Jago: The Millennium Galaxy Race

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Vo: The ultimate power in the galaxy. The wielder possesses the strength to rule the entire galaxy, and shape it to their will. With Vo's current wielder the galaxy has been at peace for a thousand years, and itâ s about to end. One can only wield Vo for a millennium before it is split into four smaller stones and sent across space. A grand race is held to determine who will be the next wielder of Vo, and become the new ruler of the galaxy. The bounty hunting ship Jago and her crew are reluctant to participate in the race, but someone strong and vicious has been eyeing them. It doesn't help that aboard their ship is the most powerful of the fighting species, an Eyes of Blue, and they soon become a target as a lust for more power. There is no better opportunity than to claim the title of the greatest fighter and ruler of the galaxy, than with the Millennium Galaxy Race. This story is COMPLETE and I will be uploading at least one chapter every day. There are 45 chapters.

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Chapter 1: Captured

Prologue - Ozias (A future event)

"Where is it?" Came a large man's low malicious voice as he held up a smaller man in the air by his scrawny neck. "The ship with the most powerful *Eyes of Blue* in the galaxyâ¦ where is the *Jago*?"

The large man's piercing blue eyes paralyzed the small man with such a fear that made responding nearly impossible. The sound of screaming and panic ensued as the large man's crew began burning and pillaging the peaceful village behind them.

"Th-they're on the other side of the villageâ¦" the small man stuttered. A smile crept on the large man's face, skewing the long scar across his face. "P-please don't-"

He tossed the human aside without a second thought. He was filled with anticipation, his mind set on meeting the strongest of his species once again. Each stride taking him closer to his goal: To kill the *True* Kai, the strongest *Eyes of Blue*.

Through the violent flames he watched as a figure approached from a distance, and elation filled him. "Akikoâ¦" he whispered manically to himself, eyes wide open with the sweet satisfaction of finally finding the one person he's spent his entire life looking for.

He had a plan but he simply could not hold back this joyous moment. At the first sight of her, he let loose his natural killing desire and made his first appearance to her since the first time they met, when she gave him his scar...

Part 1: Greatest fighter on the planet

1. Captured

Captured. That's what I am right now. The cloaked riders came at night, when nearly everyone was sound asleep. They knew exactly where we were and where we would run. We tried to get away but there were just too many of them, resistance was futile. Now my wrists are bound at the end of an assembly line of captured runaways that's headed to the largest desert city on the planet to be sold.

Glancing around, I don't recognize anyone around me, not that I'm surprised about that. I grew up mainly alone and had to learn how to fend for myself, obviously not well enough. I'm pretty sure I'm the youngest one in this group, at the age of what I think is about 16, I don't really know for sure.

It's hot. Extremely hot. This planet is basically a dried up, baked dust ball. If you don't cover yourself up properly you'll die in a day. In the distance, all I see are the dancing rock mountains created by the waves of heat radiating off the cracked, dry ground. The intensity of the two suns easily sear through my protective layers, baking me from the inside-out.

I reach for my water pouch but my hand waves through air. That's right, I didn't have it anymore. Being in the back I can see almost half the runaways have already fallen. Their bodies scraping the sunbaked ground as one of the many large scaly creatures called a scavy, continued to drag the bodies to our destination.

This is my last day. I know it. My tongue and throat are as dry as the ground I'm stumbling across. I haven't had any water all day. Last night I gave the rest of what little water I had to some strange girl. She almost

passed out from the heat, *at night*. I was surprised she lived this long considering she looked only a little bit younger than me. She drank the rest of my water like she'd never had it before. After that she mysteriously disappeared and before I knew it, I was captured.

The second sun is almost set. I embrace the last of its rays, knowing this will be the last sunset I will ever get to see. The beautiful, glowing, large sun slowly began to disappear behind the rock mountains. It was even more beautiful today. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. A warm, comforting breeze crossed my face. I took a moment and accepted my fate and when I felt at peace I opened my eyes to a new, peaceful world. No, wait, actually I saw myself being led away from the line of captured runawaysâ ¦

Wait what? All I did was close my eyes for a moment and all of a sudden I'm being led by a hooded figure that was headed into the nearby rocky mountains. I turned to look for the caravan of captured men and watched as the scavy that was leading me pulled along a cut rope behind it. Its rider was slumped over as if knocked out.

My new capturer pulled me along faster, causing me to stumble over some rocks. I was about to make a remark when the person whisked around to face me. It was a girl, a beautiful girl with light gray eyes and she looked only a few years older than me. She gracefully held a finger to her lips to motion me to stay quiet but the mere presence of such a stunning girl on this desolate planet already had me speechless.

Her tugging on the rope snapped me back to reality. I followed her up through a path in the mountains and into the mouth of a small, narrow cave. I had no idea what was going on but I had no energy to ask questions and I figured being her slave would probably be better than some strange man who would most likely buy me.

She pointed to the ground inside the cave and I slumped down at the location where she wanted me. She took off her sun-cloak and the water pouch that was strapped on her back and tossed the water to me. I quickly opened it and began gulping down. The pouch was full when she tossed it to me and I could've easily downed the entire thing, but I made myself stop when it was half empty.

My eyes wandered back to the girl. Her short, brown hair was pulled back into a small ponytail and she wore a sleeveless shirt with long, tight pants and high boots. Around her waist was a utility belt that had many pouches, along with a knife strapped on her right side.

She didn't look like she belonged here; her clothes were too clean and a different style from what we wear here on Sola, in fact, I watched her take something out of one of her pouches and press it in her ear, when she spoke it was in an alien language. The way she dressed, the language she spoke, it was now obvious she wasn't from this planet. I wasn't too surprised, in the big cities there were often people and aliens from distant planets, although I never knew why they would want to come to a dried up planet like Sola.

I couldn't understand a word she was saying but her actions and tone of voice gave the impression she was arguing with an invisible person in a strange language. Then all of a sudden, there was a pause and she began to speak in a normal tone. All I could do was watch in confusion, my wrists still bound together holding the half-empty pouch of water, and when she finished talking she turned back and faced me.

For some reason I wasn't afraid of her. Yeah she was probably older than me, even a little taller than me and the way she carried herself gave off a sort ofâ ¦badass presence, but all of that just mesmerized me even more. I couldn't stop staring at her gray eyes as she walked over. She stopped about a foot away from where I was sitting on the ground and said something to me in her language. I didn't know what to do or say so I just stared like an idiot back at her. Then she pointed to something behind me and I turned around to look. That's when I felt something strike the back of my head and my eyes became too heavy to keep open. Darkness consumed my vision and my body drifted to the cold stone floor.

Chapter 2: Abducted

2. Abducted

When I finally came to, I found my head resting on the water pouch that was still half full. What happened again? I jolted up, not remembering where I was or what had happened. Then I noticed my hands were free and that I was in a cave, a different one now. That's rightâ ¦ that girl must've knocked me out. I rubbed the back of my head where I was struck. It hurt like a bruise but I sensed something else was differentâ ¦ it felt like something was squirming around in my ear. I slowly lifted my hand to touch it.

"I wouldn't do that."

The sound of her voice startled me and I quickly turned my head to see the same girl who abducted me leaning against the rock wall, staring outside the cave. I wasn't sure if I was more surprised about her appearing out of nowhere or the fact that I could understand her clearly now.

"What happened? What did you do to me?"

The movement of my head felt weird. The girl walked over to me as I tried to stand up but I was so dizzy that I almost fell over, she caught me just in time.

"I think I'm gonna be sick," I mumbled as I wobbled back and forth like a drunken old man. My ears started ringing out of nowhere, getting louder each second.

The girl was trying to say something to me. I heard, "Lookâ ¦meâ ¦" as she propped me up to stand up straight. My head rolled around my neck like it couldn't support it but I managed to make eye contact with her and as soon as I did she quickly jabbed me in the forehead with the palm of her hand. It was kind of like a slap in the face but right after she hit me everything was set straight again. I was no longer dizzy and my ears stopped ringing. I readjusted myself and she let go of my arm. I was able to balance on my own again.

"Sorry about that," she said making sure I wasn't going to topple over again. "I wasn't able to properly set your ear-trans."

"My what?" I asked.

"Ear translators, they let you understand me if you haven't noticed already. I installed them in your ears while you were unconscious but I wasn't able to set them in properly because we had to keep moving." She explained this as she walked back to the entrance of the cave.

"You put something in my ears that lets me understand you?"

"Yes."

I understood *what* she said but I didn't' understand *why* she was saying it.

"Why?" I asked. "What do you want from me?"

She looked at me with her light gray eyes.

"I'm going to capture Vaughan," she said, "and you're going to help me."

"Vaughan? *The* Vaughan?" I said in disbelief. "The Vaughan that runs the underground slave trade?"

"Yep, that one."

From her tone I don't think she understood the gravity of what she wanted to do, and *I* was supposed to help her? *Me*? What could I possibly do?

I said the most logical thing from what I heard of this conversation, "You're crazy."

She was still looking around outside but I saw a smile creep on her face after my comment to her. I paused for a moment before asking, "What do people call you?"

She just stood there as if debating whether or not to tell me, or maybe she was making up a name instead.

She answered softly, "Akiko".

"Akikoâ ¦" I whispered to myself.

I didn't care if she made up the name, she captivated me once again and I found myself staring at her in wonder of who she really was.

"What about you?" she asked. "What do I call you?"

"Uhhâ ¦" I was caught off guard, plus I didn't want to tell her so I contemplated on giving her a fake name, but if she ever found out she probably wouldn't trust me anymore and it looked like she would knife me if she found out I lied. "â ¦It's Trash."

She stifled a laugh. "Sorry, where I'm from that means the same thing as garbage or waste."

I looked down to the ground and rubbed the back of my head. "Yeah, translates to the same word."

She was about to say something but I guess someone was calling her because she suddenly pressed her hand to her ear and responded. This time I could understand her.

"Yeah I'm at the checkpointâ ¦ tell her she better not move from that spotâ ¦ yeah they worked just fineâ ¦ a kid off the last batch of incoming slavesâ ¦ I'll wait for your signal." She removed her hand from her ear.

"I guess it's time I explain what's going on," she said to me as she sat down inside the cave.

I sat down as well. "I'd like that."

"My crew and I are intergalactic bounty hunters; our current target is Vaughan of Sola. The mission so far is running smoothly, tricky part is, we don't speak or understand your language. That's where you come in. Our technician was able to scrounge up the material needed to create a device that allows its user to understand different languages, hence the ear-trans. However, even though *we* are now able to understand each other with the ear-trans, anyone who doesn't have one won't be able to understand us."

There was a pause as she waited for me to process this.

It was a very compact explanation but I understood it so far. "So what do you need me for?"

"We know that Vaughan is currently hiding underground, and in order to bring him up to the surface we need you to go back as a slave and challenge the Quwallie."

"Challenge the Quwallie! Are you insane? Do you even know what that is? It's the title of Vaughan's right-hand man and personal protector. He'll rip me to shreds; I don't stand a chance with him even if I had a weapon, even if I had a weapon I knew how to use!"

I stood up suddenly, ready to bolt out of there. It was crazy, insane, and suicidal! The girl must have read my mind because she got up just as fast and blocked my only way out.

"All we need you to do is to make the challenge so that Vaughan comes up from underground. I would do it myself but they wouldn't understand me."

I scoffed, "Yeah right you would do it yourself."

She glared back at me after that remark. This girl was something else, for some reason I knew she would challenge the Quwallie if she could, but would she win though?

She crossed her arms. "You can either do it, or I can make you do it, your choice."

I thought for a moment. Heck what did I have to lose? I was ready to die just a few hours ago, now I can die with a purpose. It might be more of a foolish, bloodier death but it will have meaning if she succeeds. If the slave trade collapsed, people can live safer lives and not have to fear about being abducted at any time.

I must wear my expression on my face because she said, "You're not going die." There she goes reading my mind again. She spoke in a softer but serious tone, "I'll look out for you, so you don't have to worry."

I didn't know what she could possibly do, but it made me feel more at ease.

Her expression changed. "Oh, here you can wear these! I got these off some thug on our last excursion," she pulled out four, thin, circled wires from one of her pouches. "Here put them on!" she said as she handed them to me.

"What are they?" I asked examining them.

She took out four more from a different pouch. "They're sync rings," she replied as she put one of the circle wires around her wrist. They immediately coiled tightly around her skin and then vanished from sight.

"Aren't these illegal?!"

She finished putting the last one around her ankle. "Yeah pretty much."She looked over at me and saw them still sitting in my hand. "Well put them on already!"

I put one of the rings around my wrist and it tightened, then there was a sharp pinch. I put the rest on and winced each time they pinched me. After a moment they disappeared. Somehow I knew I was going to regret ever putting them on.

"How do they-" I tried asking but when I looked over at her she already had her hand up to her ear.

"I got itâ ¦ we're leaving right now." Suddenly she was a whole different, serious bounty hunter. She got up to grab the pouch of water and pulled the hood over her head on the dirty sun-cloak that was also lying on the

ground, and then said, "let's go".

I followed her outside the cave and to my surprise we were just outside the city. How did we get this close to the city? She must have carried me the rest of the way when I was knocked out. I frowned at the thought of her knocking me out but got over it quickly when I realized that she also saved my life.

She stopped behind a dirt-baked wall before entering the city and handed me the water pouch and a tiny silver device.

"It's an earpiece. Lick it and stick it in your ear. I already adjusted it so that I can always hear you."

"Ummâ ¦ alright?" I took the small device between my dirty fingers, pressed it on my tongue and stuck it in my right ear. Right away the device seemed to come alive and snuggled itself deeper in my ear. Strangely enough it tickled a lot.

We entered the city. It was a large city, the largest on the planet made almost entirely out of sun-baked sand that was molded into a multitude of low buildings. In the middle of the city was a giant arena which hosted theâ ¦ entertainment here. It was strange that fights to the death were allowed but not the selling of slaves, so Vaughan's main base was hidden deep underground. Almost everyone knew about it but if you ever said anything you'd suddenly find yourself fighting for your life for the entertainment of others.

I'm guessing this is where she was headed. I'd been to cities before but none were as big as this one. It's the capital of Sola, according to a sign on the wall of the entranceway and therefore has the same name. It's the only place on the planet that allows intergalactic travel, which is why Vaughan's base happens to be underneath it.

Akiko knew exactly where she was going, like she had been through here many times before. I had a feeling even if I tried to run she would find me no problem at all. She was walking fast with purpose, I had to struggle to keep up with her or I'd be lost for sure.

The streets were packed with vendors selling strange items from different planets and people browsing or just passing by. I sort of stuck out in the crowd; everyone was wearing much nicer, clean clothing that signified their status in the city. I guess the people who eyed me figured I was Akiko's slave or prisoner because she was wearing a Vaughan guard sun-cloak.

Finally, after what seemed like an hour of walking, Akiko stopped a block away from the large carved rock that made up the walls of the fighting arena. She took off the sun-cloak and told me to drink the rest of the water. I had been wanting to so I did without hesitation.

"Say prisoner," she moved her hand up to her ear so I thought she was talking to someone else but she motioned for me to say it.

"Prisoner" I answered quizzically.

She broke down the word, "Pri-son-erâ ¦ prison-erâ ¦ prisoner".

"Yeahâ ¦" I was totally confused.

She grabbed the empty water pouch from my hand and looked at me one last time before leaving. "Run when I give the signal" was the last thing she said.

Run? I thought. Run to where and why? I only stood there less than a minute when my questions were answered.

Akiko's voice rang from an unknown direction yelling, "PRISONER! PRISONER! PRISONER!"

Apparently she was pointing as well because suddenly everyone's eyes were on me.

Chapter 3: Prisoner

3. Prisoner

You've *got* to be kidding me. Soon the guards caught on and started running towards me and I did what my instincts told me to do, I ran. People started screaming and rushed out of my way like I was some disease they didn't want to catch. I didn't get very far though, suddenly someone from the side rammed into me and I slammed into the hard-baked ground. Then a bunch of guards sat on top of me and pinned me down. Before I knew it I was tied up again but this time I was headed toward the inside of the arena.

"How'd this one get out?" asked one of the guards stationed at an entrance.

The guard leading me answered, "Don't know but he wasn't very bright running out in broad daylight". Then he bellowed a laugh and we stopped for a moment so they could laugh together.

A voice came from my right ear, "hey kid, now's your chance." It was Akiko. I was too angry to reply though. What happened to 'I'll look out for you'? She sold me like live bait!

Wack! The guard leading me struck me hard in the stomach and I doubled over. "The man's talking to you slave, answer him."

Akiko spoke again, "the longer you wait the longer you stay there."

I didn't like what she did but she was my only way out so I had to trust her. "Ugh fine!" I exasperated to the ground on my hands and knees. "I challenge the Quwallie!"

The guards bellowed even louder.

My frustration grew, "*Anyone* has the right to challenge the Quwallieâ ¦even slaves." The guards both stopped laughing and scowled at me. My leading guard yanked the rope, pulling me right in front of his dirty face. He smelled like chewing root and spit some of it out on my feet in disgust.

"I'm gonna enjoy watching you die."

For some reason I just got angrier but I didn't retaliate. He pulled me along deeper underneath the arena. We passed by many hallways filled with prisoners in cells, some were thin and dirty, others stronger looking and dirty but they all had the same sad expression on their faces.

All the women and children were on a different level. I couldn't bring myself to look at them. It was hard to believe that these people were living their lives peacefully and before they knew it, they were captured and taken away to be sold like cattle. We were all human beings here and what Vaughan was doing was disgusting, lower than the sand beetles we step on.

I was taken to a different level with rows of empty cells. The guard dropped the rope and shoved me into the cell before locking it up. There was only a single small pot sitting at the corner of cell.

"Ain't no one challenge the Quwallie in awhile seein' as how he killed the last 275 challengers." His bellowing laughter reverberated throughout the entire level, "this'll be some good entertainment." After locking the cell he spit at my feet again and then walked away.

I sat down on the cold slab of rock and released a heavy sighed. *I think I'm the craziest person I know*, I thought to myself. I tried contacting Akiko but I guess we were too far down for her to reach me. Once again, I was alone.

It was less than an hour before someone came down to see me. A man appeared through the doorway, dressed in fancy clean clothing. He was obviously someone important to Vaughan if he wasn't Vaughan himself.

He spoke to me, "Vaughan has invited you to dinner with him." He had a look of distaste when he scanned me from head to toe. Then another guard opened the gate and placed me in metal cuffs.

I followed the fancy man with a few guards behind me and we headed even further down under the arena. I was getting nervous. What was I supposed to do? I'm about to meet the most powerful man on the planet, actually, I'm supposed to help capture him and I just challenged his number one protector.

The fancy man stopped in front of two very large marble doors and clarified to me, "you are not to engage in any manner with the Quwallie until the time given by Vaughan. If you do so you will be prohibited to fulfill the challenge and killed on the spot. Is that understood?" I nodded and he rolled his eyes.

"Open the doors!" he shouted out. A guard came back and released me from my cuffs and I rubbed my wrists where they were chafing.

Slowly the heavy doors began to open revealing a large table filled entirely with an assortment of foods. Some of them I recognized but most of them were unknown to me. My eyes widened with hunger. I had never seen so much food in one place before and I stared at it with longing until my eyes caught movement in the background.

A figure that appeared from behind the opposite wall spoke aloud, "It's beautiful isn't it? I'm sure a slave has never seen anything like this before."

I didn't know what Vaughan looked like but there was no mistaking that this was him. He wore the cleanest, finest clothing I had ever seen. He walked over to the table with a pompous attitude and sat down. Immediately, servants came to his side with a bowl of water to clean his hands. He didn't even bother to place them in the water. One servant held up the bowl and dipped his hands in and the other servant cupped his hands to pour the water over Vaughan's to wet completely. I noticed myself gawking in disbelief but quickly caught myself.

Vaughan just sat there, peering at me while his hands were being washed.

"Sit down" he commanded.

I tried to act tough, but on the inside my guts jumped at the sound of his voice. I sat down in the chair in front of me and tried not to think too much.

He spoke again, "you too, sit down."

A gigantic man appeared from behind me and sat down between myself and Vaughan. How long has he been standing there? The whole time and I didn't notice? This *must* be the Quwallie.

I am so dead. The man was almost twice as tall as me and extremely buff. He had a bald head and a mean-looking face. I'm pretty sure I looked like a baby next to him.

The Quwallie sat there, his eyes glued to the food but he didn't move until commanded.

"Eat" said the Vaughan who was already enjoying his meal. He looked at me too as if he was expecting me to shove as much food as I could in my mouth. I wasn't hungry, even though it's been days since my last meal but I couldn't look like a weakling in front of these two. I forced as much food down as I could.

"Tell meâ ¦" Vaughan spoke through a spoonful of food, "why you're so eager to die. You're a young, healthy looking lad. I could sell you for a good price."

I had to sound as convincing as I could. "I'll show you a good match."

Vaughan laughed, his food spilling out of his mouth and spraying everywhere. Even the Quwallie smirked at my remark.

"Very well, I'm eager to watch your performance! If you say you will give me a good match then I expect you will. The match will be set up for tomorrow when the suns align."

Tomorrow? This really was my last meal on Sola.

He continued, "I've had 275 meals with challengers over the past 20 years but most of them only made the challenge to Quwallie for a good meal and quick death. You look like you'll surprise me." He slightly raised his left hand and the same man who brought me here appeared. "Set the match for tomorrow during the sun alignment." The man nodded and whisked away. Vaughan took a sip from one of his many sparkling cups and stood up from his chair at the head of the table. Without delay, the Quwallie stood up and I caught on and stood as well. "Put on a good show for me tomorrow" he said to me and then turned around to leave the room.

I stood there not knowing what I should do, when servants came out and began tossing the leftover food into trash skins. There was still so much food left, it made me sick when I realized how much I ate and the servants cleaning the table probably haven't eaten all day. I felt guilty. I wanted to help them, but how? I began stacking my empty plates and all their heads turned to me with a look of fear in their eyes.

"Leave it for them," the fancy man had returned, "if they're doing their job inadequately I'll be sure to see that changes." The servants looked down at the table and started cleaning faster, obviously full of terror of being killed. I wanted to hit myself, because now I probably got them punished for something that *I* did. Now I really feel like throwing up.

The fancy man commanded to me, "Let's go."

I was cuffed again and lead back to my deep underground level, forcing myself to ignore the people in their cells. I already felt terrible.

Once I was back inside, I waited until the guards and the fancy man left before regurgitating my dinner in the toilet pot.

It was the worst night I've ever had. The bitter cold was constantly nagging at me and the stone floor made it even worse. I couldn't fathom the thought of actually living here. How did the other slave do it?

What bothered me the most though was my impending challenge with the Quwallie. Seeing him at dinner was Vaughan's way of psychological warfare. I thought about what happened at dinner and I realized that Vaughan never even asked me my name. The only reason he wouldn't ask was because he was sure I was going to die, so it was pointless to even waste his time.

Sleeping was out of the question. Every time I tried I always thought of the battle that was going to take place and I would see myself being killed in hundreds of different ways, so dawn came at the blink of an eye. In a few hours I would be out in the arena fighting for my life.

I was served breakfast but didn't touch it, I didn't even acknowledge the server. I stayed huddled in my corner until I was eventually summoned to the arena. I was in a cold sweat. Relaxing was hard but I kept telling myself I had to keep calm, relax, and focus. That didn't really work much though.

Above ground it was very bright and the suns were already almost completely aligned. I was surprised at how packed the large arena was already. It's been less than a day since I made the challenge and it seemed like the entire city was gathering in the stands. The guards put me in another cell that had two doors, one from the hallway where I came from and one that lead to the middle arena, the death grounds.

The guard locked my cell and said one last thing. "When the doors open you best get out. The ground you're standing on will set fire and anything in the cell will burn to a crisp within seconds."

I looked down and saw little holes scattered everywhere on the floor. Great, I bet they had to put these in because whoever was in here refused to be beat to death by other humans.

Outside, the crowd was cheering. I went over to the little square window at the door that led out to the arena and saw that there were already matches going on. My stomach churned and I moved away from the door and leaned against the far wall. I buried my face in my hands to try and calm down. My heart was racing but I managed to tune everything out and when I did I heard something.

A faint familiar voice whispered in my right ear. "Hey, can you hear me now? Hello?"

Her voice brought me back to life. "Akiko! Yeah I'm here! When are you getting me out of this?"

A pause. That's never a good thing.

"I have some bad news, Vaughan hasn't made his appearance yet. You're going to have to hold off the Quwallie until he arrives."

"WHAT?! That can't be! He said so last night that he was excited to see this fight. How am I supposed to *hold off* the greatest fighter on the planet?!"

"Just calm down, we have a backup plan remember? I'll just have to use the sync rings." Her voice was fading in and out, "I have to go now. I'll be back in time for your fight just stay focused alright?"

"Wait! No! Don't go!"

Too late. It was completely quiet now except for the random spurts of cheering from the crowd, probably signifying a death. I went back to burying my face in my hands.

I'm not a fighter. It's not that I can't it's just that I've never really tried or wanted to try. I've always avoided a fight if I could. I wasn't weak looking though, in fact sometimes my appearance enticed the more aggressive people to come at me but I was always in better running shape.

A loud gong echoed throughout the arena and suddenly the crowd went crazy.

I lifted up my head and faced the door that determined my fate. There were a few loud clicks coming from the door and I jumped to my feet. A hissing sound came from the entrance I came in and then a row of large flaming jets that reached all the way up to the ceiling, blocked the door. There was more hissing and the second row ignited, then the third, and suddenly I was already fighting for my life waiting for the arena door to open.

The heat was intense, my skin felt like it was already on fire. Slowly the heavy iron door slid open. The flames were getting closer and closer. I squeezed myself through the opening and rolled away from the door just as the last of the flaming jets turned on.

That was close. The match hasn't even started yet and I almost burned to a crisp.

The crowd roared as I stumbled to get on my feet. Looking around, the arena was larger than I originally thought. Pools of dark, red blood quickly caught my attention as bodies were being dragged off by men on scavys.

From what I heard, before the main match they put on a show of 20 slaves who must kill each other to survive, each kill meant more food. Anyone who lives until the suns align gets to keep their life another day.

I thought the crowd cheered loud for me but it was nothing compared to when the Quwallie stepped out from the other side of the arena. It was like thunder as the people in the stands cheered on the greatest fighter on Sola.

The Quwallie kept his eyes on me and made his way over. My heart was out of control.

My right ear buzzed again and the voice that's kept me sane this whole time whispered in my ear.

"I'm back."

Chapter 4: Sacrifice

4. Sacrifice

"Wha-do-i-do?! Wha-do-i-do?! Wha-do-i-do?!" I asked her panicking.

"First off, relax! It's hard to focus when you're screaming at me. Second of allâ ¦Uhhâ ¦I have to try and remember to how activate the sync rings."

"Are you serious?! He's coming for me!" I looked around for anything that could help me but there was nothing in sight. There was no point in running; he could cut me off at any angle.

"Rei, do you remember what that thug said on Epsilon about activating the sync rings?"

"What?" I asked, but apparently she was talking to someone else who was with her because I heard a girl's faint voice in the background.

"Yeah, he said to touch the middle part of your left pinky with your thumb. Are you ready?"

"Just a sec" came Akiko's voice.

I froze as the Quwallie stopped right in front of me. I wanted to move, but I couldn't bring myself to. Somehow I was able to take a step back, but that was the wrong move because the Quwallie was fast and as soon as he saw movement, he grabbed me by the neck and lifted me high in the air.

Blood was gushing to my head, and I thought it was going to pop off. I guess this is it, the end of my life.

Akiko's voice was drifting away, "I can see, turning on the sync rings now and activating." My arms that were gripping the Quwallie's arm tingled. Then they started twitching.

"I got this, just relax." She said.

All of a sudden my arms moved on their own, and quickly. I punch the inside of his forearm next to his elbow and it unlocked, then two more consecutive hits released his grip from my neck.

I think everyone in the stands was just as surprised as I was. When I hit the ground I didn't fall, instead I took on a defensive stance.

"What is this?" I whispered to myself.

The Quwallie shook his arm with an angry look on his face before charging at me. My instincts took over again and I blocked my face from getting hit.

Akiko's voice rang in my ear, "Don't do that! I can't see!"

This time my legs tingled and moved just enough to barely dodge a deadly punch. This aggravated him even more and he started coming at me faster. My body moved around awkwardly dodging his blows.

"Just relax. I'm using the sync rings to control your arms and legs," it sounded like Akiko was moving around as well. "But I can't control your other body parts so you need to keep your eyes on him."

I jumped and ducked without knowing it.

"You can see me?"

"No, I can see *through* your eyes." I blocked a punch and counter attacked, shifting his weight and causing him to stumble to the ground. The crowd loved it but I think I was in just as much pain. My muscles strained at every attack. "There's only so much I can do with your body, but we have to hold up a little longer. I heard Vaughan is coming up now."

I was too out of breath to respond and my arms and legs were throbbing.

"Once Vaughan's up, we'll finish it."

Finish it? There wasn't much time to think. The Quwallie obviously underestimated me at first because he was starting to get serious and that meant he was getting stronger and faster. He came at me with a right hook, I saw it coming so I was able to (or rather Akiko was able to) put my arm up to block but I couldn't hold my ground and I was sent flying across the arena.

Akiko cursed, "dammit, snap out of it kid!" my energy level was already almost at empty. "Rei how much longer?!"

The other girl's voice came through my earpiece. "He just sat down at his booth."

"Good. I'm going to end it here." The Quwallie slowly made his way over to me, lifting his arms for the crowd to cheer.

"I'm gonna need you to muster everything you have left." She warned, "When he attacks I'm not stopping until he's down."

"Right," I grunted, "do what you need to."

I don't know how, but I was able to make it on my feet. I wasn't sure if we could defeat him but we were doing way better than I had ever expected. I put my faith in Akiko. She was the only one who could help me beat him, and she had the confidence that she could. That's all I needed.

I took a deep breath and tried to relax my muscles to let her take over. I took on a different stance to prepare for his strike. He noticed this, scoffed, and then he took on a stance of his own.

The crowd became silent, like it was the first time the Quwallie had taken a challenge this seriously and they watched intently.

The suns' rays beat down hard on us. Sweat was dripping from every pore in my body and I was breathing just as fast as my heart was racing. I ignored the pain as we stood there, locked in a mind battle to see who moves first. I kept eye contact with him. That was my only job.

My lead foot pivoted away from me, and then not a moment later, he struck. He was waiting for some sort of movement before attacking. The force he expelled was tremendous, but Akiko and I were ready for it and she had a plan. We exchanged blows and blocks and when she attacked, she struck areas that I would never think of hitting, using either the point of three fingers or the knuckles of two. Whenever he attacked I wouldn't block a direct hit anymore, instead I dodged every move or used his weight against him. After multiple strikes in certain areas of his arms, they went limp and Akiko instantly went to focus on his legs.

Before I knew it he was on his knees and I had him in a choke hold. The crowd went crazy again. He still couldn't move his arms so he was left strangling in mine. That was it, I had won. I actually won.

The crowd at first was in mixed feelings, but soon they all began chanting, "Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!"

I couldn't believe it, less than an hour ago he was everyone's favorite champion and now they all chanted in unison to kill him. It was sickening.

I wasn't sure if Akiko was still in control but I wasn't going to let myself kill a now defenseless man. My arms and legs burned but I forced myself to let go of his neck and step back. He fell face-down on the dirt ground, unable to move.

Everyone booed and threw their trash at me. I didn't care. I wasn't going to take a man's life for their entertainment, for their *satisfaction*.

Soon an army of guards wearing protective gear and helmets came out. I didn't bother resisting. Apparently I was being summoned by Vaughan again. I was circled by at least 10 guards who all held electrified clubs this time.

Once again I was handcuffed and I was getting pretty used to it. We made our way to a ramp that led directly to Vaughan's fortified booth at the top.

What happened to Akiko? I hadn't heard from her since we last spoke and it seemed like I was back in control of my body. I wanted to find out, but there was no way I could try to contact her in front of all the guards. Wasn't she supposed to ambush Vaughan while he was in his booth?

There was nothing I could do and I had no choice but to relinquish myself to the guards who stayed in a circle formation as we ascended up the arena wall. I didn't know what to expect.

"Well well well, that was an interesting spectacle" Vaughan applauded. He was sitting in a comfy looking chair, facing the glass wall that had an amazing view of the arena. Smoke filled the air around him from the puffer that was sticking out of his mouth.

The guards all lined up neatly forming a semi-circle and blocking the only exit.

"So tell me," asked Vaughan. I could see his reflection in the mirror as he blew smoke from his nostrils. "Who was on the other side of your sync rings?"

What?! Was it that obvious? No, I didn't think so. Maybe in the beginning of the fight but after I got used to it I let Akiko take over my body and we were able to work pretty well together, or so I thought.

I couldn't respond.

"If you won't tell me then I have no use for you." He turned to a man in the corner of the room. "Kill him."

I never even noticed the man in black clothing. A cloth covering his face, leaving only his green eyes exposed. "Did you really think I'd let you fight my Quwallie in the open? Nothing gets passed his eyes."

Some guards behind me shoved me on my knees which gave out rather easily after the battle with the fake Quwallie. Two of the guards held down my shoulders but I was already too weak to fight back.

The real Quwallie walked up to me, unsheathed his sword and held it high to take a swing at my head. I closed my eyes, hoping it would shut out any pain.

Chapter 5: Escape

5. Escape

Clink! I opened my eyes to see one of the guards, holding up both hands to block the strike with their electrified club. The Quwallie's eyes narrowed as he stared into the guard's black tinted visor that was built into the helmet, trying to see who would betray them. He stepped back and raised his sword in a stance. The guard threw their club on the ground. It was nearly bent in half from the force and I was surprised it hadn't cut all the way through.

Vaughan stood up from his chair and faced us. "You must be the other sync ring." He took another puff, "What do you want?"

The rouge guard took something out from inside their armor and held it out in their palm for them to see. A hologram popped up with a picture of Vaughan's face next to writing I couldn't read.

Vaughan looked taken aback. "Crux bounty hunters!?" He tried to regain his posture, "This isn't the first time I've been hunted. You'll never make it out of here alive."

The Quwallie attacked the guard but the guard was ready for him. They had taken out a knife that was hidden in their armor as well, and parried the Quwallie's strikes.

It was like being back on the arena, but watching expert fighters battle each other. Since I was no longer the target, I scrambled away from the two warriors.

Clink! Clink! Clink! Clink! Knife and sword clashed. I wasn't about to interfere with that battle. Vaughan told the other guards to jump in but every time they tried they were either kick out or thrown aside by the rouge guard.

When it looked like the rouge guard was winning, Vaughan went back to his chair and pushed a button. He was getting nervous, and he should be because the rouge guard was very good.

The guard must've seen him push the button because the lights turned off for a moment and when they came back on, they had their knife to Vaughan's neck.

"It's useless," he uttered, "more guards will be on their way in less than a minute and this place will be surrounded."

The Quwallie started to take a step forward but the rouge guard pressed the knife deeper into Vaughan's neck. A little stream of blood trickled down the blade and the Quwallie instantly stopped.

No one moved. Then out of nowhere, a different guard grabbed my arm and dragged me across the room toward the glass window.

Beeeeeeeeeepâ ¦ BOOM!

The room shook violently as bombs went off just outside the door. I cowered against the wall as parts of the rock ceiling began falling. The guards were scurrying away from the falling debris. Then it suddenly got darker outside. Everything was just happening so fast, I wasn't sure what exactly was going on.

Just outside of the glass wall, a large ship was hovering. It emitted a red laser in the shape of a square on the glass, and without turning around, the rouge guard back-kicked it and the glass popped out and plummeted to the arena ground. The crowd was already screaming and fleeing the stands.

I was going to try and make a run for it while it was chaotic inside, but the other guard grabbed my arm again and dragged me to the open window. Something shot out from the ship. It was large cables that wrapped itself around me and the guard, pulling us in toward the ship. I saw another cable shoot out and wrap around Vaughan and the rouge guard. We were being whisked away, and as we were being towed in I saw the Quwallie run out of the open window and jump onto the rouge guard. Their cable jolted as he hung on.

The ship swayed before fully taking off, building speed quickly. I saw the rouge guard fighting the Quwallie on the cables as we were being wound into the ship. We were thrust on a wall of some sort of gel substance that slowed down our speed before the cables let go of us completely once we were safely inside.

The guard that was with me took off their helmet, grabbed something off the wall and pointed it at the gel wall we just came through. It was a girl and she looked strangely familiar. She just stood there, waiting for Vaughan to fall out of the gel wall, in which he did just a moment later.

"Hello there" said the girl mockingly as she held a pistol at him. Then she spoke into the air, "Tammy our cargo has arrived."

A different girl's voice echoed throughout the ship, "Understood."

A circle in the ship's floor opened up.

"Well, get in!" the girl ordered Vaughan.

He didn't seem to understand what she was saying but he understood her gesture. He sneered, then turned around to look in the hole and the girl kicked him in. I wasn't sure how far down it was but I heard him moaning at the bottom from the fall. Then the circle opening closed again.

Someone else came through the gel wall. It was the rouge guard. They took off their helmet as well, revealing another familiar face.

"It's youâ ¦" I mumbled.

Akiko frowned, "Who else would it be?"

The girl voice spoke through the ship again, "Please brace yourselves. We are leaving this planet's atmosphere."

The ship jittered for a while, and then finally stopped after I almost fell over but the girl who pulled me into the ship caught me. I was beginning to feel the full effects of my battle earlier.

"Rei, why did you bring him along?" Akiko asked the girl.

"They would've killed him if we left him there!" the girl Rei replied, hugging my arm.

Looking at her up close I remembered where I've seen her before, "You're that girl from earlier, I gave you my water."

She had a big smile on her face, "You remembered me!"

Her hair was long and brown and her eyes were a pretty hazel. I would guess she was a maybe a year younger than me.

Akiko looked down at her hand, "Oh yeahâ¦I forgot to turn these offâ¦" she fiddled with the sync ring on her wrist.

I instantly fell to the ground. I was in so much pain and I couldn't move at all. Whatever she did made my muscles hurt a hundred times worse and once again, my vision started to fade.

The last thing I heard was, "oopsâ¦"

Chapter 6: Crew

Part 2: Crew of the Jago

6. Crew

Once again I awoke in an unknown place. I was lying on what felt like a cushioned table. The first thing I noticed was how cold it was, and then I started remembering what had happened. Somehow I ended up on a bounty hunter's space ship.

I couldn't move. I don't think I was restrained but for some reason I couldn't move a muscle. My pain was gone but I felt dull and weak. All I could do was lay there and wonder where I was and what was going to happen to me. Without warning the suddenly door opened and another young girl walked inside.

"You've regained consciousness I see." The person sounded familiar, like the girl's from the intercom earlierâ ¦ Tammy I think is what Rei called her. She had a very monotone voice.

"Yeahâ ¦" I rasped. The sound I croaked was kind of creepy.

"You've been unconscious for almost a week."

"A week?"

No wonder my throat was dry.

"Yes, the use of a sync ring with Kiko left you with many torn and shredded muscles, ligaments and tendons in your arms and legs." She began pressing buttons at the head of the table. "With the sync rings on, your muscles mimic Kiko's muscles, but her physical abilities are at a much better state than yours however, so when she powered them off your brain suddenly interpreted how much damage had actually been done."

She had walked over so I could see her now standing beside me. She was a small girl, and her skin was very white. She was probably about the other girl's ageâ ¦ Rei, maybe youngerâ ¦ she definitely looked younger. She had silvery, translucent hair in two braids resting on her chest, and her hairâ ¦ looked like it was glowing slightly.

Her eyes flickered side to side, calculating information and making quick but precise hand movements over me. I guess there was a holographic board there that I just couldn't see. It looked kind of funny from my perspective actually.

"I seeâ ¦" I finally said. I was basically a mess thanks to Akiko, or Kiko is what she called her. "Will I be able to move again?"

She stopped all movement and faced me, her light brown eyes catching mine, "No. However, we have decided to let you live the rest of your existence on this table."

Stunned, shocked, depressed could hardly describe how I suddenly felt all at once. I stared at the ceiling, mortified at the thought of never being able to move freely again.

"That was a joke." She continued in her same monotonous voice. Even her expression never changed.

"What?" I looked at her, "That was a joke?"

She stared at me blankly. "Yes."

I stared back at her. What the heck was that? I'm no expert in jokes, but that really sucked.

She spoke again, "Although your injuries were very severe, I was able to piece you back together. In about a month or so you should be fully healed. For now, I have put you in a sort of stasis. I was waiting for you to regain consciousness before placing you in your brace."

"Ohâ ¦ thanks." I was praying that wasn't one of her jokes again. "I have to wear a brace?"

"Yes. I will bring them to you." She started walking away but then turned back around, "A warning, the brace was made specifically to limit your movements and to allow support for movements you would normally makeâ ¦ like walking."

"Why is that a warning? I don't plan on running anytime soon."

"Because it will hurt getting in, and you will look funny." With that she turned back around and disappeared from the room.

I'll look funny?

I laid there. It was comfy and soothing and quiet. What am I going to do now?

About a minute later the girl came back again holding a pair of gray clothes. She set them at the foot of my table and began touching an imaginary board again. It was about this time that I noticed something.

"How did I get out of my clothes?" I tried not to sound so nervous about it but I noticed I was only in a pair of boxer shorts.

"You were changed." She said simply, still waving her arms around. "Don't worry, I had Cashel change you. He's the captain of the ship."

She finished with the holographic board and pushed one final button that triggered an electric bolt through my body. Then the pain slowly came back but it wasn't as bad as before.

She took a step back, "Move all your fingers and toes."

I did. They were achy and hurt but at least I could still move them.

"Okay. I take it you can change into your brace yourself?" she asked.

I tried to sit up, and the cushion on the table helped lift me up before laying back down.

That was cool.

She walked away, "I'll be on the flight deck if you need me."

The door slid closed behind her. I examined my arms and legsâ ¦ everything seemed normal besides the pain. I couldn't move them too much before the aching got to me. Great, getting dressed is going be like being in

battle again.

I took a closer look at my wrists. I was still wearing the sync rings. I didn't know what to think about that so I chose to ignore it. I grabbed the gray clothes off the table and began the taunting mission of putting them on.

I don't think it took that long, but it was definitely the longest it's ever taken me to change. I had to take breaks in between, but eventually I got the job done.

I wasn't sure where the brace part came in until I was fully dressed. The clothing tightened around my skin and suddenly my arms and legs were outstretched. I must look ridiculous. How am I supposed to even walk? At least they dulled the pain considerably.

I wobbled to the door and stood there. There was a small window I could look through. Should I go out or just stay in here?

I didn't have to think long because I saw the top of a head bobbing by and then do a double-take to the door.

It opened.

"You're up!" Rei smiled at me. She saw my posture and laughed.

"I see Tammy's already gotten to you!" she continued laughing.

I didn't get it.

She tried to compose herself, "Here let me help you." She pressed her hand to my shirt and it lit up. Text appeared but I couldn't read it upside-down.

She mumbled to herself, "Degree of laughterâ¦" she chuckled. "8 out of 10."

She used a finger to write on my shirt. I guess it was good to know I was being used for comic relief. After finishing up on my shirt, my arms and legs went back to being a normal posture.

"Thanks for that." I said with relief.

"No problem." She smiled at me again, "I guess you figured out that Tammy likes to joke around."

"Yeahâ¦"

"I'm Rei by the way. Aki said your name was Sarth. It's nice to meet you!"

Sarth? Aki? Akiko? Akiko said my name was Sarth? "Uhhâ¦" wellâ¦Sarth *was* better than Trashâ¦I'll just go along with it.

Rei took me by the hand, "I'll introduce you to everyone!"

Before I knew it I was being led through the ship by this girl and it was actually pretty large. From the looks of it, we were on the mid deck which was the largest section. Above us was the flight deck and below was the lower deck that was used mostly for storage. The room I was in turned out to be the medical bay on the mid deck.

She led me to the nearest person who was upstairs on the flight deck and found Tammy sitting in the pilot's seat pushing buttons. The view through the flight deck window was amazing. There were thousands of bright glowing stars in the dark cosmos of space.

"This is Tammy! Her real name is Tamsin but we call her Tammy." Rei explained. Tammy simply ignored us and continued working. "She's our pilot, navigator, technician, doctor, and anything else we can't do."

So what *can* they do?

"How's it going Tammy?" she asked.

Tammy responded, "Everything is still running. It looks like we will be able to make it straight to Crux."

"That's good news! I'll go tell Cashel."

Rei grabbed my hand again and we headed down to the lower deck. We walked slowly because I was still trying to heal. For such an enthusiastic person, she didn't seem to mind the slow pace.

The lower deck had a few boxes and crates. There was an old, but still strong-looking man maybe in his 60's with a bald head and a long white beard on a hologram glass and glancing at the different crates around him.

"Ah, Rei and you must be the one Tammy was fixing up?" he asked, as he finished writing.

Rei answered for me, "This is Sarth from Sola. He helped us capture Vaughan."

"It's good to see you up and about." He held up his arms as if unveiling the ship to me for the first time. "Welcome to the Jago."

I nodded and replied, "Thank you sir."

"Sir?" he chuckled. "Just call me Cashel."

Rei butted in, "Cashel's the Captain of the Jago." Then she remembered what Tammy told her. "Oh yeah, Tammy said we can head straight to Crux."

"Ah, that's good. Would you mind telling Kiko for me that we won't be making a pit stop?"

"Sure, no problem."

Once again I was taken to a new part of the ship, this time toward the back of the mid deck.

Rei clarified the area to me. "Back here we have the training and weapons room and down the hall are the living quarter, which is where we started. Let's see if Aki's in her room."

She was the only one that called her Aki, Tammy and Cashel both called her Kiko. So what do I call her?

Rei placed her hand on the door and it lit up red.

"Hmâ ¡" she frowned, "I guess she's in the training room."

I followed her to a lone door down the hall. She placed her hand on the door again and this time it turned yellow.

She sighed, "I guess she's busy. Well, you've already met her so I guess it's no big deal." She saw me brace myself against the wall. "You should get some rest. Your room is down the hall, it'll light up green when you place your hand on it. Tonight's my dinner night! I'm gonna go prepare it now so I'll see you later in the dining room okay? Don't be late!" She took off down the hall.

Alright? I wobbled down the hall and placed my hand on each door. It took two tries before a green door opened before me. Inside there was a bed, closet and table. It wasn't very big but I wasn't about to complain about having a room to myself. It had been years since I slept on a real bed. I tried it out and fell asleep instantly.

Beep Beep. I opened my eyes. My chest was glowing again. I poked it and it stopped beeping. Guess that means dinner is ready, where was I supposed to go again? I got up and headed for the door. There was map that lit up on it, with a red dot where I guess I was supposed to go. I studied the map and learned that by doing different hand movements I was able to zoom in and out of it. It was really cool.

Somehow I still ended up lost but I eventually made it to the dining room. Rei was in the kitchen making a lot of noise for someone who was supposed to be cooking. Cashel and Tammy were already sitting at the table so I sat down with them.

"Where's Akiko?" I asked.

"I guess she's not hungry" said Tammy, her voice as monotone as ever. She reminded me of a cyborg because she never showed the slightest expression. Maybe she was. I saw her take something out from one of her many thick bracelets.

Cashel nudged her and whispered "Gimme one."

I watched as she took out another really small sheet of paper from her bracelet and hand it to Cashel. They both quickly put it on their tongue just as Rei walked out with a tray full of food. She sat in the seat next to me with her usual smile on her face.

"Since Aki isn't coming let's eat now!" she chipped as she started grabbing food and piling it her plate.

The other two started picking items as well but not nearly as much as Rei. I took a few good looking pieces, I had no idea what it was, and took a bite.

I can't describe the taste that suddenly hit my mouth. It was the worst thing I've ever had. It took all my strength to swallow it and I even started choking. Cashel laughed and Tammy stared as I tried my absolute hardest not to throw up what I just managed to swallow. I didn't want to hurt Rei's feelings since she was so happy to have me there and eating her food.

"What's the matter? Need something to wash it down?" asked Rei, half her food was already gone from her plate.

I nodded as politely as I could and she got up and went to the kitchen.

There was no way I could take another bite.

"Too bad you woke up on Rei day." Cashel chuckled and whispered, "We take turns every other day making dinner. Consider that your induction bite to the Jago!"

Tammy handed me a sheet from her bracelet. "It will nullify the taste."

"Another joke?" I asked cautiously.

"It's no joke when I suffer as well," She assured. "I wasn't sure if you would taste the same thing we do, but obviously you do."

I put the sheet on my tongue like the others did. It worked very well, even the aftertaste disappeared. I put a teeny-tiny bite of food in my mouth and I couldn't taste a thing, although I couldn't avoid the texture, but I could live with that.

Rei came back with drinks for everyone and we continued eating. She made a lot of food and ended up eating most of it herself. I helped her clear away the dishes but she insisted she'd wash and put them away herself since I was still injured.

It was hard to tell if it was nighttime in space since it was always dark outside, aside from the glowing stars. Plus it wasn't like there were many windows. I figured it was since we had dinner and all, so I went back to my room to go to bed.

I ended up looking through the items in my room, in my closet and table. There were clothes in my closet, some for sleeping, some for day use, and even some for training. There were a couple drawers in my table with nothing in them but a writing stick. I took out the writing stick and twirled it in my hands. The table glowed for a moment. I wonderedâ ¦and then tried writing on the table. The words stuck to it.

I haven't written in a long time. Not many people know how to on Sola but I was lucky enough to find someone who did and they taught me a lot, including how to read and write.

Writing came easy to me and I began writing about how I got here, the Jago, and the new people I've met. I don't know, maybe someone will read it someday.

Time flew by and I realized I had to use the bathroom but didn't know where it was. I went back to the map on my door to look for it. I couldn't read the text but there were only a few rooms I hadn't visited and they happened to be right next to the training room.

I made my way over there and stopped in front of the training room door. I wonder if Akiko was still inside. I debated putting my hand on the door to find out because for some reason I wanted to see her again.

I stood there for another second until deciding to leave, then suddenly the door slid open and there stood Akiko in her training clothes. Her stunning gray eyes looking directly at mine with a hint of bafflement.Â–

I quickly looked down and my nerves got to me, "Ohâ ¦uhhâ ¦sorry I was just headed to the bathroom." I said as I hurried away as fast as I could. I was hoping with all my might that she couldn't see me standing there outside the door somehow.

The next two days I spent wandering around the ship and the whole time I never saw Akiko again. I would see Cashel, Rei and Tammy working around the ship but never Akiko. If she *was* working around then she was clearly avoiding me for some reason because she never came to dinner as well.

I found myself talking to Tammy a lot since she always gave me straight, detailed answers, even if she would joke around sometimes and on the fifth day I decided to ask her why Akiko was avoiding me.

"Because she feels guilty about your injuries" was her answer.

"What?!" I said. I was sitting against the control panel by her feet as she worked from her pilot's chair.

"Because she feels guilty about your injuries" she answered again.

I sighed, "I heard you the first time, I just don't believe it."

"That is the conclusion I came to. If you want to know the truth then you should ask her yourself."

"But I don't even know how to find her. I've even tried looking once."

She didn't respond and I sighed again.

Then her chair turned and she faced me, "Have you ever seen the sky deck?"

Chapter 7: Stars

7. Stars

Tammy described to me how to get to the sky deck since its route wasn't on the map. She said it had a great view of the stars and that I should take a look at it, so I decided to. The entrance to it was hidden in a small corner towards the back of the ship. I've walked by it before but never noticed the ladder that led to a small circular hatch in the ceiling.

It was hard for me to go up considering my clothing brace constricted most of the movements needed to climb a ladder. Still, I made it to the top and placed my hand on the hatch door and it opened. I looked inside and was simply amazed. I was able to see through the ceiling and walls of the entire room. The only light came from the multitude of space's brightly glowing stars. There were millions of them in different sizes.

I wandered around inside. There were large beds and couches and every soft and fluffy piece of furniture you could think of to just relax and gaze at the stars. I was already lost in my own world just standing there, looking up.

A voice startled me, "I see you found this place already." I looked in the direction it came from to see Akiko lying on comfy looking bed next to the see through wall. Her arms behind her head as she watched the stars go by.

"Sorry, I didn't know anyone was in here." I apologized.

"It's okay. This room is for anyone to use. You can stay."

I didn't know what to say or do. She sounded normal to me, so why was she avoiding me? I chose a bed in the middle of the room to lie down on. It was extremely comfortable as it conformed to my body. I never wanted to get up.

It was quiet for a long time as we both gazed into space.

I decided to be the first to break the silence, "I've never seen the sky so dark before, with such bright stars. On Sola since we have two suns it never gets very dark and you have to search hard to find any stars, but up here it's completely different."

She replied, "It's the opposite where I'm from. It was almost always dark."

"Where are you from?" I asked.

She didn't answer. I didn't want to press the question or sound too nosey so I remained quiet.

"Do you miss it?" she asked.

"Miss what?"

"Your planet."

I never really thought about Sola since I arrived, I always try to look to the future and never the past. At least that's what I was taught.

"No, not really" I answered, "I'll follow the wind wherever it takes me."

"I see." She said simply.

I thought about what Tammy had told me earlier.

"I never really got to thank youâ ¦ you knowâ ¦ for saving my life back on Sola. I would've rather have died than be one of Vaughan's slaves but you saved me from that lifeâ ¦ so thanksâ ¦"

Once again she didn't reply and I thought I might have said something wrong. I just didn't want her to feel guilty about what happened.

After a moment she got up and made her way toward the exit. "Well, I'm gonna go make dinner, tonight's my night." She sounded chipper and I relaxed a little more.

I watch her start down the ladder.

"See you there" she smiled at me.

I smiled back. That was the first time in a long time I felt so great. I couldn't stand the distance she put between us for some reason and now I felt like I could die in peace.

I stayed in the sky deck until I was summoned for dinner. I made it there in record time, even from the back of the ship and I sat to watch her cook in the kitchen.

So far Cashel's and even Tammy's cooking was good enough to not use a taste nullifier so I was interested to see how Akiko's would taste.

It smelled great so far, but when she placed the dishes on the table my heart sank a little. They looked almost exactly like Rei's dishes.

I decided to wait for Cashel and Tammy before eating just to be sure.

It was surprising to see both Cashel and Tammy look so casual arriving at the dinner table, like it was their own cooking and they had no worries. I waited for Tammy to slip some nullifiers from her wrist but she never did and nor did Cashel ask. Instead they started eating right away.

I probably looked stupid being the first to sit at the table and the last to eat so I decided to put a few pieces on my plate and just eat as much as I could.

I nervously picked at the food on my plate until choosing one that looked the least intimidating. My mouth dropped from the shock of eating something so good after eating something that looked exactly the same and being traumatized by it. I couldn't believe how good it was, it was one of the best tasting foods I've ever had, if not *the* best. I guess everyone else liked it too because we had to battle who got the last of what. Rei and Akiko ended up winning most of those battles. It was funny to watch and everyone ended up laughing together.

It was strange that Akiko's food looked identical to Rei's, but with such different tastes.

That was the best dinner night by far, and for the first time ever, I felt like part of the crew.

Chapter 8: Questions

8. Questions

After the night I talked to Akiko in the sky deck, I began seeing her around more often. Most of the time she trained in the training room with Rei and sometimes I would go and watch.

She was even better than I expected. There were hundreds of different weapons in the weapons room and she was an expert with each one. She did however, have a favorite weapon. It was the simple knife that she always kept at her side. She would practice with it every day holding the blade down and out, slashing invisible advisories. That seemed to be her style.

Rei was an excellent sharp shooter, maybe not as good as Akiko but it was very close. She didn't really practice any hand-to-hand combat but she knew enough to get away pretty well but never enough to win against Akiko. It was fun to watch. The only thing I could participate in was meditating which Akiko did a lot.

If I wasn't in the training room I was talking with Tammy.

"When can I take off the sync ring?" I asked one day.

"We left it on, but not activated because your muscles need to heal completely before I can remove them or else any muscles that are not healed yet will die."

"Why does Rei and Akiko's food look the same but taste different?"

"Rei and Kiko come from the same planet. They taste different because Rei really sucks at cooking and Kiko is very good at it."

"Where are you from?"

"A distant planet called Thereon."

"Why does your hair glow?"

"I'm not human. My hair contains electric impulses that allow me to interact with mainly nonorganic objects."

"Ohâ ¦you're not human?"

"No. In fact, you are the only human on this ship, besides Vaughan. "

"I am?"

I guess I ask a lot of questions but I didn't think Tammy really minded. I had a feeling the others weren't human because we only ate dinner together every other night. Of course I always went to the kitchen when I was hungry so maybe they did too but I never saw them.

I also noticed none of them really liked talking about their past, nor did they bother asking me about mine. Sure I wondered about a few things but I never really got hung up over it. They would tell me what they wanted me to know and I was okay with that.

I had been aboard the Jago for about three weeks already. Time seemed to fly by. During that time I would wander around or play cards with Rei, which I always lost, or some days I would just lie in the sky deck. That's where Kiko always was when she wasn't busy. Yep, that's right I just called her Kiko. It happened just a few days ago in the sky deck.

"Hey Akiko, would you mind if I made dinner tonight? I don't know too many dishes but I've been practicing and I'd like to pull my weight somehow."

She chuckled, "I don't think you'd last very long cooking enough food for all of us."

I frowned. She couldn't see it but I'm sure she knew I did.

"Go for it, but only if I help you out. Tammy would kill me if you ended up hurting yourself even more."

That was a better answer than yes.

I smiled, "Thanks."

"Yeah, and call me Kiko. No one calls me Akiko here."

I smiled again, "Thanks Kiko."

My dinner turned out great thanks to Kiko. I don't think she'd ever made any dishes from Sola but somehow it turned out better than mine even though I told her what to do. I think she was secretly adding ingredients but when I asked her she denied it of course. Everyone enjoyed it and it brought back memories of when I used to cook for others a long time ago.

Before I realized it, Crux was only a few days away. Tammy told me they chose to do a job on the outskirts of the galaxy for the money. Vaughan's head was worth a pretty good price because none of the other intergalactic bounty hunters could, or wanted to spend the effort to get there, or they simply did not have the skill to complete the task. Therefore Vaughan's bounty kept increasing as time passed.

"We happened to be around the area." This time Tammy was in her workroom talking to me and fiddling with something small, "Our ship was damaged in an earlier conflict so we decided to make a pit stop on Sola and to grab some extra cash."

So they decided to challenge the planet's greatest fighter on a whimâ ¦ that's great.

"Oh. I see." I said as I watched her put a strand of her hair inside the small thing she was working on. "What are you doing?"

"Working on a vocal transmitter. It allows its user to speak the language of the person they are talking to. I added my hair to have a direct connection with it." She put the thing back together, "I don't have all the pieces yet, once we get to Crux I will be able to purchase the necessary items to have it fully functioning."

Was there anything Tammy couldn't do?

She was about to open another small transmitter when she suddenly stopped and looked straight ahead at the wall. I was about to ask her what's wrong but she answered that for me.

A loud alarm rang. I looked at her and her voice echoed throughout the ship, "Warning, hostile ships approaching quickly from the rear. Estimated approach timeâ ¦ 30 seconds."

Screens projected in front of her and she began examining the ship as she quickly walked toward the flight deck.

I followed her and heard footsteps running from behind.

"Who is it?" Cashel asked catching his breath and taking his seat at command.

Tammy responded, "Unknown. They are demanding the return of Vaughan however."

Cashel projected one of the ships on his dash board, "I see we made a lot more friends on Sola than I thought."

Through the flight deck's sun shield, large battleships started appearing one by one just as Kiko and Rei arrived on the flight deck to witness it as well.

Kiko took a look outside. "He's persistent" she whispered.

Rei asked, "Soâ ¦ how do we get out of this?" as we all watched hundreds of ships surround us.

Chapter 9: Quwallie

9. Quwallie

Tammy checked her panels.

"We are outnumbered and have no firepower" She said calmly.

Everyone thought for a moment. Was I the only one freaking out or what?

Finally Cashel spoke, "Tammy tell them we're giving them Vaughan. Kiko, Rei, prepare to make the transaction." Then he added, "Sarth you better go with them to translate."

I wasn't expecting that, but it wasn't like we could do anything else. Kiko and Rei took off to the lower deck and I followed as fast as I could. In the lower deck, Kiko opened the hatch that Rei put Vaughan in when we first arrived.

They let me translate, "Get up here" I yelled through the hole in the ground.

I saw Vaughan smiling as he made his way up. He had grown a beard since I last saw him and he had a nasty, dirty smell about him. Kiko took off the restraints on his wrists and we stood there waiting.

Tammy's voice came from the intercom, "The Quwallie is about to board for Vaughan."

I was nervous about seeing him again. Kiko sensed this because she stepped in front of me so I could see her. My heart calmed down a little knowing she was right next to me. Even Rei slipped me one of her famous 'don't worry' smiles.

The gel wall appeared before us and then the Quwallie, along with some guards, stepped out. Kiko and the Quwallie scorned at each other with discontent. You did *not* want to be between them.

Vaughan pulled away from my arm and walked over to the guards. They were about to leave when he noticed that the Quwallie was still glaring down at Kiko.

"What is it?" Vaughan demanded from him.

His voice was deep and sinister, "I wish to battle this one." Something was different about himâ ¦ it was his eyes. His once green eyes were now glowing bright blue.

"Then bring her with us, I haven't got all day. You took forever getting here." Vaughan sneered. He saw me again, "Take him too. He belongs to me."

They put restraints on Kiko. This was eerily familiar. I swallowed hard and took a step to follow them into the gel when Rei grabbed my hand.

"Be careful" she said with a concerned look on her face. The hand she was holding tingled as she pressed a finger in the middle of my palm. Her hands were soft and warm.

I nodded to her and walked through the gel wall with the others. Kiko and I knew we had no choice but to do as Vaughan wished or else he could easily destroy the Jago. We walked through a corridor that led to the large

Sola battleship.

I don't know why I thought Vaughan would ever keep his word.

"When we're far away enough, blast that damn ship apart." He commanded as we entered their mid deck. I stopped in my tracks and the guard behind me pushed me forward.

Kiko made the first move. She kicked the guard next to me and he went flying across the room. She easily broke the metal cuff links and took out her knife, taking out all the guards in the room.

"Hurry up and finish this" Vaughan said to the Quwallie before leaving the room through a large door. The Quwallie turned around and unsheathed his sword.

"Get out of here!" she yelled at me, "contact Rei!"

Contact Rei? Contact her how!?

"I know what you are" the Quwallie said to Kiko.

"Then you shouldn't have challenged me" she replied.

"It's not our nature to run from a fight" he said. "Why did you come along then if not to try and kill me? To try and save your friends?" He laughed. "It's pointless if you're dead."

He understood her. He knows her language too?

Kiko went after him. It was a different battle from before though, somehow the Quwallie was much stronger. They were moving very quickly and destroying anything in their path. All I could do was get out of their way to avoid getting killed.

"Sar! Are you okay?" came Rei's voice fromâ ¦ where?

"Rei?" I looked around. "Where are you?"

"I'm on the Jago, I'm talking to you through my soul link in your head. We need you to place the hair that's on your palm on top of any type of electrical circuit."

I looked at my palm that Rei had held earlier, there was a single strand of silvery hair that could only belong to Tammy.

"Circuitâ ¦ what kind of circuit?"

"A main circuit would be bestâ ¦" I was looking around for anything that looked electrical. "There! Put your hand on the main door." On the other side of Kiko and the Quwallie was the large door that Vaughan walked through. I made my way over.

"You can see me too?" I asked Rei.

"I can see through your eyes" she said. Wait, this has happened before on Sola. *"You need to hurry, Vaughan is loading his main weapon."*

I picked up my pace and slammed my hand on the door. At first it turned red and then it started flashing. Suddenly multiple alarms started ringing and white smoke started pouring out from the ceiling. The Quwallie turned his attention to me after the chaos started. He was striding toward me before I lost sight of him from the clouds of smoke. The smoke was thick. I put my back against the wall and searched for any sign of movement.

"Your right!" shouted Rei in my head.

I ducked just in time to avoid getting my head chopped off. Kiko appeared in front of me and tried to strike him but it was easily block.

"You alright?" she asked.

"Yeah I think so" I said.

The Quwallie attacked her again. She dodged and he sliced a large metal pillar right in half.

She led the Quwallie away from me, "Go hide somewhere and wait for Rei's signal." She said before disappearing again.

The Quwallie seemed to have the edge over Kiko which made me a little nervous. I wish there was something I could've done but this was way beyond me.

"Don't worry about her," said Rei. *"He's a tough opponent but she's tougher. Find some place to hide. Tammy locked down the room so no one can get in. She set off the evacuation alarm as well so the majority of the crew should be ejecting now."*

I found a small corner and I smashed myself inside as Kiko and the Quwallie's battle raged on.

"What is it?" I heard the Quwallie yell, "Why won't you fight me with your full potential?" he sounded like he was getting angry. "Stop hiding like a coward!"

I heard a loud crash and more clanking of metal. They had made their way back by me but I could only see silhouettes through the smoke. They stopped close the wall where we entered.

"I don't want to kill you." I heard Kiko say.

The Quwallie gave a deep laugh and said, "You've suppressed your powers for too long. You sound like a weak human."

The smoke was fading away and I could see them more clearly now. The Quwallie stood in front of the entrance.

Rei popped in my head again, *"hold on to something."*

I was about to ask why when I saw Kiko thrust her knife into the ground at the same time the entrance doors opened.

The force was unbelievable. The Quwallie was instantly sucked out into space as well as any loose debris. The doors closed just as quickly as they opened and I found Kiko pulling her knife up from the thick steal floor.

Chapter 10: Crux

10. Crux

"Tammy what's the status?" Kiko asked the air.

Tammy's voice responded through the ship's intercom, "The majority of the crew has evacuated, all that's left is those on the flight deck including Vaughan. I have also remotely overridden and rerouted the other battleships to head back to Sola."

"So all that's left is to clean up here..." Kiko said as she stashed her knife back at her side. "It looks like we have a new ship too. I'll go ahead and dump the rest of the crew in the evacuation pods, you can let Sarth back on the ship."

I was already up and walking about the torn up room. I saw that Kiko looked a little winded.

"I can stay and help translate if you'd likeâ ¦" I asked willingly.

"No that's fine. Go back and rest on the ship." It sounded like she'd rather be alone. So I left.

I was walking back to the Jago when Rei spoke in my head again, *"Don't feel bad,"* she said, *"she always needs her time after a strenuous battle."*

"I see." I said to no one. "So how is it you're talking to me without an ear piece?"

"Wellâ ¦" she started, *"as you probably knowâ ¦ I'm not human. My species is able to link with another being and allow us to communicate with each other in our minds. It's called a soul link. I am also able to see what you see and to let you see what I seeâ ¦"*

"So I could see what you see?"

"Yeah watchâ ¦"

I blinked and suddenly I was in a new room. It looked like the cargo area in the Jago. I turned my head to look around but it had no effect from what I was seeing.

"Whoa, this is kind of weird." I said.

She laughed and through her eyes I saw that she was looking at me through the red gel wall. When I saw myself I was facing the side of the corridor. It looked like I was talking to it and we both laughed again.

I tried walking to her but I ended up running into the wall so she put me back to my vision.

"It takes some getting used to" she said verbally to me as we walked back to the ship. "Maybe we can practice it more in the future."

"That sounds fun" I said excitedly at her, and she smiled back.

"I can also switch your sight to duo vision which makes only one of your eyes my sight and the other is your sight, but that takes *a lot* of practice to use efficiently. Aki's the only person I can do that with."

Tammy appeared before us.

"Sarth will you follow me please" she asked me.

"Sure" I answered, waving bye to Rei.

We walked through the ship to the medical bay.

She walked to the table and activated it. "I want to check your condition after that commotion."

I went to lie on the table, adjusting myself to get comfortable. The last checkup I had lasted for hours. Actually, I think she left me there on purpose as another joke.

"I'll be back laterâ ¦" she said as she walked out the door.

It was boring not being able to move and I ended up falling asleep.

When I woke up there was another change of clothes by my head. I guess Tammy came by. I let the table mat help me up and I changed into the clothes.

This time the sleeves were short. I put them on with no problem, in fact, I've felt good the past few days and I was happy to notice there was no movement restriction.

"You passed your checkup" said Tammy. Her face appeared above the table in the form of a hologram.

I stretched my arms and legs around, they felt great. "Thanks Tammy!"

Her face disappeared.

I felt like running a million miles. It was hard wearing the brace, not because I was hurt, but because I was used to running a lot. I love to run, so not being able to for about a month almost killed me.

I set out to find Rei, I knew she wouldn't mind helping me get back into shape. I headed down to the cargo bay because that's where she was most likely to be, but before I turned the corner I happened to overhear a conversation between Cashel and Kiko.

"I heard what happened in there," said Cashel, "are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine" Kiko answered. "He's not dead. He's frozen and floating in space somewhere now." She set down a crate of food that was in her arms.

"That's good. We should get to Crux in a few days, try and relax 'til then." He smiled at her.

She smirked at him, "You're the one that needs rest old man."

I pretended to just enter the room.

"Good timing," said Cashel "I heard you're all clear from Tammy. You can help us unload the weapons and ammo from our new ship."

"Sure no problem" I said.

I guess finding Rei would have to wait.I decided to try out the training room as soon as I woke up the next day, and ask Rei to join me whenever I saw her again.

Finally, the next day, I was able to try on the training clothes. They were super light and non-restricting, definitely not what I was used to. It lit up and I took a look at it, the text turned upside-down and I could finally read it thanks to Tammy. Apparently I could adjust the weight, tension, temperature and a few other things. I just left it alone for now, no need to stress out my newly healed body.

Inside the training room I remembered Kiko setting up an obstacle course to run through. I went to the electric panel and chose which objects I wanted to bring up from storage. Gel appeared from the ground where the objects started rising from. As soon as they were all on the training room floor the gel disappeared, seeping away back through the ground.

I only brought up the simple objects to run around or jump over, like blocks of different sizes and ladders and such. I walked over to move one of the larger black metal blocks. I figured I could push it where I wanted it but it wouldn't budge, which was weird because I saw Kiko move this same block with ease last time. I tried to move a smaller block but that was still way too heavy. I was getting discouraged, did the brace make me weaker or what? I made my way over to the smallest stepping block and used all my strength to make it budge. It slowly skidded across the floor.

This can't be right. I decided to ask the pilot/navigator/technician/doctor what was wrong.

"Tammy!" I yelled out to the room.

There was no response, but the door opened.

"She not here right now," said Kiko "she's going to be piloting both ships to Crux so she's in the Sola ship running diagnostics."

"I seeâ¦" I said sitting on one of the blocks.

She walked over to me.

"Did you need some help?" she asked.

I scratched my head. "I was just trying to move the blocks but I think something's wrong with them because they won't budge."

"Oh," she said, picking up the largest block with ease. "Where do you want it?"

That surprised me. "Whoaâ¦uhhhâ¦just over there I guess. How'd you do that?"

"I'm a little stronger than humans," she walked the block over to where I pointed and set it down. "Can I make a course for you?"

"Yeah sure."

I sat down against the wall and let her rearrange the course.

"I heard you soul linked with Rei" she stated.

"Uh yeaâ ¦ it was interesting"

She finished and said, "You should practice first before you use it outside of the ship."

I got up to stretch. "That's a good idea. I'll ask her about it later."

I ran the course, barely. I was winded afterwards but it felt good to get some exercise. Kiko helped me set up courses and gave me advice on how I should approach some of the objects before leaving to make dinner. It was Tammy's turn but Kiko offered to make it since she was busy.

Afterwards I went up the sky deck. We were almost to Crux so I wanted to spend as much time with the stars as I could since the next day we were supposed to land.

It wasn't long until I heard Tammy's voice back on our intercom. I happened to be writing in my room when I heard her say, "Prepare to descend into the Crux atmosphere."

I got ready for the jitters to come back like they did when we left Sola but they never came. I wasn't sure what was going on so I put all my stuff away and went to find out. I went to the flight deck to find everyone there. Tammy and Cashel were in their seats preparing to land. Kiko and Rei were at a table looking through a hologram of what looked like different items.

Rei was on a headset talking to someone, "30,000 Yomen? You're joking right? For a fully operation Sola battleship turbine?... okay *you* go get yourself a Sola turbine then, let me know how that goes for you."

"Who is she talking to?" I asked Kiko who was focused on her own hologram.

"She's selling the goods we made from our excursion." She said without taking her eyes off the screen.

I looked at her screen. At first the text was unreadable in another language but then it suddenly changed to text I could read.

This was once again thanks to Tammy of course. She had programmed the ship so that anything I touched would display text in my language, this didn't include however anything I didn't touch like the panels she was always on. She had told me earlier that she was working on something that would let me read any text I saw but she needed some parts to complete it, much like the vocal transmitters she was working on. Well it just so happens that the Sola battleship had the necessary equipment to finish her projects and so she summoned me to the medical bay last night to install both the vocal, and reading transmitter.

Now I was able to read what Kiko was looking at. She was browsing through ammo catalogues and making purchases. In the corner of the screen was a large, declining number, I guess Tammy gave her a certain amount to spent and it was dropping quickly.

Cashel called me, "Sarth come over here" I went over and saw through the sun-shield a very large white, glistening planet. "I thought you'd wanna see this."

I had never seen a planet from space before, it was such a beautiful sight. There were splotches of blue in some places.This must've been water and there was *a lot* of it.

"That's the most water I've ever seen." I said in awe.

Cashel burst out laughing, "You clearly haven't been out much."

We were starting to pick up speed.

"Sit down" said Tammy.

I went to find a seat as the ship now started the jittering I was expecting earlier. At first I thought it was going to stop, but progressively got stronger and stronger. I was afraid the ship was going to fall apart.

Tammy and Cashel were giving status reports and frantically checking the controls. Kiko and Rei just continued what they were doing, buying stuff.

I sat at my seat trying not to panic so much. It'll all be over soon I kept saying to myself.

Tammy never lost her composure. "Brace yourselves" she said in her usual calm voice.

I watched as we approached a very large docking bay that stretched out for miles. There were hundreds of ships, some small and some very large flying in and out of the planet. We were falling at a fast speed, too fast I thought, but it was nothing Tammy couldn't handle. Somehow the ship landed without too much of a jolt.

I didn't realize I was gripping my seat tightly.

"Relax!" said Rei as she took off her headphones. "You're gonna make *my* heart race." I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. "Not bad for your first landing though. Let's go out! We've been coopted up in here too long!" She jumped out of her seat. "Kiko we'll wait for you at the lounge" she yelled as she grabbed my hand and bolted to the exit.

"Hey don't buy anything yet!" Kiko yelled back.

I prepared myself for my first view of another planet. Once we stepped outside, it was much colder than I expected, probably because it only had one sun.

It wasn't much of a first view, all I saw were ships, ships and more ships. I turned around to take my first real look at the Jago. My jaw dropped.

Chapter 11: Introductions

11. Introductions

How was this thing even in the air? It looked like it was put through a metal shredder and slapped back together. There were holes everywhere and several panels were missing or poorly repaired by an amateur, even the logo was almost incomprehensible. It was a faded yellow with the name "JAGO" in big, bold, slanting letters.

I closed my mouth when I saw Kiko, Tammy and Cashel walk out from it and right on queue a large panel fell to the ground with a thud. I had no idea we were flying in this scrap heap. Tammy certainly is amazing to be able to keep this thing together, *and* flying another larger ship at the same time. No wonder she couldn't talk earlier.

She had landed the huge Sola battleship just behind the Jago.

"Ahhhh!" Came a man's pained voice from behind me. "What have you done to all my hard work!"

He was in overalls and riddled with grease spots. Rei giggled. The man looked mortified as he examined the remains of the ship.

Cashel apologized, "Sorry Jonas, we got caught up in a few skirmishes. We have a big catch from the other day though so you'll be properly compensated. Tammy already sent you the internal diagnostics and recommended restructure."

Rei dragged me off again. "C'mon I wanna show you something" she said.

I followed her to a rectangular block on the ground and it began lowering. The large platform took us down and because there were no walls and we saw thousands of workers working on hundreds of ships on the first level. And then we passed another levelâ¦ and anotherâ¦ the lower we went the less ships and people there were, until finally we stopped at a level surrounded by walls. One of the walls was a door and it opened revealing a hallway full of people and creatures all walking to their destination.

"This is the departure zone," Rei explained as we walked with the flow of the crowd. "I told Aki we would meet her in the lounge so let's head there."

We walked for about ten minutes following signs that said 'Lounge'. Inside was a lot quieter and had a relaxing atmosphere.

We sat down at one of the tables and a hologram popped up. It said, "Welcomeâ¦humanoid" and began repeating text in thousands of languages that my eyes interpreted as "Home Planet?" I heard Rei say Sola and a menu appeared.

"It assumes you can only speak your native language," she said.

She ordered one of the dishes that I always make and we ate. It tasted pretty bland which is how mine would taste if Kiko wasn't slipping in ingredients.

"Eh, yours is better," she said setting her empty plate aside.

She ordered the largest portion. The plate nearly took up the entire table. I'm not sure how she did it but she finished even before me.

"So where's Kiko?" I asked.

"She went to go turn in Vaughan for the bounty and now she's probably window shopping in the weapons department putting stuff on her 'to-get' list for the next time we drop by." She said with a bored attitude. "She already bought the ammo we needed but Tammy cut out a portion of Yomen we usually get because *someone* accidently destroyed the crate that held our vocal transmitters on Epsilon."

"That was you," said Kiko as she walked towards us.

"Oh you're back early!" said Rei ignoring her comment.

"Yeah there wasn't much to look at today. I guess something's going on that everyone's preparing for."

Rei thought for a moment, "The Millennium Galaxy Race! That starts soon doesn't it? Likeâ ¦"

"Next week" I finished, looking at a holographic ad on the wall. It said "Watch the Millennium Galaxy Race begin!" and had a countdown with a number 7 being the amount of days left until it starts.

"What is it?" I asked as we watched the clock run down.

"I'm not too sureâ ¦" said Rei. Tammy and Cashel walked into the lounge and joined us. "Hey Tammy, what's the Millennium Galaxy Race?"

They say down and she explained, "A race around the galaxy in which individuals or teams must collect four stones and bring them together in order to win."

"What do you win?" asked Kiko.

Tammy answered, "The life of a thousand human years and the power to rule the galaxy."

Rei slapped the table, "Seriously? No joke?"

"Yes." Her eyes wandered the table like she was reading through something very quickly. "According the Crux database, this was how Crux was formed. A stone called Vo is said to hold a vast majority of the universe's power, enabling its wielder to live for a thousand years and possess unnatural abilities. However, after a thousand years the stone will suddenly vanish and break back into four pieces which is then scattered back throughout the galaxy. The race is held to see who will be the next wielder of Vo."

Rei was enthralled. "Teams can enter this race?"

Everyone knew where she was getting at.

"Teams are formed before the race to help excel through the competition, but there can be only one winner. An example of this happened to the last winner. They formed a team of three and made an agreement on who should win but when Vo appeared before them one of them turned on the others and killed a teammate. The other two fought each other and the winner ended up being the person the team had previously agreed on."

"The team turned on each otherâ ¦" Rei whispered to herself.

Kiko and Cashel both looked sadden, like they knew what the race could do to you. We were silent for a moment.

"Let's go to our place now" said Cashel, trying to brighten up the mood.

Rei paid for our meal by placing a hand on the table. Her identification came up. I couldn't help but look at it. It had a picture and a description of her physical attributes, her birth planet and title: Class 1 Bounty Hunter, but when it came to species it said "human". I looked at her confused and she smiled and pressed a finger to her lips. What else about her ID was wrong? Were they fugitives or what?

We all made our way through the terminal. Rei pointed everything out to me very quickly as we walked past, so it was hard to remember it all. We walked for what seemed like miles heading even further underground. At the bottom of it all was a network of long tunnels. Cashel flagged a little ship and we got in and to head to our destination.

We were going fast and winding through different tunnels until I saw a light at the end of the one we were in. It got brighter and brighter until we emerged from the tunnel entirely. It was the biggest city I have ever seen. Buildings made of metal instead of dirt and as tall as mountains towered everywhere in different shapes and sizes.

"We have a place on the outskirts of the city." I heard Rei say. I was too busy staring out of the window to reply. "We should be there soon."

We didn't go too far into the city before stopping at a tall building. There were platforms at every window which is where our ship stopped and we all spilled out. Tammy opened the door to the room of the building in which they apparently stayed at here on Crux.

It was pretty plain looking and small inside. It looked to only get used only once a year or so because everything was covered in a thick layer of dust.

"Well it's good to know the place hasn't changed a bit." Said Rei, cleaning off a chair and sitting on it.

Tammy spoke to me, "Sarth, we only have 4 rooms so you can sleep wherever you want."

"That's no big deal. I'll just find a spot when I'm tired."

Rei pulled a deck of cards from a cabinet, "Hey Sar, look what I found! Let's play!"

I sat at the table with her. Kiko, Tammy and Cashel all left to finish errands so I ended up playing with her.

"No cheating okay?" I warned before the game.

"Aww I guess you figured out how I always won," she frowned. "Fine, I'll play fair this time."

A few hours later Tammy came back and had me place my hand on a glass hologram board. My new identification popped up.

My name was now officially 'Sarth' and I was given the title: Class 1 Bounty Hunter and added to the crew of the 'Jago'. Everything else was true, no fake ID for me. She even gave me 10,000 yomens to spend and said that was my share from the bounty minus medical expenses. Then she left again, saying she had to complete my residence profile for Crux.

I looked at my ID again. I was really happy that I got one. It made me feel like a real person who had a new meaning in life.

"What does Class 1 mean?"

"Oh that?" Rei was stuffing her face again with food. I'm surprised she was still smaller than me. "I'll explain that to you tomorrow when I take you to the Bounty Board."

Bounty Board? Learning new stuff every day was fun so I couldn't wait until tomorrow.

"Guess I'll go to bed then. Good night." I said trying to get comfortable on the old couch.

"'Nite" said Rei.

I didn't hear any of the others return last night but apparently they did and Kiko and Cashel left again early in the morning.

Rei and I got ready to leave. "Tammy we're going to the Bounty Board, will you let Aki know if she comes by?" she asked Tammy.

"Sure," Tammy replied, "don't get sidetracked."

"It's called *sidetracked* for a reason" Rei smiled.

We left the room and she flagged down a ship off the platform to take us to the Bounty Board which was back where the Jago was in the departure zone. We got out and I followed her as she led me through the crowded space port to a large, bustling room with the words, "Bounty Board" on top. It was full of mean, gruff looking humanoids and different species. We stuck out because we were the youngest looking ones there and so we were eyed continuously by everyone. Some of them even stared and pointed at us.

"Uhh are you sure we can be here?" I asked nervously.

"Yeah of course," she answered. "We're almost there."

The room seemed to be divided into sections of different classes. She brought us to the one that was the least crowded and labeled "Class 1".

"This room has the list of bounties that Crux puts up. It's divided by how hard a given bounty will be. There are five classes with five being the easiest bounties to perform and one being the hardest. Obviously the harder ones yield more yomen, but it's advised that you be in that Class category or lower to claim the bounty. This is how we make a living."

I studied the hologram wall, "The Jago is Class 1? The highest level?"

"Yep. You need to have collected a certain amount of yomen from bounties in order to move up in class." She put her hand on the large hologram wall and a long list of ship names scrolled down. The Jago was listed as number two with the Breccan being number one by a few million yomen but they were both a hundreds of millions yomen away from the rest of the competition. "Not only that, we're one of the best in the space port."

It was strange to think that by coincidence, I had joined an elite crew of bounty hunters who always put their life on the line with one of the most dangerous jobs in the galaxy.

I saw the amount of yomen the Jago has accumulated and something wasn't right.

"If you guys have made this much yomen, why is it we're always budgeting like we have none and we're broke?"

"Wellâ ¦" Rei chuckled nervously. "With every excursion we go on we always end up with more damage costs then we make from the bounty."

A strong looking, tall man in a nice set of clothes walked up behind Rei.

"That's right. About three months ago they managed to destroy a section of the space port because their bounty got loose."

Rei rolled her eyes and turned around. "It's nice to see that some of us are still relaxing around here." She said sarcastically. "Why don't you take a look at the board Breccan."

She slapped her hand back on the board. The Jago highlighted again in second place and then the amount of yomen went up drastically and the Jago was switched to first place above Breccan.

The man scoffed. "We've been saving our energy for more important things, like winning the Millennium Galaxy Race." He said before walking away.

For such a cool looking strong man he had a pompous attitude.

"Ugh! I can't stand that egotistical maniac." Rei spat. "I mean *who* names their ship after themselves? Don't be surprised if you hear he's been in a tragic accident one day."

I've never seen Rei so frustrated. It was quiet amusing. I guess he was more of a rival than an enemy.

We stayed awhile and she showed me how she chose which bounties to consider taking to present to the others. This is how they worked, Rei would come to the board to choose which bounties she thought they should complete. Then the others would all agree on which ones they should take. Then Tammy would set a flight plan and the next day they would leave on their excursion.

Rei took information from about 20 different bounties and we headed back to our apartment. We would only realistically take on about five bounties per trip before coming back. When she showed Tammy the info cards Tammy immediately weeded out 10, leaving 10 to discuss with Kiko and Cashel.

I was taken aback by how fast she said no to ten already. "What's wrong with those?" I asked.

"I calculated that their destinations would not be achievable based on our financial standings. Secondly, the equipment we have would not suffice for the operation. Thirdly, the amount of data I have on some of them is not sufficient."

I was impressed. "You calculated all that just by glancing at them?"

"Yes."

"What am I thinking about right now?"

"Yes, there are some things I cannot doâ¦ No I cannot read your mindâ¦ Yes I know you think this is weirdâ¦ yes I'll stop now."

That was kind of creepy. "Alright, I'm going over here nowâ¦" I said trying to get away from her politely.

She went back to reading the bounty info cards and said, "I'm not offended."

Chapter 12: Gifts

12. Gifts

The next day Rei took me shopping.

"What are we looking for?" I asked. We were inside a travel ship heading toward the city this time.

"Tammy asked if we could get her some items for the projects she's working on."

We traveled almost to the center of the city before getting out in front of a bunch of small shops. Rei glanced at the map from the hologram bracelet Tammy gave her earlier.

"It should be close by from here" she said. "There it is."

It was a small store filled almost to the brim with electronics and trinkets. Rei was gathering all the items we needed as I surveyed the items for sale. Every item was different. I scrounged around a bit until something glowing caught my attention. I picked it up and examined it.

Is this what I think it is? It looked like a little star in a tiny black vial.

"Ah, I see you activated the firestar." An alien woman said to me. Her skin was jet black and scaly but she had soft, green, human eyes. "Those are rare. It's one of the galaxy's tiniest stars. It is said that if it resonates well with you, then when you die it will also burn out and be reborn anew for someone else to carry." I held the firestar vial in my hand. It flickered for a moment and then it died out. "It seems you know someone who would resonate well with it."

I knew Kiko was the one who activated it. "How much?"

"Since you were able to activate it, I will sell it to you for 6,000 yomen."

I wasn't sure if that was a bargain or not but I wanted to get it for Kiko.

"I'll take it." I said holding my hand up to pay.

After I paid for it I put it safely in my pocket, then I felt bad only getting something for Kiko so I continued to browse around for gifts for the others.

I looked in a pile of scrap that I thought Tammy would find interesting and I found something else that caught my eye.

It was small and rectangular and I could easily squeeze it in my fist, but what I liked about it the most was its color. It was mainly silver but also glowed like Tammy's hair. I didn't know what it was but it was pretty, so I decided to buy it for her since it reminded me of her.

It was harder to find stuff for Rei and Cashel so I ended up getting them memory flashers. They were rings that were able to capture an image and display it as a hologram or you could send it to another programmed ring, which is what I figured Rei and Cashel would do the most.

Altogether I spent almost my entire allowance on gifts. I didn't feel bad though, it's not like I had anything to spend it on anyway.

I helped Rei find the rest of the items to buy and we headed out to flag a ship to take us back. I was about to call one passing by but she suddenly gasped and grabbed my arm pulling me aside.

"There's one more place I want to go before we go back." She said shoving the bags into my arms. "You know how to get back right?"

It was hard to hold all of the bags by myself.

"Where are you going?" I asked still struggling.

"Just to this place right here, I won't be long."

She shoved her way into a building with the big words "Gambling Hall" at the top.

Seriously? I never knew she liked to gamble. I thought about our card games and it finally clicked. This wasn't a gamble for someone like her, she was in here to make money for certain.

I didn't like the look of the place, we were already in a shady area and she just walked into the scavy den. I knew Kiko would kill me if she found out I left her in a place like this, so I followed her.

The air was thick with rancid smoke. There were groups of people sitting at tables making bets and playing games. I saw Rei was already at a table playing cards with a small group. I moved over to the food lounge and sat in a place where I could still see her.

I had a meal and waited for her there until she was finished. She would occasionally cheer very loudly and a few minutes later I saw a group of men, of a variety of species, eye and point at her. They gradually went up to her and one of them spoke in a booming voice.

"Hey you've made a lot of money there, you wanna share some of that with me and my buddies here?"

She casually blew them off, "Yeah right, get your own winning streak."

I knew this wasn't going to end well. As I made my way to her the man grabbed her arm.

"Let her go!" I demanded.

The guy looked at me. He had completely black eyes and no hair but spikes coming out of his skull.

"Pathetic human. Who do you think you are, ordering us around?"

No one seemed to care that we were being harassed. In fact I think the noise bothered them so a few patrons casually moved seats.

Their leader spoke again but this time to his friends, "We'll take'em with us and teach'em how to act toward a superior species."

The other guys grabbed us by the arms and started dragging us out the back door but Rei instantly started fighting back. She got away and headed towards me but more guys blocked her path and started shooting at

her, forcing her to kick over a table and jump behind it.

Of all days, she had left her pistol blaster with Kiko for maintenance. I was able to get a glimpse of her behind the table before I was over powered and subdued with a punch in the ribs. It felt like I was sledged with a hammer. My concerns were with Rei though and I straggled back toward the door.

Their leader came back and faced me, "You humans never learn."

I held my ribs and glared at him. "It's sad you need your friends to take down two lowly humans." I said angrily.

Wrong answer. If he was mad before, he wanted to kill me now. He slugged me hard on my cheek and I fell to the ground. I don't know how, but I was still conscious and in a lot of pain. The leader held up his fist revealing steel plated knuckles that were embedded in his green-tinted skin.

"Hold him down" he said.

They pinned me to the ground and the leader walked right on top of me ready to pound my face into the ground when someone appeared from the far corner. It looked like a girl...I couldn't tell who it was from the ground but when the guys saw her they began to panic.

"Oh shit it's her! Let's get outta here, get him in the ship quick!"

They threw me in the ship before I could see this mysterious person, but I had a feeling of who it was. I only knew one person who could induce this fear.

We sped down the alley, turning corners and looking for an area to flee into the sky but it was too late. I heard a thud on the roof and it started to disintegrate into a fine powder and blow away. It didn't take long for a young woman to slip inside and knock them all unconscious before they could even pull out their blasters. What I wasn't prepared for was the fact that it wasn't Kiko.

The ship came to a stop when she took out the driver. Then the young woman turned to focus on me. At first glance she was very pretty and had long golden hair tied up in a ponytail like Kiko's.

"You alright?" she asked me. She had a strange accent but she sounded sincere.

"Yeah I'm fine" I lied. Breathing hurt and half my face was throbbing and swelling with pain.

She chuckled, catching my obvious lie. "I saw what you did in the Gambling Hall" she said.

Was she referring to the fact that I couldn't do anything to help Rei?

"Rei!" I said suddenly. I had to see if she was alright. I tried to get up but a sharp pain from my ribs stopped me.

"She's fine" the young woman said quickly, stopping me from moving rashly. "She was contacting someone when I last saw her. I promise she's fine."

The sound of sirens approaching caught both our attentions. "We should get out of here, it'd be a big mess if we were caught." I didn't know what to do or how to get back to Rei.

She helped me out of the ship and said, "I have a place not too far from here. You can stay there for now."

I didn't have much of a choice since she was half steering half carrying me, so I let her lead the way to her personal ship. We flew a little further toward the middle of the city than I hoped, but eventually we made it to her place just as the sun set and the lights in every building simultaneously turned on. It was everything the Jago apartment wasn't. It was very sleek, stylish and very clean.

She helped me inside again and set me on one of the many couches.

"Sorry my room is messy" she apologized.

I looked around and there was a stack of papers spread all over a large table. She considered that a mess? I didn't want her to see our apartment.

"This is your room?" I asked looking at all the couches.

"Well, this level isâ ¦yes."

"This *entire* level?" I asked surprised. The level was easily twice as big as our entire apartment.

"Yes, why?" she asked curiously.

"Uh, I was just wondering."

I winced at the pain in my ribs.

"Let me help you with that" she said, noticing my pain. "Take off your shirt."

My head cocked with hesitation, "Uhh..."

"Trust me."

She seemed trusting enough. "Alrightâ ¦" I felt awkward undressing in front of her, plus she did most of the work but I did comply with her demand. If she could help me somehow then I couldn't complain because my ribs and face were already swelling up pretty bad.

She rubbed her hands together and her palms started emitting a yellowish light, then she placed one hand on my cheek and the other on my ribs.

"What are you doing?" I asked nervously.

"It's alright," she smiled softly. "I'm able to break down or repair any molecules that I touch. All I'm doing is repairing your damaged tissues."

She had a caring smile. I could tell this was someone who really cared about people and would always do the right thing when needed.

She came closer to my face and gazed into my eyes. "You have very pretty eyes" she said taking an interest in them.

I gazed into her green eyes as well, getting lost in them, "Thanksâ ¦" I smiled anxiously.

CRASH! Someone barged through the wall from the entrance patio and was searching around frantically. It was Kiko.

"Sar-!" she started to yell until she found the young woman and me sitting on the couch. She was still right in front of my face, her hands on my bare ribs and cheek.

My mouth dropped when I realized the position we were in, *and* I was half naked.

"Kiko!" I exclaimed.

I've never seen her so flustered, "I'll give you two a moment" she said quickly leaving the room.

"No wait! It's not- nothing happened- hold up!" I pleaded standing up to chase after her.

The young woman let go of me and stood up. "You're pretty much done anyway."

All my swelling was gone and I grabbed my shirt and put it on. "Thanks for helping me" I said sincerely but quick and quietly. Then I ran out through the torn down wall where Kiko was furiously pacing on the ship platform.

"What were you doing!" she yelled at me. "Rei told me you were in trouble and I find you here with *her*!" She point to the young woman who was standing arms crossed now glowering at Kiko from inside the room.

"She saved me from those guys at the Gambling Hall and brought me here to help me!"

The young woman's attitude changed. "As destructive as always I see," she said in a displeased tone to Kiko. "Thank you for ruining my entry way, now you better run along before Breccan comes by."

Kiko was too angry to reply so she turned around to flag a ship to keep from destroying the entire building. I've never seen her so mad, it was scary.

When the ship arrived she got in and I was about to enter but she slammed the door in my face and yelled at the driver to go.

I stood there and watched her ship take off, back toward our apartment.

Ughhhh! I didn't understand why she was so mad. I turned around to see the young woman now smiling and shaking her head at me.

"You'd better go before Breccan comes." She warned.

"You know Breccan?" I asked.

"Yeah, he owns the building," she said back in her normal, kind tone. "And he won't be pleased to see someone from the Jago did it."

"Oh, good point." I flagged a ship. "Thanks again for saving me. I'll see if we can help with repairs." I said getting in the ship.

"Don't worry about it. It was nice to meet you Sarth." She smiled and waved.

The ship took off before I could ask how she knew my name. I guess it's because she knew Breccan.

I was dreading the return to the apartment. I'm sure Kiko was still furious about me and I hated the thought of her ignoring me again.

Everyone eyed me as I walked through the entrance. Kiko was in her room and I saw Rei standing by the table. She was the only one who looked happy to see me. Cashel chuckled and shook his head and Tammy simply stared at me.

"I'm glad you're alright" she said genuinely.

"I'm glad you are too." I said sincerely but with a weak smile.

Then everyone continued with what they were doing.

The next few days were hard. I didn't see Kiko at all and I was getting frustrated not knowing why. I didn't go out much after that. Then one day it was just Tammy and I. I always spilled my thoughts and feeling with her because she would always listen and give me advice.

"I don't understand what I did wrong." I said to her.

"You did nothing wrong." She answered.

Today she was working on some sort of ship piece and I helped her clean the parts. We had to take on part time jobs to help pay for the damages to the Gambling Hall, because apparently Kiko destroyed the place even more when she arrived. I was surprised that the young woman who helped me that day really did cover for us because there was no word about getting Breccan's building fixed.

"Then why is she angry with me?" I asked.

"She's confused," she stated. "According to Rei, she was very worried about you when she heard what happened, and she went off right away to find you. When she saw you safe with Lux she didn't know what to think so her first emotion to arise was anger."

Tammy had told me earlier when I explained to her what happened that the young woman's name was Lux and that she was Breccan's second-in-command of his crew.

"Lux was only trying to help me! I didn't do or tell her anything."

"Where Kiko's from, touch is an intimate gesture, especially the hands and face. How you feel about your actions is felt very differently from her perspective, therefore it is difficult for both of you to comprehend each other's emotions."

I was starting to understand how Kiko felt. It was silly to think someone placing their hand on my face would make her flip out this much but I obviously wasn't considering how that looked to her, plus I was half naked. I thought about if I saw a man kiss herâ ¦No. I didn't even want to think about itâ ¦why? Was I jealous?

I changed the subject. "I bought something for you."

Tammy looked up from her work as I took out the present I bought for her at the store and handed it to her.

If she ever showed emotion it was in the slightest so I was pleased when she reacted to what I gave her.

"It reminded me of you so I decided to get it for you." I said happily.

She must've known what it was because she was able to open it, which I didn't know it could do.

Curiosity got the best of me, "You know what it is?"

She examined it more before it started talking, "Catalogued entry number 56,378. No reaction. End entry."

There was no hologram. It was just a voice coming from the small gadget.

"It's a data preserver," She said as she pulled out a glowing hair from inside the device. "It's from my home planet. I thought these were all destroyed long ago. Thank you."

She closed the glowing hair in her fist and closed her eyes. Then she opened both again. The hair stopped glowing and she tossed it aside.

"What was on it?" I asked.

She tucked the data preserver in her pocket, "Nothing important, a detailed description of our people torturing humans for enjoyment."

I looked at her, appalled.

"Joke."

Chapter 13: King

Part 3: Millennium Galaxy Race

13. King

As the week was ending, everyone on Crux was preparing for the Millennium Galaxy Race. It was getting harder to travel around as more and more aliens, humans, cyborgs, and all the other different species in the universe gathered on this planet. Good thing it was a huge planet, it's at least twice the size of Sola according to Tammy.

The race was a big deal. *Everyone* was talking about it since it only happened once every thousand years. I was only mildly surprised that we weren't going to do it, or even try to do it. The only person who was thrilled about it was Rei. She read as much gossip about it as she could, but it was surprising that she didn't beg the others to do it.

The others crewmembers however, had little to no interest in it.

"No need to be flashy." Said Cashel.

"Not worth the risk." Said Tammy.

And still not a word from Kiko.

The Millennium Galaxy Race was about to begin the next day when we were summoned to the inner city. The only good thing about this trip was that the entire Jago crew was summoned and so Kiko had to come along. I hadn't seen her in days but she still pretended I didn't exist. I didn't mind too much, it was just nice to finally see her again.

"What's in the inner city?" I asked Tammy in the shuttle on the way there.

"The Crux Council and the ruler of the entire galaxy."

"Surely we're not going there for them so why are we being summoned?"

She responded with a blank stare.

"You meanâ ¦they did summon us?"

"No."

Another Tammy joke I see.

"The ruler summoned us."

I laughed but no one reacted.

The inner city was beautiful, majestic andâ ¦empty. It was weird being able to walk out of the shuttle and not have to avoid anyone since only certain people were allowed to be in this area.

We walked through a garden of strange plants and into a enormous white marble building. I kept thinking we were going to stop soon but we were being ushered deeper into the manor until finally stopping in a large, circular, empty room. There were hardly any decorations, just a red carpet that lead to another part of the building. We were alone there standing, not really knowing what to do. We didn't have to wait long however.

A male voice echoed from across the room, "Welcome."

Everyone bowed their heads out of respect. It's not every day you meet a thousand year old man who ruled the entire galaxy.

He walked up to us. "There's no need for that."

He looked like a normal human man about the same age as Cashel and wearing simple but elegant attire. Unlike Cashel though, he had hair which was short and snow white.

"It's been a long time Cashel." He said.

"Not too long..." Cashel replied.

"I hear your crew is continually destructive as always" he chuckled.

Kiko fidgeted.

"Why did you summon us here Tiberius?" asked Cashel getting straight to the point. He must have known him pretty well, and for some reason he wasn't looking forward to this meeting. I saw the discontent in his face when we received the invitation to the inner city.

"I need you to finish what we started a thousand years ago." Tiberius stated.

Did he just say a thousand years ago? Were they talking about the Millennium Galaxy Race?

Tiberius continued, "We didn't have the power to destroy Vo back then, but you have it now."

Cashel shook his head. "Do you not remember what happened then? What I did?"

"That was the *past*. I can see who you are right *now*, what you live for and believe in."

Cashel continued to shake his head. "I can't risk the lives of my crew. It would be like dragging them into our own problems."

Tiberius pleaded, "It's not just our problem. This affects *everyone* in the galaxy. You haven't seen what I've seen. Do you know what would happen if Vo fell into the wrong hands? The power of Vo is immense, they would be capable of destroying everything that I've tried so hard to protect. That *we* have tried to protect."

Our captain stood there for a moment taking it all in.

"I'm sorry." He finally said shaking his head.

Tiberius gave a heavy sigh and turned around to leave, "I am too. I've already entered the Jago in the race."

Cashel was taken aback by this, "We will *not* race for you." He said angrily.

Tiberius turned back around, "I can't force you to race. But I'm hoping in time you will come to see what I have seen." He gave Cashel a weak smile, "I guess this is goodbye my friend." Then walked back, following the red carpet from where he came from. "I hope you stay true to what you believe in."

We watched as the most powerful man in the galaxy disappeared behind the curtains.

"How do you know the king of the galaxy?" Rei asked Cashel back at the apartment.

I guess he couldn't hide from it any longer.

"You all obvious know that I'm not human. My species is an ancient and dying one. None of us know or remember how we came to be, only that we live for thousands of years. We also have a special power where we're able to contain or suppress other species' powers or special abilities.

Well there's not that many of us anymore, Tiberius is the only other one I know and a thousand years ago we decided to do the race together in order to build a unified galaxy that didn't have to fear any threats." He took a deep breath. "We were winning the race and had decided that Tiberius should be the holder for Vo, but when it appeared before us I betrayed my friends to try and take it for myself. Tiberius and I fought over it and he was the victor, but instead of killing me he let me live and here I am today."

It was quiet in the room while Cashel told his story.

"So you're *thousands* of years old?" was the only thing Rei couldn't get over.

"Yep and I'll tell you one thing, the galaxy is a much better place than what it used to be before Tiberius ruled."

It was incomprehensible to think that Cashel would ever betray his friends. He cared more about us than himself.

"What are we going to do?"

"What we've always doneâ¦ bounty hunting."

A beep went off in the room, signifying that we had a visitor. Tammy opened the entry way and Breccan and Lux strolled inside. Outside, his massive ship was so large that it took up a bunch of other entry ways as well.

"Aki it's for youâ¦" Rei said with displeasure.

Kiko came out of her room with as much enthusiasm as Rei.

Breccan's face lit up, "Akiko, you're looking stunning as usual today" he radiated with happiness when he spoke to her.

Kiko wasn't amused, "What do you want?" she said simply.

"To wish you farewell," he came close to stroking her cheek but never touched her. "When I come back with Vo I'll sweep you off your feet and we can rule the galaxy together." He sounded very suave when he spoke to her with his passion.

Rei giggled and whispered to me, "Last time he touched her she put him in the medical bay for a few months."

Breccan heard her and snapped back, "don't you have something to destroy?"

Kiko simply ignored Breccan and glared at Lux who was still standing at Breccan's side.

"What are you doing here?" Kiko asked angrily.

"Just making sure our ship stays in one piece around you" Lux sassed back.

Kiko took a threatening step forward and Lux casually put her hand to her hip where a pistol blaster was ready for the taking.

Breccan put his hand between them. "My apologies Akiko." He said to her.

Lux scoffed and went back to their ship but not before smiling at me.

Kiko was holding back tight fists. I think it took all her strength not to attack Lux.

Breccan waved to us, "I bid you all farewell! We most likely won't be seeing you for a while!"

We all watched as he boarded his large ship and took off toward the sky.

"Ugh, I hate that guy" Rei exasperated. "I doubt he's gonna win that race."

"Aren't they just as good as the Jago? They're number two right?"

"In this space port yeah, but there are hundreds of spaceports throughout the planet. This is a newer spaceport too. Some of the other spaceports have hunters that have been hunting for much longer than we have." She was in the kitchen slopping food on her plate. "So overall, we're rankedâ ¦ probably in the middle somewhere."

The next morning was the day the race was supposed to begin.

Rei and I watched the holograms to see when it would start. Since we were entered into the race we were able to receive the informational holograms that were transmitted to every racer or team.

Rei read aloud, "It says at the start of the race the Vo stone will split into four stones. The race consists of finding those stones and bringing them back together in order for Vo to reappear for the taking."

"That sounds easy enough." I said.

She minimized the hologram to ask Cashel, "What will happen to Tiberius?"

"When you become the vessel for Vo, you become one with it."

So Tiberius was going to split into four pieces. No wonder he looked gloomy again today on the Crux Informational Holograms, his expression matched the gloomy weather.

Rei and I spent the rest of the day staring at the countdown clock. Even outside you could hear people start to get excited. No one knew what to expect because not everyone lives a thousand years to witness the momentous event. Eventually Tammy joined in our clock watching.

One hourâ ¦

30 minutesâ ¦

10â ¦

1 minuteâ ¦

My heart was racing like we were actually participating at the many start lines scattered throughout the planet.

3â ¦2â ¦1â ¦0.

Crowds were cheering and a large flash came from outside. We ran to take a look outside, even Kiko followed us out with interest. There was a very large pillar of light coming from the inner city and it extended all the way up to the stars. The sound of thunder reverberated everywhere.

Everyone, inside every building, was outside on their entry platforms watching the spectacle.

The light began to crackle and break into four smaller, distinct pillars. Then the lights disappeared, and suddenly four bright streaks of light flew up and then veered off away from each other.

At the same time, hundreds of thousands of ships from everywhere on the planet, all different shapes and sizes began taking off, following the streaks of light.

Some people cheered as the thousand year race began. This was something you had to be lucky enough to catch and it was an amazing thing to see. Too bad we weren't participating.

As we were about to walk back inside we heard a distant *boom* and then another. We looked up to see ships firing at each other, their debris falling to the ground. Then another loud *BOOM* came from right above us and it started raining ship parts. The people outside began screaming, and it just grew louder and louder.

What is this?! What's going on?! I looked around frantically, confused as chaos ensued. We were suddenly in the middle of a battlefield.

Cashel ran inside. "Grab your stuff. We're leaving right now!"

Chapter 14: Race

14. Race

No one questioned him. We all ran inside, grabbed as much as we could, and set it by the entrance where Cashel was shoveling it in a transport ship and directing it to the spaceport.

I helped Tammy throw all her stuff in boxes since she wasn't the fastest packer in the galaxy and Rei took all the food and some weapons. Kiko had the rest of the weapons and then helped Cashel pack it into the ship. There was no more room for us so Cashel sent it off and we waited for another to arrive.

"Aki did you grab the mineral cutter?" Rei asked, suddenly realizing she didn't grab it.

"No, I thought you did." Kiko replied.

Rei shook her head. Kiko ran back inside the apartment to get it.

An automated ship arrived to take us to the spaceport and we piled in just as a dark shadow covered us. The ship started vibrating fiercely as a large space ship came down on us.

"Aki get down!" Rei bellowed toward the apartment.

Cashel watched the ship lower and stop in front of our place. "Tammy get us away from here!" he said urgently.

Tammy's hair was already glowing and pressed into the ship's control board. We whizzed away just as the large ship crashed onto the platform and fired its large blasters into our apartment.

BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM. They were relentless.

"Kiko!" I was worried that she was blasted away. It was hard to see with all the smoke and debris flying everywhere.

"She's fine," Rei assured. "She fled to the upper levels."

I forgot that she could see through Kiko's eyes.

Cashel examined the situation, "Tammy make a pass around, we can pick her up on the other side of the ship."

I watched through the window as Kiko ran out from an upper level and jumped on top of the attacking ship. I caught a glimpse of the red laser light that came from the mineral cutter as she made a hole in their ship and jumped inside.

We made a pass around and the large ship began to rapidly descend with fresh smoke pouring out of any openings from it. Towards the bottom of the ship we saw a piece fly off. When we got closer I saw Kiko sticking out of the hole. Tammy brought us next to it and she jumped on top of our ship before the large ship crashed into the ground.

I turned around and saw our apartment ablaze with people fleeing in terror.

Kiko joined us inside the ship. "They knew we were in the race, that's why they came after us." She informed as she checked the long blaster she took from inside the large attacking ship and gave it to Rei.

"We became a target once the race started." Cashel said with frustration. "We need to get off this planet."

Tammy steered us through city, which was now a warzone.

I didn't understand, "Why are they attacking each other!?"

"Eliminating the competition" Kiko said calmly. "There are no rules to collecting the stones."

People would actually put innocent lives in danger for this race. I was starting to see how the world and the galaxy really worked; I just wasn't prepared for it to collapse this quickly and right in front of my eyes.

When we arrived at the spaceport most of it was empty but in ruins, other racers targeted the ships. Luckily our ship was smaller than most so it wasn't a main target but it still looked pretty banged up. I don't think I was ever going to see this ship in prime condition but at least it was much better than how we got here.

We got inside. Since it was still stored underground Tammy hacked the elevators to bring it up.

Cashel explained what we were going to do, "Once we're in the air we're going to be a target. Everyone needs to jump on a blaster and defend the ship until Tammy can get us out of here."

I'm sure the others already knew what to do so he was directing it more to me. Rei told me to go on one of the side guns, which was controlled from a small dark room. She was on the other side and Kiko was in the rear.

Blasters were forbidden on Sola, so I had never used one before. Rei gave me a quick rundown through her soul link. Basically all I had to do was mark my targets to blast at, seemed simple enough.

Tammy fired up the engine as the ceiling bay doors opened and we took off faster than I ever thought this ship could go.

"Whoa! Geez!" I said trying to stabilize myself since we were standing up.

Cashel was right, we became an instant target to any hostile racer in the area. Many ships pursued us, but the dangerous ones were the big ships. They had smaller ships hovering close to them protecting the big ship and attacking anything that got close to it. We had to weave through a few big ships and blasting the smaller ships was a challenge for me.

The controls for the blasters were all touch activated. The entire blaster rooms had touch holograms to lock on the target and to choose which weapon to fire. Plus we had to keep track of the top and bottom of the ship. The good thing was, all the rooms were the same and connected so even if I missed a ship, Kiko or Rei could catch it and lock on to it, which happened a few times.

The Jago jarred. I know we were hit more than once but somehow Tammy held it all together. I had heard she designed a shield that could absorb most of the energy from blasters, but I don't think that worked against projectiles.

Tammy's voice announced, "30 seconds until we are able to warp speed." It was the longest 30 seconds of my life. "Prepare to jumpâ ¦"

The room went dark and then filled with streaks of light. I didn't know what that meant so I stood there staring at nothing.

Rei spoke in my head, *"You can get out now."*

"Ohâ ¦right." I said.

I was still full of adrenaline as I got out of the room. I walked over to the flight deck and sat down. I don't think we'll be returning to Crux any time soon.

Kiko and Rei walked in.

"What are we going to do Cashel?" Kiko got straight to the point.

He continued pushing buttons on the flight deck control panel, "We're going to the safe house."

"The safe house?! We're still going to run away and pretend we didn't see Crux getting destroyed?!" Rei asked in a fury.

Cashel didn't answer so she stormed off angrily.

I went to go wash up and put on extra clothes since I had forgotten how cold it was in space. I guess I should get used to it considering how much more time we spend traveling than on an actual planet. I didn't mind it.

It was going to take us two weeks to get to the safe house on Dezner and I was determined to apologize to Kiko before we get there.

I didn't have to wait long, the next day I was running in the training room when she asked if she could talk to me. I was elated when she spoke to me.

"Yeah sure" I said happily.

"I'm sorry about my behavior these past few days..." she started.

"No, I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to worry you or make you upset." I explained trying to catch my breath, "I justâ ¦want things to go back to how they used to be."

"Yeahâ ¦I agree." She nodded and then turned around to leave to let me get back to my running.

"Wait!" I said suddenly remembering I had something for her. I've always kept it with me since I bought it, to be able to give to her at the first chance I got. "I bought this for you. I know you love gazing at the starsâ ¦"

I handed her the small black vial with the now brightly glowing star and her face lit up right along with it. "It's a-"

"Firestar" she finished in complete awe.

"Yeahâ ¦"

So apparently everyone knows what I got them except me. And here I thought I was buying random junk.

She smiled with happiness, "Thank you".

I couldn't help but smile with her, "Your welcome."

I was on the flight deck with Tammy. A week had past already since we set off for Dezner but something was bugging me.

"How is it the other racers knew we were in the race?"

"Everyone who wishes to participate is tagged." Tammy explained.

"We're tagged? Electronically? Can't you un-tag us or something?"

"It's not from an electronic signature. This is a different power that I have no control over. Vo is a completely different power altogether. There is not much I know about it to be honest."

"So can we see where the other racers are?"

"Not that I'm aware of. We can only search to see who's in the race. Those racers that attacked us had their sights set on us before the race even began, it was the perfect opportunity to finally get rid of us once it started."

Rei came in the room.

"Hey there you are! You wanna practice soul linking?" she asked me.

Soul linking with Rei was pretty fun. We would spend hours trying to get through obstacles together and afterwards we would play cards from each other's hands. She could only use her power for so long with certain people. For Kiko it was about an hour max each day and for me we were able to soul link for almost six hours straight and every time we did it we were able to keep extending the time.

"It's probably because your species is very basic." Rei contemplated. "I can only stay in Tammy's head for about five minutes before I'm pretty much thrown out from her complex thought processes." She shot a target from across the training room with a blaster using my vision to aim. "And that was when she was just sitting there and not doing anything."

"What about Cashel?"

"I can't link with him at all. He did say he was able to nullify other species' powers though, so it makes sense that I can't."

I remembered when he told us about his species. "That's right."

Another week passed. It felt like any other casual trip on the ship. I had to remind myself that a huge race was taking place, where millions and millions of racers were searching for four stones.

How would they even begin to search for stones across an entire galaxy? Tammy said it might be possible to track them if they had the right tools and knowledge. I wonder if we could ever track themâ ¦ we did have someone who won before. I wonder how long it took for them to gather all the stonesâ ¦ These were questions that were probably pointless to dwell on, but I couldn't help but wonder every once in a while.

"Prepare to enter Dezner's atmosphere." Tammy broadcasted.

I left my room and went to the flight deck. This time Kiko and Rei were just sitting at the table.

"So have you guys ever been here before?" I asked them.

"Once about six years ago, the Jago actually discovered this planet" said Kiko.

"You *found* the planet? Six years ago?"

"Yeahâ ¦well actually Tammy found it, the rest of us just explored it" said Rei.

"What were you likeâ ¦eight Rei? And Kiko you were hunting since you were twelve?"

Rei gave me a look. "We age twice as slow as humans. So I looked more likeâ ¦eleven and Kiko was about fifteen."

"Still, that's pretty young."

Kiko didn't look pleased about my last comment, luckily Tammy bailed me out.

"Sarth, would you sit down please?" She insisted.

I did as I was told and sat down next to Rei as we landed. From what I could tell, Dezner was a very green planet, like nothing I've ever seen before. It was like finding a huge oasis in the middle of dark space.

We landed in a very remote area, with no sign of life nearby. Tammy opened the cargo bay doors and we got out of the ship to walk around. Everywhere, everything was green. There were trees, bushes, plants and grass. It was truly a beautiful sight seeing so many different, natural life-forms living in harmony on the planet.

"I found something!" Rei shouted and then took off through the brush.

"Rei!" Kiko yelled running after her.

I took off as well, following behind them. They were fast but I was able to keep up. I guess my training came in handy after all. We headed towards the mountain through the trees and plants. It felt so good to run freely again.

Finally Rei stopped at the base of a mountain where water was falling out from the side into a pool. She quickly took off her boots and utility belt and jumped in. Kiko and I watched her splash about from the side.

"Come in it feels great!" She insisted.

Kiko shook her head. "We're not even here five minutes and you already take off."

"Aw come on Aki! When's the last time we went swimming?!"

Kiko finally gave in and joined her. "Aren't you coming in?" she asked me.

"Nah that's okay. You guys have fun." I said, trying to sound uninterested.

Kiko read me like a book and gave me a little smile. "You can't swim can you?"

"Uh wellâ¦"

Something alerted Kiko and her attention was drawn to some bushes off to the right of us.

"Grab our stuff and hide" she said to me as she took out her knife from underwater and dragged Rei behind the falling water.

I did as she said and hide inside some bushes. Less than 30 seconds later I heard leaves rustling and the sound of babbling. Then a group of kids ran out of the bushes and jumped into the water splashing and horsing around. It was just a group of kids playing in the water. So why were Kiko and Rei hiding?

In a moment I realized why. One of the kids by the falling water noticed Rei and Kiko hiding and started screaming.

"Something's in there!" she screamed. "Behind the waterfall!"

I guess it's called a waterfall. I watched with anticipation, wondering how both groups were going to react towards each other.

"What is it?" asked one of the kids.

"Are you sure?" asked another.

Then a bigger kid went to grab the stick he was playing with earlier.

"Guys get out of the water, I'll see what it is." He said.

The other kids backed away as the one kid with the stick slowly approached the waterfall. That was when Kiko and Rei made their appearance. The kids started screaming as soon as they saw the water move in their direction. Even the one kid with the stick hesitated at first and then raised his stick, taking a swing at the first chance he had. Kiko caught the stick with one hand, their faces still hidden behind the falling water, morphing their identity. That's when they all started freaking out and splashing to get out of the water.

"Wait! Wait! It's alright! We're not going to hurt you!" Rei tried to say but it was too late. The screaming caught the attention of a strange large beast passing by, and it did not look friendly as it approached us from the bushes, baring its long sharp teeth.

Chapter 15: Village

15. Village

They all stopped dead in their tracks once they saw the beast. It was pretty large and thick. Standing at about 15 feet tall on all four legs and 20 feet long to its spiky tail, it's skin was rough and it had a smashed face but long sharp teeth to make up for it. What made this creature so eerie were its white eyes. It looked and behaved like it was blind.

It came closer to the water, sniffing the air, following our scent. The kid with the stick started wading away to the other side of the pool and then began waving his arms in the air.

"Hey! Ugly! Over here look!" He called to the beast and its attention shifted to him. "Guys run back to the village!"

One of the girls shouted back, "No! Stellan! We can't leave you!"

Stellan was backing away, "Just go!"

The beast cornered Steallan against part of the stone mountain where the water was falling from as Kiko hastily made her way over to him. We all watched in terror as the beast opened its mouth, ready to gobble the kid in one bite.

"Stellan!" the girl screamed.

The beast lunged at him but Kiko swooped in and caught the beast by the teeth. They were stuck in a grip lock, Kiko holding it by its teeth as it attempted to gobble them both. The beast was slowly forcing Kiko down towards the ground as she struggled to keep it at bay.

Rei ran over to me and I immediately knew what she wanted. I threw her blaster to her and took out Kiko's for myself.

She shot the beast a few times in the leg. It didn't seem to do much but Kiko was able to take that opportunity and throw the large beast against the rocks. Then she took the knife she held between her teeth and readied herself.

The blasts didn't seem to penetrate the beast's skin, instead there were patches of black burn marks where each blast struck it. What kind of creature was this?

"Get out of here kid" she said to Stellan.

The kid slowly backed away watching everything that was happening.

The beast got back up and swung its tail around, growling with anger.

"Sarth, in my belt there's a pouch that has a bunch of tiny balls." She rolled out of the way of its attacking mouth again. "Throw me one."

I tossed Kiko's blaster to Rei and she ran around blasting the creature from all directions. I started opening her pouches, looking for tiny balls. I found spikes, chains, extra blaster cartridges and finally tiny round balls.

"I found them!" I exclaimed as I ran up closer to throw it to her.

The ball was tiny. I tried to throw it at her but I couldn't see where it went. According to her movements she had to take a step and extend her arm to catch it, but somehow she caught the tiny thing. Then she jumped up the rock wall avoiding each of its attacks. When she was high enough on a ledge the beast was left jumping and snapping, trying to reach her. She glanced at it over the ledge, rubbing her hands together with quick veracity. When she stopped, she looked back over the edge at the snapping beast, a look of calculation crossed her face. Then she spun around and did a backflip off the ledge and over the beast. I couldn't see the tiny ball but her movements showed that she threw the ball into its mouth. On the way down she rolled and kicked off its back, landing pretty far from it but still running away towards us. It took a moment for the beast to realize she wasn't on the ledge anymore before it changed direction and came after her again.

The kid was still in awe, watching Kiko not to far away from the action. As she ran she grabbed his hand, dragging him away behind some rocks.

"Get down!" Rei shouted as she shoved the kids behind some other large rocks.

I was barely able to get behind a tree when the beast abruptly exploded from the inside-out. It was a strong blast that bent over some nearby trees just from the shockwave alone which was something I didn't expect from such a tiny bead ball.

Beast guts flew in every direction, leaving nothing but a mess and bad odor. It was still and quiet before we all took a look at the aftermath.

"You guys alright?" Rei asked the kids motherly.

They all nodded in unison, staring at what was left of the creature. One the younger girls was still clutching her leg.

"How'd you do that?" Stellan asked, examining the remains.

"Uhhâ ¦" Kiko didn't know how to answer. "I was trained for it."

Not far from the truth, in fact it was the truth. She was always training for situations like this.

"Have you come from Crux to exterminate all the vladicles?!" he asked with excitement.

"No." she said bluntly.

The kids frowned and moaned with disappointment.

Rei interjected, "We just came to visit. Do you know where we can find Vero?"

Stellan's face lit up. "Yeah! He's my dad!"

Kiko remembered something, "Oh yeah that's right, he had a son who was supposed to arrive after we left the first time we were here."

"So you're Vero's son? It's nice to finally meet you!" said Rei.

"You know my dad?" Stellan asked.

"Yeah we brought him to Dezner a few years ago to start a colony here."

"No way!" his face lit up again. "You're the Jago crew?!"

Rei and Kiko nodded their heads. I guess Vero told his son about the Jago, but of course I wasn't there at the time.

Cashel and Tammy emerged from the bushes. The kids were surprised at first and ran behind us, all but Stellan.

"It's alright, they're with us" said Rei in a kind voice.

The five kids, including Stellan, all looked about ten or younger. I couldn't believe how brave Steallan was, attracting the vladicle so the others could get away. Even the other kids wouldn't abandon him, they seemed to have a strong bond with each other.

"Everything alright?" Cashel asked holding a large blaster in his arms.

"I detected the activation of a teenie bomb" said Tammy.

"We're okay now" said Kiko. Cashel took a look at the guts on the ground. "It used to be a vladicle."

"Still territorial as ever I see" said Cashel. "And who are these kids?"

Rei answered, "This one is Vero's son."

"Oh, it's nice to finally meet you." He said to Stellan with a big smile.

Stellan's eyes widened, "You're Cashel! The captain of the Jago!"

Cashel laughed, "Yes I am. Can you take us to your father?"

"Yeah sure! It's this way!"

Stellan led the way with his group of friends as we trekked back through the forest of trees. We walked for about a mile until the trees abruptly stopped, revealing a large village made of tree trunks and branches.

The kids all ran off in different directions once we hit the boarder of the village. The only one who stayed was Stellan who was still leading us to Vero.

We walked almost to the center of the village before stopping in front of a log house. Stellan opened the door and let us in.

"Dad! We have visitors!" Stellan yelled out.

A man from a room next door stepped out. He must've been in his early thirties with a short beard and wavy brown hair. He was dressed like he was ready to go chop down trees.

Cashel smiled when the man realized who it was.

"Well if it isn't the Jago crew!" the man smiled back. "What're you doin' here on Dezner?!"

"It's good to see you Vero! It's been awhile hasn't it?"

"Yeah yeah but let me tell you I thought it would be longer!" Vero joked around.

Cashel chuckled and then sighed, "Me tooâ ¦ we needed a place to stay. I hope you don't mindâ ¦"

"No problem! In fact, you can stay here with Stellan and I! We have two extra rooms you guys can stay in."

"Thanks, but I'm not sure how long we're going to stay"

"Stay as long as you'd like! I insist!" he said, ushering us to the two rooms up the stairs.

Vero was a very generous man, and a persuasive one. Cashel and I ended up taking one of the rooms and the girls were in the other. He even helped us bring some stuff from the Jago back to his home.

"I heard you saved my boy from a vladicle the other day" he said to Kiko, carrying some of Tammy's boxes to his house.

"Yeah we happened to be in the same areaâ ¦" she answered.

"I can't tell you how grateful I am to you, to all of you" he said sincerely.

"He was very brave, his first concern was his friends." She smiled at Stellan who was helping Rei unpack some weapons. "That's something you don't find very often."

Before I knew it, three months had passed since arriving on Dezner and let me say it was probably the best three months of my life. The planet was beautiful and I experienced different types of weather and changes as time passed. Everyone was generous and hard-working and welcomed us like family to their village. It took a little bit of adjustment for Kiko and Tammy but soon we were blending in and living like all the other villagers.

Since there were no bounties to catch, we pulled our weight by helping around the village. We would either farm or fix houses or work in the mines. Most days we helped out in the mine though, since that was the main line of work for the villagers but other days we were able to explore the beautiful planet and camp out with the kids.

Stellan would always follow Kiko around, especially when she was training. He admired her skills and strove to be just like her. Kiko wasn't very enthused about the idea, but she always let him tag along since he would basically stalk her otherwise.

All the kids loved Rei as much as she loved them. She and Tammy were the only one who didn't work in the mines. Instead, she babysat all the kids in the village and they played all the time. It was fun to watch her run around and chase the littler kids around with a big smile on her face.

Tammy didn't take too well to the lack of technology, but she never complained. Instead she devoted her time to creating newer and better tools for the miners to use. Literally everyone on the planet went to see her about any technological problem but she did rather enjoy fixing them.

Cashel enjoyed talking with the people. He was definitely a people person. He worked in the mine with Kiko and I, but he got to know everyone we worked with, their names, where they lived, what they used to do before coming to Dezner, he knew it all. Afterwards he would sometimes go have a drink with them in the

drinking hall. Everyone loved him and his humor, plus he's just a fun guy to hang around with. His stories were always great too. He was one of the best storytellers I knew.

I did a little bit of everything around the village. Cooking, cleaning, kid-watching, I was willing to do anything to help out and do my part. What I enjoyed the most though was camping out with the kids, Rei and Kiko.

One day the kids convinced us to go camping up in the southern mountain where the workers had stopped mining because a new, abundant mineral was covering all of their mining locations.

It took all day to hike to the top, but amazingly we made it with ten other kids. It was worth the hike. The view from the top was astonishing. We could see the tops of all the trees, the village, and the northern mountains at the end of it all.

It was a vast planet and a weird thought that we were the only ones on it. Since it is a newly discovered planet, Vero's village is the only one that's been established here. No one else knows about it, except Crux, but contact with Crux is only made once a year when there is enough mineral to transport back to them.

Kiko and I set up our beds on the ledge of the mining cave where we had decided to sleep for the night. We set up here because it had a great view of the stars, we just couldn't get enough of them.

She took out her knife which now had the firestar embedded in the handle and held it up to the sky. It was glowing brightly as usual. Something was on her mind.

"Do you think people change?" she asked me.

I turned on my side in my bed to look at her. "You've lived twice as long as me, do you think you have?" I asked back.

She contemplated my remark.

"I want to say I have, but I'm not sure if I believe it."

Something was bugging her. I didn't know what it was and I'm not sure she wanted to say, but I knew something's been nagging her since I've met her.

"Believing you can is the first step to changing." I smiled at her. "I believe you can, but I love who you are right now."

She chuckled. "I believe you were always the Sarth I've known. I don't think you've ever been different."

I chuckled back. "You didn't know me back then, so how would you know?"

She sighed and her smile dropped.

"Exactly," she said as she lowered her knife and turned away from me. "Good night."

I wanted to say something but I didn't know what. I obviously didn't say the right thing last time, so I sighed with frustration at myself and said good night.

We were hiking back down through the mountain caves when I noticed something move on the black rock walls.

"Did you see that?" I asked Kiko.

She nodded and gestured for me to stay back. The black rocks on the walls of the cave were supposed to be the new mineral that kept this mountain from being mined because it was so abundant that it was easier to just move to a new mountain.

The rest of the group continued on ahead of us except for Kiko, Stellan and I. We watched as Kiko took out her knife to examine the rock that moved.

She slowly touched the tip of her knife to the rock and it unexpectedly moved like a glob of liquid on to it. When she noticed it moving she instantly threw the knife behind her on the other black rock wall.

That took Stellan and I by surprise. We weren't expecting her to fling her knife but our gut reactions urged us to duck on the ground when she suddenly turned to throw it, and it was good that we did.

We looked at her with wide eyes.

"Sorry" she apologized, "I threw it on instinct."

"We know you well enough to tell when our life is in danger" said Stellan rubbing his chest where his heart is at out of relief.

The three of us got closer to examine the half blade sticking out of the rock wall.

The blade was jet black like the black rocks. Kiko tapped her knife to see if it would react again but it didn't move. Then she gripped it and still nothing happened. Finally she pulled the knife out of the rock and continued to examine it.

"Huh. That's strange. Have these rocks ever moved like that before?" she asked Stellan.

"No I don't think so." He said.

"I'll see if Tammy knows anything about it." She put her now black knife back on her hip. "Let's catch up to the others."

By the time we reached the village, Rei, Kiko and I were all holding a tired kid on our backs. Rei made sure they all got home safely as Stellan and I followed Kiko who was going to see Tammy about her black knife.

"What do you think?" she asked Tammy inside the house.

Tammy twirled it in her fingers and then wrapped a glowing hair around it.

"I've never heard of a mineral like this before" she finally responded.

"Do you think it's dangerous?"

"Noâ ¦ in fact it likes you."

The three of us made a face.

"Itâ ¦likes me?"

"Yes. It seems this mineral is type of basic life form. Therefore, it can think for itself. And it likes you, which is why it has chosen to stay with you."

"Oh. So I should keep it?"

"That is up to you, although getting it off might prove to be difficult. Its composition enables it to change its shape, and the fact that it can think on its own makes this an extremely rare mineral. I see no harm in keeping it."

"I see... thanks Tammy."

Tammy handed her the knife back. "May I make a request?" she added.

"Sure go for it" said Kiko.

"Will you take me to where you found this mineral? I would like to examine it more in its natural habitat."

"You want me to take you on a day long journey back to where we just came from?"

"Yes"

Kiko stared at her for a moment, trying to determine if it was a joke.

"Alrightâ ¦call me when you're ready."

"I'll come too" I said.

"Me too!" said Stellan.

An hour later we found ourselves hiking back up the south mountain. We made great pace since there was only three of us walking. Yep, that's right, I said three.

"I didn't think when you asked me to take you, that it literally meant I would carry you up the mountain." Kiko protested.

Tammy, who was on her back, didn't say anything.

It was truly difficult for Stellan and I to keep from bursting out laughing at her comment.

We reached the mining cave just before nightfall and Tammy spent the next few hours studying the rocks. I left Kiko who was teaching Stellan how to correctly throw a blade into the ground and went to sit down next to Tammy. I wondered what she was doing.

She was just sitting on the ground, holding a small black rock in her hands so I asked her, "How's it going?"

"Fascinating, I've never seen composition like this before, it is able to take on different forms at will, depending on the situation. Plus it's evolving even faster as it experiences new surroundings."

"Oh," I said with interest, "so why does it like Kiko so much?"

Tammy wrapped a glowing hair around the small piece of the black rock and it transformed into different shapes in the palm of her hand, "I'm sure it likes her power."

I thought for a moment, "Her power huh?"

Her power. What is her power? The power to be a super awesome fighter? The power to kick ass? I wasn't really sure. I don't really know what her power is. There was so much I didn't know about her or the galaxyâ¦

All of a sudden Tammy readily stood up and turned to me.

"We better leave. Someone else has landed on this planetâ¦with hostile intentions."

Chapter 16: Commitment

16. Commitment

"Are you *sure* someone else has landed?" It was the first time I heard Kiko sound seriously nervous.

"Yes." Tammy replied on her back.

We ran down the mountain as fast as we could and made great time because of it. We were only about five minutes away when Tammy told Kiko to let her down.

"Kiko drop me off here. Stellan and I will take the Jago to the village."

Kiko nodded and set her down.

"Stellan look after her for me" Kiko told him as we took off again.

"I will!" Stellan yelled back.

We ran fast downhill through the trees and it was getting harder to keep up with her. Once most of the trees cleared, my heart sank to the pit of my stomach.

The village was on fire.

Kiko took off sprinting. I tried to follow her but she out ran me easily.

How could this happen to the village so quickly? We were only gone less than a day.

My lungs, arms, legs all burned with pain from exertion but that didn't stop me. I had to get there as soon as possible. Reiâ ¦ and the others in the villageâ ¦ they had to be alright, they just had to.

I reached the outskirts of the town. People were screaming in terror as they ran from the burning houses. I ran to Vero's house which had caught fire and called for Rei and Cashel but no one was there.

I ran towards the other end of the village where a bunch of unknown men were slaughtering anyone they could find, making their way through the entire village. I hid behind a house to catch my breath and to try and make sense of it all.

This can't be happening. Was there nothing I could do?

I peered around the corner when I heard something, a toddler crying inside the house I was leaning against. I glanced around to see if any of the men were around to see me, then I snuck inside. I quickly scanned the house trying to pinpoint where the crying was coming from. I found the toddler hiding under a bed, eyes and cheeks red from tears.

"Sh sh sh it's okay, I'm not gonna hurt you" I whispered to her and she quieted down a little. I remembered this little girl. I've seen her around the village in her mother's arm. She was only about three years old and her mother was nowhere in sight.

I gently took her in my arms and ran for the door.

A man with red glowing eyes stood at the doorway staring at me with a sinister smile.

"Wellâ ¦look what I foundâ ¦" he said threateningly as he slowly stalked toward me.

I took a step back and grabbed a kitchen knife with my free hand that was lying on a nearby table.

"Get back!" I said waving it around like I knew how to use the knife.

He just chuckled at me and continued walking.

Someone appeared from the doorway and blasted him from behind. He fell to his knees and then thudded face forward on the ground, exposing the shooter.

It was a girl with the same bright glowing red eyes as the man. She lowered her blaster and called to me.

"Sarth!" she said.

It was Rei, but with different eyes. Her eyes made me nervous and she could tell.

"It's me Rei!" she pleaded.

She looked and sounded like Rei, all except those petrifying red eyes.

I slowly put the knife down and she came up and grabbed my hand to lead me outside where people continued to frantically run away.

"Give her to me," she said "I took all the kids up the mountain and I can take her there."

I handed her the crying toddler.

"Have you seen Kiko?" I asked.

"She's right-" without warning she kicked me out of the way of a blast from another man with red eyes. Kiko suddenly appeared and struck the man from the side.

"Get out of here!" she turned to yell at us.

Then something I've never seen before or imagined could happen, happened. A large, muscular man appeared out of nowhere right in front of Kiko and struck her hard with his fist, sending her flying across the ground. It was not a human punch.

"Kiko!" I screamed.

She quickly got up and adjusted herself to face the man, knife out, in a defensive position.

I couldn't believe what I just saw. Who *is* this man who was able to catch the amazing Kiko off guard?

I took a step toward her and slowly the man turned to face me. His eyes were glowing vibrantly blue, a color like the Quwallie's but with much more intensity and desire. A long scar ran across from the bottom of one eye to chin of the other.

I remembered how the second fight with the Quwallie went for Kiko. Looking at this man I knew he was a much better fighter than the Quwallie, with much more experience.

For the first time since I've met her, I feared for Kiko's life.

"We need to move!" Rei took my arm.

"No! We can't leave her! This guy-" I started to say.

"I know what he is! Which is why we can't distract her by being here!"

I was torn. I knew Rei was right but something about this guy made me really nervous.

"I'll back away but I'm not leaving her" I decided.

Rei reluctantly agreed, "Fine, but stay out of sight. I'll be right back."

She turned to leave with the toddler still in her arms.

I did as I promised and moved back, away from Kiko and this mysterious fighter but not enough so I couldn't hear them.

"How did you find me?" Kiko asked, still in her defensive position.

The man stopped and stood there. The other men with red eyes began gathering around to watch. Apparently the man with blue eyes was their leader.

The village continued burn down around them.

"I've been searching for you for yearsâ ¦" the man had a deep, booming voice. "It doesn't matter how I found you. Now that I've finally caught you, your power will be mine."

He suddenly disappeared again. This time Kiko was ready, but she wasn't nearly as strong as he was. He threw her against a burning log house and she went crashing through, exiting the other side.

Amazingly she got up and ran towards him. This time she was catching on quicker and was able to avoid his attacks, which were extremely fast. They exchanged blows and it looked about even but that was only because the large man was holding back.

Someone came up behind me as I was watching Kiko and this man intently. Their presence startled me. It was Stellan. He was also watching Kiko intently as he came up next to me.

The two fighters were still going at it until one finally out maneuvered the other. The man's speed increased even more and he knocked Kiko onto her knees with both arms locked behind her back.

"You've been with these humans for far too long Kai." He bent over to whisper in her ear, "Or should I sayâ ¦ True Kaiâ ¦"

Kiko angrily tried to jerk free but he had her pinned well.

"Tell me," he put his foot on her back, on top of her arms, and shoved her to the ground. "Why do you fight it? Your magnificent power."

Stellan flared with anger. "Hey you jerk!" he threw a rock at the large man and it bounced off him like it hitting a stone wall. "Get off of her!"

The man turned to Stellan and smiled.

"No! Stellan get back!" she struggled harder to get break away from the man's clutches.

He laughed. "You fight for *them*? These puny beings are worth nothing. They're lower than even the dirt we stand on." He took out a blaster from his long trench coat and aimed it at Stellan. "Why don't I just put him in the dirt where he belongs?"

"NO!" Kiko screamed.

The man fired the blaster but I tackled Stellan just in time for him to avoid getting hit. He aimed the blaster at us again. This time we wouldn't be able to run away in time. I covered Stellan and readied myself to be blown to pieces, but it never came.

I looked up and saw the man smiling with excitement at Kiko, who was now quietly facing the ground, seething with anger.

"Which one shall I kill first?" he asked her, his deep voice brimming with excitement.

A humming sound rapidly approached. It sounded like the Jago.

The man looked up to the sky and at that moment, Kiko turned over and kicked the man in the side with so much force that even though he was able to block it, he skidded straight back at least twenty feet leaving a carved trail where his feet dug into the dirt ground.

As soon as they were apart, the Jago made its appearance and started firing its large blasters at the men. Kiko ran toward us and lifted us on our feet.

The long cables shot out from the ship and picked the three of us up. Kiko took out her blaster and fired at the large blue eyed man. The blasts didn't seem to hit him. He easily dodged them as he watched us being towed into the ship with a smile on his face.

Once inside the ship, Rei helped Stellan up. "We're going to drop you off with everyone else" she told him.

"No! I want to stay and help you!"

"You're friends need you, your father needs you. Don't tell me you want to abandon them?"

He realized what he would have to leave behind if he came with us and he looked to the ground indecisively. "Promise me you guys will come back" he said, finally making up his mind.

She smiled at him with tears in her eyes and gave him a hug. "I promise we will."

Kiko stood looking through the red gel wall as they passed treetops. The cables wrapped around Stellan as it prepared to set him down.

"I know you can win" he said to her with a smile before the cables took him through the gel and back to Dezner.

Kiko didn't react to his statement, nor did she make any sort of movement as we began to ascend back into space.

Tammy's voice brought us back to a harsh reality, "Prepare to leave Dezner's atmosphere". We were now leaving our destroyed safe house to enter the race track.

Once we were satisfied about the distance we put between us and the planet, we all met on the flight deck. It was full of somber faces and fresh memories of death.

Rei was the first to speak, "How did they find us?"

Her eyes were back to their normal color but they were filled with tears.

"It seems they were able to trace us" Tammy answered.

"Yeah but how?!" she raised her voice out of frustration. "They killed them! They killed the villagers because *we* were there! This was our fault! We shouldn't have gone there!"

She was getting it all off her chest, the emotions she held back in order to save the village kids had caught up with her.

Kiko, who was standing in the corner of the room, turned and left without a word and Rei fell to the table weeping out of frustration and sorrow.

I wanted to know too, why and how this happened, but most of all I wanted to know what we were going to do about it. Our safe house was found and destroyed. Were we going to try and find a new hiding spot?

Finally, after months of debate, Cashel finally gave in to what he had been trying to avoid for a thousand years, declaring the Jago's next mission with a whisper of a voice, "We have no choice. We have to win the race." The creases were more prominent on his face as he spoke. Only people who have spent as much time with him as us would know that the look on his face, although trying not to show it, was just as sad as Rei's.

A few days went by and I hardly saw Kiko or Rei. When I did see them in the sky deck one day, Kiko was consoling Rei, so I let them be. Since I didn't want to disturb them, I went to Tammy.

She was almost always in her tech room working on a way to track the stones.

"Who are they" I asked. "Kiko seemed to know the man with blue eyes and Rei had the same red eyes as the men who slaughtered the villagers."

It took a moment before Tammy answered, "They are the same as us, competitors for the race. They are also from the same planet and the same species as Rei and Kiko."

"They're the same species?"

"I'll start from the beginning since I now have clearance to tell you this information" she set aside her work to talk to me. "Rei and Kiko are from a planet called Drogonaaz."

"Drogonaaz? They're drogonians?!" I interjected. "One of the most vicious planets in the galaxy?! It really does exist?!" Indeed some legends even reach to the far edges of the galaxy like Sola.

Tammy stared at me, waiting for me to finish.

"Sorry," I said, "Please continue."

"Yes, Drogonaaz is in fact one of the most vicious planets around. It breeds some of the galaxy's most feared warriors and the planet is constantly in a state of civil war for more power.

There are two different types of species on Drogonaaz. One is called Eyes of Red, the other is called Eyes of Blue.

The Eyes of Red are a less commonly known species. They do not focus on fighting; rather their skills lie within their eyes. They are able to see through another's eyes and also, sense the presence and power of an Eyes of Blue. But they are also able to soul link with other species, and like their name suggests, their eyes turn a ruby red color when sensing an Eyes of Blue.

Unlike the Eyes of Red, Eyes of Blue always hunger for more power. They are bred to be soldiers. Their eyes turn a glowing blue after they've killed their first Eyes of Blue. They are physically much stronger than a human with much keener senses. They are also able to link to an inanimate object with their soul stone, to greater heighten their power. They are said to possess no fear and crave killing."

Does this mean that Kiko, the girl who saved my life, is actually a bloodthirsty killer?

I realized I've never seen Kiko's eyes change color, "Is Kiko an Eyes of Red?"

"No. She's an Eyes of Blue."

Rei and Kiko didn't seem to fit with Tammy's story.

Tammy caught on to my confusion and continued, "Rei is a different sort of Eyes of Red. A true Eyes of Red's eyes will turn red when an Eyes of Blue is near. You have probably noticed that Rei's eyes do not turn red around Kiko, who is an Eyes of Blue. Instead, she can only sense other Eyes of Red."

I thought back to when I first saw Rei's glowing red eyes. She was standing next to another Eyes of Red, her own species.

"Kiko's eyes are not blue because she is suppressing almost all of her power. Lately, it's been harder for her to keep suppressing that power. Cashel and Tiberius had both used their powers to help contain Kiko's power. However, when Tiberius turned into Vo and spread throughout the galaxy, his seal on Kiko had also vanished, leaving a crack in the barriers so to speak."

Things were starting to make sense now, but how did the large Eyes of Blue man find us on Dezner?

"Do you know who that man was? How did he find us?" I asked.

"I've already found him in the race manifest" Tammy responded as a hologram picture of the large man popped up. "My guess is that he used those Eyes of Red to track Kiko down."

I read the hologram info. His name is Ozias, home planet is Drogonaaz, and species is Eyes of Blue. There he was. There was no way we could let this man win Vo, he would destroy the glaxay with it. And the only one who could stop him was apparently Kiko for some reason.

"He said he wanted Kiko's powerâ¦"

"That is the main reason why Eyes of Blue live. It's called soul stone collecting. When two Eyes of Blue commit their battle to the death, they summon their soul stone. Their soul stone heightens their power to the greatest extent, but at the cost of its location. When they summon it, the stone becomes visible on some part of their body. The only way to kill an Eyes of Blue is to destroy their soul stone, and the winner receives the loser's power. If you gather enough power you receive a title, Kai being the highest."

I got chills down my spine. I never would have guessed that Kiko's species was the most formidable one in the galaxy.

I let Tammy continue working and went to my room to reflect on everything I just learned. From then on we weren't trying to avoid the race, we had to win it. If we didn't, who knows what would happen to us and the galaxy. No pressure.

We had a meeting on the deck the next day to discuss our next move.

Tammy spoke first, "I was able to assemble a makeshift tracking device that can locate a stone on a given planet."

"How'd you do that?" Rei asked. These past few days have been especially difficult for her but she tried not to show it.

"Since Cashel and Tiberius are of the same, particularly rare species, I analyzed Cashel's chemical makeup and was able to create a device that would locate any matching remnants found in space."

I had a question, "Cashel how did you locate the stones during the last race?"

He chuckled and took a swig of his drink. "Boy, I wasn't sober enough to remember that. Plus it was a thousand years ago."

It was silent.

"Shall I continue?" Tammy asked.

I guess Cashel's prior experience was going to be no help at all.

Kiko spoke, "Have you found anything yet?"

"I am only able to scan a piece of the galaxy at a time and so far I have found nothing. It could take months to find any trace of a stone."

"Months?! Someone else could've found the stones by then!" Rei burst, suddenly losing her cool.

"Calm down Rei," said Cashel. "I'm sure most of the racers don't have any clue on how to find the stones. At least we have a way of tracking them now."

Rei sighed. "Alright, so we just have to wait until we find a trail?"

"Yes," said Tammy, "that's currently our best and only option".

There was nothing else we could do but wait. It was actually harder than it seemed. Kiko suggested that I learned how to defend myself properly since we were now going to participate in the dangerous race. She taught me the same dodging and defensive moves that she taught Stellan and never any offensive moves. It was hard at first but I eventually got pretty good at it. We spent a lot of time sparring and even more time meditating. Anytime I tried attacking instead of defending she would take me downâ¦hard. She made all of her movements look so graceful and easy. I found myself wondering if it was hard for her to hold back, but I never asked.

Rei taught me how to fire a blaster and aim at a target. I really sucked at it. Even after weeks of practice it didn't seem like I was getting any better but Rei was always optimistic about my progress. Every day she told me I was getting better. I really wasn't, but hearing her say that made me feel better, her too probably. She would often use the memory flasher I got for her and send Cashel images of my "progress" either with shooting or with Kiko. I could sometimes hear him laughing all the way from the flight deck and he would send her pictures back of funny faces or pranks he pulled on Tammy.

After a while it didn't seem like we were in a life-threatening race. We went back to our usual, routine, traveling life. I even got Kiko and Tammy to play cards with Rei and I and those were always full of laughter. Rei and Tammy were determined to out-cheat each other but Tammy always won somehow. It was one of the rare times you would see Tammy smiling.

One day I was relaxing in the sky deck with her, which was unusual for someone who hardly ever sat still long enough to actually be relaxing.

"Has it always been like this?" I asked her.

We were lying next to each other on one of the larger beds.

"No" she said honestly.

"It hasn't? Then how was it?"

"It's different with you aroundâ¦more cheerful."

"Oh" I said smiling. Then I remembered the devastation we caused on Dezner. "Do you ever have nightmares? Can you even have any?"

"I used to, until I joined the Jago." She paused. "I've noticed that you've had a few since we left Dezner."

"You can tell?"

"Yes. I monitor your vital signs."

"Ohâ¦yeah I've had a few" I sighed. "I'd never seen people get killed right in front of me."

"You're actually taking it very well" she insisted.

I shrugged and we continued to watch the stars pass by.

"Are you ever going to tell her how you feel?" she asked out of the blue.

I was startled, "What? What do you mean?"

"About Kikoâ¦"

I hesitated. "Tell her what? There's nothing to tell her."

"Did I not just say I monitor your vital signs?"

I didn't even realize my heart was pounding faster.

"Iâ¦uhâ¦guess Iâ¦"

"Hey, you called me?" Came Kiko's voice from the entrance hole.

I nearly fell off the bed from hearing her voice.

"Something wrong?" she added, giving me a concerned look.

"No. Why don't you join us?" said Tammy beckoning her to us.

"Sure alright"

My heart was beating out of control as I tried to make myself relax when Kiko came to lie down on the bed beside me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a smile creep across Tammy's face. This was all her evil plan for her own enjoyment.

"So what were you guys talking about?"

"Nothing." I said quickly. "Just ummâ¦theâ¦weather."

"The weatherâ¦in space?"

"Wellâ¦yeahâ¦its cold isn't it?" I laughed nervously.

"Oh, well if you want we can get under the covers-"

"No! I'm fine here actually. It just got really hot here all of a sudden." I half lied. I'm sure my face was turning bright red.

"Alrightâ¦" she said with a quizzical look.

I'm sure Tammy was enjoying every second of this. For someone who didn't express much she sure enjoyed meddling with other's feelings.

"How dare you have a star gazing party without me!" Rei bellowed from the entrance hole.

Could this get anymore awkward? Thank you Tammy.

"Hey, I just got here myself" said Kiko scooting closer to me to make room. Tammy wouldn't budge so I was left getting extremely close to both of them.

Rei joined us on the bed, next to Kiko. "So what's going on?" she asked.

"Nothing much" said Kiko

She snuggled next to her, "Sounds fun."

No one spoke much after that. We just watched the stars go by and enjoyed each other's company. I made myself a mental note to never forget this moment, being together here with my friendsâ ¦ I just realized I'm surrounded by girls.

After about an hour, I fell asleep and when I woke up I found Tammy asleep on my shoulder. Her hair was glowing in a peaceful, soothing pattern. I made sure not to move so I wouldn't wake her.

I looked over to see Kiko was still awake and Rei was asleep on her shoulder too.

She turned her head to face me, "I've never seen Tammy so attached to someone" she whispered.

"I guess I make a good pillow" I joked.

"No. I've known her for years and I've never seen her so happy since you've arrived."

I looked down on Tammy still in a peaceful sleep on my shoulder. I remembered her telling me that she'd never really had friends until joining the Jago.

"I know I can tell her anything. In fact, she knows me better than myself."

Kiko smiled. "Those are the best kind of friends."

I looked over at Rei. "Like you and Rei?" I asked.

"I've known Rei a long time. I made a promise to protect her no matter what."

It's true. Rei and Kiko were very close. Kiko was like Rei's older, protective sister. They always seemed to know what the other was thinking. Or maybe they were always in Rei's soul link, which was possible.

There was one other thing I've wanted to ask her for some time now.

"Kiko, how do you know Ozias?"

I was afraid I might have gone too far but she answered, "He's from my planet. He's one of the strongest Eyes of Blue."

"He called youâ ¦ True Kaiâ ¦"

She cringed at the sound of the name. "Iâ ¦" she started to say until an alarm cut her off.

Beep beep beep beep. Tammy's hair flashed in the same rhythmic pattern as the alarm. Not a moment later, all four of us were sitting up on the bed awaiting Tammy's explanation.

She looked at us, "I have the location of the first stone."

Chapter 17: Location

Part 4: Elemental Stone (November 24, 2012)

17. Location

"So where is it??" Rei asked as the four of us made our way to Tammy's work station where the tracker was set up.

"About two day's travel from here, on a planet called Fargon." She replied.

Kiko examined the planet's hologram and said, "Fargon? Never heard of it."

"It's not a planet that's often visited."

Cashel sat next to Tammy, "Fargon huh? Tell us everything you know about it Tammy."

Tammy pulled up some holograms of the planet which looked different from other planets. "This planet is located on top of a black hole," everyone gave a surprised gesture while looking at the hologram.

She continued, "The only reason why the planet is *not* being dragged into the black hole is because of a natural abundant substance that seeps out of the planet and into the atmosphere. This substance is called Sage. The Sage creates two protective layers that act as a shield, blocking the suction of the planet into the black hole."

The diagram showed the planet along with two smaller planets inside of a larger bubble, and at the bottom of that large bubble was a cone shaped spiral which I took to be the black hole.

"What are these smaller planets?" I asked, pointing to the two small balls next to the planet.

"Those are the moons to the planet," She answered.

Cashel stood up again. "Set our course for Fargon" he said as he left the room.

I spent the rest of the two days mentally preparing myself for our arrival on a new planet. Tammy said that there weren't that many people on the planet and that the main species was humans. Since it is supposed to be mainly uninhabited, I'm expecting it to be almost like Dezner. There was only one way to find out though.

The rest of the crew prepared for the journey in their own way. There was little talk or social interaction those two days. I found Rei and Kiko practically living in the training room as well as Tammy in her workroom and Cashel on the flight deck.

I was getting anxious as the two days dwindled down to a few hours. My eyes wandered the ceiling in my room as I lay on my bed. What does being in this race mean? We were going to risk our lives to try and rule the galaxy? Noâ ¦ we were trying to protect it. There was no denying that that manâ ¦Ozias was also trying to win the race, and he seemed highly capable of doing just that. Seeking power is what seems to be the only thing he lives for, but why does he want Kiko's power so badly? She must be pretty strong if he's been searching for her as well.

Tammy's image popped up on the ceiling, "Meet on the flight deck. Rei, stop daydreaming and get out of the shower, you're wasting all the hot water."

We all met on the flight deck wondering if we were there yet. Rei gave Tammy a sour look when she saw her.

"You didn't have to blast the cold water to get me to hurry," she grumbled while drying her hair.

Tammy ignored her comment and explained the situation.

"We received a message from the main space port on the planet. It seems that the planet will be destroyed."

"Destroyed?" asked Cashel.

"Apparently the Vo stone was able to penetrate the two protective layers as it entered the planet's atmosphere. Usually objects are able to pass through the atmosphere without breaking the layers if they pass through at a slower speed. My guess is that the stone was traveling at an unnatural speed, as well as containing unknown power that could have disrupted and destroy parts of the layers as it entered."

Kiko crossed her arms, "Well what does that all mean?"

"It means that they are evacuating the planet so will have to enter the planet hidden and illegally."

"Tell us something we don't usually do" said Rei.

"We'll only have approximately two Fargon weeks before the planet's layers rotate enough to face the black hole and the planet gets absorbed, destroying the planet."

Cashel thought aloud, "We're on a time limit to find the stoneâ¦two weeksâ¦" he went to his chair on the flight deck and ordered, "Tammy get us on that planet quickly and discreetly."

Tammy joined him on the flight deck. "Yes sir, I've already calculated the trajectory of the stone and its approximate location on the planet and we should be entering the atmosphere shortly."

"Why don't we just let the stone get sucked into the black hole?" I asked, standing behind the Tammy and Cashel.

"Someone could be on the planet right now searching for it and we can't risk losing this chance if no one has found it yet." Cashel responded.

I guess that made sense. Suddenly I noticed that we were approaching a light-greenish screen and on the other side of it was the planet. It was absolutely beautiful, full of different colors and it was hard to imagine that the planet would be gone in only two weeks. My guess was that the light-greenish screen was the sage protective layers.

Everyone watched intently and quietly as we slowly approached the screen. As soon as the ship made contact it was like we were flying through greenish liquid. Out of nowhere, a different alarm sounded, then another, then suddenly it seemed everything in the ship was flashing and making noise.

Tammy quickly worked the panels. "We're losing power. The layers must disrupt our power source. We need to manually turn on the backup generator."

Cashel jumped out of his chair, "I'm on it." He said as he ran out of the flight deck.

The alarms continued to ring and flash as we made our way through the light-green, liquid screen. As soon as we broke through the first layer, everything, including us, started to float.

"What's going on?" I asked with hesitation.

"The Gravity Binder must have died," said Rei.

Gravity Binder? That must have been what was keeping us down on the ship. I have to admit, it was really fun being able to float around so freely. Kiko and Rei didn't seem as amused and they were more controlled while floating then I was. They must have been able to do this all the time before I came along.

The ship began passing through the second layer as Cashel's voice came on through the speakers.

"I almost have it but it needs some-" the power died inside the entire ship and everything but the sun-shield went dark. We watched through it as we were almost through the second layer.

"Brace yourselves" was the last thing I heard Tammy say before Rei, Kiko and I were slammed to the ground as gravity in the ship came back. Before we could get up we started floating again but this time it was because we were crashing down toward the planet. The ship began spinning out of control, thrashing and spinning around along with other objects and equipment in the flight deck. We lost complete control of the ship and I was pretty sure this is how I was going to die but I didn't have much time to think about it. You shouldn't feel anything with a quick impact death right? Well, it seemed like an eternity as we continued to be thrashed about inside the ship and I was pretty bruised and battered, but all of a sudden the lights throughout the ship came back on and Tammy was able to try and regain control again, stopping the ship from spinning around.

I was completely dizzy. We took a look through the sun-shield and I saw how close we were to the surface of the planet already, and approaching it rapidly.

"We're going to crash land" said Tammy as the three of us were finally able to stand up again.

The ship shuddered and jolted and the three of us were back on the floor. I couldn't see out the sun-shield anymore but I'm pretty sure we hit the ground of the planet based off the impact that had us rolling around again. Finally, with one final stopping jolt, we stopped moving.

It was all quiet as everyone tried to regain their bearings again.

"Are we done crashing?" asked Rei who was sprawled across the floor.

"I hope so," answered Kiko from the other side of the floor.

No one moved, then Tammy, who was in her seat the entire time, unbuckled her seatbelt and stood up to check the ship's condition.

I happened to land at her feet when we crashed, "The only smart one" I said wearily.

Rei rubbed her head, "Is Cashel still alive down there?"

"Yes," said Tammy as she checked panels around the flight deck. "He made it into an empty cargo bin just in time."

The three of us stood up once again.

"I think I'm gonna be sickâ¦" I mumbled before stumbling down the hall to the nearest bathroom.

I lost my lunch and then splashed some cold water on my face to try and get me back to my normal, non-spinning senses. I never knew how much staying still felt good.

I was finally able to drag myself out of the bathroom when I heard a knock on the cargo bay door coming from the outside. That was curious. I walked over to the large bay door and listened to see if it would happen again. Abruptly, the bay doors creaked and jarred open, revealing someone I did not expect to see in the far reaches of the galaxy.

Chapter 18: Comrades

18. Comrades

"It's youâ¦" I mumbled in shock.

"Of course it's me! It's *you* I wasn't expecting!" said Breccan from outside the ship.

He was dressed in outside wear and grew a small beard since the last time we saw him. It brought out a more rugged, sturdier side of him. If anything he was even more attractive than before, which threw me off because he's been rejected by Kiko so many times.

Within a few moments the entire Jago crew gathered in front of the door.

"Of all the humanoids we could run into in this vast universe, why do we run into you?" Rei exasperated as soon as she saw him. "I think it's my turn to get sick now."

"Why did you open the door Tammy?" Kiko complained.

"It seems he wanted to discuss some matters." She said simply.

Rei joined Kiko's enthusiasm, "He can talk from outside-"

"Let him speak" said Cashel.

Rei gave a defeated sigh and plopped herself on some cargo.

Breccan smiled and spoke, "It seems we have found ourselves in a similarâ¦ predicament."

Cashel listened, "go onâ¦"

"We've both crash landed in the same area, which means I can guess that you and your crew have come searching for the same thing as us? And now we have similar problemsâ¦"

"as inâ¦"

He took a deep breath, "Your main power source failed when entering the planet but you were able to activate your backup generator in order to landâ¦somewhat safely. Now your new problem is the fact that your tracking device can no longer be powered, plus it isn't strong enough to find a close range signal of the stone. And then there's the problem of being able to leave the planet before being sucked into the black hole we are currently sitting on because the backup generator simply isn't strong enough to get you very far in the air."

Tammy nodded to Cashel. Guess he was right on target. I wonder how he knew all that.

Cashel studied Breccan before saying, "So you want to join forces I'm assuming? What do you have that we don't?"

"Resources." He gave a smug smile, "I can build almost an entirely new ship with the resources we brought with us. Plus I have an excellent mechanic crew that can build anything you want. Our problem is we don't have enough knowledge to work around a few problems we've been having but I'm pretty sure your Mechanite

can help us there." He gestured to Tammy.

Mechanite? That's what Tammy's species must be called.

"How do we determine who gets the stone if we cooperate together?"

"Eh, we can figure that out later." Breccan simply brushed off probably the most important question.

Cashel thought for a moment but it was pretty obvious what we had to do. There was no way any of us would be able to leave the planet without each other's help.

"Alright, we're temporary comrades." He agreed.

Breccan smiled, showing his pearly white teeth.

"Excellent! Feel free to drop by our base when you're ready!"

And with that he turned and strolled away whistling.

We all watched him until he was far enough away to talk about him without him overhearing, "I guess he can take things seriously when he needs to" I observed.

Rei and Kiko both scoffed at my comment before going back inside the ship.

"Is this really necessary?" Kiko exasperated to Cashel. "I seriously might just kill him."

Cashel gathered his belongings to take to Breccan's base. "We'll need each other to get off this planet," he answered. "Try and refrain from seriously injuring him, we can't afford to wait three months for him to recover."

Kiko grumbled and then walked away.

We gathered any equipment we would need, which wasn't as much as I thought because we had left a few items on Dezner, and then we all headed to Breccan's base.

Surprisingly, his base wasn't very far away. In fact it looked like they crash landed in almost the same exact spot as us. When we got out of the ship, the first thing noticeable was Breccan's large ship.

"It's funny how we landed right next to them" I said as we walked to his base.

"They must have an excellent pilot." said Tammy.

For a place with an impending doom, it was beautiful. There were many trees and bushes like Dezner but they looked different and were much more colorful, diverse, and bigger. I think this is what they would callâ ¦a jungle.

The walk was very short and soon we arrived in front of Breccan's base camp that was being guarded by a few large men of a strange species. They carried large blasters that strapped around their bodies but when they saw us coming they lowered their blasters and moved aside for us. There were several tents pitched in front of their crashed ship and many people walking about.

I couldn't believe how many people there were. It reminded me of a small village as I studied the different species we passed.

"Who're all these people?" I asked.

"Breccan's crew" Kiko answered.

"*All* of them?"

A familiar voice answered back, "We have more inside the ship," came Lux's voice from behind.

I turned to see her come up and join us on the opposite side of Kiko. She was wearing a tight sleek outfit with a few blasters on her hips and a long one on her back. I also noticed she had a whip attached to her hip as well. Kiko wasn't pleased about her appearance and turned away to walk ahead of us.

"I was surprised to see you here," she continued and asked to Cashel, "I thought you weren't going to participate in the race?"

"Thing's changed" he said gruffly. I'm sure that comment reminded him of what happened on Dezner.

"I seeâ ¦" she pointed to a few large tents in the middle of the base. "We have those two tents set up for you guys. You can assemble your stuff in there. Breccan is in that tent right there." She pointed to another large tent set up in front of the two tents. "Dinner is in a few hours but feel free to walk around if you'd like." Then she smiled at me and waved goodbye before leaving.

Rei threw her stuff on the ground. "Of course he puts us in the middle of his base next to him." She said.

Cashel assured her, "It's only for a few days."

We spent the next few hours unloading and setting up Tammy's equipment. As it was getting darker outside I realized how hungry I was and as soon that thought crossed my mind, a guard came by and knocked on our tent door.

"Dinner will be ready in 5 minutes. We've set up tables in front of the ship, you can't miss it." He told me when I answered it.

"I'm not going." Rei and Kiko said in unison after I told everyone what the messenger told me.

Cashel laughed. "Fine don't go, I won't force you." Then he walked out of the tent.

Then Tammy said in her usual monotone voice, "Just think, all-you-can-eat without affecting our own food supply on the ship."

Both Rei and Kiko's eyes lit up at the same time, and then they both got up and made their way toward the exit.

"Challenge accepted, don't hold back." I heard Kiko say to Rei before they both disappeared through the door.

There were several large tables set up in front of the ship and they were all filled to capacity with Breccan's crew.

I don't know how, but Rei and Kiko were cleaning off plates left and right. I think they made it their personal goal to cut Breccan's food supply in half.

It was loud and rowdy, and giant serving plates from the ship kept coming out to fill the table and replace the empty ones, mainly to our table.

I didn't want to admit it but everyone in Breccan's crew was having a good time and laughing together like there wasn't a care in the world. I found myself enjoying their company and I even think Rei and Kiko were starting to enjoy themselves as well.

It wasn't until Breccan and Lux came out of the ship and walked over to our table, that's when things started to get serious again. Everyone quieted down when the captain walked out, in order to listen to what he had to say to us.

"Crew of the Jago, and my beloved Akikoâ¦" he made an attempt to sit beside Kiko. She instinctively drew out her knife with one hand while continuing to shovel down food with the other. Breccan saw this and immediately walked to the other side while still trying to maintain his coolness. "Since we are *unfortunately* on a time restraint on this beautiful planet, let us begin to discuss how we should go about dealing with this minor problem."

He and Lux sat down in front of us and prepared a plate to eat.

"First things first," Cashel started, "Who gets the stone?"

Breccan made no reaction to this remark as he piled food atop his plate.

"We can figure that out once we're near the stone." He brushed away the question again.

Cashel pursed his lips and the Jago crew stopped eating to listen to what the two captains had to say.

"I guess I can agree to that right now, so what did you have planned?"

Breccan had just put a giant spoonful of food in his mouth when Cashel spoke so Lux answered him instead.

"We've been stuck on this planet for almost a month now. Since our original power source doesn't work on this planet, we've been working on a way to utilize this environment's resources to provide power."

"And what power source would that be?"

Breccan swallowed and answered, "Sage."

This time Cashel looked to Tammy for an answer and she explained, "Sage is a resilient liquid mineral that is abundant and only found on this planet. It cannot be burned, destroyed, or damaged in any way other than its own evaporation. The two layers surrounding Fargon are formed from Sage particles that leave this planet's surface."

"Can it be used as a power source?"

Tammy stared into nothing for a moment before answering, "It's feasible."

Breccan continued eating again so Lux spoke, "We have a few prototype generators made but they don't output enough power as we'd hoped. There's also the problem about creating an accurate stone finder to locate the stone in close proximity. We seem to be missing some knowledge that we just don't have and so we're willing to provide you with our resources, as well as access to our ship's mechanic shop in exchange for the knowledge you have."

I saw Tammy glow slightly when Lux mentioned their mechanic shop. This was basically an exchange of knowledge and resources. It seemed like a good plan to me.

"Are you okay with this Tammy?" Cashel whispered to her.

She nodded, back to her monotonic, quiet self again and Cashel nodded to Breccan in agreement.

"Great!" he said, "I'm glad we got all that talking out of the way!"

I'm pretty sure Lux did the major of the explaining.

Breccan had finished his plate and introduced a girl that he had called over, "This is Pippa, she's the ship's lead mechanic and knows everything about every tool we have."

The girl was in a mechanic's full body suit with goggles around her neck and she had grease marks on her smiling face. She was about Tammy's height and age but with short, messy, red hair and an actual expression on her face.

She introduced herself to Tammy, "Hiya, you need anythin' lemme know! I know everythin' 'bout our tools and ship!"

Tammy nodded and said hello.

"We can have a proximate stone locator ready in two days" Cashel said to Breccan.

He clapped his hands, "Excellent! That leavesâ ¦" he fiddled with an object that was around his wrist. I noticed that everyone in his crew had one.

A hologram of a countdown appeared in the air. "Eleven days to travel, find the stone, return to our ships and get off the planet before it get absorbed into nothing."

Eleven days to do all that? Is that even possible? All we could do is try.

We went back to our tent after dinner and Tammy went to her work tent to begin designing the blueprint drafts for the proximate stone locator. This left the rest of the Jago crew to prepare for a journey to search for the stone. Rei was checking weapons, Kiko was packing food and clothes and Cashel was checking our location on a Fargon map he received from Breccan.

Cashel thought aloud to us, "From the looks of it and based of Tammy's estimation, it looks like the journey to reach the stone will take about five days. That leaves us with just have enough time to get the stone and get back to the ships and take-off before this planet's time ends."

Luckily this seemed simple enough, all we were fighting against was time.

I didn't realize just how wrong I was until I was awoken early in the morning by a loud *CRACK* followed by strong winds and the sound of hustling outside.

Chapter 19: Wind

19. Wind

I jumped out of bed and found that everyone else was already up and helping to keep objects from flying away. I didn't notice how chaotic it was because our tents were being saved from the winds by energy shields.

When I tried to leave the tent and exit the energy shield, I almost blew away. I've never seen winds blow this fierce before. We had sand storms on Sola but not like this.

I saw someone approaching me and saw it was Kiko followed by Rei who was attached by a cable. Kiko was wearing long spikes that strapped around her lower leg and boots. They were used to stomp into the ground and to keep from flying away. Rei was wearing smaller spiked shoes since she wasn't the main anchor. They were both wearing coats and a mask to protect against the wind.

"Did you need to get somewhere?" Kiko asked after entering the shield and taking the mask off her face.

I would definitely need her to get anywhere since she was the only one strong enough to penetrate the dense ground with such long spikes.

"No, I was wondering what was going on" I said, throwing on some more clothes.

Rei wiped away dirt and debris from herself, "Apparently the weather fluctuates in random intervals at the extreme ever since the stone broke the protective layers. It came out of nowhere just a short while ago and Cashel told us to help gather items from the other tents since all the power they have is going towards our tents only."

We can probably thank Breccan's love for Kiko for that.

"I can help out too" I said as I finished putting on my boots.

Rei took off the cable and spikes on the soles of her boots and said, "nah don't bother, they seem to be doing well themselves."

We watched as several of Breccan's larger crewmembers were anchors for the smaller members. There were a few large species that looked like they weighed a ton with giant shells on their backs, supporting many crewmates with cables. They all worked quickly to tie down or move items from tent to ship.

I saw Lux and Breccan outside and cabled as well, giving orders and directing traffic. I was surprised to see how efficient they were considering my first impression of him and his attachment to Kiko.

Then, unexpectedly, a large panel from the ship ripped away and slashed through a small crewmember's cable. The small crewmember was instantly swept away, fighting to grab ahold of anything.

Lux and Kiko reacted at the same time but Kiko was faster since she wasn't connected to anyone. She shout out of the shielded tent and caught the drifter just in time as more of the ship's large panels broke off and went flying towards them.

"Look out!" I yelled out through the shield, though she probably couldn't hear me anyway.

I don't know how she did it without a mask but she swerved left and right and jumped out of the way of all the panels that fly by them with someone hanging off her back. When they were safe from the flying debris Kiko made her way back to our tent since it was closer. She released the cable that attached them and let the stranger down.

"Thank you for saving meâ ¦ Breccan's *lover*" said the girl underneath the cloak and mask. It was the ship's lead mechanic, Pippa.

Rei burst out laughing as Kiko's mouth dropped open with shocking horror. Then Kiko angrily stormed out of the tent and marched to where Breccan was giving orders, passing Lux on the way.

Rei was still laughing when Lux entered through the shield.

"Thank you for saving her," Lux told me as she went to check on Pippa who was now joking around with Rei in the tent.

"Kiko was the first to react" I said honestly.

"My gratitude would go unheard if I told Akiko that to her face."

This was especially true right now. I hope she doesn't murder Breccan, at least she didn't take it out on Pippa.

"Pippa let's go" Lux called out in our tent.

"'kay!" came Pippa's voice as she reappeared to leave.

Lux attached her cable to Pippa and they headed back out, "Sorry to bother you" she said as they left.

I didn't have a chance to reply as they marched through the wind back to Breccan's ship.

The rest of the day remained windy and it finally died down the next day, though there wasn't much to do that day either. Tammy and Cashel spent all their time creating the proximate stone locator. Rei spent her free time laughing with Pippa, and Kiko spent all her time avoiding Breccan so she wouldn't kill him. This left me with nothing much to do.

I ended up exploring Breccan's large ship. He could easily fit hundreds of people of different species on his ship which was almost filled with all his crewmembers. They all had a job they were working on and were busy most of the time, especially the mechanics of the ship. It was funny to see a little, redheaded, eccentric girl give orders to the other older mechanics, but even though she was small they still treated her with the same respect they would give Breccan. Rei was usually with her because Pippa always made her laugh.

Lux came up from behind, "Enjoying the ship?"

She caught me by surprise, "Yeah, it's enormous."

"We've had to upgrade to accommodate all the crewmembers."

"I can see thatâ ¦" I said, watching a small crew member walk through a large doorway and a bigger crew member squeezing through it.

"Well, enjoy yourself."

She smiled at me and then walked away. There was something about her smile, it always made my heart flutter.

By then end of the second day, Tammy had finished her creation that she'd been working on for the past two days straight. It was pouring rain when she walked up us in the housing tent.

"I've finished the PSL" she announced to the Jago crew.

We all got up and hurried to her work tent to see the device. It was larger than I thought it was going to be. It took up a small table and a large antenna-looking thing sprouting out of the base of the machine. Pippa was also in the room putting something together. She dropped her work when she saw us enter.

"It's amazing right?! Isn't it?! I never imagined someone being able to extract this much power from the sage using these techniques! I mean who would've thought to use Sttromb's formula for re-hashing the sage's natural biomechanical makeup??" she ran over to a hologram panel and started writing stuff only Tammy would understand and continued to explain to us how the PSL worked.

We all looked to Rei, sending her a mental message of *please stop her.*

Rei smiled at Pippa's enthusiasm, "Uhâ ¦Pipâ ¦" she finally said.

"Yeahyeah! What's up?! Should I go into more detail about the sage's decomposition from quasars emitting from the black hole??" Pippa asked as she stopped drawing on the hologram to look at us. "Is this simplification too simple?"

"We just want to know how it works," Kiko said bluntly.

"Oh," Pippa poked the hologram and the screen she was writing on closed. "Just push the power button,"

Tammy already had her finger on the button when we brought our attention back to the machine. It hummed and lit up when she pushed it. The antenna began rotating in circles as if trying to lock on to something as a small hologram appeared in front of the machine. The antenna finally stopped moving and the hologram flickered, giving us a heading.

"Excellent," admired Cashel, "go back to your ship and tell Breccan we leave early tomorrow morning." He said to Pippa.

"'kay will do!" she saluted before taking off.

Kiko examined the machine, "How are we using this thing Tammy?"

"I did not have enough time to enhance the PSL and make the signal range stronger; therefore it will need to be transported along with the expedition group." She explained.

"We'll have this thing with us?"

"Yes, and it will need to be re-synced every 5 hours in order to maintain an exact heading using your location coordinates."

"How would we do that?"

"You wouldn't. It's best to have someone who knows how the PSL works, Pippa knows this as well and so she has volunteered to go with you."

Cashel interrupted, "That's right, you three will be traveling with five others, including Breccan."

"Why does *he* have to go?" Kiko snapped.

"We've both agreed to have a captain in charge of each group, therefore his orders are on the same level as mine and are to be *followed*." He emphasized.

"What?!" she flared, "There's no way I'm taking orders from him!"

I have to admit I didn't like the idea either, and I couldn't imagine Kiko taking his orders seriously.

"We've both agreed that he's more fit for the journey, plus my expertise is needed here with the ship."

Kiko grumbled and stormed out of the tent, with Rei following close behind.

Cashel sighed and turned to Tammy.

"Can I talk to Sarth alone for a moment?" he asked her.

She said yes and she walked over to a table filled with tools, wires, and mechanical parts. She picked up something small off the table, walked over and placed it in my hand.

It was a wrist hologram projector like the ones that Breccan's crew all had.

"This is for you." She said before leaving.

"Thanks. I said. I didn't know how it worked but I put it on my wrist anyway, next to the sync ring.

After she left, Cashel sat on a chair and asked me, "Are you okay with going on this excursion?"

To be honest, I wasn't sure if I was going or not. It always seemed like I was just dead-weight, but the fact that he initially included me in it made me surprisingly happy. In fact, I *wanted* to go for some reason.

"Yeah, I am." I said sounding more confident in myself.

Cashel saw this and smirked.

"Good. I'll need you to keep an eye on those two out there. I'm sure Kiko will be more understanding with you around."

I thought about Kiko's attitude toward Breccan, "Rightâ¦"

Then he slapped his legs and stood up.

"Well, I'm gonna get started with the two ships that need to be modded. Get some rest, you're gonna need it for the next eleven days." He left the tent and I found myself alone in the work tent with the PSL.

Will this trip really be alright?

Chapter 20: Rain

20. Rain

The next morning it was still pouring rain as the eight group members that were supposed to retrieve the stone, prepared to leave. I wasn't really sure what time it was since the sun was blocked by a thick, dark layer of clouds. The rain wasn't too bad considering it was luke-warm outside, I was just getting tired of everything being wet.

Rei, Kiko and I were standing just outside the base waiting for Breccan's team to arrive when something caught our attention in the vast sky.

We watched as a giant space ship disappeared behind the trees in the direction we were headed, leaving a fiery trail behind.

"That's not good" said Rei.

"Are they racers?" I asked.

Kiko stared into the trees where the ship disappeared, "Most likely."

"Let's get going, we're obviously not alone anymore" came Breccan's voice as he and his team arrived. "You all know Lux and Pippa and me of courseâ¦" he gave a charming smile to Kiko and she rolled her eyes, "but this is Shihon and Tobiah, they're a few of my best hunters."

The first one, Shihon reminded me of the sun dweller creatures I've seen on Sola. His skin was green and bumpy like them and he had a short, reptilian snout and a long tail. His body structure made him wobble side-to-side when he walked. He acknowledged us when Breccan gestured to him, unlike his companion.

Tobiah's reaction was unknown, hidden behind half a large metal mask that covered his nostrils and mouth. He had very rough, tan, hide-skin from what I could tell, while trying to look past the hood he was wearing. His eyes were the most dangerous part about him. He glared at me in disgust with narrow red pupils and yellow eyes.

"What's his problem?" Kiko demanded, taking notice of Tobiah's death stare at me.

"He won't be one." Breccan assured. "I swear it, on my love for you."

I guess that was pretty reassuring. Tobiah turned away and ignored me like I was insignificant.

"Well! Let's go!" Pippa exclaimed happily while bouncing from foot to foot, leading the way through the jungle.

We all had large travel packs on our backs that held everything we'd need for an eleven day excursion. The only exception was Kiko who was carrying a smaller travel pack, as well as the PSL on her back. The extra weight didn't seem to hinder her at all though.

I never really thought about where all the water goes when it rains, but I got to experience it first-hand. We traveled half the day toward the white mountain when we were cut off by a raging river flowing through the trees and brush.

"We have to pass somehow!" yelled Breccan through the sound of gushing water.

Pippa put down her pack and shoved an arm down it, "I have just the thing!" she answered.

Then she pulled out a canister and handed it to Rei. "Here try this out! It'll shoot-out a super strong twine and stick to whatever the end hits."

"Really?" asked Rei analyzing the canister. "It's super light."

"It'll work, trust me!"

"Her stuff never fails!" Breccan guaranteed with an impressed smile.

Rei sassed, "I'll take Pip's word for it, not yours." Then she attached the canister to her blaster and took aim at a far, sturdy-looking tree.

Pew! She fired the blaser and twine shot out and stuck to the tree she was aiming at.

"That was pretty cool!" she said lowering her blaster with the twine still attached. "Now what?"

We all looked at Pippa and she had a concentrating look on her face.

"â ¦Didn't think that far." She said matter-of-factly and then laughed. "Actuallyâ ¦" she stopped laughing, "why don't you try shooting a tree opposite of the other one? That will work."

"Alrightâ ¦"

Rei held up the blaster again and fired at a tree opposite of the other. It stuck there and the twine became taut between the trees. However, the twine was still coming out of the end of the blaster like last time but it was attached to the spot on second tree where she hit.

Pippa went up to Rei and put her finger on a button on the canister, "To cut the twine simply push this button" she said as she pushed the button and the twine detached from the blaster. "To go back to your blaster, turn the twineulator to the right or flick it like this..." She held the blaster in her hand and flicked her wrist toward the right to demonstrate before giving it back to Rei.

"Wow! This is awesome!" said Rei. She took aim at the far tree again and shot it with the twine. Then she connected it to the opposite tree again so that there were two lines, one above the other, and we could scoot across the bottom one and hold on to the top.

Rei was in love with the new attachment and she and Pippa were in such a fixated discussion about it that they didn't notice us prepare to cross.

"A-hem" Kiko interrupted, "We'll be on the other side if you need anything."

"Oh yeah!"

"Right."

We made a line to cross along the twine. The bottom line was about three feet above the water which meant that at least we weren't getting more wet.

The first person to cross was Breccan, followed by Lux, Pippa, Shihon, Tobiah, Rei, me, and then Kiko. It wasn't hard to cross just tedious. We were a little more than half way through when I heard Pippa yelling.

"Strong as in tension! Not it's physical properties! Don't let them bite the twine!"

What was she talking about? What bite the twine? I saw Rei looking around too, trying to figure out what Pippa was yelling about. Our eyes went to the same spot, below us. A school of ugly looking fish with large sharp teeth were swimming and jumping upstream toward usâ ¦ and they could jump *high*.

"Sarth!" Kiko reminded me where my attention should be. Rei was already a few feet ahead of me, moving fast with only one arm on the twine, the other one holding on to her newly upgraded blaster.

Suddenly the bottom twine shuddered and I nearly slipped off. The others were held up ahead of us for some reason and I couldn't tell what it was. Blaster shots flew in every direction, because the fish could jump nearly as high as our heads. I dodged the ones that lunged at me and Kiko shot or kicked off any of them that would bite the twine.

Further ahead, Rei crossed over something that wasn't twine without hesitating but I stopped to notice. Breccan was holding together the severed line that we were crossing while kicking away any fish that tried to eat him.

"Hurry up and cross kid!" he grunted as he kicked another fish away from biting his arm off.

With no time to argue, I stepped over his head and onto his arm before reaching the twine again and continuing forward. I was almost to the other side where everyone else was supporting Kiko and Breccan by firing their weapons at the attacking fish.

I turned around to see Kiko, who stayed by Breccan, attach her hip cable to the upper twine and grab breccan by his backpack just as Tobiah shot his twine blaster at Kiko's back and started reeling them with haste.

They both arrived safely with us on the riverbank, Breccan looking pleased as ever.

"You saved me, my darling Akiko!" he said with emotional pleasure.

"And I regret it already" said Kiko as she got up and made her way towards the mountain once again, ignoring his gratitude.

Soon we were at the base of the large white mountain and began our journey up it. As it grew darker, the rain was finally letting up.

"We'll camp here for the night." Breccan declared.

No one argued or said anything. They simply set down their packs and prepared for the night. In Shihon's case, he let down Pippa as well since he let her ride on his back like a scavy, on all fours.

I'm glad we stopped, I was getting exhausted and tired of feeling wet.

We all set up our tents. The girls shared tents in pairs of two and all the men had their own smaller tents.

A fire was set up and blazing in the middle.

"What's to eaaaaat?" Rei complained, lying against her pack.

Shihon held up three small fuzzy dead creatures. "There are only small animals since everything else we can eat is trying to flee from the black hole."

"We'll have to eat our nourishing capsules with them" said Lux.

I saw her pull out a bottle and pour some small capsules in her hand, "What's that?" I asked, taking a closer look at them.

"They contain everything the body needs in replacement of food" she enlightened while handing me a capsule.

I examined it in my hand, "You eat this?"

Rei sighed when she was handed hers, "It's better to just swallow it."

Everyone ate theirs and I picked up mine and put it in my mouth. The taste was so strongly bitter, I immediately spit it out in my hand and the taste was still killing my taste buds.

Lux frowned, "I was hoping you wouldn't be affected but to some humans the taste can be extremely bitter."

We both watched Pippa pop in a capsule and go back to work on the PSL as if she were eating candy.

The bitter taste was still lingering in my mouth, "I don't think I can eat this." I said.

"The humans who can taste it usually can't," she said as she picked up the capsule from my hand and put it in her mouth. "You can have my portion of food tonight."

A loud crack came from where Kiko was helping move large boulders that was blocking our path. She looked extremely agitated. "You wanted these destroyed right?" she said as she pounded and cracked into the large boulders.

It didn't matter what Breccan would say, she was going to destroy them completely.

"Yes! Excellent job!" Came Breccan's unheard voice.

We all settled around the fire. It was the first time I could fully see the two moons in the since being on the planet. They were the only thing alight in the dark night, since the sage layers blocked out the stars in the sky.

We ate the creatures that Shihon captured and sat around the fire. The only one who didn't join us was Tobiah. He was leaning against some boulders away from camp.

I watched him stare at the moon and wondered why he preferred to be alone.

Lux leaned close to me, "He hates humans. Where he's from, humans were the predominant creatures and ruled over all other species."

I whispered back, "What about Breccan and Pippa and the other human crewmembers?"

"Pippa and Breccan aren't human."

I guess Pippa not being human made sense but I never knew Breccan wasn't human. He certainly looked like one. Actually, Lux looked like one too but her glowing hands gave her away, so I wondered if Breccan was the same species as her.

Breccan clapped his hands, "Alright, everyone should get to bed. We're getting up bright and early tomorrow."

His crewmembers instantly complied, even Tobiah walked back to his tent. Eventually Kiko and Rei complied and headed into their own tent.

It was warm inside my small tent and I snuggled underneath my sleeping bag and closed my eyes, wondering what the next day would bring.

Chapter 21: Snow

21. Snow

I awoke the next morning by a crunching sound approaching my tent. I didn't know what to make of it and I thought it was a beast crunching on some bones, getting ready to eat me next.

The warped shadow stopped right outside my tent.

"We're getting ready to leave Sarth" said Kiko from where the crunching was coming from.

"Kiko?" I asked sounding relieved.

"Yeah what's wrong?" she asked in a concerned tone. The shadow made a movement like it turned to face me from outside the tent.

"Nothing," I said as I opened my tent door. "I thought I heard-"

Cold air flooded my tent when I opened my tent door but what threw me off was that everything was covered in a blanket of white.

"Why is everything white??" I asked looking surprised and cold.

"Oh, you've never seen snow have you?"

"N-no" I answered starting to shiver from the sheer cold air outside.

"Close this," she closed my tent door from outside. "And change into your cold wear. It's only going to get colder from here on out."

"I-it gets c-colder than this?" I quickly went under my blankets again. "I didn't think it was possible to get this cold. I don't think I packed anything for this kind of weather."

"There should be a setting for snow on your rain jacket."

Another shiver shook through my body, "Ok-kay, I'll change and come out s-soon."

I didn't want to get out from under my warm blanket but I did anyway to change and it took me a moment to figure out how to change the setting from rain to snow on my jacket. I put on my pants and boots and five minutes after talking to Kiko, I took my first steps on this new stuff called snow.

It crunched underneath my boots. Now I knew where the sound was coming from. I could also see my breath in the air as it left my mouth. At first I thought it was going to freeze my lungs but it never did. How does it get this cold? Isn't there a sun here? I couldn't see one now because of the clouds in the sky but I know I've seen one before, but only oneâ ¦ was that why?

Everyone was packed up and we all started up the mountain again once I finished packing all my stuff together.

I didn't like the snow. It was harder to walk through and sometimes my feet would sink really low and it took more energy to lift my legs through it. It was getting harder to keep up with the group but I made sure to not fall behind.

We walked for hours like this with only a few short breaks. Most of the time it was quiet as we trudged up the mountain but occasionally we would hear Rei burst out laughing, no doubt she was soul linking with Pippa.

Soon it began to get dark again and we stopped to make camp. My toes were freezing and the first thing I did after setting up my tent was take my boots off and warm my toes at the fire. No one else seemed to have a problem with the cold, not even Pippa who sat on Shihon's back most of the timeâ ¦ maybe that's why.

"I have boots made out of a material that emits heat." She said to me when I asked if her feet were cold. She did have a rosy red nose though.

"You knowâ ¦" Breccan started saying, "I've been on planets made almost entirely out of ice. I was made king of the most populated city there!"

Kiko scoffed, "King of ice. You should've stayed there."

Breccan laughed. "Well at least I had meaning somewhere!"

It was quiet. Rei looked saddened by his comment and stood up to go to her tent.

I wasn't sure what just happened but then Kiko spoke.

"Let's talk over there." She demanded to Breccan.

"Alone?" he stood up, "Of course!"

They walked away from the camp. Lux shook her head with disappointment and the other Breccan crewmembers stared into the fire.

A moment later we heard a grunt and Breccan came flying and landed face up by the fire. He was about a foot deep in the snow. Then Kiko walked over to her tent to join Rei.

"No warning huh?" he wheezed from his spot.

"We hope it'll help you learn from your mistakes" responded Lux.

Pippa chuckled.

"Well at least someone is amused." Breccan grunted while getting back up. He brushed the snow off of himself. "I'm going to bed," was the last thing he said before leaving the camp fire.

After he left, Lux took Pippa to their tent.

"Come on lets go to bed."

"Aww I don't wanna!" Pippa pleaded.

Lux took her by the hand and practically dragged her away to their tent. All that remained was Shihon, Tobiah and I.

"You should get some rest too." Shihon said to me.

It was the first time he spoke directly to me.

"Yeah, you're probably right." I said thinking about it.

I got up to walk to my tent. "What about you?"

"I'm on watch tonight." He said looking up at the moons.

"I didn't know we made shiftsâ ¦" I wondered aloud.

"We haven't. I'm just being cautious."

I looked around to see if I could sense and danger from anywhere. All I saw was snow. We passed the last of any green life half a day ago.

"Don't worry about it. Just get some sleep." He assured.

I nodded to him and glanced at Tobiah who completely ignored me. Then I crunched my way back to my warm tent.

That was the great thing about these tents; they were made to maintain a certain temperature. The only bad thing about them was they ran off batteries that didn't have its usual power since Tammy had to quickly convert them to work on this planet. We had barely enough for the trip, if we used any more of it we'd run out. Everyone had their own battery. It was usually strapped around our waists and hidden under our jackets, well at least that's where mine was.

I didn't think I'd fall asleep easily, but the next thing I remember was waking up from a strong howling wind. My tent was shaking furiously and I was afraid that I'd be blown away. I wasn't sure how long I was asleep but there was no way I could go back to sleep now.

I changed into warmer clothes and attempted to open my tent door. That was a horrible idea. The wind blasted through along with flakes of snow that stung after hitting your bare face. I flew back from a strong blast of wind and snow unable to see anything outside.

Apparently someone came in and closed the tent door before I could make it back to it.

I looked to see who it was after shielding my eyes. I couldn't tell because they were wearing a face mask as well as being fully covered head-to-toe. They grabbed another face mask from inside their jacket and tossed it to me. I looked at it and the person pointed to their face, instructing me to put it on.

It was a sleek, simple mask that stuck on your face by suctioning to it. It was a weird feeling, plus right after I put it on I started hearing voices.

"Pippa, are you almost done configuring the direction?"

"Yep yep five more seconds."

"We're almost ready to go, Rei where's Sarth?"

"I just gave him the mask. We'll start packing up now."

I could hear everyone's conversation through the mask, and I with it on I felt like I could breathe easier somehow.

"Sarth, we should get goingâ ¦" came Rei's voice from the mask.

"Uh, yeah" I responded, remembering I still needed to pack up.

Rei helped me pack up and got my first feeling for being outside. The weather was horrible. The wind was constantly blowing snow and it seemed to get colder and colder. It went on like this for two days straight. I was getting nervous because the further up we went, the higher I seemed to be adjusting my battery to keep me at least thawed enough to keep moving forward. I hesitated each time I adjusted it, afraid I wasn't going to have enough battery power for the journey back but I didn't wish to freeze to death.

"Something wrong?" Kiko asked me through her mask on the seventh night. I was on my way to my tent. Since we no longer had any material to burn for a community fire, everyone just went to their tents at night now.

"No," I lied. I didn't want to hinder the group any more than I already was.

She didn't press the matter but still showed concern.

"Here," she took something out of her jacket. "I have this for you." It was a few pieces of dried meat.

"Where'd you get this?" I asked excitedly through my mask.

"Don't worry about that, just eat it."

I would normally question her further but the meat looked too good to pass up since I couldn't eat the nourishing capsules.

"Thanks!" I said happily.

I couldn't see her face through her mask. "No problemâ ¦ well good night." She said before turning around to walk to her own tent.

The next morning Breccan was less enthusiastic than usual. I wasn't quite sure why but I was surely in a happier mood. The dried meat Kiko brought me last night sure hit the spot. I wish I could've had more.

We were walking in a line and Rei was behind me today, and out of nowhere she came up beside me all giggly.

"How was your meat last night?" she asked.

Was surprised she knew about that but then I realized that Kiko must've told her. "Oh. It was great actually."

Rei and Pippa, who was on Shihon's back in front of us, started laughing. I was confused because I didn't see how that was so funny.

Suddenly a large snowball came flying from the front of the line and smacked Rei right in the mask. She had no idea it was coming and fell backwards from the impact. Pippa was now laughing uncontrollably and I held back my laughter to ask if she was alright while she was sprawled on the snow.

She wiped the snow off her mask and I helped her up.

"Ughh! You didn't have to throw it so hard!" She vented to the thrower.

There was no response except for Pippa's continuous laughter and I was still very confused.

"What's going on?" I finally asked.

Pippa's laughter died down as Lux's voice answered me.

"Kiko stole that dried meat from Breccan and gave it to you." I abruptly stopped walking. Did I hear that right? "It's fine. Don't worry about it. It was emergency food anyway and I'm glad you ate it before Brecccan did because he doesn't need it."

I was still kind of dazed from what I just heard. Rei was now pushing me forward as I was still processing what had happened last night.

So everyone heard our conversation last night? I had forgotten that everyone can hear each other because it was just Kiko and I when we spoke to each other but we were wearing our masksâ ¦ I knew I should've questioned her more about the meat! Now I felt guilty and bad for Breccan, no wonder he seemed down today.

We all walked in silence for a while until Pippa cried out, "Wait!"

Everyone stopped in their tracks while she jumped off Shihon's back and ran to Kiko to adjust something on the PSL, then she pointed to a spot on the mountainside.

"We can go through there."

"Through the mountain?" Breaccan asked as he made his way toward where she was pointing.

"There's just an ice wall blocking this opening, if we break through it was can just walk through the mountain."

Breccan dug through the snow revealing a thick ice wall.

"I can get through that" said Kiko who was preparing to break down the wall.

Breccan held up his hand to stop her. "That's not so wise gorgeous. Simply breaking it down could cause an avalanche and cover us up along with the entrance." He said in his charming voice.

"Then what do we do?" she asked in an irritated tone. Lux walked up to the wall.

"We'll let her handle it" Shihon answered.

Lux took off a glove on one of her hands and placed it on the ice wall. We watched curiously as she took a deep breath and exerted an invisible force at the wall. Instantly, parts of the wall turned into water and sloshed

to the ground leaving an entrance to walk through the cave.

"Whoa" I whispered but everyone could hear.

Breccan laughed. "That's not all she can do kid. Just don't get on her bad side."

We all walked inside the dark cave. Luckily our masks had lights on them, but we couldn't leave them on forever. It didn't take long to reach another dead end, this time it was rock.

Shihon and Pippa examined the rock wall. "It looks like a rock slide covered this side." Shihon said.

"Kiko we now require your assistance." Said Breccan.

"Oh, *now* you need me" she grumbled as she made her way to the wall.

Everyone stood back as she punched through the largest rock that was blocking the entire entrance. There was a loud boom as the large rock shattered and rocks began falling down. A cloud of dust blocked our vision and then sunlight hit our eyes.

We all headed towards the light in disbelief. Once the dust cloud cleared up it revealed a whole new world. It was like this area had been unaffected by the Vo stone breaking through the protective layer. There was no snow and the sun was shining through the many trees as wildlife wandered around like nothing wrong was happening.

"What is this place?" Rei asked in awe as we all took in our surroundings.

Pippa snorted with a smile on her face, "It seems Tammy's prediction was correct."

Chapter 22: Sage

22. Sage

"Her predictionâ ¦ was correct?"

"Mhmâ ¦"

I took off my mask along with everyone else and gazed at a flower that was blooming on the ground. It was large, beautiful and gave off a soothing sweet scent.

Pippa continued, "Tammy discovered interference on the scanner after putting the locater together. The stone's location was not revealed and it was suggested that a high abundance of sage was the cause of this. Since the stone didn't show up anywhere else, Tammy predicted it would be in an area protected by sage."

"So all of this is being protected by an abundance of sage?" asked Lux.

"Yep it is" Pippa smiled as she pointed to a dense flowing pillar of light-greenish substance in the center of the protected area. The sage flow dispersed at the top, creating a protective coating in this area. "The stone should be somewhere within this protected area."

"Hmmmâ ¦" Breccan suddenly had a devious smile upon his face. "I know, why don't we make a game of this?"

Everyone turned to him for a better explanation.

"Which ever group finds and reaches the stone first gets to keep it. The group of the first person to touch it wins."

Kiko gave a similar devious chuckled. "Fine by me," she grabbed me by my pack and took off running. "We start now!"

"Hey!" I gasped as I was pulled quickly through the trees and brush. I saw most of Breccan's team watch us leave, like they expected us to just take off. They huddled together and I'm guessing they spoke to each other briefly before taking off in different directions. Finally Kiko let go of me and I was able to stand on my own two feet again.

"You didn't have to drag me, and why are the three of us sticking together? Shouldn't we split up like Breccan and his crew to find the stone?"

She answered as she weaved through the trees toward the greenish pillar, "There's no need to, we both know where the stone is. It's just a matter of how we both approach it."

"We know where it's at?"

"Rei saw it when we were all standing there, it's just beyond the pillar but we're not alone in this area and I'm pretty sure Breccan split up his crew to ambush those ahead of us. We, on the other hand, are going straight for the stone."

I glanced at Rei and she smiled. I guess she already knew what Kiko was going to do. This was typical Kiko, rushing right in without really thinking and I'm sure Breccan knew this too.

We made our way towards the small mountain that housed the pillar of light which was shooting from the top of it.

"You sure there's a way through this mountain Rei?" Kiko asked.

"Yeah, but it's like a maze in there so stick with me."

Then she stopped briefly.

"What is it?" I asked behind her.

"I thought I sawâ¦" she turned to Kiko with a slight look of confusion, "nevermind, it's nothing."

That was strange, Rei doesn't usually have any problems looking ahead.

"Stay close to me" she assured.

I followed Kiko who was right behind Rei and we made our way through a narrow crack in the mountain side.

It was dark. It would've been pitch black if it weren't for the glowing green veins that covered the walls. I tried to keep up with the sound of Kiko and Rei but it seemed like they were getting further and further ahead of me. I didn't want to hinder them but I also didn't want to be left behind, lost in this maze of a mountain. Then suddenly it was silent and I could see no movement at all.

"H-Hey"

No response. My heart started pounding. Was I lost?

Something moved ahead of me.

"There you are! Don't just disappear like that!" Came an angry toned voice.

Huh? This voice wasn't Kiko's or Rei's but of another girl along with a strange boy who were both about the same age as me as they came into view behind a turn.

I turned around to see if I was the only one around. I was.

"Are youâ¦ talking to me?" I asked.

"Of course I am! Who else is there?"

Before I could respond the girl turned around to leave.

The boy gave me a funny smile, "Let's go, she'll seriously leave without us."

What the heck is going on? I didn't know who these two were and they acted like they knew me. They wore matching white clothes which was easier to see in the dark cave but what stood out the most was what they were wearing on their arm. It looked like an armband that had a small, round, glowing stone in the center.

I found myself following them, thinking about ways to ask if they knew me or what was going on.

The girl continued to talk, "Seriously, why did we come here? This is the right place right?"

"How would we know?" said the boy, "Do we look like province dictionaries?" he said sarcastically.

She sighed, "Let's just get to the drop point and find out."

We weaved through the cave and I followed behind these two strangers, still unaware of what I should do.

A beam of light shone through a small hole in the wall. I glanced through it as we passed by and my eyes widened. It was Kiko and Rei standing beside a pool of green liquid. I quickly did a double take back to the small hole but they were gone. This was apparently at the center of the mountain where light poured from the hole in the rock ceiling, but I couldn't see them anymore.

"Kiko! Rei!" I shouted out through the hole, hoping they would simply reappear again.

Nothing happened.

"Alex!" came the girl's voice.

"What're you doing?" asked the boy.

The boy and girl both gave me a puzzled look.

"Mark! Kim!" came another male voice in the direction of the green pool. The boy and girl gave no reaction to the voice.

"Did you hear that?" I asked them.

They listened for a moment, "Hear what?" asked the boy.

Couldn't they hear that? It was possible that they could be Mark and Kim.

I spun around and took off in the direction of the voice. The owner of the mysterious voice was definitely close to where I saw Kiko and Rei.

"Hey! Where you goin' now?!" the girl yelled at me as she and the boy followed close by.

I ignored them and looked for a path to the center of the cave. I weaved through the spaces as quickly as I could. I hit a few dead ends but I immediately turned around to look for a different route.

The girl and boy were still following me and finally the girl got fed up. "Ugh! What's going on Alex?!" she asked angrily toward me.

I didn't pay much attention to her, my sole focus now was to find Kiko and Rei as soon as possible. My name wasn't Alex and I had no idea who these people were so I don't know why they're acting like they know me.

Frustration began to fill me because I was tired of running in circles. I stopped in a dark passageway to catch my breath and get my bearings re-straightened. The other two also stopped behind me and didn't say anything.

I was worried I was never going to find them and remain lost in this mountain with these whack jobs until the planet would eventually be sucked up by the black hole.

I hit the wall with anger. How did this happen? I thought I was right behind Kiko when we entered the mountain.

"Hey, just tell us what's wrong Alex" said the girl in a now soothing tone after noticing my anger.

I sighed. I guess it wasn't their fault I was in this predicament.

"Iâ ¦" The two others lingered for my next words when I heard voices getting louder, and these voices were familiar to me.

I quickly stood up and walked around the corner to where light was shining through a large crack in the cave.

The girl was back to being angry, "Alright, I'm *seriously* gonna to hurt you now." She said through gritted teeth.

I ran to the crack and I heard Kiko and Rei's voices getting louder.

"Kiko! Rei!" I shouted as slipped through the crack.

The area I entered was extremely bright and I had to cover my eyes. When they finally adjusted I found myself being stared at by both Kiko and Rei.

"Yeah what is it?" asked Kiko as if nothing had happened.

I was happy and angry at the same time. "Didn't you guys notice that I was missing?" I asked.

"Missing?" questioned Rei. "Since when? You've been with us the whole time. You were pretty quiet though, is something wrong?"

"Uhhâ ¦" I was with them the whole time? That can't be. How would I explain what happened to them though? "It's nothing I guessâ ¦"

Kiko peered at me like she knew I was lying but didn't want to say but anything. "Oookayâ ¦"

A fake smile appeared on my face as I scooted closer to them. There was no way I was going to lose them again.

I changed the subject, "So what were we doing here?"

"We just found this pool of sage. It looks like this is where the sage that's protecting this area is coming from."

The three of us went up to the pool to get a better look. It was pretty large and it looked as though the sage was boiling, because it was also giving off some heat. We watched as the sage seemed to be steaming off and rising up through the hole in the top of the mountain as a light-green pillar and protective shield.

For some reason I was drawn to it, "You think it's safe to touch?" I asked, wanting to hold it in my hands.

"I'm not too sure," answered Rei, "but we can ask Tammy when we get back. I'll take some with us." She took out a canister from her pack and carefully filled it with the liquid.

Kiko stared into the green sage and then took out her knife and dipped it into the pool. "This stuff is supposed to be strong right?" she asked, examining her knife.

"Yeah according to Tammy" I answered.

We all watched as Kiko's black bladed knife interacted with the sage. It bubbled then sizzled before finally hardening back into its original black form, but now it had a greenish-clear casing around the black blade.

She tapped it against a rock and then quickly stabbed it, breaking the rock in half with her knife.

I guess that was working well for her.

Rei discovered something, "Hey, it looks like there's a path across the pool if we use the rocks to jump across."

We studied the rocks that were just above the boiling pool.

"Yep," Kiko confirmed, "looks like we can cross here if we jump carefully."

We adjusted ourselves to form another line. I really didn't want to be last again. I was going to say something but I didn't have to.

"Alright Rei go first, Sarth you can go next since you're acting weird."

Acting weird?? It's not like I *wanted* to be separated. I wasn't going to complain though.

Rei took the lead and I jumped onto every stone that she used. She was quite agile which meant her pace was quickly out-jumping mine. I lost track of which stones she used and jumped onto the wrong one.

"No! Sarth!" I heard Kiko yell before the stone I jumped to, sank underneath the bubbling green liquid bringing me along with it.

I braced myself to be burned alive by the boiling hot sage but it never came. The liquid was actually quite cool and thick. I was completely submerged when I was lifted up out of sage by Kiko.

"Can you be more careful!" she said angrily still holding me up in front of her by my pack.

I wiped my face before talking, "I'm sorry, I thought the rock was stable."

Rei sighed with relief, "At least we know the sage isn't dangerous to touch, it looks like it's just sliding off of your skin."

Kiko set me down and I looked at my hands and arms. She was right, the sage was simply sliding right off of my skin, leaving it dry-looking and I didn't feel any different.

I saw Kiko wiping off her arm. I would've died instantly after hitting the sage if it really was boiling, instead she risked losing her arm to try and save me even if it was smarter to just say goodbye to my existence.

"Thanks for saving me." I said sincerely to her.

She was still angry however, and she grumbled to me, "be more careful".

I guess I really was hindering the journey. Maybe I shouldn't have come along. I thought back through the seven days we've been traveling. Throughout that entire time we've had to go at my pace since I was the slowest, plus I had to eat the real food rations because I couldn't eat the nourishing capsule. I had to step it up if I really want to make a difference and contribute to the mission.

We made it to the other side of the pool without any more problems and I followed Rei back through the caves to the other side. I was so close to her in the dark that I had to watch where I stepped so I didn't trample on her. Losing them againâ ¦ was *not* going to happen.

Rei could sense my desire to stay together and after a few steps she gently took hold of my hand to lead me through the dark. The glowing veins on the wall began to get thinner as we came closer to the other side of the mountain.

Happiness could hardly describe how I felt to finally be out of the mountain.

It took us all a moment to readjust our eyes and what we saw afterwards was stunning. A large ruby red stone was embedded in the ground about a mile ahead of us like it crash-landed there, waiting for someone to find it.

"That has to be it" I said in awe.

"I agree with you" said Rei.

Kiko smiled, "Let's go claim it."

Chapter 23: Separated

23. Separated

We took off running towards the stone.

"Do you think," I shouted between breaths, "Breccan is already there?"

"Yep" answered Kiko confidently.

My heart sank a little. If we lose then it's my fault again for slowing us down.

"He won't touch it until we arrive" she assured. "He's waiting for us to cause a distraction."

"Cause a distraction?"

Rei chimed in, "We're not the only ones here remember?"

That's right. There were others on this planet looking for the stone as well.

"Do we have a plan?"

"Mmmâ ¦" Kiko thought for a moment, "Rei and I will take care of anyone getting in our way, you go for the stone."

For someone who's supposed to be a fierce warrior that was a pretty vague plan. I just had to believe they knew what they were doing and focus on what I was supposed to do, touch the stone first.

Wait a minute, if we could see the large stone from the distance we were at, this thing had to be huge!

I had to ask, "How are we supposed to bring this back to our ship? Let alone fly it off the planet?"

Kiko thought again, "Just focus on claiming it first."

I wanted to slap my forehead. She had no clue.

We ran fast through the trees and brush, jumping over fallen logs and rocks.

"There's a group we're catching up to just ahead of us" Rei announced.

"No problem, we'll just run through them" said Kiko taking out her blaster. "Sarth, just keep running to the stone, don't stop."

Rei took out her blaster as well and the three of us ran quickly through the jungle. We were able to take the other group by surprise, running past most of them until they began shouting.

"They're here!"

"Intruders!"

"Stop them!"

Came voices from the group we were passing.

Pew! Pew! The sound of blasters whizzing by us only made me run faster. Rei took care of everyone in front while Kiko would occasionally turn around to fire. We quickly found ourselves being chased not only by the humanoids, but by their pets as well. Ravaging, four-legged beasts with long sharp fangs, they caught up with us much faster than their owners.

"Go on!" Kiko ordered us as she stopped to face the beasts.

I didn't want her to leave but I knew I had my own job to fulfill.

Rei and I went on ahead, losing all our pursuers. We made it to the edge of the jungle where we looked down at the humongous crater made by the falling stone.

"Well this isn't good" said Rei as we looked down upon hundreds of humanoids and other different species. "For some reason I couldn't see them here."

A horn blew from the direction we just came and all the hundreds of humanoids and species turned their heads to us.

"Uhhâ ¦ so what do we do now??" I asked catching my breath.

"Keep charging!" Came Kiko's voice from behind. She didn't stop running and slide down the side of the crater, leaving Rei and I to chase after her.

A rallying cry came from the group that was ahead of us. It was terrifying. We were facing hundreds, just the three of us. Where were Breccan and his crew?

"Don't stop Sarth!" was the last thing Kiko shouted to me before running ahead and making a path for us.

I weaved and dodged past anyone who came close to me. I was definitely much better after training with Rei and Kiko for a few months.

Every few feet I would see a small group of people sent flying into the air by Kiko. She was having no trouble at all going through the crowd.

More and more people were getting closer to us. I was trying my best to avoid getting hit or captured but one of the men seemed to come out of nowhere and blocked my path. He surprised me and I had no time to react.

I heard Rei inside my head. "*Sarth duck!"* My instincts took over and I immediately ducked as Rei shot the man in front of me with her twineulator and then someone else, dragging the man to the other target.

"Thanks!" I said to her in my head. I took off again, getting closer and closer to the stone.

I was almost to it when a very large man appeared in front of me. His size threw me off but I figured since he was so big I could easily outrun him. I was definitely very wrong. The second I tried to get passed him, he caught my arm with a single grasp. I struggled to get loose but he was a large, odd looking man.

He bellowed out to Kiko and Rei, "You think you petty humanoids can just fight right past us and take the stone?" he easily picked me up by my head and held me up in the air. I fought to break away but it was like hitting a giant rock.

"I'll only say this onceâ¦"he started to say as his grip tightened around my face and I grunted from the pain.

Kiko and Rei tried to move closer but the giant man stopped them by squeezing my head even harder.

"Like I said, I'll only say this once to you disgusting-"

WHACK!

A large, dark figure appeared out of nowhere and punched the other large man so hard that he went flying to the other side of the crater. In that same moment I found myself in the large hand of the puncher. Somehow the other man's hand was severed but still attached to my head. I pulled it off and threw it on the ground with disgust. The sight of my savior took me by surprise though, it was a huge demon. At least what I thought a demon would look like. Hell's fire even seemed to be burning off of him.

Lux was next to us. Her whip was out in one hand and a blaster in the other, ready to attack anyone who threatened us.

The other fighters seemed confused about something as murmurs suddenly filled the air.

The demon holding me set me down and spoke in a very deep, ominous voice, "Set down your weapons and leave this place!" he demanded.

I saw the rest of the members of the Breccan crew slide down the sides of the crater from different directions and converge around the flaming demon. Lux turned her attention to me and asked if I was alright.

"Yeah I am, but who's that?" I asked.

"It's Breccan. These men were trained to listen to the type of species Breccan currently is right now." she said simply. "We were hoping to end this without having to fight but I doubt it now."

That's Breccan? I didn't have long to think about it because the large man burst out from under the rocks in the side of the crater, his skin was falling off like old torn paper peeling away from an old wall revealing another demon like the one who saved me (or Breccan I should say). The man was growing to the same size as demon Breccan.

"These slaves are mine!" The new demon roared back, and then he turned to his men and ordered, "Get to the stone! Take it back to the ship or I'll kill you myself!"

That seemed to jumpstart all his men's brains because they suddenly came back to life and continued to fight their way to the stone.

Both demons were now engaged in battle with each other. I saw Lux fighting her way towards the stone and I remembered the deal we made with Breccan and his crew. My only job was to get to the stone, I could at least do that much. I took off again after her.

Dodge dodge dodge. We were both getting really close to the stone but I was still lagging behind her. She was apparently the runner for Breccan because the other members of his crew were helping to clear the path for

her.

Faster! I need to run faster!

Somehow Lux kept getting further and further away from me. There's no way I could catch up with her in time now.

I'm not going to make itâ ¦ "*Duck!"* I didn't even think, suddenly I was ducking on the ground before I realized it. Rei caught Lux on the leg with her twineulator and pulled her back, stopping her from running but she caught on quickly.

"You think I don't know its weakness?" she said as she swiftly cut off the twine attached to her leg with her whip. That brief moment was enough for Kiko to draw her attention elsewhere and Lux quickly dodged a kick from her.

"We don't need to stop you, just slow you down."

Kiko engaged Lux and she could no longer run forward. "*Go Sarth!"* Came Rei's voice again.

I bolted up and took off for the stone again. I had to use this opportunity to win, it was a clear straight shot right to the stone now with no one in the way.

Wrong! Out of the corner of my eye I saw Pippa take over the run for Lux as soon as she was stopped. She sprinted up the small hill where the stone was sitting and took out a funny looking blaster, aiming it at me.

There was no way I could dodge without losing speed, I would have to take the hit. I focused on the stone and mentally braced myself for whatever Pippa had coming for me but it never came. As soon as she took out her blaster and took aim it was shot out of her hand. I didn't have to look back to know who it was.

Pippa and I ran up the hill, both of us at about the same distance from the stone. It would come down to who could get their hand on it first. I could feel all eyes watch us as we sprinted like our lives depended on it.

We ran and extended out our hands towards the glistening ruby red stone. Both of us were even and showed no sign of slowing down. As soon as the stone was a few feet away we both lunged at it with everything we had left.

I expected the stone to stop my momentum as my hand came in contact with it but that didn't happen. Pippa and I both touched the stone at the same time but I was the only one to fall right through it.

I stumbled up to see Pippa holding her hand on the stone trying to catch her breath with a surprised look on her face as she looked right at me, inside the stone. I could see everyone else with the same look on their faces behind her.

The stone suddenly shuddered and began shrinking. I searched around frantically for an exit but the stone was shrinking too fast for me to react in any way. I closed my eyes, waiting to be squashed but instead something fell on my head.

"Ow!" I looked up to see what hit me.

A ruby red stone bounced on the ground in front of my feet. I picked it up. It was like a miniature version of the large stone that was now nowhere to be seen. This must be one of the four stones. It was still a beautiful

ruby red as I clutched it in my palm.

The sky darkened and a loud *CRACK* echoed throughout the crater as the sage layers that were protecting the area began to break apart. Many of the fighters stopped to see what was happening.

"Time to go!" said Pippa as she took my arm and lead me to where the others were grouping up. "Looks like the stone was helping to protect this area until it was found."

The ground shuddered violently and most everyone fell to their hands and knees. *CRRRAACK!* Chunks of the sage ceiling began to fall apart.

"Run!" Kiko yelled out to everyone.

We all took off back in the direction we came from. Pieces of the sage ceiling were falling everywhere and an icy wind began to pick up. I watched as men from the other crew fled with us, a lot of them getting smashed by sage pieces.

We weaved and dodged through the falling sage debris, making our way back to the small mountain pass, where the green pillar was now gone from the top.

"Forget it! We're better off going around!" Breccan yelled from behind. He was back to looking like his normal self again.

"This is fastest path!" Kiko argued back.

"The path is probably blocked by now! We're going around!" Breccan said sternly insinuating his authority.

I can tell she didn't like it, but Kiko gave in to Breccan and we took another route around the mountain pass. It was a good thing too because halfway around the mountain we could see and hear it being crushed by a large falling sage piece.

We were almost back to the entrance where we entered. It was saddening to see the once beautiful, untouched paradise being destroyed right in front of us.

"That way!" Pippa pointed in the direction were should head. The entrance we came through was covered up with fallen stones and sage.

"Stand back, I'll re-open it" said Kiko.

She pounded through the rock and sage making a new opening.

We all followed her as she blew away any large pieces that were blocking our path. It was dark inside the passageway and I staggered over a few larger rocks while trying to keep up. I completely lost my balance over one rock and fell over. The next thing I knew someone helped me back on my feet as a large rock chunk fell from the ceiling where I had just fallen over.

"Thanks-" I looked up to see it was Tobiah who grabbed me but he ignored my comment and took out his spear that was attached to his back.

I looked to see what made him grab his weapon. The demon from earlier was back and slashing his way through to us. Tobiah took off his pack and took out a square box from inside. Then he pressed something on

his belt and an energy shield blocked off the demon from reaching us. Tobiah was on the other side of the shield as well though, and he took off his cloak revealing his rough, scared, tan skin.

Breccan noticed what he was doing.

"Tobiah!" he yelled at him through the shield.

Tobiah was facing the demon, ready to do battle with his spear in hand. He turned his head slightly and nodded to Breccan before engaging the menacing demon.

The Breccan crew took one last look at him fighting the demon before taking off again.

"Let's go" Breccan said as he pushed me forward through the cave.

We barely made it out in time to avoid being crushed as the pathway closed behind us, but now we were now back on the blizzard side of the mountain and no one was following us.

Everyone took out their snow gear again as we headed back down the snowy mountain with one less man. We walked in silence as we trekked across the thick snow. The weather was getting worse, this was definitely going to be a rough journey back to the ships.

A few hours passed when I noticed I was getting colder and colder. I checked the battery around my waist and saw it was dying a lot quicker than I anticipated. I didn't have long to worry about it though because a roaring cracking noise and shudder made everyone stop in their tracks.

We all glanced around our feet where the noise was coming from on the slick ice walkway. We made sure we weren't walking too close together through this area to help distribute the weight but the mountain was falling apart too quickly. Lux was behind me and I noticed the ice below her was giving away the most.

I was the first and closest to react as the ice block below her crumbled away, taking her along with it. I lunged for her hand and grabbed her just in time as I lingered on the edge of the hole. The ice below me didn't last long though and soon we were both falling. A moment later I felt something hit me hard on my pack and I snapped to a stop still holding on to Lux's hand. I looked up to see I was attached to the twineulator.

"That was too close" Rei said through her mask so everyone could hear.

"I'll pull them up" said Kiko.

"Wait!" Pippa interjected. "Oh no, the ice is cutting-"

Suddenly the twine lost tension and Lux and I found ourselves falling down once again off the cliff of the snowy mountain.

Chapter 24: Unwavering

24. Unwavering

My life flashed before my eyes as I was falling. I lost Lux's hand so I tried my best to cover myself up as I slammed into hard ice chunks on the way down. Each chunk was like being slammed against solid rock. I knew I had broken many bones in my body and after finally hitting my head on one of them, I lost consciousness.

When I finally came to my senses the first thing I noticed was how good it smelled. It smelled like I was walking back through the flower field on Crux when we went to go meet the King and my first thought was that I had died and gone to a peaceful place.

That was until something soft brushed against my skin. I slowly opened my eyes wondering where I was. It looked familiar, and it should because it was my own tent and I was inside my own sleeping bag.

I wondered how I got there.

"Ohâ ¦ you're awake" came Lux's soft voice from inside my sleeping bag.

"Ahh!" I looked down and noticed she was lying on top of me and we were both half naked. "What're you doing in here?! And where are our clothes?!" I asked, clearly freaking out given our appearance.

"Well, we both fell off the cliff and when I found you, you were near death buried under the snow. I lost my pack so we had to share your tent. Then I noticed your battery is practically dead so the only way to save you from hypothermia was to use my own body heat, so here I am."

She sounded kind of tired and when she was done explaining she rested her head back on my chest. I didn't know how to feel about how close we were but she did save my lifeâ ¦ again. I tried to remain motionless as I let her rest on me.

I don't know how much time passed but I found myself getting hotter and hotter in the sleeping bag. Lux still hadn't moved since she last spoke to me and I began to get antsy.

Buzzbuzzbuzz. My wrist was vibrating and I saw it was the device that Tammy had given me earlier. I tapped it and a small hologram of Tammy appeared.

"Tammy!" I whispered with a smile.

"Sarth, I'm glad you're okay. I've been monitoring you, and have been trying to contact you for some time now."

"Yeah I'm okay now."

"I see that." She said looking down in Lux's direction.

"No! It's not like that!" I said trying to clear up any indecent thoughts.

"Actually, I'm more concerned about Lux. She spent a lot of her energy healing you completely and it exhausted her before she could heal herself."

"She did?" I remembered how tired she sounded before falling asleep. I noticed then just how hot she was and I touched her forehead. "She's burning up!"

Tammy continued, "I can see that," She was typing on the panels in front of her. "There might be a way you can help her heal herself. The stone you managed to obtain is the Elemental Stone. It contains the galaxy's basic elemental forces. The fact that you are human is probably the reason why you were the only one capable of activating it. Considering Lux's species, you might be able to use the stone's power to heal her."

"What do I need to do?" I asked determined to help her any way I could.

"Get the stone and press it to your lips." Tammy instructed.

I glanced around looking for the stone I was carrying earlier. I found it on top of my clothes next to me and grabbed it. I pressed the cold stone against my lips and it glowed slightly.

She stopped pressing buttons on her side to speak to me. "Now press your lips onto hers."

"What?! You mean kiss her?!"

"Yes, kiss her." she answered in her usual monotone voice.

I hesitated. Just the thought made me blush already.

Tammy tried to rush things along, "You have a few hours to decide if you want to save her life."

"Just give me a sec!" I said, gently turned Lux on her back. She was still unconscious and her fever was rising quickly, giving her a red glow. "I'mâ ¦just trying to figure out the best way to do this."

I moved myself on top of her. She was even more beautiful with rosy red cheeks and I found myself getting nervous. I slowly approached her face with mine and gave her a quick kiss.

"That's not going to save anyone" said Tammy. She even sounded a little disappointed.

I grunted with anger and frustration at myself. Why was I acting this way? I'm sure Lux did everything she could to save me and here I am acting like a child with her life in my hands. I have the power to save her and I want to so what was stopping me? Only myself.

I approached her again, but this time with my burning desire to save her life. Our lips touched and I found myself putting more meaning behind it as time seemed to stand still around us. Her lips were soft and warm. I could feel the heat radiating off her body like a heater.

What was this feeling? I didn't want let go of her but eventually I removed my lips from hers. When I looked back down at her I noticed her eyes were now open and she was staring at me.

I realized my position. "I'm sorry! I'll-" I quickly said in a fluster but she cut me off by coming up to kiss me. After the initial shock I lost myself, kissing her back. I don't know how long we kissed for or why we were kissing but I couldn't let go.

It came to our attention that we were being watch when we heard girls giggling coming from my wrist and Lux let me go. I was too stunned to move afterwards so Lux turned her attention to my wrist.

"My apologizes," said Tammy.

I finally turned my head to see a bunch of girls from Breccan's crew standing behind Tammy apparently watching our every move.

"No need to apologize. I assumed you were the one who knew how to help me. Thank you." Lux's tone changed. "As for the others behind youâ ¦" she cleared her throat with a displeased attitude and the girls giggled again before scattering.

Tammy was clearly amused but apparently only I could tell. "I'll leave you two alone. See you in a few days." She said before turning off the hologram.

I was dreading the thought of her telling anyone on the Jago what Lux and I did, especially Kiko.

Lux turned back to me and I saw I was still hovering over her and I quickly moved over so we were side-by-side in the sleeping bag.

"Soâ ¦" I said first. I was still a little taken aback by all the kissing.

"Thank you for saving me" she said simply.

"You saved me too" I responded.

We laid there awkwardly for a few minutes listening to the rain and thunder patter the tent.

"We should probably get going" Lux said as she began to slip out of the sleeping bag. I quickly turned the other way since she was still half naked.

"Uhâ ¦ yeah you're right." I grabbed my clothes that were beside me and quickly threw them on, tucking the stone back in my pocket.

We started breaking everything down and packing up before heading back down the mountain.

When I stepped outside I was surprised. Not because the weather was getting worse, but because I noticed how far down we've come.

"Did we fall all the way down the mountain?" I asked, confused about our location.

"No, you've been out for a few days. We've made it further down the mountain than you think." She answered as she started to lead the way.

I followed her. "How long was I out?"

"Two days"

"You carried me all the way down the mountain?"

"Well, I'd say more likeâ ¦ drag. We had to keep to the schedule, this place is still gonna disintegrate in a few days."

Oh yeah that's right, I forgot we were on a time limit for a moment there. That fall really messed up my head, I hope it didn't affect my memory.

Lux and I moved quickly down the rest of the mountain. I was happy to be out of the snow because my battery was now dead so there was nothing to keep me warm. Of course the constant rain and wind didn't help but at least it was still warmer down here than on the mountain.

We walked all day, taking an unfamiliar route. Finally, when it got too dark to see we set up the tent again and Lux got cozy inside the sleeping bag.

"You can have the sleeping bag" I said offering it to her.

"You're going to freeze to death again, just get in." She argued.

I didn't want to argue so I just did as I was told and slipped inside the sleeping bag with her. It was warm and comfy. There was a lot on my mind about what's happened the past week that I wanted to get off my chest.

"I'm sorry about Tobiah" I said out of nowhere. I hoped she wasn't asleep yet as I soon realized after a pause.

"He was a loyal friend to Breccan. He's been part of the crew for yearsâ ¦" Her voice trailed off in her thoughts. "He'll be missed but not forgotten. We'll make sure his death wasn't in vain."

I remembered the moment before his sacrifice. "He saved my life."

"He's saved all of our lives, countless times before. He may have distaste for humans but his loyalty to Breccan runs deeper."

I couldn't believe the man I thought to be a narcissistic weirdo when I first met him, would have such an amazing crew. Not just Tobiah, but the entire Breccan crew never ever questioned his leadership or motives. They were loyal to the end.

"How did you join his crew?" I asked curiously.

She chuckled, "I met Breccan when I was a little girl. I hated him at first and he begged me to join his crew but I always said no." She thought for a moment. "Then one day he changed my life and I couldn't just say no anymore so I suddenly found myself as part of his crew."

"Wow, you've been part of his crew since you were a little girl?"

"Yeah, pretty much. After that we eventually started gathering more crew members along the way."

It was interesting to learn more about Lux and Breccan. The crew really did have a deep history behind them. Before I knew it hours flew by and we had laughed together and talked about all sorts of different things.

A cool thing I learned was that the whip she used was able to cut anything it touched, through any layer. She demonstrated by having me hold a nourishing capsule in my fist and she wrapped the whip around it and the core glowed orange. Then she took off the whip and told me to open my hand. The capsule was now cut in half. That explained how the large man who grabbed me had his arm cut off, and how she cut the twine when Rei shot her with the twineulator.

"We should go to bed" she said after hours of talking.

I sighed. "You're right, it's getting really late now."

She smiled at me. "Good night."

I smiled back. "Good night."

I awoke early the next morning to find Lux lying on top of me once again. I didn't freak out this time because she looked so peaceful and I didn't want to disturb her. I was about to fall back asleep when she suddenly woke up and rolled off of me. I pretended to be asleep as she quietly slipped out of the sleeping bag to change.

"Sarth," she whispered at me, trying to wake me up gently.

I opened my eyes and she was waving some dry meat in front of my face.

"This is the last of the food so chew it slowly." She said popping a nourishing capsule in her mouth.

I took the meat from her hand and stuck it in my mouth to suck on.

It was hard to pack up this day. The wind and rain had picked up so much that we needed to hold onto each other so we wouldn't blow away. I didn't know how she was able to lead us anywhere. She told me earlier that we were a little off course but she knew the direction we should travel. I had no idea where we were so I was relying on her to get us back to the ship.

It was hard to make progress trying to walk against the wind, especially since we lost the spikes for our shoes. I gave up trying to clear my mask from the rain and just focused on following Lux.

"Sarth! Where have you guys been?! You've had us worried for days!" Came Rei's voice in my head.

I perked up. "*Rei! We're both fine. Where are you?"* I asked searching around in vain. Lux noticed my movements and stopped.

"Wow you can't see anything! I'll look around to see if I can find you."

Lux came up to my face and lifted her mask to talk, "What's the matter?"

"Rei found us! She looking around to see where we are." I told her lifting up my own mask. It was a pain not being able to use the masks to communicate because my battery died and Lux lost hers.

"Great! I'm glad we finally found them!"

Rei spoke again, *"It's a good thing I found you guys! You're headed straight into a wild herd of unfriendly looking creatures up ahead!"*

She gave us directions and I relayed them to Lux. We followed Rei's instructions and finally caught up with them. They were resting underneath some shelter from the wind and rain.

Rei jumped on me and gave me a big hug. I was happy to see them all again. Everyone except for Tobiah was still together in one group. We were all exhausted and dirty but we were finally back together again.

"We were so worried! Kiko was about to jump off the cliff to find you! Breccan and Shihon had to stop her, which wasn't easyâ ¦ or pretty." Rei recounted.

She turned to see Lux healing Breccan from an apparent arm injury he sustained by trying to subdue Kiko, but he had a big happy smile on his face like it was his fault he hurt himself. His crew was happy to see her again and Pippa gave her a big hug.

I looked around for Kiko. She was standing behind me, staring at me with a small smile on her face.

"Welcome back" she said.

"Thanks, I'm glad to be back." I answered.

She turned her attention to Lux. "Where's her pack?"

"Oh, she lost it in the snow." I said without much thought.

She thought about it, "I seeâ¦" Then she walked away.

"Alright!" Breccan said getting pumped up, "let's get moving now!"

We all took off again, walking a few more hours. This time it was a lot easier being pulled along by Kiko with the twine they were using. The only person I got to talk to was Rei because my mask was still dead. That was okay though because Kiko was acting strange ever since Lux and I got back.

I got lost in my thoughts and I remembered our kissâ¦

"Kiss..." Said Rei.

"Kiss?! What kiss?!" I said trying to hide my thoughts.

"Huh? I said Kiko missed youâ¦"

"Ohâ¦ yeah? I missed you guys too." I tried to redeem myself but it failed.

She thought about what I said, "â¦Kiss? Waitâ¦"

"WHAT?!" she screamed aloud. I guess she came to a sudden stop behind me because I lost all my slack and almost fell backwards. Then everyone else stopped and turned to Rei for an answer. I couldn't hear what they were saying but I knew they had to be asking what was wrong.

"SHHHHHHHHHHH!! WHAT ARE YOU DOING? YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT HAPPENED!" I was in full panic mode. I couldn't let Kiko find out I had kissed her bounty hunting arch nemesis.

"Uhhâ¦ sorryâ¦ Sarth said he ate the dried meat I was saving." She chuckled nervously, "well let's keep moving!"

All eyes turned to me and I just shrugged nervously. Then we all resumed the trek through the jungle.

I sighed.

"YOU KISSED LUX?! WHAT HAPPENED UP THERE?!" Rei yelled in my head.

"*Nothing happened. Don't worry about it."* I said making up my mind that I wouldn't say anything about what happened.

Rei grumbled. I guess she knew she wasn't going to get any information from me and after that she stopped talking to me for a while.

We walked for hours and out of nowhere light green raindrops began splattering my mask.

"*Huh?"* I said to myself.

"It's starting to rain sage." Rei explained.

I wiped my mask to see the others taking notice of the green rain as well.

"That can't be good." I said.

"*It's not. Apparently we need to pick up the pace."*

It was pitch black outside when Breccan finally decided to stop for the night. Since Lux and Pippa lost their tent I ended using Shihon's since he insisted I use his tent because he wasn't going to need it tonight. I gladly took it if he wasn't going to use it.

Every inch of me was tired and exhausted. I snuggled inside my sleeping bag, watching the sage droplets batter the tent when I realized I was surprisingly lonely. I thought about how Lux and Kiko were doing in one tent.

"Hey Sarth, you still awake?"

"Yeah why?"

"It's awkwardly quiet in here. Pippa fell asleep right away but Lux, Kiko and I are just laying here obviously still awake. The tension here is getting unbearable."

"Can't you all just get along?"

"Yeah, that's not happeningâ ¦ oh Kiko gave upâ ¦ she's leaving the tent nowâ ¦ go talk to her."

"Why me?"

"This is your fault."

"What? How is this my fault??"

â ¦

I sighed and got up to go outside. It took a moment to put my boots and jacket back on and when I opened my tent I found Breccan and Kiko at the PSL, talking to a hologram of Tammy.

I walked over to try and listen but they were just finishing by the time I reached them. They both looked distressed.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"We need to leave right now" Breccan said seriously as he and Kiko walked to the other group members.

"Why? What's going on?" I asked getting worried.

I followed Kiko to the other tent where she opened to a packing crew. Lux, Pippa and Rei were already up and packing.

Lux said while packing, "Breccan said we need to leave right now."

"I see you got that memo already" Kiko sassed back as she started throwing their stuff together.

"Will someone please tell me what's going on??" I asked again.

Kiko stopped briefly to explain, "This planet will be gone by tomorrow morning. It's degrading faster than we anticipated."

My mouth dropped. "But we're still two days away!"

"That's why we need to leave like right now. Go pack."

I didn't have to be told twice. I ran to Shihon's tent where Breccan was helping me throw all my stuff together. We were all packed in record time and within 5 minutes of learning the planet wouldn't last another day, we were back to running for our lives.

The weather was getting exponentially worse by the hour and I was practically dragged through destroyed brush or the rising water level the entire time. Soon lightning filled the dark sky, its booming echo nearly made my ears bleed and I was dead tired after a few hours of such an insane pace.

Rei would try to inspire me at times. "*C'mon Sarth, we have to pick up the pace. You can do it, we're almost there."*

But I simply didn't have the energy to respond back, even in my head. I tried to keep up but I was getting slower and slower by the hour.

I was about to give up completely when I felt a familiar hand take ahold of mine. I used my other hand to clear my mask and see who it was. I saw Lux's back as she lead me with her hand the way we traveled the few days without the others. A yellow light was visible between our hands and I instantly began feeling better with a steady stream of energy entering my body, keeping me moving forward. I smiled at her even though she couldn't see it. She was always looking out for me. I squeezed her hand and I saw her glance back with a smirk on her face.

We ran the rest of the way like this and finally, after running all night we saw our ships with crewmembers running frantically all over the place. A light-greenish shield was protecting each ship from rain, wind, lightning, and anything else that was flying through the air.

Chunks of earth were now rising off the planet and soared through the sky getting smaller and smaller until it disappeared in the darkness. The ground beneath us started to crack as we ran to the ships.

"You're finally here!" Cashel howled through the wind. "Get on board so we can get off this dying planet! Tammy finished re-equipping both ships a few hours ago. We're both set to leave!"

"Great!" yelled Breccan, "We'll see you in space!"

I watched as the Breccan crew headed back to their ship. Lux smiling at me again and I smiled back before she followed Breccan inside.

"How was your trip?" Cashel asked me on the way to the Jago.

"Long" I answered earnestly.

He chuckled, "At least you made it back!"

That was definitely true. I thought about all the times I almost got killed. It was too many times if you ask me.

We all gathered on the flight deck where Tammy was handling all the controls. The entire ship shook disturbingly as the ground underneath it began to give away.

"Tammy let's get off this planet!"

She didn't need to be told because we were soon hovering in the air and ascending hastily.

A hologram of the Breccan flight deck appear before us on our flight deck.

"Whew! We're cutting it close here!" said Breccan as he assumed control over his ship.

We all watched, holding our breaths as we began to slow down, making our way toward the crumbling sage layers that used to protect the planet.

We were so close to the green sphere when an alarm rang out simultaneously on both our flight deck and Breccan's.

"What does that mean?!" asked Rei looking alarmed.

Both Tammy and Cashel were too busy trying to stabilize the ship. Breccan's crew had the same reaction as he assessed what was happening.

"We're not gonna make it." Kiko said, realizing what was going on.

The ship was almost slowed down to a complete stop now.

It was quiet for a moment as the truth hit us all like a punch to the stomach.

Breccan broke the silence by giving orders, "Tammy, concentrate your ship's sage shield to the rear of your ship."

"Are you sure about that?" She asked.

"Of course I am!" he announced to his crew, "Listen up! We're going to re-direct all of our power to our front two main blasters! Does anyone object?"

It took a moment to sink in but soon smiles started creeping up on some faces.

"We get to fire them?!" someone on the flight deck asked.

"Indeed we will and we shall!"

His flight deck started cheering and got to work to prepare the large blasters.

"Waitâ ¦" I said as I pieced together their plan. "You're gonna fire your main cannons at us?"

"The propulsion should be enough for you guys to escape" explained Lux.

"But what about you guys! We can't just leave you to die here! It's not fair! You can't just sacrifice everyone on board for us!" for some reason I was angry at first, and then I was suddenly holding back tears.

Lux just smiled at me with her usual kind smile. "We want to do this." she said. "There's a reason why we follow Breccan without hesitation."

Tears were now making their way down my face.

"Why?" My voice cracked as I tried to hold them back.

"Because we trust him, so you should trust us."

I didn't want them to die. I wanted us all to collect the pieces together and have fun like we have been the past two weeks. Why did it have to be this way?

"Cap'n the main blasters are ready to go on your command!" came Pippa's cheery voice from the background.

Breccan came back on the hologram, "Well Jago, I expect you to win this race! Kiko my darling, until we meet again!"

"You should all take a seat" said Tammy quietly.

Kiko directed me to the chair because I couldn't take my eyes off the hologram. I watched as the Breccan crew prepared to save our lives once again.

Breccan smiled and waved goodbye to us before shouting, "Fire!"

Our ship was launched forward and a blinding light made me close my eyes. I could hear the Breccan crew cheering as we took off further and further away from them and the dying planet. When we slowed down the hologram flickered for a few more seconds.

"Good luck Jago!" said Breccan as we watched the crew smile and cheer us on before we completely lost connection.

Chapter 25: Feelings

Part 5: Morph Stone

25. Feelings

I didn't leave my room for days. I didn't feel like doing anything. When I did finally come out to eat dinner it was quiet at the table. It was Cashel's turn to make dinner and he made himself busy in the kitchen as everyone sat at the table, putting food on their plate and eating quietly.

I didn't look at anyone but I can feel eyes glance at me once in a while. I ignored them and stood up to leave the table with most of my food still on my plate.

"Are you done? You barely touched your food." Kiko asked in a disapproving tone.

"I'm full." I answered simply, still avoiding any eye contact.

"I think you should eat at least a little-"

"I'm full alright! Don't pretend like you care what happens to me!" I snapped at her.

"Fine! Then starve to death!" she yelled back before storming away.

I glared at Tammy and Rei who were still sitting at the table. Cashel simply ignored our commotion and continued working in the kitchen. Tammy just stared at me with a blank face but I could see Rei's eyes swell up with tears.

All of my pent up emotions were leaking out and I was furious as I stormed away from the kitchen back to my room.

I was lying back down on my bed when the door slid open. It had to be Tammy because I had just locked it and she was the only one who could override the system.

I sighed, "What do you want?" asking without bothering to give my full attention to her.

"You miss them" she said.

"What does it matter? They're all dead."

She paused, and then pictures of Breccan and his crew began appearing on the wall I was staring at.

"What are you doing?" I said, starting to get angry again. I got up from my bed and walked over to the door to leave but it slammed shut and locked. "Open the door Tammy!" I started banging on the door, hoping it would open.

"You liked her didn't you?"

I kept banging on the door in frustration and a picture of the kiss Lux and I shared appeared on it. I couldn't hold back all the pain any longer and I cried as I saw the picture.

"We all liked the Breccan crew Sarth." She said, and then she put up other pictures of both the Jago crew and Breccan crew enjoying each other's company in the brief two weeks we spent with them. "We all feel the same pain, but you're trying to ignore it completely. It's not good to push away your emotions." She spoke in a sincere voice, one I've never heard from her before.

I slid down against the door, huddled there, crying like I haven't done in a long time. Losing friends was something no one should ever go through. She walked over, sat down next to me, and leaned her head against my shoulder, consoling me in her own way.

I felt so stupid for acting the way I have been since the incident. Tammy was right. I wanted to ignore the pain of losing our friends completely. I couldn't stand the thought of it but it was changing me and I was lashing out at the others because of it.

We sat there until the tears stopped pouring out of me.

"You think she'll forgive me?" I wondered aloud. I knew she would know that I was talking about Kiko.

"Yes," she responded, reading my mind. "She knows how you feel, she just didn't know how to approach you."

I knew I had to make up with the others somehow.

"I'm sorry." I apologized genuinely.

"It's alright. That's what friends are for."

I found Kiko and Rei in the sky deck and tried to think of the best way to approach them without getting myself killed.

"You don't need to say it." Kiko said first.

Relief spread throughout my entire body.

"You gonna join us?" Rei asked from the bed.

"Yeah" I replied happily.

The next day, I remembered that I had the stone the entire time since I first grabbed it on Fargon and yet no one's asked me about it.

I went to the jacket that went through the two week journey with me and took out the illuminated red stone. It instantly reminded me of my kiss with Lux as I stared at the spot where I pressed my lips against it.

The door opened.

"Hey you busy?" came Rei's voice.

Those thoughts fled my mind. "Uh, no not really." I said.

"Ohh is that the stone? I wanna see!"

I handed her the stone and it stopped glowing. Instead it looked like a regular red ruby stone.

"Aww I guess it doesn't like me" she frowned and I shrugged my shoulders. "Let's go show Tammy!"

She walked the stone over to Tammy who was working on the now-thrashed-thanks-to-Kiko PSL in her room.

"Tammy! Hold out your hand!" she ordered, hiding the stone behind her back.

Tammy turned in her chair with her usual straight-working face and held out her hand. Rei placed the stone on her palm and we all watched as the stone turn pitch black once it touched her.

"uhh..." Rei and I said in unison.

"What happened to it?" I questioned.

"The stone doesn't resonate very well with me." She explained as she picked up the stone to examine it. "I knew this would happen."

"Why doesn't it like you?" Rei asked with pity.

"Considering this is an elemental stone, I figured it wouldn't respond well to someone who lacks most elemental genetic makeup."

That made sense. Tammy was more suited to technology rather than nature. She gave the stone back to me and it illuminated with life once again.

"Then why does it work well with Sarth?"

"Humans are one of the most basic beings," Tammy explained and a hologram of what looked like a tree with many branches appeared. "Almost all species in the galaxy started from humans." She pointed to a figure that looked like me at the bottom of the tree. Then she pointed to figures that looked like Kiko and Rei further up, and one that looked like her towards the top of the tree. "So it shouldn't just work well with Sarth, but with any human. He was the only one in the expedition group who would've been able to activate the stone."

"Ohâ ¦"

"How did you know this was an elemental stone? Are they all like this?" I asked.

"I was able to take a look at all the research that Breccan had accumulated about the race. I was surprised at the amount of extensive work they had done. It must've taken them years to collect that much data, but they lacked someone who could piece it all together." She brought up panels full of text in front of her. "Apparently each stone each exhibits a type of theme that is seemingly randomly chosen to be the center of its power. It can be anything. I simply put it into a category I thought would fit it best."

"So there are four different types of stones somewhere in the galaxy?"

"Yes, and I won't know more about them until I can better assess where it's located."

I glanced at Rei, and Tammy went back to working on the PSL again.

"How's the tracker coming along?" Rei asked this time.

"It'll be a few days until I can find another signal, other than that it's working perfectly."

"That's good."

"This PSL, however, needs extensive work. But I knew it would come back in this condition after having Kiko carry it."

Rei and I laughed.

Weeks had passed on the ship and still no word from Tammy about the next stone.

The only interesting part about drifting along in space was stopping at a few nearby planets to re-stock or just to take a break for a day or two.

Each planet we stopped at was completely different. The others had been to most of them during their bounty hunting years. I wish I could've been there with them, they always had some sort of story to recall at each planet.

"Hey Aki, remember when we crashed the ship in one of those hasin holes?" she burst out laughing and Kiko giggled with her as they pointed to a large hole with brown filled substance in the ground. We were on one of the planets they had stopped at before.

"Yeah it took us all day to clean the ship, and Tammy wasn't happy when she got back with Cashel." She recalled.

Rei was rolling around laughing now, "That's right! She left us on the planet for three month after that."

Tammy joined in, "It was cheaper to just leave you both there. I wanted to leave you longer but Cashel insisted we pick you two back up."

I thought about all the time I spent with them. I wasn't sure exactly how long I've been with them but I've made many happy and sad memories with them already. I couldn't imagine myself without them anymore. We were like a family and I wanted to be able to recount memories with them in the future.

I was meditating with Kiko in the training room one day when I asked without thinking, "Do you have family on your home planet?"

There was no response. I figured she was ignoring me.

"I used to."

I opened my eyes. She sounded different, not like her usual self. I saw her still sitting there meditating, eyes still closed.

Interest got the better of me and I asked again, "What happened to them?"

Again it took a moment but she answered simply, "I killed her."

"Youâ ¦ killed her?"

I didn't know what was going on but I knew the normal Kiko would never answer me so simply like that about her past. It must be because she's meditating, then I remembered her number one rule she told me after allowing me to meditate with her. 'Do *not* talk' she told me. I see why she said that now.

"Yes. It was my faultâ ¦I killed herâ ¦my faultâ ¦"

Something was definitely wrong. Her aura was starting to change.

A loud beeping noise rang in the room and it started to darken. The room began removing the obstacles that were scattered about. I had no idea what was happening when Rei exploded into the room.

"AKI!" she cried out as soon as she saw her.

This jolted Kiko back to reality and she opened her eyes, looking around. Rei was by the door still trying to catch her breath, probably from running all the way from the flight deck.

The alarm and room stopped moving as soon as Kiko opened her eyes. Her gaze found me.

"What did you say?" she asked me with a stern look.

I was caught red handed. "I didn't-"

"It doesn't matter Aki, he won't do it again." Rei interjected as she walked over to me and dragged me out of the room.

She dragged me all the way to her room before finally letting me go and a second later Tammy walked in.

"Are you crazy? Do you really want to die?" Rei got straight to the point.

I didn't know my questions would lead to my death at that moment.

"He didn't know the consequences Rei" Tammy defended me.

I was still slightly confused, "I don't even know what's happening."

Rei sat down on her chair and explained, "Aki meditates for a reason, not just because she likes to." She thought about how she should explain this. "You know her species is bred to fight. It's in her blood to kill, but she doesn't want to. It's hard for her to fight against her natural urges and meditating is one way of helping her to keep her instincts under control."

Ok, that made sense.

"You *do not* want to be around if she loses control."

"Have you ever seen herâ ¦lose control before?" I wondered.

She didn't like that question but she still answered, "I've seen what she's capable of, but I've never seen her lose complete control... nor do I ever want to."

I brought back bad memories as her eyes down casted to the floor.

"I'm sorry. I won't bother her again" I said honestly.

She shook off her sorrow, "It's fine. No harm done. I'm just glad we caught it in time."

I left her room and headed to mine. Tammy followed me there.

I turned to her, "Did you need something?"

"Let me see your hand" she requested.

I didn't really understand but I held out my hand for her. She put one of her glowing braids on top of it and it flickered sporadically.

"What're you doin'?" I asked curiously.

She was still fixated on my hand when she answered, "A check-up".

I let her do whatever she was doing and then she left. She came back an hour later and handed me a small bottle.

"Use this when you shower." She told me.

"What is it?" I held the bottle up. It had a thick white substance inside.

"It's for your hair."

"What's wrong with my hair?" I asked running my hand through it.

She just turned around and left.

I did what she said and used it for my hair in the shower without a second thought.

Afterwards, I walked into the kitchen for dinner and sat down in front of Rei. She was the only one there reading something and then she took a sip of her drink. When she saw me she spit her drink out all over me and was laughing hysterically.

"What's so funny?" I asked in disgust of her drink all over me. I had to wait for her to catch her breath.

"What's with the new look?" she finally managed to ask pointing to my hair.

I remembered what Tammy gave me and ran to look for a mirror. My eyes widened with horror at my snow-white hair. It was affecting all of my hair, even my eyebrows were white and I don't remember washing my eyebrows. It made me look ten years older, like I was Cashel's younger brother or something.

"Tammy!" I yelled angrily. Rei took out her memory flasher and I heard her taking many images of me. I ignored her as she tried to get every angle.

A hologram of Tammy appeared in front of me. "Yes?" she said like nothing happened.

"What did you do to my hair?!"

I heard Cahsel suddenly burst out laughing in the background of the hologram at the pictures Rei had just sent him.

"It's not permanent" was all she said.

I was speechless. Dang it, she got me good.

Chapter 26: Destination

26. Destination

My hair was still white a week later when a familiar alarm set off throughout the ship. Everyone gathered in Tammy's workroom.

"Please tell me that's the next stone location" said Rei.

"It is" I said. I was with Tammy when the alarm went off.

Cashel came through the door, "So where are we going?"

"Tizarr" Tammy answered.

"Yeah?"

"Really?" said Kiko and Rei.

"That's good news" said Cashel.

"Yes, but it will take another month to reach the planet."

"That's fine. It'll give us enough time to re-equip for that planet."

"I agree."

Tammy clarified to me that Tizarr was one of the first planets the crew went bounty hunting together as a team on.

"It's a planet with sinking islands" she said. "The planet is basically all water but it has populated islands throughout the planet that sink underwater at random intervals."

I didn't like the thought of being surrounded by a large mass of water. I couldn't even imagine what that would look like. There were never any bodies of water in Sola that were deeper than my waist. The bodies of water on Dezner and Fargon was the most I've ever seen and I hardly even touch it.

"The main species on Tizarr are the Attar Herb Rewe."

"Attarâ ¦ Herbâ ¦ Rewe?" I said trying to repeat the name.

"We just call them Attar."

"That's much easier."

She continued, "The Attar is a species that is able to survive both in the water and on land, which is why this planet is so populated with them. There are other species as well however, who have made living on the islands possible, even with them sinking into the water."

"How do they do that?" I asked, intrigued by the idea.

"You'll see when we get there" she smiled. "You should spend this time preparing for anything you may encounter while there. There are still other racers who are looking for the stone as well."

I remembered the large man who captured me. "Yeah I guess you're right." I left her room and went to find Rei and Kiko.

We didn't make any more pit stops on other planets since we now had a destination to get to.

I eventually convinced Kiko to train me more for anything I might encounter on Tizarr. She didn't really want to at first but Rei helped me convince her and the three of us spent weeks on some intense training. She even taught me how to use simple weapons and how to counter-attack, but practicing that with her was sometimes dangerous.

We were practicing with a pair of short sticks one day when I caught her day dreaming. I used that to my advantage to try and get my first hit off of her but she instantly blocked my attempt without thinking and countered back harder than usual. I went flying backwards and thudded on the ground. I quickly realized it was my fault so I tried to play it off like it was nothing.

"Sarth! I'm so sorry!" she apologized as she ran over to me. "Are you hurt bad? Let me get Tammyâ ¦"

She was about to go get her when I grabbed her arm without warning. She reacted again by attacking but I knew she was going to and I was able to dodge her deadly kick.

"Noâ ¦" I finally managed to grunt. "I'm fine. Just stay here with me please." I pleaded.

She looked surprised. It could've been the fact that I was able to dodge her or maybe she was surprised she attacked me so dangerously for a second time. It didn't matter to me. All I wanted was for her to stay with me.

I was still holding onto her when she nodded and I finally let go. She sat down next to me with an upset face.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she tried to coax the truth out of me.

"I'm fine" I smiled at her, trying to make myself look okay.

She just sighed and avoided looking at me.

"Heyâ ¦" I whispered to her.

She slowly turned to me, her eyes glassed over with sadness. "I don't want to hurt you Sarth" she confessed, whispering back.

This girlâ ¦ there's always been something about her. I've always had this indescribable feeling towards her and she never ceases to captivate me.

"You won't hurt me" I said from the bottom of my heart. I gazed into her beautiful gray eyes and slowly raised my hand to carefully caress the side of her soft cheek. She gazed back at me the entire time. "See..."

She lifted her hand and held onto mine next to her face, never taking her eyes off me. I was being drawn in by her, slowly moving closer and closer to her face. I knew in my heart I wanted to kiss her and show her my true feelings. I was slightly surprised when she came in closer to me as well. We were almost touching and my heart was racing with anticipation. I closed my eyes and let myself goâ ¦

Thud! Thud!

"Hey Tammy why's the door locked?" we heard Rei's voice just outside the training room door and the realization of not being alone anymore separated us quickly. We swiftly let go of each other and she got up to open the door.

"Take Sarth to see Tammy" she ordered as she briskly walked out of the room.

"Huh?" she poked her head in to see me sitting on the ground, tapping my short sticks together awkwardly, pretending nothing happened. "Okayâ ¦" she said giving me a weird look.

She helped me up and took me to see Tammy. "What happened?" she asked.

"I fell" I lied.

Tammy was already in the medical bay by the time we got there.

"Just leave him on the table and go see how Kiko's doing" she told Rei.

"Geez what's with you guys today," she mumbled, "ordering me around like a slaveâ ¦" she helped me on the table and then left to find Kiko.

I was still on the table, letting Tammy assess the damage. The events with Kiko replaying over and over in my mind and I smiled out of nowhere.

"I don't even need to analyze you to know what you're thinking" said Tammy as she worked the panels.

"Is it that obvious?" I asked.

"As obvious as your three broken ribs and I see you can't even tell you're in pain." She smiled, "I take it it was worth it?"

I smiled back, "She can break my ribs every day."

I had to wear another shirt brace and tone down my training for the rest of the journey to let my ribs heal. I was a little worried about how Kiko would react to seeing me again but surprisingly she was the same as usual and I was extremely happy about that.

Finally, the arrival day on Tizarr was upon us.

"Prepare to enter Tizarr's atmosphere" came Tammy's usual announcement.

We all prepared to land. I saw the planet through the sun shield. It was completely blue with tiny specks of brown in different areas. That was definitely the most water I've ever seen before.

We landed at the space port on one of the largest islands on the planet without any problems.

I took a look around at our surroundings, "Wowâ ¦" I said, admiring the buildings around us. They looked very different from usual buildings I've seen so far. For one thing they were all generally cylinder shaped but it looked like they were grown and they were all different bright colors.

"They're coral buildings." Tammy clarified.

"What's coral?" I asked.

"Let's just say it comes from underwater and admire how pretty it is." Rei pitched in.

That was fine with me since I knew I was going to see many things I didn't know during our stay here.

We were all unloading when a young man appeared in front of us. He was about Kiko's age with strong broad shoulders and wavy blonde hair.

"How's it goin' Jago?" he asked with a big smile on his face.

Rei shrieked with happiness when she saw him and ran to go give him a hug.

"Jotham! It's great to see you again! You've gotten so big!" she said to him. He laughed and picked her up to hug her.

Kiko had a big smile on her face as he greeted her.

"Kiko, it's nice to see you again!" he gave her a handsome smile.

Who was this guy? I didn't like him already.

"You sure did grow while we were gone." She told him.

"You guys look like you barely aged at all!" he saw Tammy in the back, "Except for you! Hi Tammy!"

"Hello Jotham" she replied.

"You've gotten the biggest I see!"

She smiled at him, one of her rare gestures. I was *really* not liking this guy and I knew I was being unreasonable.

"And who's this?" he asked gesturing to me.

"I'm Sarth" I introduced myself.

Cashel came out of the ship with bags on his arms, "He's our newest crewmember."

"It's nice to meet you" he said giving me a genuine smile too.

I gave him a fake smile.

"I'll take you all to my place," he said seriously, "it isn't safe here."

We left the Jago at the space port and followed him to a small strange-looking ship and all piled in. He took us deeper into the city and we stopped in front of a smaller coral building and got out.

"Well, this is my place" he said taking us inside the building. There were many doors in the hallway and he opened one. "It isn't much but you can make yourselves at home for now."

We all shoved inside his small room. It reminded me of our place on Crux. I wondered if our place was doing okay there and then I remembered that it was blown to pieces the day the race started.

"You can all rest here. I'll be back in a few hours. I recommend you stay inside until I get back" he warned.

"Alright we will" Cashel agreed.

Jotham left us and we sat there waiting for him to get back. Tammy set up her newly modified PSL which was now much smaller and portable.

"Can you get a reading?" Cashel asked her.

"Yes, I am. The signal isn't too far from here actually."

She was now the one in charge of it instead of Kiko, and it was definitely best that way if we wanted to keep it in one piece.

"Shouldn't we start looking for it?" I asked eagerly.

"No," said Cashel, "we'll wait for Jotham like we said we would."

Attempted escape from Jotham: shot down.

"Who is this guy?" I murmured to Tammy.

"We met him when we first came to this planet." She whispered back, still adjusting the PSL. "He's a good friend, we can trust him."

It was more than a few hours when Jotham finally returned. He had a grim look on his face as he opened the door to us.

"Can I talk to you in private Cashel?" he asked as soon as he approached us.

"Of course" Cashel answered getting up to follow him to another room.

Rei, Kiko and I turned to Tammy. She sighed and then took out four earpieces and we each put one in our ears.

"I'm sorry Cashel but you can't stay here" we heard Jotham say.

"That's perfectly fine but may I ask what's wrong?" Cashel asked.

"The planet has been having problems ever since the Millennium Galaxy Race began months ago. There's an unknown group hunting down anyone involved with the race, this island especially is known to have many racers gone missing. It wouldn't be safe if you and your crew stayed here and I'm sure they already know that you've landed here. I owe it you to help you out but there's not much I can do-"

Cashel held up his hand, "Say no more, we were planning on leaving here as soon as possible anyway. It was great to see you again though, thank you for meeting us at the port."

"Of course! If you need anything let me know, I'll see what I can do for you since I actually work at the port now. I'll hide your entrance as long as I can."

"Thank you, we appreciate that."

The door opened and we all pretended to be doing something.

"Let's go." Cashel ordered. We all got up without a word and grabbed our stuff to leave. "Thanks for the heads up Jotham!"

"I'll try and keep people off your trail, and don't tell anyone you're racers!"

We said goodbye and finally left his place.

Kiko threw a bag over her shoulder, "So where are we going now?"

"We'll follow the PSL" Cashel said, "You said it wasn't too far right Tammy?"

She took out her PSL, "It'll take about an hour to reach it if we take a shuttle."

"Well what are we waiting for?" asked Rei as she flagged one down.

We got in, and a strange driver with plastic-looking pink skin spoke to us, "Destination?"

Tammy answered, "82.669"

The creature gave us a look. I would've too, what kind of a location is 82.669?

I was surprised when he answered, "What business do you have there?"

"We're nako shopping" said Cashel.

The driver gave us an embarrassed look and Rei snickered. "I seeâ ¦" he said, turning back around.

We drove for a while in silence when the driver spoke up again, "Nako's must be getting really popular because I just took some travelers there recently."

Cashel looked concerned, "Did you?"

"Yep, just the yesterday I took a few slerves there."

"Must be the Nakos" he lied.

This seemed way too easy, were we just going driving there to get the stone? It couldn't be this easy. The first stone took way more effort to retrieveâ ¦ and we had to sacrifice our friends to get it. I squeezed the elemental stone that was stashed on my pant leg pocket. Kiko notice my movement but didn't say anything.

After about an hour of traveling, the shuttle stopped in front of some old decaying coral buildings. Tammy paid the driver and we all unpacked onto the bare street. The shuttle drove away once we were all out.

I think we were all a little confused. There was no sign of a stone anywhere. Tammy was even a little flustered.

Cashel pursed his lips, "Can there be a mistake?" he asked her, hunched over looking at the PSL hologram over her shoulder. She stopped to give him a look and he backed off. I chuckled at their little interaction.

"The stone is below usâ ¦andâ ¦moving" she said.

"How can a stone be moving?" asked Kiko.

Tammy fiddled with the panels quickly and then suddenly stopped. "The signal disappeared."

Rei leaned against the light-blue coral building and sighed, "Soâ ¦we have a runaway stone?"

Tammy put her PSL away, "I'll need some time to figure this one out in a safe area." A loud gong rang throughout the streets. "The island is preparing to sink."

The ground rumbled and I could see in the distance as a large clear sphere began rising up and around the island.

I looked all around noticing it was everywhere, "That thing covers the entire island?"

"Yes-"

Rei sprang off the wall and Kiko took out her knife.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"Everyone's eyes around usâ ¦suddenly converged on usâ ¦" she turned to Tammy and I saw as Tammy was being pulled underneath the solid ground. At the last second she grabbed ahold of my foot and took me down with her.

It took me a second to adjust to the weird feeling of being dragged through what looked like solid ground. I didn't know what to do, I've never been dragged through solid ground before and it felt like we were going faster and faster. It was strange because I couldn't feel the dirt touching my skin, it just felt like I was being dragged through air and I could still breath but I couldn't really do anything else. I had to wait until we came to a stop and that took longer than I thought.

Out of nowhere the scenery changes to water and I could see Tammy holding onto my leg. She was being held by someone riding a small speed shuttle. The driver gave a confused look after realizing something was wrong when we hit the water but before he could react to it, a large explosion separated him from Tammy and I. She had put up a shield to protect herself but the force of such a close explosion knocked her against it and she became motionless in the water.

As soon as we were separated from the driver I could feel the water touching me. I held my breath and searched for Tammy in the water. I found and grabbed her but it was pointless because I didn't know how to swim. I moved awkwardly in the water trying to move toward the light but I didn't feel like I was moving at all. In fact we were moving down because of the suction of the sinking island next to us. I was running out of

breath and starting to panic. Then out of nowhere I saw a figure move quickly towards me, they took ahold of my hand and lead me up to the surface.

Air never tasted so good. I lifted Tammy's head out of the water and she slowly woke up. I saw our savior pull us to a nearby small ship that was floating on top of the water. I had never seen a floating ship before.It was rather small like like a shuttle but I looked as if it was made for the water.

The figure in the full body suit helped us board the ship.

"Thanks for saving us" I thanked, taking deep breaths of the crisp air.

I think the figure was staring at me because they were motionless while facing me for a moment.

Then they took off their mask and asked curiously, "Trash?"

Chapter 27: Reunited

27. Reunited

It was a girl my age and she looked very familiar.

I peered at her, "Lone? Is that you?" I asked as memories started flooding back.

"Yeah it's me!" She perked up with a smile, "Wow! What are you doing here?!"

Was this even possible? It had to be because there she was, squatting right in front of me, examining me closely.

"Iâ ¦ uhâ ¦ travel nowâ ¦" I couldn't even think straight. My mind was still blown. "Is that really you?" I asked again.

"Yeah it's me!" she took off her water suit revealing an older version of the Lone I remembered as a kid. "I can't believe it's you either! You've gotten so big and handsome!"

Bubbles appeared next to the ship and the small speed shuttle that the kidnapper used floated up to the top. It was only half the shuttle since the other half was blown apart.

"Let's carry this conversation somewhere else." said Lone as she moved to the deck. "There's another smaller island not too far from here, we should be safer there."

The sides of the ship rose up as we began moving on top of the water at a fast speed.

"Who is this girl?" Tammy whispered to me.

"Someone I used to know on Sola, isn't that amazing?" I turned to answer her and I noticed something trickling on her forehead. "What's on your forehead?"

She touched her forehead and a silvery substance stuck to her fingers. "It's blood" she said simply.

"Blood?! Are you alright? Hereâ ¦" I ripped off a piece of my shirt and handed it to her. She pressed the piece of cloth to her forehead to stop the bleeding. "I never knew your blood was silverâ ¦ it's kinda prettyâ ¦"

"Don't be creepy." She said with a deadpan face while staring at Lone.

I guess that *was* creepy now that I think of it. Lone glanced back at us, apparently listening to our conversation.

"Still the nice guy I see!" she yelled through the humming of the ship. I smiled at that comment remembering the times I helped her out when we were kids.

Tammy moved closer to me and whispered again, "I don't trust her Sarth."

Huh? Why doesn't she trust her? She doesn't even know herâ ¦

"But you don't even know her, so how can you say that you don't trust her?" I defended Lone.

She looked away and didn't answer. We didn't speak the rest of the way to the island until Lone spoke to us again.

"So seriously, what're you doin' here on Tizarr?" she locked her water ship on the docks of the small island.

I helped Tammy off the ship and thought of an answer, "We're bounty hunters, just looking for a bounty here."

That was somewhat true.

"Ahâ¦" she finished locking the ship and came up to us, "You're looking for a bountyâ¦ or something like it? So you must be racers too huh?"

Wow she caught on quick.

"So you're a racer?" I asked.

"No, I'm not actually. I've heard about the race but I have no means of getting the stones, so it's sorta pointless for me to go after them." We followed her inland. "I've been stuck on this planet for a few years now. It's kind of a long story actually." She chuckled, "Are you guys here alone?"

I forgot about Cashel, Rei and Kiko.

"No, actually Tammy and I were separated from the others in our crew but I'm sure they're fine. In fact, we should probably go and find them."

"Alright, I'll help you look for them. I don't have anything else to do. All I ever do is wander around so I know the islands pretty well. Plus you'll need a water ship to travel to anywhere on this planet."

I was happy she was willing to help us.

"Thank you so much! I can't wait for you to meet the rest of the crew!"

She gave me a warm smile, "Of course! We'll just stop at one of my places to get dry, eat something and then we can get started first thing in the morning."

The island was very different from the one we were just on. It was much smaller and there weren't any tall coral buildings. There were also more Attars on the island that resembled the shuttle driver on the large island than any other species present.

Lone lead us to a sandy area with many small coral buildings scattered around. It reminded me of the poor areas on Sola where I used to wander. No wonder she liked it here.

"Sorry," she said as we approached a very small coral building with a single door, "this place is pretty much just a shack."

"It reminds me of Sola" I said without thinking. "Uh not in a bad way though! It just brought back memoriesâ¦"

She laughed, "I knew you would think that! That's actually why I like this area."

We laughed together and Tammy ignored us, looking around Lone's place.

"What were you doing in the middle of the sea?" she finally asked.

Lone stopped laughing and showed her the barrel she hulled with her. Tammy hid behind me when she approached her, "I was fishing" she said earnestly, showing us a barrel of strange looking fish. "I'll whip us up something to eat right now. I don't have any extra clothes here but you can dry off by the fire outside."

I lead Tammy outside to a coral stub that had a flame burning in it. It was getting darker and I could see the glow of many other coral stubs burning around us.

Lone came out with fish on a stick and held it over the fire, "Cool huh?" she gestured to the flame. "The flame will die out right before the island sinks. Since this is more of a poor place to live, this island doesn't have any special casings for air breathers. Instead, the flame warns us to put on our underwater suitsâ ¦buuutâ ¦since you two don't have underwater suits we'll have to go back to my ship." She took off the fish from the flame and handed me the stick.

I took a bite and offered some to Tammy but she just shook her head. I guess she wasn't hungry, it wasn't like she ate much anyway. The fish tasted better than I thought it would. It really hit the spot for me, being warm, tender, and juicy.

We finished eating and watched the sun set on the water. It was absolutely beautiful seeing the reflection of the sun shimmering atop the moving sea and watching it change colors as it slowly disappeared from sight.

"So how did you appear just outside of the island's casing under the water?" she asked me as I lay on the sand, surveying the stars.

Tammy fell asleep next to me, hugging her pack and I turned away to talk to Lone so I wouldn't wake her, "I don't have a clue." I said thinking about it. "One minute Tammy and I were standing on solid ground and the next thing I know we're being dragged underground somehow."

Lone thought about it for a moment, her long dirty-blonde hair glimmering in the fire light. She'd grown up so much since I last saw her but she was still the same independent person I knew her to be.

"I've heard of some species being able to move freely through any solid. I've never seen one before though because they come from a planet on the other side of the galaxy from here."

We were quiet for a moment.

"Loneâ ¦" I started to say, trying to get some bottled up feelings off my chest.

She knew what I was thinking, "Don't dwell on the past." She said as she turned to smile to me. "I heard your name is Sarth now is it?"

My chest felt lighter even though I didn't say anything. I guess just knowing how she felt made me feel better.

"Oh, yeah, one of the other crewmembers gave me that name." I said. "You'll meet her soon, I'm sure they're looking for us."

She laid down next to me, "I look forward to it."

I woke up the next day to the smell of more cooking fish. Tammy was already up and cooking over the fire.

"Morning" I said to her.

"You're finally up" she responded.

"Still in a bad mood I seeâ¦" I rubbed the sand off me when I stood up. She surprised me by handing me a stick of fish she had already bitten off. "Thanks" I said sarcastically but with a smile. "Where's Lone?" She pointed in the direction of her water ship. "Fishing?"

She nodded, "Kiko and Rei should be here soon."

"They found us?"

"I sent them a message a while ago letting them know we were okay and our current location."

"I'm glad they're okay." That took a lot of relief off my shoulders. "What about Cashel?"

She took a fish off my stick since I was holding it out in her direction and hers weren't ready yet. "He went to make sure Jotham was safe considering we were targeted so soon, he's afraid they targeted him as well."

I forgot about Jotham. I didn't like him but I didn't want him killed because of us.

I finally took a bite of the only fish that was left, "That's good."

Lone came back with more than just fish. Rei and Kiko, carrying our bags, walked up with her as well.

"Are these your crewmembers?" she asked aloud. She knew the answer though, just from my smile.

"Yeah!" said Rei as she ran up and hugged Tammy and I. "We got Tammy's message yesterday. We didn't have much trouble other than that. It seems like they were after Tammy the entire time because they disappeared once they took you both. They must've found out she's carrying a stone locator."

"So what do we do?" I asked. They looked at Lone who was still standing there.

"Oh, sorry!" she said before starting to walk away.

"Wait!" I stopped her, "This is Lone by the way." I introduced her to Rei and Kiko. "She saved our lives in the water and I've known her since I was a kind on Sola. She wants to help us..."

They looked kind of skeptical about me knowing someone from Sola all the way out here but then they smiled.

"It's nice to meet you" said Kiko making the decision to trust me, "I'm Kiko and this is Reiâ¦"

Rei smiled and waved hello.

Lone smiled and waved back, "It's nice to finally meet you! Tra-uh-Sarth told me about you guys and that you're looking for the stone. I can take you anywhere you want with my water ship!"

Kiko gave me a look, "I guess we can use you're help if you're willingâ¦" she said to her.

A big smile appeared on Lone's face, "Yeah! Sure! Anything! I've been getting bored around here anyway!"

We all moved inside Lone's little coral hut where Kiko revealed the plan. "Alright, we'll stick together and stay hidden while Tammy figures out how to find the stone again." She turned to Tammy, "Is there anything you need?"

She thought for a second, "I have a hypothesis I would like to test. It would require us to travel to different locations so I can take readings."

"Okay, is that all you need?"

"For now, yes."

Rei was stuffing her face with fish, "Where're goin' to first?" she asked between bites.

"Another island about a three day travel from here."

She stood up with fish still in her mouth and grabbed her bags. "Let's go then!"

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to leave now." Kiko answered standing up and grabbing her bags. "Oh here's your bag Sarth." She threw me my bag that I had left on the main island when we were abducted.

"Thanks."

I ended up carrying Tammy's bag as well to Lone's small water ship. It had an upper and lower deck and the five of us barely fit inside. We took up almost all the available space and somehow I found myself surrounded by girls again. I wish Cashel came with us.

Since I was the only guy I volunteered to sleep on the upper deck, it was colder but the view of the stars was amazing. Traveling in such a small space wasn't too bad if you were on the upper deck because even though it was small, the view and vastness around still made you feel free.

We made it to the island Tammy wanted to go to without any problems and she took her readings over the course of two days. It was another small island with no casing so on the second day when the island shook and prepared to sink I ran to the water ship.

Rei and Lone were laughing together as they saw me urging them to hurry up and get on the ship.

"You mean to tell me you came to a water planet and you don't even know how to swim?" Lone asked me still laughing.

"Yeah so?" I tried to put it off casually.

They all piled in the water ship with me and we took off for the next location before the island's suction could sweep us away.

We didn't get very far when Lone stopped the ship and lowered the clear casing. I looked around wandering what was going on. Kiko threw my bag at me which had my water suit inside. I didn't plan on taking it for our trip here but I guess Tammy snuck it in my bag somehow since she's the only other one that could open it.

"Put it on" she demanded.

Then she joined Lone who was standing arms crossed against the steering deck with a big smile on her face.

"Are you serious?" I asked nervously.

"Dead serious" she said.

I've been dreading this moment. I had no desire to learn how to swim but I guess it only made sense to learn here. I put on the suit over my clothes and the mask over my face. The others, except for Tammy, changed into their water suits as well, but they didn't bother with the mask. Soon we were all standing on the edge of the water ship.

Rei was the first to jump in. Then Kiko dove in after her. I stood peering over the edge into the dark blue water. I was having second thoughts after realizing how deep it really was. I could hear the others through my mask.

"What's wrong? Jump in!" yelled Rei, her head bobbing on top of the water.

"You haven't even told me the first step to-AHHH!"

Lone pushed me in and I slapped face first into the water. All I heard was laughter from everyone as I made awkward arm and leg movements to try and stay afloat. I thought I was going to sink to the bottom of the sea for all to laugh and point at. I would be labled the crazy human who didn't know how to swim on a water planet.

"You're trying too hard!" Lone shouted as she finally stopped laughing enough to speak.

I was definitely running out of breath. "Whatâ ¦do youâ ¦mean?" I panted.

"First off, you're not gonna drown b'cause you're wearing a mask!" explained Rei.

Kiko waded over to me. "Relax yourself completely" she said seriously to me.

"How? I'll just sink faster-" I asked still thrashing about.

"Just do exactly what I said, relax yourself completely. Don't worry I won't let you sink." It was a scary thought to just let myself relax but I knew I had nothing to worry about with Kiko there. I stopped moving and she lifted my legs up so I was on my back on top of the water. "Thereâ ¦see you can float now."

Now I was too petrified to move again.

"Well you have the first step down" said Lone as she jumped in and came up next to me. I saw her out of the corner of my eye.

"Great, if I'm ever in water again I'll just play dead." I said sarcastically.

Kiko drifted away, "Well it's better than sinking."

We stayed a little longer as the others relaxed with me, floating in the water. Then we all got out so we could keep moving to the next location. We spent weeks going everywhere and every day we would stop so they could teach me how to swim. I took it really slowly but eventually I could bob and move around on top of the water like the others, with my mask on of course.

"Wow, you've come a long way!" Lone praised one day.

I was actually starting to enjoy being in the water. It gave me a feeling of being free in such a large space and reminded me of the time we were floating in the Jago that one time before we crash landed.

"Thanks!" I said happily.

"I'll teach you how to fish when you get better."

I laughed but I was actually really interested. "Yeah alright."

She taught Rei how to catch the fish there. I figured it was to help fuel her large appetite since Lone had to practically fish all day just to feed her.

The only one who never got in the water was Tammy, even after we tried to coax her to come out with us every once in a while.

"Hey Tammy why don't you ever go in the water? You don't know how to swim either?" I asked her while she was working on the PSL.

"I don't enjoy swimming like the others do." She answered.

"What *do* you like to do then?"

She must have never have thought about that before, because I actually made her freeze in motion to think about it.

"I likeâ¦"

Rei appeared from the upper deck, "Hey Tammy you should come take a look at thisâ¦"

Our attention was drawn to Rei's excitement and we went to the upper deck to see what the fuss was about. Rei, Kiko and Lone were all standing on the upper deck looking out at something in the distance. Tammy and I joined them and I saw what they were staring at but it was hard to believe.

"Is thatâ¦the stone?" I asked.

Chapter 28: Exposure

28. Exposure

"Yes, it is" said Tammy.

It looked as if millions of twinkling little stars were rising from the sea about a hundred feet away from us, high into the sky until you couldn't see it anymore.

"How are we supposed to collect that?" Rei asked staring into the twinkiling sky.

"We can't right now. It's not a stone until it's complete" said Tammy.

"Well what do we do then?"

"We follow it."

"Where's it going?"

"I'll simplify it for you," she said as she sat down on the deck, "I discovered that the stone follows a cycle. The stone changes depending on the planet's environment. It goes from being a solid on the ground, to sinking into the sea at the same time another island sinks. From there it travels the underwater currents to another location where it evaporates into the air and flies to another location where it rains down and becomes a solid on the ground again. The only way to get it is to catch it as it rides the underwater currents because that's when it solidifies into the stone completely. It follows a seemingly random cycle but its next location can be calculated based on the size of the previous island it inhabited because the stone's size changes with the size of the island it was just on."

My brain hurt trying to follow what she said and she apparently simplified it too. Just how complex are her thoughts?

"Essentially," she continued, "the stone morphs depending on the environment."

She let the information sink in.

"Soâ ¦ we just follow it right?" asked Kiko again.

"Yes, although following it now would be somewhat difficult. We have to rely on our driver here to follow the wind. The stone should rain down on another island when this island sinks." She pointed to an island on a hologram she was examining.

"Alright, so we're just following the wind?" Lone jumped back on the steering deck, "I can definitely do that."

We were back on the sea again, drifting with the wind, but this time we didn't stop to go swimming.

I was lying on the upper deck the following night when Lone came up to talk.

"Hey, you still up?" she whispered.

I looked over at her, "Yeah, what's up?"

"Can sit down with you?"

"Um, sure if you wantâ ¦" I got up and moved over so she could sit next to me. "Is something wrong?"

"No, I just can't sleep. It's getting more intense as we get closer to finding the stone." Intense? She had no idea what we went through for the first stone. "You haven't changed at all Sarthâ ¦aside from your name" she smiled.

I chuckled.

"You haven't changed either." I said.

"You think so?"

"Yeah"

We listened to the waves sloshing against the sides of the water ship.

"What're you gonna do if you win the race?" She wondered.

"I haven't really thought about that. I think we're going to destroy it somehow."

"Destroy it? Why would you do that? Isn't it supposed to be the greatest power in the galaxy?"

"I don't think any of us wants to rule the galaxyâ ¦I know I don't."

She raised an eyebrow, "You sure are a strange bunch. Do you think you guys can even get the stone from here? I meanâ ¦do you even know what it looks like?"

I scratched my head, "I'm not sure what this one looks like but I've seen another one beforeâ ¦"

"You've actually seen another stone?"

"Yeah, you wanna see it?"

"You actually *have* another stone?" she sounded surprised but interested.

I snickered and took out the elemental stone from the pocket on my leg. It glowed ruby red like usual in my hands.

"Here, check it out." I handed the stone to her and it continued glowing steadily. Her face lit up with excitement.

"It's a lot smaller than I thought it would be."

I chuckled, "You have no idea."

She handed the stone back to me, "You should keep this safe, you don't know what people will do to take it from you."

I put it back in my pocket. "I think it's pretty safe, no one knows we have it but you."

"That's good." She smiled, "well, I'll let you get some rest." She got up and headed down the lower deck. "G'night." She said.

"'nite." I said back.

The next day we arrived at the island the stone was supposed to rain on. It was a small island, the smallest we've seen so far. In fact we were the only ones on the island and we could see to the other end of it.

Rei stretched after hopping off the water ship onto sandy ground again, "Now what?" she asked.

"We wait until it rains, and then when I give the signal we can go down to the bottom of the island to retrieve the stone."

She groaned, "More waiting?"

"Be thankful nothing's happened so far."

"Whateverâ ¦" she sprawled on the sandy ground next to the water ship, "I'm gonna take a nap here thenâ ¦"

Tammy gave her a sour look but she was already face-down on the sand.

Kiko came out of the ship, "How are Cashel and Jotham?"

"They're doing fine. I spoke to Cashel earlier this morning. It seems quiet over thereâ ¦"

"Quiet?" Kiko thought.

"That's good right?" I asked.

"Sure but it wasn't what I was expectingâ ¦" she said, "*too* quiet can be bad sometimes as well."

I didn't give it much thought. I was glad nothing was going on.

It rained the next day after that.

I was expecting it to be some sort of special rain, like watching the stone evaporate and glimmer into the air but it turned out to be boring regular-looking rain.

Rei was bummed about the rain as well. "Are you sure this is the right island?" she questioned Lone as we watched water droplets pummel the island sand.

"Hey I just *'followed the wind'* like you told me!" she jokingly protested.

Tammy answered, "This is the right island, now we just have to wait for it to solidify at the bottom."

It was hard to believe her after another week had past. We were still waiting around and getting antsier by the day. It was only so hard to wait around because there wasn't much to do on a small island. I spent a lot of time in the water though which was nice. Lone even took me fishing once. She used a spear and showed me how to lure in schools of fish. I wasn't very good at it of course but Lone and Rei always brought back a ton of fish. After a month of only eating fish and weird water plant-life, I was getting sick of it.

"You shouldn't be picky with what you have" said Lone as she took away my fish that I decided not to eat.

"Exactly. Just eat it." Came Rei's voice from a food-filled mouth.

"It'll be your last night having fish for a while anyway," said Tammy as she walked up to us having dinner. "We'll head underneath the island tomorrow."

Rei jumped with excitement, "Really?"

"Really." She handed me one of her fish on a stick. "Eat it."

I grumbled but took it from her hand and ate it as ordered.

The next morning Lone shook me awake.

"Hey we're getting ready to leave." She said.

I got up and helped pack Tammy's things. Then we all piled back into the water ship.

On the upper deck I asked, "How are we gonna go underneath the island?"

Lone pulled out our water suits, "we'll swim there." She said tossing me mine.

I was a little nervous at the thought. "All the way down?"

"Yep, all the way."

At least I had some underwater experience from fishing but still, we didn't go that far down, and definitely not bottom-of-the-island far down.

I put on my water suit and mask and jumped in the luke-warm water. Rei, Kiko, and Lone joined me soon after.

"Alright Tammy whenever you're ready." Said Kiko.

I wasn't too sure about what was happening until Rei told me to hold on to the water ship. I grabbed it as soon as the ship casing closed completely and started moving downwards into the water.

"I didn't know this could go under water." I said in awe.

Lone responded through her mask, "It can but you can't leave it once you're underwater or else you'll flood the ship." she continued to explain, "These suits and masks are made to withstand the underwater pressure and allow us to breath in the whole other world down here."

It took me a moment to realize what she was talking about. We went deeper and deeper into the sea following the island's rocky bottom. You wouldn't be able to tell from the surface but underneath the small island was a mountain of rock and coral. The further down we went the more coral and plant-life we saw until we were in a city of underwater dwellers. There was Attar everywhere. They were swimming or using underwater vehicles to travel places. There really was another world underneath the surface.

Lone turned to me, "It's amazing isn't it?"

I was too stunned to respond so I just nodded.

Tammy guided us through coral and traffic to a more remote area of the island bottom. There was a strong current stream where many Attar were traveling fast through not far from where we were. From there she stopped in front of a piece of the mountain bottom and the four of us let go of the ship to investigate the area she lit up with the water ship's lights.

Lone was the first one to the stone, "So that's it huh?" she asked through her mask. There was a beautiful sapphire blue stone forming at the tip of the rock mountain bottom. Surprisingly it was even smaller than the elemental stone.

"According to Tammy it is." Kiko confirmed.

Tammy spoke to us through the ship, "It's not complete yet. It should be done within a minute though."

Lone came closer to me, "A minute huh?" then she swiftly locked my arm from behind and held a knife to my throat. "Stay back or you'll watch him bleed to death right in front of you."

I was too stunned to move. What's going on?

Kiko slowly started to move forward but Lone saw this. "You think I'm joking?" she said seriously.

I didn't understand. "Lone why are you doing this?" I asked.

She scoffed, "Are you seriously asking me that?" she pretended to whisper in my ear though she knew everyone could hear, "You've had this coming for you."

Beside us, the stone finished forming and broke off from the rock. It started floating away but she snatched it before it could get far.

"Now, it appears you have two options." She stuck the stone in a pocket inside her water suit. "You can chase after me and attempt to get the stone, *or* you can book it back to the island your ship landed on and save your friends. Oh and by the way, they're being held captive in two different locations, your captain and that half-Attar friend of yours." She kicked me to Kiko and sped off to the strong current. "Your choice" she yelled before disappearing into the current.

Kiko turned to the water ship and quickly asked, "Tammy what's she talking about?"

"I can no longer contact Cashel or Jotham. It appears she was telling the truth and they could be in trouble."

"Dammit. Let's go back and help the others, we can always track down that human later."

I put my hand to my leg pocket that I kept the elemental stone in. It was gone. I couldn't believe it. How could she betray us like that? How could she do that to *me*, the one person she's known the longest? I couldn't leave it like that, I had to know.

I took off to the strong current after her.

"Sarth! What are you doing?!" Kiko yelled after me but I ignored her.

There was only one thing I wanted to do right now and that was finding Lone and asking her myself why she was doing this. There had to be a reason and I knew Kiko and the others could handle the other situation themselves.

As soon as I hit the current I unexpectedly spun out of control. The force took me by surprise but I quickly regained composure and learned how to steer enough to get through the Attar traffic, trying to catch up to her.

I saw her up ahead and she wasn't expecting me. I caught up to her and tackled her in the water. I wasn't really thinking about how I was going to stop her, I just knew I had to stop her. I struggled to hold on to her and she struggled to break away. This caused us to spin out of control in the current and bump into other Attar or their vehicles. She finally kicked me away and kicked off an Attar from its water vehicle to drive away. I grabbed it and held on with everything I had as she swerved through traffic trying to fling me off. She drove through a covered hole on one of the island's rock bottom, straight through a small sign that translated to 'closed' and jumped off the water vehicle once we were inside. I let go as well and I heard the vehicle crash somewhere inside.

It was dark on the other end as I tried to survey my surroundings. The door closed from the end we came through, leaving the room completely dark now.

"Why did you betray us?!" I yelled out into the dark, hoping she was still listening through our masks.

"What does it matter to you?" she replied. "When have you ever cared about me?"

I felt the water being drained from inside the room until I was standing on solid ground again. I thought about what she said and I saw a door slide open on the other end, her silhouette walking through to the lit up room.

I followed her inside but she was expecting me. Luckily my instincts were much faster after training and I ducked from an attack she made with a long stave.

She spoke as she continued to attack, "You think things would be the same between us after what you did to me in the past?!"

I couldn't answer that. I remember what I did to her and I've been afraid ever since about how she would react to me if I ever saw her again.

"I thoughtâ¦we were over thatâ¦" I dodged and weaved away from her around the room.

She stopped and glared at me. I've never seen her as serious as she was now, full of hatred and resentment.

"I've *never* been over it." An evil smile appeared at the corner of her mouth, "I've been watching you, ever since you landed on this planet. I wasâ¦estaticwhen I found out it was you, the one person I've been dying to meet again out of the entire galaxy."

It was starting to make sense now, "You knewâ¦I was here?"

"I was the one who lured you and your crewmembers into a trap to capture your Mechanite. When you arrived with her in the water, however, I decided to change the plan to see just how much you've really changed since we last met." She pointed her stave at me and proclaimed with pleasure, "Trash, you haven't changed at all! You're still the worthless piece of dead weight you've always been since I've known you!"

Was this the same Lone I knew in the past? The one who I grew up and survived with? Were these her true feelings?

I didn't notice I was slowly backing up as she crept towards me with the same evil smile on her face. I tripped over something big and squishy on the ground. It was the body of a dead Attar with blaster shots all over its body. I looked up and noticed many more scattered all over the ground.

She must've been here a while ago, sometime during the week we were waiting on the island above because their blood was dry and caked on the floor. In fact, I saw that she had a small pack on her back and a few other items she didn't have on earlier she must've stashed hereâ ¦ waiting for her moment.

She took out a small blaster, "I guess I get to kill you myself nowâ ¦"

There was no way I was going let her kill me. I ran and jumped behind a table as she blasted away at everything in my direction.

"Is this the way you really want to kill me?!" I yelled out at her from behind the table that was shielding me. "The one person you've known the longest?!" My anger was rising, "Face me like you always have!"

She stopped blasting and chuckled. Then I heard her throw her blaster aside, "same old Trash."

She accepted my challenge so I got up to faced her. After learning her true feelings about me I felt more at ease for some strange reason, but I didn't like the way she betrayed us just to get to me. I guess Tammy was right after all.

Lone shortened her stave and stuck it behind her. I focused and got into my defensive stance.

She lunged at me first and I easily blocked and counter attacked but she was ready for that as well. We exchanged blows back and forth. She was good and I wasn't surprised because she was always the one who won when we were kids. She's gotten better since the last time we fought but so have I. It didn't take too long before I forced her to take out her stave again. She tried to stab me multiple times but I was always able to dodge or evade. I could see the anger beginto rise in her.

"Join us Lone," I tried to convince her to come back to her senses, "come with us, you already fit right in with everyone." She ignored and kept thrusting at me. "I know you enjoyed staying with us, I could see it on your faceâ ¦ I know youâ ¦" I was only making her angrier.

"You don't know anything about me!" she spat. "You don't know what I've been through all these years while you were safe and sound on Sola and with your new friends!"

Suddenly her moves were faster and she was able to hit me on my side, but I reacted by grabbing hold of the stave and forcing her onto the ground. She tried to get up but I was the stronger one now.

She scowled at me and whispered with a pang in her heart, "You abandoned me."

I hesitated at that word and she tried to force me off again but I had her pinned down with the stave at her neck.

"Do it," she insisted, "kill me."

I could see the longing pain in her eyes, something I haven't seen in a long time.

I knew I wasn't going to. The thought never crossed my mind. There was no way I could.

"Please," I tried to convey my honest, pleading feelings to her, "come with us Loneâ ¦"

Her tension eased as I saw my words ease the pain in her eyes.

She let go of the stave and sighed, "It's too late for me now."

I wanted her with us, I had to show it. I got up and helped her back to her feet, "It's not too late. We can get through this together but only if you're willing."

She looked down and nodded with acceptance. My heart was relievedagain.

"Let's get out of hereâ ¦" I said, trying to direct her attention from changing her mind. "You still have the stones right?"

"Yeahâ ¦" she said motioning to her pack.

I dropped her stave and we walked back to the transition room where the water had drained earlier.

"I'm sorryâ ¦" I heard her say.

I was about to say 'Don't worry about it' when I felt a breeze waft at the side of my neck.

I turned around to see Kiko, standing there, holding Lone's wrist from slicing through my neck with a knife. Kiko turned the knife against her and shoved her up against the wall.

"*He* may not be able to kill you, but *I* certainly will."

Lone smiled, "You've definitely found better friends I see." She said to me. Then she activated a mini hologram from her wrist and spoke to it, still fighting Kiko's grasp, "We're going down the second pathâ ¦ destroy the island casing."

Chapter 29: Tranquility

29. Tranquility

"What're you talking about?! What island casing?!" Kiko demanded from Lone but she just smiled.

A larger, hologram panel lit up in both rooms. It was a message that spoke to not only us, but to everyone on the planet.

"Greeting planet Tizarr," came a raspy, metallic voice from a black hooded figure. Large, dark tinted goggles and a cloth mouth guard prevented us from seeing their face.

"As you all know, the great Millennium Galaxy Race is taking place as we speak. The race that grants an unequivocal, mystical power to the winner. Now, the race, as it always has been, requires the collection of four unknown stones."

The speaker paused to chuckle or to hack something up and then continued, "Well congratulations Tizarr, we now know the holders of *two* of the remaining stones."

One-by-one, captured images of each Jago crewmembers flashed on hologram panels from when we first arrived. My stomach sank, we really were being watched the entire time and now everyone knew we had two of the stones.

"We will leave it up to you, citizens of Tizarr, to choose to take the stones for yourselves or watch the galaxy's ultimate power leave this planet right before your eyes."

The hooded figure's image vanished, leaving only the Jago's crew images affixed on the panels. We waited for a moment to see if anything else would appear but nothing did.

"What else do you have planned?!" Kiko threatened Lone by squeezing her neck tighter.

"Don't Kiko." I knew we had bigger problems now, "Just leave her here."

She snarled at her and slowly her grip around Lone's neck loosened but she didn't let go of her. Instead, she took her to the lit up room and bent a broken metal bar to cuff her hands to the ground. Then she ripped the pack off of her back and put the stones in her pocket, tossing the now useless pack on the floor next to her.

"You're gonna just leave me here?! At least finish me off!" Lone screamed at us as we walked away. "Cowards! Trash!"

We continued to ignore her until she said something that grabbed my attention, "It was me Trash! I killed your smart little brain friend!"

I stopped dead in my tracks having just learned something I wish I didn't.

She saw me stop and continued to taunt me, "That's right! He's gone because of me! I sold him out! And you're not gonna do anything about it?!"

Kiko noticed my anguish, "Sarth?"

"It's nothing, let's go." I muttered, never turning back.

We left Lone in the room and swam back the way we came. We stole a two, side-by-side seated water vehicle and rushed back to the main island where the Jago and everyone else was now at. Luckily, it wasn't too far away from the island we were currently on.

"You think that message would actually invoke anyone?" I asked Kiko through the mask.

Kiko swerved through traffic at an insane speed. I was sure we were going to crash a few times but somehow we always *barely* made it.

She turned the wheel just in time to avoid crashing into a large water vehicle, "I hope not but I doubt it." She said casually.

We drove on, undisturbed for a while until the vehicle started flashing red lights.

"That can't be good." I said.

"We're being monitoredâ¦ and followed."

I looked back to see a crowd of thug-looking Attars begin to gather behind us in their water vehicles. Blasts shot passed us in our direction. Up ahead I saw Kiko driving us towards the base of the large island's rock bottom. It was significantly bigger than the one we were just on.

"Take my blaster from my hip and shoot back at them." Kiko ordered me.

"That would probably helpâ¦" I said, feeling for her blaster on her hip.

I found it and began return firing.

"We're almost thereâ¦" she said, "You have Cashel and Jotham?"

I was about to ask what she was talking about but I realized she was talking to Rei through her earpiece. I forgot I still had mine in and I turned it on to listen to their conversation.

Rei was out of breath when she spoke, "I went and got Jotham just before that disturbing message appeared but now we're getting resistance from everyone we encounter and I can't get ahold of Tammy anymore! I have a feeling those same racers are trying to capture her again."

Kiko answered, "Most likely. Just get back to the ship, we'll regroup there."

"Alright we'll meet you there."

Their conversation ended. I was worried about Tammy's situation. It was my fault we had to split up the rescue team so she had to rescue Cashel on her own.

"We'll get Tammy back, don't worry about it." Kiko shot a smile at me.

"Yeah, I know."

Her confidence raised mine. They weren't going to hurt her anyway, they needed her to find the rest of the stones.

"Hold on!" she told me as we headed into narrow shafts that were throughout the island's rock bottom.

The tunnels were dark and the only light came from our small water vehicle's headlight. I didn't really have to fire behind us anymore because we lost quite a few pursuers just from the narrow tunnels.

"Do you know where we're going?" I asked, feeling completely lost.

"Yeah, I've been down here once before. This route should bring us almost directly beneath the port where the Jago's at."

We spun upwards and took a tunnel that went completely vertical; it took us to a larger, horizontal tunnel that had many different sized tunnels, including even smaller tunnels.

"Sarth we're gonna take a smaller tunnel, give your hand and get out of your seat." She said holding out her hand for me.

The tunnel she was headed for was quickly approaching.

"Can't I just sit behind-"

"Gimme your hand Sarth!"

There was no time to question her, the tunnel appeared faster than I thought and I quickly took her hand and jumped out of my seat. It broke off from the vehicle as we hit the tunnel and I was left dangling from Kiko's hand on the side of the vehicle. I was going to try and grab her seat when she quickly and suddenly flung me up upwards.

It all happened so quickly, I didn't really know what was happening. Apparently Kiko pierced the top of the tunnel with Lone's stave, stopping our forward motion and using that momentum she tossed me up upwards through a small hole in the top of the tunnel, then using my momentum to carry her with me as she let go of the stave.

We both fell in an empty large room filled with air. Thankfully Kiko was able to avoid landing on me but we came face-to-face close with each other as she held herself up to keep from landing on me. It sparked memories of the time we almost kissed on the ship since that was the last time we were that close to each other.

We gazed at each other for a moment before she pushed herself up and took off her mask.

"You alright?" she asked, helping me on my feet.

I took off my mask as well, "Yeah but a little warning would help next time" I said making sure I was all in one piece.

"Sorry," She walked away towards the exit, "there wasn't time."

I knew she was going say that. I think she rather enjoyed tossing me around.

We landed in what looked like an electrical maintenance room with many different toggles, switches, buttons, and lights everywhere.

We walked out of the room through more passage ways and into rooms that had a similar design. We must've been in the engineering part of the island. It smelled moist and steamy and felt humid and gross. There was no one around and we made our way upwards, taking an elevator first and then some ladder-ways until we reached the top hatch which was locked. It wasn't a problem for Kiko who simply punched through it and the hatch flew open.

She casually stuck her head out to look around.

"Geez! Do you have to cause so much commotion??" came Rei's pointlessly hushed voice from above.

From below, I heard Attar and people yelling that they found us up above. Rei and Jotham quickly joined us underneath and Kiko held the broken hatch closed.

"What's going on? Why aren't we going to the ship?" I asked as Rei and Jotham jumped down from the ladder.

"The Jago's gone," said Rei, "Tammy must've moved it before she went to save Cashel."

"So what do we do now?"

The sounds of blasters hitting the hatch rang throughout the room.

"There's only one place I can think of that she'd put it."

"Our hideout?" Jotham finished.

Rei nodded, "It's big enough for the Jago to fitâ¦"

Kiko finished rigging the hatch shut again. "Let's go!"

Once again I followed everyone to their "hideout" but this time we encountered groups of Attar and different species who were searching the passageways for us.

We easily ran through them, knocking them back from every direction.

"It's just over here!" said Jotham leading the way, "And after all these years it still hasn't been touched!"

We crawled up a small ladder, through another small hatch and closed it behind us. I looked up and smiled. It was the Jago, safe and sound inside the small room we were in. It looked like the ship was barely able to fit.

"The Jago!" exclaimed Rei.

We ran to the ship and Kiko opened the cargo bay door.

"Tammy!" I yelled out hoping her hologram would pop up like usual. No response. "Where could she be?!"

"Over here!" Jotham yelled at us from a small room next to the Jago. Kiko, Rei and I ran over to see what it was. "I thought she might be hereâ¦" he gestured to Tammy who was soaking wet, typing on multiple electrical panels on the wall. She didn't even seem to notice us.

"How's Cashel doing?" Kiko asked as she walked up next to her.

Tammy continued to work the panels as she spoke, "We have a problem."

I took a better look at her and noticed she was wearing an extra bracelet from what she usually wears. It was bigger than the others and had a green glow. She was also doing more hand movements than she usually does, and her hair wasn't glowing nearly as brightly as it usually does.

She continued, "The shady racers destroyed the gears that allow the island's casing to close when the island sinks."

"Well can't you fix it?" Kiko asked.

"I can't physically fix from here."

We thought for a moment.

"How's Cashel? Can he fix it?" I asked.

"He's fine. He took care of his captures a while ago. Right now I'm directing him to the area where the gears were disabled."

"So what's the problem? Cashel can fix it. He can fix anything." Rei said.

Jotham took over again after analyzing the panels, "If the island sinks soon, even if Cashel is able to repair the gearâ ¦"

"He'll die." Tammy finished.

"What?!" said Rei and I.

Jotham explained, "The gears are made to work underwater, that means the entire level gets flushed with water. He won't have enough time to escape."

"Well what are the chances of the island even sinking right now anyway?"

Tammy didn't answer right away, "The island will sink in less than 10 minutes. I was shown the data that proved it would."

A hologram of Cashel lit up on one of the panels. It showed him working frantically on a large gear that looked like it was recently on fire.

Rei was the first to speak, "Cashel get out of there!"

Then Kiko, "I'm coming to help you-"

"No!" he commanded. "I can fix this. I'm staying, and the rest of you are leaving this island."

Tammy tried to convince him, "I can issue an evacuation-"

"There's not enough time and you know it." He looked at us through the hologram. "I've taught you all everything I could teach youâ ¦" we all watched in silence, except for the sound of banging coming from the bottom hatch. Our captian gave us a serious, heartfelt look and spoke, "My last order as Captain of the Jago, is for all of you to get off the planet and win the race." No one moved. We couldn't quite comprehend what he was saying. There had to be a way to save him. "Tammyâ ¦ get them out of here." He stared at her with conviction about his decision.

Tammy was frozen staring back at Cashel's hologram, then finally nodded to him and turned around. She grabbed Kiko by the arm and steered her back to the ship. Cashel nodded to me and I relectantly followed her lead by grabbing Rei. She protested and Jotham helped me drag her away from the hologram.

Kiko was already at one of the ship's blaster rooms. I told Jotham to handle Rei while I joined Kiko. It took a moment for Tammy to start up the ship and as we were leaving, the hatch blew open. We could see out the bottom half of the ship through the blaster room screens, that the ceiling of the room we were in was now open and we emerged through it at the edge of the island, flying away from the blasts shoot from our pursuers below.

A few ships followed us but it was nothing compared to when we left Crux. We traveled quickly away from the island and we could see from the distance, as the island casing began to close, proving Cashel's success and then sink into the sea.

When were content that no one else was following us, Kiko and I made our way back to the flight deck where everyone else was sitting around quietly.

We flew around the planet for a few hours before stopping over a part of the open sea to drop off Jotham.

"Farewell," Jotham bid to us. "I'm truly sorry about Cashelâ ¦ he was a great man."

We all said goodbye to him and watched as he disappeared into the water, then we took off back into space, without our Captain.

The gloom of leaving Cashel hung with everyone in the Jago. It was hard leaving him but this was Cashel... our captian... he had to have made it somehow right? I guess just the thought wasn't enough to make Tammy turn back around and search for him. We were too much of a target there now.

It was quiet. I'd never seen everyone so depressed before. Even Tammy wouldn't talk for the first few days. She sat alone on the flight deck most of the time. I came up to ask her about the bracelet that Kiko broke off on the first day we left Tizarr.

"What is that?" I asked as Kiko took her knife and smashed into the side of the bracelet with ease.

"It's a stymer," she answered with a robotic expression. "It inhibits Mechanites from communicating with electrical devices." She rubbed her wrist where it used to be.

"Those shady racers had something like that?"

"They had help from other Mechanites which I encountered on my way to save Cashelâ ¦"

She turned around to resume control of the flight deck. It was still too fresh in our minds to mention Cashel so casually.

I tried to change the subject, "So, where are we going now?"

Kiko took out the two stones and slammed them on the table I where I was sitting at, "To finish the race."

Chapter 30: Decisions

Part 6: Subliminal Stone

30. Decisions

"That's what Cashel wanted us to do," said Rei as she walked in to join us.

We listened to the Jago hum slightly, as we thought to ourselves.

"Right, let's finish it." I agreed.

We all looked to Tammy who was still facing the dark sun-shield in her chair, for any acknowledgement. She could tell we were waiting for her.

She swerved around and declared our next destination, "I have the planet locations for the last two stones. First we'll be heading to the planet called Glutvagant."

Rei looked surprised, "Glutvagant?!"

"So you have heard of it?" Tammy asked her.

"Yeah," Kiko answered. "It's a common place for those who flee Drogonaaz to head."

She nodded slightly, "I figured. The entire planet is quite vulgar."

I didn't know what they were talking about so I asked, "What kind of planet is it?"

Tammy answered, "It's an over-populated, metropolitan planet, and known to house the galaxy's biggest black-market for anything contraband."

That reminded me of some parts that can be found in the large city of Sola. I thought about the city and its hopefully now-collapsed slave trade. It was entirely possible, however, that someone else had now taken up the job.

Kiko asked another question, "The third stone is there?"

"Yes," Tammy brought up a map of the section of the galaxy we were at. "I've been scanning for the two remaining stones while we were on Tizarr." The section panned out to show a blinking planet and zoomed in to enlarge it. It was a rather dark planet. "The closest one is on Glutvagant."

"Do you know where the last one is at?" Rei asked. Tammy paused and then zoomed to a distant planet on the edge of the galaxy, a lot further than the distance from where we were at to Glutvagant. It was two planets next to each other flashing this time. "There's two? What planets are those?"

"It'sâ ¦" she sounded bleak, "Thereon."

Thereon? The name sounded familiarâ ¦ waitâ ¦ could it beâ ¦

"Your home planet?" I remembered.

"Yes."

Everyone except Tammy looked surprised.

"Wasn't there a reason you left?"

"Yes. I have my reasons."

"Are you okay with going back? Maybe we should go there without you."

"I'll be fine. You'll need my help getting there anyway." We gave her a worried look. "It's unfortunate the stone landed there, but it needs to be retrieved. We should concentrate on the third stone first anyway."

The three of us nodded at her.

"How long will it take to get there?"

"Three days."

Only three days this time? It didn't seem like enough time to prepare but then I realized there wasn't really anything to prepare for.

It was a lot harder to concentrate on our goal with Cashel's belongings randomly arising throughout the ship.

Kiko spent all her time in the training room and Rei spent hers in the sky deck, leaving Tammy to find and gather most of his belongings since she was the only one who could differentiate between her gadgets and his.

I found her standing outside of Cashel's room, staring at his door a few days before we were going to land. I knew it pained her to have to find and collect his items scattered about.

"You've known him the longest didn't you?" I asked her while she was in front of his door, her arms full of his tools and small gadgets.

She sighed softly and looked down at the stuff she was carrying. "Yes, we've been traveling for years together. I've known him longer than I haven't known him."

She opened the door and walked inside. I've only been inside Cashel's room a few times but every time I have been inside, he was sitting there at his desk fiddling with something. Now it was strange not seeing him there in his chair. It made me feel how hollow the ship really was now. Tammy must feel this void the most.

She set the items in a bin and turned to leave.

"Are youâ ¦ alright?" I asked making sure she was okay.

"I'm fine." She said simply.

I didn't believe her. I followed her back to her room where she continued to work at her desk.

I sat there, at the side of her bed and ended up falling asleep. I was awoken later by the flickering lights throughout the ship. I saw Tammy at her desk, asleep as well. Her hair flickered irregularly along with the lights. I quietly got up from the floor and went to move her to her bed. There was an image from a memory

flasher of all of us, including Cashel, projected on her desk.

I could tell she hadn't slept in a while because she was still in a deep sleep as I pulled the covers over her. The flickering stopped and her hair started glowing peacefully again. It was down from her usual braids and resting on her chest.

I did something I've always wanted to do since I've met her and I thought asking her would be awkward, but I was like a moth to a flame and before I knew it I was running my fingers through her glowing hair. It was incredibly soft and silky smooth. The glowing intensified in the areas I just touched and I could feel a low electric current run through my fingers. It tickled.

I stopped playing with her hair when I realized how weird I probably looked and sat back down at the side of her bed only to fall back to sleep.

I woke up a few hours later, trying to remember where I was. I recognized that I was in Tammy's room but then I felt something leaning on me. I glanced over and saw Kiko asleep on my shoulder along with Rei on hers. We were all together, trying to fill the hole left by Cashel's death in our hearts. We slept like this the rest of the nights on the ship beore reaching Glutvagant. I would fall asleep at the side of Tammy's bed and I would wake up to find Kiko and Rei with us.

Landing day arrived quickly. Tammy was busy on the flight deck trying to keep our ship hidden from any onlookers since it was probably now broadcasted throughout the galaxy that we already had two of the four stones.

She landed the ship in a more desolate area of the city.

"You think the ship will be okay here?" Kiko asked her.

She answered as she opened the cargo doors, "I've managed to conceal our entrance with a counterfeit identification, but we shouldn't stay too long."

"How long is too long?" I asked.

"A month at the most."

"Oh that's not too bad!" said Rei, "I was thinking like two days or somethin' like that."

Kiko spoke again, "You think we can find the stone within a month?"

"If we don't digress from our destination, yes, I think we can find the stone within a month."

We walked out of the ship and I got my first view of the planet. It was dark, and apparently it was always dark. The planet didn't have a sun; instead, the planet's core *was* the sun. The further you went down toward the ground, the hotter it became. Because of this, everyone lived as high as they could. There were skyscrapers *everywhere*. There wasn't a piece of land that didn't have some sort of building on it; even where we landed was inside of a building far from the baking ground.

Kiko stopped us and told us the plan, "We're gonna stick together, get the stone, and get off."

We all agreed. Tammy was holding the elemental stone and I was holding the newly named morph stone since they both resonated pretty low with us. She said it took the stones off the radar almost completely so it was

best if we held them. No one argued.

The first thing on our agenda was to buy a cheap shuttle ship since there was no way of walking to the stone.

We let Tammy choose the ship. She wore a cape that hid her glowing hair and the rest of us wore a type of hoodie that hid most of our faces. We seemed to blend in with most of the population on the planet, which consisted of shady looking travelers.

Tammy bought a ship and we piled in. I wasn't too sure if it would last very long, it didn't even have a roof, but Tammy chose it so I knew it had to be what we needed.

We drove with traffic between skyscrapers for hours. Tammy couldn't land the Jago too close to the stone without bringing too much attention to ourselves so we were left having to drive forever to get there. It wasn't too bad of a drive because I got to see many strange things as we were going through the cities.

There were different cities that had different class. We drove through one part of the city that was well lit and had many nice shuttles driving everywhere and everyone was orderly but constantly in a rush. I'd say we stood out as one of the only run-down shuttles there but little attention was given to us.

Where we fit in really well were the shabby areas. I could almost swear I saw our shuttle with similar looking, hooded figures inside. It was almost like looking at a mirror image of us. These areas were the most prominent and the most dangerous. A few times Kiko had to stop some muggers from trying to take our ship by force. It was definitely ruthless in these parts and I certainly didn't want to be left alone here.

We took shifts driving so we could drive through the night. I had just ended my driving shift and was sitting in the back when I saw something that made me sit upright.

Lone was walking casually into the building next to us.

I knew it was her. There was no way I could mistake her figure.

Something inside me made want to follow her and without thinking, I jumped off the ship onto the building's platform and ran after her, leaving the others behind without a second thought.

Chapter 31: Artificial

31. Artificial

"Lone!" I called out.

It was useless, she continued to walk away from me as I chased after her.

I bumped into many people of different species trying to get to her but she always seemed to elude my reach. I continued to chase her further and further away from the shuttle until I completely lost sight of her.

I searched around quizzically for any sign or glimpse of her, but she was gone and I no longer knew where I was at.

Where was I going again? I felt like I need to be somewhere or do something but I couldn't remember.

Where am I? The surroundings began to slowly change around me into something more familiarâ ¦. I'm onâ ¦ Sola. I remember this place, the red sandy cliffs that made up the walls around an area where I spent a lot of time as a kid.

I walked around, feeling the familiar crunch of the hard, gritty sand beneath my boots as I took each step. The two suns above me were almost in alignment in the clear blue sky, creating two shadows for each rocky pillar that I passed.

It was empty, no one was around. I turned the corner and suddenly I was now over-looking the large city of Sola from afar. Darkness covered it and soon the city was aflame as large battle ships flew over me and began to ravage the land. I heard screams of pain and agony in the distance.

What's going on?! Why is this happening?!

Suddenly I was now on a planet filled with beautiful white buildings. It looked like a technologically advanced planet with several large holograms set up in certain screening areas, as well as droids, cyborgs, and elegant shuttles carrying many glowing haired humanoids around. Then the same thing happened on this planet. It turned dark and large ships began to destroy everything in their path, leaving only despair.

Once again my surroundings changed to another dark planet. It was gloomy and war-torn. All of the buildings were either destroyed or nearly destroyed and humanoid bodies of different ages and genders were scattered across the ground in pools of their own blood.

Something or someone was coming toward me from the center of it all. I stumbled back when I saw who was approaching me from the shadows, his bright blue eyes visible even from a distance. It was someone I hoped to never run into again. His figure grew larger as he stalked toward me, a smile on his scarred face.

We were both teleported to another planet. Behind him it was the village on Dezner when it burned to the ground thanks to him. The monster was still walking toward me and I continued to try and back away from him, to escape his haunting presence. My eyes veered to the ground. There were bodies below me and I recognized all of them. It was the crew of the Jago.

I stared at their lifeless bodies sprawled in front of me. My heart stopped. I couldn't think. This couldn't be happening. I lost myself at the sight of my friends dead on the ground. They couldn't be gone. It felt too real to

escape though, like a bad dream that you can't wake up from no matter how hard you want to shake yourself awake.

I stood there stunned. Someone was faintly calling my name in the back of my mind, and I felt their arms wrap around me from behind, pulling me back to reality. Everything went black.

"Sarthâ ¦" I was slapped in the face.

I opened my eyes. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust and when they did I found Tammy was crouched in front of me and examining me with her calculating eyes.

"Tammy?" my voice croaked.

I heard the sound of blasters firing in the background. I focused on her again, she looked almost completely different. She was dirty and her cape was filled with holes. I could see a streak of silver on her jaw line where she was cut by something.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"We can talk later" she insisted.

I was wrapped in a sticky clear substance and had nasty looking slugs on my face and chest. She helped me clear them off and stand up because I could barely move for some reason. Then she guided me towards a wall and lifted up her right arm. There was a machine attached to it and it hummed for a second before a rectangular square lit up on the wall. We walked right through it just like when we fell through the ground on Tizarr. She ran me out of several different rooms like this until we went through a wall that was outside the building. The ship was docked not too far away and she threw me inside and jumped in as it took off. There were a few small mechanical gadgets running after us and I was about to kick it away when Tammy said, "Don't". The gadgets jumped on the ship and changed shape to camouflage with it. We zoomed away and the blasting faded.

"What just happened?!" I asked, suddenly full of adrenaline. "Why do you look like that?!"

She drove us further away before answering, "You've been missing for almost four weeks now."

"What?! No! I just saw you a few minutes ago, you were driving-"

"You suddenly jumped out of the shuttle and ran off." She insisted, "I've been looking for you ever since."

I felt my face. It felt like I hadn't shaved in weeks, so she had to be right.

"Well where's everyone else?" I asked admitting my mistake.

"They're still missing. We jumped out to get you and they suddenly ran off as well."

I couldn't believe she's been alone here for almost a monthâ ¦ on this unforgiving planet of all places.

"We're being toyed with," she continued, "those black racers are back and I'm afraid they're not the only ones who have teamed up."

The big mechanical gizmo on her arm retracted into a cuff on her upper arm. I couldn't believe how much Tammy had transformed over the course of four weeks on this planet. She not only held up her own, but she also saved my butt from the horrors I was ensnared in.

I recalled my nightmare. The horrorsâ ¦

"You don't thinkâ ¦Ozias is here do you?" I asked. She didn't answer, that could only mean one thing. "How are we gonna find Kiko and Rei?"

"The same way I found you."

I realized I didn't even remember getting captured, "How did we even get captured?" I asked.

"There's a type of illegal plant that induces hallucinations. If performed correctly, it can put a person into a coma inside of a virtual reality that's controlled by a wielder. The species that can do this is extremely rare though, and I wasn't expecting there to be four of them cooperating on one planet, let alone the same area. There's obviously something going on here."

"Well I'm glad you escaped." I said relieved.

"That type of species doesn't affect mine very well since we're more electrical rather than biological. Our pursuers knew this however and sent others after me."

I felt guilty, "I'm sorry you had to be by yourself this entire time."

"It wasn't your fault. You have nothing to apologize for."

I still felt bad, but at least I could help her rescue Kiko and Rei. I was hoping they were doing better than I was but if it really was Ozias orchestrating things then I feared the worse for Kiko.

"Let's find the others."

She drove us into a vacant part of a building and parked.

"We'll be safe here." She said getting out.

She helped me get out of the shuttle and set me down on what looked like a giant robot head. I stretched and tried to move my muscles around. She came back with something in her hand and pressed it on the back of my neck. It zapped me and I twitched on the ground.

"Ow! Geez! You could warn me!" I complained while getting off the ground.

"It would've hurt more if I did." She explained with a slight smile.

I moved my muscles around again and this time they felt back to normal.

"Alright, what are we waiting for?! Let's go save Kiko and Rei!"

"You should rest here first. We don't know where they are yet so you should use this time to gather your strength."

I wanted to go and find them right now but I guess there was no point in wandering around aimlessly. I sat back down and she handed me a can with mush inside and told me to eat it, so I did. It smelled really funky but at least it didn't taste like anything. The texture was disgusting though.

She went to work, searching through a map of the city and showed it to me, "I've narrowed it down to only a few locations left. They have to be in one of these areas."

I counted about five different locations. "When will we go?"

"Tomorrow if you're ready. We'll search them all and find them."

I nodded with agreement. Then she showed me where I could clean up and cut my hair. It was strange seeing me look a month older when it felt like just yesterday I was nice and clean. I had just finished cleaning up when I finally remembered that I was supposed to be holding the morph stone. I quickly checked my pocket but it was empty. My gut wrenched. I was supposed to be protecting the stone and I ended up losing it only a few hours after arriving on Glutvagant.

I burst out of the cleaning room, "Tammy I lost my stone!"

She wasn't surprised. "I know. Don't worry about it. There was nothing we could do and I'm just glad you're still in one piece. We'll get it back, don't worry." She sounded confident but I was still disappointed with myself.

I sulked around for hours until I noticed all the gadgets that were lying around.

"What are these?"

She was working on one of them when she answered, "Stuff I've collected over the past few weeksâ ¦ mainly weapons."

"Weapons huh?" I looked at them closely, "They don't look like weapons I've ever seen."

"That's because they're all contraband."

I was about to pick up a cool looking weapon when Tammy said, "Here," stopping me, "this one's yours."

She handed me a simple-looking silver ring.

"Uh, thanksâ ¦" I looked at it, "How do you use it?"

"It'll work when you need it to."

That didn't explain much. This was supposed to help keep me safe somehow? It was more of a fashion statement.

"Alrightâ ¦" I said, only mildly complaining, and wishing it was one of the cool looking ones I was just examining.

She went back to working again and I watched her for a while until I fell asleep. I woke up and Tammy was still working, but this time it was on the shuttle. She looked like a mechanic in her jumpsuit, with her goggles on and hair up.

"You're a mechanic too?" I joked.

She looked up at me with her goggles, she was almost unrecognizable aside from her monotonic expression. "I prefer design, but I know how to use one of these if that's what you meanâ ¦" she waved a strange-looking blowtorch at me.

I smiled. I don't there's anything she couldn't do or quickly learn how to do.

I got up and stretched, "Are we leaving soon?"

She took off her goggles and put down her hair to braid. "Yeah, I just finished."

She left to go clean up and change, then I helped her load some gadgets into the shuttle. I gave her a moment to double check the room to make sure we had everything we would need and soon we were off to the first location.

"Do we have a plan?" I asked, readying myself for a rescue mission.

"I'll be the distraction and you find and rescue Kiko and Rei."

"*You're* going to be the distraction?" I sounded skeptical, "Are you sure about that?"

"I'm the only one who knows how to use this stuff." She said simply.

I didn't like it but it was the truth and she was able to rescue me on her own so I had to take her word for it.

"Do you think they're in two separate locations like I was?"

"No, I don't think so. I have a feeling they're being held together, because the species work stronger together at closer approximations and I'm sure they have more than one to subdue Kiko."

I thought about it more. "This sounds like a trapâ ¦"

"I'm sure it is but there's nothing we can do but hope for the best."

We got to the first location but we only had to drive by for Tammy to know that they weren't there. We drove by the second location with the same result but the third location she stopped short. Of course it had to be one of the most intimidating looking buildings out of all of them.

"They're on the second floor from the top," she said looking through what looked like a piece of glass. "Take this," she handed me a bracelet that looked similar to hers. "It'll allow you to walk through walls like before." I put it on and it hummed slightly. "Just focus on what shape and object you want to walk through."

"Okay."

That seemed easy enough. The plan was to go unnoticed for as long as possible, so I had to sneak inside the building.

She took me up to as far as she thought was safe, which wasn't very high, and waited for me to walk through the wall. I held up my arm like she did before and tried to visualize the wall and what shape I wanted to walk through.

I can't describe what kind of shape I produced because it wasn't an actual shape at all.

"What's that supposed to be?" she teased.

"Uhâ¦I was just trying it outâ¦" I said for pity points.

I thought I focused on a square but then the idea of a circle crossed my mind and it turned into something completely different. It was embarrassing to try and squeeze and contort my body through the shameful shape I made. I'm sure Tammy now had doubts about my ability to rescue the others, because I certainly did now.

I was lucky to walk into an empty room filled with old, dusty furniture. I didn't think about how I would head upwards. Tammy answered my question by sending one of her droids with me. I didn't even notice it until it formed a sort of ladder for me to walk up. It must've known the safe areas too because it would form a ladder in specific areas of the room I was in.

Luckily I was getting better at projecting what shape I wanted and I always stuck my head in first to make sure it was safe to climb up. Then the droid would follow me by simply jumping and climbing up the ledge of the shape. We went up quite a few floors without encountering anyone until reaching one floor where there were strange four-legged creatures pacing around in a scouting manner. I pulled my head out as soon as I saw one of them turn towards me. I held my breath, hoping it didn't see me. It was quiet so I didn't think it did.

The droid walked me to a different location and I poked my head up again. This time it was all clear and I quickly got up and hid behind some boxes while the droid joined me. Once it was up it began searching around for another safe spot. It took longer than usual but eventually we made it to the right floor and I took a look around. It was darker and smelled like something sour in the air. The droid pointed in a horizontal direction indicating that this was the floor they were on.

I took the lead and crept around. There were a few cloaked humanoids walking around but I was able to sneak passed them easily. I came to an open room and found what I was looking for but it didn't look good.

Chapter 32: Revealing

32. Revealing

I didn't understand how this was a plant. It looked like they were asleep and being swallowed by the same clear sticky substance I was caught in, but worse. The plant veins were large and wrapped around the clear casing that entrapped them. The veins grew thicker as they went up and through the ceiling, disappearing into the dark upper level.

Luckily Kiko and Rei were in the same small room together, side-by-side. I went up to Kiko and started tearing the clear substance and leeching slugs off of her. The droid did the same for Rei.

I wiped everything off of her but she still remained unconscious. I wanted to wake her somehow but I didn't know how to. I was going to pat her face when the droid stopped me.

The droid spoke in a robotic tone, "She's completely unstable right now, it's best to keep her unconscious until Tammy can revive her."

I didn't even know it could speak, but I nodded and looked to Rei. The droid took off all the slugs and gave her an electric shock. Her eyes slowly opened, glowing bright red in the dark room. That couldn't be good.

"Are you alright?" I asked her quickly. She looked around in a dazed manner. "Rei, are you alright?" I tried asking again, trying to grab her attention.

She focused on me, "Sarth?"

"Yeah, it's me. You alright?"

She hugged me tightly. "I'm glad you're hereâ¦" she was on the verge of tears, "Where's Aki?!"

I wondered what happened in her mind during the whole month.

"She's right hereâ¦" I lifted Kiko up in my arms.

Rei examined her, "She's in a dangerous conditionâ¦"

A familiar low voice sent chills up my spine. "Yes she is. I wonder what would happen if you were to awaken her right now in this stateâ¦"

Rei and I looked up to see Ozias standing by the doorway. The droid immediate transformed its arm into a blaster and began shooting at him. The blasts just went straight through. It appeared that it was just a hologram of him but just his mere presence was enough to freeze Rei and I.

He continued to speak, "I've been waiting for you to get here."

"Why didn't you just kill us?" Rei asked. Her eyes were still glowing bright red.

"You don't slaughter your cattle until they're ready." He spoke with the same deep voice. A sly smile skewed the scar on his face.

"You won't win." Rei retaliated.

Rather than responding he held up two glowing stones. I heart fell when I saw the blue stone I was supposed to be protecting in his hands. The other stone was a large, black cube that I took to be the third stone. He now had two of the four stones and we now only had one.

"I've been watching you." He took a step forward and I instinctively moved back even to just his hologram, that's how threatening he was. He pounced at my fear, "Did you like the racers I sent to you on Fargon? Or did you prefer seeing your little Sola friend again on Tizarr?"

He saw as I twitched at his comment toward Lone and continued to provoke me, "That girl of yoursâ ¦" He glared at me, "failed me." The anger began to stir inside me. "Do you know what I do to those who fail me?" He pulled out something from outside the hologram and threw it on the ground before us. The hologram extended to show a severed arm that once belonged to my longtime friend. My stomach dropped as I stared at the detached limb on the ground. "And that's not the *only* piece I claimed..."

The anger was now writhing inside of me. I hated him. How could he do that to her? I wanted to kill him right here, right now.

I started to get up but Rei held me back.

"Let's get out of hereâ ¦" she whispered, trying to calm me down.

That was the best course of action. He was only a hologram after all.

She helped prop Kiko on my back to carry her away from here.

"I'll see you in the near future" he smiled as his hologram faded.

We were about to walk out the door when a large wave-blast traveled through the wall and hit one of the black hooded racers that suddenly appeared, blasting him out of the other side of the wall. Soon everyone in the building knew we were here and shouting ensued.

"The shuttle's over here!" Rei yelled at me to follow her, leading the way.

I carried Kiko on my back and the droid gave me cover-fire from behind. I opened up the wall with a large square and Rei jumped through it. She shared one eye of her vision with me to show where the shuttle was. I used her vision to gauge my jump. We made it and set Kiko down carefully next to Rei.

"Where's Tammy?!" I asked noticing she wasn't driving the shuttle.

Rei searched for her again. "She's just below us, running away from two other Mechanites."

"Watch the ship!" I said before taking off to find Tammy.

They had to be after her because she still had the elemental stone. I went through the wall and was instantly greeted by the four-legged creatures that I saw earlier. I made another shape on the ground and fell through it just before their sharp teeth could snap shut on me.

This time I was caught by a few large Eyes of Red men who were already waiting for me. I kicked one of them away but the one that had me behind my back held on tight. He wrestled me to the ground and pinned

me down. Another wave blast appeared through the wall and struck him, sending him flying to the other Eyes of Red and through the wall. This gave me enough time to fall down another level.

I tried to contact Rei after searching around for Tammy. "*Rei where is she??"*

"Ummâ ¦ go down two more levelsâ ¦ then head to the room on the right." The entire building shuddered. "*Wow, hurry up! Something big and nasty just burst from the top floorâ ¦ it looks like a plantâ ¦ whoa! It has tentacles or somethin'! Hurry up Sarth!"*

The floor shuddered even more this time, shaking me to my knees as I tried to make another shape on it. A crashing noise was growing louder from above.

I fell to the next floor and immediately down another. There were droids in this room that looked like the one that helped me, but these ones were firing at me. I rolled out of the way into another room and kept running through rooms on the right until I came across two hair-glowing humanoids that were holding Tammy in their hands, trying to whisk her away.

There was no way I was gonna let them take her. I charged the male one that was closest to me and punched him in the chest before he could react. Something happened that we both weren't expecting. He flew back, a surge of electricity fluttered all over his body and he became motionless on the ground. His hair also stopped glowing.

"That's impossibleâ ¦" the female Mechanite said with a straight face, staring at her fallen comrade.

She started to take out her blaster but I grabbed her arm to stop her. Once again she became electrified and fell to the ground.

"What the heck?" I asked looking at my hands. I saw I was wearing the ring Tammy gave me.

"That ring disrupts the electrical current that Mechanites process on, causing them to temporarily shut down, or lose consciousness as humans would. It can allow you to do other things as well once you get used to it."

She came towards me.

"Wait-"

She read my mind, "Don't worry, it won't harm those you don't see as a threat." Then she grabbed my hand and took off the bracelet she gave me earlier and put it on her arm. "See. Now let's get out of here."

The roof caved in above us and a giant plant tentacle squirmed around, looking for things to destroy. It seemed to have eyes on it somewhere because it 'saw' and came after us.

We ran, ducked, and phased through walls to get away. It was a good thing she took the bracelet from me because she was much faster with it than I was. Wave blasts came through the walls from different places and struck the tentacle whenever it came close to us. There was a hole in the building that led to the outside and I could see Rei inside the shuttle waiting for us, shooting many blasters at once in different directions.

We jumped in and the tentacle smashed through the building right behind us. I turned around to see the giant plant annihilate the building we were just in and it crumbled to the ground far below.

Now we were being shot at from all directions, but our shuttle had an energy shield that equipped once we were all inside and many automatic blasters firing back at the shuttles now pursuing us.

Our once dilapidated shuttle was now like a mini battleship tank. Tammy really souped up our originally dinky shuttle over the past month.

"Love what you did to the shuttle Tammy!" Rei shouted from the front.

Tammy joined her and took over. "Thanks. It took me a while to modify."

Rei joined me in the back, "You have anything I can shoot?"

I didn't have anything to give her but Tammy answered, "There's a button on the back of your seat."

Rei searched around for it and suddenly the back opened up to reveal a multitude of different weapons.

She gasped with excitement, "Where did you get these?!"

Tammy evaded a large blast from behind and answered, "Around."

She picked one out just in time because many large armored ships and shuttles were now flying after us.

She fired one and nothing appeared to happen, but then the ship she was aiming at was sliced into many lateral pieces and fell apart, down to the hot ground way below.

"Wow! These are great!" Rei said excitedly.

I think she was having way too much fun considering our predicament.

"Hold on" said Tammy as we jerked sideways from another a large blast. The gun flew from Rei's hand and fell outside the shuttle.

"Oopsâ ¦" she cringed, watching it fall down with a guilty smile.

"That weapon cost more than we usually make with one bounty." Tammy stated in a displeased tone, taking notice of our loss.

"Sorry Tammy!" was the only thing she said in reply. Then she shifted her attention to me, "Well, pick one Sarth, they aren't gonna shoot themselves."

I was a little hesitant but the ships were now firing larger rounds at us. I chose one that looked easy to handle.

Rei was still picking out a new weapon when I grabbed one that looked easy to hold and aim. As soon as I touched it, it transformed itself to engulf my entire arm, up to my neck.

That was cool. I held it up to fire and it whirled to life.

Rei saw what I held up and pounced on me, "No!" she screamed as she quickly aimed my weapon in the sky to stop me from shooting it at the enemy ships. "Geez! Tammy why do you have a razalator here?!"

No response.

"What's wrong with this weapon?" I asked confused.

"It's ridiculously powerful." She chuckled nervously.

"Ohâ ¦ well it's a good thing I don't know how to fire itâ ¦"

The weapon started charging.

"Firing main cannon" It said to me.

"Uhâ ¦" I said dumbfounded, still holding my arm up above the ships.

Rei's eyes widened and a large ball of light shot out of the end, into the sky directly over our pursuers. She pulled me backwards and screamed to Tammy, "Tammy get down!"

We took cover over Kiko's body as the ball of light massively exploded.

I couldn't believe that *that* much power came out of my weapon. The shockwaves alone lurched our shuttle forward and luckily we flew between buildings and not through them, thanks to Tammy's quick maneuvering.

Our shuttle spun and spun and spun until we ricocheted off some buildings and started falling. The shuttle slide against another building and stopped suddenly when it got wedged sideways between metal building-bracers.

The force threw Tammy out but she caught a piece of the shuttle just in time. I saw her hanging on and lunged at her just as that piece of the shuttle broke off. I caught her hand but it made me slide off the sideways shuttle and so Rei had to catch me as well.

Now she was left holding me as I held on to Tammy to keep us from falling to our burning deaths, all while supporting Kiko who was still limp across her back.

"You knowâ ¦" she grunted, trying to keep hold of us by my legs, "I may be a sub-species to Kikoâ ¦ but we don't have the same strength as themâ ¦"

I looked down at Tammy. She didn't seem frightened at all dangling hundreds of feet in the air above the molten hot ground. Her eyes met mine and then she moved her head sideways to look behind Rei at Kiko.

"Your sync rings" she said to me.

I forgot I was still wearing them, and I was catching her drift.

"Rei!" I called out, "Give me Tammy's vision!"

There was no response but suddenly I blinked and I was now staring at Kiko on Rei's back. I wiggled my free left hand and tried to remember how to turn them on.

"Touch the middle part of your left pinky with your thumb. Only focus on which limb you want to move." Said Tammy.

Oh yeah, that's right. I did that and I saw Kiko's left arm abruptly mimic mine as her arm raised above her head. It was definitely a weird feeling looking through someone else's eyes and trying to command someone

else's body.

"Hurry Sarth" Rei strained. I felt myself slipping.

"Remember, Kiko's a lot stronger than you are. Be careful how you handle her."

I wish she could've said, 'no pressure or anything' instead.

I could feel everything that Kiko could feel through her left arm. It was a good thing she ended up in the position she was in right now against Rei. It was almost perfect for me to grab myself from Rei. I gently directed her arm forward and felt for my leg that Rei was grasping, making sure she didn't slide over her. Kiko really was super strong. I clutched the ankle part of my boot a little too hard before easing up.

Slowly, I lifted myself up using Kiko's arm. Rei was able to let go with relief and position herself so that Kiko wouldn't slide off her back.

With Kiko's arm, I pulled myself up higher and closer to the shuttle so that Rei could help Tammy get back on the shuttle. Rei gave me my vision back and I was able to use my now-free right hand to reach for Rei while trying not to wobble Kiko's arm too much. She pulled me in and I used Kiko to let go of me and I thunked back on the shuttle.

I turned off the sync rings while we sat there panting with relief.

"I can't believe we got out of that" I confessed. Rei and Tammy both nodded. "Soâ ¦ will this thing still start?"

Tammy went back up to the front to examine the shuttle. I helped Rei re-situate Kiko and we set her down gently so she leaned against the shuttle floor since we were still sideways.

Rei put her hand to her forehead, her eyes were no longer red but filled with concern instead.

"We need to hurry, she's losing herself quickly." She said.

"Why can't we just wake her up? I thought she would've awakened since we released her from that thing."

"No, she's too far into herself now. If we tried to wake her up without properly bringing her backâ ¦ it wouldn't be the Akiko we know."

It wouldn't be the Akiko we know? Who would it be then?

The shuttle sputtered back to life and Tammy wiggled us out from being wedged. The only good thing that came from the blast was that we were no longer being followed. Nevertheless, we made haste back to the Jago for Kiko's sake.

It would take a few more hours for us to reach the ship. I told Rei what had happened while she was induced. She couldn't believe that a month had passed since we arrived and I knew how she felt. It's hard to comprehend because it felt like just the other day we had landed and now we were leaving back to space again. The only one that felt the full effects of being here the entire month was Tammy.

She told me about how I suddenly left the shuttle that day, and that they all went after me and then she thought she saw someone from her past and went to follow them.

"What did you see?" she asked me.

I didn't want to think about it anymore but I still answered, "I think I saw the futureâ ¦" I had been thinking about it since Tammy saved me. "Ozias wanted me to see what he was going to do after he won the raceâ ¦ how he was going to destroy the galaxy and our homeplanets firstâ ¦" At least that was the conclusion I came to. "What did you see?"

She bit her thumb, "I watch you dieâ ¦I watched everyone I love, die in front of me." The color faded from her face. "It felt soâ ¦realâ ¦I knew I couldn't live like thatâ ¦all aloneâ ¦"

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

"I don't want to imagine what horrors she's going through right now," she stroked Kiko's hair, "I can feel the agony she's in."

It was torture not being able to do anything for her. We sat there, worrying every second. Tammy was going as fast as she could as we raced back to the Jago in our now-crumbling shuttle.

The ship was still in the same spot where we left it a month ago, Tammy hid it well. She drove the shuttle into the cargo bay and I carried Kiko up to the medical bay on my back.

I laid her down on the examination table and Tammy got to work assessing the situation.

"She's broken through the second barrier" she muttered toward Rei.

"You can bring her back though right?" She asked anxiously.

"Yeah but-"

A familiar alarm went off in the room. It was the same one that I heard when I interrupted Kiko's meditation. The ship shuttered slightly and a cold gust swept past, leaving my hairs on end.

Tammy continued to manipulate the panels before hovering over Kiko's head.

Rei saw what she was up to, "You're going to make a direct connection?!"

"There isn't time to take precaution."

She didn't argue there and Tammy undid one of her braids and brushed the ends of her hair across Kiko's forehead slowly. She was in deep concentration before closing her eyes to concentrate even harder.

I wondered what Rei was talking about, making a direct connection. Was this bad or something?

Rei and I watched intently. A minute passedâ ¦then two long minutesâ ¦then finally the alarm subsided, but Tammy and Kiko remained motionless on the table. We didn't have to wait too long after that though, because soon Kiko's gray eyes fluttered open.

Chapter 33: Withdraw

33. Withdraw

Tammy opened her eyes as well and a moment later moved aside for Rei who was the first to express her relief.

"Aki!" she hugged her, "you had me worried you jerk!"

"Sorryâ ¦" she was still kind of out of it as she put a hand to her head. Tammy gave a little smile before heading for the door.

Kiko called out to her, "Tammyâ ¦" Tammy stopped and watched Kiko sit upright on the table. "Thank you."

She smiled again, this time to Kiko, "Gratitude denied." Then she walked out of the medical bay. We were all stunned until her voice echoed in the room, "Joke."

I seriously have to teach her how to tell a joke.

"We're seriously leaving Glutvagant?! Didn't we just get here?!" Kiko was surprisingly, completely back to normal within a few hours.

This sounded familiarâ ¦

"Yeah, apparently we've been unconscious for the month that we were on Glutvagant." Rei answered.

"What?! A month already?!" She was in disbelief, "What about the stone?"

She got her answer from our disappointed faces but I answered her last question, "Ozias has the stone, along with the morph stone."

I remembered my failure, along with other things I didn't want to recall. Kiko handled the news better than I thought she would.

"At least we're all still alive and we know where it is" she said.

"It was decided that it's best to leave the third stone for another time" said Rei.

She nodded in agreement.

We were back in space again. It felt like we were just here, which was odd. The only one who felt the full effect of being on Glutvagant the whole month was Tammy. I went up to the flight deck to see what she was up to and I found her tapping away at the panels.

"What're you gonna do now that you're back on the ship after being alone for a month?" I asked.

She finished panel tapping and got up, "Take a shower and sleep for a week."

I chuckled as I watched her leave the flight deck.

She wasn't kidding. She really did shower and sleep non-stop for nearly a week. That month must've really taken a lot out of her. It definitely felt like she was a slightly different person. But sleeping for a week straight?

"Does she normally sleep that much?" I asked Rei in the kitchen one day while I was making dinner.

"We've seen it before. One time when Cashel was gone on an errand, she over-exhausted herself after working on one of her projects and she spent a week and a half in bed afterwards. Needless to say Kiko and I were reprimanded once he got back for letting her overwork herself that much." She gazed into the air, pondering, "That was a long time ago."

I decided that I would try and wake her up to see if she was okay after an entire week but I didn't have to. The next day I found her working in her room, looking the same as usual.

I made sure no one else was around before I walked inside and asked her something I couldn't ask Kiko herself, "Did you see what she was going through?" I had been wondering this the past week. Kiko was no longer training but constantly meditating.

"Yes." I waited for more and she continued, "It was her past." She closed the door behind me. "I should tell youâ¦" she stopped her work and said seriously to me, "Kiko broke through two of the three barriers that held her true potential at bay during that ordeal. Those barriers cannot be easily fixed, especially since she doesn't know about them and the only barrier left, is one that only she can control."

I put the pieces together in my mind, "Her meditating?"

"Correct." She nodded, "The only thing left holding her power back is her own sheer will, which will become increasingly difficult to keep holding back as time goes by. Cashel decided not to tell her about the extra precautions we had been secretly implementing on her because he was afraid she would rely solely on those barriers to keep her tremendous power under control when in fact her own desire not to kill is the strongest barrier she posesses."

That made sense, "I seeâ¦"

"I'm telling you this so that you can keep an eye on her. If she loses controlâ¦ you have to bring her back to us, in case Rei or I are not there to help."

Bring her back? I could see how Rei or Tammy would be able to do such a thing, but me? I've known her the least amount of time compared to the others. What would I even be able to?

She opened her door again.

"Rei's looking for you." She finished.

Rei passed by and stopped at Tammy's door, "There you are!" I was caught by surprise. She pleaded with me in a whispering voice so that Kiko wouldn't hear, "Can you help me clean my section of weapons?"

I sighed, "Well you shouldn't wait that long before deciding to actually do your section." I followed her out of Tammy's room.

"Ugh! But cleaning them is so boring! And it takes too long!"

We walked to the weapons bay together.

"Have you considered getting rid of some of the ones you don't use?"

She quickly turned her head with shocking disappointment, *tsk!* "That's like asking Tammy to stop growing weird glowing hair!"

Uhhâ¦that comparison didn't really made sense, but whatever.

It took hours to clean all her weapons, some of which I don't think she's even used.

"Do you even know how to use these?" I asked, dusting off an archaic-looking weapon.

"Umâ¦" her eyes squinted in thought, "Yeah, you knowâ¦I've seen it fired before, that's the same thing right?" she didn't even wait for an answer, instead she went back to piecing together the large weapon she was dusting.

I shook my head and chuckled and a new thought came to mind. "Hey, have you ever thought about what you want to do after the race?"

"Hmmâ¦" another pause, "Probably go back to Dezner. I eventually want to start my own family though believe it or not!" she smiled at her mental speculation. "What about you?"

"I just want to stay with the crew." I finished dusting off the archaic weapon, "I love it here. You guys *are* my family."

She laughed, "You have a weird family!"

I laughed with her, "You're the only one that makes it weird." We both laughed for a moment and then I said seriously, "Thank you for taking me with you... you know, off Sola."

She gave me her famous Rei-grin, "Thanks for the water!"

I had just finished leaving the weapons bay when I saw Kiko in the kitchen muttering to herself in anger, "Ugh! I told her not to eat all the smiggers, that brat!"

I sat down at the table, "Should I come back later?"

She closed the ingredients hologram with frustration. "No, just looking for a snack."

I opened up the same hologram she was just looking at, "Yeah, same here."

"If you want, I can make you something. Just don't share with Rei. I'm still mad at her."

I chortled, "Deal."

She whipped something up and I remembered the question I asked Rei earlier.

She handed me a cone of whatever she made and I asked her before she was about to walk away, "What do you want to do after the race?"

I could see she hadn't thought of it before.

"I guess go back to bounty hunting." She answered, her gray eyes meeting mine.

"You don't want to start a family?"

She gave me a surprised, perplexed look and I realized how I asked that to her.

"No! Not with me- or it doesn't have to be- you know- with meâ ¦" My face grew hot as I fumbled to somehow correct the situation. She continued to stand there, bewildered. "I'm sorry, I'll just goâ ¦ just forget about what I saidâ ¦" I quickly left my seat and headed straight for the room I felt most comfortable in.

Tammy was already waiting for me. "Awkward! That was awkward! I'm such an idiot!" I said as I paced around her room thinking to myself. Her eyes followed me while in her chair, with an entertained smile on her face.

I knew she knew what had just transpired but I felt I had to explain it through my own experience, "I asked her what she wanted to do after the race was over and she said 'go back to bounty hunting' and I said 'oh! You don't want to get together and start a family? Maybe have some kids?!' Of course she would give me that look!" I explained, mocking myself. I sat down on her bed and smashed my face in my palms. "Did I completely mess things up?" I groaned.

Tammy *actually* chuckled, "No, but it *was* a funny conversation." She jokingly flashed a '10' on her hologram laughter scale.

I gave a heavy sigh. I didn't want to approach Kiko again for a while, just to get over that initial awkwardness.

"Alright I'ma hafta sleep this one offâ ¦" I lamented, getting up.

"I'll be up all night." She assured.

I waved my hand goodbye in acknowledgement and left for my room.

I was in a deep sleep when suddenly my door slid open and a silhouette of Kiko appeared at my doorway. She came in and the door closed behind her. I jumped up half-asleep.

"What?! What is it?! Are we under attack?!" I asked trying to determine what caused the intrusion.

"No no, we're fine," She assured quietly. "I just came to tell you what I wanted to do after the raceâ ¦"

It was still completely dark in my room, so I couldn't see her at all.

"Oh, thatâ ¦" I spoke to her blindly in the dark but I could tell she could see me pretty well if not perfectly because she swiftly sat at the edge of my bed.

"I want to travel more, and see the night sky from different planetsâ ¦" I listened intently. I liked her dream so far... "-Butâ ¦ I want to do that all with you."

Was this a confession?? My heart started pounding through my chest and I got butterflies in my stomach that wouldn't go away. I had a longing to reach out to her but I was too nervous to make any sort of movement. I didn't know what to do and could feel that she was watching at me closely.

"Uhh yeah, I want to do that stuff with you too." I chuckled nervously.

It was quiet again until I felt her stand up again.

"Well I'm glad I told you," She chuckled nervously too. "Sorry to bother you late at night."

"No problem. Anytime you wanna talkâ ¦ I'm right here." I answered awkwardly.

The door slid open and she gave me an awkward wave goodbye before leaving my room.

Once again I was able to make things even more awkward with her. I covered my face with my pillow and let my anger out into it. A ding rang and I removed my pillow to see a lit up '10' on my ceiling. I'm glad someone was enjoying this.

Chapter 34: Extricate

34. Extricate

We had been traveling for a few weeks on our way to Thereon where the fourth and final stone was waiting to be found. Tammy said it would take a little over another week to reach the planet that she was born on, but dreaded returning to.

I could tell returning there bothered her even though she wouldn't admit it. She didn't allow herself any free-time and instead she was always working on a project either in her room, workroom or the flight deck. I tried not to bother her too much since she always looked really busy.

With time to kill, no Tammy or Kiko to talk to, I spent days writing in my room and then one day an unfamiliar, male, monotonic voice reverberated throughout the ship.

"Attention stone seekers, I am pleased to inform you that one of the four great stones has been found. The location of the stone is on the planet of Thereon where passage to this forbidden planet has been lifted for the ambitions of any brave racer willing to disembark on our planet. We await your arrive for the glory of the galaxy's most prized possession." We heard a *click* signifying the end of the message and the voice ceased.

There was only one way of finding out what all that was about... ask Tammy. I jumped up and ran to the flight deck where everyone else joined me en route.

We didn't even have to ask, she was already explaining when we got there, "They broadcasted on an open channel, any ship within radius has heard that message."

Kiko sat down in Cashel's old pilot seat and flipped through some panels, "They're telling everyone where the stone is? Why would they do that?"

"Maybe they don't want it anymoreâ¦" said Rei hopefully.

"It's a trap." Tammy said bluntly. "They're luring in racers to destroy them."

"Aren't there like millions of racers? Can they really destroy them all?" I questioned.

Tammy explained, "Thereon is one of the few planets that can operate outside of Crux law. Our advancement in technology has even surpassed that on Crux, and so therefore Crux had basically allowed Thereon to operate independently as long as they did not interfere with other planets' affairs. It was a win-win for both Thereon and Crux because Thereon considers all other planets inferior and won't bother wasting their time with others anyway, aside from business." She looked to me, "So, to answer your question simply, yes, they can destroy them all."

So Thereon blatantly beckoning other racers was bad news for everyone, but maybe other racers didn't know that.

She continued, "I had originally planned to masquerade the Jago as a supply ship to land on Thereon, but after the current events I recommend remaining hidden and taking a less noticeable path."

"Agreed" said Kiko.

Tammy spent the next few days re-routing and re-planning our passage to Thereon. I spent mine reliving the awkward horrors Kiko and I shared. We were both now avoiding any conversational contact with each other since the night she came to visit me in my room. We said the basic, 'hello' and 'what're you up to?' but that was about it. Of course that didn't mean I didn't like to be around her, in fact we both spent a lot of time in the sky deck, just gazing quietly together.

"Did you see that?" I asked out of the blue while we were laying there.

"See what?" she mumbled, I guess I woke her up.

Suddenly hundreds of ships appeared out of nowhere and everywhere around us. They wasted no time firing their ship's weapons. We both sprang to our feet as a large ship passed by, extremely close to ours.

Tammy's voice ordered us, "Get to the ship blasters."

We didn't have to be told twice as we both straggled through the rattling ship as fast as we could. The sound of blasters clashing with our shield rang everywhere once all the ships spotted us.

Rei joined us as we each got into a blaster room.

"What's going on?!" she asked while targeting the ships firing on us.

"I'm not sure." Kiko said mimicking her movements. "Tammy, can we get an explanation?!"

Tammy joined in the conversation, "Thereon set up a disruptive hyperdrive net in this area. Every ship traveling in this direction has come to a halt because of it."

"So what does that mean?!"

"It means we were caught in their trap."

That's not good. All we could do now was to try and defend the ship as best as we could while Tammy tried to steer us out of harms way. There were many unlucky ships being blasted to smithereens with their debris beginning to float off into space. Everyone knew there was no way we would last very long being in the middle of this battlefield against larger and more equipped ships.

The Jago jolted sideways from a huge hit, and an alarm rang in that area of the ship.

Kiko spit out curse words, "Tammy we're not gonna last much longer!"

As I was targeting hostile ships I saw a small one traveling by quickly, maneuvering out of the way of debris with only a few shots being fired from their blasters. What drew me to them was that they also had a shield around their ship, which was apparently pretty rare. It looked as if they were evading attacks and avoiding attention as much as possible so I didn't see them as a threat and I didn't target them.

Our holograms and blaster rooms abruptly powered off and I couldn't hear from anyone except for Rei.

"Did your station turn off too?" She asked.

"Yeah it did" I responded.

"Let's go see what's happening on the flight deck."

I got out of my station and met Rei on the way to the flight deck. Kiko was already there conversing with Tammy. The only operating hologram panels looked like they were broken with many strange symbols scrolling across it. Tammy was obviously trying to stop whatever was happening.

"A ship-wreck virus??" Kiko asked. None of us have heard of such a thing.

Tammy said, "The last time I heard of this it was still in the alpha testing stage. I didn't think they would have it completed so quickly." She sounded worried which made me worry.

"What does it do?" I asked.

"In very simple terms, it destroys a ships computer network and interface causing the ship to lose control and collide with other ships, planets or anything solid in space."

We heard loud explosions from space and saw out of the sun-shield, all of the remaining ships were no longer firing any weapons. Instead they began to turn and take paths that would eventually lead to colliding with each other.

Soon our ship began moving on its own and Tammy frantically worked the contaminated panels.

"I don't have enough time to bypass the virus." She said seriously.

We were getting closer and closer to a large ship that was also headed directly for us. I was getting nervous. Was there really nothing we could do?

Tammy sat down in the pilot's seat and pressed her hair into a dock in the chair. We watched as she stared into space, her eyes darting across like she was reading something in front of her.

Kiko sensed something, "Tammy what are you doing?" she asked, but Tammy didn't respond.

Before long, the ship powered back up again. Rei and I sighed with relief as Kiko bolted to the captain's chair and averted the Jago from crashing into the large ship.

Tammy removed her hair from the chair and took over from Kiko as we fled the ship graveyard.

"Wow, what'd you do?" Rei asked happily.

She didn't answer and continued to steer the ship away from danger.

"What did you do Tammy?" Kiko pressed in a serious tone.

She gave in to answering, "I took in the virus" she answered plainly.

"You what?" I asked.

"I had to. It was the only way to save the ship."

Kiko asked again, "So what does that mean?"

"It means the ship will now be able to land on Thereon."

"No. What does it mean for *you*?"

She hesitated, "It meansâ ¦ I won't be finishing the race with you."

"WHAT?!" Rei and I yelled in unison.

The thought of losing her made me panic, "No! Why?! Because of the virus?! Can't you take it out somehow?! There has to be some way to!"

"The virus was made to be contracted and unpurged, so there is no way to extract it."

I shook my head in disbelief, "No, you can't do this!" I refused to allow her to die like this for us.

Kiko stood over her and gave her a stern look, "Tammy, there has to be a way to save you. Tell us now."

She sighed slightly, contemplating on if she should tell us. We were all on-edge waiting for her answer which we knew she had.

She gave in again, "There's a very slight possibility of an antivirus somewhere on Thereon."

Kiko immediately took over the captain's chair and set a direct course for Thereon.

She continued, "But the chances of me surviving until then-"

I cut her off from finishing that sentence, "We'll make it" I said with confidence.

"We will" said Rei, backing me up.

"Damn right we will." Kiko joined, increasing the ship's speed.

It would still take us a few days to reach Thereon traveling at the Jago's full speed. Within that time period Tammy's health began declining rapidly. I stayed with her the entire time, and we were only a day away from landing when she finally collapsed. She was getting up from her chair in her work room when she stumbled into my arms.

"Tammy!" I worried, as I caught her from falling to the ground.

She felt hot in my arms and her hair no longer had its usual shining glow. It pained me to watch her suffer like this.

"I'm okayâ ¦" she said regaining some strength and trying to get back up.

"No," I held her close to keep from moving, "I'll take you to your room."

I swooped her up gently in my arms and carried her back to her room. Kiko saw me carrying her along the way and asked if she was okay. I told her I was taking her to her room and she went ahead of us to get her bed ready and I set her down gingerly on her bed. She looked frail, her face was sullen and her eyes held a distant, unfocused glaze. Kiko put the back of her hand to her forehead.

"She's heating up." She muttered.

"Kiko, can I talk to Sarth for a moment?" Tammy whispered to her.

She removed her hand from her forehead and answered, "Yeah, of course." We watched her walk to the door and say to her, "We're almost there Tammy. Hold on for us."

Then the door closed behind her.

Tammy took her hand out from under the covers and reached for my left hand. She took a strand of her hair and tied it snuggly around my pinky. Then she took her index finger and wrote something on my palm. I couldn't read it at the angle she held my hand.

"This is the unlocking code. It'll appear again when you remember this."

"Why are you telling me this like you're not gonna live to use the code yourself?" I asked distraught.

"It's just a precaution" she gently squeezed my hand when she finished and gave me a weak smile. "Promise me you'll tell her your true feelings before this is all over" she whispered.

I didn't know what that had to do with anything but I agreed.

"Okay, I promise, but you have to promise me you won't give up trying to survive."

She smiled and closed her eyes, "I promise."

I held her hand all night by her bedside and the next morning her fever was worse and she didn't wake up. I felt helpless watching her die slowly, right before my eyes.

Rei came in to check up on us, her and Kiko had both been taking turns steering the ship to Thereon since it had to piloted manually now that Tammy was incapacitated.

"How is she?" Rei whispered to me, brushing Tammy's hair out of her face.

"We need to land soon." I answered.

"We're almost there" she turned to me, "You should get some rest before we land, it'll be non-stop once we're there." She was right but I didn't want to part with Tammy. "She'll be fine. I'll be here the entire time I promise."

I nodded and let go of her hand. It was harder leaving her than I thought and when I was in my room all I did was worry. Ever since I've been on this ship, Tammy's the one I've bonded the easiest with. She's always been there for me, even when I didn't know it. She's saved our lives plenty of times, and now it's time to save hers. We won't fail. I refuse to. By my last breath, I *will* save her.

Somehow Kiko knew I wasn't sleeping and I heard her voice over the intercom, "Sarth get some rest, don't make me have to come over there and knock you out myself."

I smiled at her concern. She was right, if I wanted to be of any use to help Tammy I'd need to get all my rest done before we land. I closed my eyes.

After all, she promised she wouldn't give up, so I had nothing to fear because I wouldn't either.

I had a strange dream that night. I was on a strangely familiar planet, wandering. No one else was around and I suddenly I was standing right in front of a large rock. It looked a normal rock but this one stood out somehow from the others. I took a look around; there were patches of remains of what used to be white building on my right, like it had been destroyed and abandoned a while ago. I faced the large rock again and held out my hand to touch it. That's when I woke up.

I didn't think much of it when I woke up. In fact I pretty much forgot about it and went straight to see how Tammy was doing. Rei was sitting next to her fixing a wet cloth on her forehead. I didn't have to ask to see how she was doing. She was definitely worse than when I left her last night. We stayed with her for a few more hours before Kiko called us both up to the flight deck. I reluctantly followed Rei to where Kiko summoned us.

Kiko explained the situation from the hologram table where two planets were hovering above it, "Tammy was able to camouflage our ship and find a landing spot for us on the larger of the two planets that make up Thereon." She zoomed onto the larger planet, "She also gave us the coordinates to a safe-house on the outskirts of the nearest town." She zoomed even closer to a bare spot on planet. "We will be landing within the hour, so we should prepare ourselves."

"What are we gonna do after we land?" I asked.

"We'll have to find someone we can trust, locate the antivirus and bring it back to Tammy."

The vagueness of the plan had me worried. There were a lot of variables we were leaving out which would inevitably take time that we just don't have.

"We should split up and search for the antivirus" I said.

Kiko thought for a moment and eventually nodded, "We'll need to in order to cover more ground. But we need to maintain communication somehow."

"Tammy has a few long-range earpiecesâ ¦" Rei suggested.

"Yes but they're easily intercepted and traceable, especially on this planetâ ¦" We paused to think again but came up with nothing. "We'll just have to use it when we really need to."

So far our plan wasn't the best.

"What're we going to do about Tammy? We can't just leave her all alone."

Kiko shook her head, "We'll just have to see what we can do when we get there."

I groaned and pounded the table with vexation. I couldn't stand the thought of such an unstable plan over something so important. Rei and Kiko stood staring with empathy.

Then Kiko walked over, caringly put her hand on my shoulder and said, "Sarth, we'll make it in time. We'll save her. I give you my word."

I looked at her confident face and into her fearless gray eyes. They spoke the truth from deep within her heart that somehow we wouldn't fail.

I swallowed the tears that were building up in my throat and nodded to her. She gave me a smirk to cheer me up then went back to the pilot's chair.

"Prepare to land."

Chapter 35: Veer

Part 7: Tech Stone

35. Veer

I licked and pushed the earpiece into my ear, keeping it powered off. Then I changed into a clean pair of our crew's bounty hunting uniform, which was simply a breathable contorting shirt and pocketed slacks. Kiko and Rei also wore similar but different styles of our uniform.

Once I was ready, I made my way back to Tammy's room. Her face was flush and her breathing was now labored as if she were struggling to stay alive as long as possible, which she was. I sat in the chair next to her, watching her hair endeavor to maintain a steady glow. I decided to do what I always do with her, talk.

"I realized that I've never asked you what you wanted to do after the raceâ ¦" I said to her, not expecting a response. "And you never told me what you enjoy doingâ ¦ I expect you to answer those for me when you wake up." I said jokingly.

I sighed, "What do *I* like to do?" Many things crossed my mind but they all included everyone in the crew. "All of my best memories are with you guys. My life wasn't the greatest on Sola, although I did meet a few interesting people though..." I chuckled, "I guess I never really told you about my past have I? It's not the most interesting, but I'm sure you won't mind me telling you. In fact I can picture myself going off in tangent about it while you're working in your workroom. You always pretend like you're uninterested or not listening but I knew you areâ ¦"

I missed sitting on the ground next to her, talking about anything and everything while she worked. I shook the thought from my mind.

"Sarth, we're landing now." Kiko's voice echoed.

"Alright" I answered. "How far are we from the safe house?"

We decided to take Tammy to the safe house that she told us to go to, on the larger planet. From there we could decide how to split ourselves up to search for an antivirus.

"A few miles"

It was a rougher landing than what I was used to, but at least we had made it safely on Thereon.

I nimbly picked up Tammy's motionless, hot body and took her to the cargo bay where Rei had started the shuttle. Her body was burning up so hot that I had to endure a searing pain in order not to drop her. I didn't know she could get so hot, but then again she wasn't human.

Kiko sped us to the location of the safe house. I cringed at every shutter that shook the shuttle because Tammy winced every time.

It was hard to tell how early or late it was because there were dark clouds in the sky covering any sort of sun or suns they had. There was surprisingly nothing around us as we drove aside from a few sparse, odd-looking trees here and there but other than that the area was dead.

"Are you sure there's a safe house around here?" Rei asked Kiko, noticing the same thing.

"There has to be, Tammy gave me these coordinates herself." She answered.

It took a few more minutes but eventually we came to a lone, small, decrepit building at the bottom of a rock hill. That had to be it and sure enough Kiko stopped the shuttle in front of it. There was another different looking, broken shuttle at the side of the building. I got out with Tammy in my arms as Kiko and Rei took out their weapons to scout the building ahead.

The door opened as Kiko approached it. She instantly held up her knife, ready to attack when an old man appeared in the doorway.

He peered at Tammy in my arms behind Kiko and Rei. "Is that Tamsin? We've been waiting for you to arrive since decoding her messageâ ¦" he took a closer look and when he was satisfied he gestured to us, "Hurry hurry come in and set her down on the bed over there."

Kiko looked to us and Rei and I nodded. They somehow knew Tammy and this was location of the coordinates she gave us so I was sure we could trust them.

We walked inside. It was an extremely small house with only two rooms. One room was larger than the other, housing the kitchen and two small beds. The other was a bedroom with a single bed inside which seemed untouched for years at a quick glance.

I set her down on a bed where an old lady with Mechanite-trademark silver-glowing hair showed me to put her. She immediately began to examine Tammy by brushing her long hair over hers.

"She's deteriorating quickly, although I am surprised she has lasted this long. It is no easy task, delaying the lethal virus' encroachment. It would seem only logical for any other Mechanite to accept their fate with little discomfort; however it seems she's determined to last as long as she can."

"Please, you have to help us!" I begged. "She told us there could be an antivirus somewhere on this planet! Just tell us where it's at and we'll go get it!"

She had the same monotone look Tammy had when I first met her. "It's not rational to do such a thing."

"That doesn't matter at all!" I was getting aggravated, "We have to at least try!"

The old lady cocked her head sideways slightly as she peered at me, trying to her best to read my emotions.

She finally decided and said, "We'll do everything we can for her." I let out a sigh of relief. "Tamsin had a secret workroom in the other room. We'll keep her in there for now, it's much safer."

She told me to take Tammy and follow her into the next room. I was about to cross over into it when the old lady stopped me, then she took Tammy's hand and placed it on the wall by the doorway. The door slid closed and the glowing lines on it changed colors from blue to purple before re-opening.

It was now a completely different room with another bed in the back. It reminded me of Tammy's workroom in the Jago.

"She'll be safe in here" assured the old lady.

I set her down again and fixed the covers over her. Her eyes fluttered slightly and then opened halfway darting around until they found me.

"You'll be safe here" I whispered to her.

I started to get up and she grabbed my hand.

"Don't leave Sarthâ ¦" she pleaded in a pained voice. "Iâ ¦can't lose youâ ¦"

It was the most emotion I've even seen from her. Her pleading words moved me and I felt a pang in my heart for having to leave her behind.

"That's interestingâ ¦" the old lady commented, "A residual human-emotion has surfaced in place of her Mechanite electrical impulses."

I said to Tammy in a soothing voice, "I'll be back Tammy, I promise. Get some rest here first."

I squeezed her hand and watched her try and process what I just said as she closed her eyes again.

A small, spherical device on a table next to the bed lit up. I was intrigued by its activation and went to examine it further. As soon as I touched it, it turned on and transformed itself to have little legs and illuminated eyes. It hummed slightly as it hovered in the air in front of me.

"Sarth from Sola. Greetings." It spoke in a robotic voice.

I was taken aback by its activation and so was the old lady.

"You were able to activate her prototype companion?" she asked me.

I examined the device, "Uhâ ¦I guess?"

"You can call me PC for short" it said to me as I got up to see the others. I ignored it but it followed me out of the room, hovering above my shoulder.

"Sarth, the old man said we might be able to find an antivirus antidote on the other planet." Rei relayed to me while Kiko and the old man were talking.

"What are we waiting for then?" I asked.

"Aki's getting directions to the nearest jumper."

"Jumper?"

"It'll allow us to jump onto the other planet without having to take a ship there which is much faster."

Kiko finished talking and called to us, "Alright let's go!"

They hastily made their way back to the shuttle. I was about to run after them when the old lady stopped to warned me, "She won't last the day."

I cringed at her comment, clenching my fists tight. "We'll be back before then" I pledged, "Please take care of her for me until we come back."

Rei and Kiko were waiting for me in the shuttle and we took off full speed again to our next destination.

"What's the updated plan?" I asked, ready to accomplish anything I needed to.

"The old guy said that if there was an antivirus it would be kept inside of a safe station on the Origin Planet."

"Alright, we'll get to that location and find the antivirus then."

"He also said that there are three *different* safe stations at *different* locations on the planet that it could be on, far away from each other. Splitting up and getting to each station at about the same time would lessen our chances of higher security later on then if we hit them all one by one, plus it saves us time, so splitting up is a good idea."

So far it didn't seem too difficult.

"Just tell me where I need to go"

She continued, "Each one of us will head to separate jumpers that'll take us to the different safe stations across the Origin Planet. From there we'll need to infiltrate the safe station and hack into the archival database with the hairs Tammy gave us. The antivirus should be somewhere in there. Once one of us finds it, use the earpiece to let us know and then head straight back to Tammy. The other two will make sure there aren't any trailers."

"Okay. Where are the jumpers at?"

"Dammitâ¦" she uttered, "I forgot to ask. Tammy usually directs us during a hunt."

"I can help with that" came PC's robotic voice by my shoulder.

"I've been wondering what that wasâ¦" said Rei poking and taking a closer look at it.

"I didn't know it was following me" I said.

"Greetings, Rei and Akiko. I am Tammy's prototype companion, she asked that I serve to help you in any way I can. I understand that the three of you have LD earpieces and that you prefer not to use them in case of interference, am I correct?"

"If by LD you mean long distance then yeah" I said.

"Well, I am able to create a secure line in which we can communicate and I will personally direct you to each safe station if you allow it."

"Uh, *yeah.* You're just now telling us this?" Rei sneered.

"Excellent" It ignored her attitude. "By my calculations we should part ways in two minutes and forty-three seconds."

Rei and Kiko both put their hands to their ears at the same time, listening to something.

"Yeah"

"Okay"

They both responded into their earpiece.

PC spoke to me again, "I will be staying with you if that's allowable."

"That's fine with me" I allowed.

We stopped about two minutes later and Kiko and I got out of the shuttle.

"Rei will be taking the shuttle since her destination is the furthest" said Kiko. "Make haste."

Then she took off running straight ahead.

"See you later Sarth" Rei waved from the front of the shuttle before taking off in direction to the right.

I waved at her, and then took off running in the opposite direction.

"How long is it gonna take to get there?" I asked PC between breaths.

It answered, "Approximately three hours and seventeen minutes"

I took bigger strides, following the light that PC shone on the ground that showed the direction I was to head. I ran in silence for about an hour, solely focusing on my objective, during that time there was still no one to be seen. Was there even anyone on this planet?

"Where is everyone?" I asked PC.

"This planet mainly inhabits the common people of Thereon. However, this area was purged a long time ago and has remained in this state ever since. The other planet, Origin, is mainly populated with the higher level Mechanites as it is the brain of the two planets. It controls the history, leadership, and actions the planets make-" I stopped suddenly after glancing at a large rock. "Is something the matter?" asked PC.

"I'veâ ¦been here beforeâ ¦" I said in bewilderment.

"You've been on Thereon before?"

I ignored its question. I've definitely seen this rock somewhere before. I turned my head and sure enough there were the remains of decaying buildings right where I expected them to be.

"I've seen this in dreamâ ¦"

I turned my attention back to the large rock and held out my hand like I did in my dream before I woke up. I went to touch it with my left hand and I saw Tammy's hair glow bright on my pinky. I expected my hand to touch solid rock but instead it went straight through like passing through air. PC clutched onto my shoulder with its little robotic arms as I passed my entire body through it.

"It seems you've found one of Tammy's hiding spots" it said shining a light in the darkness.

It scanned the area until it lit up a large chest at the side of the rock room. I walked over and opened it. It made a creaking sound as a layer of dust and sand slide off.

PC scanned the items inside and said, "These items belong to one of Tammy's acquaintances, but it seems he's not around any longer so I suggest you use them for the journey."

I took out what looked like a silver tube-handle for something and gripped it in my hand. Two beams of white light emitted from the ends of it at about two feet long in the same direction, forming the shape of a duel bladed sword. I felt the ring that Tammy gave me react to it and a pulse of electricity crackled between the light blades.

PC took note of the ring, "I didn't know you had the disruptor ring, it only makes sense if you use the shredder sword with it."

"Shredder sword?"

I twisted my wrist and the light sliced through the metal parts of the chest.

"Yes. The shredder's light will allow you to slice through metal and *only* metal objects."

"Only metal huh?" I looked at it closely, "Can I touch it?"

"Yes of course, I wouldn't suggest it if you're made of metal however."

I ran my hand through the light and didn't feel a thing. Once I let go of the handle, the light disappeared. What other cool things would I find here?

There was only one other thing inside the chest and it was somewhat big. It was a medium-sized box. I lifted it up and it beeped and began moving on its own to a standing position. It was like half of a suit because it appeared to be an exoskeleton in the shape of a humanoid.

"What's this?"

PC answered, "S.E.E.S. The Stimulus Enhancer Exoskeleton Suit"

The head part turned and faced me. Creepy. Then it opened up, allowing me to enter. I stepped inside of it and it contracted to form to my body. The helmet had a computer interface that identified objects in the room that I couldn't see before.

"It works by predicting and enhancing your desired movements to your greatest physical extent without wearing you down."

I tried jumping in it and it took no effort at all, I even seemed to jump higher than normal.

"These will come in handy" I said grabbing the shredder.

I thought about where I should put it and my hand automatically stashed it in a side compartment I didn't even know about. This suit was really cool.

"Let's go" I said to PC as the suit outlined the rock exit for me.

I made great pace in the S.E.E.S., being able to run at a fast full speed without tiring.

PC updated me from on my shoulder, "We should get to the jumper in just under an hour."

The suit was great. I knew where I wanted to go and it was effortless getting there, even over sheer cliffs I managed to somehow breeze up it.

I was heading down a hill when something small approached me from a distance. The suit enhanced the image for me. It was a man driving a shuttle not of this planet, in my direction. I chose to ignore him but he kept getting closer and closer to me until I was within his attacking range. I grabbed the shredder and readied myself for any hostile movements from him while running. The S.E.E.S. identified all the weapons he was carrying, and it was a ridiculous amount.

"Hey wait, I'm not here to fight." The man shouted from his shuttle, "I can see that you're in a hurry"

He looked human but I ignored him again.

"Look, I know what you're afterâ ¦" I glanced at him and he continued, "You're looking for an antivirus from the ship-wreck virus aren't you?"

I examined him closer, trying to read his motives.

"How do you know that?" I asked him.

He paced his shuttle next to me, "Because I'm looking for it too."

Chapter 36: Origin

36. Origin

"My name's Balt" he said to me.

I didn't like the thought of him following me but I didn't have time to try and lose him.

"Sarth" I answered back.

"I know" he said. What's with this guy? Claiming he knows everything. "I have a Premon and a Mechanite on my ship. We're racers as well."

I didn't know what a Premon was and PC told to me through my earpiece, "Premons: A type of species that can see the future."

Well that explained how he knew everything and why he was here. I was weary about him at first but now he didn't seem like such a bad guy.

Waitâ ¦

"If you have someone who can predict the future, how did you fall into the trap?" I asked.

"We fell for it intentionally." He explained. "It was also predicted we'd both get the antivirus."

If he could predict that then I was headed in the right direction and I felt a heavy burden lift off my shoulders.

I thought of another question, "Do you know who'll win the race?"

He laughed, "That's the one thing we can't see."

He continued to follow me to the location of the jumper. As long as he didn't hinder me I didn't care what he did.

We came to a small city with a few Mechanites wandering around. It seemed like a normal city but even for a lower class the city it was immaculate and beautiful. If I had time I would've liked to have seen the different architectural aspects of each different building.

The only weird part was that everyone had the same straight, Mechanite face and no one veered off course of their destination, except when they saw us.

I don't know if it was the suit or the fact that we were humans (or looked human) but once they saw us they immediately changed direction in an orderly fashion, avoiding us like the plague. I continued further into the city and somewhere along the way Balt disappeared.

That was fine with me. I didn't have time to deal with any of them. I ran through the city following PC's arrow to a huge entrance of a large building. Everyone had scattered. I was about to run through when a few large mechanical droids dropped down in front of me, taking out large blasters to shoot.

Without thinking I whipped out my shredder and waved it through them as I passed by, shredding through the droids easily and they crumbled to the ground in pieces. PC was already ahead, waiting for me at one of the many different doorways.

"Welcome back Balt" PC noted behind me.

"Just went to park my shuttle. I see you got through okay." He said smiling at me. He was now wearing a full battle armament suit with a large blaster in both hands. Seeing him up close, he looked to be in his mid-thirties and built like a tough, experienced soldier, "Does this lead to the jumper?" he asked.

"Indeed. We'll be taking a smaller, more discreet jumper to the safe station. Although, once we jump to Origin it seems we will encounter resistance."

He scoffed, "Yeah, I expected that."

PC led us into a small, circular, white room.

"It'll take a moment for the jumper to activate" it said.

We stood there waiting.

"How're the others doing?" I asked PC.

"They have both made it to Origin. Here is Kiko's audioâ ¦" it played Kiko's audio and I heard metal ripping and clashing. "Here is Rei's audioâ ¦" this time I heard blasters being fired consistently, "Get out of my way!" I heard her grunt as I was guessing she was kicking something out of the way.

They were both engaged in their own battles already. We were all advancing at about the same rate.

Balt did an unsatisfied look-over at me, and then he asked, "Are you prepared to kill to save your Mech?"

I never thought of it like that, I didn't like the idea of having to kill to save but I was going to risk my life in any way to save hers.

"I'm prepared to die for mine." I said confidently. "Are you?"

He snorted, then chuckled, then full on laughed at my comment.

"You *are* interesting" he said catching his breath.

"We've arrived on Origin" PC announced aloud.

What? Nothing even happened.

"Great, let's go lad" he beckoned to me as he headed to the door.

We ran out into a hallway with many turns. It didn't take long until we were greeted with more droids and this time it included smaller, quicker ones as well. It was a good thing we both had energy shields. Mine was attached to S.E.E.S. and his was probably around his waist, along with other gadgets I didn't recognize. While we were safe from minor blasters, debris and explosions still affected us. Some of the droids had shields as well but Balt's large gun didn't shoot out blasts, it resembled the gun Rei was shooting on Glutvagant and did

devastating ultrasonic damage.

"Are you trying to take down the entire building?!" I shouted through the explosions he was creating while shredding an attacking droid.

"If I were trying it would already be destroyed!" he shouted back with a grin.

I rolled my eyes. Was he not trying to save a crewmember as well? Or was he just here to have fun?

"PC! Lead me!" I ordered PC to continue guiding me.

Its arrow appeared again and I started to follow it. Balt and I ran down an empty hall and turned the corner to find three Mechanites in a type of exoskeleton that resembled mine. Balt tried to blast them away but somehow one of them deflected the blow and sent it right back to us. We jumped out of the way just in time but the blast still sent me flying and I bounced off a nearby wall. The massive impact stunned me and it took me a moment to remember where I was.

"Danger" came PC's voice.

I caught the movement through my helmet and narrowly dodged a fatal blow to the head. Two of the three Super Mechs had their sights set on me, and they were fast. If I hadn't been wearing the S.E.E.S. I would've been dead already. They're movements were so quick that I could only focus on dodging all of their attacks. I went to grab for my shredder but it was missing. I quickly glanced around looking for it and S.E.E.S. highlighted it lying on the ground, blended in with rubble. My quick glance wasn't quick enough though because as soon as I started thinking about how I could get to it one of the Super Mechs picked me up and slammed me down on the ground.

"Where is Tamsin X2858 located?" the smooth male voice of the Super Mech asked me.

They wanted Tammy? I wasn't about to answer him.

He reached for his long glowing hair when another Super Mech showed up behind him and kicked him off of me. This one was different from the other two, because they had no hair at all.

"You know Tamsin X2858?" it asked me in a similar male voice.

Did this guy just change sides or what? I was too surprised to answer.

We started receiving fire and he tossed me my shredder.

"Follow me" he said.

I decided to trust him since he gave me my weapon back. We turned the corner and he opened a room. We ran inside and he sealed the door shut.

"How is Tamsin?" he asked me.

"How do you know her?" I asked instead.

"Every Mechanite knows of her." He said, "Do you not know what she is?"

I shook my head thinking if I knew but she's never talked or mentioned about her past.

"She's the last Livindevâ ¦" he said, trying to invoke some memory if I did know.

I shook my head again. Livindev? I've never heard of that word before.

"I'm sorry, I would explain what it is to you in detail, but I don't have much time before I'm rebooted. You're not too far from the archival database. I'll take you as far as I can."

He opened the door again and we ran outside. Balt was passing by when he saw me.

"Get down!" he shouted to me when he saw the Super Mech leading me.

"No! Wait!" I shouted back, getting in front of the Mech that helped me. "He's trying to help!"

Balt gave me a look but slowly lowered his weapon. PC was with him as well.

"Malachy, I didn't think I'd ever see you again" PC said to the Super Mech.

"As did I" Malachy responded. "The archival database is just through the large doors down this hallway." He said to Balt and I.

I lead the way with Balt in the rear watching Malachy's every move. He opened the large emerald doors and we all ran inside. In the middle of the room was a round, glowing pool of blue liquid with floating hologram panels surrounding it.

That must be the archival database. I ran up to it while Balt and Malachy bolted the door.

"Okay whadoido?!" I asked PC urgently.

"You'll need to transfer the data Tammy gave you on your pinky. She wrote an algorithm to automatically locate an antivirus in the database and transfer it to the data strand hair on your pinky."

Blasts were now bursting on the emerald doors.

"How do I transfer?!"

"Place your left hand on a panel, Tammy's DSH will work automatically."

I placed my hand on a panel and her hair gleamed on my pinky. Automatically, the hologram panels lit up and random symbols and text flashed instantaneously in a search pattern.

"How long is this gonna take?"

PC scanned the glowing hair and said, "Five minutes"

"Five minutes! We don't have five minutes! Is there any way to go faster?!"

"This is the neatest and quickest algorithm ever written according to my database. The archival database has never been hacked before, let alone done in five minutes."

So Tammy was really good at what she does and I should be thankful it was only going to take five minutes.

PC spoke again, "The others have already hacked into their safe station's archival database, so we know for sure that if there's an antivirus, it'll be here."

It was going to appear here, I knew it. There had to be an antivirus somewhere on this planet.

"Hey kid hurry it up! We're about to be overrun and I'm down to two weapons!" Balt yelled across the room.

I took out my shredder and threw it to him.

"I'll need five minutes!" I yelled back.

He squeezed the shredder's handle in his hand and it lit up. His face gleamed with joy with the new weapon in his hand.

The invaders breached the emerald doors and began swarming inside. Balt and Malachy fended them off as best they could, and they were doing a pretty good job working together.

There was only about two minutes left when the two other Super Mechs reappeared. One of them had half of its suit blown away revealing the Mechanite's white skin and silvery blood. With both of them engaged, it allowed for the smaller droids to sneak past and seek me out. I was unarmed this time *and* I had to keep my hand on the panel.

Luckily their blasts meant nothing to me but once they came close I was left fending myself with one hand. It wasn't too hard with the smaller droids, the bigger droids however made me nervous when they came over. I dodged and weaved but I was at a disadvantage. I was ready to take a hit when Malachy came to my aid. He smashed and kicked away any droids near me.

"Thanks Malachy" I said to him.

"Don't thank me yet." He almost fell over but he caught himself. "I don'tâ ¦have longâ ¦" He stammered.

"Why? What's wrong?" I asked but continued defending me. The Super Mech he was battling with earlier reappeared and they re-engaged in battle. Something was definitely wrong with Malachy because he was now easily overpowered.

Beep. It was the panel I had my hand on. It read, "Location Found" and the blue pool of liquid behind it changed colors before turning clear.

"Put your hand in the data pool" PC whizzed behind me.

I ran up to the pool and dipped my left hand inside it. A purple liquid oozed from Tammy's hair and spread throughout the pool. I saw images flash on the surface of what must have been Tammy's memories but it was flashing too fast for me to comprehend. Soon the purple color turned red and it began retracting back to the hair leaving the pool clear again. I took my hand out, it was dry and the hair remained red.

That was it. I had the antivirus. I can save Tammy. I searched for Balt.

"Balt! I have it!" I affirmed.

He was busy dodging the attacking Mechanite. The shredder sliced his exoskeleton in half but left the Mechanite unharmed. Somehow he was able to throw me something. It was tiny. I caught it and inspected it. It was a tiny vial with a now glowing hair inside. A tiny hologram lit up on the vial and slowly the hair's color began to change to red. It must've somehow copied the antivirus.

I searched for Malachy. He was now standing with the Super Mech he was fighting.

"Malachy let's go!" I said to him.

"Goâ¦" he uttered, he was unable to move yet no one was touching him.

The Super Mech turned his attention to me. "He is not yours to control" he spoke to me.

"Go" Malachy uttered again.

I didn't know what was happening. I wanted to help him but I didn't have time. I started to head for the doors and I saw he was now running after me. I thought he had a change of heart and decided to come with me but instead his arm flew at me and I skidded sideways from his punch. He advanced again towards me and I stumbled back. I saw something fly above his head to me and I caught it. It was my shredder.

I lit it up but Malachy still advanced with a threatening aura.

"Don't make me use this" I pleaded with him. The blade sparked with flowing electricity from my ring.

He stopped abruptly mid-step and strained to speak, "Destroyâ¦ meâ¦"

Destroy him? No! I couldn't do that and I didn't have to. The other Super Mech stabbed him through with a long, glowing, purple crystal. It pierced through his chest and the lights on his suit flickered before turning off completely.

"No!" I shouted, watching his lifeless body fall to the floor in front of me.

"We've no need for faulty vassals" the Super Mech said simply, now advancing toward me.

He took out the crystal from Malachy's exoskeleton and readied to kill me with it. I heard Balt's excited battle cry as he jumped onto the Super Mech's back. I took this opportunity and swept through the Super Mech from the ground up with the full force of my electrified shredder. His suit split in three pieces and he thudded to ground next to Malachy.

"Let's go, there's nothing we can do for him" Balt said to me as I contemplated on seeing if Malachy was still alive.

Balt headed for the doors and I took one last look at Malachy before following after him.

"I've notified both Kiko and Rei that you have the antivirus. They are now on their way to support you." PC stated.

"Thanks. Do you know if Malachy will be alright?" I asked. My head was filled with wishful thinking.

"No. He's gone." My stomach churned. "Those crystals are made with similar technology to your disruptor ring with one major differenceâ¦"

I jumped over and slashed through more droids.

"What's the difference?" I asked, bringing my attention back to his comment.

PC resumed lighting the way back to the jumper and continued, "The crystals don't disrupt. They destroy the electrical impulses."

So any hope I had for him shattered. He was gone. Why did he even help us? He obviously knew Tammy, was that why?

"Kid, what's your deal? It's this wayâ¦" said Balt. I saw his head pop out from behind a corner.

The arrow from PC did indeed point in his direction. I caught up with him and we hid behind a pillar after noticing more droids and even more Super Mechs arrive.

"Alright," he held out his gloved hand to me, "We'll part here. I'll distract them and you get to the jumper."

I stared at his hand, and he gestured to give him somethingâ¦ oh yeah I still had his vial. I took it out and gave it to him.

"What about you?" I asked.

"I'll be fine" he grinned again, "I know what happens remember?"

He took out his two blasters he had left.

"Thanks for your help" I said to him.

He smiled, "Thanks for entertaining me."

Then he took off away from the direction of the jumper. I waited as all the droids began engaging after him before taking off to the jumper as fast as I could. A few of them noticed my flight and chased after me but I dashed away turning corners until I finally made it back to the jumper. PC closed the door and I waited in silence for his confirmation of a successful jump.

I stood there, catching my breath. I was getting closer to Tammy. I can do this. I can make it.

A hologram of a figure appeared on the wall.

"Human, do you really think you can escape Thereon unscathed?"

It was a Mechanite, his hair was in a long braid and he wore a thin silver ring atop his head.

"I'll take my chances" I said to him.

"You are a racer are you not?" he asked.

"Yeah, I am."

"How about we made a dealâ¦" I waited to hear what it was. "We will give you the stone and your lives, all we ask for in return is your Mechanite."

This was all about Tammy wasn't it? Why did they want her so much that they'd give up a piece of the galaxy's greatest power just for her? I scoffed at the easy question.

"We'll *never* give Tammy to you." I proclaimed.

The Mechanite peered at me. "You've lost your opportunity."

I glared back at him with conviction and the hologram switched off.

PC broke the silence, "We've arrived back on Populous."

Chapter 37: Agony

37. Agony

I made it back to the planet Tammy was on.

I ran through the building hoping to no longer run into anymore resistance. It was pointless to hope for that, all kinds of droids, machines and Mechanites were swarming after me. I ran, dodged, evaded, and slashed my way through the swarms. I was extremely thankful for the S.E.E.S. because there was no way I could get this far without it and I was still having trouble battling through.

"Sarth!"

My heart relieved at the sound of her voice.

"Kiko!" I smiled.

She was tearing through everything in her path with ease.

"Wow, what's with the getup?" she asked noticing the S.E.E.S. "Your sword's cool though. Rei's on her way right now. Get back to Tammy. We'll hold them off for you."

She cleared a path for me.

"Thanks, I'll see you there."

I took off again and heard Kiko destroying anything following after me. I ran as fast as I could past the city and back into the vast desolate area we left Tammy in.

I kept praying to make it in time. I was almost back to the safe house when I saw a ship leaving in the distance. The S.E.E.S. enhanced the image for me. It was the same ship I saw earlier when I was in the Jago's blaster room. Was it possible that that was Balt's ship? It could've been. I wondered if he was able to save his crewmate because I was for sure going to save mine.

I picked up my pace again, imagining myself getting to Tammy, giving her the antivirus, and having things the way it's always been on the Jago. Happy thoughts, that's what I kept making myself think during my hour and a half run.

At the top of the hill I could see the small house below. Something was off though, the door was wide open.

I shot down the hill to the house. Once I passed through the doorway the S.E.E.S. broke off of me and compacted itself on the floor.

My heart sank as I saw what had happened inside. The two bodies of the old lady and man were sprawled out on the floor, their silver and red blood pooling together in a puddle. I immediately ran over to the room where I had left Tammy. It was showing the regular room that was still empty. How did the old lady change it again?? She put Tammy's hand on the wall, so I placed my left hand on the spot where Tammy's was and the door shut itself and turned purple like last time before reopening.

I had never felt so relieved in my life. Tammy was still unconscious on the bed where I had left her. I ran up to her bedside and carefully grazed her cheek. It was blisteringly hot and her hair only had a slight glow at the ends of her braids now.

Somehow I knew what to do. I knelt down beside her and held one of her braids in my left hand with the data strand hair glowing red on my pinky. The red hair spread its glow to Tammy's hair and it slowly made its way to all of her hairs. It stayed like this for a moment before morphing back to her normal hair glowing color.

I held my breath waiting for her to respond. I wasn't sure if that's what it was supposed to do or not. Every part of me willed her to wake up. She had to.

"Tammy please wake upâ ¦" I begged her. "Pleaseâ ¦"

I held her hand close to my chest and gently squeezed her hair with the other. Tears filled my eyes with the thought of losing her as she remained motionless. "Tammyâ ¦"

I felt her hand move when I whispered her name and her eyes slowly opened. The searched around before finding me.

"Sarth" she uttered.

My heart fluttered with elation.

"Yeah it's me" I smiled, "I'm right here."

She gave me a weak smile. "You came back for meâ ¦"

"Of course I did!"

She gave me a bigger smile and sat up on the bed looking back to normal so quickly. Before I knew it she had lunged herself at me, giving me the biggest hug I think she's ever given anyone before. She held me tight and I embraced her in my arms. Having her back with me, alive and in my arms was one of the happiest moments of my life.

"Sarthâ ¦ there's something I've been wanting to tell you â ¦" she whispered in my ear still holding me close.

She slowly let go of me so we were face-to-face with each other. She looked almost human with her rosy red cheeks and light brown eyes. I realized just how cute she really was as our eyes locked together, trying to communicate. She glanced down at the ground with an embarrassed smile.

"I just wanted to sayâ ¦" she said, continuing to smile to the ground, "that I-"

Her hair flashed abruptly and her eyes averted to something behind me. She impulsively pushed me back, out of the way of something that came flying toward us. I glanced out of the room and saw a Mechanite standing at the house doorway, looking like he had just thrown something.

I looked back at Tammy, and my heart stopped. The object that the Mechanite threw was a purple crystal, and half of it was protruding out of her chest.

"Noâ ¦ this can't be happening."

She began to fall and I lunged forward and caught her, her silver blood spilling out from the puncture wound where the sparkling crystal was embedded. I pulled the crystal out and put my hand over the wound but the damage had already been done. The Mechanite was about to enter the house but something made him hesitate and then run away.

"Tammyâ ¦ noâ ¦ please stay with me" I choked, trying to swallow tears that were quickly building up in my throat.

Her eyes began to gloss-over as she kept them fixed on me.

I didn't know what to do. I looked around for anything or anyone that could help me but I knew there was nothing I could do to help her except be there with her, tears now pouring down my face.

"Why?" I cried, "Why did you do that? Why did you save me?"

Her eyes began filling with tears I had never seen before, and it only made me cry even harder. She weakly pressed something in my hand and gave me a faint smile as the tears rolled down her cheeks, "love" she whispered.

Her hair flickered a few more times before completely dying out. At the same I watched as the life faded from her light brown eyes.

"No!" I bawled, "Tammy!"

I died at that moment, crying the hardest I ever have before, screaming my pain for the planets to hear. Let them come kill me, I didn't care, my heart was ripped out of my chest from losing the one person who was closest to me. I was gone. Nothing else in the galaxy mattered.

This couldn't be right, I saved her. She was alive and well in my arms a few moments ago, and now... she was gone. The sudden shift of emotions tortured my heart and mind.

I didn't notice Kiko was standing at the doorway staring, watching me agonize over the loss of my best friend, or Rei who was sobbing on the ground next to her, or the rain that was now pouring outside. None of it mattered.

I cried over Tammy's body for hours. I was content with dying right there with her. I couldn't part with her, I had failed her.

Rei came up next to me at some point and held Tammy's hand.

"We have to burn her body" she finally said. Her voice was filled with sorrow.

I shook my head slightly. No expression or emotion on my face and heart, just like a Mechanite.

"We can't let the Mechanites have her bodyâ ¦ the best way to avoid that is to cremate her." I stared at Tammy in my arms. "She would want thatâ ¦"

I didn't want the Mechs to have her, especially the one that spoke to me in the jumper.

"I'll build the fireâ ¦" my voice cracked.

"We'll wait until it stops raining"

I had set Tammy's body aside but I still found myself staring into nothing in her direction on the floor against the wall. Rei had covered the other two bodies up that were in the other room and Kiko was still missing. She had apparently left after learning about Tammy's death.

I sat there like that all night, covered in Tammy's silvery blood, the silver-tinted purple crystal on the floor next to her body. PC was dead on the floor next to me, it must've died when she died. Rei stayed with me, I could tell she was concerned about my well-being, and Kiko's as well because she had been missing since yesterday now.

The rain had finally stopped and I pulled myself away from Tammy in order to build a fire to cremate the bodies. Rei had already collected some brush and stone and I helped her finish it off.

I carried the two bodies to our pit and placed them gingerly inside. I was grateful to them for not selling out Tammy's location. Then I brought out Tammy's body. Knowing that I'd never get to hold her in my arms again only brought back more tears. I placed her next to the other two bodies, and then caressed the two lifeless braids resting on her chest one last time before kissing her hand goodbye.

I couldn't bring myself to watch her burn away from me. I let Rei light the fire and then turned to go back inside the house. I saw someone approach us from atop the hill. It was Kiko walking back to us, down from the hill. She seemed to glisten in the light and when she came closer I saw why. She was covered almost entirely in Mechanite blood, and her piercing eyes were no longer gray.

Chapter 38: Consume

38. Consume

She walked up to us with a serious battle-worn look on her face.

The knife was still in her hand, dripping silver blood from the black blade. She was holding something else in her other hand. It was a flat, emerald green stone, but that wasn't what I drew my attention to. I saw only a glimpse at who she truly was and a spark of fear ignited from the pit of my stomach when I realized how just inhumane she could be.

Her eyes were what I focused on. They were no longer the light gray eyes I knew them to be, the eyes that had mesmerized me many times before. No, these were different eyes; they reflected the fearful power of the Eyes of Blue from most ruthless planet in the galaxy.

She avoided my eyes but I was drawn to hers, her now light blue eyes.

Rei was just as stunned as we watched her walk right past us. She gave off a cold chill that froze me still.

Was this her true power?

She spoke without turning back, "Let's get off this planet."

She went straight to the shuttle and started it up. Rei held on to my arm and nudged me forward. I got into the shuttle with them after Rei double-checked to make sure we had everything.

We left and I turned around to watch the flames that engulfed Tammy's body get smaller and smaller as we headed back to the Jago with one less crewmember.

I didn't leave my room. I couldn't. Everything in the ship reminded me of Tammy. I just sat there in the corner of my room, crying most of the time, upset at myself for failing.

After a few days I headed to the training room but it was locked. I heard loud thrashing inside that could only come from Kiko. I let her be and went up to the sky deck.

I lay there, I chose a bed I hadn't used before. It was pointless, I thought about the time when the four of us were laying together and Tammy fell asleep on my shoulderâ ¦ that was before the first stone. My heart ached and I ignored the tears that were falling from my face.

The hatch opened and Rei came up to join me.

"How're you doin' Sarth?" she consoled me.

I didn't answer.

"It's hard for everyoneâ ¦ Aki hasn't been out of the training room since."

Again I didn't answer.

"It wasn't your fault Sarthâ ¦" she whispered.

That pushed me over the edge. I didn't want to hear any more, so I got up and left. On the way back to my room I saw Kiko head up to the kitchen and I decided to follow her, but following her meant that I had to walk past Tammy's workroom.

I stopped in front of it, debating if I should go in. I wanted to walk in and see her working at her desk like usual, but I would never see that again.

I placed my hand on her door and it slide open. Her room looked exactly the way she left it. I took a step inside and instantly braced myself on the wall. It hurt too much knowing I would never get to see or talk to her again.

I was about to leave when Kiko suddenly appeared next to me. I quickly wiped away the tears on my cheeks. She stared at me with her blue eyes and I avoided making any eye contact with her. Not because of her eyes, but because I didn't want her to see my pain. I knew she was in pain too.

"I'm sorry I've failed you" she said.

"No, it wasn't your fault. It was my faultâ ¦" I started confessing my true feelings, "*I* should've died instead of Tammy." I was getting angry and sadder, "Instead she died saving *me*! I'm always being saved! I'm useless, worthless, dead-weightâ ¦*trash*â ¦"

I slid down the wall and buried my face in my hands, crying from the bottom of my heart. Frustration, pain, and sorrow were the emotions that incapacitated me from continuing to live life like I had been. It consumed me.

Kiko didn't say anything. Instead she sat on the floor in front of me and embraced me in her arms, allowing me to take all the pain off my chest to be shared with her.

"It wasn't your fault," she comforted me. "I'd never seen her so happy before with you around. I could tell she truly loved you and that's supposed to be impossible for Mechanites. I'm sure if she could, she'd save you as many times as it takes."

What she was saying only made me cry harder. All I wanted was for our crew to be back to the way it was, but it would never be the same again, and coming to terms with that was the hardest thing to get over. She held me in her arms until I stopped crying and I wiped away my tears again.

I noticed I was still wearing Tammy's hair on my pinky. I stared at it because it was glowing steadily like she was around and had activated it. Then I remembered what she gave me right before she died.

"Is that Tammy's hair that's glowing?" she asked me, noticing the glow as well.

"Yeahâ ¦She gave me-"

Rei's apprehensive voice coming from the intercom cut me off, "Guysâ ¦we're receiving a messageâ ¦I think you should get up here."

Her tone made us quickly jump up and run to the flight deck. She was sitting in the pilot's seat when Kiko asked, "Who's it from?"

"You're not gonna like it." she said opening up some holograms to relay the message.

A voice none of us wanted to hear, gave us a taunting message, "It seems you were able to obtain the last and final stone after an amusing display of yourâ¦ *talents*â¦" Ozias', gruff, menacing voice echoed through the flight deck intercom. "Now we both have two of the four Vo stones but there can only be *one* winner." I hated his blood-curdling voice. "Let's finish this race once and for all. Bring your two stones to Dezner and we'll see who gets to walk away with themâ¦" he chuckled. "See you thereâ¦" *click*. The intercom turned off.

It was quiet. Rei and I gave a concerned look to Kiko because we knew Ozias was taunting *her* specifically. Her blue eyes were affixed to the table.

We waited for a response from her.

"Set our course for Dezner" she finally concluded before striding away.

Rei and I glanced at each other as the clanking of Kiko's footsteps through the hall faded away. Rei set the course and soon we would be back on Dezner to face Ozias for the last two stones.

Back in my room I found the item Tammy had pressed into my hand before she died. It was the data preserver I gave her back on Crux a long time ago. I examined it and remembered that I didn't know how to open it.

I put it in my pocket and went to lie down on my bed. I could still smell Kiko's sweet scent on me from when she held me close in Tammy's workroom. I fell asleep laughing, thinking about what Tammy would say to me if I told her that I smelled Kiko.

I was writing in my room the next day when Kiko told me to meet her in the training room. I walked over and saw Rei there as well but no Kiko.

"Did she call you here too?" she asked me.

"Yeah she did. Do you know what this is about?" I asked back.

"No clue."

The door slid open and Kiko walked in, then she locked the door behind her. That was strange.

She got straight to the point, "I've decided to go to Dezner by myself."

Rei and I immediately retaliated at the same time, "No!"

"We're going with you. We're sticking together." I said.

"We're not leaving you. There's no way you're going without us." Rei said.

Kiko expected this because her expression didn't change. She simply waited for us to stop giving her reasons to stay together.

"Look, I've made up my mind. I'm dropping you both off at the nearest safe planet." She was dead serious.

Rei shook her head. "Aki, *please* don't do thisâ¦" her voice strained as she held back tears.

Kiko's face pained when she saw Rei's eyes fill with tears. She approached her and held her in her arms. Rei held her close and I could hear her stifle a cry before going completely limp in her arms. Kiko set her down

gently on the floor, and then set her sights on me.

I wasn't going to go down that easily. I stepped back and went into the first defensive stance she ever taught me. It didn't faze her at all.

"Please look after her" she said to me. Her face showed how much it pained her to make such a request.

I didn't say anything because there was no need to. She already knew I would protect her with my life.

"Don't do this Kikoâ ¦" I urged.

"It's the only way to keep you both safe."

I clenched my jaw. She was acting like she was never coming back and that we would never see each other again.

I shook my head. "I'm not going down without a fight" I warned her.

We stood there eyeing each other. I waited for her to make a move and as soon as I blinked she disappeared. The next thing I knew it was losing consciousness and was falling down. I expected to fall to the ground but the last thing I felt was her embracing arms as she held me close.

Chapter 39: Abandoned

39. Abandoned

When I awoke I still had the sensation of being in Kiko's arms but when I glanced around, Rei and I were on a strange sand planet with nothing else but the hot blowing wind. I immediately knew it wasn't Sola, there was only one shadow being cast on a nearby plant.

Rei was still unconscious in the shuttle next to me. Kiko must've driven us inside of a sand cave and I saw her walking back to the Jago so I jumped out of the shuttle after her.

"Why?" I asked, "Why are you abandoning us?"

She was a few steps from the Jago when she stopped walking but didn't turn around.

"I can't lose you" she said.

I wanted to say something back but she never gave me the chance to. She walked through the cargo door's red gel wall and it closed behind her. I watched as the Jago ascended in the air and blast off back into space.

Lose me? I angrily kicked the sand. It's *me* who's losing everyone.

I walked back to the cave and saw that she left us the shuttle, some of our stuff, and all the food. I knew it would get cold at night so I grabbed a sword from the shuttle and walked over to a patch of dry brush just outside of the cave.

Collecting the brush was just my excuse to take my anger out on something. I hacked and swung and mutilated anything in my path with more force than I knew I possessed. I only stopped when I was out of breath and my muscles wouldn't allow me to hold the sword up anymore. I had made enough brush to last us at least a week.

I carried a bundle back to the cave and used one of Rei's weapons to start a fire. I let the dancing flames hypnotize me into a trance. The last time I saw a fire burning, it was engulfing Tammy's lifeless body. Somehow an image of Kiko's body burning in a fire popped into my mind and I quickly pushed it out.

It was almost completely dark when Rei finally woke up in a startled state.

"Aki!" she yelled out as she jolted up looking around. She saw me sitting by the fire and then the realization hit her face. "She's goneâ ¦isn't she?"

I couldn't bring myself to answer. Instead I tossed the small stick I was playing with into the whisking flames.

She disappeared behind the back seat and the last thing I heard her say was, "That jerkâ ¦"

The next day Rei was quieter than usual but she always had high spirits for Kiko returning or finding some way to reach her. She went through everything Kiko left us to find something that would help us get off the planet. I wasn't sure what she was looking for, what we had most of was food.

"She didn't even leave us a map or anything!" she grumbled going through the items in a medium-sized cargo bin.

I rotated the meat I was cooking on the fire. We had no way of getting off the planet without a space ship and there were no large cities in sight. It could take us weeks to reach a city and find a ship and how were we supposed to get to Dezner then? I'm sure it wasn't even on a map yet since it was just recently found.

"It's useless Reiâ ¦ we're stuck here without a shipâ ¦" I stressed.

"*Ahem*. You say you need a ship?"

Rei turned around and swiftly drew her blaster out at the intruder.

"Whoa," came Balt's voice and he held up his hands to show he wasn't a threat. "Feisty one you have here Sarth" he gave her a charming smirk.

"Balt?!" I exclaimed.

"You know this human?" Rei asked still pointing her blaster at him with disgust.

"Yeah, I met him on Thereon."

"What do you want?" Rei asked him.

Balt casually cracked his neck while keeping his hands up, "Wellâ ¦" *crack*. "I heard you needed a rideâ ¦" *crack*.

Rei gave me a questioning look and I shrugged at her.

"How'd you find us?" I asked him.

"Premon remember?"

Oh yeah, that's right. He could tell the future, but what did *we* have to do with it?

Rei got back to the point, "Will you give us a ride?"

"*Yeah*" This time he was using a pinky to clean is ear and he flicked the contents away casually. "That's why I'm here."

"Do you trust him?" Rei's mind-voice asked me.

Wellâ ¦ he did help me get the antivirusâ ¦

"Yeah I do." I told her.

Rei finally holstered her blaster after a moment's hesitation.

"Well!" Balt clapped his hands together, "Let's get going then!"

He grabbed a large cargo bin of food and carried it out of the cave. Rei and I followed him and we saw a small ship hovering just over the cave. He set down the bin and long cables shot out of the side of the ship to pick it up and carry it inside just like the Jago's. Then he went back into the cave to bring up more of our stuff. Two other cables shot out and lifted us up into the ship. I read the word "Constance" written in faded paint on the

side.

We were set down in a small cargo bay area that was filled with bins. A female voice spoke to use through the intercom.

"Welcome aboard the Constance, feel free to make yourselves at home. There is a spare room through the door to your left, you can't miss it." *Click.* The voice spoke to us in a classical Mechanite tone.

I saw Rei sigh next to me. "They have a Mechanite?" she asked somberly.

That's rightâ ¦ Balt followed me to Origin to save his crewmate from a similar fate.

Rei followed me up the stairs and the door slid open for us. The inside of the ship looked even smaller. Everything was narrower than what I was used to on the Jago. I turned the corner and there was only one door. The empty room was a little smaller than my room but at least it had a bed, but then again there were two of us so I knew I was sleeping on the floor. That was fine with me because I didn't want to be left alone.

We sat on the small bed, not knowing what to do. Then there was a knock on our door. Rei opened it and there stood a small older lady holding a tray of food. She brought it in for us and I took it from her hands.

"Thank you" I said to her.

She was an old lady with dark-toned, wrinkly skin. Her hair was short and speckled gray, probably from old age. She covered herself in a loose cloth garb that looked like a blanket with a hole in the middle for her head.

I handed Rei her bowl of clear liquid and sat down on the bed next to her.

"What is this? We're eating water with a spoon?" Rei asked lifting a spoonful of the clear liquid to inspect.

"You're complaining about food?" I joked. She threw me a look and put the spoon in her mouth. Her eyes widened and she became motionless. "*Is there something wrong with it??"*

She shook her head. "*So goodâ ¦"*

I put a spoonful into my mouth and the texture instantly changed to one of my favorite dishes that Kiko usually makes.

My eyes widened as well.

The old lady smiled, "You're welcome to meet us in the flight deck at any time."

Rei was too busy slurping her bowl to answer.

"Okayâ ¦" I swallowed my food. "Umâ ¦ what should we call you?"

"You may call me Finola" she smiled and then walked away to let us finish eating.

Rei watched me finish my bowl, I knew she wanted more but it was just too good to share. We felt the tiny ship shuttered as we entered space.

She stood up and stretched, "We should probably go tell them where we want to goâ ¦"

I put my bowl down on the tray that was on the steel floor and stood up with her. "Yeah you're probably right."

We walked out of the room and down the narrow hallway and passed a few doors which I would guess were the other crewmember's rooms. We took a flight of stairs up and kept moving towards the front of the ship. Luckily the Constance was structured very similarly to the Jago and we easily found the flight deck.

Balt and a glowing haired girl were sitting at the two pilot seats. They both turned around when we entered. I'm sure Rei was also staring at the girl who was also about the same age Tammy was.

"I see you made it up here okay" said Balt. "This is my ship, the Constance, and this here is my navigator Verena."

We stared at her and she simply stared back. Verena's hair was shorter than Tammy's and she had it back in a simple ponytail but they shared the same white skin and blank expression. We continued to stare at each other until she turned back around in her chair.

Balt got serious for once, "Uhâ¦I heard about your lossâ¦and I'm sorryâ¦"

Rei shot a look at him, "How'd you know about that?"

"Finola is a Premon. She told me."

"There's that word againâ¦" she said before thinking for a moment, "Premonâ¦a future teller?! She is?!"

"Yeah," Balt smiled, "true story."

"That's way cool."

"It definitely is."

What is this? They're best friends already?

Ahem. I interrupted their bonding moment, "Do you know where we need to go?"

He stood up and opened a hologram map of the galaxy, "Yep. Dezner. We're headed there right now actually."

"Good."

Somehow everything worked out perfectlyâ¦too perfect actuallyâ¦why would Balt and his crew help us out? They were racers tooâ¦weren't they after the stones as well?

Balt turned his attention back to Rei, "You wanna see my armament collection?" he asked her excitedly.

Rei's mouth dropped, "*Yes*!"

They both left the flight deck leaving me alone with Verena, the one situation I did *not* want to be in because I was still hurting about losing Tammy.

I decided to go back to my room but as soon as I turned to leave she spoke to me.

"Sarthâ ¦" Her voice was like a punch to my stomach. She sounded just like her and I stopped dead in my tracks. I heard her turn around in her chair to face me. "Thank you. For helping Captain Balt retrieve the antivirus."

I stood there, picturing myself turning around and seeing Tammy sitting in that seat with a smile on her face.

"You're welcomeâ ¦ I'm glad it worked for you." I said before walking away.

I never turned around.

Chapter 40: Landing

Part 8: Vo

40. Landing

I hardly saw Rei the next few days other than when she came to sleep, but even that was rare. She was having way too much fun with Balt's toys, and so was he! Wasn't he the captain?! Shouldn't he be captaining or something?! Then again Cashel hardly ever took complete control of his crew. He always let Tammy make all the minor decisions, which was most of the decisions actually. I guess it was the same with this ship.

I spent my time in the small cargo bay fixing and cleaning up the shuttle for our arrival on Dezner. I enjoyed the peace and quiet but sometimes it was just too quiet.

It was the day of our arrival and I was walking back to the ship's bathroom to shower when one of the room doors slid open as I was passing by. I peeked inside and saw Finola sitting in the dark, with only a single light glowing in middle of the room. She beckoned me to come in when she saw me take interest.

I glanced around to make sure it was me she was talking to before stepping inside. It smelled strongly of moist flowers. She gestured for me to sit at a chair while she set many small glasses in a row in front of her. Then she sat back in her seat.

"Pick one" she said to me.

I looked at the glasses. They all looked exactly alike so I pointed to one at random. Then she picked up a pitcher filled with more clear liquid and poured it over each glass without concern for spilling. When the liquid fell to the table however, it sizzled away.

She finished pouring and gazed into each glass. The liquid inside each of them was now a different color.

"Hmmâ¦" she frowned. I waited for a better answer but she didn't say anything else. That wasn't good enough for me.

I knew she had the answers to some of my questions so I asked, "Why are you helping us?" and then she smiled showing a few of her silver teeth. She was obviously waiting for me to ask her something.

"For a few reasons, one of which is to repay a debt. The other is in the best interest for everyone."

The liquid in one of the glasses changed back to clear.

"Best interest for everyoneâ¦ what does that mean?"

"It means you will not fail in your quest, so do not hesitate to approach it."

Another glass turned clear.

I decided to take a risk asking this question, "Do you plan on taking the stone once we're there?"

She gave a slight frown. "We no longer seek the stone, nor do we wish to continue with the race."

There were only two colored glasses left.

Now to the future. "Will we win the race?"

She chuckled with a big grin on her face. "I cannot tell you that."

None of the glasses changed.

I sighed. What was the point of talking to a Premon if they weren't going to tell you the future?

"Why won't you finish the race?"

"The beings that have obtained the stones are too powerful for any of us to challenge." Her eyes narrowed and she whispered, "'Tis a battle between true *demonsâ ¦*"

Demonsâ ¦ was she talking about Ozias and Kiko? Another glass changed leaving only one glass left. I was about to ask her if Kiko would defeat Ozias but she took the last glass that I originally pointed at and drank it. I wasn't sure if that meant anything but a moment later the door slid back open. I had to shield my eyes from the sudden bright light to see who it was.

It was Balt.

"We're going through an asteroid belt so it's gonna get a little rocky." He laughed at his pun and took off again. At least he knew how to tell a joke.

The door remained open and Finola said, "The shower's free now." I guess that was my queue to leave.

"Thanks for theâ ¦ thisâ ¦" I said after standing up.

She smiled and I walked back to my room to get a change of clothes.

I got out of the shower and went up to the flight deck. Only Verena was there but I expected that.

"Where's Balt and Rei?" I asked her even though she was busy evading the large asteroids.

"Shooting rocks" The ship swayed back and forth, up and down, making me feel queasy. "Can you please tell them to not aim at the largest asteroids but at the ones in *front* of the ship? It's only creating more, smaller asteroids to evade."

Ugh Reiâ ¦ leave it to them to think asteroids was a game. I took off to the ship's blaster rooms bracing each side of the walls as the ship jeered in different directions. I entered one of the empty rooms and it activated.

"Hey," I tried to get their attention but they were arguing with each other about how many points they each had, "Verena wants you to aim at the asteroids at the front of the ship."

"Oh join us Sarth!" said Balt happily, completely ignoring my comment.

"Yeah you can be our judge, let us know who hit which asteroid first!" said Rei.

They went back to arguing about their points again and I ended up being the only one blasting the large asteroids away in front of the ship.

"Thank you" came Verena's voice in my blaster room as soon as we passed through the belt.

I left the room, "No problem" I said aloud. I went back to the flight deck. "Do you think we'll make it to Dezner in time?"

"At the speed we're traveling we should reach Dezner only a few hours after Kiko arrives" she responded.

"Wow, that's pretty close" I said admiring her work.

"This ship is a bit faster compared to the Jago" she said.

I snapped my head toward her, "How do you know about the Jago?" I asked perplexed.

"I helped design it." She said simply.

"You helped design it?" I exclaimed.

"Yes"

I was in shock. She helped design it? Did that mean she knew Tammy?

Balt walked in, "Good you're here Sarth. We'll be landing shortly so can you go help Rei pack your stuff?"

I veered my attention away from Verena, I had the feeling she didn't want to talk about it anyway, "Yeah sure" I said before leaving the fight deck.

Moments later her voice echoed in the cargo bay, "Prepare to enter Dezner's atmosphere."

Rei was already throwing her stuff into the shuttle.

"We can leave the food behind, I'm sure we can stop at the village afterwards to restock."

"Good idea."

The food would've taken up the most of the room if we took it with us in the small shuttle.

"Anything we don't need we should leave with Balt and the others, they might find some use for it."

I think she should take her own advice because she was the one with the most stuff. Nevertheless, we finished packing anything we needed as Balt and Finola joined us with along with Verena a few seconds later.

I turned to face our saviors one last time.

Balt wore a small smile but spoke in a serious manner, "You're always welcome back on the Constance Sarthâ ¦" he said to me.

"Thanks," I smiled back, "I hope we meet again somewhere in space."

I shook his hand then he took off the weapon attached to his back and tossed it to Rei.

"That's my favorite, make good use of it!" he grinned at her.

Her eyes lit up with joy, "Thanks Balty!" she said excitedly while examining the mid-sized blaster and then attaching it to her back.

I joined her in the front of shuttle.

She took a deep breath in front of the steering panels, "Are you ready for this?"

Getting back to Kiko was all I've been thinking about since she left us, "I've been ready."

We felt the ship touch down on solid ground and the cargo bay door opened for us. Rei started the shuttle as the Constance crew saw us off.

"Thanks for the ride!" Rei beamed at Balt.

He had a big grin on his face as he stood there with his arms crossed, wishing us farewell in his own way. "Thanks for your company!"

"Thank you" I said sincerely.

Verena smiled at me and I couldn't help but smile back as Rei whisked us away from the ship.

She swerved through the trees, "It's time to finish this race!"

I couldn't agree more. It was time for the Jago crew to reunite.

Chapter 41: Link

41. Link

Rei said that Balt dropped us off a distance from where Kiko was located and that we would have to sneak by several of Ozias' crewmembers in order to get anywhere close to her. At least we were on the same planet now, and on the desolate side at that. We sighed with relief after learning that the village was safe on the other side of the planet.

We rushed through untamed forest and vast open fields, even flying over a large, pristine lake. The planet had a beautiful untouched atmosphere. I made a mental note to ask Kiko and Rei if we could stay a while longer to explore it once this was all over with. We came to a stop as soon as clouds began to fill the evening sky, darkening our view but hiding our presence.

"We'll leave the shuttle here and walk the rest of the way" she said. I nodded to her and got out of the shuttle. "Hereâ ¦" she tossed me the compacted S.E.E.S. that expanded once I realized what it was.

"You brought this from Thereon? How'd you know what it was?"

"Yep, thought you might want it later, might come in handy. Kiko told me about it after you had left."

I stepped into the exoskeleton and it conformed to my body. The Shredder was still attached to it as well but I doubt there would be much metal around here. Rei stashed as much weapons and ammunition as she could around her utility belt and pockets. She tossed me a blaster with a twineulator attached.

"Take that too" she said.

We finished loading up and she took the lead as we ran back through thick brush, jumping over dead logs and rocks. She stopped suddenly and looked at me. She saw my expression change as she peered at me with brightly glowing red eyes.

"I'm going to completely soul link with you to mask your human presence okay? Eyes of Red usually can't sense other Eyes of Red, I'm an exception however." She explained in my mind.

"That's fine with me." I agreed.

"Close your eyes."

I closed my eyes and felt her take her warm hands into mine. Nothing felt any different but once she let go and said let's move, I opened my eyes to a whole new world.

Suddenly I was seeing split vision with her but not only that, I could sense everything around me that had vision. She explained a little to me as I took baby steps toward her.

"It'll take some time getting used to but once you get it it'll click suddenly." The double vision was throwing me off because she would randomly change her view to some creature that had us in their sight. "*All you have to do is know what you want.*"

"Know what I want?" I asked.

"Yeah, if you need only your vision, then know you want it. If you want only my vision, then know you want only that."

She walked up to me and it was like looking at two profile pictures of us side by side but now only one of her eyes was glowing red, the other was dark brown like mine. But waitâ ¦looking through her eyes, one of my eyes was glowing red now too. I guess this is what she meant by completely soul linking.

I tired what she said and focused on only wanting my vision. It changed slowly to expand my surroundings.

"Not bad!" She smiled at me.

We continued again and I experimented with the new powers I had. I could see everything and anything I wanted to see since there was wildlife *everywhere* here. I could even choose where I wanted to see double, triple or thousands of visions in my sight. Top, bottom, left, right, square in the middle, the options were only limited to my imagination.

"This is amazing! You see this all the time?" I mentally exclaimed to her.

She mentally chuckled at me. "*No, actually the visual range doubles when I completely soul link with someone. They sort of act like a router but they also share my powers as well. So I guess you could say it empowers both of us greatly but at the cost of sharing a single life."*

"We're sharing the same life?"

"Yeah, if something happens to you, I feel it as well. And I'm the only one who can sever the link." So basically she could make me feel whatever she was feeling and I could do nothing about it. What power. "*Eyes of Red can't sense other Eyes of Red but they can still spot them in something else's vision. I, however, know exactly where they're at, and now so do you."*

I focused on wanting to know where the Eyes of Red were at and half of my vision zoomed to the location of each of them. A red glow around their body indicated how much power they possessed. This power was getting cooler by the second. There were a lot of them so I focused on the ones that were closest to us.

"It's gonna to be impossible to sneak past all of them." She said. "*It'll be safer if we separate but not too far from each other. You can see Kiko right? We're headed there so take the route with less eyes watching."*

"Alright" I said and we broke apart from each other.

I tried to sense where Kiko was but it was impossible. I could only see where she was through the eyes of others and even then I didn't have a good visual because they seemed to be in a flat area with nothing but a large rock wall around. Luckily that rock wall had a bird watching their confrontation. Kiko was fighting Ozias but he was easily overpowering her.

I was too busy watching their confrontation to notice that the Eyes of Red had shifted their positions and I had almost run right into a batch that had congregated in front of me. Suddenly I had the urge to roll out of the way of something and I did but nothing was there. Then I remembered that I was sharing Rei's emotions and I looked to see where she was. One of the Eyes of Red spotted her and she was now taking cover behind a tree as a gruff Eyes of Red man was slowing advancing, shooting a large blaster in his arms. Rei grabbed the medium-sized blaster off of her back and began firing back.

I watched as a flood of red glowing bodies made their way towards her and instantly took off in her direction. I was close enough to reach her before the crowd of red eyes would appear. I sprinted until I came into view of the man who was firing at Rei. He saw me coming and quickly changed his blaster's direction to me. The S.E.E.S. allowed me to easily dodge his blasts and that's when Rei shot him in the neck with a gooey black ball. The man put a hand to his neck to feel what it was and then his head contorted sideways abruptly, his eyes rolling behind his head and he clunked to the ground.

"What was that?" I asked running to her.

"A type of projectile gun I got from Balt. I'm glad I finally got to try it out." She said checking out the weapon. "*Unfortunately, because it shoots projectiles it'll eventually run out of ammo."* She continued checking all the weapons she had on her.

What was she doing?! "*We gotta go, they're coming!"*

"We're already surrounded. We're gonna have to fight through." I checked to see what she was talking about. All the red figures were already circled around us. My stomach dropped at the amount that had gathered. "*Hey, don't feel so depressed!"* She chided. "*Positive thinking will help the both of us."* I took a deep breath and imagined us making it to Kiko together. "*Thank you, that's much better.*

She clicked a cartridge into the medium-sized gun, put it back on her back and took out two smaller blasters. One of the blasters had a twineulator attached. I took out mine as well.

"Ready?" She asked. "*We'll make a run for it."*

"Let me go first. I have a blaster shield on this." I pointed to the exoskeleton.

"Alright then, I'll follow you."

"On threeâ ¦"

"Oneâ ¦ twoâ ¦"

BOOM!

A large explosion erupted out of nowhere at the base of the tree we were both bracing against and we both flew backwards.

Chapter 42: Restraint

42. Restraint

I was blown away. The burst from the explosion shattered the tree and I was flew through the air before slamming to the ground. My ears were ringing as I stumbled to stand up to see if Rei was alright. I wobbled everywhere and when I tried to jump over a tree, I brushed my leg I felt something wet. I looked down at my hand and saw blood on my hand coming from my leg. There was a large gash there but I didn't feel anything. What pain I did feel came from my arm but when I inspected it, it looked fine. That could only mean it was coming from Rei.

"Rei!" I yelled out. I halved my vision with her and I watched her look at her arm and pull out a piece of tree shrapnel. I winced in pain.

"Sorry. Dammit you're hit too?" She observed.

"My leg, but I can't feel anything." I said. "*S.E.E.S. must be blocking the pain."*

I found her staggering to get on her feet and readying her blasters again. We were both all cut up just from the blast.

"They're coming but they're not gonna catch us off guard again." She vowed. "*We're gonna break through."* She held up her blasters in the direction of the closest Eyes of Red. "*Let's go."*

We ran, ignoring the pain. That's when Ozias' crew made their move. Rei shot down a few of them but they were fast. I fired my blasters a few times but my aim was still horrible. The only thing I had left was to fight hand-to-hand. I saw a man aiming at Rei and I lunged at him forcing his attention on me. I didn't know too many offensive moves but what I did know I was very good at and I was actually surprised at being able to take one down.

My ring gave off an electric discharge around my fist. I had forgotten about it. I blocked another Eyes of Red and I could feel the ring electrocute him whenever we touched. I sensed another one behind me and I ducked from being hit with a club. Soon I was surrounded by a small crowd but I saw Rei take the weapon off her back and it changed shape into what looked like a little cannon that rested on her shoulder. I knew she was planning on taking them all out with whatever she had. I didn't have to communicate with her to know what she was thinking and I ran and jumped out of the way of an explosion I'd never seen before. An energy sphere surrounded the group and dragged them all together in one spot before exploding them apart.

I saw another man behind a tree taking aim at her. I was about to warn her but I didn't have to. She felt my fear for her and swiftly pulled out another blaster and shot the man. Soul linking with Rei definitely had its advantages working as a team, because we were handling the multitude of enemies extremely well together.

It wasn't until we took down a majority of them that we ran into trouble. I felt something or someone with incredible power quickly approach us. I could sense Rei's fear of the intruder which made me fear even more.

"Run Sarth!" She said as started to take off.

I took off after her and we ran as fast as we could through the trees in Kiko's direction. We could feel the powerful Eyes of Red encroaching on us. There was no way we were going to be able to outrun him.

"Go on! I'll hold him off, you go get Kiko!" she said to me as she took out her big blaster again.

"No. I'm not leaving you here." I said matter-of-factly.

She chortled nervously. Her reaction to this enemy was different from the others, she usually doesn't fear but I could feel that she's had bad encounters with this person before.

"Careful." She warned. "*He knows how to quick-step."*

Quick-step? I didn't have to wait long for an answer to my question, a big man wearing thick-layered armor appeared suddenly before us. His power aura was a brilliant red color.

Rei didn't waste any time firing another energy sphere but it caught only air. She shot at every location he appeared but failed to hit him each time. I'd never seen her fail to hit her target before. Who was this man? I couldn't even visually follow where he was, once second he was here and the next he was gone. Was this what quick stepping was? Rei ran out of ammo and took out her smaller blasters but the man disappeared again. The amount of power the man wielded clouded our senses of him so we couldn't tell exactly where he was.

Rei and I were back to back surveying our surroundings. Our breathing was in sync with each other as our hearts raced to try and anticipate his next location.

I felt him before I saw him. A powerful force hammered me on my side and I was thrust against a dense tree trunk before falling to the ground onto its protruding roots. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Rei grab her ribs and stagger away from the man who was now hovering over her. My impact clearly affected her as well.

"Completely soul linking with a *human*?" The man said in disgust. "How much lower can you get?" Rei just glared at the man. "You dare gaze at me with *those* eyes." He slowly approached her with intense animosity.

I was back on my feet, ready to help her out but I noticed that my S.E.E.S. was on the brink after that hit, and the pain was slowly creeping in.

The man turned and growled at me, "Stay out of this human. I've been searching for this little fugitive for a long time now."

I ignored his comment and ran after him anyway. He disappeared again as soon as I got close and reappeared directly behind me. I felt his hand slam on my shoulder and I fell to my knees, with a blade to my neck. Just the presence of his hand on my shoulder held me with such a force that I could no longer move at all.

"No wait!" Rei screamed.

"Don't worry," the man said simply. "I'm supposed to bring you both back alive." He retracted his blade and more Eyes of Red appeared next to us with similar strong power but nothing compared to this man.

"Shall we carry them Roju-Draven?" one of them asked.

"No," the powerful Eyes of Red answered, "bind them and make them walk. Drag them if they stop."

He lifted his hand from my shoulder and the tension released. There was no point in resisting this man, we already lost.

The other Eyes of Red took out a metallic cable and tied our hands together with it. When he was finished he lurched us forward with it. As the adrenaline subsided I began to feel the full effects of our injuries, mine being the worst but the S.E.E.S. was taking most of the pain for me. I felt bad for Rei who only sustained minor injuries but had to put up with the full effects of mine.

"Are you alright?" I asked concerned as I saw we headed up a small hill. "*Maybe you should break the link."*

"No." She said. *"You could pass out and be dragged the rest of the way if I can't concentrate completely on breaking the link correctly."* She stumbled on some rocks and I caught her from falling before the cable tugged us both forward again. She only made it a few steps before tripping again.

"Let me carry you." I said as I held her up again.

"I'm fine-"

"I wasn't asking. I'm not going watch them drag you *there either."*

She sighed but didn't contest as I knelt down to hoist her on my back. I was in pain but it would've hurt much more to watch her stumble all the way there. I felt her rest her head on mine and it made me feel more at ease.

"How do you know that man, Roju-Draven?" I asked her.

"He used to be Head of the Protection Squad back on my planet." She answered wearily.

"Why is he after you?"

"He and the rest of my species see my eyes as a threat, he's been after me ever since."

"Because you can sense them and not the Eyes of Blue?!"

"Yep, pretty much the story of my life. I was cast aside like a piece of Trash." Trash huh? Sounds familiar. *"At least I have Kikoâ ¦"*

We came to the edge of the forest, to a vast empty field with a large pile of boulders in the middle. There was a sheer rock cliff on the other side, giving the feeling of being back in an enclosed arena. I set Rei down and the cables were taken off of us and we were shoved forward towards Ozias and Kiko, now pinned to the ground by a leg on our backs, my twinulator blaster falling from the S.E.E.S. and onto the ground in front of me.

Kiko already looked the worse I had ever seen her before, her clothes were shredded in many areas and she already looked exhausted. It obviously took all her strength to hold Ozias at bay, because she didn't even sense us until Roju-Draven tossed us in her direction. I could see a surprised and saddened expression fill her face even through the darkening sky.

"It looks like we have companyâ ¦" said Ozias in a cool, calm manner. "I've been expecting you..." He was expecting us? Were we betrayed by Balt?! "I knew you would find your way here. I was the one who told Balt your location when Akiko selfishly abandoned you."

Rei tried to jerk free but it was futile.

"Ozias! They have nothing to do with this!" Kiko roared at him.

He turned and gave her an evil smile. His brightly lit blue eyes made and the shadow of the night made him look especially eerie. "On the contrary, they have *everything* to do with this. You and your crew were all vital to events that lead to this very moment."

He grabbed her attention in with insinuating comment, "This momentâ ¦ ever since our last encounter, I've been planning how this moment would play out. When I finally found you, I knew the race was the greatest opportunity for us to meet again and finish what we started many years ago."

She listened intently and he continued, "Ever since I found you, I've been watching. I knew your captain would join the race after a little push through the door and I sent those racers to you on Fargon to test your strength. I found and used your human's little friend on Tizarr. And ohâ ¦" he grumbled, "That Mechanite of yoursâ ¦ was the biggest pain in plans. Thwarting each of my attempts to release your power by destroying the incitor I placed on your human and taming your inner power on Glutvagantâ ¦" he spat on the ground and smiled again, "Her exultant death ensured my victory."

This time *I* wanted to get up and bash his face in. I struggled to get at him but the Eyes of Red on top of me simply slammed his foot down and the force made me lose my breath. Kiko took a step toward us and the Eyes of Red both took out a blaster and aimed it at our heads.

She stopped in her tracks, "Leave them out of this and you can have me!"

Ozias chuckled, "Simply killing you is not enough. We need to finish what we startedâ ¦ yet you seem to possess tremendous restraint holding back your latent powers."

He turned his attention back to us and slowly made his way over.

"Wait!" Kiko shouted as she attempted to stop him but Draven was able to easily hold her off himself.

He continued to walk over to us from the middle of the field, talking as his evil aura encroached on us. "You've become a weak Kaiâ ¦ the weakest, and I only fight the strongest. If you're not even able to defeat Draven then you have no chance saving your friends."

Kiko fought harder to get around him but she was no match, for even him. The temperature dropped and I all I could feel was fear as I imagined what he was going to do to us. Draven managed to easily pin a panicking Kiko down but she continued to fight his suppression. I felt the link between Rei and I begin to dwindle as Ozias stopped right in front of us. He was a huge, strong man and my instincts kept telling me to run away from him.

"No! Wait! I'll do it! I'll release it!" Kiko pleaded to him still fighting to get up.

Ozias smiled at us and the man on top of Rei let her go. She scurried backwards but froze when he extended his arm to grab her by the neck.

"NO! PLEASE!" Kiko agonized.

"Rei!" I shouted, coming back to my senses. I looked around for anything I could use to help her. My twineulator blaster was the closest thing and I stretched out as far as I could to grab it but it was just out of my reach. Ozias swung around to show Rei struggling against his grip around her neck.

The smile never left his face, "*This* is what's holding you backâ ¦"

I continued to reach the blaster but it was useless.

"Sarthâ ¦" I heard Rei whimper as now both of her red eyes met mine, "*take care of her-"*

"REEII!" Kiko shouted.

*Crack*â ¦ Ozias easily snapped her neck with a twist of his wrist. Her lifeless arms dangled to her sides as her glowing red eyes diminished into the darkness.

Chapter 43: Kai

43. Kai

He tossed Rei's limp body aside and I watched in disbelief as her body crumpled to the ground like a rag doll. I was in total shock, my eyes couldn't leave her body. Ozias waited, letting the realization of Rei's sudden death set in.

Then, out of nowhere I heard him chuckle and then start to laugh. It was deep, malicious, and full of elation.

I looked to see what he was laughing at. Kiko was motionless on the ground, her face buried into it as if groveling in penance. The ground shook slightly and then grew with intensity at the same rate at Ozias' laughter. The air around me became an icy chill that sent shivers down my spine. Thenâ ¦complete silence. The only thing I heard was my breath leaving my body in a cloud of vapor.

Roju-Draven's reaction changed drastically. The cold, calculating man suddenly had an expression of fear strike his face as he released Kiko's body from underneath his foot. She didn't react to him, he was no longer a concern to her.

I zoomed in on her with S.E.E.S. but what I saw was no longer Kiko. She slowly got to her knees and stood up. Her hair was a mess, hanging down the sides of her face leaving her expression unknown. Her head calmly lifted up to face the man who had just killed her best friend.

As soon as I saw her face I was hit with a lightning bolt of overwhelming terror. Her mere aura petrified me with an emotion I've never felt before. Her eyes were now a dazzling bright blue, the brightest light in the night. The most frightening part about her though was the smile that crept across her face as she glared at the man she was now longing to tear apart with her own bare hands.

A whirlwind of her pure aura began circling around her as all the Eyes of Red witnessed how much power she really possessed and what she was truly capable of. No one moved. No one even dared taking a breath for fear of invoking the waking demon.

"We should *not* have summoned the True Kai. She has completely lost all control and reason." Roju-Draven muttered with realization, "Thisâ ¦is now just an untamed, killing monster."

Thunder rang in the distance and she disappeared without a sound. Roju-Draven frantically scanned the area but even he was too slow to react. She reappeared right in front of him again mid-punch and let loose the most powerful blasting punch I've ever seen. The ground below them shattered and caved in like an invisible asteroid crash-landed in the direction that he flew. His body broke through the trees and slammed against the far rock cliffs leaving his body impression behind as he fell, dead on the ground.

All the Eyes of Red scattered at once after witnessing the quick defeat of the strongest of their species. Kiko stood there, smiling as they all ran away. She disappeared again and I heard screams of agony from their running direction.

I was left alone with Ozias who was waiting patiently for Kiko to return.

"She's beautiful isn't she?" he said with admiration.

This was no longer Kiko, it was just a demon that resembled her. The loss of the one she swore to protect was just too much for her to bear. The Kiko I knew and loved, was lost within that body and I knew only I could bring her back. I convinced myself that I would bring her back, or die trying.

The screaming stopped and Kiko instantly reappeared in front of Ozias, she was just standing there with the same frightening smile on her face but it was now spattered with red blood from her freshly disposed victims. I saw she was holding no weapon in her red handsâ¦so how did she kill them? I tossed the thought from my mind.

Another chill passed through every cell in my body, leaving behind a morbid residue and the feeling of death. I didn't feel safe where I was, even though the two drogonians were now in the middle of the large field, far away from me.

Getting to Rei's body was my first priority. I crawled on the ground to her, ignoring the throbbing pain from the gash on my leg and staying out of sight as much as possible. I'm sure they noticed me but they took no interest in killing me and I for the first time ever, I was thankful for be a simple, lowly human.

My heart tore to pieces as I coddled Rei's body which was quickly fading warmth. It was only a few minutes ago she had her head nestled on mine. This feelingâ¦the painâ¦was all too familiar as I held another one of my lifeless friends against my chest.

Only Kiko and I remained of the Jago crew and yet Kiko's soul was lost within herself. I was the only one left to reach out to her and bring her back to this worldâ¦back to me. The only obstacle left was Ozias and his two stones, but his only concern at the moment was claiming the title of the greatest fighter in the galaxy.

"You're not the same Akiko I fought before. Back then you were Kaiâ¦" he said unsheathing a long, thick sword from his back and throwing her own knife back at her. He must've swiped it from her before we got there.

She caught her knife effortlessly, without batting any eye. "Nowâ¦I get to kill the True Kaiâ¦" His eyes widened with anticipation along with his joyous smile.

Kiko's knife transformed in her hand, the black blade extended into a crescent shape blade just a few inches from her clenched fist. The green-tinted sage that was coating the blade entwined itself with Kiko's blazing blue aura, glowing fiercely, creating a blend of beautiful colors.

"Hm," Ozias noted, "you're weapon changed types" His long, broadsword was gleaming with his own aura as the two most powerful fighters in the galaxy eagerly raised their strengths to their full potential, readying to engage in an epic battle.

Time stopped. Then Kiko and Ozias disappeared at the same time. When they reappeared they clashed and expelled so much powerful energy that the two opposing forces exploded like an amped-up razalator.

I tried to duck from it but it was pointless. The sheer power blew over even the thickest, strongest trees in the area. I must've flown at least a hundred feet away before grabbing ahold of a stationed tree, waiting for the explosion to pass. I held onto Rei the entire time. There was no way I was going to let her blow away like a piece of trash.

The intense pressure blew over and I dropped to the dirt along with Rei's body. It took a moment to get my bearings straight again. I thought about how I should approach Kiko but I wanted to put Rei to rest in a safe spot first. I arranged her body so it looked as if she were sleeping peacefully on a bed after star gazing in the

sky deck of the Jago.

"Reiâ ¦" I croaked, swallowing back tears. "I'm sorryâ ¦"

I stood up, burning her memory into my mind before limping back to the raging battlefield. I couldn't afford to lose myself in despair so I left her body there, next to the tree that saved me, promising to come back for her.

It took all the mental strength I had to force myself to walk back to the field where any sane person would flee in an instant. I knew it wasn't safe, I could feel it in core of my bones and from the chill on my skin. I was walking straight to my death.All the while I could hear and feel the vibrations in the air of their intense battle.

I stopped at the clearing. They were easy to spot when they were actually visible because they appeared and disappeared like flashing images. They seemed to be even in strength, but Kiko was eventually overwhelming Ozias, getting more hits in than he was.

They came to a stop. Ozias clutched his sword in fist, catching his breath. Kiko looked the same as she did when she first rose as a demon, cool, calm, and with a vicious half-smile of joy.

A similar smile came back on his face, "I will show you something that only the dead have seenâ ¦"

The S.E.E.S. enhanced his face where a black and white stone emerged on his forehead. The stone was mainly white with a black crescent toward the bottom of it.

"Surprised?" he asked rhetorically, "It only makes sense that the descendant of the True Kai's first killer should wield a part of the stone he severed from him."

He didn't allow Kiko to react. He swung his sword through the air towards her without moving from his spot. Somehow he sliced the air and ground itself with an invisible, large, devastating slash that ripped apart anything in its path. I saw Kiko put her arms up to guard the incoming attack and as soon as it finished Ozias swung at her again but this time he appeared at her side, leaving her with no time to block it. It slashed her and she stumbled back.

Whatever he did empowered him even more because now he was the one dominating the fight. His attacks were relentless and strong. At the rate things were going, Kiko had no chance of winning. He pounded her left and right leaving large craters in the ground before picking her up by her face and throwing her, breaking through some large boulders and cracking the rock cliff nearly in half. From there Ozias held her against it, his blade held between her eyes.

He growled at her, "This time I'll be the one to shatter your soul stone, and the glory of killing the True Kai will be *mine*."

Another smiled appeared on her face, disrupting the flow of blood that was trickling from her forehead. It turned into a chuckle, and then into a chilling, full-blown maniacal laugh.

She calmed down enough to utter one word, "*Pathetic.*"

A large, round, white stone emerged on her chest. Her knife-weapon in her hand transformed again into a long, thin, elegant black blade. She held it up and Ozias was pushed away from her. His eyes narrowed, taken aback at her transformation. He slashed at her again with more force but this time she countered him with a swift motion of her own slash, exerting energy force that was larger and overpowering his own. The attack pummeled him like a thousand knives slicing through the air. She walked towards him, her sword glistening

with a killing desire. He disappeared again but Kiko didn't even bother tracking him, she continued to walk forward. He appeared at her side with a physical attack this time and she readily stopped him with one arm.

He smirked at her in their deadlock. "Was I even a challenge for you?"

She smirked back and another whirlwind of aura surrounded her, igniting into wisps of blue flames. He summoned all of his power into his next attacks but Kiko swiftly blocked and viciously counter attacked with her free arm, crushing his leg and slicing off an arm. He continued to advance and she brutally snapped his other arm in half leaving him defenseless. He quietly chuckled and smiled at her as she held her black sword to his forehead. A moment later it plunged through his stone, and through the back of his head. Both smiles never disappeared as she withdrew her sword and watched his body fall face forward to the ground.

Ozias was dead, she killed him. My first emotion was relief. In fact I was so relieved she won, that I forgot that this wasn't Kiko. I only remembered when her head slowly turned in my direction, and the same wide-eyed, bloody, creepy, maniacal smile across her face.

Chapter 44: Fragment

44. Fragment

I couldn't move. Not an inch.

I blinked and the S.E.E.S. adjusted my view to show her standing right in front of me now. Her body was giving off an icy chill that was gnawing at my skin, leaving me frigid with fear. The most powerful person in the galaxy was fixated on me, her brilliant blue eyes glowing with her desire to tear me apart like the others.

Running or hiding wasn't an option, even if I wanted to. Using only her desire to keep me there immobilized me with her invisible force. I changed my thoughts to what I needed to do. I had to bring her back somehow. Focusing on that goal gave me the strength to try and defy her. I fought against her aura and tried to slowly reach out to her. The ominous smile fell when she noticed that I wasn't going to run from her and she dropped the invisible force that held me down.

I thought I was getting somewhere with her, reaching her somehow, but instead she lifted me up by my helmet and shattered it to pieces. The S.E.E.S. detached from my body and I was left completely defenseless. Since I wasn't running she decided to toy with me, like a tiny bug on the ground you play with when you're bored, flinging me around various parts of the destroyed forest. I felt hopeless. How was I supposed to reach her?

I was going to die like this, unable to save a single one of my friends. The negative realization filled my eyes with tears of frustration as she continued to kick me around randomly. It was only when I landed close to see enough to Rei's sleeping body that I re-empowered myself to stand up to her, even if it killed me.

"Kiko!" I shouted at her before she was able to kick me again. Her leg stopped mid-kick and I was determined to speak my mind before allowing her what she wished with me. "It's meâ¦" I pleaded, staggering to my knees and trying to catch my breath. I still wasn't reaching her and she raised her sword's tip to my forehead like she did with Ozias before impaling him. She drew it back, ready to make the easy kill. I stared into her eyes and saw her conviction as she thrust it at my despairing face. This was it, I was going to die but I at least wanted her to know it was me, "â¦it's Sarthâ¦"

Her blade stopped only millimeters away from my forehead but the only thing that caught my attention was how her expression suddenly changed again. My words reached her. I know it did. I saw it. Her fierce blue eyes dimmed like she was trying to recall a lost memory and her blade slowly lowered to her side. She was gazing at me in wonder, trying to remember who I was. I staggered to my feet in front of her. I didn't care if she killed me because I was determined to do what I've been dying to do since I met her that fateful day on Sola.

I slowly approached her, eyes still fluttering around as if trying to comprehend the mayhem around us. I put my hands around her back, pulling her closer to me and I slowly moved my face in on hers, kissing her gently on her soft lips, finally expressing my true feelings to her. I kissed her tenderly a few times before stopping.

I rested my forehead on hers and whispered to her, "I've always loved you."

The Kiko I fell in love with was finally back with me, "Sarthâ¦"

She moved in on me and we kissed again with a mutual, loving passion. My heart was racing and beating with joy as I finally confessed my love for her. I wanted to stay like this forever, never letting the moment end, forgetting all the pain we've been through to get to this point. She let go of her sword and wrapped her arms

tightly around me. Holding her close, I could feel the warmth begin to return to her body. It was the best moment of my life.

Once we stopped she gazed at me with sad eyes, "She's goneâ ¦ isn't she?"

It was like a punch to the stomach. I didn't want her to fall back into despair again but I couldn't lie to her, so I simply cast my eyes down. I knew she already knew the answer but it hurt just to recall it. We both cast our eyes to the ground and I squeezed her arms as I saw her break down and cry for the first time ever. I held on to her and we both grieved over the loss of Rei and our other friends that we've lost to this race.

I gave her a moment alone with Rei's body so I walked back over to the field clearing where I saw Ozias' body. What was this all for? What was the point of it again? The galaxy's ultimate obtainable powerâ ¦ the Millennium Galaxy Raceâ ¦ was it worth losing everyone over? I didn't even want to participate in the race, we were dragged in by the monster who was now dead on the field. It was *his* fault this happened. I felt Kiko brush up next to me as I asked myself those questions to the stars in the sky.

"Why did this happen?" I asked, full of heartache.

She entwined her fingers with mine, I looked over and saw her eyes were still red and raw from saying goodbye to Rei as she stared up at the stars.

"I don't know whyâ ¦" she whispered, "but I know how it ends."

I looked over at her, "How it ends?"

Her eyes focused on one star, "Do you believe in fate? That, things were meant to happen for a reason?" She turned back to me with an unwavering look.

I wasn't sure what she what she was getting at. "You think this happened for a reason?"

"Yes." She answered with conviction, "I'm the only one in the galaxy who can destroy the Vo stone, and now we have all the piecesâ ¦"

Our eyes darted back to Ozias' body on the ground in the middle of the field.

"Are you sure it can be destroyed?" I asked.

She nodded, "I *know* it can be."

"Then how do we do it?" I thought of her long black sword she had earlier.

She took a deep breath and squeezed my hand tight. "I have to shatter it while it's in one piece."

"The wielder holds Vo within themâ ¦" I thought about what she was saying, "you're going to destroy it within yourself?! No! You can't!" I said hysterically. I lost it quickly. There was no way I could lose Kiko. No, she was *all* I had left in the galaxy! "We'll hide all the pieces in far off places! In different corners of the galaxy! No one will ever find them!"

She waited patiently for me to stop making excuses and avoiding the hard truth. Even I knew we couldn't simply just hide the four stones but I wouldn't accept her death as the answer. I stopped to catch my breath and she came in and gave me a hug. I clutched her tight and found my tears pouring from my eyes as we held

each other.

"Take me with you" I sobbed.

She gave me a squeeze, "I'm sorry it has to be this wayâ¦" she cooed into my ear, tears falling from her cheeks as well. "You're strong, and you have a big heartâ¦I know you'll be okayâ¦" I was losing consciousness. The last words I would ever heard from her were, "I love you tooâ¦" before everything went black.

Chapter 45: Reason

45. Reason

My eyes slowly opened as the ground violently shook. I jumped up right away in search of Kiko just as a bright pillar of light lit up the dark sky, reaching into space itself. I averted and shielded my eyes from the immense light but continued to walk towards it. I knew Kiko was inside it, taking control of Vo to become the goddess of the galaxy. A thunderous blast of air kept me from moving forward.

"KIKO!" I shouted with all my might, but the blast merely blew away any effort to call to her.

I watched as her silhouette began to rise in the light, faster and faster until the light became a star in the sky. At first nothing happened, and then I witnessed, along with millions of others everywhere in the galaxy, a huge supernova illuminate all of space. Its blast scattered millions of tiny flying lights that flew off in all directions.

No one else in the galaxy knew that the supernova was Kiko, a girl who gave her life to preserve the peace in the galaxy. I fell to my knees and for the first time in my life, I wanted to die. I no longer had anything to live for. Cashel, Tammy, Rei and Kikoâ ¦ were all gone, leaving only me behind to lament over their absence alone. I had only been with them just over a year but it was the best year of my life and I would no longer get to have it back or let it grow into more Jago memories.

I collapsed on my back and watched the millions of lights fly overhead. I didn't mind dying while watching her streak across the sky. I imagined her right here next to me, holding my hand as I closed my eyes, hoping to never open them again.

My wish didn't come true. Somehow I was able to open my eyes again to a place I would only recognize after hearing a familiar voice.

"Dad, I heard you found itâ ¦ is it true?" came Stellan's aged voice.

Another familiar, but somber voice, "Yes, it was a few miles to the west of the battlefield."

"You didn't find Kiko or the others there?"

A heavy sigh, "I'm afraid notâ ¦ we'll only know more when Sarth awakens to enlighten us."

I was fully awake now and strained myself to sit up. I was alone in the room I shared with Cashel when we stayed with Vero here on Dezner. I had a few bandages wrapped around my torso, and leg which ached when I tried to move it.

Standing up was difficult but I managed to hop to the doorway and peer out. Stellan was walking back up the stairs when he saw me and his face enlightened instantly.

"Sarth! You're finally awake!" he ran up and put my arm around his shoulder to help me down the stairs and to a chair at the table.

I sat down and sighed. He watched me eagerly, waiting patiently for an explanation as to what happened to the Jago crew. I looked back at him. He already looked much older and sturdier even though only a year has passed.

"We saw the pillar of light in the sky and went to investigate and only found you lying on the ground half-dead." He explained. Then he asked with an eager face, "What happened to the others?"

I swallowed hard, hoping he wouldn't make me feel worse than I already did. I averted my eyes from his, "They're gone." I whispered.

He clenched his fists and I waited for him to start crying but he never did.

"We brought back everything we could find," he said in the same, unfaltering tone. "This is all we could find on youâ ¦" he took something small and silver out of his pocket and handed it to me. It was the data preserver that Tammy gave to me.

"Thanksâ ¦" I said to him turning the device over in my hands. I fiddled with it again but still didn't know how to open it.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A data preserver, but it won't openâ ¦"

"What, you don't know how to unlock it?"

"Yeahâ ¦ something like-" I froze. Something clicked in my mind.

I didn't know how to unlock itâ ¦I looked to my palm on my left hand where Tammy had written something the night before we landed on Thereon. Her hair was still tied around my pinky and it started to illuminate along with the unlocking code on my palm. I read the unlocking code, expecting some kind of numbered code but all it said was 'live'.

Stellan took a look at my hand with the same puzzled expression. "That's supposed to open this?"

"I guess soâ ¦" I replied unconvincingly.

Live? I did live even though I didn't want to. I clanked the data preserver down on the table with obvious frustration.

Stellan was watching me. He crossed his arms and peered into my soul, "Are you happy to be alive?"

I guess I wear my emotions on my sleeve.

"I have nothing left to live forâ ¦" I said gloomily.

"Do you think the others would like what you're saying right now?"

"They're *dead*, what does it matter?" I snapped.

I must've hurt his feelings, because he took a step back. It was hard to remember that he was still just a kid because he'd matured so much since we last met.

"Sorryâ ¦" I muttered, feeling the void within my heart. "There's nothing left for me to live forâ ¦"

He sulked over to the doorway and said to me before walking out, "I know they would want you to live your life to the fullestâ ¦ for themâ ¦"

I buried my face in my hands. No matter how much I wanted to disagree with him, I knew he was right. None of my friends would want to see me like this. Was that what Tammy was trying to tell me? To live on somehow, without them?

Click. The data preserver on the table popped open and I heard Tammy's voice for the first time since she died in my arms.

Months had passed with Vero, Stellan, and the other villagers on Dezner. I made nearly a full recovery except for every now and then I would get a pain in my leg and it would travel to my heart after remembering how I got it.

Vero and the other villagers managed to haul the Jago and the other ships and shuttles back to the village to scrap. They left my belongings to me to do what I wished with them and that included the Jago and shuttle.

I decided to leave it in a hidden cave. It wasn't like I knew how to pilot or operate it. I walked through it one last time. It was quiet and empty. Kiko had left a hologram image above the beds in the sky deck of all of us having dinner at the table one night before the race started. I left it there and continued through each room. Everything was left like we were about to come back and resume bounty hunting across the galaxy again.

I left and watched the cargo bay doors close, revealing the tattered letters '*Jago*' across the ship's body. I said goodbye to it and made my way up the mountain to a spot where Kiko and I would frequently watch the stars at night when we were living here.

I found a small opening in the cave that faced the beautiful scenery of the entire village, and placed the few items I brought with me there. I left the same hologram image that Cashel always had displayed in his room. It was of Rei, Kiko, Tammy and I when we were all laughing together in the sky deck. I also left Rei's iconic blaster she always had with the twinulator attached, Kiko's black-bladed knife with the burned-out firestar, and Tammy's data preserver.

I set them down gently next to each other and took the data preserver back in my hand. Tammy's data strand on my pinky glowed steadily. I had listened to the contents of the data preserver so many times that I've already memorized it but I decided to play it one last time before leaving their belongings to watch over the villageâ ¦ and myself.

Sarthâ ¦ if you're listening to this, then that means I was unable to tell you this in person, which I should've done a long time ago...

There is so much I want to tell you, but unfortunately I won't have the chance to. What I wanted to tell youâ ¦ were my true feelings.

By now you must know that Mechanites are incapable of such emotions, yet here I am, able to tell you the impact you've given me since we first met not that long ago. At first I wasn't sure what I was feeling, only that I had a longing to listen to you, talk to you, and just be around you. I didn't know what it was that was drawing me to you, until I came to my own conclusionâ ¦ it had to be love.

The realization of such a human emotion only made me more curious about you. I, however, know where your true feelings are directed, and I was, and still am, hoping you tell her how you truly feel about her.

Don't let her go. I know how she feels about you too, I've been watching both of your life-signs after all. She needs you, more than you know. We all do. If there's one thing we want you to continue doing, it's to live on. You may feel hopeless and alone sometimes, but never forget how much you mean to usâ ¦ to me. Live on Sarth, and find your true path in life. The Jago and her crew will always be there for you.

Take care Sarth, and there's one last thing I need to tell you, the Breccan and its crewâ ¦ they're still alive.

This is a shoutout to my very first fan SGAuthor!!

Thank you so much for being the very first reader and commenting on every chapter of the story!!

And here's to Banitt to being a close second!!

If you enjoyed this story I HIGHLY RECOMMEND checking out theirs!!

At some point this entire story will be edited and updated.

Some portions might change.

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