous” Tears filled my eyes, I wasn’t ready for death, I had so much I wanted to do! “Why are you crying Melinda?”

“I’m not ready to die!” I cried.

“Oh, well I am very glad to hear that!” He said. His voice was so confident but nonchalant about my death. “If you’re willing to fight for it, I can help you restore not only your life, but the children you gave you life to try and save!”

“I don’t know why, but for some reason, I thought I could catch that wall” I said. The tears were going away, I fought with the reality. “Who are you Glavous, are you a god? Is this the afterlife?”

He chuckled. “No, and I am no god. And no, this is not the afterlife, yet. But rest assured, in this moment of time, you are indeed dead. I have pulled you to my void, Melinda.”

“I don’t understand, if I’m dead, but this isn’t the afterlife, where is this?”

“Where you died, I have just” He thought for a second. “removed everything for you. Your soul has not yet left your body. Though it is crushed under that wall. Look!”

I turned to see the wall, many of the people I had met that day were trying to come to my aid, trying to lift the wall off my body, off the bodies of those kids. But they were frozen, without color, black and white.

“In the moment of your death, as I witnessed it, I saw something. Something I did not expect to find. Which surprises me, Melinda, I can normally sense someone with your talents days and large distances away. Perhaps I was distracted, but that is a train of thought for another day.” Suddenly the frozen image of my death started to move, but in reverse. Those who came to my aid ran backwards. A few moments later the wall rose as a child ran backwards under it, and it stopped again. I could see myself holding this giant metal wall, the one child was under it again along with the others. “Right here, Melinda. You DID catch this wall! In fact, you DID save this one child!” The gold dragon pointed at the child that ran backwards under the wall. Suddenly the scene moved forward again. The wall fell just after the child got out of the way. Then the scene reversed again, back to me holding the wall. “Did you see? You are a hero already!”

I was relieved, my death wasn’t senseless, I did save at least one, my heart filled with joy. “Thank you for showing me this, Glavous!”

“Oh? Is that why you think I’m here? We are not even close to finished!” he took a serious tone.

“Melinda, are you going to save millions! But first we need to start with these 5 children and 3 adults

under this wall!”

“How? I’m not strong enough to hold up all this metal!” I told him

“Yet you did, for almost 2 seconds, enough for this child to escape!” The gold dragon stepped closer to me “Let me show you, Melinda. Allow me to open your third eye.”

He placed his hand on the side of my face, and suddenly my mind was filled with images and events that I had never seen with my own eyes. A very muscular green dragon first, holding an unrealistically large axe, glowing green and ethereal. That dragon was then holding a boulder over his head, but it was many times larger than he was. Then another dragon, uprooting a large tree with their bare claws. Another, lifting the side of an entire ship. Then another, breaking through a cement wall like it was made of paper. Then another, swinging a huge metal beam and throwing it dozens of meters. Feats of strength that are impossible. Then the images slowed as the dragon withdrew his hand. I was back in the white void.

“This is your element, Melinda. This supernatural strength is what you were born to do! Let me teach you how to awake and use this strength to save all 8 of these lives. After that, come with me, to learn how to use all your strength to bring our kind back to our true potential!”

Suddenly I was back to reality, the wall was falling onto me. I put my hands up in the air and caught it again, and with as much strength as I could muster, I held up that wall. But it was still too heavy! I turned my head as two children crawled out from under it, but then I fell, the wall crushing me under its weight.

I was back in the white void, the gold dragon looked at me with a slight smile. “Improvement after only one attempt! 2 children survived this time, we have 6 to go!”

“It’s too heavy, Glavous, what do I do?”

“Melinda, this strength does not come from your muscles or your body, it comes from your soul! Let’s try again!”

The wall came down and I caught it again. The two children ran out from under it, my arms and legs were shaking, but one of the adults grabbed the smallest child and ran out from under the wall with them. The remaining 2 children and 2 adults were nearly out as well then my body failed, the wall came down on us remaining 5.

“Closer, Melinda, but we will save them all, and then yourself!”

The wall came down yet again, and I caught it, a nearly identical chain of events as last time, but a little longer, then I was crushed again.

“Again! Melinda, pull from the strength within you!”

Over and over, the wall came down, each time was eventually the same result. I was crushed, usually along with at least two of the other adults and the remaining two children. Each time my heart would break a little. I was becoming frustrated.

“Melinda, each time, whether you realize it or not, you are becoming stronger! But have no worry, we technically have all eternity to get this right!”

“All eternity?”

“Yes! We will do this over and over until you save them all, and then yourself!”

The wall came down again. As each time I caught it, but I thought about doing this for all eternity, it was hell! I could not watch these people die over and over! That gave me more strength! I pressed back against the wall, taking a step forward and moving one hand inward for more grip, I lifted the wall upwards for the first time! They all made it out, all 3 adults and the 5 children!

But the wall came down on me.

“You’re so close! Melinda, you only need to save yourself now!” The gold dragon seemed excited now. But I kept returning to this white void, between each attempt.

We ended up back in repetition. Over and over, the wall fell on us, each time I seemed easier to hold it up while the others escaped, but backing out while holding up the wall seemed impossible. I was becoming even more frustrated, angry even. Each attempt yielded no closer to a solution, over and over I died.

That axe, I saw in the first memory he placed in my head, if only I had something large like that.

The wall fell on me again, then again. I watched the others escape, while I am crushed under the weight of this huge metal wall, over and over.

Then after what felt like 100 failures I became enraged.

The wall came down at us again, but instead of catching it, I remembered the axe. An axe wouldn’t work, but I knew something that would!

I roared at the wall, an guttural feral roar, as it came at me, but this time would be different. I swung at it with a hammer, like his axe, I summoned from my very being. The head was as large as my body and square, the hand made of metal, and wrapped, like his axe, it was glowing an ethereal green. I swung at the wall, it broke, the two sides were no one was standing near slammed to the ground, but the middle section that had killed me hundreds of times by now was flung backwards as it echoed a large bell like ring. It flew back up past its standing position and fell inwards towards the fiery crash that started all this, as the hammer faded into nothing.

I was alive!

Screw running, I leapt into the air and flew over there. Landing not far from Melinda’s tent. Just as the outer wall of the hanger started falling. I looked at the ground, the children were running but they weren’t going to make it. I wasn’t going to make it in there and pull them out, Melinda stood beside her water tent and suddenly she was holding a giant glowing green hammer and roaring at the falling wall,

she swung up upwards smashing the wall, it broke into 3 pieces, the middle section that would have crushed them was flung up and over, inward and safely away from the small group. The adults stood in shock as the children ran away, back to their parents.

Glavous was standing only a few feet from her, and it suddenly made sense to me. He turned to me as his face spikes were fading from a bright glowing gold color, something I had never seen before.

“Glavous, what was all this?” I asked him.

“Deakon, meet Melinda, the Champion of Strength!” He pointed to Melinda, who was getting thanks and appreciation from the adults she just saved, though they were bewildered on how. Glavous turned to me and spoke again. “And never call me heartless again, Deakon!”

“I didn’t!” I exclaimed.

“Melinda!” Glavous turned to her as she walked towards us. “This is Deakon, the Champion of lightning!”

“Yes, we’ve met, but, ‘Champion of Lightning’?” She asked

“There is much to tell you, but if you wish to know, you need to come with us!” Glavous explained. “Will you allow me to teach you more, to harness this ability?”

“Yes! Yes of course!” She seemed excited.

“Then take some time to close your loose ends here, we leave at sunrise!” Glavous said.

“Oh, well okay I’m done with that then!” She said happily

“What?” I asked.

“I only arrived here a week ago, I’ve got nothing other than what I have with me! I came here to join the Militia, and fight for freeing people from the grip of Chen! I came here to join the Revolution, but I think this will be a better way to fight!”

Glavous and I smiled at each other, then looked back to her as he spoke. “Then our goals are already in alignment!”

Melinda looked over her shoulder back at the fiery mess that was a hanger a few moments ago. “Shouldn’t we help look for survivors?”

“There was no one else in there” Glavous said with confidence.

“How do you know that?” She asked

Glavous started to speak, but I beat him to it. “Glavous knows things, if he says no one was in there, I’m put my life on him being correct” I turned and started walking back to the Phoenix, as the two followed me. Between me flying over there, and Melinda’s little hammer trick, we were getting some strange looks, but also she was getting a couple cheers!

We reached the Phoenix, Olto was in front of her, staring at the flames of the wrecked building not far away. "Is everyone okay, Deakon?" She asked as we approached.

"No one is hurt!" I replied.

"Oh thanks goodness!" She turned to the reaming crate that contained the new transponder. "Can you give me a hand, this one is too heavy for just myself!"

Melinda ran up to her. "I've got it!" and she effortlessly picked up the crate weighting well over 200 kilos. "Hi! I'm Melinda! Nice to meet you!"

Olto was shocked, she was likely the strongest of us all, and she could barely lift the crate herself, never mind carry it like it weighed nothing.

"O-Olto" She stuttered. "Thank you! This way!" and she lead Melinda up the stairs inside the Phoenix. Olto lead her down the first corridor, not far within the lower deck and stopped at a door. "Here, I think is where they wanted it" The faint voices of Exodus and Pike could be heard within the room they stopped in front of. "This is the electrical control room." Then Exodus came out, leaning out around the corner of the door. Their flight suit was partially off, the arms tied around their waist.

"Oh good you brought it in! Pike and I can start hooking this up too!" They said happily, then Noticed Melinda. "Oh Hi!"

"Pu-purple!" Melinda exclaimed, taking a step back, as Exodus stepped out completely.

"Seriously?" They held out a hand in front of them as their shoulders slumped and their face turned gray.

"Melinda!" Glavous made his way up the stairs into the Phoenix and towards her. "Please, ignore the rumors and false legends, purple is simply another morph, as I am gold, and you have that furry mane. Exodus is simply purple, that is all. In fact, they are likely the sweetest and most honest and compassionate dragon you will ever meet!" Exodus scoffed and went back into the electrical room. "Even if you have offended them deeply just now, you will see as you get to know them."

"I can talk to them, but later you may want to apologize" I put my hand on her shoulder. "Really, get to know them. You won't regret it."

"Who is this?" I turned as I heard Duke's voice, we was coming down the stair from the upper deck, and had noticed our new arrival.

"A new worker!" Glavous replied.

"Wait! I didn't agree to anything like th-" She started but Glavous interrupted.

"It will be nothing like the oppression on Chen's worlds!" He assured her. "You will have lots of time to yourself and with me to refine your skills!" He turned to Duke "You did want to start expanding the station didn't you?"

Duke was much more open to the idea now than he was with us. “Okay, what skills do you have?”

“I worked on an assembly line on Economy, I don’t really have any trades or education” She said, a little quiet but I could see in her face she was really hoping it wouldn’t matter.

“Okay, fine! We do need some general laborers too, for the expansion! You can learn some trades as we go along!” Duke proclaimed, like he was some sort of vocational college. “8 hour days, three days a week to start, if you’re okay with that. Assuming your with Glavous like Deakon and Exodus are?”

She looked at Glavous who nodded. “Yes! But how much do we get paid?” She was still thinking like the worker how she had spent her life.

“We don’t pay you directly, usually. We feed you, give you your own space. Once everyone’s needs are taken care of on the station we look at fulfilling people’s ‘wants’, like extra devices or vacation trips.” He paused. “We always take in the Lightning Festival on Sandpit, for example.”

“So I work only 8 hours, not 16, only 3 days, not 6 or 7 per week, and I don’t pay rent and don’t have to pay for food?”

“Yeah, that’s right!” He said proudly “But to be honest, I might ask for some extra help while we start building some extra things.”

“Sure! I’m fine with all of this!” She replied happily.

“Okay, well come with me, I need to walk over the the spaceport authority office and register this transponder under my account. It’s a boring thing I need to do but I could use the company, and we can hash out some details!” Duke offered.

“I should come with you” Glavous said “Just so I know how much training I can provide, like when we first brought Exodus and Deakon to the station”

“That’s a great Idea” Duke stated.

“Okay! Sounds great! Let’s go!” Melinda said.

It was several hours later before the spaceport was given the go ahead to resume operations. The three had of course returned long by then. We had the radio, transponder and transceiver installed, but it wasn’t interfaced with E.M.B.E.R. yet. We could do that on the station later. For now our risk of getting shot down or chased away was now, in theory all gone. The lineup to leave Solaris was quite long after the long closure of the air and space above. We would have to wait another hour just to take off. Once we had the Phoenix back up into space, we finally headed back to the Duke’s station.

Exodus got us out of Orbit and let the Autopilot do most of the work to take us home. Retiring to the captain’s cabin with me for sleep. They laid on their back as the talked to me while I removed my coth fo sleep. “She did apologize, while we were waiting to take off. She came to the bridge and talked to me. She seemed genuinely sorry. I think we can get along” They said, staring up to the ceiling. I crawled onto the bed then hovered my body over them while on all 4’s.

“Good, she doesn’t yet know how lucky she just to have met you!” I leaned my face close to my

mate's.

"What do you mean?" they whispered.

"You are actually one in a million" I kissed them on their lips. "You are a sweet and lovable dragon" I kissed them again. "You're very beautiful" I kissed them one more time. "And I'm the luckiest dragon in the galaxy to be your mate!"

"You are such a sweetheart Deakon!" They reached up and wrapped their arms around my head. Their face spikes had turned to a deep red, and the look in their eyes told me we were not going to sleep right away.

2 Months Later, Titan's Tower, 4 floors below his throne;

All the Master Generals sat nervously around the table. Titan stood at the head, leaned forward with his large hands on the steel, Selena to his left. Sampson stood to his right, blood still dripping from his nose and face from the unfortunate results of informing his brother the Longsword and its escorts did not return. Sampson was firm, he showed no signs of pain, he no longer felt it. An entire lifetime of his assaults made this normal for him, he no longer felt it.

"You've let my military grow weak, apathetic, complacent." He stood upright and slowly started walking to his right. "You've lost me one of my prized Longswords, through your direct lack of leadership." He stood behind one of his Master Generals, who nervously looked forward. "This one, Master General Sarnin, is in charge of the battle group that Longsword was a part of!" He stood behind his General, placing his hands on his shoulders, the general wincing. "Tell me, General, what do you intend to do, to prevent this from happening again?"

"My Liege, perhaps if we increase our training and exercises, making our soldiers stro-" He was not able to finish his sentence. As he spoke, Titan Grabbed him by the neck, raising him into the air as he strangled him with one hand. His face spikes glowing a faint green in color.

"YOU WILL DO NOTHING AGAIN!" The general kicked back at Titan, but for him it was like kicking a cement wall while he fought for his life. Titan spoke calmer as he held the general in the air. "I will give you 2 years to reform my military, make it stronger, make us invincible. I am no fool, I understand such a change is not instant, but.." The general kicked back again, now also hitting him with his tail, his arms and wings flailing. Titan looked up at him for a brief second. "Stop this!" He ordered and he tightened his grip. The General's neck snapped, his body going limp and hanging from Titan's hand. Sampson winced at the sound, he was all too familiar with it.

"As I was saying, the change cannot be instant, I am no fool. You will make my military disciplined, strong, and unrelenting. My forces will become a source of fear again!" To the other general's horror, the one trapped in his hand blinked and looked around, seeking help. He was still alive, He was still breathing, but paralyzed from the neck down. "If you fail to make my army stronger, will behind replacing you!" His face grew darker "Do you all understand the concept of 'replacement'?"

"Yes, my Liege" they said in unison.

“Good!” Then he lost it.

“DON’T” he yelled as he slammed the general’s head into the table, blood splattering all over the table and nearby generals. He raised the general into the air again.

“FUCKING!” He slammed his head down again, this time a horn broke off, sliding across the table.

“FAIL!” Teeth and bone was splattered across the table.

“ME!” Another slam, his skull was crushed, brain matter and bits of skull flew over the table now.

“AGAIN!” He pulled up the corpse, turned and flung it at the wall, the broken up head splattering blood and bones breaking inside the body from the forceful impact.

He turned back to his generals, sitting around the table, some now covered in blood. “Master General Sarnin has been replaced” he silently walked form the room, Selena and Sampson followed.