

**THE
COMMISSION**
Qi Saga Book One

S. DAWN NELSON

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To Charles

Dear Qi,

In the beginning was the singularity, and the singularity was All. But this story is not about the beginning. The end is all that matters. It is the end that drives me passionately to meet its sweet nothingness, for humanity has proven itself unworthy of another chapter.

We have evolved to conquer the universe where other species have failed. We have achieved scientific feats so advanced that if our ancestors from the origin planet could see us now, they would think us sorcerers, defying the natural laws. Look around you. Has all this exploration and progress made us happier? Have we conquered the chaos, the unfairness of life? If your answer is genuine, you must conclude we have not. We are no better off than our primitive ancestors of planet Earth. Our pointless quests have solved nothing. Even those who live ordered lives still feel the pain of senseless suffering. That is why I must close the book of life.

If you are reading this letter, it is because I have failed to achieve my commission, but rest assured I am coming back. I will not stop until All becomes naught. I will not rest. The only thing left in life to achieve is the end. Zero is my quest, and I am willing to give up everything to achieve nothing.

Until the End,
The Commissioner

Chapter 1

14A, Year 3014
Ceres, Spica
Galaxy 3988, Virgo cluster

I am nothing, as are you. The *you* was no one in particular. El sat alone in his secret cellar, contemplating the mysteries of the universe. *You* had become synonymous with anything not him, but in reality there was no difference. Existence was all in a point, and a point was nothing at all, at least that's what El had come to believe. Tonight, he would test his faith.

A torrential storm raged outside the Matrix of Pythagoras's pyramid, incessantly beating against the ground above. Thunder shook debris into the cellar as he watched his candle drip onto the desk. He adjusted the flame over Phi Euler's Book of Chaos. Time had taken its toll on the book. The binding had come undone and the paper had yellowed. He turned to the final page, pushing back a few strands of his thinning brown hair and dusting off his black priest robe, dirty from navigating through the Matrix's ancient tunnels. He was tired, but he could not stop. He had to solve this.

The old tunnel's entrance was behind a shelf of the Basic Arithmetic section of the Pythagorean library, seldom used for study because most priests believed themselves beyond the fundamental principles of Numology. The underground tunnels had been built ages ago to protect the highest leader of the Matrix, known as the Phi, in the event the Matrix was invaded by infidels during the Crusades of the Holy Order.

I am one of those infidels, thought El. He paused, listening to the rushing rain. For a moment he thought he heard footsteps between the thunder, but it was probably just his paranoia. He'd been spending a lot of time alone down here. He wasn't allowed to take books out of the library, and if the Matrix found out what he was doing, he would suffer Euler's fate. He envisioned Euler bravely walking the plank of the Matrix's skyship, falling through the clouds to certain death. What courage it must have taken him to stand for his convictions.

El had a theory, an unpopular idea that had relentlessly latched onto his mind and taken up residence. For years he tried to reason his way out of this heretical thinking, delving deeper into studying each book in the Holy Order, but the answers never satisfied him. They couldn't explain why thousands of Mori babies were killed during the Infantile Massacre of the Universal Revolution, or why entire planets were deleted from existence by antiweapons. The more El examined the universe around him, the more he saw suffering and chaos. He began to wonder if All really did contain a Holy Order. He'd led an ordered life, but All allowed him to suffer. Why? It didn't make sense. Good should equal good and bad should equal bad, but if Phi Euler was right, that the final answer to life was the unholy zero, then none of it mattered. The only thing left to do would be to help life to its final state. No one would have to suffer anymore. Good people struggled while bad people prospered. Humanity didn't deserve this. Zero was fair. There was no pain in zero.

He told himself it was no accident he happened upon the Book of Chaos after deciding to go back to the fundamentals of Numology. He remembered pulling a children's book entitled $1+1=2$ off the shelves. It looked like it hadn't seen eyes in ages. No serious Numist scholar would even think to do such simple calculations, but hidden within these covers was another book very unlike basic addition with a small caption that read "Book of Chaos: The Revelations of Phi Euler."

El was fully aware he was approaching the edge of a cliff, but he couldn't help himself. He had to look into the abyss. He didn't understand it, so he kept exploring. Now, after pushing his body and sanity to the limits, he had reached the bottom of the chasm.

He moved some symbols around, performing the final calculation...

The door cracked open. "You shouldn't be here, Psi. The tunnels are off limits," said an old librarian, stepping into the candlelight. "I must ask you to—" The librarian gasped, looking down at the desk. "The Book of Chaos. Where did you find this? We must destroy it!" He grabbed the book, moving it over the flame.

"No!" El reached for his staff, swinging at the librarian's head. A second hit knocked him to the floor, and El continued swinging till the man stopped screaming. Then he dropped his candle on the

librarian, sat back down, and continued his calculations. A metallic, musky smell mixed with the moldy cellar air, but El barely noticed as the burning flesh illuminated his final answer. "Equals zero."

Chapter 2

14A, Year 3034 – 20 years later
Heze, Syrma
Galaxy 498, Virgo cluster

“It’s just tragic what happened to baby Amber,” said a Universal Child Services worker. “Strangled by her PM-addicted mother. What a senseless loss. No one deserves to be deleted so early. Didn’t even have a chance to experience life.”

“How long ago did this happen?” asked Psi Mason.

“It’s been four days. Such a horrible drug. She wasn’t even aware of what she was doing.”

“It’s sad we’re unable to reach some Qi. We have many priests working with addicts, and more matrices are offering Awakened Mind support groups.”

“We tried to send her to an AM group, but she was inconsistent in her attendance. We were about to remove Amber from the home when the fatality occurred. If I’d just gotten there sooner...”

“Do you think the mother can be rehabilitated? She must be devastated.”

“They’re all devastated, but the allure of lucid dreaming’s so powerful most continue choosing dreamland instead of facing their tragic lives. Controlling their dreams helps numb the pain of reality. My hunch would be no. She’ll probably slip into PM paralysis and be cared for at taxpayer expense till she dies.”

“Are there any family members who’ve requested religious services?”

“None we can identify, but we have another case that wants a priest. You probably heard about it already on the news. A six-year-old boy was kidnapped by a known Scorpion gang member two days ago. Apparently this Scorpion was mom’s latest live-in boyfriend. Blood was found in the bedroom so we’re presuming the worst. I have a signed Numology Service Request from the family. Here’s their file so you can make contact and offer your support. I really appreciate all the services the Matrix does to help our families. If only more people would follow the Fibonacci Code we wouldn’t—”

“You’ve got no right to keep me here!”

Psi Mason turned to see a scrawny Qian girl enter the room with a young UCS worker running in behind her. The worker was having trouble controlling the shouting teenager. The girl began circling her just out of arms reach.

“Calm down, dear. We can’t have you roaming about on the streets of Heze. It isn’t safe. Just the other day a child was kidnapped by Scorpions. We’re working to make contact with your mother so you can return home to Auva.”

This agitated the girl more. She started breathing heavily, her face flushing as she continued her nervous pacing.

The girl wore the traditional Virgo uniform for her age group – plaid skirt, blouse, high socks, and a navy sweater. Her light brown hair was long and disheveled. An unpleasant odor permeated the room. Everyone was too polite to comment, but it was obvious her uniform hadn’t been washed in months.

“I’m seventeen. Can’t I just be emancipated? I’ve survived two years without Shala.”

“That’s not how it works, Ara. We’re responsible for your well-being until you become a legal adult.”

Ara took off her sweater and untucked her blouse. In what appeared to be an act of desperation, she pulled up the back of her shirt, exposing several large scars across her lower back. “Shala isn’t the sweet Numist patron you think she is. She only takes in orphans so she can have workers for her factory, and if we don’t produce merchandise fast enough, she finds creative uses for her staff.”

The young worker looked unsure of what to do, glancing over at her supervisor for assistance.

Ara tucked in her blouse and picked up her sweater from the floor. As she turned over the sweater, a small dark object fell out. She didn’t appear to notice it drop. I’m not going back, she thought. I can survive on my own. Struggling on the streets is better than being at Shala’s Home for Children. If they force me to return, I’ll just run again.

Psi Mason walked closer to offer his assistance to the troubled youth. He bent down to pick up the object and paused, remaining kneeling for a moment.

It had been a long time since he'd held this stone. It felt cold – too cold to be a fake. He saw himself standing on a battlefield surrounded by the dead and wounded. A tattered flag bearing the entropy symbol blew violently in the gust. The symbol resembled a star with eight jagged arrows pointing out from a single center point. He gripped the flag tightly and tore it off, watching it get carried away by the wind. He would have none of it, but when he looked at his chest he was conflicted, for his armor bore the same symbol of chaos. Many memories flooded forth, but he pushed them back, quickly refocusing on the girl.

"Where did you find this?" He slowly rose, attempting to conceal his flashback with a calm voice and caring curiosity.

Ara snatched the object from Psi Mason and proceeded to look the priest up and down. He appeared to be in his early thirties and of average height for a Qian. He was clean-shaven with neatly cropped brown hair and blue eyes accentuated by his deep blue robe. The priest held a staff with a large sapphire resting in the base between two outer points. It was much grander than the fake diamond on Shala's staff. Ara decided he looked harmless enough, but that meant nothing. Shala put up a good front every time a UCS worker came out to the house. A sweet appearance and the right connections could mask a lot of dysfunction. She wasn't sure why this priest wanted to know about her stone. It wasn't anywhere near as impressive as his sapphire, but it did have a special feel to it. Maybe he felt the energy too.

"Oh, it's an old marble I found at Cantor toy factory. Wasn't the same size as the others so I pocketed it. Kept it as a souvenir to remind myself *never* to go back to Shala's Home for Children."

"Well I suggest you keep a closer eye on it then. Ms. Sanders, it is clear to me that Miss...?"

"Cantor," said Ara.

"That Miss Cantor can't return to the orphanage. I'll take her under my wing and ensure she gets appropriate care till she reaches the age of maturity."

Ara looked skeptical. Why does this priest want to help me? He probably has some ulterior motive, but it beats returning to Shala, and when he's not looking I can make a run for it.

"But we'll need to go to court and draw up custody papers. You can't just come into UCS and walk out with a child. We have rules and regulations. We have to do a trial placement and a home study and—"

"The Matrix will compensate you generously for your contribution to the order. I'll be preparing her for the priesthood of course."

No you won't, thought Ara. She'd spent two years on the streets, and she doubted All could forgive her for what she'd done.

The older UCS worker came over to intervene. "Psi Mason, we'd be honored to share one of our children with you. Please take good care of her. She's been through a lot. We'll complete the necessary paperwork from our end and contact you once the custody order's ready to be signed."

"But ma'am, the UCS manual states that—"

"Ms. Sanders, sometimes children don't fit into a manual. If there is fallout, it will come on me. I have faith this is what Ara needs and assure you I'll accept full responsibility if we get audited. Our manual failed Amber. I won't let it fail Ara too."

Ms. Sanders reluctantly handed her notepad to the supervisor and walked out of the room. She didn't say anything to Ara.

"Ara, go gather your belongings and proceed with Psi Mason," said the supervisor. "You'll be safe with him. He has a kind Qi."

Ara entered the next room and grabbed her staff. She'd taken it from Shala when she ran from the orphanage. It normally stayed folded at her side, ready to access at a moment's notice. She threw a tattered satchel over her body containing the only belongings she had: a few pi coins, mix-matched socks, an old journal, and a half-eaten sandwich.

"I'm ready." Her voice had a hint of enthusiastic anticipation.

"Ara, my name's Naphtali. You can call me Naph. Let me show you to my skyship."

She didn't know how to respond, so she said nothing. She wasn't normally short on words, but she was still trying to figure this priest out. For starters, he had a decent amount of pi. Skyship fuel wasn't cheap. Many people used trains to commute within the planet or took skyferries to travel longer

distances across continents. These mass-transit ferries also ported to other planets within the cluster. If folks shelled out more pi, they could get an international port to another cluster of galaxies.

Naphtali led Ara down to the Heze harbor and found his slip. "Here she is. Her name's *Sapphire*. What do you think?"

Sapphire was an old sailboat, one-masted with two sails. "It's nice."

"It's just a standard skyship. Nothing fancy like those hybrids." He climbed aboard, helping Ara onto the deck.

This doesn't make sense, she thought. People aren't this nice. Don't let your guard down. There's some reason he's picked up a stray child. "Thanks for helping me, but if you have some crazy idea about coupling with me or wanting me to do anything un-Virgo like, I'll jam your staff up your—"

"That won't be necessary." Naphtali's voice remained calm. "I'm of the old tradition and don't seek to couple. I understand you've been through a lot and probably don't trust me right now, but I hope over time you'll see we have your best interests at heart."

Ara raised an eyebrow. "We?"

"Oh, just some of my brothers. Fellow priests that can assist in your training."

"I don't know if I believe in Numology. There's not much order in my life."

"Have faith, Ara. I believe you've been given a special gift and have an important part to play in the order of our universe."

Naphtali began untying *Sapphire*. Ara felt the water beneath the keel slightly bob the small sailboat up and down. She looked around the harbor, examining other skyships parked in their slips, waiting for their captains to return. They ranged in size from one-masted sailboats like *Sapphire* to four-masted freighters. Heze was a landlocked city so the harbor was artificially built to hold skyships.

An important part to play in the order of the universe? She didn't know how upfront she should be with her suspicions, but the curiosity was killing her and she'd never been the most subtle person. "Does this have something to do with my marble? You seemed very interested in it. It has this weird energy vibe. Did you feel it too?"

"No, the stone is cold to me. All will be revealed shortly, but for now enjoy the ride. The skycast shows good weather today, so we should have a smooth launch." Naphtali placed his hand on the helm and entered a code on his computer to activate the skyship's gravity engine.

Sapphire rose quickly into the air, passing a two-masted sailing yacht carrying people headed towards a vacation somewhere tropical, probably an island in the Cancer cluster of galaxies. They were blaring loud party music, dancing, and flinging leis over their Virgo uniforms.

Ara looked down at the old city of Heze. Its gothic buildings towered high over the streets. She saw the local matrix, a cathedral in the center of the city. A few birds flew off one of the spires towards *Sapphire*. She tore a piece of bread from her half-eaten sandwich and cast it into the sky, watching a bird swoop down and try to catch it. Trains wove like caterpillars through the curvy city loops. People were bustling below to pile onto one that had stopped. From up in the sky, everyone looked the same – Leo, Mori, Qian, Sada, Rua, Maian, Rami, Nahn – all were wearing Virgo uniforms and buzzing like little bees towards their respective hives.

The universal government acknowledged eight lines of people, first thought to have evolved on the ancient planet Earth. Leos were believed to have come from Earth's African continent and the Mori from the Orient. Universal historians often debated about which line came first. Sadas originated from the Indian region and Ruas, known for their red hair, from the North. Other lines included the Rami of the Arabian deserts, Nahn islanders of the South Pacific, and Maians from the Americas. Everyone else was known as a Qian.

"Have you ever been in a skycannon?" asked Naphtali.

"No." She'd been in orbit before, but she didn't want to think about those nightmares. It wasn't like she saw outside anyway.

"It's a rush. The skycannon launches every hour to catch the orbiting skyring. We should get there just before the next launch. Check under the hatch; I've got an extra pair of magboots you can wear. Might be a bit big, but it'll keep you grounded while we're in low-planet orbit."

Ara lifted the hatch near the mast, fishing out an old pair of magnetic boots, specifically designed to compensate for the lack of gravity in space. She pulled the boots over her flats, cinching them tightly.

Naphtali chuckled, watching Ara walk awkwardly towards the stern in shoes twice her size.

She frowned. "I look like a clown."

"Better than floating around in space. There's the cannon." Naphtali pointed to a giant donut-shaped ring with a long cannon extending into the sky. He steered *Sapphire* over to the skycannon, joining a line of skyships entering the ring.

A giant digital clock above the entrance counted down to launch time. The next launch was in one minute.

"Last call for skyships," said a robotic voice over the intercom. "Gate closing in thirty seconds."

"Phew! Just made it," said Naphtali, positioning *Sapphire* between a two-masted schooner and a three-masted galleon in a single file line around the inside of the ring.

"Prepare for launch," said the intercom. "Please fasten harnesses and activate autocaptains."

Naphtali touched a button on his helm's computer, switching on the autocaptain. The autocaptain used universal positioning technology to detect *Sapphire's* current location, adjusting the skyship's settings and internal atmosphere. "Magshield's up. We need to pressurize for higher altitude. Strap in so you don't fall overboard."

Ara fumbled with the tangled straps of her harness, but it was too short to fasten the shoulder buckles.

"Launching in ten, nine..."

"Hurry!" shouted Naphtali, trying to help Ara loosen the knots.

"I can't get it to click!"

"Seven, six..."

Naphtali pulled at the straps, frantically trying to force the buckle in.

"Four, three..."

He yanked down hard on the strap. *Click*. "Got it."

"One, launch."

Ara felt a heavy force push her back as *Sapphire* began spinning around the ring with the other skyships. She tried counting the rotations to distract herself from the nausea, but they were moving too fast to keep track. "How long do we circle?"

"Just another minute. We've gotta get fast enough to launch into the orbiting skyring."

She reached into her pocket, holding her black marble. The energy radiating from the stone made her feel safe. I wonder what's so special about this thing? Her mind drifted back to working at Cantor toy factory.

She was at her workstation, filling bags of marbles. As she sorted through them, she came upon a defective one slightly smaller than the rest. It was smooth, warm, and felt alive, sending a strange energy sensation through her body. She had a strong affinity to the marble and placed it in her pocket, fiddling with it throughout the day.

Shala came to check her progress, growing irate when she saw Ara was a few bags short of her daily quota. "You ungrateful child! I took you in when no one else wanted you, and this is how you repay me? There are children in the voids waiting for toys, and these marbles could be the last bit of happiness they receive before dying of dehydration. You're a subtracter!" Shala swung her staff at Ara.

She quickly grabbed the staff and whacked Shala, surprised by the strength of her reflexes. Something had shifted inside her that day. She felt empowered. It was an incredible, unforgettable feeling. She kept hitting her adopted mom until the fat witch stopped squirming. Then she took the staff and broke through an upper window in the factory. She tried to get the other children to follow her, but they were too scared, so she ran alone into the forest, vowing to never return to Auva.

Suddenly a door in the ring opened and ships exited, launching through a dark tunnel into the sky. A line of skyships sailed upwards in a high arc, quickly accelerating above the cloud line. As they entered the upper atmosphere, the curvature of the planet became apparent, contrasted with the darkness of space above. Then the orbiting skyring appeared over the horizon, a long metallic cylinder encasing floating islands with skyships bustling towards restaurants, ports, and shops. The ships

slowed as they were magnetically captured by the ring. Signs posted along the inner wall read "Speed Limit 13 Knots." A guard sat in a small patrol ship near one of the signs. Ara saw Star Burger, the restaurant's familiar golden star causing her stomach to grumble. A few ships were hovering by the sky-thru, waiting to order food. Several holographic billboard ads lined the interior of the ring. One of the ads featured a popular fluxball player. She was suddenly feeling very thirsty.

"Gary Jackson drinks Shift. 'As a pro-fluxball player, my day shifts rapidly from practice to interviews to taking care of my three children. How do I re-energize? With a refreshing Shift. Shift provides essential vitamins and electrolytes to rehydrate your body so you can always be at the top of your game.' Shift energy drinks, available in red and blue. Will you make the shift?" Ara watched as Gary Jackson, an athletic Leo dressed in his Lions fluxball jersey, took a long swig of his BlueShift.

The billboard changed to the next ad. Businessmen and women dressed in their Virgo uniforms were leisurely sipping coffee on the deck of a ferry entering a metropolitan area. "Tired of your morning planet commute? Neutrino prices too high? Relax, take it easy, and enjoy a complimentary cup of joe on Skyline Ferry, voted number one shuttle service in Virgo by discerning professionals like yourself. Skyline Ferry is conveniently located in the capital cities of most planets, offering services throughout Virgo's galaxies. Our fleet has recently expanded to provide international travel to other galactic clusters, and we operate our own Skyline cannons so you don't have to wait in bow-to-stern traffic. Skyline Ferry. Sailing Above the Bar." A huge white ferry flew into the sunset and the billboard rotated to a movie advertisement.

Naphtali steered *Sapphire* towards a Jetty station on one of the skylands. Situated around the circumference were multiple neutrino pumps at intervals large enough for a skyship to hover with its bow facing the pump. The middle of the skyland had a Jetty-Mart filled with junk food and other sundry items for travelers.

"Gotta refuel on neutrinos before we port. Tank's almost on empty." He used his helm's computer to open a small compartment in the bow of the ship. Then he pressed a payment button on the screen. The words "Are you sure you want to authorize this transaction from your Horizon Bank account?" appeared and Naphtali pressed the yes button. The pump automatically moved a large nozzle over the skyship and lowered it down into the bow's neutrino tank. He shook his head in frustration as he watched the price climb rapidly on his computer.

"Here. Go buy us a snack." Naphtali tossed a few pi into Ara's hands. "I want a BlueShift."

Ara climbed down *Sapphire's* ladder and landed on a small pier extending from the skyland. She clomped towards the Jetty-Mart in her oversized magboots, noticing several sailors leering at her as they smoked cigarettes. She thought about saying something smart but decided not to press her luck, silently pushing through the convenient store's door. Ara grabbed a BlueShift for Naphtali, then wandered down the snack aisle looking for something sweet. She had a penchant for candy, narrowing her choices down to Galaxy Gummies and a Cocoa Planet. The chocolate planet was the winner.

Naphtali was fiddling with his computer's holographic screen when she returned and handed him the drink. "Thanks for the snack. So where are we porting to?"

"My home on planet Nede, Galaxy 9484 in Virgo. I'm guessing this is your first time porting?"

Ara nodded, biting into her candy planet. The milk chocolate and creamy peanut butter layers were amazing.

"It's nothing to be nervous about." Naphtali guided *Sapphire* towards the terminal. "Ports connect us to the Web using the principles of quantum entanglement. It's how most communication works in the universe. Just like information is entangled over computers, humans can also be transferred into informational vibrations and travel through the Web to anywhere we have linked with a port." He positioned *Sapphire* in the line for planet Nede's port. Only one ship was in front of them.

"What about the voids?"

"The government sanctions have forced voiders to put their ports outside of heliospheres. Sometimes they sneak 'em onto outer planets, but the guards are cracking down on that."

Ara knew about the voids. Shala always talked about how negative they were, filled with subtracters doing chaotic things like killing and stealing. Shala's main purpose of Cantor toys was to supply Numist missionaries with items to sway void children into becoming "Adders for All." Shala

reasoned if she could convert voiders at a young enough age, the negative effects of living in the voids could be diminished. Every toy came packaged with a pamphlet on the Fibonacci Code. Ara had nothing against giving children toys, but she wondered why Shala didn't invest her energy in providing them with food or water instead. Voiders can't play with toys if they're dead from dehydration.

She became lost in thought, imagining what it'd be like to travel to one of these voids and see all the toys she'd spent years assembling. She hoped they made void children happy, helping them escape the unfortunate hand they'd been dealt. Maybe water and food shortages were too big of a problem to solve, or there just weren't enough resources to go around. Toys were cheap to make, especially with Shala's illegal child labor sweatshop. It wasn't a solution, but it did add a moment of happiness to their lives.

"Next," said a lackluster guard. He appeared to be a bit bigger than his uniform permitted and was in the process of inhaling a slice of Galileo pepperoni pizza. Some tomato sauce had spilled onto his collar. "Welcome to Port Syrma-Nede. We have a ship on the other side waiting to entangle with you. The cost of this port is fifteen pi. If you'll be traveling back within twenty-four hours universal time, we have a round trip special for twenty-five pi."

Naphtali handed some money to the guard. "Just a one-way, please. How's the weather on Nede?"

"Overcast. Might require a light jacket but nothing extreme." The guard pulled out a laminated card and began reading in a quick, monotone voice. "The Universal Safety Regulatory Committee has mandated that I inform you of the risks of port travel. You will be uploaded onto the computer. Your ship and its components will be converted to digits and a particle scan will be completed. Your total mass will then be compared to the mass of your entangled partner skyship and digital mass will be added to your ship if needed. Then I will initiate the entanglement and you will be downloaded to your destination port. You should not notice any discomfort when uploaded. About fifteen percent of people get dizziness after download which lasts for approximately ten minutes. There is a point-zero-zero-zero-zero-one percent chance of a digital error that could result in loss of vital ship equipment or personnel. The Universal Guard and its cluster subsidiaries are not responsible in the rare event that this occurs. Are you ready to be uploaded to the computer at this time?" The guard set down his information card and grabbed another slice of pizza.

"Yes." Naphtali tapped the port button, causing a holographic keyboard to project from his helm's computer. He punched in the numbers as the guard gave him the access code.

Ara looked nervously over at the port.

"Don't worry," said Naphtali. "Ports are the safest mode of travel in the universe. You're way more likely to die in a train accident or skyship collision."

"Valid connection. Initiating upload in five, four, three, two, one, upload," said a voice over the guard's computer.

An alarm sounded from the port. "Warning. Incomplete entanglement. Abort immediately."

But *Sapphire* had already disappeared from the sky.

Chapter 3

14A, Year 3014 – 20 years earlier
Ophi, Phorbos
Galaxy 7, Ophiuchus void

“How many dimensions exist?” Edison Hitar asked his students in Dimensional Physics 101.

Edison was a twenty-five-year-old graduate student at the prestigious Ophi University where only the brightest minds in the universe were invited to study. Purposefully built on planet Phorbos in the Ophiuchus void, the university’s remote location helped separate its students from distractions in the more populated cluster regions. As one of these elite students, Edison had been placed on a short list of the physics department’s smartest scholars and given the honor of teaching the undergraduate dimensional physics class. Eager students filled his lecture hall ready to be enlightened with a higher knowledge of how the universe worked.

“The number of dimensions isn’t certain,” said a blond female student. “We know there are four open dimensions, three space and one time. The math points to the possibility of several hidden dimensions and depending on which theory you believe, this could mean there are five, six, seven, or possibly even more dimensions.”

Edison ran a hand through his messy brown locks. “That’s a very textbook answer, Kya. You all were selected to be students at Ophi because of your ability to think outside the four-dimensional box. If I wanted students who could recite what’s already known of the box, I’d be teaching at the College of Numology.”

Several students chuckled. The religion of Numology didn’t hold up to the scientific rigor of the prestigious Ophi.

“A great mind once said, ‘Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited, but imagination encircles the world.’ Can anyone tell me who said that?”

The room fell silent. Students scrambled through their textbooks, searching vigorously for the answer.

“Einstein,” said a man from the back of the classroom.

Edison paused, surprised someone knew this obscure fact from origin planet history. Earth had been destroyed in the thirteenth aeon, over two hundred million years ago. It was remarkable any of this planet’s primitive history survived. “Who said that?”

“Psi Kali, from the College of Numology.”

Heads turned to look at the student in the back who managed to impress their instructor. He was a tall, slender Qian dressed in a black priest robe. His pale complexion suggested a lack of exposure to the daily recommended dose of sunlight, making his dark gray eyes even more striking. He was clearly the oldest person in the lecture hall, somewhere in his early forties.

“Einstein is correct. For those of you who are unfamiliar, he was a physicist from the origin planet, which once existed in Galaxy 667 of the Virgo cluster. So for your homework, I’d like you to use your imagination and write an essay on how many dimensions you think exist. Of course I’ll expect you to back up your answer with physics and mathematics. Okay, class dismissed.”

Students crammed books into their backpacks, shuffling out the door to their next class or back to the dormitories to research this Einstein character. The lecture hall emptied except for the man in the back.

“El, it’s been years. How’s life in the Eridanus swamps? Still preaching at that old matrix in Cursa?”

“I’ve moved on from the swamps, as I see have you.” El walked down the stairs towards Edison’s desk. “I always knew you were meant for more than a simple life on planet Sadira.”

El stared at Edison, contemplating how many years had gone by since he last saw him. Edison appeared to be trying to look the part of a professor, wearing a dapper tweed jacket that was a common style among Ophi’s circle of the intellectual elite. His hair had turned from the dirty blond locks El remembered him having in his youth to a mousy brown. Still messy though. Edison never had time to comb it.

"This place really suits you. Finally you can be around people who think at your level. I know growing up in the bayous wasn't the most intellectually stimulating environment."

"I got off that black hole of a planet and made something of myself."

EI smiled instinctively. He'd come to the right place. Edison would be able to help him. If anyone knew how to move All to its final number, it would be him, and if he didn't know, he'd struggle with the problem until he solved it. Edison hated not understanding.

"Speaking of the old days, I have something to show you, Psi." Edison began shuffling through his desk drawers. They weren't very organized, a hodgepodge of office supplies and old student papers. "I've been dying to get another intellect's opinion on this but ... well you'll understand once I show you. It's not something I can show just anyone. It requires imagination."

"I'm honored you thought of me."

"You can't be a priest without some imagination." Edison grinned, enjoying his small job at the religion of Numology. "When I was thirteen, I found these strange pearls while diving in the swamps. I wasn't sure what to do with them. They weren't cream-colored like the Eridanus pearl, and that's all my owner seemed to care about. A week later the Scorpions sold me to work the uranium mines on Antares, so I managed to keep the pearls."

EI's eyes registered a deep compassion. Indentured servitude was an ongoing problem in the universe, especially out in the voids. Families would sell children to dive for pearls in the dangerous swamps of Eridanus or work down in the uranium mines of Scorpio, among other less than desirable places. In return they'd get basic necessities like food and water.

"I always wondered why you never came back. There's so much evil in this universe. Eons of evolution and we still have slavery. I'm glad I was able to track you down. Took me several weeks. Luckily I know a wealthy Maian who's a patron of the Matrix."

Edison's face grew agitated as he combed his messy desk drawers. "Maians are hypocrites. They outwardly claim to support the anti-slavery laws of the Zodiac Republic, but they make large profits from goods produced by slaves."

Maians were the wealthiest line of people in the universe, located predominately in the Taurus cluster and the Eridanus void, once a territory of Taurus. They traced their ancestry back to the origin planet and claimed they were the first to predict Earth would be annihilated by an asteroid.

"There are Maian slaves as well."

"Yes, but rare compared to us Qians." Edison continued to navigate his disheveled drawers, placing stacks of student papers on top of his desk so he could see farther back. "Ah, here they are." He pulled out a small leather pouch and poured eight black pearls into EI's hand. "Take a look at these. Have you ever seen anything like it?"

EI ran his fingers over the pearls, causing a pulsating sensation to spread throughout his body. He felt powerful, energized, like he could take on the universe. "I never knew black pearls existed outside the realm of mythology. How very peculiar. They feel wonderful. Such an intense energy to them."

"Let me show you something else." Edison placed one of the pearls between his thumb and forefinger. He fixed his eyes on a seat in the back of the lecture hall and stared intensely at the spot. Suddenly, he was in that seat.

It took EI a few seconds to register what had happened. "Great All! How did you do that? Some strange adaptation to quantum entanglement?"

"No, I wormholed locally. Remarkable, isn't it? The pearl allows me to access passageways in the fifth dimension. I've been trying to locate higher dimensions, but it doesn't seem to go beyond the fifth." Edison descended the steps back towards EI.

His former priest sat awestruck at the desk. "You weren't kidding about the 'requires imagination' part, but how do you know there are more than five dimensions? Numology doctrine only supports five, the four open and one hidden fifth dimension, what we Numists call the realm of All. How many dimensions do you think exist?"

"The dissertation I'm working on predicts eight, curiously the same number of black pearls I've discovered. Do you think that's a coincidence or is it your mysterious Holy Order?" Edison made a point to emphasize the words *Holy Order*. He wasn't a very religious man and sometimes mocked

Numology, but this didn't offend El. He accepted Edison for who he was and had grown to appreciate his skepticism.

El pondered this a moment. "Maybe the order meant for you to find these stones and for us to reconnect. Tell me, what other properties do these pearls possess?"

"There's one other I've discovered, but it violates what you taught me in the Fibonacci Code. You know I'm no Numist."

"I'm not sure I am either anymore. The universe exists because at the dawn of time there was a slight imbalance between matter and antimatter. Life's the leftovers of this imperfection. If that's the reality of All, who am I to judge your flaws? We all came from chaos."

Edison looked stunned. This wasn't the passionate missionary he once knew – a man who defended the Holy Order at all costs. "You have changed. Isn't it against Numology to speak of chaos?"

"Chaos exists whether the Matrix chooses to recognize it or not. I'll explain why I've changed, but first confess to me your flaw. It can be our secret."

Edison rolled the pearl in his hand, a nervous energy building up inside him. "Examine my pearl. Do you see how it's a tad lighter shade than the rest? You have to look closely."

El scrutinized the different pearls, trying to identify any minor discrepancies. It took him a minute. "Yes, one's a very dark shade of gray while the others are pitch black. I see it now."

"When I was working in the Antares mines, a prison laborer attacked me and..." Edison shifted his eyes, discomfort spreading over his face. "...and he tried to do what male prisoners sometimes do, but I fought back. I'd managed to steal a knife from a guard a few weeks prior. I had to defend myself and in our struggle stabbed him several times, eventually slitting his throat. I didn't intend on killing him, but it was survival."

"The most basic of human instincts. You can't be faulted for that."

"I was scared and didn't know what to do so I took out a pearl to warp away from his body, but before I could concentrate on a destination point, something strange happened. I saw this energy radiate out of the man and flow into my pearl. When that happened, the stone changed color slightly. I – this is going to sound crazy – I think I took his energy and trapped it inside my pearl."

"So you're saying this pearl is holding the man's Qi in some type of limbo?" El livened, his pale face showing the slightest bit of color. "Edison, you are doing All's work. Don't you see? This man caused suffering, and you subtracted the negative. Even if the Qi recycled and lived a better life, it would still suffer. You've saved it from enduring another life full of pain and disappointment, and by draining his Qi into your pearl, you preclude the possibility of it converting into dark energy, which Numists predict will lead to the end of the universe in roughly—"

"I know. I've read *The Shattering Truth*. It's another example of Numists using fear to convert people to their religion. There are some facts in the book, but most of it's propaganda. Dark energy's increasing because of antimatter technology and fuel emissions, not spirits moving to the Shadows."

"Maybe our answers are too simplistic, but regardless of what terms we use, it appears the pearl somehow diverts a Qi's passage, storing it for possible use later on."

"What do you think the energy could be used for? My pearl doesn't seem to operate differently than the others even though it may have a Qi inside it."

"I shall have to ponder this more." El gave the pearls back to Edison, keeping one in his hand. He stared at it for a moment, appearing lost in thought. "These pearls are definitely a gift from All. May I try one?"

"Yes, after you tell me why you're here."

"Ah, fair enough. Have you ever heard of an old head of our Matrix, went by the name Euler?"

"I don't believe so, but Numist history's never been of much interest to me."

"He lived during the Crusades. Legend has it he discovered a set of equations built around the principles of chaos and recorded his revelations in a secret book. The more calculations he did, the more convinced Phi Euler became that chaos was the most important field of Numology and would lead to what he termed 'the final number to All.' He tried convincing the Matrix to add his revelations to the Holy Order, but of course this wasn't accepted. Phi Euler was convicted of heresy, stripped of his title, and deleted. Right before he died, it was said he uttered a mysterious Omega prophecy. All

copies of the book were assumed to have been destroyed, but I found one hidden within a children's Numology text in the Pythagorean library."

"What did the equations say?"

EI lowered his voice and stared decisively into his old pupil's eyes. "Euler's answer to All was zero."

Edison's generally olive tone turned a shade closer to EI's pale complexion. "That's not logical."

"I thought you might say that, so I brought a copy of the equations and my solution." EI pulled out a notebook from the interior pocket of his robe and placed it on Edison's desk. "Check my math and make sure it's correct. After all, I only studied at the College of Numology and don't pretend to have the IQ of an Ophi scholar." With that challenge, EI clenched his fingers around the pearl and fixed his eyes on the doorway to the lecture hall. In his mind, EI saw himself leaning against the door, looking down at the empty classroom. The energy became stronger with the passing seconds. Then he was at the entrance. "Remarkable! Can this be used to wormhole non-locally, like if I envisioned myself back in the Eridanus swamps?"

"Unfortunately, no. I've tried and it doesn't work, even with my dark gray pearl. You can only use the pearl for local points in your line of sight. If you can't see it, the point doesn't seem to exist in the pearl's reality."

EI placed the pearl on a desk and proceeded to leave the lecture hall, unfolding his staff.

"Wait. What was Euler's Omega prophecy?"

EI paused and turned to face the young professor. He had him hooked, intrigued by a problem requiring the mind of a genius. EI knew his old student wouldn't be able to resist the mysterious nature of the final number. The Professor just needed to see proof, and he was confident Euler's equations provided that.

"One will arrive who is unlike the set. This one holds the key that will move All to its final number."

Chapter 4

14A, Year 3034

Nede

Galaxy 9484, Virgo cluster

Sapphire sailed effortlessly through a ring marking the location of Port Nede-Syrma's exit. It was thinner than the skydings and merely there to direct traffic in and out of the port. Two other ships were already in line waiting to port to Syrma.

"Welcome to Port Nede-Syrma," said a guard. He was much friendlier than the last one, and his hands weren't dripping in grease. "You all are some lucky Qi! The cargo ship lost a few sails in the entanglement, but no people disappeared. First time I've ever seen that happen. I mean I've heard stories, but it's so rare. Glad you made it through! Thank you for traveling with the Virgo guard. Have a safe and pleasant stay on planet Nede."

"Has that ever happened to you?" asked Ara as they sailed towards the skyding's exit sign to Nede. Above the sign scrolled names of cities the orbiting skyding was passing over, with ships dropping out of the ring when their desired destination appeared. On the left side of the ring was a sign pointing up that read "Nede Heliosphere."

"Yeah, a few times over the millennia, I mean years. Oh, there's Hathor. Strap in. We're going down!" Naphtali turned on the gravity engine and exited the skyding.

Ara's stomach felt like it was spilling out of her body as the skyship entered planet Nede's atmosphere. The keel ignited, sending flames shooting up the sides of the hull. She gripped her seat, reminding herself the ship's magnetic shield would protect them during their descent. This is a normal part of entering a planet, she thought. *Sapphire's* just burning off energy to slow down. They dropped through the clouds, leveling out before running into the treeline.

Ara exhaled, looking down at the planet. Nede was rich in vegetation and appeared to be more rustic than her home planet of Syrma. She watched a train move through the forest, heading west towards an industrial city off in the distance.

Naphtali pointed to the west. "That's Hathor over there. Old blue-collar city. Infrastructure's a bit rundown, not much to look at except factories and paper mills. Most people here do forestry and prefer to stay in villages outside the city."

Her mind strayed to other memories as she watched the trees pass by below. Living on the streets hadn't been easy. There were things that would stay with her the rest of her life, things she had to do to survive. Her life was a mess, and if this do-gooder priest thought he could save her with a few equations from the Holy Order, he was in for a rude awakening.

"We're getting close," said Naphtali. "Look starboard. You should start seeing one of the towers ... there it is ... Stone Castle."

Rising above the trees in the dense, lush pine forest was an old castle. A moat encircled the castle's two tall towers built on either side of the main entrance. A large flag with an infinity symbol crest topped the castle, blowing lightly in the breeze.

"This is your home?"

"Well it's more my brother Joseph's place. He's from Libra but spends a lot of time at the castle." Naphtali tried to contact Joseph over his mobile. "No answer, as usual. His Qi's stuck in a past shell." He brought *Sapphire* up to the castle door, grasping the arm of an unnecessarily large and somewhat gaudy galaxy-shaped door knocker.

Thud-thud-thud.

An old man popped his head out a window in the middle of the left tower. "I'm coming. Park your ship and I'll let down the drawbridge."

Naphtali lowered *Sapphire* into the moat and turned off the engine. "Come. Joseph will be most interested in meeting you."

She followed him onto the bridge and into the entrance hall of Stone Castle. On both sides were elaborate sculptures representing the twelve zodiac clusters.

Naphtali pointed to a statue of a female that looked like it belonged in the Universal Museum of Art. "That's Virgo, the maiden. Legend has it she represents an ancient goddess named Demeter who has the power to save and destroy life."

"What did she choose?"

"It's uncertain. She was depressed because her daughter was lost to the Shadows. Demeter braved the darkness, trying to bring back her daughter's Qi, but she couldn't hold her in the open dimensions, for the daughter had already tasted dark energy. She pleaded to All, asking that her daughter be given another chance. All told Demeter not to stare into the Shadows, but to concentrate on the life still existing around her. It's said the fate of the universe rests on a mother's grief. If she can't overcome her grief and birth more children, All will be lost."

"That's a lot of pressure. It's a good thing the universe doesn't really rest on one person's choice. Maybe some people's traumas are too great to overcome."

"Let's hope not. There is always a choice."

"Naphtali, you better have a good reason for bringing an outsider to Stone Castle. Explain yourself, brother."

Ara turned to see an old Mori dressed in an opalescent priest robe reflecting various colors as it hit the light. He was holding a staff with a beautiful opal at the top.

"Brother Joseph, I've found a darkstone. It chose this girl."

Joseph clenched his staff. "We must call a Circle immediately."

Ara was led up a spiral staircase into a tower of Stone Castle. Above her were rafters of the spire and several small windows casting light into the room below. A circular table decorated with engravings from mythology adorned the room. Around the table were twelve wooden chairs carved with the zodiac symbols of their respective galactic clusters.

Joseph stared intensely at his opal. As he touched the top of the gem, the opal radiated light. Then he began calling names. "Asher, Issachar, Manasseh, Levi, Reuben, Benjamin, Simeon, Zebulun, Gad, Judah."

Other priests suddenly started appearing in the room. They were literally just popping into existence and acting like it was the most natural thing to do, on par with walking and breathing. The priests were from various lines and wore robes matching their glowing gems.

Well at least they're fashionable, thought Ara. In actuality, she didn't know what to think. She wondered briefly if she was dreaming, but on the rare occasion when she did dream, it would be a nightmare, so she quickly rejected this notion.

One by one the priests appeared until eleven seats were filled. Their stones illuminated the room, glowing brilliantly. The gems slowly faded back to their normal color with the passing seconds.

Ara stood against the wall, unsure of what to do. One seat remained empty, but she doubted it was reserved for her.

"Where is Simeon?" asked Joseph. He was in his mid-seventies, the oldest of the brothers. The remaining priests ranged in age from early thirties to late sixties.

"He's most likely in the Endless," said Reuben, a slender Leo with a peridot staff and light green robe.

"Very well. We'll begin the Circle without him. I have summoned you here because this girl, Ara Cantor, was discovered by Naphtali to be a Mason of the Darkstone."

The men gasped and whispered among themselves. They stared intensely at Ara, who shifted uncomfortably by the wall.

"Not again. We're still fixing our balance from the last one." Levi, a blond-haired Qian from Pisces, looked like he was about to be sick. He clenched his light blue robe and gripped his aquamarine-tipped staff, which he appeared to be using to keep from keeling over.

"I think she could be the *one* spoken of in the prophecy."

"There you go again with that old legend, Naph," said Zebulun of Gemini. "We don't even know if it's true, only that it's been passed down through our recyclings." Zebulun was in his late thirties, a Qian with dark hair and an elegant white robe matching his glistening moonstone. He wore a scowl that suggested he felt smiling took too much effort, so he never did it. "I understand you believe one of

your past selves was present during Phi Euler's deletion, but maybe you created this memory from legends you heard. I think we should proceed with caution when trying to interpret a vague prophecy."

"Zeb, we must trust ourselves," said Asher. "If we start questioning our memories, what will we have left? Our engrams make us who we are." Asher was an Aries Qian with long gray hair, older than most of the brothers with the exception of Joseph. He wore a gray robe and held a diamond staff that sparkled as he shifted to point at Zeb.

Ara thought he was the most distinguished of the brothers. He certainly commanded the attention of the room.

"Ara's different than the other dark masons," said Naphtali. "She doesn't appear to be corrupted by the stone even though she's held it for several years."

"Every time we discover a new dark mason, you think they're the *one*, and just like all the other masons tied to these cursed stones, they become destructive, delete a bunch of people in pursuit of their own misguided power, and eventually die, only to be recycled to destroy more life. We should get rid of her before she turns dark. We're fortunate to have discovered one so young."

The masons murmured around the table, contemplating Naphtali's hypothesis and Zebulun's proposal.

What does Zeb mean, *get rid of me*? She didn't like the direction this Circle was spinning.

"Many lives would have been spared if we'd discovered the last dark mason sooner," said Issachar. He was an older Maian from Taurus who wore a dark green robe made by a couture designer. His emerald staff was more elaborate than the others, covered with intricate engravings and embossed with extra stones around the two outer points.

Naphtali took a deep breath before responding. "She's just a child. We're in the business of saving life, not deleting it."

"And it would violate our code. We can only delete them when they become noticeably destructive towards life," said Benjamin of Capricorn, a Rua wearing a dark red robe and holding a garnet-tipped staff.

Zeb crossed his arms. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, that's all I'm saying. Ages of existence and we haven't found a good dark mason yet. What's different about now?"

"There's kindness in her. I can sense it. I don't think she'll turn against life."

"And what data do you have to support that?" asked Levi.

"Millions of years of intuition."

"And faith in that dumb prophecy of yours. We don't even know what the final number is. If you ask me, the idea that—"

"Zebulun, your proposal is on the table, but first we must see this stone for ourselves. Young Ara, please come closer."

Ara was hesitant to approach Joseph given the current conversation. They weren't as nice as Naphtali. "I think I'll stay here, seeing as how you're talking pretty destructive towards me."

"Show us your darkstone, please." Joseph was slightly more stern than his initial approach.

"I will, after you answer one of my questions." She was not going to let herself get pushed around by a bunch of psychopathic priests throwing out terms like *delete* and *get rid of her*.

"You are being questioned by our eldest brother. He has lived many ages and recycled through universes. You need to show some respect." Judah of Cancer slammed his ruby staff on the floor. He was an extremely muscular Nahn with a bright red robe.

Must be the tough guy of the group, thought Ara.

"Judah, it's okay," said Joseph. "I think we owe Ara some answers. What do you wish to know?"

Ara breathed a sigh of relief. She arched her back confidently and felt the stone inside her pocket, its familiar energy giving her a rush of adrenaline. "So what exactly are you guys, wizards or something?"

Most of the Brotherhood chuckled, with the exception of Judah, who was scowling in his chair, and Zeb, who smiled once a millennium.

"We are masons of the Qistones, entrusted by All to preserve life in the universe. When Qi pass into the higher dimensions, we guide them back to the open, preventing them from falling to the Shadows. I am the eldest brother, the Mason of the Opal."

“Okay, so let me get this straight. You use these magic gems to somehow go into the realm of the dead and resurrect Qi back to the land of the living, fighting the forces of evil ripping the universe apart. So wizards, I was right.”

“We’re very much human, Ara. No one can operate outside the dimensions. Everything we do is based on a higher understanding of All’s laws, so it may appear to less sophisticated minds as if it were magic. We have been given the key to the universe, as have you. Now may we please see your stone?”

Well, Joseph did answer her question. She had a gazillion more like “Are you gonna delete me?” but she decided not to press her luck given Judah’s current agitated state. He appeared to be flexing his muscles as he sat, waiting to be released from his chair. She thought the chair might break from the sheer magnitude of his body mass.

She pulled out her darkstone and extended her hand. The electrical sensations began crawling through her body, calming her nerves. The stone made her feel powerful. She didn’t want to give it up.

The room fell silent. Joseph took the darkstone and held it for about five seconds. “It is authentic – very cold. Good work, Naphtali.” He passed it around the table so each brother could feel the stone.

“So I’m a mason too?”

“Yes, but your stone doesn’t work like ours.” Manasseh of Sagittarius, a Rami with a turquoise, handed the darkstone to Levi. “You’ll need to be taught how to use it, if we decide to allow your existence.”

“She’ll just come back in another shell. They always do,” said Gad, a Sada from Aquarius with an amethyst stone. “We’d only be delaying an inevitable.”

“Some life-savers you are. I have no intention of destroying anything. I just want to be free.”

“See, she really has no idea,” said Naphtali. “Completely childlike in her innocence.”

Joseph received the darkstone back. “Let’s put it to vote. All in favor of Zebulun’s proposal to delete Ara, please raise your staff.”

Zebulun, Issachar, Levi, Judah, Manasseh, and Reuben lifted their staffs.

Ara tried to bolt down the steps, but Judah quickly blocked her path. “You have not been excused.”

“I can count. I thought my family was dysfunctional, but this is nuts. Just take me back to Child Services. You can have the stone!”

“Joseph, please. She trusted me.”

“Our vote is final. We have never changed a decision of the Circle. I’m sorry. Judah, make it quick.”

“No!” Ara kicked Judah in the legs as he wrenched her arm tightly to pull her outside the room.

Before they could exit, another man appeared in the doorway. His citrine gem glowed a bright orange like it had been set ablaze. He wasn’t wearing a robe. Instead he was dressed like a typical Scorpio cowboy: ten-gallon hat, leather boots, long coat, brown pants dusty from the outback, and a holster with a six-shooter. He was unshaven, very tan, and a bit rough-looking around the edges. His skin, leathery from long hours under the sun, had aged considerably for a man in his early forties.

“Simeon, late as usual.” Issachar stroked his perfectly groomed goatee with an obvious sense of superiority.

“Sorry, got held up herding Qi in the Endless. Didn’t have time to change into my dress. I see Judah’s got his work cut out for him.” Simeon chuckled as he watched Ara squirm within the mason’s muscled arms.

“He should get a vote,” said Gad. “He’s here in time.”

Levi leafed through an old book he’d been taking notes in. “That is in accordance with our bylaws. The Circle has not adjourned.”

“Simeon, this is Ara Cantor,” said Joseph. “She happened upon a darkstone, and it has chosen her.”

“Great All!” Simeon took a quick scan of Ara. “She doesn’t look like a power-mongering villain. What’s the vote?”

“She may be young, but we all know how dark masons turn out,” said Zeb. “We’ve voted to delete her now to avoid problems later.”

"But she could be the *one* who's different than the other dark masons," said Naphtali. "She's held the darkstone for several years and doesn't appear to have done anything with it. I don't sense a destructive nature in her. We're meant to save life, not delete it. Killing Ara goes against our oath."

"Simeon, you more than anyone should realize how tricky the dark masons are. Don't be fooled by her looks. She'll destroy many lives. They all do. We can't change who we are."

Naphtali shook his head. "We shift shells all the time, Zeb. Each recycling changes us. Humans can't help but change. It's part of life."

"Simeon, your vote. We must get back to channeling operations." Asher stared at him expectantly.

"I say she lives. No one's perfect. We should give her a chance."

"Then we have a tie. Brother Joseph, it goes to you." Asher looked at the Mason of the Opal.

Zeb raised his moonstone staff. "The blood will be on our hands if we have another Shattering. Is one girl worth the potential destruction of a universe?"

"They've never been organized enough to cause anything but planetary destruction in the current universe, and if she's indeed the *one* who could lead us to transcendence, the blood would certainly be on our hands," said Naphtali.

"This final number could mean many things. You're placing our decision on no hard data. It's more probable she's like the others of her kind, dark and destructive."

"People aren't just data points on your graph, Levi," said Benjamin. "We have a Qi. We feel and connect to All's Holy Order. I for one don't feel a threat from this child."

Joseph slowly stood. "I feel a threat and am deeply troubled by the return of another dark mason, but my initial decision stands. I will not raise my staff. She hasn't done anything worthy of deletion, and it isn't our place to judge what may or may not come to pass. There is enough chaos already in our universe. We don't need to add to that today. Ara Cantor, you live. Our decision is final. You will be given to a mason for training so you can learn to use your stone correctly."

Some of the brothers displayed obvious disappointment, but they respected Joseph as their elder and followed the ancient rules set forth in the Circle.

"Who should teach her?"

Silence fell over the room as the men contemplated Asher's question. Everyone looked around, waiting for someone else to volunteer.

"Not so eager to raise your staffs now, huh?" Maybe she should be grateful they decided to let her live, but the fact they contemplated deleting her in the first place was insane. The rock had energy, but it didn't seem to have any other magical powers she could tap into.

"This is absurd. We don't teach dark masons to be a part of the Brotherhood. They're not one of us. No dark mason has channeled Qi since the old universe, and we all know how well that turned out." Zebulun made no attempt to hide his frustration.

"Stop being a sore loser."

"Well then why don't you train her, Simeon? You like getting close to dark masons, as I recall."

"I agree. The girl can practice on prisoners in Scorpio. If she fails in her channeling, it wouldn't be a tragic loss of Qi."

Ara thought the Mason of the Emerald sounded snobbish. Who was he to assume she'd fail?

Simeon seemed unfazed by Zebulun and Issachar's snide remarks. "I can show her the ropes, but I gotta say, Scorpio's no place for a lady."

"Don't worry. She's not a lady." Judah laughed, amused by his small bout of cleverness.

"I'll be fine. I've survived two years on the streets, and I'd prefer to be trained by someone who didn't vote to delete me."

"Let's not waste time. Simeon, you have been tasked." Joseph pointed his opal staff at the Mason of the Citrine.

"Do I get some kinda hazard pay for taking in a dark mason?"

The brothers gave a disapproving glare.

"Just checking. Planet taxes keep climbing. Ready to go, Ara? We'll catch a train to the local ferry, port to Virgo's capital planet Spica, then get the international line in Ceres to the Scorpio cluster."

"I'll drop you at the station on my way out," said Naphtali.

“Good. We have a plan. This concludes our Circle. Levi will send you a copy of the minutes.”
Joseph raised his staff in the air. “For All.”

“For All,” said the masons, lifting their staffs in unison.

Chapter 5

14A, Year 3014 – 20 years earlier
Ophi, Phorbos
Galaxy 7, Ophiuchus void

“The Seven-Dimensional Universe” by Charles Porter: This paper will demonstrate how our universe contains the following dimensional make-up: 1–4D (three spacial dimensions and time), 5D (hyperspace dimension), 6D (quantum dimension), and 7D (dark energy dimension).

“Hmm ... his math seems correct, but he’s missing a dimension. Solid B.” Edison marked a large red B on the student’s essay and picked up the next paper in his “to grade” pile. He laughed when he saw the title “Why the Universe has Ten Dimensions.” “This should be interesting.” He leafed through the paper, red pen in hand.

Edison was sitting in his study. The room was small and cozy with his degrees, numerous certificates of achievement, and a framed map of the universe on the wall. An old photo of Ophi University’s fluxball team, the Ophi Isotopes, was propped on his desk next to a pipe. The remaining wall space was lined with overcrowded bookshelves containing math and physics texts.

He heard a knock on the door and was a little perturbed by it. Who would want counsel at this late hour?

“I’m back.” El entered, not bothering to wait for Edison to open the door. “Sorry it’s taken me a few months. I went to visit a patron in Taurus who I think will be sympathetic to my cause.”

“You mean about the final number?”

“Yes. Tell me, have you had sufficient time to review the math?”

“I have, and I must say Phi Euler would have made a good Ophi scholar. The math’s solid. Very complex, nonlinear of course, and his final answer appears correct. It also supports my eight-dimensional theory.”

El sat down in a chair across from Edison. “What did I tell you? The numbers don’t lie. I knew you’d see it. So the question becomes, how can we achieve this final number? Did you notice Euler’s drawing in the back of the notebook? I photocopied it from the original.”

“Yes, the one titled ‘Omega.’ I thought it a bit peculiar. It looks as if he has eight figures standing in a circle holding small white spheres. Below on the ground are eight dark circles. He has equations written off to the side that suggest he’s proposing to somehow create and combine black holes together to form an omega black hole, but this is purely a theoretical construct. If a black hole that massive existed, we wouldn’t be here having this conversation.”

“So an omega black hole could destroy life?”

“Well in theory, if a black hole was strong enough to produce a singularity that could pull the universe back in, then it could return us to a state of zero. But it would have to overpower the seventh dimension’s dark energy forces, which are pulling the universe apart as we speak.”

“So it is possible. I have an idea. I’ll give you fair warning it’s quite disturbing, but would you humor an old priest?”

“Of course, El. I’m always looking for a challenge. Stretch my imagination.”

“I think your pearls can be used to produce the Omega. Remember how the pearl shifted color slightly when it drained the prisoner’s Qi?”

Edison nodded, leaning back in his chair and lighting his pipe.

“Well, it would reason that if enough Qi were drained into the pearl, it would turn completely white. I’m not sure how much Qi it would take per pearl, and maybe some Qi have more energy than others, but if we collected all this energy into such a small space, we could create a singularity inside the pearl. Imagine the power we could harness to achieve the Omega. I believe those circles Phi Euler drew in the Book of Chaos are your pearls. The order meant for us to meet. It can’t be a coincidence I discovered this book and you found the pearls. Out of all the people in the universe to find such things, it was us. All knows life is beyond repair and has given us a way out. We have a duty, a commission if you will, to put life to rest.”

Edison was glad he lit his pipe. "How would Euler have known the pearls exist? Those empty circles could mean anything."

"Maybe Euler's math predicted their existence but those equations didn't survive, or maybe it's hidden within the symbols of the Book of Chaos but our minds aren't evolved enough to see it. It's hard to detect the hidden dimensions, but we know they're there."

"So you're asking me to have faith in an old phi your religion denounced as a heretic?"

"The only thing certain in our universe is math, and you saw it for yourself. The final answer is correct."

"But the final number's zero. I guess a part of me wants to believe the answer would be something else."

"Think about it, Edison. The universe has existed for fourteen billion years. We've populated multiple galaxies and connected ourselves through ports across the universe, but we still haven't been able to solve suffering. As we speak, children are dying of dehydration in the voids due to corporate greed and government sanctions. More people are turning to PM just to get by, preferring to escape into dreams rather than face the harsh reality of existence. In my lifetime and yours, there was a three-year war where billions of lives perished because we couldn't learn to get along. The Fibonacci Code sounds great in theory, but the universe has more subtracters than adders. We've made no moral progress in fourteen aeons, and even if we did, there would still be suffering caused by chance." El paused, stepping closer to Edison. "The Omega could free the universe from its flawed existence. No one would ever have to suffer again. With zero, we can be at peace."

It was a good speech. After all, El was a preacher. He had an intoxicating charisma that made you want to follow him straight to the Shadows, and he had more passion than the most ardent of fluxball fans. His proposal was insane, but somehow he made it make sense.

"I'm gonna have to think about this, El. Do you realize for the Omega to be possible as you've proposed, you'd have to delete many people. The energy required for a singularity, especially one at the center of this theoretical omega black hole, is enormous. This would certainly come to the attention of reporters at UNN."

"I have a contact. She could help us. If it would make you feel better, we could only delete those in tremendous suffering or people worthy of death. Since the Qi departs the body at the moment of deletion, we'd need to be present to capture it. Maybe we could take from those in nursing homes who will die soon anyway. If you would loan me a pearl, I could test my hypothesis."

Edison wanted to understand more of the pearl's properties too. These stones held a mysterious truth he needed to know. They might even be the secret to unlocking hidden dimensions and finding the ultimate truth behind existence. "Okay, I'll give you one, but please be careful. You've been a good friend and mentor to me, El. I'm trusting you with this."

"I won't let it out of my sight. Goodnight, Edison. Don't work yourself too hard. You look a bit dark under the eyes."

"You're lacking light as well, Psi."

Chapter 6

14A, Year 3034
Pine Forest, Nede
Galaxy 9484, Virgo cluster

“Goodbye, Ara.” Naphtali hugged her lightly.

She flinched, unused to the affection.

“It was very nice to meet you, and I look forward to seeing you again. Allspeed!”

The star was setting in the west as they stood on the platform of Pine Forest Station. Simeon was over at the ticket booth fiddling with the machines. A sign above read “Train approaching. Mind the tracks.”

“It’s been fun, other than almost getting me killed.” She really didn’t know how to say goodbye to Naph. They had met under such strange circumstances.

“I apologize for that. I thought my brothers would be more receptive, but we have a long, complicated history with dark masons. Ara, remember that you hold the power to shift the universe. Choose your path wisely. Don’t let the darkstone pull you to the Shadows.”

“I’ll try.” She was unsure what he meant.

“Trying will not be enough. Every day dark energy shifts us closer to another Shattering. If the darkstones enter that door, the universe is lost.”

What door? Could Naph be any more cryptic? “But won’t I be able to control the darkstone?”

“It’s uncertain. There are dimensional forces at work we have yet to understand. The Brotherhood has already seen one Shattering. Stay strong, Ara. For what it’s worth, I believe you’re the *one*.”

“All aboard.” Simeon pointed to the approaching train.

“This is where I leave you,” said Naphtali.

Ara ran to join Simeon and stepped onto the magnetic train hovering slightly over the tracks.

“Don’t let Naph scare ya too much. He tends to talk a bit epic.” Simeon sat down in the window seat across from Ara.

“He said I was the *one*.”

“Yep, been there, heard that. He’s a very hopeful mate.”

“What does he mean, the *one*?”

“Well if ya believe such things, the *one*’s supposed to decide the fate of All. I wouldn’t worry yourself over it. Just try not to destroy stuff. If you can manage that, you’ll be faring better than your predecessors.”

Ara peered out the window, waving goodbye to Naphtali as the train accelerated to its cruising speed. She laughed to herself, thinking about how ridiculous it sounded for All to tie its existence into a rock. I need a reality check, she thought, glancing at the holovision. UNN was playing on the holographic screen with an attractive, clean-cut reporter broadcasting the latest news.

“In the face of continued home foreclosures across the clusters, President Rex has decided to make a visit during his reelection campaign to the Pisces cluster to work with Goldman Galactic Enterprises and other financial powerhouses on a plan to reduce interest rates on mortgages. Plexian party protestors are also present, demanding answers from the Zodiac party and a lifting of sanctions in the voids, where many who have lost their homes are forced to move.”

Ara saw *Skyship One* land in the water and President Rex, a distinguished blond-haired man in his late forties, smile and wave at crowds of people on water boats.

A group of Plexians circled as close to *Skyship One* as the President’s guards allowed. The protestors held up giant signs with the equal symbol on them and chanted, “The Zodiac’s corrupt” and “Voiders have rights.”

Ara remembered reading about the Pisces cluster. Most of the habitable planets were water worlds with buildings called seascrapers submerged under the ocean. Only the roofs of the buildings floated on the surface like mini-islands bobbing in the sea.

President Rex walked down his ramp onto the rooftop of Goldman Galactic Enterprises, being met by Geoff Goldman himself. The roof had an exquisite garden with a giant G2 symbol in the center.

Cameras snapped photos of the two shaking hands as they boarded the glass elevator to descend into the seascraper.

“Didn’t President Rex use to be a priest?”

“Yep. Ran that popular holovangelism show *Every Number Matters to All*. Not sure that includes voiders ‘cause he continues to sanction them.”

“You’re not a Zodiac?” Ara thought all priests supported the Zodiac party, probably because she’d listened to years worth of Shala’s anti-void sentiment. Shala loved watching Psi Rex’s weekly sermons on HV and would often donate toys to missionaries from his mega-matrix in Libra.

“I’m an independent freethinker. I’d say the guy means well. It’s just sad to keep hearing ‘bout people dying in the voids ‘cause of difficulty getting basic resources out there. The voids won their independence, if ya could call it winning. After the Void War, the Zodiacs shut down cluster ports to the voids, making them build their own out in space. You need a void map just to find the ports, which will cost ya some pi. There’s also tons of bureaucratic red tape with space travel. You have to have a space passport and other such nonsense. Zaniah Rex campaigned on bringing the voids back into the fold, but so far integration’s been unproductive. The war’s still too fresh in our minds.”

“Well if they make it so hard to find their ports to deliver food and water, no wonder they’re dying of dehydration.”

“You’ve got a point, Ara, but it’s more complicated than that. People on both sides have pride, hurt feelings, and distrust that go way back before the war broke out. Folks hold onto trauma and pass it through their lines, so we’ve got children growing up already geared towards hating each other because of pain their ancestors caused.”

“How can we forget trauma?” Ara thought about her own nightmares from the past. She had accepted they would always be with her, at least while she remained in this shell.

“I don’t know if we really can or should. In the outback trauma teaches us lessons, sometimes costly ones. It reminds us to be humble in the grand scope of All when we, with our mastery of space, can still die from a single snake bite.”

Ara pictured a poisonous snake slithering up to her and baring its fangs. She quickly shrugged the thought away and proceeded to stare out the window, hypnotizing herself with the passing scenery and daydreaming about journeying to the voids. I wonder what it’s like in the dark ocean? She was steering a skyship through an asteroid belt when Simeon nudged her from the reverie.

“Train stopping at Hathor terminal,” said a robotic voice over the speakers. “Please exit to your right.”

“The ferry to Spica’s port is over there.” Simeon pointed to a Ferry Services sign. “Let’s hurry so we can get a seat.”

Chapter 7

14A, Year 3014 – 20 years earlier
Nashira, Dabih
Galaxy 820, Capricorn cluster

It was noisy in Esmer's Bar. Smoke permeated the air and country music blared through the speakers. A fluxball game between the Capricorn Devils and Virgo Saints played on the big-screen holovision. The bar was littered with people wearing red flickering Devils horns and neon glowing Saints halos. Since Esmer's Bar was on Capricorn's capital planet Dabih, the Devils were the clear favorite.

"And Johnson kicks the ball into the black hole. In the innershell we have McDonnell, waiting to shoot. Here comes the ball through the white hole. Will he be able to hit the nucleus? McDonnell shoots ... and scores!" the announcer cried. "And the Devils take the lead five-four over the Saints."

Devils fans in the bar went wild, clanging their plastic pitchforks together. The holographic screen lit up the words "Big Bang" in glittery letters. Three waitresses worked the room, pouring the next round of drinks. They wore Devils horns, short-shorts, and jerseys tied to expose their midriffs.

"What do ya got on tap?" asked a drunk, overweight Saints fan. He wore a cheap white robe that was unable to hide his protuberant figure.

"Comet Light and Quark," said a waitress whose name tag read "Pam."

"I'll have a pitcher of Quark."

"Coming right up."

"That's my lil' devil," slurred the man, groping her as she walked off.

Pam paused for a second, then kept walking, apparently deciding it wasn't worth the effort or loss of tips to chastise the drunk man.

EI sat by himself in a corner booth, eying the spectacle with sadness. He was wearing his standard black priest robe. What debauchery, he thought. All these people are escaping their pain by watching meaningless fluxball games, drinking their troubles away, and trying to find someone to couple with for a night. What's worse, they take their misery and dump it onto others, like the drunk man harassing the waitress. She'll probably go home and yell at someone she cares about or drink herself to sleep, because growing up I doubt being a waitress at a sleazy bar dealing with inebriated gropers was what she envisioned her life to be. This is existence – a noisy, smoke-infested bar with a bunch of people trying to escape.

As he listened to several fans get into an argument over the last play of the game, EI began twirling his silver necklace. At the end of this necklace was an exquisite black pearl.

Pam approached the table. "That's a beautiful piece of jewelry, Psi. Too bad black pearls aren't real, huh?"

"It is a black pearl."

"Oh come on, you're jesting me. Only Eridanus pearls exist. I saw one once. Sort of a cream color."

EI kept silent, an unchanged expression on his face.

Pam looked uncomfortable. "It's really a black pearl?"

He smiled at the waitress. "It's as real as you or I."

She laughed, reassured by the priest's smile. "Well can I get ya anything to drink, jester?"

"I'll have a shot of Absolute Zero, please."

"Ya don't mess around. I'll be right back with that."

EI stared into his pearl – pure, dark, perfect, unconcerned with the troubles of life. Tonight, he decided, was going to be the start of his commission. He'd spent months digging through the Book of Chaos, examining every possible interpretation of the Omega. Each time he came to the same conclusion: the pearls must drain Qi in order to achieve this powerful singularity. He had tried deleting animals, but the pearl didn't accept their energy because it wasn't Qi – energy that could choose its direction. He also tried the pearl at a nursing home in Aquarius, sitting with an elderly man until he died. The pearl wouldn't take the old man's Qi. EI reasoned the pearl's commander must make the

choice to end someone's life. The commander directed a person's energy, and in the pearl it would remain, suspended in limbo until the Omega.

Pam came back with the drink. "I'm on break, but Sheryl can help if this ain't enough spirits for ya." She pointed to a waitress at the bar.

EI nodded. "Thank you."

The fat, drunken Saints fan got up to use the restroom. EI quickly downed his shot of vodka and followed the man inside. After being sure the bathroom was clear, he propped his staff against the door to barricade the entrance and pulled out an object concealed by a pouch inside his robe. He unfolded it, revealing a short stick attached to a long, curved scythe blade.

As the man opened the stall door, EI stabbed him quickly, the blade piercing through the man's back. Blood splattered over his white Saints robe as he fell dead to the floor, his thud muffled by the noisy bar.

EI watched the Qi leave the man's shell and flow towards his pearl. It was a beautiful, undulating energy that slightly bent the spacetime around it. Then the spirit entered his pearl, shifting its color to a very dark gray. My hypothesis is confirmed, he thought. Excellent.

He pulled out the blade from the man's corpse, folded up the weapon, grabbed his staff, and quickly left the bar through the back door.

He ran into Pam, who was smoking a cigarette by the dumpster. She gripped her cheap knock-off purse like it was a treasured possession and wiped her eyes, smearing her mascara.

"Are you okay?"

Pam shook her head. "Nothing ever goes right for me."

"Maybe I could be of assistance."

"I don't want to bother you with my problems. I'm sure you wanna watch the game."

"I'm a good listener, and my team's losing." EI gave her that same reassuring smile he displayed earlier when ordering his drink.

"My life's such a mess, Psi. My boyfriend keeps screwing around on me and my ex is threatening to take custody of my kid. I haven't made enough in tips to pay rent this month so my landlord's probably gonna kick me out. I'll have to move again. Why would All allow this to happen? I try to be a good Numist."

"All doesn't want you to suffer. The universe has a higher plan for your Qi. I can help you."

"What's your name?" she asked, her vision blurred by tears.

"I am the Commissioner." He calmly extended his scythe and deleted Pam, taking her Qi. "Your suffering has ended."

EI left her body where she fell and walked off into the night. There was no going back. He would not stop until All became nothing. That was why he existed – to end existence.

Chapter 8

14A, Year 3034

Ceres, Spica

Galaxy 3988, Virgo cluster

“Why don’t they have ports on the ground? It would make them more accessible to people.” Ara stepped onto a skyland in Spica’s skyring.

The skyring was littered with changing holovision billboards, fast food joints, a Costo station for neutrino refuel, and a cheap Vector motel, popular with travelers stuck waiting for their ferries. Being the international hub for the Virgo cluster, Spica’s skyring had ports to the other capital planets in the zodiac, such as planet Antares in Scorpio and planet Epsilon in Pisces.

“You just answered your own question.” Simeon disembarked onto the skyland, joining Ara. “The government has a media liaison scientist who comes up with some gibberish about how the superconductors help the ports more efficiently entangle, blah, blah, blah. But between you and me, I’ve heard it’s ‘cause the government wants to regulate universal travel. It costs money to get up here. Helps contain the riff-raff.”

“Isn’t that what Scorpio does since all convicted prisoners get shipped there?”

“Yep, home sweet home.” Simeon was walking briskly over to the international terminal to check the ferry schedules. “The prisoners work to mine and enrich uranium for government and military transportation.”

“What if the prisoners don’t cooperate?”

“We delete ‘em. Don’t have time to deal with wild horses.” Simeon examined the international board for ferry times. “Two-hundred pi per person! Sure could have used that hazard pay I proposed. Looks like it’s too late for any Scorpio ferries. We’ll have to get a room at Vector.”

“Why not try to tame them?”

“We do. Every prisoner gets a three-month ‘How to be a Universal Citizen’ class and three more months to practice the techniques learned in class. If they’re still wild, the Libra High Court deems them ‘not able to be rehabilitated’ and they get a one-way ticket off the plank. Game over, thanks for playing.”

“You know, I’m a bit wild.” Ara followed Simeon onto a moving skywalk connecting the terminal to the motel’s skyland.

“At one time I think we all were, but if ya wanna to be free, you’ve gotta outrun the lassos and be brave enough to face the wide open plains with all them deadly creatures. The pen’s much safer.”

“Yeah, but the pen is boring.”

Chapter 9

14A, Year 3016 – 18 years earlier
Astraea, Zuben
Galaxy 4586, Libra cluster

“In conclusion, there is much we still don’t know about the hidden dimensions. Future research needs to focus on discovering the pathways energy takes from the fifth into the sixth dimension and why it appears some energy is recycled back to the open dimensions while other energy decays into the seventh dimension’s dark energy. As I demonstrated in this presentation and in my book *The Dimension Revelation*, the math shows that an eighth dimension exists, but more investigation into what this eighth dimension is needs to be done. Thank you for your time. I’ll be available in the back for questions.”

The room filled with applause at the Universal Physics Symposium. Dr. Edison Hitar stepped down from the podium and headed towards a back table holding stacks of his books. A line formed to get an autographed copy. In the middle of the queue was a familiar face.

“Dr. Hitar, I’m impressed,” said EI, approaching the table. “Almost two years from our last reunion and you’ve already finished your Ph.D. and published a book. You’re the rising star of physics, making it accessible to the masses. I saw a teenager on the train ride here immersed in *The Dimension Revelation*.”

“I’m glad you got my message.” Edison lowered his voice. “Frankly, you had me worried, EI, but you didn’t come up on the Universe’s Most Wanted list so I figured you were okay. I’m dying to know how the experiments went.”

“Let’s meet tonight. I know a quiet bar downtown. A lot’s happened, but do not fear, your pearl is safe against my heart.” EI pulled out his necklace to show Edison. Its shade had become noticeably gray.

“Okay, shall we say 2100?”

“Certainly. The bar’s called Black Hole, on the corner of 10th and Zeus.”

“Very fitting. I’ll see you then.”

This place really is a hole-in-the-wall, thought Edison as he walked into the bar.

Black Hole was a rundown bar in Astraea, capital city of the universe. The majority of folks who lived here had political connections, and it was said you were more likely to find the Garden of Dreams, a mythical utopian planet rumored to be out in the voids, than an honest Astraeon.

The bar was empty except for an old man sitting on a stool talking politics to an even older bartender. “Rex will win the election for sure. The incumbent always has an advantage in the presidential race.”

The bartender poured his customer another drink. “I dunno, Bob. Senator Anzu’s gaining in popularity. She supports void representation in the Senate and a lifting of port sanctions. There are a lot of businessmen frustrated by the added costs of trading with the voids.”

“Rex is working on that with his Reunion Act.”

“Sounds good in theory, but nothing’s come of it. He can’t get it past the Senate. Too much anti-void sentiment still.”

The Commissioner sat in a corner, an empty shot glass on the table. “You want one? Absolute Zero vodka, the best.”

Edison slid into the booth. “No, I’ll take a Cloud Nine.”

“Hey Mack, we need a Cloud Nine and another shot of Zero.”

“Sure thing, Psi.” The old bartender busied himself preparing the drinks.

“So the pearl works as discussed. Did you bring yours?”

“Yes, it’s here in my pocket.” Edison pulled out his dark gray stone. “I always keep one on hand, just in case.” The familiar tingling sensation raced through his body. It made him feel safe.

“The pearl won’t take to an animal’s energy or a Qi that dies naturally. The user must make the choice to delete someone and drain their Qi. Also, it has to be captured at the moment of death, for

the Qi moves quickly to the fifth dimension, only existing for a few breaths in the open. I believe the pearl mimics the energy vibrations of the fifth dimension. The Qi gravitates towards it, thinking it's moving to a higher dimension. Do you see how mine's a shade lighter than yours?" El pushed his pearl necklace across the table. "With many drains, I'm confident the pearls will turn white and become the singularities we need to perform the Omega. The stone feels like it's getting more powerful with each drain."

Edison picked up El's pearl, examining it. "It does feel more intense. What about wormholing? Can you warp farther?"

"No, that property appears to stay fixed. I haven't had any issues warping when necessary. A good thing to have when you're involved in drainage operations."

"You've certainly done your homework."

The bartender came back with the drinks.

"Put it on my tab," said El.

Edison paused to take a sip of his Cloud Nine. "Okay, count me in."

El wasn't expecting it to be this easy. "Just like that, huh? No complicated philosophical or ethical theorizing? No heated debate between religion and science?"

"The math points to the answer. The numbers don't lie, right?"

"Yes, the equations are correct."

Edison stirred his drink slowly. "I just need a favor."

"What do you desire?" El leaned forward, twirling his necklace.

"A deletion. You can drain the Qi if you like."

"And if I do this, we have a deal? You'll be my right-hand man?"

Edison nodded, taking another drink.

"I'll ask you to find three drainers to contribute to our cause. I'll supply the other three. Then the Commission of eight will be complete."

"I can deliver."

"Not everyone can drain Qi. The pearl must take to them. In fact, you and I are the only ones I've met that can feel its energy. It's cold to everyone else who touches it, but I'm certain we'll find the other recruits. They're out there, waiting to receive their calling."

"There's one other thing."

"Another deletion?"

"Many. I want you to bleach my pearl for me. Let me stay at Ophi and work on the dimensional physics. There are a lot of details that need to be understood in order for your plan to succeed."

"Brains and brawn. I think this is the beginning of the end. Welcome to the Commission, Professor."

Edison handed his pearl to El and raised his glass. "Here's to nothing."

"To nothing." El downed his shot of Zero, feeling the burn pass through his throat. He longed for the day when he'd no longer feel this warmth. The day when there would be nothing left to feel.

Chapter 10

14A, Year 3034
Phaeton, Antares
Galaxy 8343, Scorpio cluster

Ara followed Simeon through the dusty streets of Phaeton. Phaeton was an old frontier town where whiskey replaced water and being fashionable meant having the slickest-looking six-shooter in the saloon. Painted on the town's entrance sign was a large revolver shooting out the words "We have six rules."

Ara was dressed for the outback, finally getting rid of her smelly Virgo uniform. She looked like a smaller version of Simeon, with the exception of a revolver and holster, which she'd begged him for. "Not until you learn how to shoot proper," he had said. Her staff stayed folded inside her satchel. Simeon had told her he didn't want them looking noticeable. Apparently some Scorpios weren't too fond of Numists, especially their teachings on order, temperance, and humility.

A small crowd formed outside a bar as two inebriated men began fighting over who had a better fluxball team, the Scorpio Stingers or Fornax Dragons.

"The Dragons have gladiators fightin' dinosaurs at the Colosseum," slurred one man. "The Stingers are just a bunch of sissies who complain to their agents every time they don't get enough money in their contracts. They don't play for the love of the game."

"Those gladiator fights are fake. I watched that documentary film on it, *Smackdown Scandal*. They don't stand a chance in the playoffs against the Stingers. We survive in the real outback, not in an arena of choreographed violence."

"Well Wyatt, there's only one way to settle this, I reckon," said Earl, the Dragon's fan. "I challenge you to a duel."

And there they were, Wyatt and Earl, back-to-back counting out their paces to twelve. Wyatt turned before they had finished the count, shooting Earl in the leg.

"Didn't choreograph that one, did ya?" Wyatt laughed, mounting his horse and riding away.

Earl hopped off, yelping in pain as people scattered towards their previous tasks, undisturbed by the spectacle.

"That's not fair," said Ara. "He cheated."

"Welcome to Scorpio. Phaeton's a fairly civilized town compared to some of the smaller outposts on Antares. Wait till you get to my ranch near the slammer. Wyatt and Earl will look like gentlemen standing next to the men out there. Frankly I'm surprised they got to ten before someone shot. Fair's a relative concept in Scorpio. Fair's whatever keeps you alive."

"So will Wyatt get in trouble? He did just shoot a man in the leg."

"Nah, he'll be buying Earl a drink later in one of the saloons, mark my word. People may be rough here, but they rarely hold grudges. Most just move forward and try to survive as best they can. They don't have many highfalutin dreams, just existence plain and simple, hoping they don't die from radiation sickness or a reactor meltdown."

Simeon pointed to two horses tied and saddled by a post. "Our horses are over there." He opened up the front door to a saloon. "Thanks for feeding 'em, Sal."

"Anytime, Psi."

"Horses? You don't have a skyship?"

"Naph has spoiled you. Nope, never much cared for 'em. Besides, out here it'd just get stolen."

"We can't take the train?"

"There's no station near my ranch." Simeon began picking out the hooves of his chestnut gelding. A clump of packed dirt fell onto the dusty ground. He put the front hoof down and moved his hand to the hind leg, leaning against his horse to encourage the hoof to lift.

Ara raised an eyebrow. "I thought you said you lived near the penitentiary?"

"Well, near's a relative term in the outback."

"Everything seems relative out here, including people's legs."

Simeon stood up, putting the hoof pick in his saddlebag. "What's the number one rule of survival?"

"I don't know." She was not in a mood to play guessing games.

"Adaptation. Things change all the time, so you've got to adapt or die. That's why we live day to day and that's why everything's relative. Come on, I thought you liked adventure." Simeon smiled, mounting his chestnut horse. "This here's Ramad and that bay mare of yours is Angel."

"Angel. That doesn't sound so bad." Ara shrugged. There's a first time for everything, she thought. She pulled herself onto the horse and gathered the reins in her hand.

Before she had a chance to position herself, she was jerked forward. Angel bolted, galloping into the desert outback. She grabbed the horn and a chunk of mane, clinging to the saddle as best she could. She felt herself tilting to the right, her foot popping out of the left stirrup.

"Pull back on the reins." Simeon rode up beside her. "Breathe!"

She managed to get Angel to slow down to a jog without falling off, but her arms felt like they were going to collapse. She gathered herself back in the center of the saddle and found her stirrups.

"Angel?" She made no attempt to hide her frustration. Both she and the horse were panting for breath.

"She is, but you dug your heels into her sides as you mounted so she thought you wanted to go. Horses are sensitive creatures. You two just have to get to know each other."

"Sure thing. Maybe your critters don't like dark masons either."

"They don't discriminate, just so long as you feed 'em and be nice."

"Well that's better than the Brotherhood." Ara practiced reining her horse, following Simeon's lead. It wasn't too hard to figure out. She just had to remind herself not to grip tightly with her heels. "Before I was almost killed again, I was thinking about what you said earlier. It seems like such a strange way to live, without dreams. My dreams keep me going. Truth be told, I don't know who I'd be without them. One day I'm gonna step foot on every cluster and void in the universe."

"That's a great goal, but that doesn't mean you existed any more than these cowboys. A cowboy might dream of finding a pretty girl, settling down with a family, and having a small herd of cattle. If that's what makes him happy and he's following the order, who are we to judge? Life's a cattle chute and we're all heading towards it. Every choice you make closes off the possibility of other choices. As long as you can both look back on your life and feel like you've really lived, so much so that you want to keep living, that's what matters. That's the difference between Qi who choose to recycle and those who get stuck in the Endless regretting what could have been."

"What's the Endless?"

"That'll be for another time. I have much to teach you, but for now, try being in the moment and enjoy the sunset."

Ara's mind was so restless she hadn't stopped to notice. The rich pastels plastered the sky as if an artist dreamed them into existence. Three moons hung overhead at varying stages of waxing or waning. Off in the distance she heard a coyote howl, and for a split second she felt fully at one with All. Her incessant need to run disappeared as she watched All's beauty unfold before her.

The two rode in silence the remainder of the journey and came upon Simeon's ranch after dusk. Ara had never seen the stars so bright, like little holes piercing the black fabric of space. She felt small but at the same time special. She wondered how many other folks had looked at the sky over the ages and felt the same.

A sign over the front gate read "Mason Ranch."

"Is your last name Mason, same as Naphtali?"

"We all call ourselves by the surname Mason. We may have been recycled into different families, but the Brotherhood has existed longer than this universe and is bound by a tie deeper than blood."

"What's that?"

"Hope. Hope that no matter what happens, even if all the lights in the sky snuff out, somewhere a light will find a way to reignite."

"How can you be sure if you can't see the light?"

"Because I have hope, and that is stronger than the darkness."

The two corralled their horses and walked into the ranch house. It was small and cozy. The living room had a couch, two rocking chairs, and a fireplace. A large longhorn skull was mounted above the mantle and pictures of outback animals lined the walls. Ara glanced at an old photograph of twelve

people leaning against a fence. It looked like it had been taken at the ranch. From the style of clothing, she guessed the photo was snapped several centuries back.

“Who are these people?”

“That’s us masons, in different shells of course.”

“There are three girl masons.”

“Yeah, our Qi is gender neutral, but our original shells were male so the name Brotherhood has stuck over time. Every now and again we all come back as girls. I said we should call ourselves the Sisterhood when that happens, but I got voted down by the more traditionally-minded masons. You should see Judah when he recycles as a girl. It’s scary.” Simeon disappeared into a back room, leaving Ara to her own devices.

She couldn’t help but snoop. Anyone would if they were in my shoes, she rationalized. It’s not everyday, or ever, that you meet an ancient wizard. She began scanning a row of books on the shelf. She felt something hit her from behind and jumped, turning around to see a baby kangaroo. “Simeon, come quick!”

Simeon walked back into the room and smiled when he saw what had startled her. “Oh, that’s just Jack. He lives here.”

“Inside the house?”

“You wouldn’t want the coyotes to get him now, would ya? His mother was shot by a hunter so I’m taking care of him. Cute little guy, ain’t he? Hops around the ranch during daylight but comes in at night. He’s harmless, just a bit nosy.”

Ara was tired and saddle sore. “Are there any other pets I should know about?”

“That’s it, other than Rattler, my pet snake. He likes to roam about the house too.”

“A snake!”

Simeon laughed. “I’m kidding. Rattlers are outside the house, most of the time.”

Ara was clearly not amused.

“I got ya good. Should have seen the look on your face. Whiter than a specter. Well, I’ll let you and Jack get acquainted. I gotta go hunt down some Qi in the Endless. I’ll see you in the morning. The guest bedroom’s to your left at the end of the hall. Feel free to raid my fridge, but I’d check the expiration dates if I was you.” Simeon unfolded his staff and pulled up a small photo on his mobile. He stared at the picture intensely while touching his citrine stone. The Qistone began glowing and in a moment, he was gone to some other dimension.

Ara had so many questions, but they’d obviously have to wait until morning. She crawled into bed and pulled the quilt over her eyes, curling tightly inside the covers. A few minutes later Jack nudged through the door. He hopped into bed with her, and she was too tired to object.

Chapter 11

14A, Year 3016 – 18 years earlier
Caleano, Maia
Galaxy 563, Taurus cluster

“Psi Kali, so good to see you again.” A young Maian woman approached, elegantly dressed in a black gown. A string of rare Eridanus pearls hung around her neck. Her long, wavy brown hair was perfectly in place and all eyes turned towards her as she entered the restaurant. The woman was stunning and clearly knew how to command a room.

“Good evening, Vela. It’s been too long. You look remarkable.” El kissed her on the cheek. “I reserved a table for us by the pillars. I thought that might be quieter than the interior.”

“Yes, that would be lovely. Thank you, El. I simply adore this restaurant. I’m so glad you were able to get us a reservation.” Vela allowed the priest to escort her through the restaurant to a small table overlooking the city of Caleano.

El thought Caleano was one of the most beautiful places in the universe. The city was built along a series of winding canals too small for skyships to sail through. Instead, small robotic boats moved along tracks, allowing people to stop and start as they pleased. Huge columns lined the buildings and lanterns lit the hundreds of arched bridges connecting the streets. On the mountainside were ancient temples the Maians built long ago to align with celestial events.

The restaurant was in the Solstice Temple at the top of the mountain. The temple had giant stone pillars arranged like a sundial. Elegant tables were placed strategically throughout the ruins. Solstice was probably the most expensive restaurant in the universe and was consistently given a ten-star rating. Its slogan “Timeless Dining” was legendary. The Universal Historical Society continued to blacklist the restaurant, stating commercializing ruins destroyed the integrity of the temple. It was supposed to be a place where everyone could come and admire All’s grandeur. Casimir Costos disagreed, buying the entire mountain so he could have his premier restaurant at the top.

“Good evening, Miss Medina, Psi Kali. My name is Julio and I will be your server tonight. Can I start you off with a bottle of wine? We have an excellent red from Theon or a white from Hyades.”

“Oh, the vineyards on planet Theon are much better,” said Vela.

El smiled. “The red it is.”

“Excellent choice, sir. I will be right back.”

“I have a special treat for you tonight.”

“Have you brought me more pearls from Eridanus?” Vela lightly touched her cream pearl necklace.

“Just one, but I think you’ll be most pleased with its beauty. First, if I may inquire, how has your ideological crisis been going since our last visit?”

Vela sighed. “I’ve decided it’s no longer a crisis.” A sad look registered in her eyes. “I’ve come to accept the reality of our meaningless existence. It’s a pity, really. Life was more exciting when I tricked myself into believing it had a purpose. I’m twenty-three years old and have already been to all the interesting places in the universe. Even this restaurant has lost its allure. I know I said I adored it earlier, and at one time I did, but I’ve eaten here so many times it doesn’t inspire me anymore. Many commoners dream of being able to vacation in Caleano and to me it’s just another city filled with empty existence. I’ll sit in my father’s box seats at Bull Stadium, remembering how enthralled I used to get watching the games. When my team scores I try to cheer. Then I realize how pointless it all is.”

The server returned with the wine, pouring two glasses. “Would you like to hear our specials?”

“I already know them all. I’ll have the veal.”

“And for you, sir?”

“Filet mignon, rare.”

“Very good. Enjoy your wine.”

“You seem depressed, Vela. Have you been taking your medication?”

“This can’t be fixed with pills. Believe me, I’ve tried. It’s such a lie, those commercials of people happily walking on the beach after taking their antidepressants. You can’t bottle and manufacture happiness.”

"There are only two ways to happiness. The first is ignorance, which would be hard for the daughter of a media mogul."

"You know my father spins UNN to make the universe sound better than it is. He used to broadcast most of the truth, but he got too many complaints from viewers, so now he interjects hero of the day snippets to appease the masses. That story last night of the firefighter who saved a little boy, totally made-up. Daddy's movie studio produced the clip. People want to believe there's more good than evil, so we paint that picture because hope sells. All we're doing is giving nightlights to those afraid of the dark. Well my light's gone out." Vela paused, taking a sip of wine. "You said there's a second way?"

"My gift." El held up an elegant black pearl necklace. "Touch the pearl and tell me what you feel."

Vela reached out, transfixed by something she'd never seen before. "I feel ... alive." A small tear rolled down her cheek. "I haven't felt this real since childhood. El, this pearl has an energy to it. I wasn't aware black pearls even existed. Where did you get this?"

"A colleague of mine acquired it in the Eridanus swamps, along with seven others. I also have one." He pulled out a necklace from underneath his black robe to show Vela.

"But your pearl appears a shade lighter."

"That's because it's slowly fulfilling its purpose."

"What is that?"

"To destroy existence."

Vela's hazel eyes widened as she leaned forward and whispered, "Destruction doesn't sound so boring. Tell me everything."

And El did, beginning with his discovery of the Book of Chaos, the solution to Euler's equations, meetings with Dr. Hitar, and the ultimate plan to perform the Omega. El made sure to connect with Vela, explaining how he had a similar crisis of faith with his Numist beliefs. He too found purpose in relieving the universe of its meaningless, depressing existence.

They drank the most expensive wine, ate the most delicate foods, and decided that nothing tastes as sweet as nothing. Vela was sold. El knew she would be. In a universe filled with chaos, everyone wants a commission – a task that gives them a sense of order, place, and purpose in life. El had just given Vela her meaning back.

"To our commission." Vela held up her glass, stroking her new necklace. "El, I just genuinely smiled. It feels so good to be alive again!"

"Vela, you understand you must cause the deletions and be present right after death to receive the Qi into your pearl. You can do this?"

"Of course. I can convince people to do whatever I want. Deletion will be more of a challenge, one that I will certainly rise to." The Heiress couldn't stop smiling. "And don't worry about the media. Daddy wants me to be happy. If that means spinning a story to help the Commission, it can be arranged. So Professor Hitar's locating the other three recruits? That means you have two more as well."

"Yes, that's correct."

"Oh El, let me find one of them. You're busy trying to fill two pearls. I won't take no for an answer."

"Well Vela, if you insist..." El smiled. He anticipated this would happen. Vela thrived on manipulating pieces. She just had to stay interested in the game.

"This will make some commoner happy." Vela unfastened her Eridanus pearl necklace and threw it down the mountainside.

"You're very generous, Miss Medina."

"I try to follow the Golden Rectangle. I just added positive to life."

"And soon you'll be subtracting the negative."

Chapter 12

“Ara, I’m very disappointed in you.” Shala Cantor leaned over a seven-year-old Ara, shaking her head.

Ara was trying to put together a model skyship, but the paint bottle slipped out of her grasp, scattering glass on the floor.

“A robot could do a better job. Now a child in the voids will die of dehydration, miserable and alone, without a skyship to dream of traveling to a better world. Your carelessness has caused more suffering. I have to punish you for violating All’s Code. It pains me to do so, but you didn’t add positive to life. Stand up!”

Ara was crying, already upset about dropping the paint bottle. She’d wanted to do a good job. She didn’t mean to break the bottle.

Shala yanked her out of the chair and struck her with a staff.

Ara tried to run but stepped on the glass. She cried out in pain as it pierced through her cheap shoes. Blood gushed from her foot, mixing with the red paint.

“I still love you, but you must try harder for All.” Shala walked away, leaving Ara on the floor crying.

She pulled the glass out of her foot and flew her model skyship around the broken bottle, dreaming of being elsewhere. The shards became planets and the paint an exotic nebula.

Why didn’t my parents want me? Who would want a failure? I can’t do anything right. Even the masons think I’m destructive.

She stood on the deck of a skyship in space and watched a planet get deleted from existence. It crumbled before her eyes, leaving a blank spot where once had been billions of lives. She knew it was her fault the planet had died. She had caused the destruction.

Ara awoke, drenched in sweat. Jack had left the room. All the distractions in the universe couldn’t protect her at night from the memories. Images from the dream flashed in her mind. They were mostly in black and white, except for the color red. It was more vivid than normal, like a bright neon light.

She thought about her parents. When she was a kid, she used to pretend they were pirates on adventures around the universe and one day when they found their treasure, they’d come back for her. She’d check the mail hoping they might send a postcard from some far-off planet, but nothing ever came. Over time she convinced herself her parents were dead. Maybe their Qi had already recycled into new shells. She may never know the truth. Everything was a woven web of guesses.

She tossed and turned the rest of the night, waking up to the smell of fresh coffee. Simeon sat in the kitchen sipping his mug. Jack was hanging in a bag on the wall, strategically placed at the same height as a mama kangaroo’s pouch.

“There’s some joe if ya want it.” Simeon looked like he’d been hit by a train.

“You okay?” Ara grabbed a Scorpio Stingers mug and poured herself a cup of coffee.

“Was a long night is all. Most Qi follow you to the alpha door and open it, no questions asked, but some are stubborn.”

“Maybe they don’t want to return.”

“The point of life’s to keep living. Masons don’t give up. We stay down there till the Qi goes through the alpha door.”

“What do you mean, alpha door?”

Simeon was tired from a frustrating night of channeling, but his job was to train Ara. He took another sip of coffee and collected his thoughts. “The Numists say there are five dimensions, but that’s not right. We actually have nine dimensions. There are four open dimensions, three space and one time. Everyone knows that. The fifth is the passage dimension. When someone dies, his Qi moves through this dimension, traveling inside a wormhole that takes him into the sixth dimension, the Endless hallway. Our Qistones open the door to this dimension. We say it’s the ‘Qi’ to unlocking the door.” Simeon laughed at his cheesy play on words. “Darkstones can also unlock the sixth dimension.”

“So I can travel to this hallway?”

“Yep, and I’ll show you how. It’s easy to get lost in the Endless so listen carefully. When you get down there, you’ll see a winding hallway filled with many doors, passageways, staircases, and levels.

No two hallways are the same, and it stretches on for what seems like an eternity. It's not really Endless, but you know how it is – perception's reality. The doors can be really grand and you're naturally gonna be attracted to them, but whatever you do, don't encourage a Qi to open these doors."

"What's behind them?" She tried Simeon's version of coffee. It tasted awful. He didn't seem to believe in cream or sugar.

"Fake worlds. For each major choice a Qi made during his life, an alternative reality gets destroyed and the choice that person did make becomes real. These doors show a Qi what his life could have been like if he'd made a different decision."

"What's so bad about a Qi choosing an alternative world?"

"Because they're not real. Remember the cattle chute? The possible world gets destroyed when you choose another path. Behind these doors are holographic screens playing out virtual lives. A Qi gets lost down there, mesmerized by what could have been."

"Where's the real door then?"

"It's different in every hallway. We call it the alpha door, and our stones gravitate towards it. That's where we come in, Ara, to help Qi find the door back to life."

"How do we do that?"

"We need an object from their life. Something that's tied to their Qi, like a photo, piece of clothing, old toy, anything that was a part of their memory. Most of the time we use pictures from the obituaries. This guides us to the Qi's unique hallway."

"So if I held a person's sock or something while gripping my stone, I'd warp down to her hallway, not mine?"

"Correct. You can only be in your hallway if you're dead."

"How will I know when I've got the right door?"

"Your stone will pulse stronger than normal. It's gonna pull you towards the alpha door. You just have to get the Qi to follow. If they don't, they could end up at the exit."

"Where does that go?"

"To the seventh dimension, otherwise known as the Shadows. That's how our old universe shattered. The nine dark masons thought they could enter a higher dimension of gods, but instead they unleashed dark energy, cursing the stones."

"Do you know what the eighth and ninth dimensions are?"

"We have our suspicions. We think the alpha door leads to the eighth dimension. It's the realm of the gods, as we called it long ago, or more modernly, All's dimension."

"So what does All's realm look like?"

"None of us have actually seen it, but we know what happens there 'cause the Stonemason's given Joseph dreams. In one of his dreams, Joseph was able to follow a Qi through the alpha door. He saw it pass into the eighth dimension and get assigned a new shell. Our stones come from All's dimension and reside there when we're between recyclings. When we become old enough to handle our calling, the stones leave the eighth dimension and return to us."

"If All's in the eighth dimension, what could the ninth dimension possibly be?"

Simeon put down his mug. "Nothing, zero, zilch, nada, end of the road—"

"I get it, but how can nothing be a dimension?"

"I suppose you could say it's the zeroth dimension, but we start counting at one, so it became the ninth. I need you to understand, Ara, that the darkstone is a powerful weapon. Don't be fooled by its size. It has the potential to destroy all life as we know it."

"You mean another Shattering?"

"No, much worse than that. The darkstones can annihilate the realm of the gods where all life is birthed. Destroying the eighth dimension. Permanent nonexistence. Total darkness. The Omega."

"I don't understand. How could I cause the Omega with this thing?" She removed the stone from her pocket. Maybe this cowboy was overreacting. It was just a rock.

Simeon began laughing hysterically, choking on his coffee in the process. "Excuse me, Mr. Mason. I've got the power to end existence. I just need to know how to do it. Did I mention we've been around for two universes? Judah's Qi's taken a little longer to evolve than the rest of us, but don't mistake us for idiots. We can't share secrets with the enemy."

"That's not fair. I haven't done anything to hurt you."

"Not in this lifetime, but like I said, there's a history."

"I was just curious." Ara leaned back in her chair, taking another sip of coffee. She was desperate for some caffeine despite the taste.

"So were the other dark masons and look what happened."

"I take it your citrine doesn't have the same power?"

Simeon paused. "Our stones sustain life, not destroy it."

"Are you sure? Maybe your gems are just as destructive. You all almost killed me, remember?"

"Only to prevent the possibility of greater destruction, and we didn't, so all's well that ends well. The Qistones are bent towards creation and the darkstones towards destruction. That's just how it is, but the good news is you can choose to use your stone however you want. It still unlocks the hallway. The dark masons were channelers once, until they got lost in their delusions of grandeur and developed an All-complex."

"So much power." Ara rolled the darkstone around in her hand, letting the energy pulse through her nerves. "When can I start channeling?"

"That's the spirit, although ... the light leads way to the shadows." Simeon looked lost for a minute, like he was thinking about one of his past lives. He stared blankly into his half-empty coffee mug. Maybe this was a bad idea. Dark masons couldn't be trusted. He'd made that mistake before. What if he was wrong about Ara?

"Simeon?"

He came to, twitching his head slightly. He took a large swig of joe, downing the rest of his black concoction. "There are some executions later tonight." Simeon pulled up a photo on his mobile. "Here's one. Marvin Myers. Couldn't be rehabilitated."

"What did he do?"

"Beat his kid to death."

Ara frowned. "Why would I want to bring someone like that back? Shouldn't his Qi be sent straight to the Shadows? It doesn't sound like he lived an ordered life."

"His Qi will be channeled into a new shell. Fresh energy for a fresh start. His memories of the previous life will erase when he goes through the alpha door."

"A decent chunk of your Brotherhood didn't want to give me a fresh start."

"You're a dark mason. The average rules don't apply."

Ara rose to rinse out her mug. "He beat his kid to death, Simeon."

"Let All worry about the man's next shell. That's not for us to decide. The order will take care of helping the Qi grow, but he's gotta come back to mature."

She watched the soapy water flow down the drain. "So I'm just herding this guy's energy back – a clean slate, neither good nor bad. He doesn't have some complicated rock to worry about like us masons."

"Exactly. It'll be the Qi's choice how to live the next life."

"If it's a Qi's choice, why does a dark mason become destructive?"

"Cause he's got that stone."

"It's such a small thing."

Simeon put his mug in the sink. "Destruction always starts that way, but little things become bigger things, and before you know it, an entire world's being deleted."

Ara steered Angel alongside Simeon's horse Ramad. Twilight was fast approaching and the wind was picking up dust, decreasing visibility. "Are we almost there?"

"Soon. The Universal Penitentiary is purposefully put in the most desolate part of Antares. It deters prisoners from trying to escape 'cause they'd likely die from the critters, outlaws, or desert. Also the mines, enrichment factories, and reactors are around these parts due to the higher concentrations of uranium. Many Scorpio planets are rich in uranium, making us the prime spot to harvest neutrinos."

"I've heard it's dangerous to mine and enrich. That's why they use prisoners."

"Yep, prisoners assist in mining for military and government travel. The private companies like Jetty and Costo use indentured servants. Not that many folk care about a convict dying in a mine or

getting radiation sickness, but if Joe the migrant dies from sweating in the shafts to earn his citizenship and provide for his family, well that's a cryin' shame. He was a good, hard-working guy – didn't deserve it. At the end of the day, it all comes down to flux."

"That's depressing, Simeon."

It was a windy night in the outback with dust clouds forming in the distance. The scenery wasn't very spectacular around the outskirts of the vast prison, which Ara could make out looming in the distance. It looked like a large industrial complex containing many rows of austere gray metal buildings. Each building was connected by a tunnel to the central hub, affectionately known as the Parent, where prisoners would take their mandatory rehabilitation classes. The Parent would also assign, process, and check on the progress of a prisoner's performance at his compulsory service job.

"Prisoners have rights."

"Give Marvin time."

"Depleted uranium depletes life."

Ara glanced over to see a few people protesting outside a chain-link fence surrounding a large pit. They were wearing shirts with the familiar equal sign on them. "Plexians. They really like to protest, huh?"

"Radiation kills!"

Simeon laughed. "Yep, they hate rules and don't trust the current government. Always pushing for more freedom and looking for conspiracy theories around every corner. There are more moderate ones like Sandra Anzu, but every political party has its radicals."

"Less rules don't sound so bad."

"Problem is, I'm not sure they'd know what to do if they actually got it, like a dog chasing a squirrel."

"They'd probably find something else to protest."

A small guard ship approached the execution pit. As the skyship passed by, the Plexians got more vocal, raising their signs higher for effect. Several ground patrol guards worked to help quiet down the protestors.

Three guards, a judge, and the prisoner stepped out of the skyship's cabin. The highest ranking guard was handed a piece of paper by the judge. The guard looked over it for a minute, nodded his head, and began to read:

"Marvin Ezekiel Myers, you are hereby sentenced to deletion in accordance with Universal Law Eighty-seven-fifty-nine, failure to show likelihood of rehabilitation. You received your 'How to be a Universal Citizen' class on the twenty-fifth of Sagittarius, fourteenth aeon, year three thousand thirty-three. It is now the thirtieth of Gemini, year three thousand thirty-four. You have not shown sufficient rehabilitative progress during the allotted six-month period. The Libra High Court has signed your deletion orders. Judge Aberner is present today to witness and sign your deletion certificate. Do you have any last words?"

Marvin, a large man with a shaved head and dark beard, stood at the edge of the ship. He wore a traditional orange jumpsuit and had his hands bound behind him. Two bulky guards held him securely. Ara noticed a scorpion tattoo on his right forearm. He must be a gang member, she thought.

"I'd rather walk the plank than die from radiation," said Marvin.

This fueled the Plexians, who loudly chanted, "Radiation kills!"

"He has a valid point," said Simeon. "If a miner isn't killed in an accident, working too long exposed to all that uranium can make a person real sick, slowly eatin' away at the body and mutating your DNA. It's a nasty thing what radiation does to a person."

But he beat his kid to death. Ara tried to look past this, seeing the man's Qi, but all she could see were memories of Shala's beatings. He's a monster, she thought. He deserves to be deleted.

The skyship hovered over the pit and extended a metal plank. Marvin walked to the edge with a stoic resolve, but once out at the end he hesitated, looking down into the chasm. One of the guards took a long pole and shoved him, causing Marvin to lose his balance and fall. The prisoner screamed as he was swallowed by the pit.

"What's down there?"

"Lots of corpses, I reckon."

Ara cringed, imagining a graveyard of bodies in various stages of decomposition.

"The pit used to be a uranium mine, shut down after we drained it all." Simeon turned his horse away from the execution site, pointing to a small group of trees at a distance from the protestors. "Let's go over there so we can be discreet."

They walked their horses underneath the trees and dismounted.

Simeon showed her Marvin's mug shot. "Ya ready?"

Ara took a deep breath. She wasn't really ready, but how could she be? She was traveling for the first time to the higher dimensions. "I'm a little afraid."

"It's okay. I was too my first time. I still get a tad nervous when I begin herding in a new shell 'cause I know I'm rusty. But that's courage, facing the dark unknown even though you're scared. You'll do fine. Just remember what we practiced. Find the alpha door. Your stone should lead you to it."

Ara took another deep breath and concentrated on Marvin's photo. She pulled out her darkstone and gripped it tightly, allowing the energy to overtake her body. Take me to his Qi, she thought as her mind filled with Marvin's image.

The world started spinning around her, breaking into fragments until nothing remained but a gray dust. Now she was moving feet first through a tunnel. Then she was still, arriving in a dark hallway. She found her shell still intact and examined her hand in wonder. She was outside reality, existing in some kind of limbo afterlife. It didn't seem possible.

Marvin was present in his shell. There was a dull, lifeless expression on his face and his eyes were glazed over. In front of him was an old metal factory door. Above the door hung a red neon exit sign flickering on and off. She heard the buzzing of the sign's fluorescent lights as it illuminated the darkness.

Marvin turned the knob, opening the door a crack. An awful white noise enveloped the hallway.

She covered her ears, but the noise was still loud. Something's not right. Where are all the other doors? This isn't the alpha door. Her mind whirled, trying to remember what Simeon had taught her.

"Marvin, wait!" she screamed, but the white noise drowned her out.

She watched helplessly as he swung the door wide open and stepped into a gigantic static screen, disappearing. The Qi was gone.

She didn't know what to do. It happened so fast. She felt pulled in by the static. The noise was maddening, like a thousand simultaneous nails scratching on a chalkboard. A part of her wanted to follow him through the door and disintegrate, but she stood fast, her will to survive overpowering the allure of the Shadows.

It took all the energy she had to shut the exit door. As she turned around, the knob moved slightly and the door creaked back open. She held her stone, terrified. She felt like she'd never return to the open. The exit door was her only reality. Her hands trembled as the energy pulsed, pulling her through the fifth-dimensional tunnel.

She arrived back in the open. Simeon was in the same spot, leaning against a tree. The horses were grazing on splotches of sparse grass nearby, and it was still dark.

"Did the Qi give ya any trouble?" asked Simeon.

Ara hesitated. Simeon had taken a chance on her. His vote had kept her alive. She didn't want to disappoint him, but if she pretended everything was okay, she wouldn't learn what she'd done wrong. "The Qi went through the exit door."

Simeon looked lost for a moment. Then his face filled with fury. He clenched his staff so tightly it indented the dirt. "Ara, what have you done? You were supposed to guide the Qi back to life, not lead it to the slaughter! Dark energy is rising, shifting us closer to the end of the universe. Is that what you want? To destroy life!"

She didn't know what to do. Her experience in the hallway was nothing like what Simeon had described. "I'm sorry. I don't know what happened."

"That's not good enough." Simeon flailed his staff as he spoke. "A Qi has been permanently lost to the Shadows. You must try harder if you want to overcome your destructive nature. Failure is not an option for a mason." He raised his staff high in the air. "We don't give up on life!"

You're a failure. You can't do anything right. Shala was shaking her staff threateningly at Ara.

"Please don't hit me!" Ara ran behind her horse and quickly mounted Angel. All she could think to do was run. It would be easier on everyone. Simeon was just like Shala. Whatever she did, it wasn't going to be good enough. Maybe the Brotherhood would change their minds and delete her. This was a big mistake. She wasn't meant to be a mason.

"Ara, get down. I'm not gonna hurt you." Simeon lowered his staff. "I just need to understand what went wrong."

"There were no other doors." Her hands were shaking as she held the reins. She dug her heels hard into Angel's side and galloped away, fleeing into the desert night.

"Ara, come back. You'll die out there!" Simeon flung onto Ramad. He tried to follow Angel, but it was dark and windy.

She heard Simeon screaming, but she didn't care. I'd rather face the creatures of the outback than deal with the Brotherhood. What else could I have done? Maybe if I'd shouted louder or ran and closed the door before he went through ... but it's in the past. The Qi's gone. He was a subtracter anyway.

She spurred Angel on until her horse refused to go farther. Simeon and Ramad were nowhere in sight. The dust storm had picked up strength, blowing grains of sand into her mouth and eyes. Angel and Ara were both drenched in sweat, the sand sticking to the perspiration on their bodies. Visibility was low, but up ahead she was able to see the faint outline of several rocky mounds. She reasoned this would be a good spot to rest and steered Angel towards the mounds, navigating through the crevices. It appeared the mounds contained a system of caverns.

"Stay here, girl. We're gonna be okay. Just need to lay low till this storm passes." She dismounted Angel, hugging the mare's neck. The horse's body heat felt comforting.

She unfolded her staff and pulled a flashlight out of her saddlebag to explore the caverns. As she walked farther into the caves, she heard voices. They must also be seeking shelter from the storm, she thought.

"We need to be discreet about collecting the merchandise. Don't want this all over UNN," said a man.

"How do we do that? It's not like we're sneaking something small," said another.

"We can't just pull from the central location. That would be obvious. We need to steal from across the universe. Small quantities here and there won't be noticed," said a third man.

"Might make the local planet news."

"No one cares about that. Besides, if we pull from the outside, the merchandise won't be missed."

Ara ducked behind a rock. The three men looked like Scorpion outlaws. They were dressed as cowboys and had prominent gang tattoos on their arms. One had slicked-back dark hair and another was bald. Both of these men had guns. The third had long red hair pulled into a low ponytail. A machete hung by his side.

"Gentlemen, this map shows a dispersal of your target sites and how many I expect from each location," said the red-haired man, spreading his map over a rock slab.

"Alvah, this is going to require an extensive amount of planning and manpower," said the dark-haired man. "We can supply the resources. The question is, can you afford it? The price of neutrinos has gone up so freighting out to the voids won't be cheap."

"I've brought a deposit as discussed." Alvah opened up a sack filled with more pi bills than Ara had ever seen.

I need to get out of here. News stories of notorious crimes committed by Scorpions flashed through her mind. She didn't want to become the next headline. Using the rocks and shadows to stay concealed, she slowly inched her way out of the cave.

The dark-haired man had finished counting the money. "Excellent. I believe this will secure our services. You wish to have all merchandise shipped to the Auriga void?"

"Correct. You also need to plant the drugs."

"No worries, we'll take care of it. You want it inside the—"

"What's that?" The bald man turned in the direction of Ara.

She'd tripped over a small stone. The sound echoed through the cavern, disrupting the scheming outlaws. She eyed the men's weapons nervously.

“Probably just an animal. You’re paranoid, Lars.”

“Someone’s here, Don. I can feel it.” Lars inspected the chamber with his flashlight. He and his two companions moved closer to Ara.

She carefully retreated her steps, trying to stay covered by the rock formations. Her heart beat faster, and it became harder to take in oxygen. Then light hit her foot.

“There he is!” Lars pointed.

“Delete him!” shouted Alvah. “I can’t have my plans compromised.”

Ara panicked. Run! she coached herself, scraping her skin on the rocks as she scrambled through the caverns. Keep going. You’re good at running. Don’t stop.

“I’ll shoot him.” Don pulled out his gun, aiming in Ara’s general direction. It annihilated several stalactites and stalagmites, turning them into a fine dust.

He has an antigun, thought Ara, squeezing through a crevice. Antiweapons were illegal to possess unless you had a special military clearance. They used antimatter technology to destroy matter, releasing a tremendous amount of energy that left nothing behind but a pile of dust. Only a faint popping sound registered when a target got pierced, making them the perfect murder weapon.

Another shot fired, causing more rocks to disappear.

I’m almost to Angel. I just need to get to my horse. She curved back around to the main entrance of the cave and ran up to the mare. She was about to grab the reins when a bullet hit Angel in the flank. Another blasted apart the mare’s neck, the horse’s dusty remains covering Ara.

Alvah stood on a rock, holding out his machete. “There’s nowhere to run. You’ll die in the outback.”

“Please, I just want to go back to my ranch.”

Lars grinned. “Hey, it’s a lass. Maybe we shouldn’t delete her just yet.”

She turned and faced the desert, knowing the antiguns were pointed at her back. She reached inside her pocket, holding her stone. Its familiar energy enveloped her body. As she stared into the dust storm, she saw the sails of a distant ship crossing the sky. She thought about her dreams of exploring the universe, imagining herself on that ship. She stood by the bow, trying to decide where she wanted to go for her next adventure. It was a good dream. Then everything went hazy.

Chapter 13

“Go away.” Something was jabbing at Ara’s arm, disrupting her dream. She awoke in a sunny garden to find a large falcon pecking at her wrist. She jumped in surprise, knocking over a potted plant. The falcon squawked loudly and flew around the room.

A man came running into the first floor. He was a Rami dressed in traditional warrior clothes. Everything he wore was black, from his tall boots, cloak, pants, long leather gloves, and hood. His belt bore the falcon coat of arms, indicating he was an Orion. Ara had heard of these men. They were chosen from an early age to become assassins for the Universal Army. Once they had finished their service obligation, they often went on to do private contract work.

The Orion aimed an arrow at Ara and stared silently at her with piercing eyes. The intensity of his glare nearly caused her to keel over.

The falcon landed on the Orion’s shoulder. “You upset Isis.”

A Rua came into the second floor of the stardome. She was dressed in overalls, a stark contrast to the fierce Rami warrior. Her fiery red hair was tied loosely back, with several strands falling over her freckled face. She put her hands on her hips and looked down at Ara and the Rami. “Who are you and what are you doing in my garden?”

“My name’s Ara. Are you dead too?”

The Rua and Rami exchanged looks.

“Are you mental? We’re very much alive, last time I checked. Right, Saiph?”

“She’s only alive because I have not decided to kill her.” Saiph stretched his bow a little wider.

Nice guy, thought Ara. Okay, so I’m alive and somehow managed to get on board a skyship. It must have been the stone. Maybe it sensed my need and gave me passage to the ship, warping me through the fifth dimension. That sounds crazy. I need to come up with a better answer. There’s no way they’ll believe that. “I was being chased by Scorpions. They were about to kill me so I snuck on board your ship. I don’t mean to cause any trouble. You can drop me off at the next port.” Well, it was partly true.

“Outlaws are after you? We don’t need more of those. Saiph, let’s take her to Captain Hood. He’ll know what to do.”

He grabbed Ara brusquely and pulled her towards the ladder. “My arrow is aimed at your back. Climb.”

Ara followed the Orion’s command.

Saiph tossed Ara’s staff up to the Rua. He climbed the ladder after her and dragged her out of the stardome onto the deck of the ship. It was a three-masted square-rigged vessel flying the flag of the Aries cluster. Must be a trade ship, she thought, given that Aries was the head of the Universal Trade Federation.

She saw a Leo off to the right fiddling with some riggings. He wore a lab coat signifying he was a doctor. The Leo cluster was famous for its medical school that produced some of the best doctors in the universe. Odd, thought Ara, for a doctor to be on a trade ship. Maybe it’s a research vessel.

“Ginger, who’s that?” asked the Leo.

“Her name’s Ara. She’s a bit off.” The Rua made a crazy gesture with her hand. “Claims outlaws were chasing her and she came to our ship for refuge.”

The Leo laughed loudly. “You haven’t told her?”

“Of course not. I’ve got more sense than that. Besides, Jay’s gonna love this.”

Tell me what? They climbed the stairs to the quarterdeck and walked past a beautiful Mori at the helm who eyed Ara curiously. Her pink kimono looked much too elegant to wear on a trade ship. Could be a diplomacy skyship, thought Ara.

Saiph brought her to a large cabin on the quarterdeck situated towards the stern of the ship. Inside was a Qian man who appeared to be in his mid-twenties. He had dirty blond hair falling in his eyes and was dressed like a sailor, wearing a loose white shirt, black coat, and brown pants. An old compass hung around his neck, which didn’t make much sense given universal positioning technology. He had his black boots propped on a desk while reading a *Galaxy Girls* magazine, the Gemini twins edition. On the cover were two Mori girls in pink bikinis standing provocatively next to palm trees. Tacked

down to his desk were maps of various clusters. Behind him was a large window with space navigation grids on either side of the frame. One wall contained a model skyship shelf built beside a small door leading to sleeping quarters below. Another wall had a holovision that was turned off. Instead an antiquated television sat in the corner, playing a 2D movie. On the wall by the main entrance was a mounted drawing board. Lines of poetry were written on it with names of several planets and ungraphical features scribbled off to the side.

Saiph kept his arrow pointed at Ara. "Captain Hood, we found a girl in our stardome."

"A girl?" Hood raised his eyes from the magazine and looked Ara up and down. "Interesting sense of style. What's your name?"

"Ara."

"Surname please."

"Mason." She lied, unsure if he might have seen a missing persons report on the Web.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one." She figured she'd make herself a bit older.

Ginger held out a staff. "She was carrying this."

"You're a Numology student? Where's your robe?"

"I lost it on Scorpio when I was running from the outlaws."

Captain Hood sat forward in his chair. "The robe just fell off as you were fleeing to expose these dirty cowboy accoutrements?"

"Yeah. I was in the outback on a mission trip and stopped to rest at some caves. I didn't know Scorpions were in there, and they were making some high-pi deal when they heard me. I ran to get my horse, but they shot her with an antigen."

"And now you're here on *Pandora*. Thanks for clarifying." The man stood up. "Ara Mason, allow me to introduce myself. I am Captain Jaden Hood and you have illegally boarded my skyship *Pandora*. People have called me many things, but I'm not an idiot. You clearly aren't from Scorpio. You're too pale and don't have the accent. If I had to guess, I'd say you came from Virgo, which makes sense if you're a Numology student, but you're definitely not twenty-one. From the looks of it, I'd say you aren't even legal, probably seventeen, so you can't yet be a student at the College of Numology, now can you?" An air of superiority crossed his face as he brushed his hair away from his eyes. "So now I have to ask myself, why's a runaway kid on my ship, and what am I to do with you?"

"I..." She looked around the cabin, trying to think of a better explanation than the truth, but she couldn't come up with one. Saiph stood in the corner, gripping his bow. "I ran away from my adopted mom in Virgo and lived on the streets for two years before Child Services found me and gave me to a Numist priest for care until I turned eighteen. He handed me over to his brother on Antares, but I didn't like it there so I left. The outlaw cave story's true." Even if she told Captain Hood about her darkstone and the Brotherhood, he wouldn't believe her.

"It was a rhetorical question. I don't care about your various versions of the truth. We've got a mission to complete, and I don't have time to babysit a rebellious teenager. Saiph, take her to the plank."

The Rami grabbed Ara and dragged her outside.

"The ... no! Can't you drop me off at the skyring or something? I'll figure it out from there."

"We aren't using the ring and I'm not gonna waste neutrinos landing, but we can gladly drop you off." Captain Hood smiled, following Ara and Saiph down the stairs to the main deck.

Ginger ran out behind them. "Jay, don't you think we should give her a chance? I came on board *Pandora* when I was seventeen. She may have some skills we could utilize."

"All she does is run, hide, and lie. Doesn't look to be much of a fighter. She's dead weight. Won't be able to handle the voids."

"I can help you! Whatever you need! I can mop the deck."

Another crew member heard the commotion and appeared out of the main deck's hatch. He was a curly-haired Qian dressed in a polo shirt and khaki pants. "What's going on?"

"Sid, this girl Ara smuggled onto *Pandora*," said Ginger. "She's a runaway from Virgo. Jay ruled she should walk the plank. That's not really fair, is it? She hasn't had a proper trial or nothing."

“Well, according to Universal Law Thirty-seven-thirty-eight, skyships are considered personal property and breaking into one’s property is illegal,” said Sid. “Also, UL Thirty-seven-ninety-seven states that all passengers on board skyships must be invited on board by the captain or hold a valid travel ticket on commercial skyships. If not, the passenger is deemed a stowaway. Subsection B states that if the skyship is in the air at the time of discovery of said stowaway, the captain should make a reasonable effort to contact the Universal Guard and hand over the stowaway to authorities. According to Subsection C, in the event the stowaway is deemed an immediate danger to personnel on board, it’s the captain’s prerogative to question the stowaway and determine an appropriate course of action.”

The Mori slowly descended the stairs to the main deck. “She doesn’t look to be an immediate danger.”

“Neither do you, Keiko, but we all know what you’ve got under that kimono of yours,” said Jay, making the lady blush.

“I can teach her to be my research assistant,” said the Leo.

“Crew, if you want to feel sorry for some wayward teen, go work for UCS or adopt UNN’s child of the week. I have questioned the stowaway and feel she’s a threat to our mission. We obviously can’t call the Scorpio guard given our situation. We have precious merchandise to bring out to the Hydra void and if we don’t meet our deadline, the buyer will have my head, which means your heads will follow. Voiders don’t take well to broken contracts.”

The crew went silent, apparently not able to come up with a decent rebuttal to Jay’s argument. Everyone valued their heads.

“First Mate, release the plank.”

“Roger, Captain.” Saiph kicked a button with his foot, causing a portion of *Pandora*’s railing to drop and a long metal plank to extend. He shoved Ara forward onto the plank.

“Please, I can help you!”

Jay pulled out his sword and poked her in the back. “Move along, miss.”

Ara imagined what Marvin must have felt like slowly stepping to his doom. *Pandora* was much higher in the sky than the execution ship had been. The ship’s protective magnetic shield obviously extended out to the end of the plank since she wasn’t being pushed off by blustering winds. She glanced down and began to feel dizzy.

I should try my stone again. Maybe I can warp out of this. She removed the darkstone from her pocket and looked out into the distance, hoping to see another skyship pass by, but there was nothing.

I need a focal point. She turned around at the end of the plank, facing the crew of six staring back at her. She looked up at the crow’s nest and saw Saiph’s falcon perched on the edge. She fixed her eyes on Isis, holding her stone and letting the energy run through her body. I am inside the crow’s nest, she thought. I’m already there. They just don’t know it yet.

“Goodbye.” Jay stomped his foot down hard, vibrating the plank.

Ara lost her balance and fell into the sky, clenching her darkstone. She landed awkwardly in the crow’s nest, quickly grabbing hold of the mainmast. It worked! *Phew*. That was close.

“Hello.” She waved to the astonished crew below, grabbed the falcon, and held up her darkstone. “Want me to make Isis disappear?”

Saiph aimed an arrow at Ara. “If you hurt my falcon, I will send you to the Shadows.”

Ginger nudged Jay with her elbow. “Told ya she could be useful to us. You really need to start listening to me more, Captain.”

Jay had a quizzical expression on his face. It was hard to discern if he was angry or intrigued by their strange visitor. He stood with his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. The crew eyed him patiently, awaiting his decision. Saiph glared menacingly at Ara.

“Okay miss, it appears we may be able to negotiate your passage on *Pandora*.” Jay signaled for Saiph to lower his weapon. “Come down so we can talk.”

“I think I’m more comfortable up here, and I want to ask you a question.” She was done being pushed around by Mr. Know-it-all Hood and his bird-obsessed henchman.

“Okay, one question and then you’ll come down.”

“And you have to answer honestly.”

“Yes, my lady, as I’ve seen integrity to be of utmost importance to you.” Jay bowed mockingly.

Ara ignored him. If she fed into his efforts to get under her skin, he’d have the upper hand. “Who are you, and what’s your purpose?”

The crew glanced at one another.

“Miss Ara, I am Keiko of Gemini, *Pandora*’s navigator.” The Mori bowed gracefully.

“I’m Dr. Gentry Hawk from Leo. I research drugs to help PM paralysis patients.”

“Name’s Ginger O’Connor of Capricorn. I’m *Pandora*’s gardener and mechanic.” She smiled pleasantly, unfazed by the tension on deck.

“Sidney Goldman of Pisces. Merchandise redistribution manager and accountant, at your service.”

“And expert in universal law,” said Ginger.

“I have many talents. This here’s Saiph Orion.” Sid pointed to the Rami. “Doesn’t talk much. Prefers to spend his energy killing people, and if you hurt Isis, he’ll make good on his promise.”

Ara didn’t loosen her grip on the falcon.

“Crew, she doesn’t need your bios or scare tactics. Ara, we’re pirates. We take from the clusters and give to the voids, getting a cut of the profits upon delivery. Our home is *Pandora* and our purpose is wherever the universe takes us. Are you interested?”

Captain Hood certainly gets to the point, she thought. Adventure, roaming in search of “treasures” (which she’d already imagined the merchandise to be), no humdrum life stuck in a pen... “I’m in.” She released Isis and warped to the main deck.

The falcon flew down, perching on Saiph’s arm. He gave her a treat and spoke to her in an ancient Rami dialect.

“I’ll have to give you a formal tour of my garden.” Ginger handed the staff back to Ara and linked into her arm, leading her over to the hatch. “You can stay in my berth. I’ve got an extra bunk.”

“Ara, after you get settled I need to speak with you.” Jay stormed up the stairs to his cabin.

“Aye, aye Captain.” She gave a mocked salute behind his back.

Ginger’s berth was in the lower deck towards the stern. It was small and messy with a mixture of Devils fluxball paraphernalia, plant pictures, *Qi Informer* gossip magazines, and photos from the Capricorn farmlands tacked to every inch of the walls. A bamboo plant had taken over one corner of the cabin. By the bed was a picture of Ginger as a teenager with her parents and three younger brothers.

Ginger picked up a pile of dirty clothes, throwing them in the hamper. “You okay sleeping on the top bunk? Not gonna roll out or nothing are ya?”

“No, I’ll be fine, thanks.”

“The covers are fastened to the bed so you don’t float away when sleeping in zero-G. Most of my other stuff’s tacked down. I can clear up some wall space for ya, just so long as you don’t put up any Virgo Saints stuff.” Ginger did not look like she was joking.

“I don’t even understand fluxball. Couldn’t tell you the difference between the black and white holes.”

“Oh, you will soon enough. The Universal Cup’s coming up and we’re gonna have a party in the captain’s cabin to watch the game on the big-screen holo-vision. Jay’s not a huge fluxball fan either, but he likes the cheerleaders.”

“I better get up there before he decides to push me off the plank again.”

“Don’t let him bully you. He’s really not a bad guy, just puffs up a lot. He’s got that scoundrel image to uphold and he’s only twenty-five, trying to command a crew. Once he got me this rare species of spider orchids I’d been wanting. Must have cost him some pi. Jay and I go way back, but we’re just friends. The only thing that man can seriously commit to is *Pandora*, although I think he and Keiko may have something going on. She spends a lot more time than the rest of us in the captain’s cabin, just saying. She won’t talk about it though. A bit stuck up if ya ask me. Thinks she’s better than everyone else ‘cause she’s a princess.”

“Really, a princess?” Could this get any stranger?

“Yep, I’ll tell you all the juicy details later.”

Ara was sure she would. Ginger certainly enjoyed talking.

“Ya better go see Jay now. He’s impatient.”

“Okay. Hey, thanks for sticking up for me earlier. I really did appreciate it.”

“No problem, although I wish I could have done more. Jay shouldn’t have made you walk the plank.”

Ara ascended a tight spiral staircase that led to the hatch on the main deck. She returned up the stairs to the quarterdeck and knocked on Captain Hood’s door. He didn’t answer. She cracked the door open slightly. “You wanted to see me, Captain.”

“Yes, come in, Ara.” He was standing by his model skyships, examining one.

Probably admiring his own handiwork, she thought.

“I think we got off to a bad start.” He fastened the ship back on its shelf base.

“You tried to kill me.”

“Okay, Ara. Here’s how it is. You don’t have to like me, but I need to know that when the time comes to follow orders, you can respect me as captain of *Pandora*. If not, I’ll offer you safe passage to the Hydra void and we can part ways there. Lots of freighters stop in Hydra for various diversions, so you’ll have no trouble hitching a ride to wherever it is you’re trying to go. If you decide to stay on *Pandora*, you’re gonna need to earn your keep. Understood?”

“Yes, Captain.” She could sense a heavy burden on his Qi, as if he were carrying the mass of the universe on his shoulders.

“Your device, may I see it?”

“I’d rather hang onto it.” Ara remembered what Naphtali had told her, and Hood made his living as a pirate. Integrity wasn’t exactly part of the job description.

Jay pulled out his sword, causing Ara to retreat. He laid it flat over his palms and extended his hands. “Take it.”

She grabbed the sword quickly and pressed the darkstone into his palm. “I have no problem using this.”

He let the stone rest firmly in his hand. “What do you call it?”

“A darkstone. Do you feel anything?” She was curious if he could sense the energy pulsing.

“It’s very cold.”

“Strange. It’s warm to me. The energy’s so strong when I hold it.” It was cold to the masons too. Am I the only one that can feel its power?

“The stone’s chosen you. Your order’s tied to its path.” He gave the stone back to Ara.

She lowered the sword and handed him the hilt. “Have you ever seen a darkstone before?”

“No, I’ve seen a lot of things in my life, but a stone that can warp someone about is definitely a new addition.”

“Then how can you presume to know my order?” She didn’t need another lecture. She’d make her own path, not let some tiny rock, crazy wizard priests, or arrogant captain tell her where to go.

“The same way I knew you were a seventeen-year-old runaway from Virgo. Things on the surface may seem perplexing, but underneath there’s a pattern.” Jay pointed at the navigational screen on his computer. “We’re about to enter space. Why don’t you sleep on your decision? The stakes are pretty high if you come to our table.”

“I don’t need to sleep on it. I want to be part of *Pandora*.”

“Why?”

“Because I have nowhere else to go.”

Jay leaned forward. “That’s the most honest thing you’ve said. Welcome to our crew. Goodnight, Ara Cantor.”

“How did you know my real name?”

Jay pulled a *Galaxy Girls* magazine out of his top desk drawer. He flipped through the pages until he came to an ad entitled “Missing Children.” The page was filled with small photos of children from the Universal Missing Persons Registry. In the middle of the third row was Ara Cantor.

Chapter 14

Simeon spent a good hour searching for Ara but found no trace of her or Angel. He decided to ride into the local mining town, hoping someone had seen her pass by.

He tied his horse outside Cyclops Saloon. It was a rough joint located near the slammer, not the type of establishment he'd ever take Ara to. Mostly outlaws hung out here, evident by the gang paraphernalia and numerous scorpion-themed tattoos displayed by the customers. In one corner were several men fighting their scorpions with some pi at stake. In another corner and on the balconies upstairs were Scorpions enjoying their other favorite activities, whiskey and women.

The old bartender who went by the name Cyclops was also a gang member. He did some hard time in the Universal Penitentiary for piracy and distribution of the illegal drug PM. He wore a black patch over one eye and had a long scar down his face.

Simeon thought back to the stories people told about Cyclops. Some folks said he was mauled by a tiger while hunting for the PM plant *panaceas majoris* in the jungles of Leo where it originated. Other clusters had tried to grow this plant due to its high-value on the black market, but it needed a very particular climate and soil to develop, which only appeared to be found in remote parts of the Leo cluster.

Whatever caused his scaring, it didn't seem to stop Cyclops. It was business as usual at the saloon. A PM addict slept on the couch, commanding whatever fantasy world temporarily sheltered him from reality. A holovision played above the man, broadcasting the latest news.

"Pirates have struck again. A vessel believed to be flying under the Aries flag has stolen fifty barrels of neutrinos from a reactor on planet Antares, Galaxy 8343 in the Scorpio cluster. It is suspected to be heading to the voids. With the increased demand for private skyship travel, market analysts in Pisces worry continued piracy may lead to shortages at neutrino stations and inflated fuel costs. Some pirates use the Aries flag to disguise themselves as merchant ships under the auspices of the Universal Trade Federation. President Zaniah Rex, on the campaign trail in the Aries skycity of Bharani, had this to say about the issue in a press conference held earlier today."

The news switched to a clip of President Rex in a Universal Trade Federation conference room. "Piracy is one of my top universal security concerns. Rest assured that the Zodiac government is working with UTF and the Department of Skyship Vessels to catalog all valid commercially and privately owned skyships used for trade and freight. Each cluster's guard in conjunction with the Universal Guard are crosschecking these cataloged ships with their Most Wanted lists. Those considered suspect are placed on the Piracy Registry, a centralized database available to everyone online. The registry contains photos of the alleged pirate captains and their skyships, plus any unclassified information authorities have on their last known whereabouts. If I am reelected, I plan on continuing my fight against piracy for the protection of honest, hardworking citizens everywhere." President Rex stared decisively into the cameras, smiling confidently.

Geez, this guy can't stop campaigning, thought Simeon, but when billions of pi go into running for reelection, I'm sure his contributors expect Rex to be relentless. You can't become president of the universe without that tenacity.

Simeon walked over to the bar, trying to blend in. Luckily his years in the outback had given him some insight into Scorpion culture. "Double shot of whiskey." He threw down way more pi than the whiskey cost.

Cyclops grinned, showing a few missing teeth. "What'll it be, stranger? Dames, dreams, or a whole lotta drinks? You can have your own room upstairs if ya throw in an extra ten pi."

Simeon gazed directly into the man's good eye. "I'm looking for a girl."

"Ah, aren't we all. Well you've come to the right place. What do you like – Qian, Leo, Sada, Mori, Nahn? Don't have a Maian or Rami and my Rua's occupied."

"I'm trying to find a teenage Qian."

Cyclops raised an eyebrow. "All my girls are adults, but let me see what I can do. It's not gonna be cheap."

"I've got plenty of pi." Simeon flashed several one-hundred pi bills.

"Hey Lars, come over here," Cyclops hollered to a bulky bald man watching the scorpions fight.

Lars approached the bar. "This better be good, Cy. Got my prizefighter Stinger out there. Gonna win me some pi tonight."

"This man here's looking for a Qian teen. You come across any in these parts? I know you've been freighting more and figured maybe you could acquire one. He's got the pi."

"They're rare out here. Gotta import most, but ya know, I almost had me one earlier. Tried to nab her, but she disappeared into the storm. Shot her horse so she couldn't have gotten far. Probably dead by now, I reckon. I can ride back and check. Maybe more will frequent Allunga."

"That won't be necessary. I needed someone now. Thanks for your help." Simeon shoved a few pi coins into Lars's hand.

"No worries. Care to wager a bet on Stinger? He's a good lil' fighter."

"Not tonight. Keep the change, Cy."

"Thanks, mate. I'll keep my eye out for ya." He grinned, pointing to his one good eye.

Simeon left the saloon and headed for the Allunga caves, hoping to find some evidence of Ara. He was impressed she'd made it that far. He had to hand it to her, the girl knew how to survive.

He arrived at the caves, immediately noticing the antigun damage. He stepped through piles of dust where stalagmites once grew. Such a shame, he thought. The Allunga caves are very old.

Scorpions used to just deal in drug and human trafficking, but due to the lucrative nature of the antiweapons black market, more and more outlaws were smuggling illegal arms. Simeon shuddered as he thought of someone like Lars handling an antimissile. Large ones were capable of destroying planets. Antiweapons also took a Qi's choice to recycle away, converting it straight to dark energy. At least that's what the Brotherhood theorized because they weren't able to find Qi deleted by antimatter technology in the Endless hallway. Numists also supported this reasoning, citing research that showed dark energy rose substantially after the invention of antiweapons.

Simeon's mind drifted back to Ara. What happened down in the hallway? How did her darkstone bypass the alpha and virtual doors? Why did it link straight to the Shadows? He was going to have to call an emergency Circle. No time to wait for the regularly scheduled meetings at Stone Castle.

He was embarrassed to face his brothers, but he had to. Ara was lost out there – frightened, angry, and probably feeling betrayed. These emotions could tip her towards destruction. They needed to act fast to find her. He took his orange robe out of the saddlebag and threw it on, trying to look more professional than he had at the last Circle. This is gonna be intense, he thought. He swallowed his pride and placed his hand over the staff, activating his citrine to summon the Brotherhood.

Issachar arrived first, his emerald casting an eerie green glow upon the cavern walls. "Why have you summoned us so soon? Already having trouble managing a teenage girl?"

"Oww!" Judah hit his head on a stalactite as he warped into the cave.

"Where's Ara?" asked Naphtali, Mason of the Sapphire.

"Joseph called earlier to inform me he'd be back and forth from the Endless. A large group of Plexians were killed during violent protests outside the Hedron, so he's got a channeling marathon ahead of him." Asher raised his diamond staff, signaling he would assume command of the Circle as the next eldest brother.

Once all the masons were assembled, Simeon addressed the group. "Brothers, I've lost Ara. I'm sorry for my failure. I know you entrusted me with an important task."

Silence came over the chamber. Simeon expected the news to hit hard.

Reuben clenched his peridot Qistone. "Simeon, this is most irresponsible. You know what the darkstones are capable of."

"Here we go again," said Zeb. "Should have deleted her when we had the chance. I hate to say I told you so, but—"

"Her Qi would find a way into another shell," said Naphtali. "The stone is indestructible."

"Masons, it's in the past. Zebulun, you know our decision is final." Asher pointed his diamond staff at Simeon. "What happened?"

"I'm still trying to understand it. I taught her how to channel Qi, explained the nine dimensions, and told her about the darkstone's destructive powers."

"Great," said Zeb. "Why don't you show her how to delete a planet while you're at it."

"I didn't give her a How to Destroy Life instruction manual, but she deserves to know some information."

"Why is Ara gone, Simeon?" A worried expression spread over Asher's face.

"I lost my temper and she bolted. She somehow ended up at the end of the hallway. Said there were no other doors but the exit. This is all my fault, brothers. She looked really scared and confused, but I was too angry about the lost Qi to notice."

"She couldn't see the alpha or virtual doors?" asked Gad, Mason of the Amethyst.

"No, I believe her about only seeing the exit, but that don't make sense. The darkstones could still channel in the old universe."

"The dark masons went through the exit door, tying their destiny to the Shadows." Zeb couldn't understand why his brothers were allowing themselves to be fooled by this girl.

"But isn't the theory that Ara's stone is the one that didn't go through the door, the ninth dark mason's stone?" asked Reuben.

"All darkstones are the same," said Zeb. "They aren't unique like ours."

Benjamin glanced down at his garnet. "You know how our Qistones have engrams that hold memories from our past?"

"Yes, so we can remember our recyclings," said Manasseh, Mason of the Turquoise.

"Well, we know darkstones don't have personal engrams. Instead they have engrams for the dimensions. That's why they hold power over the structure of our universe. But if Ara's Qi is indeed the spirit of the ninth dark mason, then the exit door never claimed her. It still calls to her no matter what hallway she enters."

Issachar looked intrigued. "You may be onto something, Ben."

Asher touched his diamond, causing it to glow. "The Stonemason never indicated darkstones were different than Qistones with respect to channeling. My engram shows they worked the same."

"But dark masons can capture Qi," said Benjamin.

"That was a later discovery," said Levi, Mason of the Aquamarine.

Issachar activated his emerald, recalling a past engram. "And that little fact about them being able to destroy dimensions. Didn't see that one coming. I'm beginning to question the intentions of this Stonemason. He left out many details. Maybe he didn't know what the darkstones were capable of. Just a tool being used by some higher power bent towards destruction. We blindly believed these stones were life-enhancing and look what happened – an entire universe deleted on us."

"Why would All make stones that could destroy life?" asked Levi.

"Maybe they came from the ninth dimension and the stones are trying to get back there. Isn't that what's said, that All came from nothing?"

Zeb frowned. "That doesn't make sense, Naph."

"Many things don't make sense," said Asher. "Brothers, we've been tasked with the power to continue life, hopefully for eternity. It's not just the fate of the universe, but the fate of all existence that is bound to these stones, especially if the others have returned."

"If my analysis is correct, taking the darkstones through the exit door won't destroy the realm of the gods," said Levi. "All the seventh dimension contains is enough dark energy to cause another Shattering. That would be upsetting, but at least we have some comfort in knowing a new universe could rise up like what happened after the last Shattering."

"If there's a way to destroy the eighth dimension, the dark masons will figure it out eventually. Mark my word, shattering one universe won't be enough for them." Zeb pounded his moonstone staff into the ground to emphasize his point. "We must find a way to permanently delete these masons if we wish to protect life."

"If Ara is the *one*, she might be able to help."

"Euler was mad. He stopped believing in the order after what happened in the Crusades. You really need to lay off the prophecy, Naph. You've been obsessing about it for centuries. No dark mason has ever been different. They all turn to chaos."

"Euler could have been a dark mason," said Issachar. "Some are good at hiding the stone."

The masons murmured among themselves, adding to the speculation about the prophecy.

Asher raised his staff, signaling he wished to address the group. "Regardless of whether you believe the prophecy, the bottom line is Ara must be found. We've voted to allow her existence and are therefore responsible to ensure she doesn't choose a destructive path."

"When we find her, what should we do?" asked Judah, Mason of the Ruby. "Since deletion's off the table, can we at least snatch the stone and hide it?"

"The stone will find a way back to its mason. They always do. Remember brothers, we're guided by the order, but we can't control another's free will. It will be up to Ara to accept our guidance. I'll be taking over as her trainer. Let us pray she continues to resist the darkstone's destructive powers."

The brothers nodded in agreement at Asher's decision. He had a strong connection to his diamond and was well-respected among the masons.

"So let's try to determine where in the universe this girl's run off to," said Reuben. "Any leads, Simeon?"

"I've traced her whereabouts to these caves. Heard a Scorpion talk about seeing her here. He went after Ara, but she ran. Managed to kill my horse, the scoundrel. After that I'm not sure, but my hunch is she got on board a skyship. I've combed the outback and found no trace of her. Most ships 'round these parts are headed to the voids to freight fuel. Legit ones go to Aries for processing."

"Let's split up our forces. We can't stop Qi channeling operations, so I'll dispatch four masons to locate Ara. I'll head to my home cluster of Aries. Naphtali, I'd like you to join me since you were the first to meet Ara and help her out. If she trusts any mason right now, it'd be you."

"Of course, Asher. I'd be honored to accompany you."

"The voids are dangerous. Judah, you're our strongest fighter. I think we should send you."

Judah balled his hand into a fist. "I can handle the voids."

"We'll need a purpose to enter certain void regions. Foreigners aren't welcome in some parts. I could secure a hybrid freighter and bring a few vats of water from Aquarius. We would then be most welcome."

"Excellent suggestion, Gad. Make it happen. We have a solid plan." Asher raised his staff to end the Circle. "For All."

"For All," responded the masons.

Chapter 15

"I'm flying!" Ara was bouncing all over the place, eventually grabbing hold of the foremast. She pushed herself into a back flip off the mast, awkwardly spinning towards the main deck.

Space was darker than she imagined it would be. Lanterns were glowing around *Pandora* to help the crew continue in their tasks. Ara held onto the mainmast's horizontal top yard and admired the view of the reddish-orange planet Antares as *Pandora* quickly sped out farther into the dark ocean.

Jay was in one of his more captain-esque moods, walking out of his cabin wearing a ridiculously large hat.

Ara floated over to him as he descended the steps towards the main deck. "Overcompensating for something?" She snatched his hat, trying to put it on while floating.

"Don't mess with my hat." Jay grabbed Ara's waist tightly and pulled her down near the mainmast, making her stomach sink a little.

He placed the hat back on his head. "Didn't anyone think to give this girl some magshoes? Keiko, you've got to have an extra pair in that walk-in closet of yours."

"Yes Jay, I have plenty."

Keiko was wearing a dark blue modern twist on a traditional kimono. It was shorter and more form-fitting than the one she had on earlier. Her hair was elegantly pinned up with matching blue chopsticks. She also had on stilettos, which Ara was amazed she could even walk in. Stilettos in space, who would have thought? Only a guy could come up with something that ridiculous.

She started squirming, feeling a bit weird about Jay holding her so close.

"Stop trying to float away. You aren't going anywhere until you've got proper footwear on. If you miss grabbing the riggings, you could fly out in space and die."

"My death didn't seem to concern you much earlier. Besides, isn't that what the magshield's for?"

"The shield keeps a comfortable atmosphere around the ship, but it's permeable to objects of significant mass. And you'll get spacesick if you keep bouncing around. I don't want you throwing up on *Pandora*. Just took her through a shipwash before this mission."

She envisioned orbs of puke floating around his captain's hat.

"What kind of shoes should I give her?" asked Keiko.

"Well she certainly doesn't need Nebulae heels."

Keiko laughed. "We can't all appreciate the finer things in life, Captain. I think I have those ugly boots I wore during our mission to the Eridanus swamps. Let me go search my closet." She walked towards her cabin connected to the main deck.

"Wow, really big of you, Keiko. Maybe you can give me a Nebulae kimono to go with my swamp boots and we can be best friends."

Jay took Ara off guard, spinning her abruptly so she faced him. His eyes were an intense shade of greenish-blue. She diverted her gaze, but he pulled her in sharply.

"Keiko's doing you a favor. Magshoes are expensive. She's just downplaying it so you don't feel bad she's giving you a four-hundred pi pair of boots. Now when she comes back, you will apologize."

Ara didn't like being told what to do. "She's being condescending. I can say the words, but that doesn't mean I'm sincere."

"Well, it's a start. At least try to be a better liar."

Keiko emerged from her room, holding a shoebox. "Here you go, Ara. I hope they fit your feet well."

"Thank you. I'm sorry for my lack of manners, and I appreciate you helping me stay grounded." She forced a smile.

"Oh, it's okay. Let me know if there's anything else you need."

Ara put on the magboots. They were a little big on her feet, but not as bad as Naphtali's. How in the universe does Keiko walk in magheels? She had to admit she was slightly impressed.

"Jaden, I think I've figured out a clue on the Hydra void map."

"Excellent. Let's go inside my cabin and look it over." Jay lightly touched Keiko on the back and guided her up the steps to the quarterdeck.

Ara walked towards the bow of *Pandora* and was quickly intercepted by Ginger. She looked animated. "I heard everything. I think you made the princess cry. Good job! That girl needs to come down off her high throne, and what's up with you and Jay?" Ginger smiled, nudging her. "I saw how close he was holding you. Isn't he handsome? I mean in a roguish, scoundrel sort of way. He should do something with his hair. It's a wonder he can see to navigate with it all in his face like that."

"Doesn't he use autocaptain?"

"Sometimes, but Jay's old-fashioned. Still wears that stupid compass around his neck. Even though the helm's got autocaptain, he's adamant you can't always trust it and if you try to argue with him, he'll start telling long stories about getting lost in space due to computer glitches and what not. In case you haven't noticed, Jay likes being in control. It's just easier to do your turn at the helm so he doesn't get all moody. He'll probably put you on helm duty soon."

"But I don't have my captain's license."

"Neither do I. Only got my skipper's. You're fine as long as there's a captain on board. We just won't have you at the helm when we port. The guard ain't watching that closely anyways. Helm duty's not so bad. There's a universal positioning screen on the helm that's connected back to the main computer in the captain's cabin. All you have to do is follow the course Jay programs in. Sometimes he lets the autocaptain take over if he wants everyone in his office for a meeting or on special occasions."

"What would be a special occasion?"

"For Jay? Anything involving decent-looking women." Ginger had that fiery look in her eyes. "I'm telling you, I think he likes you. He looks at you different than he does other girls, and I've seen Jay look at a lot of girls. He's got restless eyes, but when he sees you, they stop a bit. It's ever so slight. You intrigue him, Ara, and that's mighty hard to do."

"It's my stone that intrigues him. There's not a photon's chance in the shadows we'd end up together. Keiko can have him." Ara felt uncomfortable with Ginger's speculations. Jay wasn't hideous looking, she'd give him that, but he tried to kill her. Good thing Ginger was easily distracted as long as you kept her talking. "So you're *Pandora*'s mechanic."

"Yep, I grew up on a farm. My dad taught me how to fix all sorts of things. I think it's kinda fun, like a giant puzzle. Just gotta arrange the pieces so the picture makes sense. Speaking of which, I need to check some riggings. Come on up with me. The UPS has us passing planet Lesath soon. We should get a nice view." Ginger adeptly climbed the shroud of the foremast, stopping periodically to check the lines and shackles holding the solar sails in place.

"Does your dad still have the farm?"

"Oh, well it's still in the family, but my mom runs it now. My dad died in the Void War. He joined the Army right before it began. Crops hadn't grown well in a few years and the Army offered a steady paycheck."

"I'm sorry." Ara wasn't sure what to say. There was never an easy way to respond to death.

"It's okay. Dad died over four years ago. Death's like a tree. A fruit falls off, leaves seeds in the ground, winter comes, and then there's the spring. More fruit's always growing. His Qi's probably in a new shell by now. The best way to honor him is to live my life in a meaningful way. That's what Dad would've wanted anyways."

"What's your meaning?" Ara stood on the fore yard, leaning against the mast. She gazed out, watching *Pandora* approach a little blue dot. It looked so small and insignificant, swallowed by the black blanket around it. That must be planet Lesath, she thought.

"To take care of my family. I've got my mom and three brothers to help support. She refuses to give up the farm. Typical O'Connors, we don't know when to quit. It's been in the family a long time. I think if my mom lost it, she'd croak. She didn't handle my dad's passing well. What about you? What's your meaning?"

She had no idea, other than the darkstone, but would All make someone whose purpose was to destroy? Well there are some things that should be destroyed, she thought. Destruction is natural, like fruit falling from a tree.

"Ara?"

"I'm not sure. I envy you've found yours."

"Oh, don't worry. You'll find it. We've all got one. Hey, we've gotta check the fore topgallant sail. Come on." Ginger climbed up the shroud to the middle yard.

"Okay." Ara followed, not quite so adept at navigating the rope ladders. "How do these sails work in space?"

Ginger crawled onto the fore top yard and started inching her body towards the end. "All skyships use sails to travel throughout the heliosphere. The sails catch solar radiation and laser beams from available moon stations. Once we sail farther into the dark ocean, we can vortex."

"Like a whirlpool in water?"

"Yeah, kinda like that." Ginger began loosening a knot. "Hybrid ships have stronger magshields, more sails, and dual engines that can produce gravity and antigravity. Burns a lot of neutrinos, so space environmentalists hate them, but on the plus side you can travel to the far reaches of the universe. The dual engine first creates gravity, causing a vortex to form in space. As more gravity's generated, the ship spirals deeper into the vortex until the gravity is strong enough to attract the tendrils of a black hole in hyperspace."

"Hyperspace. The space outside of space, right?"

"Yep. It's pretty hard to describe because we can't actually see or touch it. Our shells would be annihilated if we did. Hyperspace is the Holy Order's realm, the fifth dimension. The vortex tunnels into hyperspace by stretching the fabric of spacetime around us, so we're still protected by the open dimensions while moving through the fifth."

Ara wondered how her darkstone gave her safe passage through the fifth dimension every time she warped. Maybe it worked similar to the vortex. She started seeing flashes of Marvin in the Endless but quickly brought herself back to *Pandora's* mast.

Ginger had finished tightening the knot and scooted to the other end of the fore top yard. "So once our vortex fuses with the black hole tendrils, the antigravity engine kicks in, opening the tunnel that allows us passage to our destination sector. We're essentially taking a shortcut through the fabric of spacetime. Cool, huh?"

"More like stabbing a hole in it. Isn't antigravity the same thing as dark energy?"

"Yeah, but since dark energy has a negative connotation thanks to some Numists, hybrid ship makers call it antigravity instead. That's the cost of space travel. I don't really believe those doomsday Numists anyway. 'Dark energy's gonna rip apart the universe because we're not following the order.' Come on! There's more than enough gravity out there, even with our increased neutrino use."

Ginger moved up the shroud to the fore topgallant yard and tugged at the riggings. "Gotta make sure everything's tied down tight before we vortex. The magshield will stay up, but we've lost a sail before. Things can shift a bit when the engine switches the ratio of gravity to antigravity. Jay has us all stay inside till we exit. He gets real paranoid when vortexing. I think these are tight enough."

"He lets the autocaptain take over?" Ara panted, struggling to keep up with Ginger as she moved like a monkey down the mast. She supposed she could warp, but she wanted the exercise.

"Nope, he takes the helm the whole time. Man's got trust issues." Ginger jumped down to the main deck. "I think he had a bad experience in a vortex during the Void War. Doesn't talk about it though, just my theory. Anyways, now's a good time for you to get an official tour of my garden." She grabbed Ara's hand, tugging her towards the main deck's entrance to the stardome.

Ara felt like a new puppy, but she believed Ginger meant well. She was just excited to have a female on board she could talk to. Keiko probably thought she was too good for Ginger.

"You know, Jay's quaint about a lot of things. It's kinda cute."

Ara tried not to visually roll her eyes. Ginger had the O'Connors pegged pretty well. They didn't know when to quit.

"He fights with a sword even though Sid's offered to buy him a gun on the black market, and he loves old movies on a television screen. Who watches TV when you can have HV? Holovision is way cooler if ya ask me. The total immersion experience," said Ginger, waving her hands. "He has a big-screen in his office, but Jay says he only got it to prevent mutiny on the ship." She walked inside the second floor of the stardome. "After all, you can't watch fluxball on a TV."

"Go Lions!" yelled Hawk from the main garden below.

“Gary Jackson couldn’t find a black hole beyond the event horizon.” Ginger grinned, taking out shears from her back pocket.

“Whose kicker got the Heisenberg Trophy last year?”

“Well ... the Lions,” mumbled Ginger, pruning a plant.

“What’s that? I couldn’t hear you all the way down here.” Hawk emerged from his lab on the first floor, cupping his hand to his ear.

“Lions, but that was a total fluke. Given enough time even monkeys could write a symphony.”

“And the Devils could win a Universal Cup.”

“Arghhh!” Ginger’s face started to match her hair. She tossed her shears into the air and climbed down to the main floor of the garden, ready for battle.

Ara followed Ginger down the ladder in anticipation. It was like Wyatt and Earl without the six-shooters.

“The Lions didn’t even make it out of the Fire league this year. Got beat by a void team – how embarrassing. The Devils, on the other hand, conquered the Ophiuchus Vipers to take the Rock league championship.” Ginger began checking hydroponic pipe systems around the roots of the larger trees living on the main level of the stardome. Hydroponic gardening didn’t use soil and conserved water better than conventional gardening, making it the preferred method for space gardens. It also grew plants twice as fast.

“I’ll bet you ten pi the Twins beat the Devils in the semifinals.” Hawk stepped into his lab underneath the top floor of the stardome. It contained a refrigerator, microscope, rat cages, table, cot, and a bunch of scientific equipment Ara didn’t know the names of.

“You’re on! It’ll definitely be the Devils versus Dragons at this year’s Universal Cup.”

“What are you working on over there, Dr. Hawk?” Ara watched him cut a leaf off a plant and place it onto a microscope slide.

“A drug that sedates PM paralysis patients during night terrors. Right now there’s nothing that works. This plant, the Jasmina ivy, has incredible sedation properties. I’m hoping I can augment its effects by mixing it with the Victoria vine, which is what Devils athletes use illegally before games to increase their adrenaline.”

“O’Leary was never caught with victory juice.” Ginger was checking tomatoes on the other side of the garden, but her ears seemed tuned in to anything involving fluxball. “It was all a misunderstanding fueled on by the media, which is largely controlled by Victor Medina, owner of UNN and the Taurus Bulls. Coincidence? I think not.”

“The head of the UFL didn’t seem to think so. I believe Samuel O’Leary’s name was removed from the Fluxball Hall of Fame.”

“That drug would be huge, wouldn’t it?” asked Ara before Ginger could think of a comeback. “I’ve seen deaths caused by night terrors.”

“Yes, every major pharmaceutical company would be banging down my door. It’s a start, but nowhere near my final goal of curing PM paralysis.”

“You’d sell more books than Dr. Avery.”

“Don’t get me started on her Awakened Mind support groups.”

“Isn’t Dr. Avery supposed to be the universal self-help guru?”

“I watch *Robin*,” said Ginger. “She has good guests on her talk show.”

“Pop psychology for the masses doesn’t make it scientifically valid. She didn’t go to Panthera Medical School.”

“Or Ophi.” Sid walked in from the door on the galley deck connecting the stardome to the galley, bathrooms, and four lower deck berths. He was like a male version of Keiko but dressed in a preppy style. His sweater had a small N logo on it, probably for Nebulae, thought Ara.

“You dropped out of Ophi,” said Ginger.

“The classes bored me. I need to be challenged.”

“It’s the best overall university, but Panthera outranks them in biochemical studies.”

“I’m guessing you went to Panthera,” said Ara.

Hawk nodded.

"So Doc, I've been going over our budget," said Sid. "I think your cut of the profits from this mission should give you enough to buy some more rats and that new centrifuge you've been wanting."

Hawk looked over at his empty multistory rat cage system. It was actually several cages connected by tunnels and partitions he could slide in and out.

"What happened to your rats?" asked Ara.

"They killed each other. I gave them enough *panaceas majoris* to induce PM paralysis, and they exhibited similar violent behavior to people having night terrors. I was hoping my sedation formula would work, but as you can see the experiment failed."

"There wasn't even a last rat standing?"

"Self-deleted. Cut his head off on the wheel."

Ara cringed. "I never knew rats could dream."

"Research shows that animals, particularly mammals, dream to organize information in the unconscious."

"Do they float around the cage?" Ara laughed, imagining rats trying to function in zero gravity.

"I've got magcollars for them." Hawk opened his fridge, pulling out a bottle labeled V-juice. "This is good news, Sid. It'll help speed up my research. The old centrifuge isn't spinning samples like it used to. I also need more water hemlock. Do you think we can find these in Hydra?"

"Next to Pan's Palace and Snake Charmer, I doubt it, but probably on the black market we can find what you need, at least with the poison. I'll make some contacts once we dock."

"Snake Charmer? The words *snake* and *charm* don't really go together, do they?" Ara picked an apple off a nearby tree.

"Oh they do on Hydra." Sid grinned. "It's an exclusive nightclub that has some of the most exotic women in the universe."

"That dance with snakes," said Hawk.

"They are very talented."

Ginger shook her head. "They don't have guys that dance with snakes. It's not fair."

"Supply and demand, Red," said Sid. "More men travel to Hydra."

"Speaking of travel, do you think we're going in the right direction?" Ginger stared out the stardome's geodesic encasement into the vastness of space.

"Who knows." Sid shrugged his shoulders, pushing back a strand of his curly brown hair. "Voiders keep moving the ports because they're paranoid about the clusters impinging on their freedoms, plus they make good profits selling updated maps. We're sure they hid it in this galaxy?"

"Keiko's pretty good with maps," said Hawk. "She went over the clues multiple times and said this was the best explanation."

"She's been in the captain's cabin for quite some time working on the last clue." Ginger had that fiery look in her eyes again.

Sid grinned. "Clues aren't the only thing they're uncovering."

"She sure knows how to spin his compass."

"Ugh, you two, Keiko's not like that," said Hawk. "She's a sophisticated Mori princess."

"Who ran away from Prism Palace to join a crew of pirates. Real classy. But you know, I think Jay has a thing for Ara." Ginger looked like she'd just found the juiciest piece of fruit in her garden.

"Really?" asked Sid.

"Well he was holding her pretty close today and Keiko looked super jealous. She stomped her crazy-expensive Nebulae heels all the way back to her cabin."

"He was gripping me so I wouldn't throw up on his precious skyship. Sorry to burst your soap-opera-in-space bubble."

"Keiko doesn't stomp. She glides." Hawk moved his hand through the ivy.

Ginger and Sid rolled their eyes dramatically.

"I'd walk the plank again before coupling with a man who tried to kill me." That seemed to end the conversation.

"Saiph sent me to get you, Doc. He's hooked up *Universal Smackdown III* in his berth. Ready to have my gladiator whoop your T-Rex? I've doubled his level while you've been playing with your plants."

Hawk was pouring the V-juice in with ethanol to make a tincture, adding an extract from the leaf of the *Jasmina* ivy. "There's not much I can do until I get more rats anyway." He put his concoction in the fridge and left the garden with Sid, discussing gaming strategies.

"Guys and their video games, although *Smackdown III* is a bit addicting. I've got a killer stegosaurus that can beat Saiph's Orion gladiator. He gets so pissed off. It's hilarious." Ginger climbed the ladder, signaling Ara to follow. "Okay, so now I'll show you the rest of my garden. My prettiest flowers and herbs are up here. Most of the other edible stuff, trees, and Hawk's research plants are on the main level. These are my award-winning orchids. I once won the exotic plant contest at my home planet's fair..."

Ara half paid attention. She finished the last bite of her apple, shoving the core into a nearby trash can. She remembered to close the lid so the trash wouldn't float around the room. Her mind drifted to the Brotherhood, wondering what they were doing. Would they come after her and try to force her back to Qi channeling, or worse, delete her? What was the point of getting the stone in the first place? It obviously didn't work the way they intended it to. Maybe it couldn't even destroy dimensions anymore. She felt inside her pocket. The darkstone wasn't there. She tried again, searching the other pocket just in case ... nothing. She must have lost it while floating around the ship. Her stone may have destructive tendencies, but it had kept her alive. She began to feel an intense anxiety, like she was missing an important part of herself. "Ginger, I'm sorry. I think I'm getting spacesick. See you at dinner later."

"Oh, okay." Ginger looked a little disappointed. "Here, try mixing these peppermint leaves in tea. We've got some down in the galley. It should help calm your stomach."

"Thanks." She caught the floating peppermint Ginger tossed her way and exited the garden to begin her search. *Pandora* was a three-masted galleon with the stardome located by the bow of the skyship. The foremast went through the dome, its sails rising over the encasement. She looked back to see Ginger busying herself with her herbs, then started roaming the main deck. Isis was vigilantly keeping watch in the crow's nest. She climbed up the mainmast's shroud but saw no trace of her darkstone. She imagined her stone would float like any other object with mass that wasn't tacked down, wearing magshoes, or otherwise contained. What if it went outside the magshield? Was it massive enough to permeate the shield?

She headed towards *Pandora*'s stern, ascending the stairs to the quarterdeck. Jay was navigating at the helm. She tried to be nonchalant about looking for her stone. The darkstone's the only reason I'm on *Pandora*. If I can't find it, where will I go? I'm certainly not going to be a Hydra snake dancer.

She passed the mizzenmast, climbing the ladder to search the high deck. This deck was at the very back of the ship on top of the captain's cabin.

Jay turned around and leaned against the helm. "What are you doing all the way up there?"

"Oh, just enjoying the view."

"Of outer space? There's nothing to see."

"Well some of us appreciate All's vastness." Ara turned on a lantern to help illuminate the deck.

Maybe the darkstone wanted to leave me. After all, I failed to bring back the Qi, and Simeon said the stone chooses its mason. It might want a more competent mason.

No luck. She climbed down the ladder and descended the quarterdeck's stairs, quickly passing Jay before he could think of any smart-alec remarks. She lifted the hatch on the main deck to go below to the galley where Ginger, Saiph, Sid, and Hawk's cabins were located.

Ara carefully stepped down the narrow spiral staircase. It had no railing so the crew could hop off at the galley or continue down another level to the cargo hold. It also allowed access to the very bottom of the ship's hull where the engine compartment was housed. Ara entered the galley and placed the peppermint leaves inside the refrigerator. She searched around the tables and cabinets, thinking maybe it got pushed down when one of the crew opened the hatch. Nothing.

She went back to her berth, frustrated at herself. Tired from searching, she crawled into her bunk, waking a few hours later to Ginger's tacky cow alarm clock mooing. It wasn't morning, was it? Wait. I'm in space. Day and night are irrelevant here. Really can throw off your sleep cycle, she thought groggily.

She floated out of bed, checking the lower bunk for Ginger. She wasn't there, but she guessed at some point the Rua had come in because a *Qi Informer* magazine was drifting lazily around the room.

Ara rummaged through the closet and hamper, hoping her darkstone had slipped out when she'd changed into the clothes Ginger was letting her borrow. She searched the pockets of her dirty outback pants. Still nothing.

"This is a lost cause." She tossed the pants, watching them float around with the other clothes she'd emptied from the hamper. I'm gonna have to tell the crew. She rehearsed "what if" scenarios in her mind, imagining how they'd react.

A knock at the door jolted her out of her catastrophic thoughts. "Who is it?"

"It's Keiko. Can I come in, please?"

Great. What does she want? Ara put on her magboots and opened the door.

Keiko smiled politely and walked inside, trying carefully not to run into the floating articles of clothing. She pushed a T-shirt out of the way. "Sorry, I'm used to a much larger cabin."

Way to rub it in, Keiko. Ara snatched up the clothes and began placing them back inside the hamper. Keiko's room was above the galley deck berths. It was a large sleeping cabin underneath the quarterdeck and adjacent to the main deck. Jay's berth was also on that level, but it could only be accessed from the interior door of his cabin on the quarterdeck. They probably both have their own bathrooms, thought Ara.

"I believe you dropped this earlier." Keiko held up a gold chain and released it.

Ara's mouth gaped as she watched the necklace drift towards her. Fastened to the bottom of the chain was her darkstone.

"I took the liberty of putting it on an old necklace of mine so you wouldn't lose it again."

"Thank you." She tried to copy Keiko's introductory bow from earlier but hit her in the process. "Oh, sorry."

"That's okay. Here, let me show you. We bow like this." Keiko brought both her hands together and lightly bent down and back up in one fluid motion.

Ara tried again. It was still a bit choppy.

"It takes practice. I had a professional bow instructor."

Ara grinned. "Never seen those guys advertised in the classifieds."

"I think there's only one in the universe, maybe two. Bowing is an ancient Mori custom."

Keiko sat down on the edge of the bottom bunk and lowered her voice. "Ara, I've seen and worn many rare gems, but what you have is remarkable. There is an old legend that's been passed down by the Mori about a black pearl. It was discovered by a princess while she was trapped inside a tower. Her sisters imprisoned her there because they were jealous of her beauty. The princess waited years for her prince to come rescue her, but he never came."

"Typical."

"So the princess took her black pearl and made a wish that he would come. Instantly, the princess was taken to another dimension where she came face to face with the Chaos dragon. He breathed fire all around her, protecting his treasures, but the princess didn't try to slay Chaos. Instead she stood bravely, offering the dragon the only treasure she had – her black pearl. The pearl disappeared and Chaos was transformed into a handsome prince, lifting the terrible curse he'd borne since existence. Moved by the princess's sacrifice, the prince embraced her. As they kissed, the two were transported to a beautiful garden with dirt made of gold dust and sparkling gems growing from trees. 'Where are we?' asked the princess. 'My kingdom, Utopia,' said the prince. Some say they still reign over the kingdom, waiting for others to escape their towers, understand their dragons, and discover Utopia."

"Well I'm certainly no princess. Did you feel my pearl's energy?"

"No, just a coldness. I may have the title princess, but all that means is my Qi was born into a family that believes in such titles. It's a word I've honestly grown to despise and chosen to run from. I want to determine my own destiny, not have a title determine it for me."

"So we're both runners, only you can run in heels." Ara smiled, grabbing her floating necklace.

Keiko grinned. "I think boots are better."

Chapter 16

14A, Year 3018 – 16 years earlier
Ariad, Bode
Galaxy 6, Coma void

It was a quiet day at Sandman Sanctuary, at least for now. Nurse Devi Knight was doing her daily rounds. Her crisp white uniform and neatly cropped hairstyle were in stark contrast to the disheveled appearance of the patients around her. Devi was a Leo in her late thirties who had been working at the sanctuary since she was twenty-two years old, fresh out of nursing school. It was a difficult job that had a hard time keeping staff due to the dangerous nature of caring for patients with PM paralysis.

Sandman Sanctuary was on the rundown shanty planet of Bode in the Coma void. Other sanctuaries in the universe, such as Sweet Dreams, were in much nicer locations. Sweet Dreams was a chain of private facilities run by the universe-renowned addiction psychiatrist Dr. Robin Avery, but it only catered to addicts with money. Sandman was one of many overcrowded and unhygienic sanctuaries where the universe dumped its poor.

Devi continued her rounds, checking IVs of patients lying paralyzed on mattresses. Most of the time patients would stay in sleep paralysis with their eyes open, a vacant gaze staring into their surroundings, but at random times they'd slip into night terrors, attacking anything and everything around them with no idea they were doing it.

Due to multiple deaths of patients and staff during night terrors, many Sandman employees had signed a petition demanding patients be strapped to the beds at all times. They went on strike, causing a massive staffing crisis in an already understaffed sanctuary. However, UL 46-17, which dictates patient's rights, stated that patients could not be restrained against their will unless they became a threat to themselves or others.

That's fine for Sweet Dreams, which is well-staffed and gives each patient a private padded room, but it doesn't fare well at Sandman, thought Devi. Patients were jam-packed inside rooms with an average of ten per room. Fluorescent lights littered with dead bugs hung precariously from the ceilings. The walls were pocketed with scratch marks and peeling paint. Devi couldn't remember the last time a maintenance team had come through her ward. The only comfort these patients had were flimsy mattresses stained and torn from years of use.

The stench of urine and feces was strong as she quickly changed a bedpan. It was too much work. There wasn't enough staff to meet the needs of the thousands of patients in the sanctuary, between keeping up with IVs, bedpans, and eye drop applications, not to mention night terror control.

At times Devi questioned why she stayed. She'd been offered better, higher-paying jobs at hospitals back in Leo. Everyone knew the worst cases were sent out to the Coma void, but she felt sorry for these patients. Most had been abandoned by their families.

Devi thought about her grandfather on Leo who had raised her. He'd tell Devi that PM gave him control over his night demons, but eventually he lost that control, flinging himself out a window during a night terror. It was a horrible drug, luring its victims in with the promise of living a dream.

At least Grandpa was able to end his terror, thought Devi. These patients are dying a slow, painful death. Animals are given more humane treatment. When they get to the point where the intensity of pain outweighs the quality of life, we put them out of their misery because it's the kindest thing to do – a selfless act to relieve their suffering.

That's what I'm doing, my small part to help these patients die with the little bit of dignity they have left. It's why the Commissioner felt I could be entrusted with this task. He sees how much I suffer watching them slowly waste away. He understands how painful empathy can be. It would be so much easier if I just didn't care.

Psi El Kali had befriended Devi during his visits to Sandman Sanctuary. Not many priests bothered coming out to Sandman, but Psi Kali cared about these forgotten people. Slowly Devi confessed to him her intentions of assisting Qi to the fifth dimension. She was surprised that instead of judging her, he agreed, referring to her as a true healer, for she knew when it was time to call upon the healing

power of the higher dimensions. He then showed her a beautiful black pearl that radiated a strong energy throughout her body.

“Devi,” he had told her, “with this pearl you can help Qi journey to a better place where they won’t have to suffer anymore. I am forming a Commission of other people like you who can understand what has become of our universe. We are special, Devi. Not many people can see beyond the illusions of life towards the final reality of existence. By taking on the burden of people’s Qi inside your stone, you will eventually turn this pearl pure white. Then we can create a portal to a new dimension without disease. Together, we can stop this nightmare.”

Devi twirled her black pearl necklace, feeling its energy race through her body like lightning bolts beneath the skin. “All, give me the strength to help relieve Qi of their suffering.”

She leaned over to put drops in a patient’s eye, seeing his pupil suddenly dilate.

The patient jumped up. “The end is near! There is nothing we can do to escape the Shadows. Everything is dark. All the lights are out. I will put on the lights. Yes, let me flick the switch. On, off, on, off, on, off...” He rocked back and forth on the floor, a look of sheer terror on his face. “On, off, on, off, on, off...”

A small tear formed in the corner of Devi’s eye. No one should live stuck in their nightmares. This man had been sent here to die.

“On, off, on, off, on—”

“Off.” She inserted a needle into his arm. “Now you can finally be at peace. Goodnight.”

His Qi flowed into her pearl, shifting the color like the Commissioner said it would. He was a very wise priest. She felt a sense of relief, a small burden lifting from her shoulders.

She looked around at the other patients paralyzed on their mattresses. She still had to clean their bedpans and put in eye drops. For what? So the government could take her tax dollars to keep them lingering on living half-lives. These weren’t people. They were ruins, empty shells. She grabbed a patient’s neck and squeezed. He didn’t even try to fight, eyes open and vacant till the Qi left his shell. She choked another, smelling the woman defecate on herself. No one would question it. She could say a night terror patient got out of control and choked them, she thought as she strangled the next patient with a moldy pillow, rehearsing her speech. “I had to poison him to protect myself,” she whispered. “Look what he did to these other patients.” Of course they’ll believe me, she thought, squeezing the life out of another. I’m the hardest-working nurse here, and we’re allowed to delete in self-defense. Before she knew it, she had freed ten patients from their nightmares. Ten less bedpans to clean. Tomorrow the government would dump ten more ruins here, but she’d find a way to help them. That was her job, and she always did her job.

Chapter 17

“Between the planet of the night that dances with the dawn; next to an ancient starry light till heaven stole her song.” Jay repeated the void map’s clues to his crew.

They were all sitting around his cabin waiting for the fluxball semifinals match to begin. Ginger and Sid had brought in space cushions to make the cabin more comfortable. The cushions were bubble-like seats that suctioned to the floor. An episode of *Skyship Styles* was playing in the background with a man looking really excited about his newly renovated tropical-themed cabin. “Now I can relax in space,” he said, leaning against a palm tree.

Sid sank into his space cushion. “Maybe that’s what you need, Captain. Ginger and I could add a few plants to your office. A small hydroponic system would be cheap.”

“No, what I need is for this void map to speak plain Qiani. Head starboard at planet X and port at star Y. The poetry isn’t even good.”

“They don’t want just anyone finding them. They’re terrified the Zodiacs will try to force them back into the universal government.”

“I know, Ara. I fought for secession in the Void War, but this exclusive isolation thing is getting ridiculous. They’re creating the very thing we were fighting to stop – slavery and dehydration.”

“Well we aren’t going to solve the problems of the universe tonight, so let’s concentrate on what we can solve,” said Hawk. “Keiko, what do you think about these clues?”

“Shalim was a god of dusk in ancient mythology. There’s a story where Shalim, lonely by himself in the dark sky, makes Shahar, meaning dawn, so he could have a companion. The two dance back and forth, creating the day and night. Shalim and Shahar are planets in Arm B of Scorpio Galaxy 8343, so I think we’re on track.” Keiko held up her paper-thin electronic map. It was flexible with a holographic screen projecting the topography of space. “The unigraphical patterns on the void map have matched my UPS coordinates so far, but we need to solve this final clue to narrow down the sector. We should be grateful there’s a void port close to the galactic region where our merchandise collection point was located. Remember how far our last delivery was?”

“Ugh, that was a nightmare. On the complete opposite side of the supermassive black hole, which we can’t vortex around. Ended up having to backtrack and reroute. The Coma void was really depressing, and it smelled funny.” Ginger rubbed her nose, recalling the scent of rotting mushrooms. “Hope we never have to do a drop there again. Maybe it’s better on the more populated planets.”

“I did get some unusual species of plants to experiment with.”

“Are all planets named after figures from mythology?” asked Ara.

“No, but many are. They say the majority of our myths came from the origin planet. The Mori take myths seriously. We believe they teach us deep truths.”

“Keiko, we’re on course to vortex, but the planets are in two different heliospheres. I need to know which black hole to direct the vortex to. The only thing mythology’s good for is interpreting these stupid maps. Now what’s this ancient starry light business?”

“I’m not sure, Jaden. I’m trying to go through my history and mythology books, but so far I can’t give you a good decipher.”

“Are we lost?”

“No Red, we’re heading to the interstellar medium. I know we’re on the right side of the galaxy this time. We’re at least in the general area. I just need more details.”

“General can be a large area in space.” Saiph sat in the corner with Isis perched on his arm. The falcon was dressed in some type of hideous green costume.

“Thank you, Saiph, for that enlightening remark.”

Jay sure can be moody, thought Ara, but Saiph didn’t appear fazed by Captain Hood’s curt reply.

“Hey, the game’s starting.” Ginger grabbed the remote and turned up the holovision’s volume.

“Welcome to the Rock-Air Fluxball Semifinals. The winner will go on to play the Fornax Dragons in this year’s Universal Cup,” stated the enthusiastic sports announcer. “It’s a beautiful day at Twin Stadium here in Gemini and...”

Ara had to admit watching this on the holographic screen was pretty cool. She almost felt like she was at Twin Stadium. Why Jay liked 2D movies was beyond her.

"The crowd looks ready for some flux. Both the Gemini Twins and Capricorn Devils have had a strong year. Who will be champion?" The cameras scanned to the stadium littered with glowing Devils pitchforks and people dressed as the Yin-Yang twins, Gemini's beloved mascot.

Sid had purchased a case of Comet Space beer, specifically brewed for microgravity conditions. "I've been saving this for tonight's match."

Everyone except Jay got excited and began opening bottles. Jay remained at his desk, leafing through a book entitled *Scorpio Unigraphical Series: Galaxy 8343*.

Sid poured a small amount of beer out of the bottle. The beer formed an amber carbonated orb. He sucked the floating orb into his mouth, a look of sheer contentment on his face. "Beer always tastes better in space."

Ara watched the game for a while but didn't completely understand what was happening. "Could someone please explain the rules of fluxball so I won't be so clueless?"

"Don't worry. Jay's clueless too."

Jay shot Sid the evil eye.

"Here are the basics. There are four leagues that fall under the UFL: Water, Fire, Rock, and Air. Each league has four teams. The Water league has the Scorpio Stingers, Cancer Claws, Eridanus Gators, and one of the best teams in the UFL, the Pisces Sharks."

"They didn't bite very hard this year." Ginger grinned, poking Sid's Sharks jersey with her pitchfork.

"They had some injured players. The Fire league has the Leo Lions..."

Hawk pushed a button on his stuffed Lion, causing it to roar.

"Aries Rams, Sagittarius Assassins, and Fornax Dragons."

Saiph pulled out a Dragons lighter that released flames from its mouth.

Oh, so that's what Isis is supposed to be dressed as, thought Ara. Poor falcon.

"The Taurus Bulls, Capricorn Devils..."

"Woohoo!" Ginger pumped her pitchfork in the air.

"Virgo Saints and Ophiuchus Vipers are on the Rock league, and the Gemini Twins..."

Keiko subtly unfolded a paper fan with a picture of the Yin-Yang twins on it, one on each side.

"Libra Judges, Aquarius Tsunamis, and Coma Nightmares make up the Air league."

"Four leagues and four teams in each league," said Ara.

"That's right. Each league plays a series of games to determine who'll be its champion," said Ginger. "This year the Devils won the Rock league championships. Then the teams are matched together for the semifinals, and the winners go on to battle it out in the Universal Cup."

"Makes sense. This isn't so hard to understand."

"Wait till you hear the ridiculous rules."

"Oh hush. Look, the cheerleaders." Ginger pointed towards the holovision screen as several girls simultaneously jumped into the splits.

Jay briefly glanced up, but the flexible cheerleaders couldn't sustain his attention. The mission always came first.

"There are three main parts of the fluxball court: the outershell, innershell, and nucleus," said Hawk. "The outershell is divided into eight octants, four on each side. The home team always has Side A. In the middle of the outershell is the event horizon around the black hole. When the ball comes into play, the kickers try to get the ball into the black hole. One of the players on each side stays on defense, guarding the event horizon, but no player's allowed to go inside the event horizon. If they do, the other team automatically gets a point."

"Who starts the ball in play?" asked Ara, trying to catch a beer orb.

"The referee starts the fluxer, which rapidly spins the ball underneath the outershell. The ball can pop out of a small hole in any one of the eight octants. You have six kickers, three on each side, so two holes are open to whoever gets there first."

"What about the innershell?"

"Once the ball's kicked in the black hole, it gets sucked up a small tunnel to the innershell court. There are two shooters up there, one for each team. Their objective's to catch the ball as it pops out of the white hole and throw it into the nucleus. If the shooter makes the ball through the nucleus, the team scores, dubbed a 'hit.' Then the ball goes back in flux."

Ara looked confused by Hawk's explanation. "What's the point of Team A or B getting it in the black hole if it's just gonna pop out of the white hole for either shooter to grab?"

"The black hole's divided into two sides, so if Team B kicks the ball into the black hole on their side, the ball gets sucked up to their white hole. Shooter A has to stay on his side of the court till B takes a shot. If he misses, the ball goes into free play till the nucleus is hit. A lot of injuries happen in the innershell because shooters can tackle each other for the ball."

"So shooters are the most important players?"

"Well they normally win most valuable player, which means more pi and endorsement deals," said Ginger, sucking another orb in her mouth. "The Devils shooter Brady O'Malley is the guy on all those milk commercials. I think he's gonna hit the nucleus."

"Not just shooters. Gary Jackson drinks Shift," said Hawk, repeating the popular ad. "He's one of the top kickers in the UFL."

"Yes! Big bang O'Malley." Ginger punched her pitchfork in the air. "Looks like someone's gonna owe me some pi."

"It's still early," said Hawk.

"And O'Malley gets a hit, bringing the score to three-one as we go into half-time. Can the Twins catch up to the Devils? Stay tuned for the second half of the Rock-Air semifinals."

"The Twins will come back," said Hawk, grinning at Keiko. "They're just lying low until the time's right to make their move."

Keiko fanned herself lightly. "Ichiro Kwan's a great shooter, but we need our kickers to work harder. I have faith it'll all work out in the end."

Ginger scowled, catching another beer orb in her mouth.

"'Next to an ancient starry light till heaven stole her song.' What the dark does that mean?" Jay was obsessed.

"Captain, a beer just floated by you." Sid shook his head, popping open another bottle.

Jay ignored him, continuing to flip through his map book.

The announcer came back onscreen. "We have a great half-time show for you tonight. SuperNova will be performing."

"Oh snap, I love him!" Ginger looked more excited than when O'Malley scored.

"Who's SuperNova?"

Everyone stared at Ara like she had three heads.

Captain Hood even glanced up from his book. "You really don't get out much, do you? He's that hip-hop artist always rapping about cruising in his skyship, picking up women, how much pi he has."

"He has some deep lyrics," said Ginger. "You just have to understand his metaphors."

"I like that song 'Explode.' It's catchy and about violence." Saiph was trying to tie his falcon's dragon outfit back in place after Isis managed to peck loose one of the strings.

"It's not about violence. SuperNova's talking about exploding into who you're supposed to be as a person, shedding your old self to become someone new."

Jay laughed. "That explains why women are shedding their clothes in his music video. Thanks for clarifying, Red."

"It's symbolic, like peeling the layers of an onion."

"I'm not complaining. You gals keep on exploding. I'll be there to support you in your self-exploration."

Ara shook her head. "Aren't you supposed to be focusing on the maps?"

Jay grinned mischievously and went back to his book.

"I've heard SuperNova's gonna be collaborating with Shady Star for an upcoming album," said Ginger. "Wouldn't that be something?"

Hawk poured more beer. "I thought they hated each other."

"They've had some artistic differences, but most of the drama's just hype to sell albums," said Sid.

"I dunno. Shady Star was caught with SuperNova's girl at the Aurora Hotel in Cancer. According to the *Qi Informer*, he was seen leaving the hotel at—"

“‘Next to an ancient starry light till heaven stole her song.’ When a large star dies, it violently implodes on itself – a supernova,” said Saiph. He remained in his corner, calmly petting Isis. She was still protesting her dragon costume.

“Never underestimate an Orion,” said Jay. “Keiko, are there any nebulae in the sector between Shalim and Shahar that came from a supernova?”

“Let me look in the library. I’ve got a book on supernova remnants.” She rose from her space cushion and exited through the interior door of the cabin.

“Everyone out!”

“But Jay, the game. My team’s winning. We’ve got a few days before Helio’s Wall. The clues will still be here tomorrow.”

“Not now, Red. We’re on a time crunch to get these goods to Hydra. There’s a lot of pi riding on us meeting the delivery deadline.”

There was no point in arguing with Captain Hood. He’d already turned off the holovision.

“We didn’t even get to see SuperNova.”

Sid put his arm around Ginger as they walked out of Jay’s cabin. “Wanna go play *Smackdown III*? I think I can beat your stegosaurus now.”

“Okay, but it’s not the same.”

Ara grinned. “How about some gossip?”

Ginger’s eyes lit up.

“Keiko went through Jay’s interior door. What’s up with that? Is the library in his bedroom?”

“You know, she’s the only one regularly allowed in the captain’s sleeping quarters. I’ve seen his room a few times and he does have a lot of bookshelves, so I assume that’s what she means by library. There’s no reason Keiko couldn’t keep her books in her own cabin though. It’s the largest berth on the ship, bigger than Jay’s if you don’t count his office space. I used to have that cabin but had to move out when Miss Princess came on board. I loved those quarters.” Ginger sighed. “Could keep a lot of plants in there. Jay did expand my stardome, but still, it ain’t fair. She gets whatever she wants.”

“Including Jay.”

“That’s the theory,” said Sid.

“Maybe that’s why she ran away, because she fell in love with Jay.”

“You don’t know?” Ginger looked surprised. “You really need to read *Royal Watch* or at least the *Qi Informer*. On her twenty-first birthday, Keiko was supposed to assume the throne in accordance with Mori customs. They still have that old monarchy system in Gemini. They send a senator to the Hedron, but the Mori like their royalty. For whatever reason, Keiko didn’t want the throne and bolted, leaving the uncle in charge.”

“Maybe she felt trapped.” Ara thought about being forced into doing something she didn’t want to do. She hated feeling imprisoned.

“Keiko’s parents were assassinated, and she’s their only child. It’s her duty to become queen. From what I’ve read, her uncle is corrupt and driving the Gemini cluster down the tubes. They call Keiko the ‘lost queen’ and worship her like she’s gonna be some sort of savior to her people. It’s kinda fun to read the tabloids ‘cause there’s all these rumors about what happened to her. Everything from being imprisoned by her evil uncle in the voids to being kidnapped by Scorpion outlaws. Oh, and taken by pirates of course. Apparently there’s a ninja task force that’s been sent out to search the universe for her, but we’ve never encountered these alleged ninjas.”

“Probably just information made up to sell tabloids to suckers like Ginger.”

“Hey!” Ginger jabbed Sid in the side as she emptied the last bit of beer out of her bottle. She watched the orb float around for a few seconds before popping it in her mouth. “Sometimes we have to make choices for the greater good that may not be the life we wanted. Others need us, so we sacrifice our dreams for them. Keiko’s incapable of making sacrifices.”

Maybe Ginger’s right, thought Ara. Am I being selfish running away from my duties as a mason to go on adventures with pirates? I don’t really have a family or kingdom to sacrifice my dreams for. The Brotherhood certainly isn’t a family, at least not to me. Some priests they are, voting to delete me. But the fate of the universe supposedly rests in my hands. I bet Naphtali was just being dramatic. How dumb of All to put the universe’s destiny on me or any one person.

It was quiet on deck. Everyone had retired to their cabins with the exception of Hawk, who was pulling helm duty, and Saiph, who was looking through the telescope in the crow's nest. Ara gazed into the darkness of space from the high deck, trying to empty her mind.

About an hour had passed when she saw Isis begin frantically flying between masts. The falcon squawked loudly, disrupting her meditation.

"Patrol ship, straight ahead!" shouted Saiph from the crow's nest.

"What?" Ara watched Saiph scramble down the shroud. "Wouldn't Hawk have seen them on the UPS?" She descended the ladder to the quarterdeck.

"No," said Hawk. "Universal Positioning doesn't show security skyships. This is bad. They'll probably pull us over to scan our ship, picking up your body heat. You don't by any chance have a space passport, do you?"

Ara shook her head.

"I didn't think so. They're a bureaucratic nightmare to get. When they discover you've illegally entered space, they'll do a thorough search of *Pandora*, finding our stolen neutrinos. Go get Jay and Keiko. I'll head to the berths and rally the others."

Saiph took over the helm as Hawk ran down the steps to the main deck and opened the hatch.

Ara burst into Jay's cabin, but it was empty. He's probably in his sleeping quarters, she thought, opening the interior door and descending the tight spiral staircase.

"Captain Hood, Saiph has spotted a—" Ara stopped before hitting the last step.

Jay and Keiko were by the bookshelves in the middle of a heavy embrace. Jay's shirt was off and Keiko was wearing a thin, short slip with her stilettos.

"Aries skyship, this is the Universal Guard. Please identify yourself. Over."

Chapter 18

14A, Year 3034
Sedna, Hoki
Galaxy 8, Sculptor void

It was freezing outside. Yaw had left the comfort of his home in the small village of Sedna to go check on his samples. He hoped he wouldn't have to drain any today.

A local Mori from the village greeted him. "Hi, how are you? Did you hear a blizzard might be blowing through later?"

"Uh-huh." Yaw quickly shuffled by the man. He didn't have time for small talk.

"Sir, your snow boots are unfastened." A Mori woman pointed.

"Uh-huh." Yaw briskly walked past, paying no attention. He kept doing calculations in his head, trying to figure out if he'd chosen the right chromosome to mutate.

Yaw was an average-sized Qian. Not many lived out in the Sculptor void, primarily populated by the Mori. It was a harsh environment with the habitable regions near the poles. Half of the year was mostly daylight and the other half mainly night lit up by the dancing plasma of the borealis. The village of Sedna near the southern pole was in the daylight portion of the year, so Yaw had on large wraparound shades tinted black. He wore an old fur coat, snow pants, and a crazy multicolored hat hanging low over his ears to cover his matted brown dreadlocks.

Yaw began thinking out loud. "Maybe I should look at mutating chromosome nine. That could produce some interesting results. Yes, that will be my next work of art."

"Mister, fresh fish?" A young boy at the market held up his catch of the day.

"Uh-huh," mumbled Yaw, trudging forward through the snow.

Yaw met a Rami man at the edge of Sedna. He was an older Orion assassin but no longer dressed as such. His vigilant falcon rested on his arm. It was said an Orion never gave up his falcon. When one died, he would get another. The man had finished his service in the Universal Army years ago but once an Orion, always an Orion. The Rami straddled a glider hovering slightly above the ground. Gliders could only seat two passengers, one behind another. Their compact gravity engines made them handy to navigate within cities or out in the voids where magnetic trains and skyrings didn't operate, but they couldn't go high in altitude.

"I am cold and my falcon is cold. It's tropical in Fornax. Why have you made me wait?" Being late was one of his biggest pet peeves, and Yaw knew how to push his buttons.

"Lost track of time, Sef."

Sef looked Yaw up and down, obviously not impressed. "Your boots are unhooked. Have you been smoking root again?"

Yaw bent down to fasten his boots. "Root helps me tap into the order."

Sef shook his head. Root was legal in the voids but not in the clusters. Orions had strict rules against any mind-altering substances. "Hop on. We will head to the Odin caves now."

"Some of the samples are really making progress. I think you'll be pleased, Sef."

"We shall see."

The two men rode in silence over the icy terrain. The Odin caves were situated in a remote area of planet Hoki, far removed from prying eyes. Sculptor was the only void that didn't have a high mortality rate from dehydration, but starvation was common and the living conditions were so harsh it dissuaded people from moving out to the frigid planets. Every year the news reported stories of adventure travelers freezing to death in the tundra. Other deaths were caused by ski or snowboarding accidents on the luxury resort planets. The majority of people who journeyed to Sculptor came for the winter sports, leaving Yaw and Sef's secret project in the caves of Hoki undisturbed.

The scenery was breathtaking around them. Large glaciers towered overhead as the men glided above the snow, but Yaw didn't notice. All he could think about were his samples. They were exquisite works of art. He didn't want to delete one because it wasn't Sef's idea of beauty, but he knew if it came down to it he must. That was his commission. Sacrifices needed to be made to create the perfect work of art.

Sef and Yaw descended into the cave holding a rope railing Yaw had constructed to prevent them from losing traction. It wasn't helping Yaw very much today. He was having a hard time keeping his balance, slipping and sliding along the rope. He took off his shades, revealing red and puffy eyes.

"You need to lay off the root."

"Just wait till you see my artwork."

They came to a large room in the cave covered with icicle formations. Encased all around them were cryogenic chambers containing adult humans of various lines. They were suspended inside their capsules, frozen by liquid nitrogen.

"How many samples do you have right now?"

"Twenty. I'm still waiting for you to deliver three replacements."

"I'm working on it. We're getting in a new batch of gladiators, and some won't make the cut. I'm a businessman, Yaw, and violence sells. If my gladiators are capable of fighting, I like to try them out. If they don't win and suffer a mortal blow, then I deliver another Qi to our cause." Sef pulled out a dagger and smiled. It still had dried blood on it.

Yaw cringed. "I thought the Smackdown was rigged."

"Sometimes we predetermine kills, unbeknownst to the unfortunate gladiator. Our dinosaurs are sedated, but every now and again you get a particularly wild one or we forget to drug them. It happens. Smackdown would be dull without the occasional kill. Our ratings consistently go up when we have a death match, not to mention our ticket sales and pay-per-view customers. *Universal Smackdown III* is the number one video game on the market right now." Sef grinned proudly. "I plan it so the victorious gladiator makes the deadly strike, and we allow the loser to briefly wither in pain, for dramatic effect. Then I, as the merciful Ringmaster, come in to finish the match. My producer wanted to zoom the cameras in for the final blow, but I said, 'No, let the man die in peace. A wide-angle shot is fine.' Besides, the Professor said the cameras might pick up the Qi trail as it moves to my pearl. I don't want people questioning what we do at the Colosseum."

Sef's falcon was trying unsuccessfully to walk on the slippery floor. "Immortal, come over here before you get hurt." The falcon flew obediently to his master's arm.

"You named your new falcon Immortal?"

"Beneath my assassin exterior, I've always been a bit of an optimist."

"I saw *Smackdown Scandal*. Felix Haven makes a good case against you for orchestrating violence."

Sef laughed. "That fringe documentary film man? He also made one about the Garden of Dreams. He's a quack. No reasonable director takes him seriously, and I hired Medina's men from Mirror Films to make my blockbuster hit, *T-Rex vs. Gladiator*. Obliterated Haven's indie film at the box office."

"Dinosaurs and violence sell."

"Those prehistoric planets in the Fornax void were a good investment." Sef began inspecting the samples. Each pod had a small computer attached where he could pull up a hologram of the sample and test it against his Orion-X gladiator, a computer-generated model of a perfect soldier. "Better. Sample Five's reflexes are improving."

"I think my mutations have gotten more adaptive." Yaw displayed a digitized strand of the woman's DNA and started discussing the biochemical changes he'd made.

Sef had already moved on to the next sample. "I don't care about the details, only the results. This one's no good. His warrior aptitude hasn't improved. Delete him."

"But he has improvements in his abstract reasoning skills. Don't you want fighters who can think outside the box, like that myth about the Trojan horse?"

"This is the real universe, not folklore from the origin planet. The people of Earth's mythology didn't save them from the giant asteroid, now did it? There is no room for freethinkers in my Entropy Army. They must follow orders and not question why. I don't have time to explain the intricate details of our plan to them. Delete him. We are wasting time discussing this."

Yaw looked tragically sad as he pushed the delete button on the computer, causing the internal temperature of the cryogenic chamber to rise. The capsule door sprang open and fog poured into the room.

A naked man staggered forward, grabbing his heart. "I hurt." He drew a breath and fell to the floor.

Yaw took out his gray pearl from underneath his fur coat. It was clumped together with other charms in a tangled mass of necklaces. He shed a few tears as the Qi flowed inside it. He hated deleting samples, but the Professor said it was the only way to reach utopia. His perfect work of art must have a perfect place to live.

“Oh for the love of All.” Sef couldn’t understand why the pearl had chosen someone so weak. “My pearl’s grayer than yours. You’re helping my Entropy Army so I won’t say anything to the Commissioner at our next assembly, but you need to deliver. We have a deadline.”

“Yes Sef, you can count on me. I always complete my artwork.”

Chapter 19

Keiko looked extremely embarrassed.

Jay didn't care. "Guards, just perfect. There's no way we can hide Ara. They'll pick up her body heat on the scanner. We're gonna have to fight unless we get dumb ones we can trick. Keiko, are you prepared?"

"Yes, Captain." She quickly donned her kimono and unfastened an interior pocket to reveal an array of ninja antistars.

"You know how to throw those?" asked Ara, surprised.

"I was trained by Mori ninjas. All royalty are."

Jay didn't bother getting dressed. Instead he grabbed his sword and took off up the stairs.

He probably likes showing off his muscles, thought Ara. "What should I do?"

Keiko took Ara's hand. "Come with me. I will protect you. You have your pearl if needed."

She followed Keiko upstairs to Jay's office cabin where the crew was preparing for battle. Saiph sorted through his arrows, Ginger unsheathed a machete, and Sid loaded his revolver.

Hawk stuck a syringe inside a liquid vial. "Potassium chloride and water hemlock, my own deadly combination. Causes cardiac arrest to most humans in less than a minute."

Jay was sharpening his sword blade, deep in thought. He hadn't responded to the patrol ship yet.

Ara tapped her foot impatiently. "A sword? I know there's strict gun control laws, but you're a pirate. Don't you think that's a bit outdated?"

Jay finished grinding the edge of his blade before responding. "If I'm gonna kill a man, I'm gonna do it proper. I want to look a man square in the eyes, fully experiencing what it's like to take his life, feeling the tension of the blade as it rips through his flesh, watching him take his final breath. We need to feel something when we delete. The sword helps me keep that perspective."

Ara was taken aback. That wasn't the response she'd expected.

Ginger shrugged. "Ruas use machetes 'cause they're cheap."

"I like experimenting with drug combinations." Hawk loaded another syringe full of poison.

"Antibows are efficient, and I am an Orion. When we delete, they don't come back."

"The Mori antistar is an adaptation of an ancient weapon used by our ancestors. They called it the warrior's star."

Sid spun his revolver. "Mine's just illegal and fun."

Ara wondered how many Qi Jay had deleted over time. He seemed to think the most about the ramifications of taking a human life. "Then why didn't you kill me with your sword?"

"Wouldn't have been a fair fight." Jay turned towards the computer and touched a button onscreen to respond over the Web. "Universal Guard, this is Captain Harod. We read you. Over."

"We will be boarding your skyship to scan passports and verify registration. Your ship has been randomly selected in accordance with the Universal Security Act. We'll only need a few minutes of your time. Thank you for your cooperation. Over."

Jay ended the call.

Ara raised an eyebrow. "Harod?"

"I have several aliases. *Pandora's* not registered under my real name. Crew, let's go over our cover. We're a DSV-registered research vessel investigating better treatments for PM addiction. There are certain plants in the Hydra void that need to be collected for our study. Remember your lines, Doc?"

"Sure do, Captain."

"Research assistants?"

Ginger and Sid came forward, donning lab coats.

"I am the resident botanist."

"And I'm the lab tech." Sid pulled a few test tubes out of his pocket.

"Keiko?" Jay glanced over at her.

"I am Mrs. Hawk, diligent wife and Mori history teacher for those poor uncultured children in the voids." Keiko locked arms with Hawk and tried to suppress a smile.

“Right. Saiph’s security and yours truly is Psi Harod, Numist missionary to the lost voiders.” Jay threw on a black robe.

“You’re a priest?” Ara crossed her arms. “Well that’s believable.”

“The government regulates space travel, allegedly because of how dangerous it is,” said Sid. “There are five passports for space: research, diplomacy, security, mission, and freight. It was easiest to register *Pandora* as a research vessel because we have a legit doctor on board, but when Jay’s passport expired and we needed a new one in a hurry, the black market at our location was only selling mission passports.”

“People vacation in the voids. What passport do they get?”

“They get temporary travel visas, but they’re only good for six months. That includes space travel time.”

Jay unfolded his staff and attempted to look serene. “All is number.”

Ara shook her head. “Have you even read the Holy Order?”

“I’ve skimmed through it. Besides, our main purpose is research. That’s what they’re gonna focus on.”

A guard’s voice came over the computer. “This is a routine security check. Stand by while we connect the bridge. Over.”

“Ara, I’m gonna need you to be a better liar. Can you act?”

“Um, I was a tree once in a play at the village matrix.”

“A tree? Any lines?”

“Nope, just swayed back and forth.”

“Okay, you’ll be a PM paralysis patient then. Lie there stiff as a board. Keep your eyes open and do not under any circumstances blink while the guards are looking at you. Is that clear?”

“Crystal.”

“The bridge is connected. We will now board your ship. Over.”

“Places everyone. Let’s try to isolate them to my cabin and the main deck. Ara, go lie in my bed. When you hear them open the interior door, act paralyzed.”

“Roger, Captain.” Ara descended the stairs to Jay’s quarters, lying down quietly so she could hear what was happening on deck. “Oh, gross!” Her arm touched a pair of red lacy underwear wedged beneath the covers. She quickly picked it up, shoving it under the bed as she heard a thud reverberate from above. It sounded like an army was boarding *Pandora*.

A short, athletic sergeant marched onto the skyship, his sword nearly dragging on the deck. He was trailed by five guards. “Who is the captain of this ship?”

“I am. Captain Harod, at your service.”

“You on mission work out to the voids? They sure do need it.”

“Yes I am. Every number matters to All, even the negative ones, but the main purpose of our vessel is research.”

“Very well. I’ll connect to your computer and initiate the scan.”

“Of course. Right this way to the quarterdeck, Sergeant.”

“Jimmy, come with me. The rest of you stay here and keep an eye on the crew.”

Ara heard the men ascend the steps and go into Jay’s office.

“Nice holovision,” said the sergeant. “Wish I could have watched the semifinals on that. Too bad the Devils didn’t win. I really thought this was their year.”

“Initiating scan in five, four, three, two, one, scan,” said Jimmy. “Okay Sergeant, looks like we have seven bodies and one critter. The skyship has a valid DSV registration under the name *Pandora* and is space-licensed in the Aries cluster for research purposes.”

“Roger. I’ll need to see each member of your crew and their passports.” The thuds went back down towards the main deck. “Let’s start with you.”

Jimmy opened Saiph’s passport to the information page and placed a small scanning wand over the photo.

“Saiph Orion, age thirty, Sagittarius cluster, security,” said a robotic voice from the scanner.” *Beep-beep*. “Valid match.”

The sergeant placed his hands on his hips. “You have papers for your critter?”

“Yes, she is a registered Orion falcon.” Saiph pulled a crinkled paper out of his pocket that seemed to satisfy the guard.

“Is it true they can track scents and signal if you’ve had a kill?”

“I’ve heard they can gouge a person’s eyes out,” said Jimmy.

“Only if they are trained by a falconry expert and bonded to their Orion.”

“Cute little thing, what’s its—Oww! Dumb bird bit me.”

“I’m sorry, Sergeant. She is protective.”

“Hmph.”

Jimmy scanned the next passport.

“Ginger O’Connor, age twenty-one, Capricorn cluster, research.” *Beep-beep*. “Valid match.”

“You look a bit young to be a researcher. What’s the nature of your research, miss?”

“I’m a botanist. I can show you my hydroponic garden if you like. I assist Dr. Hawk in his research on PM addiction. Did you know there are over one hundred species of plants that may have beneficial properties in treating PM paralysis patients? For example, the Jasmina ivy, native to the Auriga void, has—”

“That won’t be necessary. Next.”

“Sidney Goldman, age twenty-three, Pisces cluster, research.” *Beep-beep*. “Valid match.”

“You aren’t by any chance related to the Goldmans of G2 Enterprises, are ya?”

“I wish. I’m just a lab tech.” Sid pulled out his test tubes for effect.

“Damn, I could have used some stock tips. Stupid invest-in-your-own-planet…”

“Okay boss, let’s see what we have here.” Jimmy took Hawk’s passport and scanned it.

“Dr. Gentry Hawk, age twenty-nine, Leo cluster, research.” *Beep-beep*. “Valid match.”

The sergeant eyed Saiph and Isis suspiciously as Jimmy moved to the next crew member.

“Keiko Hawk, age twenty-four, Gemini cluster, diplomacy.” *Beep-beep*. “Valid match.”

“What’s your diplomacy?”

“We have many Mori families in the voids. Since my husband often travels there for research, I applied to become a Mori history teacher. We don’t want our line to lose their heritage being so far removed from their native cluster.”

The sergeant pointed at Jay. “Your turn, Captain.”

“Matthew Harod, age twenty-five, Hydra void, mission.” *Beep-beep*. “Valid match.”

“You’re a voider?”

“I want to bring the Fibonacci Code to my people. We’re so lost in subtractions and need the Holy Order added to our lives.”

Over the top, thought Ara, lying quietly in bed. Well that better explains his lack of manners and human decency.

The sergeant looked around the main deck. “Where is the seventh body?”

“She’s a patient of mine. I was treating her for PM dependence, but I’m afraid we weren’t able to save her. She has slipped into paralysis.”

“I rescued the poor girl from the streets of Hydra. She was selling herself for PM, and I thought maybe I could help establish some order in her life. Unfortunately she didn’t have a space passport, being a poor voider and all.”

“The void police, just like the guard, requires a passport for space travel. I know you all don’t have as much law and order, but rules are rules. I’m gonna need to take a sample. We’ll match her DNA to the Human Registry. If she was born in a hospital, she’ll be in the system. We may not get anything, but I have to document I tried to tag her.”

“I understand. Sorry for the trouble, Sergeant. Right this way. Her sleeping quarters are beneath my cabin.”

“So we can monitor her vitals closely and make her as comfortable as possible,” said Hawk.

Sample me? What does that mean? He better not be sticking a needle in me or removing any clothing. I wonder if my DNA would match anyone? I have no idea where I was born.

“Jimmy, come with me. You guys stay here and guard the other crew.”

“Yes, sir,” said four guards in unison.

Jimmy shook his head. “Such a pity. PM is a nasty drug.”

"I've started organizing AM support groups at local matrices in my void," said Jay. "Trying to do my small part to diminish subtractions."

They're coming, thought Ara. Be still.

Two guards descended the steps and walked over to the bed.

"What's her name?" asked the sergeant.

"She told us it was Ara Mason, but I have no way of knowing if that's true. A lot of PM addicts lie."

Don't blink. Her eyes were starting to sting.

"Alright, I'm just gonna move in closer and—" The ship tilted slightly, causing a pair of red underwear to float out from underneath the bed. The sergeant eyed it suspiciously. "Hey, what's going on here? Are you taking advantage of this poor paralyzed girl?"

"What? No, I was trying to help her."

"All the way to your bed, huh?" The sergeant jammed his finger into Jay's chest. "Clearly this is your room. It's got void pictures all over the walls and shelves full of navigational-type books."

"Even smells like the void," said Jimmy.

"What's a PM paralysis patient need sexy underwear for? Answer me, Psi!"

"I don't know, Sergeant. It's what she had on."

Jay was floundering. This was bad. Don't blink. Just hold on a little longer.

"So you know what kind of undergarments she wears?"

"Er, someone has to make sure she gets bathed and changed, just until we get her to a sanctuary."

"You have females on board for this task," said Jimmy.

Ara's eyes were getting really dry. You can do this. Just don't blink. Do not blink.

"We'll take her to a sanctuary. I don't trust your intentions, Captain Harod."

"I'm gonna get the sample, boss." Jimmy pulled out a needle, jabbing it in Ara's arm.

Owww! She flinched and blinked her eyes.

"Hey, what game are you—"

From underneath Jay's robe came a flash of silver. He pierced Jimmy through the chest and quickly pulled out his sword from the guard's body.

Ara rolled off the blood-spattered sheets to avoid the corpse falling on top of her. "Ugh!"

The sergeant ran up the steps. "It's a trap. They're pirates. Attack!"

Jay and Ara bolted upstairs, racing out of the captain's cabin onto the quarterdeck. The battle had already begun. Hawk used his syringe to poison one of the guards. The man started staggering and convulsing in pain. Ginger slashed another with her machete. The guard was still fighting with his stomach bleeding out. Sid shot at two guards. He had pretty good aim for an accountant, thought Ara.

More guards from the patrol ship were crossing over the bridge towards *Pandora*. Saiph and Keiko positioned themselves in the masts, firing their antiweapons at the guards on the bridge. They deleted some with precision accuracy, but there were too many to take them all down. Saiph sat perched in the crow's nest with his antibow. Isis circled around the ship, squawking loudly to confirm Saiph's kills. Keiko balanced herself using the riggings on the mizzen top yard, crouching slightly and rotating her body to get a faster spin when she threw the antistars.

Jay barely missed a bullet the sergeant fired at him. He ducked into a roll and charged towards his assailant, knocking the gun out of his hands. Then he brandished his sword. "Let's level the playing field."

The sergeant drew his sword and met Jay in battle.

Ara grabbed the sergeant's gun as it floated by. It was still hot from being fired. She had no idea what she was doing, but she wanted to help. Jay and the sergeant were still dueling, Ginger was engaging in a knife fight with another guard, and Hawk was reloading a syringe. Sid had been shot in the arm and was staggering towards a corner of the main deck. Keiko and Saiph continued to carefully aim their antiweapons as more guards infiltrated the ship.

I need to retract the bridge, thought Ara. She gripped her pearl and concentrated on the deck of the patrol ship. She held the gun firmly in her other hand and warped over. Now what?

"Hey, you!" A guard bolted towards her, aiming his gun.

She shot the guard in the leg and ran up the steps to the quarterdeck, flinging herself behind a mast to block his return fire. She continued moving closer to the captain's cabin. The controls for the

bridge were probably in there on the main computer. She ducked behind a barrel to avoid being spotted and peered into the window of the cabin.

The captain was talking over the secure Web. "Yes, that's right, sir. We've found a pirate ship. Ariès-registered vessel. Neutrinos are the most probable stolen merchandise, but that's not confirmed. We're in the process of capturing the skyship. The name of—"

Ara barged through the door, shooting the captain in the chest. She didn't want *Pandora's* identity revealed. His body slumped sideways in the chair. Then the captain exhaled and shut his eyes.

She stood there in shock, realizing she'd just killed a man. An energy rose out of the captain's chest like a ghostly spirit, causing the space around it to warp. Is that the man's Qi? She was mesmerized by its beauty as it danced quietly towards her. She'd never seen anything like it. No mysterious energy appeared when the other guards were killed on *Pandora*. The Qi entered her pearl, changing its color slightly. She touched her darkstone, feeling her energy strengthen. I just took his spirit, she thought. What does that mean?

"Captain Ward, come in. Captain Ward, do you copy?"

She refocused, stepping over to the central computer. It had a picture of the patrol ship onscreen. She placed her finger on the bridge and several choices popped up: raise, lower, swing port, swing starboard, retract. She selected "retract."

The bridge began moving back, taking the guards and crew by surprise. Several guards flung their bodies onto *Pandora*. Most lost their balance and fell into space through the permeable magshield. Two guards made it back to the patrol ship and started running towards the captain's cabin.

Ara bolted out the door and held her pearl, but the guards were rapidly firing at her. She couldn't concentrate to wormhole. She shot back at one guard and grasped her pearl again, trying to warp to *Pandora*.

The other guard grabbed her, wrenching her arms behind her back. She felt the cold barrel of a gun press against her spine. "We're under authority to shoot if necessary."

"Incoming!" shouted the injured guard shot in the leg.

The guard dissolved behind Ara. No Qi trail appeared. She heard Isis squawking from *Pandora*, acknowledging Saiph's kill. Another arrow flew into the second guard and Keiko used an antistar on the third. Both bodies exploded to dust.

She warped back to the skyship as Jay dealt a final blow to the sergeant. The other guards looked like they'd been killed or disabled. A mess of blood orbs floated around *Pandora*. Ginger and Saiph started picking up bodies and throwing them overboard. A few were badly injured but still alive.

"Please, I surrender. I have family back in the Cancer cluster."

Saiph and Ginger paid no attention, dumping the guard anyway.

"Don't you think we should take them prisoner, Captain?"

"Ara, we're pirates. They'll squeal on us the first chance they get. It's a dirty, bloody business being a pirate. The romantic notion you see in movies is a complete lie. Well, except for that part about the dashing young captain." Jay took the helm, turning the ship back on course.

"You're a scoundrel. This only got messy because of your womanizing."

"Or because someone didn't have a passport and couldn't keep still, but you held your own, exceeded my expectations actually. That little rock's proven quite useful."

Ara had to agree. It was handy being able to warp around.

Hawk was working on bandaging Sid's left arm in the corner of the quarterdeck.

"Are you okay?" asked Ara.

"I'll be fine. Just gotta keep it wrapped for a while. Good thing I'm right-handed."

After the last body was thrown overboard, Saiph began climbing the shroud to his watchtower.

Ara walked down to the main deck and looked up the mast. "Thanks for saving my life."

Saiph paused mid-climb and turned around. "It's what I do. The Orion Code of Conduct says, 'If you take, you must also give.'"

"But you deleted more than you saved today. How can you correct that?"

"By taking what's needed to the voids so they may sustain their Qi."

"The clusters overuse their resources," said Sid. "We help balance out the playing field. Make the game more fair."

"You all keep my head spinning. I can't decide if being a pirate's good or bad."

Ginger shrugged. "It's both."

"Crew, let's sail to the Hydra port. We need to get deep enough to vortex to the Elara nebula."

"Is that the answer to the final clue? I know you and Keiko were working hard on it." Ara shot Jay a triumphant look as she ascended to the quarterdeck. She loved having dirt on him. "How deep do you have to go?"

Keiko turned away, staring into space.

Jay made no attempt to acknowledge Ara's insinuations. "Elara's the only supernova remnant near planets Shalim and Shahar. We can safely vortex once we get past Helio's Wall, which divides a heliosphere from the interstellar medium."

"Why do we have to be so far out to vortex?"

"So we don't suck in space debris, and the computer won't allow it. Skyship engineers are required by law to build in safety mechanisms. The computer detects where we're at in space and tells us when we're far enough from the heliosphere to vortex."

"By debris, Jay means planets," said Sid. "It takes a lot of gravity to vortex, which not only pulls us into hyperspace but also nearby objects. You wouldn't want some drunk captain at the helm knocking entire planets out of orbit."

Ara went down to the bathroom and took a long shower. It was hard to wash with water orbs, and as she popped one over her head, she thought about the planet she'd destroyed in her dream.

She had deleted a life. She didn't want to be destructive, but it seemed as if the universe was pulling her in that direction. She could have shot the captain in the arm like Sid had been injured. The man was just trying to do his job. He probably had a family in Scorpio waiting for him to finish his patrol of the heliosphere. She had also taken his Qi. She didn't understand what that meant, only that her darkstone felt more powerful, and she had to admit, she liked that feeling.

Chapter 20

“Hold tight. I’m gonna start vortexing.” Jay pressed several buttons on the helm’s computer system. *Pandora* had made it past the turbulent sector of Helio’s Wall and was now far enough out to vortex. “UPS calculations say I need to pick up the second closest tendril in hyperspace. This’ll exit us through the black hole nearest Elara.”

“Are black holes that common in space?” asked Ara.

“Loads of ‘em out there,” said Sid. “We used them to construct the space highway. It was really popular during the Golden Age of Exploration. Not as much use for it nowadays with all the ports.”

The crew spaced themselves around the deck and grabbed hold of the masts or riggings. Jay turned the helm counterclockwise and touched the vortex button on his computer, sending *Pandora* rotating in a large circle. Then the gravity engine switched on.

The space around the ship began moving in waves. A small dimple formed and *Pandora* sank into the hole, spiraling deeper through hyperspace as more gravity was created. The skyship was protected by the vortex tunnel stretching the fabric of spacetime around them. It felt as if they were spinning down an infinite abyss. All the stars appeared to gather together like the universe was reversing its expansion, but even this light disappeared as *Pandora* journeyed farther down the vortex. Their spiral got tighter with each rotation, and they started moving slower.

“We’re approaching the singularity,” said Hawk. “They’re at the tip of every black hole.”

“Like the singularity that made our universe?” asked Ara.

“Not that massive. They say the one at the dawn of time was infinitely dense so it could contain everything.”

“Even All?”

“That’s a mystery. Some say All’s beyond the singularity. Others say All was the singularity. It’s semantics, but these singularities are much smaller. If they were really, really massive, the universe would get sucked back in.”

“Dark energy’s too strong for that to happen,” said Sid.

Jay turned the helm counterclockwise. “No way to tell if something’s infinitely dense. Can’t measure infinity.”

It became eerily quiet on board *Pandora*. Even Ginger wasn’t saying anything as the ship neared the end of the vortex. There was nothing but darkness around them, and it didn’t feel like they were moving anymore.

“Okay, we’re about to fuse. Get inside.”

Ara followed Sid, Saiph, Keiko, Hawk, and Ginger into the captain’s cabin and held her breath, waiting to fuse with the singularity. She looked over at Saiph. “Where’s Isis?”

“Keeping watch. She is stubborn.”

A few moments later, time stopped. It was as if *Pandora* existed in a painting, forever paralyzed in the scene. The entire ship was still. Isis was frozen in the air between masts, wings outspread.

A violent lurch jolted *Pandora* awake. Even the magshield was trembling.

Ara stumbled forward, knocking Ginger over.

Saiph immediately left the cabin to check on Isis.

Sid braced in Jay’s chair. Then he opened a drawer containing numerous *Galaxy Girls* magazines, took one out, and leafed through it.

Hawk had fallen on top of Keiko but quickly found his feet. “I’m sorry, my lady.”

Pandora flew forward in a high arc like it was riding the crest of a powerful tsunami. The sails stretched taut from *Pandora*’s momentum. Then the ship was at peace, floating again in the dark ocean.

The crew emerged from the cabin to witness Jay jumping up and down. “What a rush!” He ran over and hugged Ginger. “Good job with the riggings, Red. We didn’t lose a single sail this time.”

“We just dumped a bunch of dark energy into the universe, didn’t we?” asked Ara.

“It’s either that or staying put on your planet,” said Jay. “Kind of a hard trade for folks that like to run as much as you. Moving about has an energy cost, but space is large. It can handle itself. You don’t really believe that Shattering nonsense, do you?”

“Isn’t there scientific evidence to support it?”

“According to some Numists, but it’s not like they’re Ophi scholars,” said Sid. “It’s all scare tactics used to convince people not to travel to the voids. Ironic, given they still send missionaries out there.”

“That sounds like a conspiracy theory. I’m not saying I believe everything in the Holy Order, but the basic tenets of the Golden Rectangle aren’t bad, trying to subtract negative and add positive. Doing things that support life.” Ara was surprised to find herself defending Numology. Too many years living with Shala, she reasoned.

“I’m a Numist too, but what Sid’s saying is true. I saw Felix Haven’s film *Numology Exposed*. It explains a lot about the Matrix’s attack on dark energy. Numists make it an evil concept, but it’s really not. Dark energy’s necessary in our universe. If we didn’t have it, we’d all fall towards each other in a big crunch.” Ginger clapped her hands together.

“You’re trying to justify why we pollute our universe.” Keiko was braiding her hair, which had come undone during the vortex.

Ginger didn’t seem as concerned with her appearance. Her hair was loosely pulled into a lopsided ponytail, a few strands sticking out haphazardly. “Where’s your evidence, Keiko? Haven interviewed experts for his film.”

“Like Dr. Haryana, President Rex’s security adviser who supports having an increased military presence in space. He also owns a good deal of shares in Photon, one of the top luxury hybrid ship companies. I would hardly call that objective.”

“I saw the rebuttal film *The Shattering Apocalypse*,” said Hawk. “It’s scary stuff.”

“Well regardless of how much antigravity we’re emitting, *Pandora*’s doing its part to help the universe. That’s why we bring goods to the voids. To give people a chance at a better life.”

Ara leaned against the mizzenmast. “I thought you did it for the money, Captain.”

“I could make a lot more pi doing something else. Most voiders can’t pay much, so *Pandora* often sells merchandise far below the market value. We earn enough to support our needs, the next mission, and if there’s anything left, our pleasures.”

“Women,” said Ara.

Jay grinned. “Yep, you ladies like the bad boy image.”

“I’ve improved my game telling girls I’m a pirate. The doctor thing got old.”

“Me too. Works better than throwing out the Goldman name.”

“But not as good as being an Orion. If I have Isis – double points.”

Some time passed before a dense fog began engulfing the ship. The space around *Pandora* changed to a bluish-green color. It was a subtle shift at first, but gradually the colors grew more vibrant.

Keiko pointed to her digital map. “The Elara nebula.”

Ara gazed above the masts as they sailed deeper into Elara. Large golden clouds were surrounded by a radiant teal haze. They looked like floating pillars of a space castle beckoning explorers to come inside.

“It’s beautiful. I feel like I’m entering the gateway to a lost kingdom.” Ara was in awe of the wonder before her, hypnotized by the glowing clouds slowly shifting through space as *Pandora* passed between pillars.

“If utopia exists, I imagine it would look like this,” said Keiko.

“We’re entering the leftovers of a star that imploded ‘cause it got too massive. All lights eventually go out.”

Ginger frowned. “You sure know how to ruin a magical moment, Captain.”

“That’s science, Red. I don’t make the laws of the universe. This nebula’s a supernova remnant.”

“So the star couldn’t handle its own weight and just died?” asked Ara.

“Stars shine by burning hydrogen to make fusion in their cores, but eventually all the hydrogen gets used up,” said Hawk. “Most stars will lose their hydrogen by expanding to become a red giant star. As the red giant swells, it sheds its outer layers until only the core remains, which we call a white dwarf. These white dwarfs slowly cool until they’re no longer able to shine. At this point we call them black dwarfs and their existence fades into the fabric, but some stars don’t go so quietly into the dark.”

When the mass of a star's core exceeds a certain limit, the core becomes so hot and heavy that the star explodes inward, causing its own collapse due to the core's gravitational pull."

"Elara's not really dead then," said Ara. "It just changed forms."

"Yes," said Keiko. "You see, we don't give stars names, only numbers like we do for galaxies. There are just too many, but when a star dies a violent death, we immortalize it with a name because it becomes something special – the birthplace of new life. The implosion produces so much energy that it pushes out the building blocks of life to other parts of the universe. The leftover dust and gases from where the star once shined forms a nebula that incubates new stars. Destruction birthing creation."

"That's poetry." Ara stared at the colorful clouds surrounding her. "I always thought of All as more of an artist. Elara explains why." She felt at peace with herself and the universe around her, just as she had that night in the outback. There was no past or future, only the now, and the now had no room for bad dreams and memories.

Ginger sighed. "They say the longer you look at a nebula, the prettier it becomes."

"That's only because the human eye has developed a longer exposure time so—"

Ginger put her hand over Jay's mouth. "Don't say anything to ruin the moment."

The crew sat in silence for a while, admiring nature's poetry around them. Captain Hood kept checking and rechecking his UPS coordinates, growing more frustrated by the minute.

"I see the port," Saiph eventually shouted from his perch.

As the nebula rolled past, the bow of another ship pierced through the clouds. Clinging to the bow was a carved figurehead of a hideous she-devil with hollowed-out eyes and a scaled torso. Instead of feet, a serpent's tail coiled around her, causing the woman to resemble the offspring of a human and snake. The three-masted vessel was fully rigged. Written on the flying jib were the words "Hydra Port." The ship appeared to have been abandoned long ago.

Ara imagined it was haunted. "Looks like a port to the Shadows."

"Oh it's fine," said Ginger. "Been through this port plenty of times. They just move its location to throw people off."

"And to sell new void maps," said Sid. "Extra pi if you want the deciphered ones. Saves us a lot of trouble, but it's too much overhead cost. Makes it difficult to turn a profit. It's not worth it unless we have an emergency."

Jay turned the helm towards the old ship. "People have to make a living somehow."

"Remember when that swindler sold us an outdated map? Man, did we get lost," said Ginger.

"That's why we have Keiko." Jay smiled, putting his arm around her.

Keiko blushed, knowing the crew was making inferences.

Ara hadn't told anyone what she'd seen, especially Ginger, although it was really tempting to talk about. She figured if the situation were reversed, she would want her friend to do the same, and Ara had decided she liked Keiko despite Ginger's slights to her character. Ara liked Ginger too. In fact, she'd grown fond of the entire crew, as diverse and strange as they were. Jay was barely tolerable, but he had his redeeming moments. He was a pirate after all. Ara smiled. She felt like she'd found her home with a bunch of the universe's misfits.

Jay navigated *Pandora* behind the old ship's stern. "Let's port."

"How exactly do we do that? There's no guard." Ara suspiciously eyed the vessel, fully expecting a ghost to pop out at any second.

"No worries." Ginger pointed to the map in Keiko's hands. "The void map gives us a code we punch into our computer to sync with the quantum network. The code will automatically upload us once we move through the port."

"Don't we have to entangle with another ship? Is that why this monstrosity's here?"

"The ship's a hologram projected by the quantum computer to mark the location of the port," said Sid. "When you entangle over the void Net, digital mass is added to match our particles. That's why void maps are so expensive. You're paying for the extra mass. The voids see less traffic and don't have as many ports. If you do a cost-benefit analysis of their business operations, it all evens out. Once you get to the voids, you still have to pay a port fee to travel between planets. Nothing's free except our Qi."

Ara was confused. Holographic ghost ships in the middle of space seemed about as probable as gem-wielding wizards from an ancient universe, but against all reason they existed.

Pandora moved through the ghost ship, disappearing from the Elara nebula once her bow met the figurehead.

Chapter 21

14A, Year 3026 – 8 years earlier
Kataka Island, Praesepe
Galaxy 117, Cancer cluster

The lagoon could not have been clearer. Tropical fish and turtles swam lazily around rocks, undisturbed by a young Nahn woman floating leisurely on her back. She had beautiful, thick black hair that undulated slowly in the water as she glided along.

Edison Hitar looked down at the lagoon's floor, admiring the vegetation. He thought back to his astrophysics research at the Cancer cluster's universe-renowned Kei Observatory where he studied abroad during graduate school. It had been over a decade since he'd visited the tropics of Cancer. Life was much simpler then. All he worried about was studying, drinking, and if he was lucky, a woman. Now he had the weight of the universe on his shoulders. He never imagined he would come back here. It was beautiful – palm trees, white sands, a light breeze – but Edison didn't get out much anymore. He preferred to stay in his office at Ophi, delving deeper into his dimensional physics. Now he was wandering around a tropical island on planet Praesepe trying to track down a recruit. Life takes us down the strangest paths, he thought.

What am I doing here? El's much better at this. He already found his three recruits. I could be devoting my time to more research. There are so many loose ends Phi Euler never addressed. But the Commissioner was pressing him for his final recruit.

El had pulled him aside after their last assembly with the other commanders. He had a sense of urgency in his voice. "Over a decade has passed since the forming of our Commission. Sef and Yaw are performing excellently, but we need one more commander. I can't drain three pearls, Edison. Two is hard enough. We made a deal, remember?"

Edison knew he needed to do it. He just didn't want to be bothered. Sef and Yaw were challenging enough to deal with.

Technically the Professor was trespassing on the Enchantress's private property. He watched as the woman climbed onto the rocks at the far end of the lagoon, disappearing behind a waterfall. I hope she takes to the pearl, he thought. The Professor just wanted to get this over with so he could go back to the comfortable familiarity of the university, losing himself in his elegant equations.

Edison took off his plain white T-shirt, revealing a pale, skinny chest. A faint outline of his ribs was visible. It looked like eating was an afterthought, only if he could pull himself away from his calculations and theorizing. Food just wasn't as interesting as researching the mysteries of the universe.

He removed his shoes and dove into the lagoon. The water was cold, but within thirty seconds he accustomed himself to the temperature. He hadn't swam in years, his efforts to reach the waterfall resembling a cross between the front crawl and doggy paddle.

"You're a hard woman to catch up with." He climbed out of the water, slipping on the rocks as he approached the Enchantress.

"What are you doing on my property?" The woman quickly placed him into a stronghold, slamming his body belly down on the rocks and locking his arms behind him. "I don't like strange men sneaking up on me. Do you know what I used to do to men?" She jabbed her knee deep into his back. "I deleted them, or if I was lazy, fed them to the dinosaurs."

"I assure you I mean no harm. Sef sent me here. He said you might be interested in a proposition that I have."

"A proposition? No offense, but you're not my type. I don't do the skinny nerd thing."

"I mean a proposal. He has a job for you."

"That man hasn't given me work in over a year. He says I'm washed out, injured, too broken to fight." She released her hold and moved against the rock wall, exposing an intricate Nahn tribal tattoo that wove down her spine and disappeared beneath her bikini.

Edison got up and approached her slowly, trying to remember his boundaries. It had been a while since he'd been with a woman. His mind flashed to his study abroad in the islands and that student with the golden hair.

"There, there." Edison patted her on the shoulder. He didn't know how to comfort her. Emotions made him feel uneasy. It was hard to put anger, fear, and sadness into an equation.

"Don't touch me and don't pretend like you understand! You men are all the same. Trying to act sincere while screwing me from behind. Do you even know who I am?" The woman's voice became louder. She didn't wait for Edison to respond as she turned abruptly to face him. "I used to be the highest paid gladiator in the arena. Everyone came to see the Enchantress. I still remember the crowd cheering for me. Can you imagine what it feels like to hear millions of people chanting your name?"

Edison had stepped a safe distance away, wearing a blank look on his face. What would El do?

"No, I suppose not. It's the most marvelous, magnificent feeling in the universe. I was needed, wanted, admired. Now my own husband doesn't even want me – that lying, cheating bastard. I hope he gets killed by a dinosaur."

"That's what I came to talk to you about. Sef said this could be arranged. He might accidentally forget to drug a raptor in one of the Bone Collector's upcoming fights or maybe give his gladiator opponent a little too much victory juice. Either way, he can ensure defeat in a death match."

The woman let her mind wander back to the arena, envisioning the Bone Collector being ripped apart by two raptors. She could see his bloody intestines unraveling from his severed stomach. It was a sweet fantasy, but why would Sef send this skinny wimp to convince her? He should have been man enough to come himself. Something seemed off. "What's the catch? I know Sef too well. He never does anything unless there's something in it for him. The Bone Collector's one of his prized fighters."

Edison took off the pearl necklace dangling around his neck and held it in front of her. "He wants you to kill men again, Lilith. In exchange, he will delete your estranged husband, the Bone Collector as you call him."

"He doesn't deserve to be called by his real name. He's an actor, a fake. Our entire marriage was an act. He isn't even that great of a gladiator. Sef only likes him because he draws ladies to the arena. Should have clued me in he was a player, right? What was I thinking? I can't believe I ever loved that narcissistic, arrogant prick!" Lilith stood next to the waterfall, trying to meditate on the trickling curtain. She remembered her anger management therapist's instructions. She kept her focal point on the falls and cleared her mind of all else. She took a few deep breaths, calming herself back down. "How many people do I have to delete?"

"As many as it takes to turn the pearl white."

"You mean this is an authentic black pearl? I thought they only existed in fairy tales and costume jewelry. Some say the origin planet had real ones. I also remember a children's story about a princess and a cursed dragon. The black pearl lifted the curse, revealing a handsome prince. Yeah right. That's every girl's problem, isn't it? As kids we get pumped full of lies about Prince Charmings that don't exist. It's cruel. No one can be faithful anymore. What's the point of embarking if you're gonna jump ship when the sailing gets rough? It's not my fault I got injured. I admit using a little victory juice, but do you know how much pressure there is in the pro-gladiator industry? There's always someone younger and stronger trying to become the next big thing."

"The pearl is real and very magical. I know this sounds crazy, but it might even help you find your prince." Edison cringed internally. He couldn't believe the asinine garbage spewing out his mouth. There's no way a logical human being would believe this, but Sef had assured him Lilith would take the bait. "I am confident the pearl will resonate with her," he had told Edison.

Lilith laughed. "Did Sef put you up to this as some sort of practical joke? You're very convincing, playing on my hatred towards my husband, but come on. A prince and a magic pearl? I may have hit my head in the arena, but I'm not an idiot."

"No, no, you're very bright. Let me explain better. I'm part of a special group of people called the Commission. Sef's also a member. We've been chosen by our Commissioner to receive these pearls. You should feel privileged to be recruited for this task. It's the highest honor in the universe, more epic than being victorious in the arena. This stone is one of the keys to unlocking utopia."

Lilith rolled her eyes. "Utopia, please. Everyone knows there's no such thing as—"

“There are hidden dimensions higher than the fifth. I know because I’m a dimensional physics professor at Ophi. All is number, right? The math shows there are dimensions of existence we have yet to discover, hidden until the right amount of energy is offered to All. The pearls capture this energy. Then All will accept our sacrifice and open the gates to the dimension of utopia. I wish there was an easier way, but sacrifices are required. That’s where you come in, Lilith. You’re still the Enchantress. You always will be. I believe you have what it takes to perform the necessary purification sacrifices and help us unlock this kingdom. Please, just try it. If you perform a deletion, you’ll see the Qi get trapped inside your pearl. Think about it. You could hold men inside this stone next to your heart. They would never leave you again.”

Lilith took the necklace from Edison, massaging the pearl in circular motions. “It feels like a beating heart ... orgasmic.”

“See, you’re connecting to the magic already. It’s even stronger once you’ve performed a sacrifice.”

It felt like she was back in the arena. So much power at her fingertips. She began breathing heavily. The pleasure intensified the longer she held the stone. “I want my husband’s bones delivered to me in a box, along with his gladiator costume. I will collect his bones.” She smiled, the image of sweet revenge consuming her. Screw anger management. She was a gladiator.

“I’m confident Sef can arrange this.” Edison was a little concerned about Lilith’s emotional stability, but given the task at hand it made sense why Sef recommended her. The stone had rejected many others. Lilith was the last of the Commission. None of the commanders of the pearl were normal anyway. They all had exceptional ways of looking at life. Either they were the most abnormal, insane people in the universe, or they were the only ones sane enough to see beyond the illusion.

“Till death do us part.” Lilith ran her hands through the waterfall’s curtain, dividing its flow.

Chapter 22

14A, Year 3034
Corvus, Noriko
Galaxy 7, Hydra void

“Welcome to planet Noriko, city of Corvus. If Corvus is not your final destination, you can head to the main terminal to make your connections. We do not have a skyring or trains. If you want to travel to other cities on Noriko, you must do so using your own transportation or through our skyferry services, also available at the main terminal. Enjoy your stay,” said a man with a VP band on his arm.

“Stands for void police,” Ginger told Ara. “Contrary to popular belief, they do have some law out here, just not as strict.”

“We finally made it.” Jay looked relieved.

“Do we have to port anywhere else?” asked Ara.

“No, thank All. Corvus is where our buyer’s located. We’re meeting her tomorrow at Eden Hotel and Casino. Let’s find a place to dock.”

The Hydra void was arranged differently than the clusters. The port was located on the ground in the outskirts of the city. Jay had turned on the gravity engine, allowing *Pandora* to hover slightly over the sand as he navigated. They passed by the main terminal. It was filled with a combination of freighters, personal skyships, ferries, and Void Adventure cruise liners.

“Oh snap!” Ginger pointed at the terminal. “The Photon-X, one of the fastest ships in the universe. I wonder who owns it?”

The Photon-X was a sleek black racing yacht. Its owner had designed it with stars that had intricate, artistic flames shooting out from them. The sails were also black with the same matching star pattern. It was definitely the coolest ship in the terminal.

“That’s SuperNova’s ship,” said Sid. “I saw him perform a few years back on Epsilon. It was an awesome show. He must be bringing his Beware of Explosives tour to the voids.”

“No way! Could you get us tickets, Sid? I’ve been a fan since *Massive*. I’ve got some pi I could give ya.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Wasn’t he just on holovision performing at the fluxball semifinals that the Gemini Twins won?” Keiko smiled pleasantly.

“That’s right. Someone owes me some pi.” Hawk glanced over at Ginger, opening his hand expectantly.

“SuperNova’s exploding all over the place,” said Sid.

“That’s how fast the Photon-X is.” Ginger reluctantly forked over the money.

“Crew, need I remind you we’re here on a mission. Seeing a hip-hop show’s not high on our priority list.”

“If we have time, as long as it doesn’t conflict with the delivery?” Ginger gave Jay her puppy eyes.

“Fine, but I’m sure it’s sold out. Even Sid has his limits.”

“Don’t worry, Red. I’ve got connections.”

Pandora approached Corvus. The city was carved into the sides of extremely large cliffs towering over the otherwise unremarkable desert. People were riding camels and gliders around the bottom of the cliffs.

Ara noticed rows of hitching posts in lots labeled “Camel Parking Only.” “What’s with the camels?”

“Neutrinos are expensive out here,” said Keiko. “Hydra doesn’t have any uranium-rich planets so fuel has to be imported.”

“Jay, watch out. You almost hit a camel.” Ginger slapped him on the arm.

Sid grinned. “Ten points.”

“No, fifteen,” said Hawk. “You have to add the rider.”

“This is not accurate. Camels are worth twenty points, thirty with a rider.” Saiph sat sorting his arrows near the front railing of the quarterdeck.

“I like that camels are worth more than people,” said Ara.

"I think there's a dock over there." Keiko pointed to a divide between two massive cliffs. Ships and gliders were moving in and out of the crevice.

Jay navigated *Pandora* between the cliffs and docked next to a Vector motel cliff dwelling. He parked in one of the three-masted vessel slips. Unlike harbors in the clusters, docks contained no water, only large foam bases for hulls to sink into to keep the ship upright.

Captain Hood turned off the gravity engine. He then entered a code in his computer to park the ship. "Okay, you all know the drill. Be safe, stay together, and don't do anything I wouldn't do. I'll expect to see you by midnight local time."

Ara raised an eyebrow. "We have a curfew?"

"Yes, I started one after that incident in Fornax."

"It's not everyday you get to party with gladiators," said Sid. "That was fun."

"Up until the dinosaur attack. Sid, I'm gonna need you to acquire a few things for us. We've got to register *Pandora* under a new flag. The guards will be on the lookout for an Aries skyship matching our description. It's a good thing our name didn't get out."

"Can't you paint a new name on the ship just in case?" asked Ara.

"No, the law regulates that we have our name visibly marked on the outside of the ship, and it has to match our registered name," said Jay. "This information gets checked every time we port in the clusters. Even pirates have to do a few things legally."

"I shot the captain before he said the name *Pandora*, so I think we're good there."

Saiph stroked his falcon. "Dead men tell no tales."

"We also need a passport for Ara. Make her purpose mission if you can. She already has a staff and a holier-than-thou attitude. Should be a good fit."

"Let's see, I have a centrifuge, rats, and more poison for Hawk," said Sid. "Tickets to see SuperNova – who's going?"

Saiph, Ginger, and Hawk raised their hands.

"A flag registration for *Pandora* and passport for Ara. Can I get you anything else, Captain?" Sid smiled, pretending to be a waiter.

"That'll do."

Ginger grabbed Ara's hand and tugged her onto the dock. "You're coming with me. We're gonna go see SuperNova."

"But I don't have money for a ticket."

"Don't worry. I'll get your ticket. This is the chance of a lifetime. Besides, Jay and Keiko need some alone time, if you know what I mean." Ginger winked obviously.

"My contact lives in a cliff dwelling outside the city so we'll have to rent some camels." Sid walked towards the dock's exit. "Jay won't let us get gliders. I already tried."

"Why's that?" asked Ara.

"We ... had an incident. Ended up crashing—"

"Because they were street racing like idiots," said Ginger.

"Cost us a lot of pi to reimburse." Sid pushed through the exit door, finding himself in a small shopping area. The others filed in behind him.

"I had the fastest glider," said Saiph.

Sid laughed. "You shot down the others."

"So mine was the fastest. Orions do not lose."

"There's a place." Hawk pointed to a commercial cliff dwelling. "Rent-A-Camel."

The five entered the glass doors of the shop.

An older woman wearing an excessive amount of makeup was sitting at the counter, vigorously filing her nails. "Welcome to Rent-A-Camel. How many camels do you need?"

Saiph crossed his arms. "I'm not sharing a camel."

"We'll take three," said Sid.

"Standard or deluxe?"

"Um, what's the difference?"

"Deluxe has two humps. Costs an extra fifteen pi."

"No, we'll just take the standard."

"I want the deluxe," said Saiph.

Sid looked at the Orion and shrugged. "It's your money."

"That'll be fifteen pi each for the standard, thirty for the deluxe." The woman put her nail file down and held open her hand to admire the manicure.

The group got out their money and paid the lady.

"The lot's on the side of the dwelling. Posts five, six, and twenty are yours. Have them back by 1900 local time or you'll be charged for a second day."

"Thank you," said Ginger.

The crew made their way to the camel lot, which contained a herd of one and two-humped camels saddled and ready for customers. Each post was marked with a sign indicating the camel's number.

"Aww, they're kinda cute." Ara pet camel number five. A large wet projectile landed on the side of her face. "Ugh, it spits."

"Should have gotten the deluxe model." Saiph was already mounted on camel twenty.

Sid and Hawk took camel six, leaving Ginger and Ara with the spitting camel.

Sid navigated his camel out of the lot. "Follow me. The Sheikh's not far from town."

"A Sheikh? That sounds pretty important," said Ginger.

"He runs a few casinos and nightclubs in Corvus. Also owns a bunch of planets and has his finger on the pulse of the black market. He'll probably offer you some root so you're gonna have to smoke. It would be rude not to. Just don't inhale deeply. The Sheikh gives potent root to relax people before doing business with them. He thinks it gets him a better deal."

"I haven't had root since college," said Hawk.

"Doesn't root have mind-altering effects?" asked Ara.

"It's supposed to expand your mind and make you think more creatively." Hawk saw the concerned look on Ara's face. "Don't worry. It's completely natural and doesn't have any serious side effects."

They rode their camels for about an hour before coming upon a giant cliff with multistory dwellings.

Ginger scanned the cliff. "This is nice, like luxury apartments. Which one's his?"

Sid laughed. "He owns the whole cliff. It's the Sheikh's palace. The rooms are connected inside by a series of elevators moving vertically and horizontally. They say he has fifty bedrooms and thirty-three bathrooms."

"That doesn't sound like enough bathrooms." Ginger stuck up her nose, pretending to be snooty. "I would at least have one for each bedroom."

"How many people live here?" asked Hawk.

"The Sheikh and his three wives. Maybe some security. Things could have changed. Last time I was here was with my father. I think I was twelve years old."

"He was most likely conducting some shady business deal," said Ginger.

"To be sure. C2 was also there. I think my father was trying to get some uranium-rich planets before him. The Sheikh was probably playing them both."

"C2?" asked Ara.

"Casimir Costos, owner of Neptune Corporation, Zenith Bank, and Costo Fuel. He's one of G2's biggest rivals. They're always competing to see who'll top the other on *Pi* magazine's wealthiest people in the universe."

"Your father is *the* Geoff Goldman?"

"The one and only. He's a complete jerk. He'll do anything for pi, and I mean anything. That own-your-own-planet scheme, orchestrated by him I'm sure. Just gets away with it because he controls a lot of Shark Street."

"Where's the Sheikh on *Pi* magazine's list?" asked Hawk.

"He's below C2 and G2, but it's hard to say how accurate that is because he hides his money out here to avoid paying taxes. Major cluster banks like Horizon and Zenith don't branch in the voids. It's become a common practice among the wealthy elite to get a separate void bank account. The Zodiac government's been trying to crack down on tax evasion, but it's difficult to control. The Sheikh also has a lot of tie-in to the Scorpion gang's illegal antiweapon and drug operations, all black market profits. He may be richer than either of the two alliterative powers, just better at hiding his money."

Ginger turned her camel towards the cliff. "Since he owns a bunch of uranium planets, did we actually steal from him?"

"He doesn't own Antares. That planet is government owned. Technically we stole from Jetty Fuel, a subsidiary of Goldman Galactic Enterprises. Jetty bought land from the government to mine, enrich, and build their own for-profit reactors. Eventually I stand to inherit the company, so we didn't steal per se..."

Ginger raised an eyebrow. "Didn't G2 cut off your trust fund when you dropped out of college? What makes you think the Sheikh's gonna help us?"

"Because I've acquired my own assets. My father's so rich he can't keep track of it all. A few million pi gone missing is a drop in the bucket. When I left, I made sure to create my own void account, which funnels money from various stocks held by Goldman Galactic to my company, Sidereal, Inc. The Sheikh knows I can't stand my father so in exchange for what we want, I'll shuffle the pi."

"You move pi like it's a chess game between you and your dad."

"It's more like checkers, and don't lecture me about things you don't understand, Ginger. You want the SuperNova tickets, right? If you're so concerned about pawns, why not use that money to sponsor a void child or send it back to your struggling family farm in Capricorn? The resources are unbalanced. Fifty bedrooms for one man's house makes no sense. Why does he have this? Because he can. Life's a game and he's played it better. I'm trying to switch the game from checkers to chess so at least we can start thinking long-term instead of draining our resources for some quick profits. My father doesn't care about the future of the universe, only that he continues collecting treasures."

Ginger became quiet, a rarity for her. She looked like she was going to cry.

Ara tried to think of something to say, but she couldn't come up with anything helpful.

"An Orion would shoot his opponent. Problem solved." Saiph dismounted his camel.

"Another opponent would just rise up," said Sid. "That doesn't solve anything."

"Then we would shoot him too. He who aims the arrow controls the direction."

The others dismounted their camels and tied them to elaborate golden posts with gem-encrusted serpents slithering up them.

"So unnecessary. The camels don't care what their posts look like." Ginger shook her head. She was purposefully keeping herself at a distance from Sid.

"Don't listen to him," said Ara. "He's a jerk like his father."

"He's right though. I should send more money to my family."

Sid rang the doorbell.

An Orion answered the door, noticing Saiph immediately. "What business do you have with the Sheikh?"

"Tell him Sidney Goldman and associates are here to discuss his recent acquisition."

"Very well. Please wait in the foyer."

The crew followed the Orion into an open hallway.

"What was his recent acquisition?" whispered Hawk.

"Who knows. We just needed something to get us in the door."

"I don't like that Orion. His falcon looked at Isis funny."

The foyer was decorated with intimidating stuffed creatures from various regions: tigers, lions, wolves, bears – he even had a raptor.

"Very warm and inviting décor," said Ara.

A large Rami man dressed in a traditional Sagittarius thawb entered the room. The thawb was a long white robe worn with a matching keffiyeh headdress. The agal band around the keffiyeh was purple and lined with gems. A purple cloak was draped over his thawb, signifying he was a person of great wealth in Rami society. He walked with an intricately carved cobra cane. The cobra's eyes were made of rubies.

The Sheikh smiled, opening his arms. "Little Goldman, you've grown up. What brings you all the way out here?"

"My associates and I need some merchandise. I'd like to see if we could come to an arrangement."

“But of course. Let’s step inside my office. This way.” The Sheikh led them through the scary creature foyer to a glass elevator. The elevator moved sideways for a few rooms, then shifted vertically up to the third floor.

The elevator doors opened to a room filled with satin cushions, large platters of fresh grapes, and three beautiful Rami women lying lazily on cushions. They were not traditionally dressed, wearing rather transparent outfits.

“Mrs. Sheikhs, prepare the root.” The Sheikh clapped and the wives jumped to attention, hurrying into the elevator.

Ara cringed internally. It wasn’t her idea of a relationship, but the women certainly seemed content.

“We will smoke the hookah and talk. Sit and make yourselves comfortable. How is Geoff these days?”

“Oh you know, still trying to one-up Casimir in the planet market. Moving pi around as he pleases. I think he’s trying to acquire some more water planets.”

“It is becoming a valuable commodity, especially in the voids. I believe Neptune Corporation owns more water mills than Triton. They outsource to Aquarius. Much cheaper labor than your father’s mills in Pisces.”

“Yes, but G2 has Jetty Fuel. Jetty’s stocks are trading higher than Costo’s in the neutrino market.”

“Which are both dependent on many of my uranium-rich planets.” The Sheikh smiled.

The women came back with a large hookah and placed it on the floor in the middle of the cushions. “Please, enjoy my root. It is premium quality, harvested from the Coma void.”

They took turns smoking the hookah. Saiph was excused because of his Orion Code of Conduct.

The root made Ara feel very relaxed, like there wasn’t a care in the universe. The colors of the room appeared more vibrant. This would have been nice while going through the Elara nebula, she thought.

“What type of merchandise do you desire?”

“A centrifuge, water hemlock, different cluster registration for our hybrid ship *Pandora*, mission passport, and five SuperNova tickets.”

“A change in registration ... that will be tricky. I’ll have to call a contact at the DSV and see if she can wipe out your old registration to make it look like you were registered in a different cluster all along. You’re aware once a ship’s registered you can’t change flags, even if you move clusters? What flag do you wish to fly and what is the primary purpose of your hybrid skyship?”

“Our ship’s a research vessel and we’d like to fly the Leo flag. It’s currently registered with the Aries DSV. Here’s our registration information.” Sid handed the Sheikh a piece of paper.

“I can make this happen.” The Sheikh jotted down a few notes. “Who needs the passport?”

“Me.” Ara raised her hand.

“Name and age, miss?”

“Ara Cantor, age seventeen. I mean eighteen. I am an adult.” The root seemed to be impacting her mind a little.

“You need to be older. No one will believe a priest at eighteen. I will make you twenty-two, fresh out of the College of Numology. Are you in the Human Registry?”

“I’m a human.”

“What a coincidence, so am I,” said Hawk.

“I don’t know what I am.” Ginger sat with her legs crossed on the cushion. “Energy, I think ... just energy.”

“It is good root. Have more, I insist.” The Sheikh handed the pipe back around.

Hawk took another hit, blowing out puffs of smoke. The room grew hazier as it filled with the distinct smell of root.

“If she is in the registry, I will need to change her birth date to make her older. If not, no problem. I’ll just make her from the Hydra void. Either way I can ensure a valid match. I will have to forge a Numology diploma and swab for DNA to put on file.” The Sheikh signaled one of his wives to go retrieve a DNA kit. “All passports must match the Human Registry. What is your birth date, miss?”

“I don’t know. I was a baby attached to a chord.” Ara pulled the hookah hose towards her belly button. “Sometime in the month of the Crab.”

“Okay, I’ll just make one up if necessary. The medical equipment is easy, but SuperNova tickets...” The Sheikh shook his head. “I am sorry. I do not have these. The show’s been sold out for months. He is very famous. I hear he’ll be performing tomorrow night at Victor Medina’s hotel and casino, probably at Snake Charmer. Maybe you can name-drop your way in. I wish you luck.”

“He is explosive.” Ara mimicked an explosion with her hands.

Hawk laughed, copying Ara’s gesture. “Ka-pow!”

Ginger sat up straight, eyes glazed over like she’d entered a trance.

The wife came back with the DNA kit and handed it to the Sheikh.

“I’ll do it. I’m a real doctor.” Hawk eagerly took the kit out of the Sheikh’s hands. “Open wide, Ara.”

“Ahhhh.” She stuck out her tongue, and Hawk swabbed the insides of her mouth to collect the sample.

Ginger inspected her cushions suspiciously. “How do you know you’re real? This could all be a dream.”

“We’re on a time crunch. Can you have these available tomorrow night?”

“You ask a lot little Goldman. Here’s what I need from you. I have some planets I bought which did not have the uranium quantities I’d hoped for. I want you to bundle them into other stocks and sell them for a profit on the market. They need to have a good rating. I don’t want to lose money on this. My planet taxes keep going up, and I need to get rid of these duds. Here is all the information. Can I count on you?”

“I can deliver.” Sid took the Sheikh’s investment paperwork and looked it over.

The room is really pretty, thought Ara. She grabbed a cluster of grapes, inspecting them. I never noticed how amazing grapes are. They look like little planets connected by wormholes. Maybe the universe is a giant grapevine.

“Then we have a deal. Smile for the camera, miss.” The Sheikh snapped a photo for her passport.

The afterimage of the flash confused Ara. “What are these floating shadows?” She tried to grab one. “They must be Qi trying to find the alpha door. Where is the alpha door?”

“What is she talking about? I have no such door.”

“I have to find the alpha door.”

“She’s high. No more root for you, Ara. Come on. We’ve taken up enough of the Sheikh’s time.” Sid grabbed Ara’s hand and signaled the others out the door.

“Meet me tomorrow at Oasis. 1830 by the lobby bar. I’ll have your merchandise. Alimah will see you out. May order find you.”

“Pleasure doing business with you,” said Sid.

They followed Alimah into the elevator, riding it back to the main foyer. She bowed gracefully, disappearing behind the closing elevator.

“We forgot my rats!” Hawk repeatedly pushed the elevator buttons.

The Orion standing guard walked closer to the crew, removing an antibow from his back.

“I’ll get them for you later,” said Sid, hurrying Hawk out the door before he had time to protest.

“I told you not to inhale deeply.” Sid sat on his camel, looking irritated.

“I really do think the universe is like a grapevine,” said Ara. “Did you see his grapes? The tiny stems looked the same as the big stems. Isn’t that amazing? We’re living in All’s grapevine.”

“And getting drunk off his wine,” said Hawk.

Ara laughed loudly. “That rhymes.”

“Can I come to All’s party?” asked Ginger, still glassy-eyed.

“You’re already in the party. Life’s the party!” Hawk threw up his hands, causing him to tilt on the camel.

“Is the alpha door at the party?”

“Yes, and so are my rats.”

Sid shook his head. “You all are ridiculous. Just try not to fall off the camel.”

“Should have gotten two humps,” said Saiph.

Chapter 23

Judah hit his slot machine in frustration. "It shouldn't be so hard to line up three Grey aliens. What am I doing wrong?" He and Gad were sitting inside Eden Hotel and Casino, playing slots and drinking beer.

"I thought you did line up the aliens," said Gad.

"Those weren't the right kind. I need the Grey ones in saucers to hit the jackpot. Maybe I should try another machine."

"The house always wins. I told you that. There's a reason Eden's so opulent. We should probably go before you lose more pi. I'm not sure this is helping our search efforts. We're supposed to be looking for Ara."

"Relax brother, we are looking for her. Our destination was the voids, and SuperNova's performance is the hottest thing this side of the universe. People from all over are coming to see his show tonight, so if Ara's in the voids, chances are high she's here. Scorpions smuggle to Corvus a lot, and it's a black market hub for pirates. You should feel lucky I won those tickets. The show was sold out."

"You were the strongest man in the bar."

Judah grinned, flexing his muscles.

"Do you think we look hip enough? I feel strange out of my robe."

"Yes, I watched his 'Explode' music video. This is what they were wearing. Besides, we can conceal our staffs under these baggy clothes. Added bonus."

Ara scrutinized her mission passport photo. "I look a bit dazed and confused."

"You were a bit dazed and confused. Take me to the alpha door." Sid laughed, pretending to be a stoned zombie.

"That was very strong root. I'm just glad the pet store had my rats."

"The Sheikh said I really wasn't in the Human Registry?"

"No Ara, for the third time, no trace of your DNA was found in the system," said Sid. "Maybe you were born somewhere in the voids. A lot of remote places still do natural births outside of hospitals. So congrats, you're now in the Human Registry from the Hydra void and gained several years of life. Welcome to being a responsible adult. Don't you feel important?"

Ara grinned at Ginger. "I'm not sure what I feel. Maybe I'm just energy."

"You know, Ara, that purple dress really suits you. It's like the color of grapes, which as we learned yesterday make up the universe. The universe is a grapevine!" Ginger smirked.

"It seemed like a revolutionary idea at the time."

The crew was sitting in a lounge at Eden Hotel and Casino, waiting for their buyer to arrive. Sid had met the Sheikh earlier and picked up the requested merchandise. *Pandora's* Leo flag had been hoisted, and Hawk placed a new batch of rats in his complex of cages.

Jay looked down at his watch. "Our buyer's running late. I hope she's not flaking on us. We've been through a lot of trouble to get these neutrinos out here."

"Don't worry. She'll be here," said Keiko, wearing a stunning slim black dress with a high collar and golden flowers accenting it. Keiko had also outfitted Ginger and Ara from her extensive walk-in closet.

"This dress is itchy." Ginger shifted around in her green strapless ensemble. It had a skirt that tapered out at the waist and extended halfway down her thighs.

"You look really cute," said Keiko. "You should wear your hair down more often."

"It would get in the way of my gardening."

The men were fashionable as well, wearing dress slacks and button-down shirts. Saiph was a little grumpy after being told to remove his hood and leave his bird at the ship, but he'd managed to keep his antibow on him, strategically hidden by a long trench coat.

"Eden Hotel and Casino is a first-class establishment," said Jay. "We'd not be welcome looking like pirates."

Ginger sighed. "I just hope we can get into Snake Charmer. I don't mind getting dolled up for SuperNova."

A beautiful Maian woman elegantly dressed in an expensive red gown approached their table. She had long, wavy brown hair and an infectious smile. The woman was in her early forties but could easily pass for mid-thirties.

"Is that our buyer?" asked Ginger.

Sid's mouth dropped. "She's beautiful."

"Good evening. Hesiod, I presume?"

"Yes, I'm Captain Hesiod and these are my associates. We've delivered your merchandise as requested."

"All fifty barrels?"

"Correct. It's on our ship for you to pick up once we receive payment."

"And they were taken from Reactor Fourteen as stipulated in our agreement?"

"That's the one. Way out in the middle-of-nowhere Antares."

"Then I have your payment. Alvah, come here." The woman summoned over a Rua man sitting at the bar.

I've seen him before, thought Ara, noticing the red ponytail. He was one of the outlaws who tried to kill me in the Antares caves. There's no way he could recognize me dressed like this, and it was dusty that night in the outback.

"Hello, Vela. Is it ready for transfer?"

"Yes, go with them to their ship and take it. I have no need for fuel. I hope this helps your operations."

"Thank you, Miss Medina. You are most generous." Alvah took off his cowboy hat and bowed slightly.

The crew got up to leave with Alvah. As they passed Vela, she grazed Ara's shoulder and came to a stop. "Why miss, what an exquisite necklace you're wearing." She reached out and touched Ara's pearl, her hazel eyes widening. "Wherever did you get it?"

She did not like how Vela was looking at her. "Oh, from a flea market in Virgo."

Vela smiled. "It's a good counterfeit." She paused for a moment. "You know, I have these tickets for SuperNova tonight that I won't be able to use. Captain Hesiod, would your crew like to attend this show after you finish with Alvah? It doesn't begin until 2300. You should have plenty of time to make it back."

Ginger looked like she was about to explode.

"Um, that would be nice," said Jay, intoxicated by Vela's charm. "Thank you."

"Just say the name Hesiod at the door of Snake Charmer. Tell them you're on Vela Medina's guest list. You'll have no trouble getting in."

"Thank you, miss!" said Ginger.

Vela smiled graciously. "It's no trouble at all. Alvah will pay you at the dock."

The crew left with Alvah and helped transport the neutrino barrels onto his ship, an old freighter named *Aryanna*. Alvah opened a suitcase containing stacks of pi bills. Sid counted the money and confirmed the crew's entire payment was enclosed.

"Hope the fuel comes in handy to you," said Jay.

"Oh, it's going to excellent use. Enjoy the SuperNova show. Would ya like a ride back to Eden in *Aryanna*?"

"We'll walk, thank you," said Ara brusquely.

"Suit yourself. Y'all take care." Alvah waved, stepping onto his plank connected to the dock.

"Ara, you're aware I'm in heels," said Ginger, wobbling through the sand. "It would have been easier to ride with that Rua cowboy. There was plenty of room on his ship."

"That was one of the Scorpions who tried to kill me in the cave! I wasn't making that up. They were talking about some shady black market deal and moving merchandise to the Auriga void. And did you notice how interested Vela seemed in my pearl? I'm pretty sure she felt its energy when she touched it."

"Relax," said Sid. "She gave us SuperNova tickets. Even the Sheikh couldn't get us those."

"They're probably taking the neutrinos out to Auriga. That void's hurting for fuel. I wouldn't concern yourself with their dealings. We have our money and are ready for a new job. Go watch the show. I'll be watching the snake dancers." Jay grinned.

Ara bit her lip. "If the neutrinos are being shipped to Auriga, why meet in Hydra?"

"Maybe it's going to multiple destinations," said Ginger. "Not our problem. Come on, cheer up. You're gonna love SuperNova."

"You're right. I'm probably just being paranoid." Although in the back of her mind, she wasn't so sure. Life on the streets had fine-tuned her intuition, and it was sounding an alarm.

The crew approached the VIP entrance to Snake Charmer.

"Regular ticket holders over there." A bouncer pointed to an impossibly long line wrapping around the corner. The people in line were complaining loudly.

"Hurry up! We're gonna miss the show."

"This is ridiculous. We have tickets."

"I came all the way from the Libra cluster."

"Open up another line. Where is your manager?"

Bouncers stood stoically around the crowd, trying to manage the queue.

"We should be on Vela Medina's guest list under the name Hesiod," said Jay.

The bouncer scanned his list. "Oh yes, I see you right here. These are our VIP wristbands. They'll get you complimentary drinks and into our private lounges. Enjoy the show."

Ginger fastened her wristband, crafted to resemble a slithering snake. "What a jerk. Who's he to assume what line we belong in?"

"It's all good, Red. Don't let it ruin your night. Look, the snake dancers!" Sid pointed.

The crew glanced up to see gorgeous exotic women dancing on elevated platforms around the club. They wore bikinis matching the colorful snakes twisted over their bodies. Some snakes coiled on poles while their handlers swayed seductively around them. The club also had trees inside floor-to-ceiling terrariums with serpents wrapped in their branches.

"This is pretty awesome." Ara let her worries from earlier fade.

Jay was mesmerized by one of the snake dancers. "It takes a special talent to move like that."

"Hey, look at those guys over there!" Hawk laughed, pointing at two men in their thirties who were trying way too hard to be cool.

"Oh no, it's the Brotherhood." Ara realized afterwards she'd said this out loud.

"The Brotherhood?" shouted Ginger over the pulsing music. "Is that some kinda term for obsessive stalker fans?"

"No, it's..." Ara couldn't begin to think of how to explain this to Ginger. The Snake Charmer nightclub certainly didn't seem like the place to have an in-depth discussion about destroying existence. She knew she'd eventually need to trust the crew with more information, but she was finally making some friends and enjoying where she was at. She didn't want her darkstone to ruin this, and the stone seemed to have a way of messing things up, like dimensions. "It's complicated. I'll fill you in later. Let's just stay away from them. They'll ruin our cool vibe."

Ginger shook her head, watching the men attempt to dance. "They're pitiful. Let me show you how it's supposed to be done. Come on, Doc." She grabbed Hawk's hand and pulled him into the crowd.

Ara felt the floor vibrate under her feet as the bass pumped louder. She looked over at Jay and Sid. They were still transfixed by the snake dancers. Keiko sat sipping a cocktail, surrounded by male admirers. Saiph stood in the corner with some bouncers. He appeared to be scanning the club for potential targets.

Sid stared at a Nahn woman on one of the platforms. "That snake dancer looks like the Enchantress."

"She definitely is enchanting," said Jay.

"That's got to be her. She has the same tribal tattoo down her back. I used to be a huge fan of hers when I was a teenager. She was one of the only female gladiators who could fight the Allosaurus. Got injured during a match and retired young. Looks good for being in her mid-thirties."

"Must be all that exercise she gets."

"Man, what I would give to spend some time with her tonight."

"Sid, we're VIP. You can do whatever you want. Go talk to her when she's on break." Jay flashed his wristband at the bar. "Two Cloud Nines. We're gonna give you a little liquid courage, my friend."

As the song faded to its end, an announcer stepped on stage. "Ladies and gentleman, we are just minutes away from the moment you've been waiting for. All the way from the Pisces cluster, we have tonight, exclusively at Snake Charmer ... SuperNova!"

The crowd went wild. It was a packed club.

"We also have DJ Slither in the house, spinning some of the hottest mixes in the universe."

A slender bald man covered in snake tattoos and piercings stuck out his tongue, split into two parts to resemble a reptile.

"And last, but certainly not least, we have our talented, tempting, universe-famous snake dancers!"

The crowd whistled and cheered, raising their drinks to the ladies.

"As a reminder, please don't touch the snakes unless given permission by their handler. Snake Charmer, are you ready to explode!"

The sound became deafening as the lights dimmed. A spotlight illuminated the stage and green fog rolled in. Out of the smoke appeared a Leo wearing baggy clothes with artistic flames, similar to the ones on his Photon-X skyship. Around his neck was a gold chain with a large pi symbol dangling from the bottom. The music started pumping and everyone was, for lack of a better word, exploding, dancing intensely to the extremely catchy song.

"Let's dance." Sid grabbed Ara's hand and showed her some moves.

She tried to copy his lead and after several attempts seemed to get the hang of it.

"Hey, not bad," said Sid.

Even Jay and Keiko were out on the dance floor, although Keiko was being too ladylike to really get down and Jay was watching the snake dancers more than dancing. Ginger had no qualms about letting herself go and was probably the crew's best dancer. Hawk and Sid weren't bad either. Saiph stayed in his corner by the bouncers, bobbing his head to the beat.

Ara eyed the two masons, laughing at Judah as he stiffly moved his muscled body and Gad as he attempted to do an epileptic version of the robot. How in the dark did they find me? I wonder if they're just big SuperNova fans. They sure attempted to dress like him. It doesn't matter anyway. *Pandora* is my home now. I'm not going back to the Brotherhood, no matter how hard they try to convince me.

A server holding a tray of drinks walked through the crowd and approached Ara. "White Hole?"

"Sure." Ara took the beverage. She had no idea what a White Hole was, but it looked interesting. It tasted like creamy coffee mixed with vodka. She continued to sip it as she danced with Ginger, Hawk, Sid, and Keiko. Jay had left the area. Probably looking for someone to couple with, she thought.

"Hey Ginger, want to dance?" asked Sid, moving closer to her.

"I'm dancing with Hawk."

Sid took another swig of his Cloud Nine. "I'm gonna check out the VIP lounges."

Ginger watched him disappear through the sea of people and head towards the back of the club. "I'm still mad at Sid. He thinks he's so much better than me because he went to Ophi. He says I talk about things I don't understand, well so does he. I got into college you know, but I had to take care of my family."

Ara was afraid Ginger might break into a long story. She didn't mind listening, but she was feeling a little queasy. "Hey, I need to find a bathroom. Just have fun. Don't pay any attention to him."

"Okay, but hurry back. The lines for the restroom can be long. You don't wanna miss the finale. I betcha he'll sing 'Massive.'"

Ara was getting dizzy and nauseous. Probably from drinking and dancing, she thought. Maybe I'll feel better if I throw up. She wound her way through the crowd. The heat was making it harder to breathe. Sweat soaked through her purple dress and the room started spinning as the hazy image of a man moved towards her.

Who does Ginger think she is? She can be so impossible sometimes, thought Sid, approaching one of the VIP lounges.

He entered a room filled with plush black velvet furniture and threw himself down on a couch. "This is posh." Overhead was a ceiling of fiber-optic stars twinkling in and out. Large tropical trees twisted around the room and crawled up the walls.

Through the leaves he saw a Nahn woman appear, caressing a snake coiled around her torso. It had a long, whitish-purple stripe down its body, interspersed with a series of golden-brown hourglass shapes. The woman was tan with straight black hair falling down her back. She wore a bikini designed to match her snake's colors, accented by snake fang earrings and a necklace with a gray stone at the end. A tiny silver snake was decoratively coiled around the stone.

Oh man, it's the Enchantress. He sat up. Okay Sid, keep it together. His mind flashed to his bedroom as a teenager. Her gladiator poster was hanging on his wall.

"Good evening. How are you feeling tonight?" She moved in closer.

"I ... um ... I'm okay, thanks."

"Just okay? Well that's not going to do. Gabon doesn't want you to be just okay."

"Who's Gabon?"

"Why my snake, silly. Isn't he beautiful?" She allowed Gabon to creep onto one of the lower tree branches.

"Yes, but not as beautiful as you." That was lame, he thought. Come on. You can do better than that. "You know, I was a really big fan of yours growing up. That fight you had with the raptor was epic."

"Really big?" She sat down next to him and placed her hand on his thigh.

"Huge. I even had an Enchantress action figure, not like I played with it or anything. It was a collector's item."

"What did you play with?" She slowly slithered her hand higher.

"Um ... I..."

"My name's Lilith," she whispered in his ear, "and I'm going to make you feel better than just okay." She leaned in and softly kissed him, running her hands up his body.

"Enchant me."

Lilith ripped off Sid's shirt and pulled him down towards her.

This is the most amazing night of my life, he thought, allowing himself to get lost in her embrace. He couldn't believe his good fortune. Lilith was clearly experienced. She smelled incredible, like coconut mixed with a fresh tropical breeze. He imagined himself on an island in Cancer listening to the waves crash—

Owww! Large two-inch fangs sank deeply into the flesh of his right leg. He tried to scream, but nothing came out. The intensity of the pain was unbearable.

"Oh Gabon, how could you? That wasn't very nice to do to our guest." Lilith bent over to move her snake back. "I'm so sorry. Normally he stays in the trees. Wait here. I'll go get the antivenom." She ran out of the room, leaving Sid withering in pain.

"Hey, don't—" His eyes widened as he saw Gabon slithering in the corner. The snake crept closer, curling up by the couch. Why would she leave me in here with this thing?

He limped over to the door. It wouldn't open. He tried again. The door had been locked. He started pressing random numbers on the interior keypad. I'm trapped. I'm going to die! I've got to get out of here.

"Help!" he screamed, but the loud hip-hop music drowned out his pleas. He instinctively reached for his gun, realizing he didn't have it on him. He tried to break a limb off the tree to move Gabon away, but the branches were large and made of plastic. Fake, of course. Too good to be true, Sid. Too good to be true. What was I thinking?

"Help, somebody, anybody, help!" He convulsed and urinated on himself. "Help! Please All, help me!" His eyelids grew puffy and his throat swelled, constricting his airway. Then he passed out on the floor.

Chapter 24

Ginger looked anxiously around the club. "Where's Ara? It shouldn't take her this long to use the bathroom."

"Maybe she's sick in one of the stalls," said Keiko. "I'll go look for her in the ladies room."

"She could be in the VIP lounges with Sid," said Hawk. "They were dancing together earlier. I'll head back there and check."

"She's gonna miss the last song." Ginger stood on her toes, trying to see above people's heads. "It's impossible to make her out in such a large crowd, especially with all these moving lights."

Hawk began making his way to the lounges. He ran into Jay, who was sitting at a table with his arms around two pretty girls.

"You know, I really am a pirate." Jay took another sip of his Cloud Nine. "Been all over the universe."

"That sounds dangerous." A Qian female ran her hand through her blond hair.

"Tell us about your space adventures," said the other, a beautiful Mori.

"Hey Jay, have you seen Ara?" asked Hawk.

"Nope. She's probably coupling somewhere. It's hard not to be in the mood here." Jay cast a seductive smile at his female admirers.

Saiph materialized out of the crowd and approached Jay's table. "Two men were watching us. They just moved off the grid."

"Were they bad dancers?" asked Hawk.

"Terrible."

"Probably those guys I pointed out earlier. I noticed them glancing our way a lot too. Have you seen Ara?"

"Her last known whereabouts were in sector two of the club. I saw her moving towards sector three but then lost sight of her. This is why I wanted to bring Isis."

"Keiko's already checking the restrooms. I'm going to look in the VIP lounges."

"Sector six. I will come with you."

"What does he mean, sector?" asked the blond-haired girl.

"Oh, he's an Orion," said Jay. "They see things differently."

The Mori looked impressed. "You're friends with an Orion?"

"That's how I roll." Jay continued flirting with the girls, seemingly unconcerned with Ara's whereabouts.

Hawk and Saiph made their way to the lounges. The first lounge had several couples busy drinking and embracing.

The second had a snake dancer giving a private dance to a man. "Hey, I'm paying good money for this. Get out!"

"Apologies." Hawk shut the door and continued on. "It looks like there's another room back here."

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but lounge three is not operational right now. Our first two lounges are available for your enjoyment." Lilith smiled, entering the second lounge.

Hawk tried the door anyway. It didn't open. He pointed to a keypad on the wall. "It requires a passcode."

"I will make it operational." Saiph pulled out his antibow and shot an arrow into the door, causing it to explode. "A door is always open to an Orion."

"Sid!" Hawk gasped.

Gabon was crawling towards Sid as he lay passed out on the floor.

Saiph drew his bow and pierced the snake, obliterating it on impact.

"He's been bit by a viper." Hawk pulled up Sid's pant leg to inspect the wound. The area around the bite was red and severely swollen. "This is bad. The venom works quickly. We need to get him to *Pandora* immediately."

Saiph picked up Sid's body and carried him through the club. SuperNova was on stage performing his hit song "Massive," making it harder to navigate around the crowd.

"Move out of the way," yelled Hawk to several curious strangers.

“It gets lonely out in space, but being a—”

“Captain, he’s been bit by a viper.” Saiph held up Sid’s limp body.

Jay’s two female admirers looked at each other in shock.

“What? These snakes aren’t supposed to be poisonous. Can you treat him, Doc?”

“Not here. I think the snake was a Gabon viper, a rare indigenous species from the Leo cluster. We’ll have to go there to get antivenom. I can stall the envenomation, but we don’t have much time.”

“Take him to *Pandora*. I’ll round up the girls. Where the dark’s Ara?”

Chapter 25

Ara opened her eyes to the living room of a two-story luxurious penthouse. The floors were made of marble and romantic paintings adorned the walls. The penthouse had antique furniture and a chandelier hanging from a high ceiling. There were steps going up to an open second floor bedroom with a four-poster mahogany bed. Sheer drapes hung from the bed's canopy. The living room had a panoramic view of Corvus, the city's neon casinos brightening the night. Judging from below, she guessed she was on the top floor of Eden.

Ara rose from the chaise lounge she'd been lying on and walked towards the door. "The toilet's probably made of gold."

"Only the faucets. A golden toilet would be excessive." Vela descended the stairs, startling Ara. She was dressed in a pink satin nightgown with a matching chiffon robe.

Even her sleeping attire is elegant, thought Ara. She didn't trust this lady at all. She pulled the handle to one of the wooden double doors.

"You will find that it's locked. You need a passcode."

"Let me out!" She kicked the door several times.

"My dear, you're making a scene. Sit down so we can chat." Vela patted the cushion on her empire couch.

"A scene for who? It's just me and you in here."

"And Alvah. He's making us cookies in the kitchen."

"Howdy." Alvah appeared in the living room with an ornate silver tray of chocolate chip cookies. He placed the tray on the coffee table in front of Vela.

Alvah was still dressed like a cowboy. He was in his late thirties but looked slightly older. His fair skin had seen too much unprotected sunlight, causing his face to be covered with rosy splotches. He wore a large Capricorn belt buckle, ten-gallon hat over his red ponytail, and snakeskin boots.

Ara stood firmly by the door. "What do you want?"

"To help you, Ara." Vela smiled, shooing Alvah back into the kitchen.

"By spiking my drink and dragging me here? I'd put you more on the problem side of the equation. And how do you know my name?"

"You mumbled it to Alvah as he was helping you out of the club. You were complaining of feeling dizzy and nauseous. He said you told him the room was spinning around you. Ara, nightclubs are a dangerous place for young, pretty girls like yourself. Alvah was concerned someone spiked your drink to take advantage of you, so he brought you to me. He wanted you to be safe."

"Oh yeah, well then why's the door locked?"

"Sometimes people are confused when they wake up from certain drugs. We want to make sure the effects of the drug have fully worn off before allowing you to return to *Pandora*."

"How do you—"

"You also asked for the captain of *Pandora*. See, you don't remember this. That's why we have you secured for your own protection, just until your head clears. Please, have a cookie. Alvah will be upset if you don't."

Ara didn't feel quite as nauseous now. She still wasn't convinced she trusted Vela, but she remembered seeing news reports about drugs being put in people's drinks.

"I'm curious though, if you were about to throw up, why not wormhole to the bathroom instead of navigating through the riff-raff of the crowd?"

She knows. "Wormhole? What are you talking about? Maybe you were drugged too."

Vela laughed and took out a necklace from her handbag. She walked over to Ara, dangling it in front of her. Then she placed her gray pearl between her fingers and gazed up at the top of the stairs, appearing there within moments.

"You've also been given this ability. I felt the energy of your stone." Vela descended the steps, putting on her necklace. "You're a very special person to be entrusted with one of these pearls. I know what a burden it is to carry and would like to help teach you its purpose. I'm sure you have lots of questions." She sat on the couch, leaving room for Ara.

She had tons. There was so much about the pearl that didn't make sense. Vela's stone was a different shade than hers. The Brotherhood never told her about gray darkstones. They also didn't know about the stone taking her straight to the exit door. In fact, she was beginning to think these masons were rather clueless about the pearl's power. Maybe she knows why my pearl captured a Qi, thought Ara. Vela seemed so confident, like she understood how life worked and how to arrange all the pieces around her.

Ara sat next to Vela on the empire couch and took a cookie. It was really good. Warm and moist with rich chocolate morsels melting in her mouth. "Why is your stone lighter than mine?"

"Because I've been using the pearl for its intended purpose. Everything exists for a reason, Ara."

"Sometimes I think life's meaningless. What's the reason any of us are here?"

"You ask big questions for a young mind. I like your curiosity. Don't ever lose that. You remind me a lot of myself when I was younger, before I was given a pearl."

"And then you found your reason?"

"I exist to help the pearl obtain what it is seeking."

"What's that?"

"To save Qi."

Ara thought about this. It sounded similar to the Brotherhood's mission. Did Vela know about the hallway and higher dimensions? "Like by recycling Qi back to the open?"

"No, the pearl doesn't recycle Qi. It holds onto it, saving the Qi for a higher purpose. Recycling is a small solution to the problem. We seek a final solution."

"We? There are more?"

"Yes. Every dimension has a pearl, but you're an interesting thing. You carry a ninth pearl, and our calculations have only shown eight dimensions. Do you know of another?"

"Oh, well the ninth is nothing. If there's something, there's gotta be nothing, right?"

"I see. That does make sense. You're quite clever. The Commissioner has also foreseen this."

"Who's the Commissioner?"

"Our leader. He's the one who uncovered the final answer to the prophecy. He'll be most interested in meeting you."

"What's the final answer?"

"The ninth dimension. You hold the key to unlocking the final dimension of existence, solving the problem of suffering that has haunted us since our species evolved. Wouldn't you like to relieve suffering, Ara?" Vela's eyes widened.

"Is that possible?" It sounded too good to be true. "The Brotherhood said the darkstones destroy dimensions, not unlock them."

Vela laughed lightly. "Who's this Brotherhood? Do they also have pearls?"

"No, they have other stones like a ruby, sapphire, diamond, emerald. They help Qi recycle back to life."

"So they couldn't possibly understand the darkstones. They haven't been given this burden to carry."

"Some of them actually wanted to delete me. They said I have a destructive nature and did terrible things in my past shells."

"To create something new, something old must die. That's how we grow. Don't look at your pearl as destructive. Look at its potential to create something better. The darkstones unlock the secrets of the universe, leading to the highest dimension of existence. The Commission needs you, Ara, to help us discover the ninth dimension."

"What happens if I unlock it?"

"Suffering will end and life will move to its final state of perfection."

"Like the kingdom of Utopia?" Ara thought back to Keiko's story of the princess and the dragon.

"Yes, I suppose you could think of it like that." Vela smiled, offering another cookie.

"If utopia exists, I'm sure it would have these cookies." Ara stuffed her mouth full of chocolatey goodness. "So how do I find the ninth dimension? I've only been to the seventh dimension's door."

Vela looked intrigued. "You've been past the fifth? What's it like?"

“Oh ... it’s ... it’s horrible.” Ara was worried about telling Vela what happened. She didn’t want her to start yelling like Simeon had, but Vela seemed to understand her better. She needed to stop pushing things back. It wasn’t healthy to keep running from her past. “At least that’s what it felt like when I was there. I didn’t mean to lose the Qi. I wanted to help it come back to the open, but there was nothing I could do. Marvin just stood there like a zombie. It seemed as if the dark energy was beckoning him to go through the door, and he had to follow its call. Behind the door was this large static screen. The sound was so loud and I tried to shout, warning him not to go through, but the noise drowned me out. Then he was gone, into the Shadows. I couldn’t save him.” Ara covered her face with her hands. “I’m such a failure. I never asked for this stone.” She was trembling. She hated feeling this vulnerable.

Vela placed an arm around her, hugging her closely. “Ara, listen to me. You are not a failure. You’re one person. You can’t fight the forces of dark energy alone. Don’t ever let someone make you feel less than the amazing person you are. We, the Commission, are here to help you fight the Shadows so you can be successful in your true calling. You will unlock the ninth dimension, curing us from the imperfection of life so no one will ever have to feel like a failure again.”

“You really think I can save the universe from suffering?” Ara wiped the tears off her face.

“I believe you’re the *one*. We need you, Ara. Will you join our Commission?”

Her head was spinning. How could she say no? If it was really her purpose to open the ninth dimension and find utopia, it would be selfish not to fulfill this task. She was relieved to know she wasn’t alone, but *Pandora* was her home. Her friends were there. She thought about her childhood dream of sailing to far-off planets around the universe. She would have to let that go, but it was a sacrifice she should make because it was the right thing to do for humanity. “Sometimes we make choices for the greater good that may not be the life we wanted. Others need us, so we sacrifice our dreams for them,” she remembered Ginger saying.

“Yes, I’ll help you.” Ara nodded, taking another cookie.

Chapter 26

Gad pointed up a flight of stairs. "The Rua took her this way."

"Look at the mud from those dirty snakeskin boots he was wearing," said Judah, examining the floor.

"What does he want with Ara?"

"He's probably with those people from the club. I bet they're pirates who've kidnapped her."

"She didn't look very imprisoned on the dance floor. I think we should summon Asher and Naphtali. If they're pirates, we'll need reinforcements."

Judah seemed offended, tensing up his muscles.

"You would obviously fight the captain. Might just want some backup for the rest of the crew, so you can concentrate your full strength on the leader. You know, cut off the snake at the head."

"That makes sense I guess. Okay, let's summon them in."

Gad took out the compacted staff from beneath his baggy clothes and quickly snapped it open. He placed his hand over the amethyst, causing it to glow. "Asher, Naphtali."

Both men appeared within seconds, their stones shining in the middle of their staffs.

"What are you wearing?" asked Naphtali, traditionally dressed in his deep blue robe.

"Disguises," said Judah.

"Have you found Ara?" The glow of Asher's diamond died down.

"Yes, she's here. We believe she's with a band of pirates."

"We saw them at the nightclub," said Judah. "Ara left with a Rua cowboy. We think they turned a corner to head this way."

"Is she their prisoner?" asked Naphtali.

"We're not sure," said Gad. "She was dancing with some of them at the SuperNova concert and seemed to be having a good time."

Naphtali raised an eyebrow. "You got to see SuperNova?"

"We were only there following Ara," said Judah quickly.

Asher lifted his staff. "Brothers, focus. If Ara's willingly with these outlaws, it'll be harder to convince her to return, but if she's their captive, she may view us as her savior. They could have brainwashed her as well. We need to be prepared for multiple avenues of attack. Whatever happens, we must bring back Ara."

"I'm ready to attack," said Judah, unfolding his ruby staff.

Naphtali faced Asher. "What if she doesn't want to come? I thought you said she needed to return of her own volition."

"Joseph has become increasingly concerned the girl will turn destructive. His instructions were to bring Ara back to him, even if she can't understand at the time why we're doing so. When she's ready, we'll reveal more."

Gad climbed the steps and examined the door at the top. "I think this is the penthouse. No other rooms have double doors. There's nothing else around this corner, so she's got to be up here."

"Brothers, extend your staffs," said Asher. "We're going in."

The four masons hit a small button on the metal centerpiece underneath their Qistones, causing very sharp spearheads to extend from the two outer points of their staffs.

"Shouldn't we knock first?" asked Naphtali.

"Yes, that would be polite," said Asher, rapping his fist on the door.

Chapter 27

Thud-thud-thud.

"I'm not going to answer that," said Vela, noticing Ara glance towards the door. "You're more important right now." She sat forward on the couch, actively listening to Ara as she discussed her experiences with the Brotherhood. "So you were saying there are twelve Numist priests from an ancient universe who use their stones to help Qi recycle, but none of them have pearls, right?"

"Yeah, they have these different colored—"

A loud thud resounded in the room.

Alvah ran out, unsheathing his machete. "What the dark's going on?"

A set of spears came plunging into the door, creating a hole. Wood chippings fell to the floor as a second set of spears stabbed through. A hand reached into the gap, feeling for the handle. "It's locked from the interior too," said a familiar voice.

Naphtali, thought Ara, seeing the sleeve of his blue robe.

"You need a passcode," said Vela.

"Don't tell me what I need!" Judah jammed his staff into the door and twisted it between the other holes, creating large cracks in the wood that expanded the opening. He dove through the gap, somersaulting into the room with his staff. "Ara, we're here to rescue you!"

Vela looked Judah up and down. "Is this one of the brothers?"

"Yeah, that's Judah Mason."

"Questionable taste in fashion."

Gad came tumbling into the room, hitting his head on a side table.

"Good grief. Let me open the door before someone gets hurt." Vela punched the numbers into her interior keypad and pulled open what remained of one of her double doors. "Alvah, put away that knife and let's be civilized."

Alvah followed command, watching the men closely.

Asher and Naphtali entered the room, keeping their staffs pointed forward.

"I don't need rescuing," said Ara, crossing her arms.

"Please, have a seat. I am Vela Medina and this is my friend, Alvah McCormic."

"What do you want with Ara?" asked Naphtali.

"I was only trying to help her. Pirates drugged her in my father's nightclub. And you are...?"

"Naphtali Mason, her legal guardian."

"So she was taken by pirates." Judah seemed pleased with himself.

"Thank you for returning her safely to us. Come on, Ara. It's time to go home." Naphtali grabbed her arm lightly.

Ara quickly wrested it loose. "I'm an adult now. Check the Human Registry. I'm not going back. You all wanted to kill me anyway."

"I know we've made some mistakes, but don't let that deter you from your higher—"

"I found her!" Jay dashed through the door, brandishing his sword. Ginger and Keiko came running in behind him, looking exhausted. The crew was still dressed in their nightclub attire.

Judah seemed confused. "Who are you?"

"They're the pirates," said Alvah. "Keep up."

"Don't tell me what to do, cowboy!" Judah pointed his staff at Alvah.

"Are you threatening me?" Alvah pulled his machete back out. "I just sharpened this."

Asher held up his staff. "I think we should all sit down and—"

"Ara, we've got to get out of here," said Jay. "Sid's dying."

"What?"

"He's been bit by a snake. I'll explain later. Let's go." Jay grabbed Ara's hand, tugging her towards the door.

"Jay, I have to stay here. I'm sorry. You told me not to run from my order. That my path was tied to the pearl. I've found other dark masons who can teach me its purpose." Ara moved beside Vela.

She touched Ara's shoulder and smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry. The Commission will take good care of her."

"I don't trust these masons. You've crossed *Pandora's* path, so now you're stuck with me." Jay threw Ara over his shoulder and headed towards the door.

"And me." Ginger pulled out her machete.

"Put me down or I'll warp."

Asher blocked his path. "Ara must come with us."

"Move out of my way, old man. Don't make me hurt you." Jay plunged his sword towards Asher's neck.

Gray hair whipped Ara's face as Asher rammed his staff between Jay's neck, slamming him down on the floor.

Ara found her pearl and warped upstairs. She slid through the second floor patio doors, which opened to a small terrace on top of the cliff. I can warp down from—

A Nahn woman wearing snakeskin pants and a corset grabbed her from behind with a long, double-sided spear. She pushed the middle of the spear horizontally up so it rested tightly against Ara's stomach.

Vela wormholed onto the terrace, holding a bottle of wine.

"Is this the one you wanted?" asked the Nahn.

"Yes Liliith, thank you for coming so soon."

"My pleasure."

The masons and pirates emerged from the penthouse. Alvah and Judah were already in full battle. Jay was raging after Asher and Ginger leaped towards Gad.

"Let me go!" shouted Ara. "Vela, what's going on?"

"Lilith's on our side. She has a darkstone too. Let Alvah and Liliith take care of these people who don't understand you. Come sit on the terrace and have a glass of wine. Don't worry about this mess." Vela poured two glasses of red wine. She stood calmly on her patio, watching the spectacle. This game could get interesting, she thought.

Naphtali and Judah took their staffs and twisted them between the ends of Liliith's spearheads, lifting the weapon enough for Ara to free herself.

Lilith spun her spear towards Naphtali. "Are you challenging a gladiator? Let me give you something to really pray about!"

Ara warped to a natural bridge connecting two large cliff dwellings. "Wine! Vela, people are trying to kill each other over this stupid rock!" She removed her necklace, dangling it over the edge. "A utopia isn't worth it if people can't change their natures. They'd destroy it like you're destroying each other!"

Vela set down her glass and grabbed her darkstone.

Keiko slowly approached Ara. "Don't lose faith in people. You need the pearl to save the dragon."

"That's just a myth."

"So are black pearls, but here we are." Keiko threw two antistars into the bridge, creating a large gap.

Vela warped, appearing on the edge of the cliff. She nearly fell into the newly formed divide but stepped back in time, regaining her balance. "You promised to join the Commission. I won't forget that," she called across the chasm, "and I'll continue to share this burden with you."

Ara didn't know what to think. Maybe her first instinct was right about Vela, and the Brotherhood certainly had ulterior motives. *Pandora*, despite being pirates, seemed to be the most trustworthy group at the moment.

"I have strict instructions from Captain Hood not to let you run away again. Follow me. We're going to *Pandora*."

"What about Jay and Ginger?"

"We'll come back for them." Keiko led Ara to an elevator on the adjacent cliff top.

Vela warped back to her terrace, amused. All this trouble over such a little stone. Ara was right. A utopia wasn't worth it. Humanity didn't deserve it. Vela thought she had to appeal to the silly human desire of paradise to win Ara over. After all, convincing someone to delete had to be done delicately. She'd told Alvah this lie and assumed Edison had given Liliith a similar story. Liliith was always talking about finding her Prince Charming when they reached utopia. What unevolved dribble.

I've underestimated Ara. She's too wise to believe in myths. I may need to adapt my approach. I could convince her our true mission's correct. She has an inner darkness. I can sense it. She must be the *one* spoken of in the prophecy. Ara's different than the others in the Commission. She's reluctant about the pearl, hesitant to use its power. I need to help Ara embrace her calling and make the final sacrifice. This is going to be a challenge, thought Vela. I like Ara. She's not boring.

Gad planted his spears in the ground and sprang into the air, circling the staff to kick Ginger in the chest. She collected herself back up, but a second kick rendered her unconscious.

Jay climbed onto the rocks to gain the higher ground advantage against Asher.

The Mason of the Diamond was a strong fighter, using his staff to vault onto the boulders after Jay. "I don't wish to kill you, but if I must, I promise to guide your Qi back to life."

"Very generous of you, Psi." Jay thrust his sword forward.

"Ara must return to us." Asher shielded himself with a boulder.

"What do you want with her?"

"To train her. She holds a very dangerous weapon." He used his staff to defensively block Jay's sword, plunging his spears at Jay when he found a window of attack.

Jay scrambled higher to avoid being stabbed. He tried to angle down on Asher, but the priest's staff deflected his blows. "The stone chose Ara. You should trust her to use it right."

"She doesn't have all the information."

Alvah slashed Judah's arm, blood soaking through the Nahn's clothes.

"I liked these clothes!" Judah caught Alvah's machete between the spears of his staff and twisted it with such force it flung the weapon over the cliff. "Oops." He shrugged, smiling at Alvah.

The machete fell onto *Pandora's* deck, almost hitting Saiph as he guided the skyship up the cliff dwellings. "Keiko, tie this to the side rail." He tossed her a thick rope.

"Can't we just use the hoist?"

"Ginger's been improving its performance. It's not operational now."

Keiko pursed her lips. Why couldn't Ginger leave well enough alone? The hoist had been working just fine.

"When we get to the top, I'm going to steer *Pandora* over to Jay and Ginger so they can climb on board. I'll need you to help me navigate."

"Roger, First Mate."

They rose over the cliff, scanning the situation on the ground. Ara pointed down at the rocks. "There's Jay."

"And Ginger, she looks hurt," said Keiko. "I hope she's okay."

"Drop the rope," said Saiph.

Ara helped Keiko hoist it overboard.

Judah ran to the rope, folded his staff, and climbed towards *Pandora*.

Jay jumped from the high rocks, twisting his ankle in the process. He hobbled over to Ginger as pain shot up the side of his left leg. Asher scrambled down the rocks in pursuit.

Naphtali and Lilith were still engaged in a heated battle while Alvah warped to grab Ginger's machete.

Gad was holding Vela captive on the terrace. She seemed undisturbed by this, almost serene. "You can't stop the Commission. We're destined by the order."

Gad raised his amethyst staff towards Vela's chest. "To do what?"

"Fix a mistake."

"Ginger, wake up!" Jay shook her vigorously. "She's out cold!"

Ara touched her pearl, concentrating on the ground below. She wasn't sure this would work, but Jay couldn't climb while holding Ginger.

"Ara, don't!" shouted Keiko, but it was too late.

Ara appeared on the ground next to Jay.

"I told you to stay on the ship."

"Since when have I listened to you? Go. I've got Ginger."

Jay glanced over at Asher, who'd made his way down the rocks and was heading towards him.

"Trust me, Captain."

Jay hesitated for a moment, then nodded. He grabbed the rope and began climbing as Asher approached.

"Ara, please, we need you. You're a mason."

"The darkstone can't channel Qi. That's not its purpose, at least not anymore. *Pandora's* my home now. I'd rather be a pirate than a mason." Ara gathered Ginger in her arms and held her close. She felt the pearl's energy pulse as she concentrated on the ship's stardome.

Nothing happened. What am I doing wrong? She tried again, burning the image of where she wanted to be in her mind. She and Ginger were next to the trees. She could see the red apples vividly. Still nothing.

"You can't bring another Qi. The darkstone only transports its mason." Asher grabbed Ara. "You're coming with me. I'm sorry, but you'll understand later." He yanked the necklace over her head, placing it in his pocket.

"That's mine! Give it back."

"I don't want you disappearing."

Judah pulled himself onto *Pandora's* deck and moved towards Saiph and Keiko. Saiph instinctively drew his antibow, but Keiko stopped him. "He's a priest, despite his present fashion statement. Killing him may disrupt your order."

Saiph nodded. "I will not waste an arrow. Take the wheel, my lady. I shall disable him." He grabbed their newly acquired machete in one hand and some riggings with the other, swinging down from the quarterdeck.

"An Orion!" Judah grinned. "Now I might actually break a sweat."

"You will break more than a sweat." Saiph swung the machete at Judah, who blocked it with his staff.

"I expected more from the Army's elite."

"I am just stretching my arms."

"Crew, Ara's in trouble!" Jay called as he clung to the rope. "Navigate *Pandora* to that gray-robed man."

"Aye, aye Captain." Keiko turned the helm towards the glint of silver down below.

Visibility increased as Noriko's star rose in the east.

Naphtali had pinned Lilith down and was pressing his staff horizontally into her chest. He knelt on top of her legs, preventing Lilith from kicking free. "What are you doing with the darkstones?"

Lilith had a dreamy look in her eyes. "We're turning darkness to light, holding Qi till we can unlock paradise."

"Life already has light. Dawn is approaching."

A beautiful sunrise appeared over the desert, casting a pastel radiance upon the cliff top.

"But it also has darkness," said a voice from behind. Alvah raised Ginger's machete and beheaded Naphtali in one slice.

"No!" screamed Asher as the light of dawn hit his diamond.

Alvah knelt over Naphtali's body, draining the Qi into his pearl. He stood up and smiled at Asher. "Your brother's in my pen now."

"I'm gonna delete you!" Gad ran raging towards him, leaving Vela at the terrace. He stabbed Alvah in the leg with one of his spearheads, twisting it deeper for additional pain.

Jay came at Asher from behind, swinging from the dangling rope. He held his sword to the mason's neck. "Let's try this again. You're outnumbered, Psi. I'll take our crew member back now, along with her stone. Pirates or dark masons, what'll it be?"

Asher nodded sadly and let Ara go, placing the pearl necklace into her palm. "We will be back to claim you. Your Qi has been bound to the Brotherhood and the fate of All. I'm sorry for this burden. A mason's life is not his own. It was a choice made long ago. I will fend off the dark masons for you."

"Wait." Ara warped to Naphtali's remains. His blue eyes were still open, frozen in death. "Goodbye, Naph. I won't let it pull me to the Shadows. I promise." She took his staff, noticing an empty space where the sapphire once rested.

She warped back and presented the staff to Asher. "I'm sorry for your loss. Naphtali was kind to me."

"Thank you." He got out his mobile and called Joseph. "Summon a Circle immediately. We've lost Naphtali to the darkstone."

Jay had picked up Ginger and cut off the end of the rope, tying her tightly around himself. He grabbed the rope firmly. "Ara, get back to the ship now!"

She nodded, warping to the main deck of *Pandora*.

"Set sail!" shouted Jay.

Keiko navigated *Pandora* away from the cliff as Jay and Ginger swung wildly from the rope.

"Give up," said Saiph, slamming Judah against the mainmast.

"Only if I'm deleted."

"Orions don't kill priests. It violates our code."

As Judah pressed his staff against Saiph's machete, his ruby began to burn. "You're fortunate. I have been summoned." Judah touched his Qistone and was gone.

"It is you who is fortunate," said Saiph.

Lilith threw her spear at Gad, but he took the dark mason by surprise, warping before her weapon pierced his body.

Vela watched Asher disappear, then started on her second glass of wine as Alvah limped over to her, gripping his bloody leg.

"I knew when you said 'trust me,' it was too good to be true," said Jay once he was back on *Pandora*. "It's a good thing I came to save the day. First Mate, set course for the Leo cluster. I've got another life to save."

"Aye, aye Captain, but which port gets us near Leo?"

"Argh, I don't have time to deal with those stupid poet cartographers. We'll head to the Hydra terminal and buy the official deciphered maps."

"Can we afford that?" asked Saiph.

"Nope, but I can't have a mission without my crew. We'll just have to find another job."

"I thought void ports weren't put by cluster planets because of the sanctions," said Ara.

"Once in a while they'll place one close. It's not often, but with the election approaching I bet void politicians have made a deal with Rex. There's increased interest in the president's reunification efforts among void governors, and he's done some campaigning out here."

"I hope you're right, Captain."

"Of course I'm right." Jay donned his hat and took the helm.

Chapter 28

14A, Year 3034

Antares

Galaxy 8343, Scorpio cluster

“With the election just days away, the presidential race is getting tighter between incumbent Zaniah Rex and Plexian party candidate Sandra Anzu. In a stunning turn of events, the independent Senate majority leader, Gerald Mondola of Leo, has changed his support to a third party candidate from the Guardians, Takeo Chen, billionaire owner of Eclipse hotels. Will this dark horse candidate eclipse Anzu in the election? Many moderate Plexians agree with Chen’s support of void representation in the Senate. Keep your holovision set on UNN for around the clock coverage of this exciting race.

“Scorpio authorities are now blaming the supervisor of Reactor Fourteen, Monty Dalton, for the theft of fifty barrels of neutrino fuel, stating he had close ties to pirates in the Aries cluster. Monty Dalton was also found in possession of PM and officials speculate he may have betrayed his company, Jetty Fuel, so he could continue his costly addiction. He is currently on bond while awaiting trial for charges of grand larceny and possession of PM.

“A Universal Guard patrol ship was found out in Arm B of Scorpio Galaxy 8343 with the body of the murdered captain still on board. It is assumed the other guards on this fully staffed patrol ship were tossed overboard by unknown pirates flying under the Aries flag. Traces of dust were found at the crime scene suggesting that antiweapons may have been used. The pirates are presumed to be connected to Monty Dalton, who right now is the chief suspect in organizing these deletions. If charged and found guilty, he could face life in prison. Stay tuned for a UNN special investigative report, *Monty Dalton: Addicted to a Dream*, where our own Paul Cooperson investigates how this simple family man could have fallen into a life of drugs, theft, and possibly even murder.”

Monty chugged another Quark beer. He turned off his HV and crushed the can, chucking it into a pile of empty cans in the corner of his living room. He picked up a small photo of his family. They were smiling in front of Stinger Stadium. A knock interrupted his memories and he staggered towards the front door, opening it to find a beautiful Maian woman dressed in a tailored suit. She had blond hair cut in a stylish bob and was holding a notepad.

“Hello Monty, may I come in?”

“Are you a reporter?”

“Yes.” Vela showed her UNN badge with the name Lyla Ortiz on it. “It’s most unfortunate how you’re being portrayed in the news. It must be so hard on your family, listening to the constant stories of your alleged misconduct. I’m here because I want to get your side of the story.”

“Sit down, please. Would you like some coffee?”

“No, thank you. Where is your family? You have two boys, right?”

“Steve and Sam. My wife’s taken them to fluxball practice.”

“Monty, how have you been doing? The media can be so relentless, and I apologize on behalf of UNN for what your family must be going through being in the spotlight like this.”

“I know you probably hear this a lot, ma’am, but I’m innocent. I’ve never done PM in my life. I don’t know how it could have gotten in my bathroom. My wife Mary swears up and down it wasn’t hers, and my sons are only eight and ten. Mary doesn’t even believe me. She wants a divorce. Says she’s gonna move back with her family on planet Sargas. I don’t understand why this is happening to me. I’ve worked so hard to make my way up to supervisor of the plant. We even won Best Managed Reactor of the Month.”

“Are you worried about working down in the government mines? Have you seen those studies about the harmful effects of long-term uranium exposure?” Vela tried her hardest to look concerned.

“Yeah, it eats away at you.”

“I did a story once on radiation sickness in migrant workers. The longer you’re down there, the more the radiation seeps into your cells, leading to inflammation, ulceration, muscle atrophy, necrosis, tumors, deformities, and eventually death.” She paused, allowing Monty time to digest this information. “Do you have health insurance to cover your medical costs once you’re released from prison?”

“Not now that I’m fired. I’ve been with Jetty twenty years. I don’t know what else I could do. Unimed isn’t gonna cover the hospital bills for radiation sickness.”

“It’s going to be hard to get another job, isn’t it? You’re all over the news.”

“You’re right.” Monty slumped his shoulders, looking defeated by life. “Everything’s dark.”

“How will you care for your family?”

“I ... I don’t know. We lost a lot of our savings when the real estate market tanked. The only thing I have left is a life insurance plan.”

“How did those barrels go missing?”

“I keep going over it in my mind. I think it was pirates, but I don’t have any connection to them like they say I do.”

“They found excerpts of a Web exchange between you and a contact named Hesiod discussing the operation. That’s going to be hard to disprove.”

“I know it looks like it came from my computer, but it wasn’t me. I swear it! I think I got hacked or something. I’m ruined.” Monty broke into tears. “And my family’s ruined. How am I gonna send my sons to college now? What kind of life will they have working the mines? They’ll probably get radiation sickness. My dad was a miner. Died young. I don’t want them to suffer a similar fate, and I worked hard so they wouldn’t have to. It’s all been for nothing.”

Vela placed a hand lightly on his shoulder. “How much is your life insurance policy?”

“My life ... um, a million pi.”

“That’s a lot of money. I see you care enough about your family to plan well for their future. Monty, your family doesn’t have to be ruined if you can be brave and do the selfless thing for the well-being of your wife and children.” Vela opened her purse, retrieving two white pills. “I will give you a beautiful eulogy in the news. A story of a man wrongfully accused of a crime, framed by the scoundrel pirate Hesiod. Monty Dalton – a family man who loved his wife and sons and wanted to do the right thing for their future.”

Monty looked down at his family photo. He didn’t know what to do. Unless his family was able to access the life insurance policy, they’d probably become destitute. Steve and Sam deserved better than that. They were his legacy. He loved Mary, but she seemed adamant about a divorce. How did things go so wrong? He thought if he followed the Holy Order, All would reward him. He wasn’t a bad person. The universe was so unfair. Why would someone want to hurt him like this? He was always the guy trying to help people out. He didn’t think he had enemies.

“All has forsaken me.” His hand was shaking as he picked up a pen and wrote:

Steve and Sam, I won’t be able to make it to your fluxball game, but I know you’ll be great. You’re the best sons a dad could ever hope for. I love you so much. I’m sorry I can’t be in your horizon. The sun is setting for me, but you will rise with the dawn and climb higher than your old man ever could. Mary, our Qi has been joined. When I recycle, it’s my dream that we’ll meet again in a better universe. May order find you.

Monty couldn’t bring himself to sign the note. He placed it by his family photo and swallowed the pills, falling sideways onto the couch. A few minutes later, the Qi rose out of his body.

Vela leaned over Monty’s chest to receive his energy. She smiled, watching her pearl turn just a little grayer. Monty’s meaningless existence had been ended.

Chapter 29

It was dark in the woods behind Stone Castle. Dense clouds covered the night sky. It looked like it was about to storm, an eerie calm permeating the air. The clouds were playing hide-and-seek with the moon and every so often a sliver of light would appear. The only other light came from the forest below where eleven robed men stood silently around a ring of fire. In the middle of the fire was a lone staff. They fixed their eyes upon the staff, feeling the warmth of the flames as the smoke rose to join the stormy sky.

Joseph looked into his opal, watching the prism of colors shift with the dance of the flames. After a moment of reflection, he addressed the masons. "Brothers, this is Naphtali's final Circle. The Mason of the Sapphire loved to tell the story of Virgo's lost daughter. He would say, 'Do not mourn for a point in time that no longer exists. Existence cannot be contained in a single point. It is all around us in the now.' Masons, death will not frame our lives. There is always an open door, and we hold the Qi that can open these doors.

"It is time to close the door on Naphtali's life and entrust his Qi to All. We move forward to open another door, for a new mason is in our now and the darkstones are upon us, beckoning dimensions. As long as our Brotherhood exists, we will fight for these dimensions. That was our oath made long ago, when death had caved in around us. That is our commission. That is our hope. For All!"

"For All!" The Brotherhood held out their staves to touch Naphtali's as it withstood the engulfing flames.

The masons slowly left the forest until only two remained. Joseph and Asher stared at the burning staff for several minutes, silently taking in the depth of Naphtali's loss. The fire was getting hotter and the staff would soon begin to melt.

"Joseph, I'm afraid. The darkstones have returned and found their masons."

"How many stones have you seen?"

"Four."

"That's not enough to cause a Shattering."

"I believe there are more. The eight pearls are connected to each other. They went through the door together. Counting Ara's stone, it could mean all nine have returned to the open. If the eighth dimension is destroyed, there will be no hope of life in any universe. All will perish to zero."

Asher and Joseph watched the staff begin to break down. The flames shot higher into the night as the smell of burnt metal and dense pine trees filled the forest air. The wind was picking up strength, and lightning flashed in the distance.

"There is always an open door." Joseph watched Naphtali's staff melt further down. He was silent for a few moments, meditating on the flame. "I see a path. We know dark masons can trap Qi inside their pearls. As long as a Qi stays confined within the darkstone, it cannot recycle. If we trained Ara to capture the Qi of the dark masons..."

"This may work, but she would have to perform the deletions herself. Draining Qi corrupts a dark mason. Do you think she's capable of betraying her own kind and staying resistant to the Shadows? I know she appears harmless, but Ara's not like us. She's been created for a different purpose than the Brotherhood. We must stay vigilant."

"She may be the *one*. Naphtali died for that belief. She'll need guidance on how to defeat a dark mason."

"I will train her," said Asher. "Her stone is meant to destroy, but she can choose what she destroys. We always have a choice."

"So you shall train her to make the right choice."

"What do you think the final number is, brother Joseph?"

"It is uncertain, but I hope that it's eternal."

The flames stabbed the darkness, absorbing the last remaining shards of the staff. The masons put up their hoods as rain poured down around them, slowly dousing the fire.

Asher turned to face Joseph. "Naphtali's staff is gone."

"His deletion has increased our understanding. No one dies in vain. Always seek the order, even in chaos."

Chapter 30

14A, Year 3034
Panthera
Galaxy 2030, Leo cluster

The jungle was dense and misty. Canopy trees towered overhead, allowing small pockets of light to shine onto the forest below. Panthera's jungle was filled with various vegetation including diverse species of ferns and liana. Vines wrapped around trees, creating a gigantic forest highway that monkeys were using to navigate to and from their homes above the ground.

Ginger watched a monkey crawling on a nearby vine. "All these monkeys, can't one of them be golden?" She had awakened in Libra before *Pandora* ported to the Leo cluster. Her last memory was of the Elara nebula. "You mean I got to see SuperNova perform and can't even remember it? Life's so unfair," she had said.

Ara didn't bother telling her she'd been mad at Sid. Ginger was really worried, asking Hawk to check his vitals every few minutes.

Sid was drifting in and out of consciousness and looked like death was waiting around the corner for him. He had seized violently several times since the crew had gotten to Panthera. His skin was bruised and inflamed, and the infection in his right leg was spreading.

"I'm gonna kill that snake dancer!" Ginger slashed through the brush with her machete.

"Are we almost there, Doc?" Ara was exhausted from carrying the stretcher on her shoulders with Hawk, Saiph, and Jay.

"I don't know. The Temple of the Golden Monkey isn't exactly marked on the map. Most Pantherans don't venture out to these remote parts of the planet. They're a bit superstitious. Claim the old continent's jungles are cursed."

"Great," mumbled Ginger. "These shamans should really make themselves more accessible. No wonder doctors look down on them."

The crew had initially contacted Hawk's alma mater, Panthera Medical School, but the Gabon viper was so rare neither the school nor hospital bothered carrying antivenom for it. These vipers existed in isolated regions populated by indigenous tribes. Hawk was raised in a tribal village on planet Regali where people still believed in shamans, and as a child he once witnessed a shaman heal someone bit by this viper.

Only a small subset of shamans still existed in the universe, and Hawk remembered hearing some lived on Panthera in the Temple of the Golden Monkey. It was the only place he knew to try since planet Regali continued to have massive genocides from tribes fighting with Scorpion drug lords over PM crops, which many natives built their livelihoods around. Hawk's tribe had been on the losing end of one of these massacres, his entire village destroyed except for a few Qi. Leo's senator continued to declare Regali a dangerous planet and restricted port travel to military and humanitarian aid personnel only.

"You've never been to this temple, right?" Keiko held open a map, scrutinizing the terrain.

"No, I just heard stories about it when I was a child," said Hawk. "My mother used to say, 'When two flows into one and the twisted tree turns straight, you'll see a golden monkey and his little golden gate.' I know it sounds crazy, but I don't know what else to try."

Jay pushed through some vines. "Wandering around a cursed jungle with gorillas and poisonous snakes to find a mythical golden monkey sounds perfectly sane to me."

"Don't forget the little golden gate," said Saiph.

"I wish we could have flown in *Pandora*. What's the point of having technology if we can't even use it." Ginger looked over at Hawk. "How's Sid doing?"

"Not good, I'm afraid. If we don't find this temple soon, he will pass to the fifth dimension."

Ginger walked ahead, violently hacking away at the vegetation in her path. "I won't let him die!"

"We wouldn't be able to see the temple from the air," said Hawk. "It's hidden deep under the jungle canopy. The shamans don't like technology. They prefer to be in nature. Claim it's how All intended us to live. They view dark energy as All's punishment for man refusing to stay in harmony with nature."

"The Mori have a saying: 'If you stand too long on the mountaintop, the wind will blow you off.' Nature's not meant to be conquered. It must be appreciated."

"Well while you go hug a tree, Keiko, I'm going to find a cure for Sid. You aren't helping us at all with these directions." Jay balanced the stretcher on his shoulders and yanked the map out of her hands.

"Hey, don't yell at her," said Hawk. "She's trying. This is the only area on Panthera with twisted trees, and it's not like we can put in 'Temple of the Golden Monkey' on the UPS."

Keiko remained poised. "I think trees may be more evolved than some of us. They don't waste time worrying. They just concentrate their energy on growing towards the sky."

"Doc, why's the jungle cursed?" asked Ara before Jay could say anything.

"Because many who enter never return."

"We're not gonna become a statistic," said Jay. "It looks like there's two rivers to the west that join up. That's gotta be two flowing into one."

"I was heading towards the east. See the trails that merge here." Keiko pointed to a quadrant on the map.

Saiph whistled to Isis, signaling her to fly back on his shoulder. "Why don't you ask All for guidance?"

"I don't have time for Numology," said Jay. "All doesn't care who lives or dies. Only that its existence is sustained."

"Can we rest our shoulders for a minute and take a vote?" The weight of the stretcher was causing severe aching in Ara's neck and upper back. "I say east. Keiko's good with maps. She found the Elara nebula."

"I concur." Hawk helped lower the stretcher. He then knelt down to check vitals.

Sid's eyes opened slightly when he felt his body hit the ground, but he looked too swollen from the poison to talk.

"Rivers flow, paths converge," said Ginger. "I think Jay's right. Head west."

Saiph spread his arms to the sky and released Isis. "*Nehes, nehes, nehes.*"

She flew to a tree straight ahead, perching on one of the high branches.

Jay glared at him. "What are you chanting? We need your vote."

"I am asking All to awaken. Isis will connect her energy to the order and guide us to this temple."

"Saiph, that's ridiculous. Animals don't have Qi, and she flew due north. The map shows nothing coming together there, only an area entitled 'Gorilla Mountain: Stay away! Cursed!!' There's even a skull next to the warning."

"The last time I prayed those words, a young captain saved my life. My vote is north."

"I will also support heading north," said Keiko.

"You're changing your answer!" yelled Jay.

"I never gave an answer, only where I was thinking of going. Since animals don't consciously choose their direction, maybe they're more in tune to All's direction."

"So we're going to follow a bird instead of using our brains? We might as well kill Sid now and be done with it."

"Don't talk like that!" Ginger teared up.

"We have a three-way tie and are wasting time. I could use my pearl to warp as far down the path as I can see in each direction."

"No, it's too dangerous. We stay together."

"Well I don't see you coming up with a better idea, Captain Hood. You're just as lost as the rest of us."

"We need to keep walking," said Hawk. "Crew, help me pick up the stretcher. Come on. Captain, make the call."

Saiph crossed his arms. "I think Isis should count as a vote."

"I'm not counting a bird's vote!"

"Fine. I'll change my vote. Let's just go east." Keiko was frustrated with the arguing.

"Don't let Jay boss you around like that," said Ara.

"He's not being bossy!" yelled Ginger. "He's just trying to make a decision."

The crew shouted back and forth at each other. They were all on edge and scared. Ara didn't know what to do. Everything looked the same out in the jungle, a never-ending pattern of trees, ferns, roots, flowers, and vines. There were a large variety of beautiful flowers, but she had stopped appreciating the landscape after hours of trekking in the heat. She was tired, frustrated, and her shoulder was shooting in pain from carrying the stretcher. The crew had done everything in their power to save Sid. She wished she could comfort him by promising to channel his Qi back to life, but that's not how her darkstone worked.

If I end this misery for him, I could hold onto his Qi until the Commission shows me what to do with it, she thought. She looked at Sid, listening to him moan in agony. What's the point of recycling energy into a universe where they continue to suffer? They weren't going to make it. The Temple of the Golden Monkey probably didn't even exist. "Sid's suffering. We need to take another vote. I will bear his Qi."

"What are you talking about?" shouted Hawk. "We're going east."

"Wait. Ara's right. I've seen what her darkstone can do. When the sapphire mason got killed by Alvah, he took the Qi into his pearl. It's a last resort, but I fear we're at that point."

"Jay, you're asking us to kill Sid. Are you crazy? We can't just give up on him like that. *Pandora* never gives up. Even with all the ills of the universe, there's always hope. That's what you told me once, remember?"

"That was a long time ago, Ginger. Hope remains for his Qi. Ara will keep it safe in her stone, like a temporary shell."

"What happens to the Qi after it goes inside the pearl?" asked Keiko.

"I don't know. Vela told me it would help unlock a higher dimension, some kind of utopia."

"There's no such thing as utopia," said Ginger. "That lady's pure evil. I could see it in her eyes."

"None of us know what the higher dimension holds," said Keiko. "Sid's slowly dying. I don't know how much longer I can watch him suffer."

Hawk pulled out a syringe. "I can give him more sedatives so he won't be as aware."

Jay handed Ara his sword and signaled Hawk to inject the medicine. "Make it quick. I'd do it if I could. I'm sorry it has to be you."

"What? No! I can't believe you all!" Ginger threw herself on top of Sid. "If you're going to kill him, you'll have to kill me too. He's not dead. We should keep moving."

"If we wait and he dies without me deleting him, I can't preserve his Qi. I don't understand it, but that seems to be how the pearl works."

Hawk stood up and discarded the empty syringe into the jungle. "We'd be taking a big risk delaying this any longer. I can't guarantee when he'll take his last breath."

"Ginger, you need to get up," said Jay softly.

Ginger was crying inconsolably, a stream of red hair falling over Sid's body. She wouldn't leave his side, shaking her head. "No."

"Ginger, it's finished. We tried everything we could. Please, get up. Don't make this harder than it has to be." Jay put his arm around her, rubbing her back.

"Don't touch me, murderer!"

"Ginger, as your captain I order you to stand away from the body."

"The body! He has a name. Sidney Goldman." Ginger stared intensely into Jay's eyes, her hair a deeper red from mixing with the blood that had streamed down Sid's nose and mouth.

Jay grabbed Ginger and pulled her away, kicking and screaming. He held her tightly, turning her face into his chest. "Don't look. I'm sorry. I know you loved him."

"You don't know anything about love! It takes true courage to love. You have to let people in, believe in people, be willing to feel pain. All you've got is a shell. Everything you do just hardens it more so you don't get hurt. You're a coward. You can't handle the intensity of love. You, feel sorry for me? Well I'm sorry for you, Jaden Hood, because underneath your condescending, superficial shell you're just a lonely, empty nothing."

Jay didn't respond. He just stood there gripping Ginger. There was nothing anyone could say to help.

Saiph called Isis to come back, but she wouldn't move from her spot in the tree. "Isis does not like your decision."

Ara moved in with Jay's sword. Her hands were trembling. It was one thing to kill someone she didn't know, but Sid was her friend. She was going to be brave. She had to be. He was suffering so much.

Sid moaned loudly and coughed, blood spewing from his mouth.

Ara raised the sword over his heart.

He opened his eyes and stared at her.

She froze. Didn't Hawk sedate him? I can do this, she thought. Breathe. Be brave. I need to save his Qi. On three: one ... two...

"North."

What? Did he—

"Go north," said Sid. He coughed violently, then closed his eyes.

She threw down the sword, her body shaking. "I change my vote to north."

"Me too. North!" Ginger pulled away from Jay's loosened grip. "Isis, lead the way."

"North," said Keiko and Hawk, looking towards Jay.

"My falcon is very wise."

Jay said nothing. He simply picked up his sword and walked north through the jungle, shoving the map back in Keiko's hand.

Chapter 31

14A, Year 3034
Astraea, Zuben
Galaxy 4586, Libra cluster

Zaniah Rex stepped up to the podium. It was a beautiful spring day in Astraea. The smell of freshly cut grass and magnolia trees filled the air. A large crowd had gathered at the Hedron to hear him speak. Zaniah loved the Hedron. The building had been called one of the architectural wonders of the universe. It was constructed to resemble a dodecahedron, a twelve-sided geometric object, each point representing a cluster. Some people were offended the voids had been left out, but the architect said the empty spaces between points represented the voids as well as the fabric of spacetime the universe was expanding into. Around the Hedron was the Libra High Court with its *Scales of Justice* statue and twelve obelisks housing the Senate offices. Carved on each obelisk was the symbol for its respective cluster.

President Rex took a deep breath and looked out at the citizens spread over the Hedron's lawn, awaiting his victory speech.

"People of the universe, Senators, Generals, and distinguished guests. We come together at a unique time in our history as a species. As we look forward into the horizon, I would like to reflect on the past so that we may always carry with us the Qi of our ancestors. I wish to tell you a story that's been passed down through the ages. It's said to have come from our origin planet Earth, which once existed in the Virgo cluster.

"On Earth there was a man named Adam. He was a pure Qi who lived a simple life, but all around him there were people who didn't follow the order. They were adding negative to life and causing suffering to others. Earth's deity Elohim looked down at his creation and was sad, for there was so much darkness upon the planet, and this was not what he'd intended for the Qi. Elohim began to cry and could not stop, for the suffering of Earth's people was great. His tears caused a giant flood, and as the waters rose to cover the planet, Adam and his wife Eve ascended up a large mountain. They were tired and wanted to rest, but the waters kept rising around them. They climbed and climbed for days and eventually reached the top of the highest peak. Elohim watched them from above. Moved by the strength of their Qi, he stopped crying and admired the beauty of his handiwork. 'I have created the most perfect work of art,' he said. 'Now I can rest.' The waters receded and life continued as Adam and Eve replenished the Earth.

"And here we stand, fourteen aeons from the point of creation. Why are we here when other species have gone extinct long ago? Because we have hope. Even when the waves crash down around us, we continue to swim, with faith there is shore. If no lighthouse exists, we build one. If we have not reached the peak, we keep climbing. When dark energy threatens the very fabric of space and time, we shout out to All, 'No, we will not be torn asunder! No, we will not be controlled by the waves!'

"Keep climbing, citizens of the universe. The summit of the mountain is upon us. Together, we will reach our peak, and when we do, we will not settle at the top. We will find a higher, more glorious mountain to ascend. For All has entrusted us with the gift of life, and we will not let it perish to the Shadows. I am honored and humbled to be a part of that gift. It is a rare and delicate pearl, beyond our ability to number. Citizens of All, join me as we work towards the horizon, but don't forget to hold Elohim's hand, for if we forget, he may cry again."

Chapter 32

14A, Year 3034
Ophi, Phorbos
Galaxy 7, Ophiuchus void

It was late in Professor Hitar's lecture hall. The students had retired to their dorms and the professors to their studies, but seated in the front were seven people quietly waiting for their teacher to arrive. They couldn't have been more different from one another. Vela was poised, displaying the latest Nebulae fashions. Lilith sat next to her, wearing not much at all. Yaw rocked in his chair, slowly rolling a joint. Sef pet his falcon Immortal, repeatedly checking his watch. Alvah sharpened his machete, mud dripping down his boots. Devi straightened her uniform, struggling to stay awake, and Edison smoked his pipe, studying equations.

EI warped into the room, no longer needing to see his destination. He'd aged significantly since the start of his commission some twenty years prior. His head was now completely bald and more prominent wrinkles wove around his gray eyes.

"Good evening, Commanders. Before I receive your reports, I have something exciting to show you." The Commissioner lifted a silver necklace from his pocket and carefully fastened it around his neck. At the bottom of this necklace, contrasted by his black robe, was a stunning white pearl. The pearl was not cream-colored like the ones found in the murky Eridanus swamps. It was pure white, almost transparent.

A moment of reverent silence came over the room.

EI undid the necklace, watching it sway lightly. "I hold in my hands, a singularity. Power over life and death in such a small thing. The pearl no longer accepts Qi. A lightstone has been completed. One down, eight to follow. Utopia is in our grasp."

"Eight?" asked Yaw. "We should have seven left."

"There's a ninth pearl needed for the Omega." Edison held up his notepad. "I've revised my calculations to go beyond Euler's initial work. If you do the math, you'll see it's correct." No one took Edison up on his offer. The Professor knew he was the only one smart enough to understand the equations. Even EI had his limits.

"Our Commission is the same. Continue with your drains, but we must delete faster. Now that you know creating a singularity is possible, go forward in faith that you too can achieve this power. As you let your shadows of doubt fade, work harder to increase the fading of your pearl. Vela can take care of the media should suspicions arise. Lastly, we must find the ninth pearl. The Omega can't be performed without it."

"Where is it?" asked Devi.

Vela smiled. "On *Pandora*."