

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



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**IN HEAVEN  
AND EARTH**

**Amy Rae Durreson**

## **IN HEAVEN AND EARTH**

When the crew of the Medical Explorer Juniper arrive at the space city of Caelestia, they are horrified to find it floating airless in space with thousands of its people dead. The only survivor is a cyborg gardener, Vairya, who has been left amnesiac and terrified, barely able to choke out a few words: “It could happen again.”

As ex-military doctor Reuben Cooper explores the illusory rose garden of Vairya’s memory, where Vairya himself flirts and hides among the flowers, he discovers a terrible threat, not just to the crew of the Juniper but to all humanity.

Can four doctors and a cyborg fight a merciless enemy that can kill with a touch?

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## IN HEAVEN AND EARTH

By Amy Rae Durreson

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

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This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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## Photo Description

A cyborg stands in a ruined city, dressed in a thin robe, with his face lifted towards the stars. His hands are outstretched, as if in supplication, and his whole pose suggests sorrow.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

Medical Explorer MEx Juniper, internal report #014/case028:

*“Dr. Cooper reporting, 14 days after the destruction of Caelestia-1:*

*The sole survivor we’ve taken on board, a TC4 Cyborg, still can’t provide any information about what happened there. Examination showed severe damage to the memory chips holding his short-term recollection, making any data on the onslaught inaccessible to him. Reconstruction is in process, so far without results. The TC4 has shown uncharacteristic violent behaviour—maybe caused by irritation about his memory-loss. To prevent further damage we keep him shut down most of the time.”*

*I stop the recording. What a clusterfuck! Caelestia-1, the largest of the New Orbital Cities destroyed, 1.3 million inhabitants dead, no clue who or what did it. Some charred memory chips, probably holding our only leads. Two weeks of trying to restore the data, with no breakthrough in sight. And here I am, not able to stop thinking about that damned hunk of a Cyborg. A TC4, supposed to store the whole cultural and historical knowledge of Old Earth on his hard drive; a damaged memory-machine throwing temper tantrums. But what keep haunting me are his eyes, so human, so confused. His eyes, and his words I fear to include in my reports: “It’ll happen again.”*

*Sincerely,*

*Wintermute*

## Story Info

**Genre:** science fiction

**Tags:** cyborg, doctor, transformation, interspecies, redemption, other world, action, medical rescue, past issues/history, mild violence, quotations, tearjerker

**Word Count:** 38,460



# **IN HEAVEN AND EARTH**

**By Amy Rae Durreson**

## Chapter One

They found the cyborg frozen in the heart of the city, his face turned towards the uncaring stars. He looked more statue than flesh and steel, poised in midstep, but even from the end of the street, Reuben could see the glimmer of light in his eyes that meant he had not been deactivated.

All around them, the bodies of the fallen swayed and drifted in the streets, barely tethered to the station by the remnants of the platform's gravity. Many of the city's lights still shone over the airless streets, illuminating the bluish tone of the bodies' skin, the frost that surrounded their mouths and eyes, and the frozen blood on their lips.

Only the cyborg still stood upright. He only wore a thin white chiton, fastened by a loose gold cord. Pretty but useless, Reuben thought disdainfully, because it had still exposed his skin to the cold, and frost marked both steel and flesh.

"I'm going to check if he's responsive," Chanthavy said, her voice crackling over the coms. "Start gathering IDs from the dead. We've still not accounted for half the population."

"Aye aye, captain," Meili responded, her tone light enough to be mocking. She'd been getting more brittle and sarcastic with every street full of bodies they traversed. At least this wasn't another school.

Quietly, Reuben moved along the left side of the street. They were all encased in double layers of ward suits, one to keep them warm and breathing in this vacuum and another layer below to protect them from disease if they found any survivors. Even Reuben, who always expected the worst of any human outpost, had never imagined wearing his emergency gear here in Caelestia, one of the great space cities.

He bent over the first corpse, holding his gloved hand out to touch her face. The DNA reader shivered in the glove, making his palm itch, and a moment later a reading came up in the corner of his vision:

*Ha Nawabi*

Citizen code: *CL782093HY890*

Employment: *Records clerk, Taloquan and Dai, Importers*

Estimated Time of Death...

“Record to database,” Reuben commanded, blinking the scrolling text off. He didn’t need to read that. She was dead, like the rest of them. No data would help her now.

Chanthavy was bounding closer to the cyborg, her feet leaving the ground with every step. Reuben watched as he moved towards the next body. She was the captain, but the still figure of the cyborg was unsettling him. He was the only one of them who had ever been to war, and old battle instincts were making his scalp creep with sweat under his helmet. He didn’t trust the last man standing, whether it was in a battle, an election, or a massacre.

The cyborg did not react as Chanthavy sank to a halt in front of him. She reached out cautiously, the medical scanner in her glove flashing red, and touched his cheek.

The cyborg reacted so fast that Reuben barely saw the flash of movement before its cybernetic hand clasped Chanthavy’s throat and began to lift her.

Reuben was already bounding towards them, leaping through the air with all the grace the Rigel Orbital Fleet had forced into him. He hit the ground just hard enough to thrust him forwards with the perfect momentum to slam into the cyborg, grabbing his shoulders to stop himself from bouncing back. All three of them went sailing backwards across the street, carried by the force of Reuben’s blow.

They hit the opposite wall softly, but Reuben had his arm locked around the cyborg’s throat by then, wrenching his head back hard enough to hurt. He caught a glimpse of Chanthavy’s shocked face through the screen of her helmet, but then he brought his suited knee up hard. There were sexless cyborgs out there, but they were rare, and this one had looked all male.

And if it was male, human or machine, a knee to the balls would distract it.

The borg doubled up, releasing Chanthavy, and its foot caught the wall, pushing them both back into the street. By now Reuben was convinced that this borg had no military augmentations. Increased strength, sure, and greater physical resilience, but none of that mattered if you didn’t know how to use them.

Reuben, on the other hand, had survived General Ahrima’s combat medic training. Came top of his class even, which made him the most dangerous doctor in the galaxy and a damn sight more lethal than many professional soldiers. So it didn’t take much to press the flailing cyborg down to the ground

and hold him steady enough that Reuben could press his hand against the borg's bare chest.

"Sedate," he told the suit and watched as the borg's eyes widened and went hazy.

Reuben held him there until he was convinced the borg was unconscious. Then he commed Chanthavy. "You all right, captain?"

"I'm fine," she said, and Reuben managed not to wince at her cool tone. His crewmates didn't like to be reminded of his past. "What was he trying to say?"

"Say?" Reuben repeated.

"He was mouthing something. Didn't you notice?"

Reuben hadn't, and he felt his heart quicken. He had been trying so hard to just be a doctor again, but it seemed like his good intentions hadn't survived the first brush with violence. He took a moment to steady himself before saying, "I'd like to get him up to the ship. He's the only survivor we've found, and even artificial flesh won't stand the cold for much longer."

"Go ahead. But remember, Doctor, that the Sirius Conventions grant him the same rights to care as a genetic human."

"I know that!" Reuben snapped, his stomach clenching. Did she really think he, of all people, would disregard the law? Could a man ever escape his past? Biting back everything he wanted to say, he activated his connection to the ship. "Eskil, I need to bring a survivor on board."

"Someone lived through it?" Eskil demanded immediately. "Just one or are there—"

"One," Reuben said. "Cyborg, not military, showing signs of emotional distress, potentially violent. I need a blue room."

"Got one ready for you. In five, four, three..."

Reuben closed his eyes so he didn't have to watch the world go white as the transporter jerked them onto the *Juniper*. When he opened them, they were in one of the smaller sickbays. A blue force field separated it from the rest of the bay, and three gleaming robot aides were already moving forwards, hovering beside him to await orders.

"Lift the patient onto the bed and commence scan," Reuben told them, relinquishing the cyborg and rising to his feet. He let the robots do their job as

he stripped off his outer suit. He padded over to the bed, and tapped the wall to activate recording. “Commence log. This is Doctor Reuben Cooper, trauma surgeon, medical licence number 67249106, currently assigned to *Medical Explorer Juniper*, on the third circuit. We completed a tour of the Gamma Auriga Sector approximately thirty-six hours ago and entered hyperspace to transition to Caelestia for resupply and a rest period. On entering Caelestia space, we received a mayday message from the city. We advanced under shields and discovered the city was—”

His voice caught. He could only be dispassionate for so long, and he had to fight back the sudden knot of fear, panic, and grief in his throat, swallowing hard. “On our arrival, the city appeared to have lost atmosphere and have reduced gravitational capacity. Our instruments indicated that there was no breathable air left in the city. There was no evidence that life pods or emergency shelters had been activated.”

What the hell had happened down there? How had the entire city died so fast that no one could get away? There were supposed to be so many fail-safes built into the orbital platforms that they would maintain atmosphere under anything but a full military bombardment. Even then, sectors were supposed to seal off and maintain local conditions the moment there was an atmospheric breach elsewhere in the city.

There wasn’t even a scorch mark on Caelestia.

“Captain Som, Lieutenant Peake, and I proceeded to the city surface. As of fifteen hundred hours, we have located one survivor, currently under examination. We have explored approximately five point three percent of the city surface and confirmed five hundred forty-six fatalities.”

They might find another cyborg, or just possibly someone with the kind of military augmentations that would let them survive outside a ship’s hull for a few hours.

A beep from the robonurses pulled his attention back to the bed. The patient was naked, with the scan data gathering across the wall beside him. Reuben glanced at it, noting there was nothing scarlet enough to suggest critical danger and then tapped the contagion report to enlarge it.

No known pathogens and, more importantly, no symptoms suggesting the presence of an unknown or forgotten infection. With a sigh of relief, Reuben broke the seal on his isolation suit, kicking it off. One of the robots picked it up

with a scolding beep, but he was too busy drawing a proper breath to care. He had heard that city folk here in the peaceful prime cities, used to the parks and gardens of the orbital platforms, found ship air stale. After five hours in a sealed suit, nothing tasted quite so sweet to him.

Rocking back on his heels, he considered the data before him: some minor scrapes and frost damage, especially around the meld points between skin and cybernetic components, a slight excess of nitrogen in the blood, already normalising, a dark spot on the brain scan. He brought that up and out to examine properly and gaped.

It was a three-D rendering now he had enlarged it, the two halves of the skull folded back neatly to show the brain.

There was nothing there. The rendering showed that the inside of the skull was coated with something that gleamed and glittered like jet, but there was nothing else material there, just flickers and pulses of light darting in a web across the empty space within. Down towards the base of the skull there was a patch where the crystals had gone dull and the lights were flickering in repeating patterns, looping round and round in an endless circle.

He had never seen anything like it.

“Eskil,” he said. “You near a wallscreen? I need a consult.”

“Sure. Anything to turn my back on the death toll.”

“Any more survivors?”

“No.”

“Damn. Sending you a brain projection. Any chance you can tell me what I’m looking at?”

Eskil was their resident cybernetic expert. Reuben knew more about flesh than circuits.

“Open up for me, baby,” Eskil murmured to himself. “Sorry, Coop. Screen up here is on the blink again. Now, let’s have a look—well, fuck me sideways with a hypercortex!”

“Rather not,” Reuben said. “What’s that about?”

“ID!” Eskil said, sounding suddenly shrill. “Have you got an ID yet?”

“No. Is it dangerous?”

“Not if—get the ID, man. Get it *now*.”

Reuben reached up to tap the DNA scan data, activating the search function. “Waiting for the database. What’s your problem?”

“You,” Eskil returned, but he clearly wasn’t trying. “Come on, you antique crapsack of technology. Talk to Eskil, darling.”

“There are some things I don’t need to know about you and the computer,” Reuben said. Eskil’s reactions were making him nervous, and he rubbed his wrist, feeling the ridge of the tracking implant beneath the skin. He couldn’t afford to be involved in another disaster, not with his history.

The database chimed softly, and the cyborg’s personal data appeared on the wall. From Eskil’s indrawn breath, he could see it too.

Designated Name: *Vairya*

Sentence category: *Cyborg, TC4*

Citizen number: *CL00000000001*

Place of manufacture: *Terra*

Date of manufacture: *-1 Galactic Era*

Specialist category: *Archival unit*

Current employment: *Gardener*

“A gardener?” Reuben said incredulously and then took in the data again. “From *Old Earth*?”

“That’s Vairya.” Eskil sounded like he was on the verge of a religious experience. What was it about machine life that sent so many people off the edge of rationality?

“No surname?”

“He doesn’t need one. He’s a TC4. A real live TC4 in our sickbay.”

“Why don’t you help us both out by assuming I have no idea what you’re talking about?”

“T for Terran, C for Codex, 4 for the final generation.” Eskil spoke with the slow condescension Reuben had last heard from the Senate War Crimes Lawyer on Alpha Centauri, right before Reuben started to produce the evidence to support his statement. “Jogged your memory yet?”

“Because Rigel has always been known for its expertise on artificial life, clearly,” Reuben pointed out and regretted it as soon as he heard Eskil draw

breath. He had alienated the women within weeks of joining the *Juniper*, maybe because he wasn't humble and contrite enough to satisfy their outrage, maybe because he couldn't be bothered with all the social niceties they seemed to think were necessary. Eskil, on the other hand, was easy to talk to, mostly because he saw humans as a minor distraction from his true love. Reuben knew he mattered less than the ship in Eskil's mind, but he'd be damned if he lost his last bit of tolerable human company.

"Sorry," he muttered reluctantly. "Forget I said that. What's so special about a TC4, then?"

"They were made on Old Earth," Eskil said, and that note of awe was back in his voice. "Look at *when* he was made, Coop. They were the *last* Terran cyborgs ever made. His mind contains everything humanity ever knew: history, science, literature, music, art, *everything*. They thought humanity was doomed by then, and the TC4s were... well, humanity's final record, the thing that would outlast us."

Humanity was doomed to repeat the same mistakes, Reuben knew, and they had never stopped chasing after immortality. And somewhere, somehow, surrounded by nanites who responded to every human whim, someone had expressed the wish that everything should be preserved, made as strong as diamonds, made to last forever, and uttered that command aloud, out of madness or carelessness or who knew what strange whim.

And the nanites had. At first slowly and then at ever-increasing speed, everything on Earth had been transformed, carbon to carbon, flesh and earth and leaf, all changed into diamond. Some semblance of life had still flickered on, but all the subtleties of thought had faded as the relentless flood rolled over every living thing.

The only desire left in the gleaming creatures which had once been human was to follow that first imperative, to preserve everything as they had been preserved.

The last survivors of humanity had been those who had been off planet in those last desperate months: spacers, miners, crazy colonists in sleeper ships.

And, as Eskil explained, a handful of cyborgs, sent hurtling off planet as the last scientists on Earth sealed the atmosphere behind them, trapping themselves and humanity's doom together.

"Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair," Reuben said softly. Ahrima had quoted that little fragment of Old Earth at him countless times. It had been



years before he searched out the whole poem and realised just how bitter the irony was.

“What’s that?”

“Something your borg here would know, if you’re right. How the hell did he end up as a gardener in Caelestia?”

“The stories said he was dead. They’re fucking *myths*, Coop. Only thirty ever made, and less than twenty of those even made it off Earth. Humanity was fucked, or so everyone thought, and by the time the survivors started paying attention, half of the TC4s had vanished beyond human space. Those that were left—well, six of them suicided once they realised humanity was going to make it.”

Reuben cast a worried glance towards his patient, who was still sleeping peacefully. He looked as young and innocent as an angel, one of the pure and wrathful type they had venerated on Rigel platform, maybe, but just as unsullied by life as those blazing creatures. Satisfied that his patient, this Vairya, wasn’t about to hurt himself, he asked, “Why?”

“They used to programme pacifism into their cyborgs, back on the old planet,” Eskil said, sounding disapproving. “They couldn’t fight back, even to save themselves—”

“Fucking hell.”

“Yeah. The TC4s, on the other hand, *could* fight, seeing as they were humanity’s last hope, but they gave them an overdose of compassion, just to stop them from becoming monsters.”

“Compassion and the entirety of human history? Poor bastards.”

“Yeah. There’s Jibrail on Sirius, and Zaphkiel on Deneb. Binah was last seen on Alpha Centauri station a century ago, and everyone knew Vairya was here, but no one knew exactly where.”

Angels indeed, thought Reuben, who had spent a year in protective custody with nothing to do but read and seek absolution. Fascinated and disturbed, he walked over to the bed and looked down at his rescued cybernetic angel with unease.

As a child, Reuben had been taught to see the melding of flesh and skin as anathema. It had taken long years to overcome that prejudice, but now it held a strange fascination for him. He had always wondered what it would feel like to

touch a cyborg's skin, whether he would feel the shiver of cold electricity where a warm pulse should be, but over the years the revolted fascination he had felt as a boy had become something else, something that still made him ashamed. A truly open-minded man would not eroticise it, either, but simply accept that all sentient beings were human, regardless of their origin.

This particular sentient being was pale skinned and golden haired, so rare in the descendants of Earth's last survivors. Reuben held his own hand out, marvelling at the contrast between his own brown skin and the weird variation of the cyborg, flushed where his blood ran close to the skin and milk pale in other places. Pretty, Reuben thought, but strange. Had he been sent off from Old Earth unfinished, without proper pigmentation? His skin did not cover him completely, but in places vanished to reveal articulated plates of metal or throbbing pistons. His chest was half made, certainly, the underplates showing there and at his sides. How much of that was cold damage?

He had a human-enough cock, pink, and curled up primly against his belly. Did it function for more than just urine disposal, Reuben wondered. He'd never actually spoken to a full cyborg. Those who knew his name refused to speak to him.

*The polluted must be redeemed*, Ahrima's voice whispered in his memory, and he shuddered and stepped back.

"Any ideas on that brain scan?" he asked Eskil.

"Memory damage, possibly. I've got a search going, but I'm going to have to wait for results from Sirius. We don't have anything in the onboard manuals."

The patient sighed softly, his eyelashes flickering.

"He's rousing," Reuben said. "Let's see if he's any more coherent here."

"I've got you on camera," Eskil said.

Not hugely reassured, Reuben went to the bed, softening his voice to say, "Vairya, you are safe. Wake up slowly, now."

Vairya opened his eyes, blinking slowly. His eyes were blue, too bright a colour to be human, but the little sigh he gave was all misery.

"Hey there," Reuben said. "You're okay. I'm Dr Cooper, this is the Medical Explorer *Juniper*, and you are safe. If you can talk, say yes. If you can't, blink."

Vairya just stared at him, his eyes wide.

Memory damage, Eskil had said. Very carefully, Reuben asked, “Do you know who you are?”

Vairya wet his lips, but didn’t speak, still staring at Reuben. He looked frightened.

“What do you remember, Vairya?”

“Remember,” Vairya echoed, and Reuben swallowed back a gasp. Vairya’s voice was surprisingly deep and husky.

Probably, Reuben reminded himself firmly, because he’d been standing in an airless city for God knew how long. “Do you need water?” He turned away a little to reach for a cup.

Vairya sat up fast, whipping his hand out to seize Reuben’s wrist. “Remember!” he said, his breath catching.

“What do you remember?” Reuben asked, feeling his pulse beat against the strength of Vairya’s grip.

Vairya gasped, shuddering hard, before he choked out, “It could happen again!”

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Two

“What could?” Reuben said. “What happened to the city?”

“Again. It could... again. Again... againagainagain. It could happen—happen again. Happen.” He blinked, all the panic fading from his face as it went completely blank. He sank back a little, his grip softening. Then, with a jerk, he sat up and repeated, “It could happen again! Again. It could... again. Again... againagainagain. It could happen—happen—”

“Sssh,” Reuben said, his heart clenching as Vairya gasped his way through exactly the same loop again. “Sounds like your memory needs some work. Eskil? Any luck identifying that damage?”

“Getting the file open now. Come on you slow hunk of silicon, talk to Daddy.”

“...could... again. Again... againagainagain. It could...”

“Quickly, or I’m just going to sedate him again. He can’t communicate like this, and there’s no point letting him stay scared.” Reuben glanced at the wall, where flickering numbers showed that Vairya’s pulse rate was rising rapidly.

“Got it! Short term memory, but nothing here about how to fix it, except—uh oh.”

“What?”

Eskil’s voice sounded small and hopeless. “Knock him out, Coop. If he doesn’t heal on his own, there’s only one way to fix him.”

“How?” Reuben demanded, pressing Vairya back against the bed firmly and pressing the sedation icon on the wall, holding his hand there so it could check his fingerprint for verification. The bed hummed a little, vibrating at just the right speed to lull Vairya. Reuben unpeeled Vairya’s hand from his wrist and pressed it softly against the bedframe to receive the rest of the sedative.

“Again...” Vairya sighed, his voice reproachful. “It... could...”

“I know,” Reuben murmured back to him, “but I need you to sleep until we work out how to get you talking properly. Gently does it, now. Sleep safe.” A gentle tone would ease Vairya under faster now the sedative was taking effect, so Reuben kept saying soft things.

Vairya blinked at him twice, those blue eyes going hazy, but then he sighed and slept again. Reuben waited for a moment, watching to make sure he was properly under, before he stepped away from the bed. “Well?”

“He was made with nanotech,” Eskil said, sounding frightened. “Without it, we can’t fix him.”

Reuben glanced at his pharmacy with a shudder, imagining that tiny gleaming jar behind its layers of locked force fields. “Shit.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Eskil was still panicking four hours later when they all sat in the cramped mess, waiting for Chanthavy to finish her ansible call to Sirius.

“They can’t ask us to,” he was saying, drumming his fingernails against the peeling surface of the table. His hair was stirring around him like smoke, thick purple cables lifting off his shoulders with agitation, the sensor tips at the end of each dread flashing as they caught the light. “Only ten operations a year satisfy the emergency criteria—”

“You’ve been trained for it,” Meili snapped. She had been pacing up and down the mess, too jittery to sit, and now she swung on Eskil, turning perfectly on her heel. “We all have, and they’ve issued us with the bots. There’s no rational reason to prevent their use.”

“Fuck rationality,” Eskil said, his drumming getting faster and faster. “I don’t want to be remade. I don’t want those things inside me.”

Reuben poured them all another cup of tea, adding a liberal spoonful of sugar to Meili’s. He passed it to her and then put Eskil’s down in front of him, before leaning back against the counter with his own. The room felt cramped with all of them in here at once, especially when Eskil’s hair was spreading.

“Way I see it,” he said, “none of you are still human anyway. What difference does it make?”

“I’m human!” Eskil protested furiously, his hair suddenly standing out on end.

Meili turned to face Reuben, sneering as she focussed on him, her metallic eyes gleaming. “Didn’t you know, Esk? Cooper thinks we’re all worth less than his shit.”

“Didn’t say that,” Reuben pointed out, sipping his tea. “You all jump to add to your bodies, all your cyber implants, but you’re scared of a few little robots inside you? I don’t see the difference.”

“You wouldn’t,” Meili said flatly.

“It’s *different*, Coop,” Eskil said earnestly, leaning forwardly. “These things, they’re just enhancements. We could survive without them, if we had to—”

Reuben remembered a man in a green robe, eyeless and stumbling, pressing his hands to the wall to find his way.

“—but nano, that changes who you are. It remakes you.”

Reuben shrugged and poured another cup of tea at the sound of Chanthavy’s steps in the hall.

She took it with a nod of thanks and sank into her usual chair with a sigh. She looked old, the lines around her eyes deeper than they had been that morning, and her whole face sagging with sorrow and exhaustion.

“They’ve dispatched a Fleet investigatory team,” she said. “We are to remain here until they arrive. Our first priority is to repair Vairya’s memory and get an account of what happened, but they would also like us to start identifying the dead.”

“Did they have any suggestions *how* we’re supposed to fix him?” Eskil asked.

She looked at her tea, cupping her hands around the chipped ceramic, and said softly, “They’ve issued a Section Thirty-Nine exemption.”

Eskil drew his breath in so sharply that the sound hissed across the room. Meili’s tea sloshed over her hands, making her swear.

Chanthavy did not look up. “I am captain, and I will not ask it of any of you. I will inject the nanites—”

They all shouted over her. Even Reuben snapped, “No!”

“It’s too dangerous,” Eskil said. “We’ll draw lots.”

“It’s my duty,” Chanthavy began.

“We need you as captain,” Meili said. “One of us should—”

“I’ll do it.”

Reuben hadn’t intended to volunteer until the words burst out of him, but it felt right. He lifted his chin and met their horrified gazes. “Let me. He’s my patient.”

“I’m the tech expert,” Eskil said, every word reluctant.

“Then we’ll need you monitoring both of us. Chanthavy needs to be captain, and Meili’s expertise is contagious disease, not the mind. Vairya’s memory needs to be repaired and, last I checked, I’m the only brain surgeon on this ship. I’ll do it.”

Meili was staring at him, her brow furrowed in confusion. “I thought your body was too pure for technology?”

Reuben put his teacup down, irritated enough that the click of its base against the counter cut across the room like a gunshot. “I *betrayed* Ahrima. What makes you keep assuming I shared her prejudices?”

“Enough,” Chanthavy said wearily. “Reuben, you are in no way obliged to do this. I have already said as much to the Protectorate advisors.”

“They suggested me?” Reuben asked sharply. So much for gratitude.

Chanthavy’s lips narrowed, but she just repeated, “You are not obliged.”

“I’m volunteering,” Reuben said, and looked at them all. Chanthavy had a husband and two grown children on Sirius platform. Meili was the youngest of six siblings. Eskil had two elderly and doting fathers, who sent him long messages once a week, every one packed with photographs and sly jokes. At least nobody would miss Reuben if the nanojuice turned him to diamond.

It might even get him a hero’s obituary. What an irony that would be.

“Let’s do it,” he said, striding out of the mess. “No point in waiting, is there?”

It took all four of them to open the safe where the nano treatment was kept. Reuben was the one to take it out, though, closing his hand around the cool bottle. Suddenly, for the first time in years, he felt certainty rush through him. Here was a necessary thing, and he was the one made to do it.

As a boy on Rigel platform, he had been taught to believe in providence. He had rebelled against the idea even then, knowing, as only the young can know, that he had the intelligence and willpower to change the world for the better. As far as his faith had survived into adulthood, it had been in the belief that God had given him the ability to save lives for a reason, and so he would wage war on sickness and injury with all his strength.

Even that faith had long since failed him, but standing here now, with the stuff that had almost destroyed humanity shimmering in a vial in his palm, he felt suddenly close to God again.

“You still don’t have to,” Eskil whispered. “Not yet. We’ve got time to let you think it through.”

“‘If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come—the readiness is all,’” Reuben quoted. Eskil looked blank, so Reuben smiled at him ruefully and asked, “What do you do in hyperspace when the rest of us are reading?”

“Fly the damn ship,” Eskil snapped back with a ghost of a smile.

“Play games and watch vids like a normal person,” Meili said, rolling her eyes.

Chanthavy smiled at him, though. He wasn’t much older than Meili and Eskil, but her smile was that of an elder to an elder. “You’re hardly the Hamlet sort, Cooper.”

“Even Hamlet took action in the end, for all the good it did him,” Reuben said.

Chanthavy glanced at the uncomprehending faces of the rest of the crew and offered him a wry smile. “Another time, perhaps. Only you will be able to effect changes in our patient, but we will all be taking shifts to monitor your life signs. You have ten days before any nanites still in your system self-destruct. They will reproduce and change function at your direction. If the attempt proves fruitless, inform us, and we will revive you.”

“You won’t have any tools in there except what you visualise,” Eskil said, his hair twisting into knots. “On the other hand, the bots will respond to your every whim. You’ll need to set up a mental protocol to control—”

“I did the simulation training too,” Reuben said.

“Really?”

Reuben rolled his eyes as he walked over to sit on the second bed that Meili had set up. He stripped off and shrugged on a robe before he settled back against the crinkling pillow. “Yes, Eskil, I am just as qualified to be here as the rest of you.”

“Bet it didn’t take you as many attempts to pass the sim as it did Eskil,” Meili said, adjusting the bed settings. “Or me, for that matter.”

“Mei and I met in the resit class,” Eskil said. “Hey, *Juniper*, what did Cooper score in NTSIM01? Was he as crap as the rest of us?”

“Ninety-seven percent, Dr Levin.” The ship’s computer had a prim voice, despite Eskil’s many attempts to reprogram it.



They all turned to stare at Reuben, who glared back. “What? They docked marks when I swore at the examiner. When did you hack into my records, Eskil?”

“It’s a sign of affection,” Eskil tried, but he was still staring. Suddenly, he smiled. “Okay, then, I’m a little less worried. Good luck, Coop.”

“Ready?” Chanthavy said, holding out her hand.

He passed her the vial. “As I’ll ever be.”

Eskil and Meili left, and Reuben tried to find the most comfortable position on the bed. He spread his legs a little and winced as the bed’s extensions telescoped up and probed their way into place. He didn’t want to wake up swimming in his own waste, but knowing that didn’t make the damn things any less cold and uncomfortable.

Across from him, Chanthavy was administering the first dose of nano treatment to Vairya. Now she returned to him. The nanites were in sync with each other, Reuben knew from his training, allowing a doctor with matching nanites in his bloodstream to direct them through a patient’s body with only willpower.

“I’ll send the activation pulse in five minutes. You should be safely under by then.”

“Thank you.”

She looked down on him, her brow creased with concern. “Reuben...”

“I volunteered. I’m trained. I’m capable.” He liked Chanthavy, but she worried through things so slowly it made him impatient. She was honest, conscientious, humourless, and had been one of the few captains willing to accept his application. He respected her, but he wanted to act now, not get caught in her second thoughts.

*Conscience does make cowards of us all*, he thought and jammed his hand against the sedative pad. “Count me down, captain.”

“Breathe slowly,” she said, her hand warm on his shoulder. “Ten... nine... eight...”

He felt the pinch of an injection as he drifted away, but by then the sedative was drifting through him, wrapping him in clouds, and he couldn’t bring himself to care what else was now working in his blood.

For a long time, he hung in that misty place between waking and dreaming, perfectly at ease. It was quiet here, with no one demanding his attention or judging him with every frown. Here, he could rest.

Dreamily, he willed the clouds away and imagined stars instead, the light-strewn sky over Rigel. He had loved the stars once, before he set his heart on medicine, and he could still trace and name every beloved constellation. He had never really expected that he would end up so far from home, exiled to the wandering stars, but he had dreamed of flying through the stars then, as some heroic adventurer seeking out and saving long-lost outposts of humanity.

Well, he was doing that now, in a way. He hadn't known as a child that most of those colonies, cut off when Old Earth died, would need rescuing from their own bodies more than dangerous aliens. Too many of the early colonies had struggled to adapt to alien soils, or to live on space platforms made out of gutted colony ships or hollowed out asteroids, like Caelestia. The strongest—Alpha Centauri, Sirius, Caelestia, and Deneb—had recovered first and joined together into a loose federation. Others had vanished, died of radiation, malnourishment, civil wars like Rigel's, or any of the countless dangers that awaited humans in space. Even the stronger cities had needed a century to recover before they started sending out medical teams to locate and help the lost colonies.

Slowly, as he gazed at imaginary stars, he began to notice streaks of silver across the sky, sparkling like meteors.

Each one left a trail of shimmering light that slowly covered the sky in gleaming cobwebs. Reuben watched it quietly until it began to cover the stars. Then he reached up and grasped a handful of threads, willing the scene around him to change.

This was the skill that had made him pass the simulation so easily, the one which others struggled to acquire. He was the master of his own dreams.

He found himself in a version of his own infirmary, one where the corners of the room didn't quite meet and where the wall screen was webbed with silver.

"Connect with your counterparts in the patient," Reuben said. In the simulations, he had always found it better to give verbal commands. It kept his whims and feelings out of the interface more effectively. "Project image of patient's mind."

The projection came up on screen immediately. The nanites were a damn sight faster than the *Juniper's* computer. Amused, Reuben crossed to the wall, zooming in until he was looking straight at the damaged patch in Vairya's memory. Little silver specks scuttled across the screen, but Reuben ignored them for the moment. This was a much clearer image than the best the ship's scanners could do.

He could now see that the gleaming inside of Vairya's skull was formed of countless tiny scales, overlapping and gleaming. Light flickered across them in a ceaseless rainbow ripple. In the damaged corner, a whole streak of scales had gone dim, blackened in places. They had not been entirely destroyed, though, so he touched each one on the screen, highlighting them.

"Nanites, repair selected cells," he commanded and then took a careful breath as he issued the truly dangerous command, "Replicate as necessary to complete previous command."

The little silver dots stilled for a moment, before they all converged on the damaged area. Within seconds, the burnt cells had vanished below a roiling spread of silver.

If this was all that was needed to heal a man, Reuben could understand why the scientists of Old Earth had found this technology so seductive. Why was it that every generation had to learn again that you shouldn't trust anything which seemed too good to be true?

On the screen, the silver dots were shifting away from the damaged area, like iron filings repelled by a magnet. Reuben frowned as they revealed the same damage, barely altered. A few of the cells were gleaming again, but most were still dull. As Reuben watched, a thin line of light appeared around them, gleaming with the same play of colours as the lights that swirled across the rest of Vairya's mind.

One of the silver dots crept back towards the damage, only to bounce off the shining barrier.

Interesting. Not so easy, after all.

Time to see if he was completely alone in here. Imagining a com chip in his ear, he asked, "Eskil, can you see what I'm visualising?"

Eskil's voice came back with a slight echo of distance. "No, but I can hear you loud and clear. You're speaking out loud."

"Get your scan up and zoom in."

“On it, but give me a clue what... oh. That’s odd.”

“And not my doing. Is he still completely out?”

“Yeah. Looks like his brain is fighting back. Could be an inbuilt defence.”

“Find out for me. I’m going to try something different.” He turned his attention back to the screen. “Nanites, form a spearhead and break through that wall.”

They rushed to obey, but even their most concentrated attack merely recoiled from that thread of light.

“Nothing I can find anywhere about defence protocols,” Eskil said, “but no one really knows much about the TC4s.”

Reuben grinned up at the screen, relishing a challenge. “I’ll have to be creative, then.”

Eskil cleared his throat, and asked hesitantly, “Have you considered that it may be psychological? If he’s suffering some form of traumatic amnesia, he may well be subconsciously fighting the memory.”

“Do cyborgs have a subconscious?” Reuben wondered.

“I think you’re about to find out.”

Reuben pondered that, regarding his screen, and grimaced. This infirmary was just a mental projection, albeit a comfortable one, but it was *his* imaginary landscape. If Eskil was right, he needed to see what was in Vairya’s mind, not his own.

“Nanites,” he murmured. “Cease hostilities. Show me what Vairya is dreaming.”

Signal to signal, brain to brain, imagination to imagination, he and Vairya were joined right now. This was the place where science and magic became one, and it both scared and fascinated him.

The projection of Vairya’s brain vanished from the screen. In its place, a new picture appeared, like something out of an ancient painting or fantasy vid. A walled city stood among green fields, its white walls gleaming like pearl in the sunlight. Around it, an army had gathered, knights in gleaming silver armour riding up and down on metallic horses.

How bizarre.

Nonetheless, Reuben's next move was obvious. Taking a deep breath, he stepped through the screen, into Vairya's dream.

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## Chapter Three

It didn't feel like a dream. The grass was crisp beneath his feet, and he could feel a cool wind gusting past his cheeks. Behind him, the door to a large tent flapped and billowed.

The silver knights had all turned to line up before him in perfect rows. They all wore visored helmets and metalled gauntlets, with not a hint of skin showing.

"Nanites," Reuben said, and they all saluted, hands clanging off their helmets.

There was something disturbing about the way they had no faces, and Reuben wished that Vairya's imagination had pushed them into a different shape. They were supposed to be mindless and functional. The hint of humanity this shape gave them just emphasised how inhuman they really were.

"Cease the attack," he told them. "Take a flag of parley to the walls."

Three of them immediately wheeled and rode off, the banner they carried changing colour as they moved. Another swung down from its saddle and offered Reuben its horse.

He didn't know how to ride, but since the horse was metal and the whole scenario subject to his imagination, he dragged himself up the horse's side and into the saddle, jerking the reins in the direction of the castle.

With a soft whirr of cogs, the horse carried him in that direction.

It was only a few minutes before he arrived at the gates of the city, but it gave him time to survey the landscape around him. It was an odd place. For the most part, it looked like something from an ancient picture: castle, blue sky, ploughed fields rising in gentle curves, cobbled road placed at an aesthetically pleasing angle across the fields.

All across the fields, however, thin stakes of glass rose towards the sky, glittering in the sunlight and confusing the eye. They struck Reuben as ominous, for all they should have been fragile, and he was glad none stuck out of the road. All the same, he directed his iron horse to the middle of the road to avoid them, and shuddered when a wind shifted through them, making them hum and moan in a way that set his teeth on edge.

He was glad to reach the gatehouse of the citadel, where his nanoknights were waiting for him, their white flag streaming in the wind.

On the wall over the gate, a lone man in a white surcoat was standing, his blue cloak flaring in the breeze. Reuben shaded his eyes with his hand and looked up at him.

Vairya looked back at him.

In the infirmary, he had been a body and a medical puzzle. Now, staring down at Reuben with the wind stinging colour into his cheeks and tousling his fair curls, he looked like a man, and a damned pretty one at that.

“Hello,” Reuben called to him. “I’ve been looking for you.”

Vairya didn’t seem to have heard that. Instead, he stood straight, a cold expression settling on his face. “Sir Knight, I am Vairya, lord of this castle. Wherefore do you besiege us with such strength of arms?”

What the fuck? Sighing, Reuben reassessed the situation. They were in Vairya’s mind, after all, which combined a dose of amnesia with memories of all of human history. If he had to operate within the bounds of the scenario to win Vairya’s trust, so be it. He had seen enough silly vids set in the ancient era.

“Lord Vairya, I greet you in the name of the Sirius Protectorate, whom we both serve. I am Sir Reuben, late of Rigel, Knight-Chirurgeon. As a penance for my sins, this geas has been laid upon me: I may not pass by any man who suffers a wound or sickness without offering him my service until he is healed once more.”

“Oh, well played,” Vairya said, his eyes bright and his mouth tilting into a grin, “but that’s really not what a geas meant. You’re muddling your myth cycles.”

Reuben crossed his arms and glowered. “Nonetheless, I swore an oath. Let me in so I can treat you.”

“What of your fierce warriors? Are they your bodyguards, good knight?”

Vairya was laughing at him. Irritated, Reuben dug out a smirk of his own. “You mean my orderlies? Absolutely essential to the healing process.” He was starting to enjoy this.

“Orderlies in armour? How original.”

Reuben shrugged one shoulder. “Believe me, the first time you get punched by some convulsing idiot, you see the need.”

“Invalids,” Vairya said, his voice dripping sarcasm. “Such a nuisance.”

“Damn right. Some won’t even let me in their gates.”

Vairya raised his brows. “Gracious me, Sir Reuben, I begin to see why someone might have laid a geas upon you.”

“Some people just don’t appreciate my bedside manner. Let me in, Lord Vairya.”

“So you can show me your bedside manner?”

Oh, so the little shit was going to flirt with him. Unimpressed, Reuben crossed his arms and glared. “Because you’re sick, and I have siege weapons.”

As soon as he said it, he wondered if he had pushed his luck too far. People tended not to recognise his sense of humour. They were more likely to take him at face value and hate him.

Vairya, after a second of incredulity, collapsed into a fit of laughter, leaning hard against the battlements. The laughter lit him up, and Reuben had to bite back a smile of appreciation. For someone who had been designed as a glorified database, he was too pretty for his own good.

When Vairya stopped laughing and stood up properly, he said, “I will let you in, and two of your orderlies, but know this, Sir Knight: mere medicine alone will not cure the Dolorous Wound I have suffered.”

He left the wall, and Reuben rocked back on his heels to wait. Something about that last comment had tickled his memory. It had been something he read, in those long months in witness protection when he had nothing to do but wait for the trial and read his way through over three millennia’s worth of literature. In the cold, clean isolation of a room in space, he had been drawn to old stories, the passion, violence, and colour of knights and heroes, devils and the doomed, the plays of Shakespeare, the poetry of dying empires, the raging against the dying of the light of those who could only reach the stars in their dreams. When he had finally been set loose to live his own life again, he had been more educated, if no wiser. All he had learnt from his reading was that people were still stupid in the same old ways, no matter the era or the technology they wielded.

It had been oddly comforting at the time, when he was face to face with the price of his own hubris, but there had been times since when he wondered if he had missed something.



By the time the wicket gate creaked open, he had chased down the reference, and he didn't bother to hide his incredulity. "The Dolorous Blow was suffered by the Fisher King in Arthurian myth. You, on the other hand, just have a particularly irritating head injury."

"Irritating to me or you?" Vairya inquired, holding out his hand.

"Both."

Vairya laughed again. Closer up, he looked subtly different to the body in the infirmary. Everyone did, when they were projecting their own self-image, but there was so much more life and mischief in his face that he looked like his own brother. "Do come into my city, Sir Reuben. We are honoured to have you as our guest."

"The honour is all mine," Reuben said, remembering some manners, and waved to two of his nanoknights to follow him inside.

"Aren't you going to ask why I chose that particular myth?"

"Since a wound to the thigh was a medieval euphemism for castration, I'm just going to assume—"

"My dick works just fine," Vairya snapped, the first hint of irritation in his voice. "I chose the Fisher King because he can't be healed by just anyone. It has to be someone worthy."

Reuben wasn't convinced. There were plenty of myths about sick kings. If Vairya had chosen this one, it meant something, although probably not sexual dysfunction. It was a reminder that this man, for all his banter, was a patient and a terrified and traumatised one at that. Gentling his voice, he asked, "How may I prove myself worthy?"

Vairya shot him a startled look, and said hurriedly, "Do come and see my garden, Sir Reuben."

"I'm not here to pick flowers," Reuben started, but Vairya seized his hand and dragged him forwards, through the deep gateway and out into the sunlit land beyond.

He had expected a castle yard or a city. Instead, the walls of Vairya's citadel circled a vast rose garden. There were walls scattered between the flowers, but they were all overgrown with flowering briars. The air smelt sweet as he stepped forwards in surprise, the scent so heady that he felt a little dizzy. Swathes of coloured flowers curled across the ground like streaked marble:

pink, red, yellow, white, all still in bud, but close enough to opening that the air was full of their perfume.

“Aren’t they lovely?” Vairya asked and reached out to touch one of the roses tenderly, running his finger down the pink curve of its petals.

“Beautiful,” Reuben said, “but I am here for you, not the flowers.”

Vairya shrugged. “But I am here for the roses. They have such short lives, and they are so lovely when they flower. They deserve to be cared for.”

“What about the people in the city? Don’t they deserve your care too? We need your memory working so we can find out what happened to them.”

Vairya bowed his head towards the flower, breathing in softly. When he looked up, his eyes were sad. “I was starting to think you might be the one, but you don’t understand at all. You can’t help me.”

“I could if you’d let me,” Reuben said in frustration, but Vairya just shook his head.

What was he missing? Oh, it was obvious enough that Vairya didn’t want to remember and was twisting this scenario to avoid it, but there must be a weakness here, some flaw in Vairya’s defences that Reuben could exploit to break through all the fear and avoidance.

“You doubt I am worthy? Set me a task, and let me prove my worth.” He knew the kind of quests a scenario like this would throw up, fighting monsters, fetching obscure items, or rescuing princesses, and he was confident his imagination was a match for any of them.

Vairya hesitated, lifting his shoulders slightly. “That’s not how—”

Reuben pressed his advantage. “It’s only fair. I’ve come here with the best of intentions, as a complete stranger who knows nothing of your situation. You owe me a chance to prove myself.”

Vairya was quiet for a moment. Then he lifted his chin with a sudden sharp grin. “You won’t like it.”

“Try me.”

“Oh, I will. Your task is trial by ordeal.”

“And what will that prove?” Reuben asked, intrigued. It seemed out of character.

“Your determination.”

“Trying to scare me off? It won’t work.” In here torture was merely a matter of the mind, and Reuben knew he could out-think the mere illusion of pain.

Vairya led him under an arch covered with scarlet flowers, into a round of grass. Roses surrounded it, and a pebbled path led across it to a door.

It stood within a stone archway, with the path continuing on either side. It was made of wood, with a heavy iron ring as its handle. Reuben walked around it, trying to swallow a laugh. He was beginning to suspect that Vairya was taking his ideas from bad vids rather than any actual historical source. Wagging his eyebrows, he said, “Let me guess—the Chamber of the Ordeal?”

“No,” Vairya said, though he looked cross. “Of course not.”

“What is it, then?”

“It’s, er... It has no name. It’s the Nameless Chamber.”

“Of Dread?” Reuben inquired, grinning. “The Nameless Chamber of Doom? Destiny?”

“It needs no name,” Vairya said primly, but amusement was starting to dance in his eyes again. “It is beyond such petty mortal concerns.”

“The rack, boiling oil, or pliers to my toenails?”

Vairya looked horrified. “What sort of doctor are you? That’s barbaric.”

“Torture always is,” Reuben said grimly. “No matter how civilised men try to justify it.”

“I don’t intend to torture you, just understand you. It won’t hurt.”

He seemed genuinely upset, so Reuben smiled a little, wanting to reassure him, and opened the door.

It did not, inevitably, simply open on the garden on the other side of its frame. Instead, a long grey corridor led away into the distance. Reuben recognised its type at once, a space station passage. Nowhere else combined that windowless blandness with such scope.

“You coming?” he asked Vairya.

“I’ll watch from here.”

“If this turns out to be an emergency exit, I’m going to be overflowing with righteous wrath when I get back.”

“It’s not a trick.”

Reuben shrugged and stepped through the doorway. It hissed shut behind him, and he turned to see it had become a metal hatch. Shrugging again, he walked along the corridor at a steady speed, bracing for an attack.

None came, but after a few minutes the corridor ended at another hatch. Reuben touched the keypad, and took a slow breath as it slid open. Whatever unpleasantness Vairya had concocted for him, he was ready.

The door opened to show a wide office backed with a clear wall that displayed the stars beyond. A glass desk stood on a slightly raised dais, and someone was standing by the window, looking out at the vastness of space.

Reuben froze. He knew this room, knew it couldn't be real, had long ago been dismantled.

The figure at the window turned and stepped forwards into the light.

"Dr Cooper," General Ahrima said, her voice soft and dangerous, "I've been waiting for you."

Reuben's throat closed.

"Come in. Sit down. We should talk."

He still couldn't breathe, each breath catching in his throat before he could pull it into his lungs. His head felt hot and swollen, his pulse beating like a drum in the back of his skull, and he gasped desperately, trying to think past the sight of her, smiling at him with that terrible mixture of charm and menace.

She wasn't here. It wasn't real. She was imprisoned on Sirius, her mind lulled by soft drugs, and her will chained. She couldn't hurt him now.

Napoleon, he remembered, had escaped from Elba. He had been one of the few historical figures Ahrima had recognised and admired.

"We have worlds to conquer, my friend," she said, leaning back against the desk with an easy smile. "I need men of your calibre, Cooper."

His vision was going black at the edges, but he managed to croak, "No."

Her smile didn't fade, but even the illusion of warmth faded from her dark eyes. "I know everything you have done, Cooper. You cannot refuse me. I own you."

"No," Reuben managed again, but all the other words caught in his throat. He threw his hand out, clawing at the air to pull breath back into his lungs. "No!"

And, neatly and suddenly, a wall of darkness rolled over him, scrolling down from the corner of the room until he drowned in it.

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## Chapter Four

He woke in the infirmary with a breathing mask over his face, and Eskil standing beside him, one of his dreads plugged into the bed as he perused the medical data scrolling across the wall. Meili stood in the doorway, her arms crossed as she stared at him.

This was the real sickbay, then, not his imaginary one. Surprised, Reuben pushed the mask off and rasped, “What happened?”

“You had a panic attack,” Eskil said. “I pulled you out.”

“Shit,” Reuben said, sitting up enough to glower at Vairya where he lay sleeping on the other side of the bay. “Little fucker ambushed me.”

Meili snorted. “Your respect for your patients is always such an inspiration, Cooper.”

“What did he do?” Eskil asked more gently, holding his hand up to hush her.

Reuben didn’t feel like sharing. “Doesn’t matter. I was making progress. I need to go back in.”

“Not until your breathing and heart rate have settled.”

“Fuck that.”

Eskil glared at him, which was unusual enough that Reuben shut up. “Right now, I’m your doctor too. You don’t get to put yourself at any more risk until I say so.”

“Get Meili to do it,” Reuben grumbled. “She doesn’t care if my heart explodes.”

Meili grinned at him, sharp-toothed. “Damn right.”

“Hippocrates,” Eskil said to her, stressing every syllable.

“Never heard of him.”

Reuben grinned at her as Eskil’s unused hair stood on end. “And you call yourself—”

“Always works,” Meili commented to Reuben, returning his grin. “You manage to talk to your cyberboy?”

There was something oddly reassuring about their mutual loathing, and Reuben returned her smirk with a lazy shrug. “Briefly. Eskil had the right idea. He’s using every dodge he can to avoid his memories.”

“Going to do something about that?”

“Sure, when Eskil stops fussing.”

“You’ll be here forever.”

“I’m still here,” Eskil put in mildly. “Stop baiting him, and tell him what you found.”

“I can do better than that. *Juniper*, show headcam from fifteen thirty-four.”

A rectangular window opened up, shouldering the medical reports to the side of the wall. It showed the airless and dark remains of Caelestia. This was a residential area, and had clearly been tree-lined once, because blackened boughs hung by the sides of the doors and stretched across the street. Reuben thought of Vairya’s rose garden and wondered what had flowered here once.

A couple of glass statues stood beside the leafy arches, gleaming in the dim light, and the walls were pale. It must have been a pretty place once.

On the screen, the observer entered the building. Inside stairs and lifts showed there must be higher floors, but they turned into one of ground floor apartments.

There was a family in there, all caught in death.

Unlike the people in the street, they hadn’t collapsed where they stood when the air ran out. They were all seated quite comfortably, angled towards still-playing vids on the walls or games rising out of the flexible table tops.

“This is what’s weird,” Meili said, before he could make his own observations. “All through the residential areas, we found people who had been connected to the city net before the disaster. All of them were already brain dead when the air ran out. The only ones who died of air loss were those who weren’t connected to the net.”

“What killed them?”

“Haven’t got that far yet. Caelestia has a mental net, and they’ve all got burns around the wireless chips in their cortex. Something, or someone, got to them through the net, and we’re not planning to sign in to find out how.”

“Someone?” Reuben echoed, turning to look at Vairya. “You think it was him? No.”

“Why not?”

Reuben shrugged. “Doesn’t seem the type. Too easily shocked.”

Meili raised an eyebrow. “You woke up screaming.”

“He didn’t make me scream,” Reuben said and forced himself to settle back against the pillows calmly. “Send me back in.”

Eskil looked concerned. “Your heart rate is still a little fast.”

“Send me back. I need to talk to Vairya.”

“Ask him if he killed his city on purpose or whether it was an accident,” Meili suggested sharply.

Reuben ignored her to close his eyes and breathe in deeply. He felt the pinch of the sedative again, and let the stars rise around him.

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He walked straight into the garden, tasting the sweetness of the roses before the stars had faded. He stood still as his vision cleared, watching the roses take form around him, their flowers ruffs of elegantly folded petals and their stems twining over the rubble of long abandoned walls.

“A shame I’m not the one with the headcam,” he said to the invisible watchers in his sickbay.

“See something interesting?” Meili asked sharply. “A clue?”

“Flowers,” Reuben murmured. “There’s nothing here except flowers.”

As soon as he’d said it, though, he realised it wasn’t quite true. There were walls here too, low, broken, worn away by time and the burrowing roots. The outer bailey might be the only wall which was still at its full height, but there had been buildings within the wall once. Intrigued, and with no one in sight to ask, Reuben turned up the next sloping path between the flowers.

It led him onto a small mound. From there he could see the whole southern side of the garden.

For the first time, he realised how quiet it was.

There were no birds here. In all the vids he’d seen of real planets, there were animals: birds on feathered wings and small creatures playing in the undergrowth. He had even been to the great zoological gardens on Sirius Station to see the descendants of the wildlife rescued from old Earth. There were no people here, either, no happy young lovers courting in the bowers.



In Vairya's dreamworld, there were only flowers, rustling sadly under the wind.

From here, Reuben could see the pattern the walls made, and suddenly it seemed familiar. When they docked above Caelestia, they had crossed over the spaceward side of the city, where only force fields separated the hollowed out asteroid and its atmosphere from the stars, and had looked down on the city.

The streets had followed the same patterns as the broken walls of Vairya's garden.

Reuben sighed.

Locked within his own mind, Vairya had hidden the destruction of Caelestia under sweet flowers, but he had not been able to escape it. The truth was there, if you knew how to look.

He needed to talk to Vairya again. Scanning the horizon, he spotted a distant glimmer of light. It was little effort to improve his own vision until he could see one of his nanoknights moving slowly between the rows of flowers, bent over something. The other was a few rows away, in a similar posture.

Reuben studied the route to them and then began to run. He had never been a star athlete, although he made the effort to stay fit, but the only restriction in here was the limits of his imagination, and so he ran at record-breaking speed, darting down long avenues and hurdling gates with the lightest of touches. It was fun to move so freely, and he was laughing a little by the time he reached the nanoknights.

Then he realised that they had lost their swords and were wielding hoes.

The laughter broke out of him completely, surprise and delight and irritation all together.

"I thought helping things to grow suited their nature better than war," Vairya said, stepping out into the bower. Despite his casual words, he was wringing his hands and peering at Reuben anxiously.

"You said," Reuben growled, "that you wouldn't hurt me." He took a pace forwards, suddenly angry. Vairya had flirted and teased and then thrown him to Ahrima's mercy.

"I didn't intend to," Vairya said, stepping forwards himself (brave, then, because Reuben knew he was intimidating in a rage). "It was just meant to be something unpleasant from your past to see how you react."

“And do I look like someone whose past is full of light and flowers?” Reuben demanded.

“No,” Vairya said and held up his hand before Reuben could continue. “And I’m sorry. I had no idea who you were.”

“But you do now?”

“I’m always linked to the city net,” Vairya said. “I looked you up.”

“Disconnect!” Reuben snapped, taking another urgent step forwards. “Now!”

“Why?” Vairya asked. “I like to know things. I can see the city through it, you know, the other city. I can see the dead.”

“Lots of them were connected to the net when they died. Disconnect, Vairya.”

Vairya laughed, soft and humourless. “Oh, Sir Reuben, trying to save me? It wasn’t the net that killed them. They were doomed before that. We were all doomed from the moment that—”

“What?” Reuben demanded when he stopped. “When what happened? How did they die, Vairya?”

“Gently,” Eskil murmured in his ear. “Don’t provoke him.”

“He’s no killer,” Reuben said flatly and took another step towards Vairya. “You didn’t kill your people, did you?”

Vairya’s head came up, his eyes widening with shock. “Kill them? Me? No! Never! Who thinks I could ever hurt them?”

“My colleagues,” Reuben said. “Someone or something liquefied the brains of everyone linked into the city net. Was that you?” He was pushing hard, he knew, far too hard, but he wanted to shock the truth out of Vairya. They needed to know what had happened here.

“That wasn’t what killed them!” Vairya cried. “That was the only way I could *save* them!”

“By melting their brains?”

“By uploading them!” The words tore out of Vairya, and then he clapped his hand across his mouth, like a child caught in a lie. Then, very slowly, he wrapped his arms around himself and began to rock on his heels. “I couldn’t

save their flesh, and some of them I couldn't save at all, but I thought I would still be able to transmit them. Then the Enemy took the ansible transmitters, and we were all trapped here together. We can't get out."

"What enemy, Vairya?" Reuben asked, forcing his voice back to something gentle.

"*The Enemy*," Vairya whispered. "The Enemy came. They found us again, and I had to save the people. Humanity must go on, Sir Reuben, even if the planets and cities fall. You must go on."

"Tell me about the enemy, Vairya," Reuben coaxed, stepping closer again. He was almost within reach of Vairya now, and could see, for the first time, the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, too quickly and shallowly.

"The Enemy is the enemy is the enemy-enemy-enemy," Vairya babbled and then jerked to a stop. To Reuben's dismay, he stuttered, "It could happen again! Again. It could... again. Again... againagainagain. It could happen—happen—"

"Shit," Reuben said. "Lost him."

"He's run away?" Eskil asked. "What the hell was that, Coop?"

"I got some answers," Reuben pointed out as he strode back to the nanoknights. He took one of their hoes, not without a slight struggle, and lugged it back to Vairya, the nanoknight watching him forlornly from a distance.

"...again. Again... againagainagain. It could..."

"I'm only doing this because this is an imagined landscape, and I think this will be more psychologically effective than an imaginary sedative," Reuben muttered, to assuage his conscience, and hit Vairya over the head with the hoe. Twice.

Vairya's babble trailed off into a yelp of pain, and he fell over.

Reuben cast the hoe aside in relief and knelt down next to him, settling him into a more comfortable position and checking the swelling on his head.

"That hurt," Vairya complained.

"If it had been a real farm implement, I could have killed you."

Vairya turned a little to blink up at him, wincing. "Was that supposed to be reassuring or not? I can't quite tell."

“Just honest.”

“Honesty,” Vairya said acidly, “is overrated. That really fucking hurts.”

“Only in your imagination,” Reuben said, gently pushing Vairya’s hair back from the swelling. “You’re quite capable of thinking it away.”

Vairya’s hair was very soft, and curled around his fingers in golden twists. Reuben reminded himself very firmly that this was an illusion.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the nanoknight sidle forwards and reclaim his hoe. “You’ve even corrupted my knights.”

“And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks,” Vairya said. “Not the other way round.”

“It goes both ways,” Reuben said mildly and failed to take his hand away. “A ploughshare can easily be melted down to make a sword, and they were, throughout history.”

After a moment, Vairya muttered, “Such a shame you’re a mindless thug. I usually appreciate a well-read man.”

“Thug, I will accept, but not mindless. You are no longer hysterical, and you are about to finish what you were telling me before you crashed, weren’t you?”

“No,” Vairya said. “I wasn’t.” He propped himself up a little against Reuben’s leg, as if they were out on a picnic somewhere, and stared at the sky. He rubbed his head and said, his voice suddenly bleak, “Oh, I remember now. I *remember*. Sir Reuben, do you know how to build a new ansible?”

“No.” Reuben followed his gaze up. There were clouds drifting across the blue arch of the sky, and as he watched one began to reform, billowing into the silhouette of a charging knight armed not with a spear but a hoe.

“Then you should leave, all of you, while you still can. Wait for the Fleet to arrive, and then tell them to drag Caelestia into the heart of the sun.”

Reuben took a deep breath and picked a cloud of his own to shape into a little dog, yapping at the knight’s heels. “Why? What happened here that was so terrible? Was it a plague?”

“Worse. Leave, Doctor. I can look after Caelestia in its final hours.”

“If we leave, you will come with us.”

Vairya's knight went galloping across the sky, and little dark wisps of cloud suddenly formed into wolves, pacing forwards. "I only had one task here, Sir Reuben. I was sent to protect them. I failed. I have no future."

Reuben turned his terrier around to snarl defiance at the wolves. "Bullshit."

"Truth." Then, before Reuben could argue him down, Vairya asked brightly, "Have you ever actually seen a bull? I never have."

"No," Reuben said, grimacing. "I've never worked on a farm platform, thankfully."

"Hark at you," Vairya cried, but his humour sounded brittle. "All judgemental, aren't you, Sir Knight? Nothing wrong with a good honest farmer."

"Says the walking archive."

"Says the gardener," Vairya corrected smugly. "I like flowers. They don't have expectations."

"You convinced me," Reuben said easily. There was something rather nice about this, lazing around in the sunshine with an interesting man to keep his mind busy, and if he could lull Vairya into honesty this way, it would be even better.

Vairya snorted. "You'd hate it. You're not a gardener, Sir Reuben. You're too much of a hero."

Reuben's shoulders tensed. "That's not funny."

Vairya sat up, so they were face-to-face. "It wasn't a joke. I know who you are, Reuben Cooper. They sent me a real knight errant, didn't they? A hero to save the lost prince." His tone was bitter.

"I'm just a doctor, and I'm sorry if that's not good enough for you, but you get what—"

Vairya caught his sleeve, his eyes wide and startled. "I'm not mocking you, man. I admire what you did. Courage like that is rare."

"Courage?"

"Yes. Or are you not Dr Cooper of Rigel, the saviour of his people?"

Reuben laughed, staring up at the clouds again so fiercely his eyes stung. "That's what they call me in other systems. In Rigel, I'm the Great Betrayer."

## Chapter Five

“No you’re not.” Vairya knelt up enough to lean between him and the sky. “I’ve got access to the most up-to-date newsfeeds and footage from everywhere in human space. Did you know there’s a statue of you in—”

Reuben put his hands over his ears.

Vairya tried to peel them away, leaning around Reuben, who tried to push him back, and they both went tumbling across the grass of the bower.

The lawn conveniently extended just before they rolled into the briars, and Vairya slammed his hands down on either side of Reuben’s head to stop them rolling any further.

“There!” he said, a little breathlessly. “I’ve caught you.”

“I’m supposed to be catching you,” Reuben complained, but the sweetness of the air and the strangeness of the moment softened him, and he smiled, just a little.

Vairya’s eyes widened. “He smiles! Is such a thing permitted to knights of your solemn order, oh most virtuous and humble of penitents?”

“What are you going on about now?” Vairya had ended up sprawled over his chest, and he was staring down at Reuben with mischief in his eyes again.

“I’ve decided you’re a penitent friar. It’s the only thing that accounts for your bad temper. Celibacy and flagellation do that to a man.”

“I’m not a flagellant!” Reuben snapped. “Morons, all of them. And I’m damn well not celibate, either.”

In his ear, Meili snorted with laughter and said, “Interrogation going well, then?”

“Fuck off, Meili.”

Vairya’s eyes widened again. “Your colleagues can hear us?”

“They can hear me.”

“Well, that could be fun.”

“Or,” Reuben said, biting back his smile, “you could just answer some questions. Exactly what do you think you know about me?”

“Reuben Akosa Cooper, Doctor of Medicine, born thirty-three years ago in the Darwin Memorial Hospital on Rigel, only child of Olafemi and Ezekiel. Is

that a certificate in Mathematics at the age of seven? A first degree at fifteen? How precocious.”

“Are you reading my personnel file?” Reuben asked mildly. “You could just ask.”

Vairya frowned faintly, leaning a little closer, until Reuben could see every silvery fleck in his blue eyes. “No anger? I would have predicted indignation.”

“Still trying to find my weaknesses?” Reuben asked. Vairya was almost close enough to taste, and Reuben wondered idly if he would taste as sweet as the roses or as sharp as steel and starlight.

“I was,” Vairya said a little peevishly. “Now I’m just confused. Don’t you mind me invading your privacy?”

“Privacy is an illusion,” Reuben told him and smiled wryly. How had Vairya lived so long without learning that? “Most people don’t realise it, but once the Senate prosecutors and worse, the media, have torn apart every decision you’ve ever made, you realise there are no secrets left in the world. We just pretend there are to keep the masses happy. There are thousands upon thousands of people who have made a study of me and my choices. If you lined up everyone who thinks they know me, I wouldn’t even be able to remember a fraction of their names, let alone know them in return. Life’s much easier once the whole galaxy has judged you and found you wanting. You no longer need to fear the reactions of others. You are free to simply act as you believe. No one’s opinion matters any more. They can’t think any worse of you. When everyone watching despises you, and there’s no one left to care, you may as well just be completely alone. You can do whatever you like.”

“Coop,” Eskil breathed, his voice shaking.

Reuben ignored him. He was more interested in Vairya’s reaction, how steadily he was staring down, his lips slightly parted.

Then, very softly, he said, “That’s a terrible way to live, Reuben.”

And he leaned forwards to kiss Reuben’s forehead lightly.

Reuben hadn’t expected that. “What the—”

And Vairya kissed his mouth as well.

His kiss was too warm for steel and too firm for flowers. It was only a quick press of lips, more kind than passionate, but it silenced Reuben.

“There,” Vairya murmured. “That’s better. You should stay here with me. I won’t judge you.”

“I have a mission. I have to wake you up.”

“But I belong here. It’s beautiful here, Reuben. There’s sunlight and flowers and knowledge and soon, very soon, my people will be here. We don’t have much time left, but we will spend it together. You could spend it with us. There’s always room for another hero.”

“I can’t.”

“Then you must go. Take your colleagues and run, to the furthest ends of space, and pray it is not too late for you.”

“Why?”

Vairya’s eyes lost none of their warmth or laughter but there was a hint of something terrible in them now, a fear so vast that Reuben could not make sense of it. “I have a mission too.”

“What mission?”

“I have to save the human race,” Vairya said and gave a shaky smile. “No matter what the cost.”

“What does that mean?” Reuben cried out in frustration.

“It means that you won’t need the Fleet to destroy us,” Vairya said, and he was so calm that Reuben went cold. He recognised that sort of peace, the type you only found when all hope had failed. “I initiated the self-destruction protocols three days ago. You have approximately five hours before the evacuation period ends and the city’s engines begin to move us towards the sun.” Then, just as tranquilly, he looked up and said, “Ah, here are the people now.”

He rolled off Reuben and stood up, holding his hands out and smiling, so joyously that Reuben knew, with a sudden sick certainty, that he must be mad.

And then, with a shiver, the flowers opened, the air growing thick with sweetness, and Reuben saw what had been hidden behind their folded petals.

Each rose contained a human face, caught in peaceful sleep.

As Reuben struggled to his feet, they began to open their eyes, blinking sleepily. Lips parted, stems shuddered, and flower heads lifted. Then, in a roar like the wind, the silent garden filled with startled voices.

“Why?” Reuben choked out.

Vairya turned to face him again. The wind was still dancing through the garden, and it tumbled through his golden curls even as the sunlight washed



over him. He had never looked less human. “Heaven is a sunlit garden, Reuben. They will not suffer now. When the Enemy takes their bodies, it will kill their souls without noticing. This was the last thing I could do for them.”

“What enemy?” Reuben roared.

All around him the garden went quiet, flowering faces turning their way in fear. Vairya smiled at him, sad and triumphant. “The only Enemy. Caelestia has been invaded, Sir Reuben. You will need your knights if we do not die fast enough. I disabled their engines, you see, once they landed, but they will grow new ones. And this may not be the only ship to break free. It could happen again. You need to warn my brothers and sisters, Reuben. Tell them our first purpose stands. We must still serve.”

“What ship?”

“The one from Old Earth,” Vairya said, and all around the garden people drew in a shocked breath. It went sighing and whispering out over the roses.

No. No, no, no. This was worse than Ahrima.

“That’s impossible,” Reuben whispered.

“I wish it was,” Vairya said and reached out to cup his hand around Reuben’s cheek. “I think you should wake up now, Dr Cooper. Take your people and run.”

“Vairya!”

“This one *is* an emergency exit,” Vairya told him, before he leaned forwards and kissed Reuben lightly. “Goodbye, Reuben. You are a good man.”

And threads of silver light rose up around Reuben, spearing out of the ground like prison bars. He lunged for Vairya, but it was too late. The garden was gone, and he was surrounded by light, with no path back.

“Eskil!” he shouted. “Wake me up!”

He came awake with a jerk, to Eskil’s disapproving face. “It really isn’t good for you to keep—”

Reuben sat up, shouldering him aside to override the bed’s controls. Vairya had mentioned the ansible, which meant they could get confirmation of his story. “Eskil, can you get a drone close to the city’s ansible installation?”

“Sure, it’s just round the outer curve of the asteroid. What’s going on?”

Reuben ignored him to tap for a com. “Captain, you there?”

“Awake already, Dr Cooper?”

“Vairya has just informed me that a ship from Old Earth is currently docked on Caelestia.”

Meili gasped and Eskil whipped round to stare at him, blanching.

“Get that damned drone out to confirm it!” Reuben snapped at him. “Captain?”

Chanthavy sounded shaken. “Do you believe him, Dr Cooper? Old Earth has no spaceflight capability. It was all destroyed.”

“They’ve had two hundred years to invent some,” Reuben pointed out. “He believes. He claims to have activated the city’s self-destruction protocol.”

“Destroy the city?” Meili interrupted. “Is he mad?”

“Given the alternative,” Reuben said grimly, thinking of Vairya’s laughter, “I damn well hope so. He uploaded their personalities, captain. Every one of them who was connected to the net is now saved to his memory.”

“No wonder it was damaged,” Eskil said. “Drone’s out, but it will take a few minutes to get into position.”

“We need definite confirmation before I inform Sirius,” Chanthavy said, her voice steady. “On this, of all things, we cannot cry wolf.”

Meili strode over to the wall. “*Juniper*, patch into the city net and show me the morgue in the city hall.” To Reuben, she said, “That’s where we’ve been moving the bodies.”

A viewscreen opened up slowly, showing the shadowy interior of a great hall. Bodies lay across the floor in neat rows, bagged and numbered.

Reuben had always thought body bags looked too close to rubbish sacks, as if taunting the survivors with what they lost. These, however, looked like nothing he had ever seen before.

They were transparent and gleaming, as if the floor had been covered with swells of glass. In the dim light, he could only see the barest impression of familiar shapes: the curve of a jaw, a swirling pattern which might have been loose hair, the ridges of fingers. As they watched, the walls of the hall began to change, solid pseudo-oak shimmering and fading as it transformed.

“Oh, god,” Meili whispered. “Oh, god, it’s true.”

“Drone’s in place,” Eskil whispered. “Visuals on screen.”

A second window opened up, showing the rocky underside of the city. Here too the light of the local sun blazed off streaks of diamond. The remains of a ship were smeared across the rocks, also diamond, except in the places where a purple haze swirled and bubbled through the wreckage.

"I think that's a quantum disruptor warhead," Eskil said, sounding impressed. "Someone certainly tried to blow the shit out of them."

"Didn't succeed, did they?" Meili said harshly. "Captain, are you getting all this?"

"Yes," Chanthavy said quietly. "I'm contacting High Command now."

"We were all down there," Meili said, her fists clenching and her words coming fast. "We all touched those bodies."

"You were in suits," Eskil said.

"It doesn't matter, not with nanites! We could all be next and he's almost certainly infected!" She pointed at Vairya.

"And?" Reuben asked, moving to stand between her and the unconscious cyborg.

She stared at him, and then her anger faded to horror. "And nothing! What did you think—we're not all barbarians, Cooper."

"Stop it!" Eskil said before Reuben could respond. "Just stop it! Stop fighting!" His voice cracked a little.

Meili took a sharp breath, but didn't say anything. Reuben reached out and squeezed Eskil's shoulder, trying to keep it gentle.

"They'll send help," he said, trying to inject some certainty into his voice. He'd talked nervous recruits through a battle before. He knew how to lie convincingly, for all he hadn't needed to bother for years. "For now, let's get out of here. I'm starving. Whose turn is it to cook?"

"Eskil's," Meili said promptly. He wasn't sure if she was picking up his cues or just glad for a change of subject, but it helped. Eskil looked a little less lost.

"Good," Reuben said. "I was worried we might get one of your two recipes again."

"Nothing wrong with a little consistency," she fired back. "Least I've never given anyone food poisoning."

“That was once,” Eskil said indignantly, but hesitated when she tugged at his elbow. “Should we leave Vairya here?”

“He’s happy,” Reuben said. “He’s in his garden, with his people. Let him sleep.”

“Was it really a garden?” Eskil asked, and that conversation took them all the way up to the mess.

They shared the cooking after that. Meili and Eskil talked, light chatter about everything except the monster in the room, and Reuben made an effort to join in when Eskil threw a comment his way. Meili’s obvious nerves made him dislike her less. Suddenly, she seemed like a junior officer faced with battle for the first time, and he switched back to old behaviour patterns without thinking about it. He had been Chief Medic on Ahrima’s flagship for five years, before everything else, and he knew how to play that role.

Chances were he and his colleagues, along with Vairya and the city of Caelestia, were just the first casualties in a galactic war. If so, he’d damn well go down fighting.

When Chanthavy came to join them, she simply walked in and sat down, dropping her head into her hands without speaking.

“What are our orders?” Reuben asked, as the other two stepped closer to each other, Eskil’s hand clenching around the spoon he was stirring with.

“Withdraw from action within the city, but remain docked and await instructions. They ordered me to send them command codes for our engines and hyperdrive.”

“Did you?” Reuben asked.

“Of course,” she said, and she sounded old for the first time. “It was a direct order.”

“Vairya said we should run,” Reuben said and began to set the table. It was rather pointless, but he needed to do something with his hands.

“I don’t understand,” Eskil said. “What does that mean?”

“It means we’re collateral damage,” Reuben said. “They’re going to send us into the sun with the city. Permission to break out the good booze, captain?”

“Granted,” she said without looking up.

## Chapter Six

Later, after they had all drunk enough to get a little hazy, Meili planted her elbow hard on the table and glared at Reuben. “So, you think we’re all judging you?”

“Am I wrong?” he asked mildly.

She snorted, but then said, “No. Didn’t know it bothered you.”

“I’m used to it.”

“So you said. To Vairya.” She lifted her hand to point at him. “So how is it that you talk more to the crazy cyborg than to any of us, huh?”

“Maybe I like him better than you,” Reuben said and took another drink.

But this time, to his surprise, she laughed. “That was a joke, wasn’t it? Fucking nasty sense of humour you have, Cooper.”

“Better than none at all.”

“Wait,” Eskil said, lifting his head from where he was slumped on the table. “Don’t you like us, Coop?”

“If he cries,” Meili said, grinning evilly, “you’re paying for my therapy.”

“I like you,” Reuben told Eskil and managed not to pat him on the head. “Now go back to sleep so Meili and I can stop playing nicely again.”

But Eskil was sitting up. It took him a couple of attempts, but he stared at Reuben reproachfully. “She’s right. You did talk to him more freely than you ever have to us.” A slow smile bloomed across his face and he waved his finger at Reuben. “You liked him.”

“Shoot me now,” Reuben said to Meili. “You don’t want to have to sit through this any more than I do.”

She leaned back in her chair, laughing. “No, I think this should be hilarious. Go ahead, Eskil. Matchmake at the end of time. Why not?”

“You’re mean,” Eskil told her and slumped back down on the table.

“You didn’t really fancy him, did you?” she asked. “Dr Bigot and the cyborg? Ironic.”

Chanthavy, who had been gazing into space, stirred at that one. “Don’t call Reuben a bigot, Meili. And, Reuben, I do hope you haven’t been forming any inappropriate attachments to—”

"I should have just hung myself in my cell," Reuben muttered, tongue loosened by Sirian brandy. "If I'd realised I was in for a lifetime of ethics lectures, I might not have looked forwards to the end of the damn trial so much. In case any of you missed it, I was a witness for the *prosecution*."

"But you worked for General Ahrima," Meili said. "You were her chief surgeon. You knew what she was doing. You must have."

They were all staring at him now.

Reuben knocked back the rest of his drink. "The trial transcripts are all online. Form your own opinions."

"I want to hear it from you," Meili said belligerently. "I want to know what deal you did to keep your licence and how the hell you can sleep with what you did."

"I think," Eskil said muzzily, "that this is probably why Reuben doesn't like us. Vairya was nice to him. You should try that, Mei."

"Seriously, just shoot me before we get to that point," Reuben muttered.

But she was looking at him, her whole head quirked to the side. "Didn't realise until today that you were funny. What else did I miss, Cooper?"

"I'm not obliged to justify myself to any of you."

One of Eskil's dreads stretched across the table to tap Reuben on the wrist. "Coop, be nice to Meili too."

"Oh, yeah," Meili muttered. "I'll shoot you if you shoot me."

"I myself would like to hear the story," Chanthavy said, as Eskil pouted and Meili glared. "You are certainly not obliged to tell us your side of events, but we have nothing else to do but sit here and await our doom. I would hate to enter oblivion misjudging a colleague."

Since she was the one who asked, he considered it. Vairya's reaction had thrown him off balance. No one had ever called him a hero to his face. Oh, some of the prosecutors had shown him grim respect, and he had received a letter of commendation from the Senate, but there had been no one to look at him with such warmth and pride. His parents were long dead and he had heard nothing from his wider family, who had all voted for Ahrima, after all. It would be nice, he thought, a little wistfully, to have someone hear his story just because they wanted to know him better, rather than because they were searching for some historical truth.

“I don’t know where to begin,” he said, looking down at the table. It was standard government issue, ten years past the date it should have been retired, scuffed and chipped. It was a long way from the gleaming military messes of Ahrima’s Fleet.

“How did you end up working for Ahrima?” Meili asked.

“What do you know about Rigel’s wars?”

“Not much,” Meili admitted. “Only that they seem to have been going on forever.”

“I know more,” Chanthavy said, unsurprisingly.

“I only know there were some,” Eskil said. “I was fourteen when Ahrima was arrested. This is all history to me.”

“Baby,” Meili said and did pat his head.

“Hey.”

“Rigel System has three gas planets with thirty inhabited moons and a space platform. The moon colonies are all small and compete for mining rights on the planets. They exist in a constant state of rivalry.” Reuben paused, trying to find a simple way to explain the tense state he had grown up in. “The platform is more advanced, technologically, and has the largest population of any outpost. We—they—play peacekeeper whenever things heat up into full conflict rather than the usual skirmishes. Causes some resentment in the moons, of course, so there’s always at least six anti-federation movements at work trying to bring down the platform or overthrow the government. You get used to it. Someone’s always trying to assassinate someone, or hijack their ships, or blow up their bases. It’s only the intensity that changes. And the sides, of course. Alliances change all the time.”

“Sounds terrible,” Eskil said sympathetically.

Reuben’s heart suddenly ached. How to explain it, what it was like to grow up under that sun, where trails of fire crossed the sky on more days than not, fighters and troopships filling the air over the docks, the loudness of laughter wherever off-duty soldiers gathered, the discipline that came with learning from the first when to fight, when to run, how to be aware of danger. Rigel was steel and the distant thunder of guns; it was the purple gleam of sunlight off the jagged edges of shot-out fortresses, the lonely call of sirens in the night. It was being that little more alive than he had ever been since, the wild glee of facing challenge after challenge and triumphing over them all, of choosing your life’s path not out of whimsy but because you were needed to serve your people.

“It was home,” he said and went back to his story. “When I was eighteen, it turned into outright war again. The moons of Rigel III declared independence and started attacking passing shipping. I was newly qualified, and I signed up at once, before conscription started. Got assigned to the sickbay on one of the big battlecruisers.”

“Ahrima’s ship?”

“No, not then. I was on *Anansi*, assigned to convoy duty. Ahrima wasn’t even a general then. She was in command of the Outer Orbital Fleet, well beyond the area where we were operating. It’s why she escaped the worst of the Hyperion Proxy attack.”

“The what?” Eskil asked.

Reuben looked at Chanthavy in surprise. She lowered her head and said, “It wasn’t widely reported on out here, not in comparison to Ahrima’s later career.”

“It was the worst thing I have seen,” Reuben said and reached for the bottle again. Chanthavy poured him a generous glassful but he could only sip at it. The memories were pushing too hard at the inside of his skull, making his head throb. “Rigel—we’ve always perceived implants as a flaw, a weakness. You would have to be pretty perverse to choose to alter your body if it wasn’t necessary. That never meant people didn’t have them, though. Cybernetic enhancements were actually very common in the Rigelian Fleet. In the Federation, most people either end up in the mines or the military, or both. Injuries are common and both jobs carry the risk of needing prosthetics. I never met anyone who took pride in their implants until I left Rigel, but it didn’t mean we didn’t have them.”

“Thought you were all complete body purists,” Meili said. “Better death than implantation and similar crap.”

“I’m about to tell you how we got to that point,” Reuben said and took another sip. “The rebels had a genius, you see, one of those people who sees how to do a thing and doesn’t stop to think about whether you *ought* to do it. Most of the cyberware in the Fleet was originally mining issue, or old military stock, not the sophisticated stuff you get coming out of Sirius or Alpha Centauri. This madman of theirs found a way to bypass their security profiles and access their command chips from a distance.”

“He hacked their bodies?” Eskil said in horror. “Turned them off?”



“No,” Reuben said flatly. “He turned them *up*. The patch he got through, it had an AI component, enough that it could randomise the actions of any cybernetic implant he hacked. Artificial lungs expanding a thousand times a second, limbs turning to beat their owners, hair like yours throttling people, eyes heating up until they began to melt, skin carapaces locking so that men suffocated in their own defences.”

Eskil looked like he was about to be sick. “That’s horrific.”

“It was war,” Reuben said, but relented enough to nod agreement. “It was evil. It was—they all came to my sickbay, and most of the medical staff were down too, and then the attack began. We could barely defend ourselves.”

“What did you do?” Meili asked.

“Those with no or minimal enhancements fought. I did surgery,” Reuben said. “Lots of surgery.” He had been the youngest doctor in the bay, and one of only three who hadn’t had any cyber implants. Patient after patient had come under his laser scalpel and he had cut away cables and cogs and steel until he no longer saw faces, only bodies. “I cut out every implant that could be removed. Those I didn’t cripple went back to the guns.”

“How did you survive?”

“Ahrima. She heard what was happening before they got close enough to her command. Every cyber-enhanced soldier in her command went under the knife before they swept back in system to relieve us. She cut her own eye out, she told me later, right there on her command deck. ‘And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out,’ she said.”

“And so she became a hero,” Chanthavy said. “You had no enhancements, I assume?”

“No. It was arrogance, nothing more. I thought I could do as much with my own hands as less talented men could with enhancements. Not many Fleet doctors could claim as much, not after years at the front line, but me, I was proud to be pure.” He grimaced. “Being a smug little bigot saved my life. Of course, it also brought me to Ahrima’s attention.”

He had still been standing when Ahrima strode into his sickbay, shaking so hard he could no longer hold his tools, blood stained and speechless. She had looked at him, and it had been like another blow, the ferocity and astonishment in her unbandaged eye. Then she had smiled at him, sharp and impressed, and said, “Stand down, Doctor. You can rest now. The cavalry’s here.”

He had just blinked at her, not understanding.

She had walked over to him, taken his elbow, and guided him to a seat. “What’s your name, Doctor?”

“Reuben.” Then, out of some dim instinct for military discipline, he had dragged out, “Lieutenant Cooper, sir, ROMC.”

“Consider yourself promoted, captain. Where’s your CO?”

Reuben lifted his arm towards the morgue. “Visual implant melted. Brain aneurysm.”

“Is there a senior doctor here?”

Reuben had looked around, watching dimly as new personnel started filing in, taking over the care of his patients. The only members of his original team still here were Kitty Okafor, who had been a year behind him at med school, standing in the middle of the ward with tears running down her face as she turned to the next patient, three corpsmen, and the robonurses. There was no one else. “I think,” he said, “Doctor Chukwu is in the next ward.”

“Is he still standing?”

“Only amputated his arm.” The world went a little hazy at that thought, and when he came back round, he was on one of his own beds, with a strange doctor standing over him. He tried to get up, only to be pushed down firmly.

“You’re off duty, Dr Cooper,” the stranger said and smiled at him. “Stand down, kid. You did good.”

“Casualties?”

“Too many,” the doctor said grimly, “but you saved a lot of lives. The commander wants to talk to you when you’ve rested. She’s impressed.”

“She ended the war,” he said now. “*Ended* it. Not just a temporary truce or a lessening of hostilities. She *ended* it.”

“Brutally,” Meili said.

“By then, no one cared. Too many people had died. Most people were just so damn grateful to have a chance of peace. When she ran for president... well, it was an easy victory.”

“Even though she ran on a pure human platform?”

“It wasn’t what defined her, not then. Law and order, security, *peace*. She promised free implant removal as one of her health policies, but it was a popular pledge. After the war...”

He stopped himself, sickened. It was still too easy to defend her, to remember the general he would have followed into hell, the president he had idolised. “I trusted her,” he said instead. “She helped me. Because of her patronage, I was at the top of my field, with opportunities no one else my age had. All she asked was that I support her publicly, tell people that they could survive without implants.”

“I saw the news clips,” Chanthavy said. “You were eloquent.”

“I believed it,” he said. “I never had her religious convictions, but I had seen what could go wrong. I do still think we are over-reliant on mechanical enhancement. I would hate to see another Hyperion Proxy.”

“Is that why you performed those operations?” Meili demanded. “Because you believed they would be better off without their eyes or their limbs or—”

“I was given consent forms,” he snapped. “For every operation I performed, I was shown written consent.” He took a deep breath. “I should have insisted that I speak to every patient first, but there were so many of them, and the president said they wanted discretion, and the whole system was clamouring for a return to... I was wrong. I was stupid. I should have asked.”

“How did you find out?” Eskil asked.

“Ahrima took me on a visit to a convalescent hospital. It was a media event, all scripted, but my cousin was ill, so I slipped away from my minders to contact her. While I was there, I stumbled into a side ward, saw a man I recognised from my table, and went to ask after his recovery.”

“And he told you the truth?” Meili breathed.

“He had no idea who I was. He was blind. I had taken his eyes. I didn’t know who he was, what it meant until he started to curse the bastard who had crippled him.”

“Who was he?”

“His name was Jonah Imasuen. He was one of the leaders of the opposition party. The media had been told he had left Rigel.”

They knew the rest, the horrible truth that had come out over the next few months, Ahrima’s prisons and asylums, the way her opponents had been treated, the forced operations and silenced critics. “I investigated. Found out what was happening. Went to Alpha Centauri and begged them to listen. Testified. And here I am. Can we change the fucking subject now?” He didn’t want to talk about betrayal any more, not Ahrima’s of him or his of her.

“Sure,” Meili said. “Shitty time, shitty situation, shitty leader. Damned if I know what I would have done in your place.”

“Of course you do,” Reuben said bitterly. “Everyone knows better than I did.”

“Easy to say if you’re not living it,” Eskil said, and Meili nodded shortly.

“So, what now?” she asked, staring at him. “You’re the tough one. Are we just going to sit and wait to die? Can’t we fight?”

“Fight what?” Eskil said. “We have no weapons, not to use against them. We’re not soldiers, Meili, not even Cooper here.”

“I’d rather fight,” Reuben said and rubbed his forehead. “Is there any way we can isolate the nanites within the city?”

“It should be possible to put up barriers between districts,” Meili said. “That’s what you’d do in a contagion, to minimise the spread.”

“If this was a viral outbreak, how would you approach it?” She was the expert on contagious disease.

“Stop any movement out of infected areas,” she said grimly, “which is what they’re doing with us, and then get inoculated medical teams in there to treat the sick. Develop a vaccine.”

“Don’t think there is one for this.”

“We’re the medical team on the ground,” Chanthavy said. “We have no patients, though.”

“Safe disposal of bodies is a priority in a bad epidemic,” Meili said. “We could look at that. Perhaps it would work better to think of it as a forest fire. We need to create fire breaks, deprive it of fuel.”

“We need to break the city apart,” Eskil said, “and destroy the infected parts.”

“That’s exactly what Vairya has set in motion,” Reuben pointed out, “and exactly what the Fleet will do when they arrive.”

They all went quiet. Then Meili looked up, her face fierce. “I don’t care. I don’t care if it won’t make much difference. I want to go down fighting. This thing, these nanites, they’re worse than a disease. I want to destroy as many of them as I can before they get me.”

“Yes,” Reuben said and reached out to offer her his hand. “No waiting to die.”

She grasped his hand, squeezing tightly, and Eskil reached out tentatively to press his fingers over theirs. “Me too. I’ll fight.”

Chanthavy was more hesitant, but she reached out at last. “I’m not sure what we can do, but we must try something.”

Reuben nodded. “We need detailed information about the city if we’re going to start building fire breaks.”

From the doorway, Vairya said quietly, “I think I can help with that.”

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## Chapter Seven

They all turned to stare at him, and he offered them a hesitant smile. “The sedatives wore off. If I can’t be in my garden, let me keep you company.”

“Come in,” Reuben said and moved up to make space for him.

Vairya came and sat down beside him, a little tentatively. He was wearing his filmy chiton again, and was barefoot, and looked utterly out of place in their grotty mess. As soon as he settled into the neighbouring chair, Reuben was aware of him, warm and solid and real beside him, suddenly present in the real world in a way that was both bizarre and made the hairs stand up on Reuben’s arms.

“Captain,” Reuben said, remembering some basic courtesies, “this is Vairya of Caelestia. Vairya, Captain Chanthavy Som, Lieutenant Meili Peake and Lieutenant Eskil Levin, crew of the *Juniper*.”

“I am honoured,” Chanthavy said.

“The honour is mine,” Vairya said gravely and glanced up at Reuben. “Any chance of a drink?”

“No,” everyone around the table said at once.

“You have a head injury,” Meili reminded him. “No alcohol.”

“My brain is made up of entirely different elements from yours,” he pointed out, pouting a little.

“Does alcohol make you giddy, absent-minded, uncoordinated, or overemotional?” Reuben asked.

“On a good day,” Vairya muttered.

“Then you don’t get to drink with a head injury, whatever your brain is made of.”

Vairya sighed. “Food?”

“That we can do,” Eskil said and bounced to his feet. “Is there anything you don’t eat? I can make something fresh if you like.”

“Don’t go to any trouble, please.”

“Eskil’s never met a TC4 before,” Reuben said. “He’s expecting you to have wings and a halo.”

“Coop!”

“No,” Vairya said, and he grinned a little. “Nothing like that. I’m just a gardener. You want my brother Jibrail if that’s what you’re after. He makes everyone feel unworthy.”

“For now,” Chanthavy said, “I would like to give my crew time to record messages for their families. We welcome your help and mean no rudeness, but perhaps we could leave you to your meal?”

“I’ll keep him company,” Reuben said. “No one will expect a message from me.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Vairya said before any of the others could comment. “Perhaps you could lend me a change of clothes. This isn’t particularly warm.”

“Sure,” Reuben said and watched him eat. Vairya looked so out of place here, in such an ordinary place, and he couldn’t make sense of it enough to look away. Some people belonged in imaginary kingdoms, not mundane kitchens.

It still felt strange when he walked with Vairya to his cabin. Inside Vairya’s garden, it had been easy to talk, to play games with words and wit. Here, it was all a little too real.

“Have you turned shy on me, good Sir Reuben?” Vairya said. He had fallen into step with Reuben easily, but there was something less graceful about him out here. Glancing across, Reuben could see the red patches where his skin hadn’t quite healed from the cold. His hair was a little tangled, his cheek a little rougher, and it made him more strange rather than less.

“That’s not who I am,” he said. “I’m not a knight, or anything like it. I’m just a man.”

“Yes,” Vairya said. “I rather liked the fierce knight who invaded my garden, but I think I prefer your real face. You look kinder than your imagined self.”

Reuben stopped dead. “Kind? I’m not—”

“I think you might be,” Vairya said and reached out to tug at his arm. “Kind enough not to make me walk around in this for much longer.”

“Why are you wearing that?” Reuben grumbled, not pulling his arm free.

“We were rehearsing,” Vairya said, and all his sadness was back. “Once a year, we put on a play in the city gardens, and we were midrehearsal when the ship arrived.”

“You act?”

“Why not? I have no trouble remembering the lines.”

“I suppose not,” Reuben said. “Are you any good?”

Vairya laughed, and it wasn’t as light as his laugh in the garden, but there was a different warmth in it. “Modesty forbids.”

Reuben snorted at that, and opened a hatch. “Down here.”

It felt strange having someone else in his space, and he had to remind himself that he had trespassed inside Vairya’s mind first. He had no right to feel self-conscious about his plain sheets and undecorated walls. He had never felt the need to fill his space with meaningless clutter. All he needed was something to read on and access to the ship’s library.

It wasn’t until the hatch closed behind them that it occurred to him that he could just have taken Vairya to one of the sickbays and found him some scrubs.

“How long do you think it will take them to record their messages?” Vairya asked, stopping in the tiny square of open floor between the ladder and the end of the bed.

“Depends on the message,” Reuben said, scrambling onto the bed so he could reach the overhead lockers. “Why?”

“I was wondering how long we have got,” Vairya said, and there was an odd note in his voice, something which would never have belonged in the rose garden.

“Depends when Chanthavy cuts Eskil off,” Reuben said, pulling out a change of clothes and turning round. “At least an hour.”

“Not long enough,” Vairya murmured, looking up at him. He held out his hand. “Reuben.”

No mock title this time, and something about the honesty of his name in that soft voice made Reuben shudder, suddenly aware that he was alone with this man, who was attractive and infuriating and appealing in a way no one had been since he was a teenager trying to prove himself to his adult classmates. Uncertain, he dropped the clothes onto the edge of the bed and leaned forwards, taking Vairya’s offered hand. “Yes.”

“Tomorrow we die.”

“Tomorrow we fight.”



“No,” Vairya said, and his hand twitched a little in Reuben’s. “There’s no coming back from this. We’re just choosing how to die. Tomorrow, it ends. Everything ends.”

His eyes were wide, and Reuben could hear the effort he was making to keep his voice steady. Two hundred years old, and he’d probably never had to consider his own mortality before. Strange, that this was another thing Reuben understood better. Carefully, he stepped off the bed and put his arms around Vairya. “Don’t be afraid.”

He had meant to keep his embrace loose and comforting, but Vairya seized hold of him tightly, pressing warm skin and cooler metal against Reuben. “Why ever not?”

Reuben shrugged but tightened his hold. “It doesn’t help. Just keep living until our time runs out.”

Vairya pressed his cheek against Reuben’s shoulder and let out a rough laugh. “Believe it or not, that was where I was trying to go with this. I didn’t mean to—” His voice caught.

He was shaking, and Reuben ran his hand down his spine, closing his eyes. It had been a long time since he had comforted anyone or been comforted himself, and he was caught now between wanting Vairya to conquer his fear, to be steady in the world again, and wanting to just stay here, like this, locked in this warmth for as long as they could.

“Ssh,” he murmured, rocking Vairya slightly. “I’ve got you.”

“Yes,” Vairya sighed and looked up. There were tears caught on his lashes and Reuben wondered how that worked. Who had crafted his tear ducts?

This close, he could see every tiny imperfection in Vairya’s face, the subtle wear and tear of a face well lived in, the creases around his eyes, the rough edge of a chapped lip, the shadows below his eyes. At first sight, Vairya had looked like a warrior angel, or a legendary prince, art more than flesh.

Now he looked like a man, and Reuben’s breath caught a little.

Vairya had kissed him in the garden, and suddenly he wanted it again now, where it would count for more. Because Vairya was right, they were about to die, and suddenly his skin itched with it, and his gut clenched with need, and Vairya was right there, too sad and perfect for Reuben to touch with impunity.

“I didn’t intend to cry on you,” Vairya said, and his mouth turned up again, the faintest attempt at a smile. “I had other plans.”

“The best laid plans—” Reuben began, but Vairya laid his hand over his mouth, shushing him.

“Actually,” he said firmly, “I intended to spend our last free moments doing this.”

And he dropped his hand and kissed Reuben.

Reuben breathed into it, his whole body surging forwards in relief, and Vairya gasped.

It was rough, clumsy even, mouths clashing, his legs trapped against the edge of the bed, Vairya’s hand trapped between them, knuckles curled against Reuben’s chest.

And yet his heart rose, and his body tensed and relaxed, as if he had suddenly taken flight, and it was all he could do not to pull away and swear wildly, because this was not how kisses were supposed to be, not how they had ever been. They weren’t supposed to sing through him like this, weren’t supposed to make him crush Vairya tighter in his arms, weren’t supposed to fill his sour, shadowed heart with sudden, relentless light.

There were poets who had written of such things. He knew that. He had read them.

But he couldn’t remember them, not when Vairya was kissing him.

When Vairya pulled away, Reuben groaned, tugging at his shoulders to pull him back.

Vairya didn’t move, but just stared at him, his eyes wide with shock.

“Reuben,” he said, breath gusting out. “Reuben.”

Reuben slid his hand up into Vairya’s hair, cupped his skull, and tried to pull him back. “More.”

“Yes,” Vairya said and fell back against him, pushing at him until they both went crashing to the bed.

Vairya’s weight on top of him was so good, and Reuben pulled him closer, rising back into his kiss as he reached under Vairya’s flimsy tunic to press his palms against ridges of metal, cables shivering with static, skin. He was hard, his cock a bar against Reuben’s thigh.

His hands were tingling, and Vairya shuddered on top of him, his whole body going tight as he dragged his mouth away. He looked wild, his pupils blown and his cheeks as bright as roses. “What the fuck *is* this?”

“Nanites?” Reuben suggested, drawing in a desperate breath. “Adrenaline. Impending death. *I don’t care.*”

Vairya scrambled off him, back to his feet at the end of the bed. Reuben sat up, waiting for the urgency to fade now they were no longer touching.

Instead, he found himself staring, watching every laboured breath Vairya took.

“Vairya,” he said, because he didn’t care why this was different, not when it was the last chance either of them would ever have. “Vairya.”

Vairya took another breath, his shoulders rising, and then wet his lips. “Reuben,” he said, voice huskier than before. “Take your damn clothes off.”

Reuben smiled, and it didn’t even feel out of place on his face. Without looking away from Vairya, he stripped his clothes off, throwing them to the side of the bed and then propped himself up on his elbows, aware of every stir of the air against his bare skin.

He wasn’t pretty, never had been, but he was strong. When he had been famous, people had called him handsome from time to time, but he had always known that was more about the fame than the breadth of his shoulders. After all, the same journalists had called him a treacherous brute a few years later.

Right now, though, watching the blush rise in Vairya’s cheeks, he wanted to be seen. Even more, he wanted to be touched.

“Just going to stand there and look?” he demanded.

“No,” Vairya murmured and lifted his hands to struggle with the knotted cord that fastened his tunic over his shoulder. When it broke free, the whole flimsy garment simply fell off him, catching for a moment on his risen cock until he shoved it right away and stood exposed to Reuben’s gaze.

Perhaps, Reuben thought, transfixed, he had chosen roses to match all the colours of his skin, white in the curve of his wrist, pink across his cheeks, blush red as his cock where it stood full against his belly.

Only the silver plates of his chest and the metal twists at his hips and down his forearms did not match.

Vairya followed his gaze and said, dropping his eyes, “They didn’t have time to finish us. I function, but skin over those last components was aesthetic.”

“Will it hurt you, if I touch them?”

“No. There are no nerves there. They put in enough that I could understand what it means to be a man, but the Enemy were at the gate.”

Reuben sat up and reached out, pressing his hands over gleaming metal. “You’re beautiful.”

Vairya curled his lip. “In places.”

Reuben kissed him, pressing his mouth to the soft skin of his navel, to his open palm, the subtle curve of his throat, his mouth, which softened against his as he drew Vairya down, skin against skin, need rising through them again as their legs tangled, and their hips slotted together.

It was easy to turn, pressing Vairya down against his pillows, and then to run his hand down the length of his body, sliding over skin and steel alike until he closed his hand over Vairya’s cock.

“Reuben,” Vairya murmured and reached out himself. His grip was firm, and Reuben thrust against his hold in relief as he kissed him again.

He had meant to keep it gentle, to draw out every damn moment, but Vairya’s hips rose up hard and fast, his breathing quickening, and his urgency seemed to infect Reuben, making his heart beat faster and his body shudder in response.

His kiss went sloppy, and Vairya grabbed his hair to hold him in place, his hand quickening on Reuben’s cock as they kissed and thrust and gasped against each other, sweat gathering until their hands grew clumsy, and all the while fire was gathering under Reuben’s skin, in his balls, at the head of his cock as Vairya slid his thumb across the slickness gathering there.

Reuben groaned, and Vairya rocked against him faster, shoving against Reuben’s hand as he scraped his teeth across his lip, and Reuben had to move his hand, had to drive him into more gasps and shudders, had to make him writhe and squirm, because he couldn’t stop watching the pleasure rush across Vairya’s face, couldn’t stop his own hips from jerking forwards, faster and harder, unstoppable now, as it rose through him in a rush that made his head spin and his body convulse.

Dimly, he felt Vairya shake against him, and then he was the one sprawled across the sheets as Vairya straddled him, hand jerking on his own cock until he spilled, his whole body going still.

When he slumped forwards, Reuben caught him and held him. Where he spread his hand across Vairya’s back, he could feel the thunder of his pulse, and it made him shiver and want again.

“Tell me,” Vairya breathed against his neck, “that was just a warm up.”

Reuben kissed the nearest bit of skin, the place where Vairya’s ear met his jaw. “Took the edge off, right?”

“I want more.”

“You’ll get more.” He chuckled a little, self-conscious. “Might even manage to make it last next time.”

“Yeah,” Vairya murmured, his hips shifting. Reuben felt the faint stir of Vairya’s cock against him, and the answering throb of his own. He wasn’t going to stir much more than that yet, but Vairya... well, Vairya didn’t seem to have that particular human limit, because he was half-hard again already.

Contentedly, Reuben spread his legs, and Vairya pressed closer with a happy mumble, erection sliding along the crease of Reuben’s thigh.

“Do you even have a refractory period?” Reuben asked, sliding his hand down to cup Vairya’s arse.

Vairya raised his head and smirked at him, eyes half-lidded and his whole face slack with lust. “Sometimes. Complaining?”

“Not at all,” Reuben murmured and wrapped his leg over Vairya’s hip. He felt like he’d melted into the bed, his whole body lax and sated. He could barely summon the energy to bat his eyelashes at Vairya and simper, “Do be gentle with me, good sir.”

Vairya snorted laughter and bit his lip gently, making Reuben shudder happily. “For that,” Vairya muttered, pushing himself up, “I’m going to take terrible advantage of you.”

Reuben reached under the pillow for his lube, tossed it at Vairya, and then folded his arms behind his head. “Go ahead. Ravage me.”

Vairya’s grin went sharp and appreciative. “Seriously? How long until the afterglow wears off, and you start getting cranky again?”

“Not yet,” Reuben said, “but I’ll make sure to warn—oh, *that’s* good.”

Vairya lifted his head from where he had just fastened his mouth over Reuben’s nipple, and patted him fondly on the cheek. “Just lie back and take it, there’s a good boy.”

“You should be very glad of my afterglow,” Reuben grumbled, but he couldn’t stop himself from reaching out to touch Vairya’s hair where it stood up on end.

Vairya laughed and dipped his head down again. He kissed and stroked his way down Reuben's body, mouth and hands wandering in a way that seemed purposeless until Reuben's cock filled again, and he began to shiver, anticipating every touch. Vairya just kept going, slapping Reuben's hand away when he tried to reach down to return the favour, and Reuben simply gave up. Vairya kissed and touched him and sucked his cock with unrelenting tenderness. He slid his fingers into Reuben, teased him until he shuddered on the edge of oblivion, and then pulled right away for just long enough to make Reuben panic. And then he folded Reuben's legs back and fucked into him so steadily that Reuben arched his neck and forgot everything but the rhythm of his hips, meeting every thrust as he groped for own cock, watching the shift of muscle under skin and the pulse of pistons as Vairya rode him, until, at last, Reuben's toes curled, and his spine tingled and he came so hard he almost missed Vairya's own cry and arch of completion.

This time they both went sprawling gracelessly across the bed, Vairya's head tucked against his shoulder and their legs splayed.

Reuben wasn't sure how long they lay there, but suddenly, the ship shook beneath them, a long grinding roll that made their discarded clothes go sliding across the floor.

"What the hell?" Reuben said.

"The city just shifted to start approaching the sun," Vairya said, sitting up. "This is how the world ends."

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## Chapter Eight

“Not with a bang but with a whimper,” Reuben murmured. “I wouldn’t have thought Eliot was to your taste.”

“Nonetheless, I remember it.” Vairya’s eyes were sad again. “I remember everything.”

The com buzzed. “Dr Cooper, we’re all gathered on the bridge.”

“We’re on our way,” Reuben said, reaching for his clothes. He tossed Vairya the pile he had got out earlier and then changed his mind, dropping back to the bed to kiss Vairya hard.

Vairya locked his arms around Reuben’s neck and returned his kiss with equal force. Then he pulled back enough to say, “The game’s afoot.”

“And we stand ‘like greyhounds in the slips’?” Reuben inquired dryly and pulled his clothes back on as Vairya broke into a delighted smile.

“Oh, Dr Cooper,” he said, wriggling into a set of Reuben’s spare clothes, “I do wish I had more time with you.”

Reuben’s throat tightened and for a few wild seconds he indulged in might-have-beens, vague colourful dreams of gardens and pageants and Vairya’s sly, bright smile. Then, because he was a realist, he put his dreams aside and said, a little self-consciously, “It’s mutual. Pass me my shirt.”

“Such romance,” Vairya muttered and surprised him by offering him the gleaming cord from his chiton. When Reuben looked puzzled, Vairya sighed and looped it over his belt. “There. My token, before you ride into battle, Sir Knight.”

“Shouldn’t you have something of mine as well?” Reuben asked with that same warm clutch of his heart.

Vairya raised his eyebrow. “Besides the fact I’m wearing your underwear?”

A laugh cracked out of Reuben, surprising him, and he shot back, “*Such* romance.”

Vairya met his gaze with such warm amusement that Reuben couldn’t help smiling back, despite the fact that the world was collapsing around them, his spirits lifting against all sense and reason.

Damn it. Not here, not now, not this impossible man.

“We should go,” he said.

“Once more into the breach,” Vairya agreed, and they headed up towards the bridge, Vairya reciting Shakespeare with relish.

Once they were there, the mood turned sombre. Eskil was tucked into his pilot’s chair, looking miserable, and the other two were standing by the window, staring down at the city from where they were docked on the edge of the upper shell.

“Took your time,” Meili said.

“Sorry,” Reuben said to forestall the argument. “We’re on the move.”

“Yes,” Chanthavy said. “How long do we have?”

“The city has no hyperdrive,” Vairya said. “It will take three days before we’re close enough that there can be no escape.”

“Is there any way they can escape the city in that time?” Reuben asked. The others turned towards him and he shrugged. “That has to be our first priority. I’m surprised they haven’t tried to move yet.”

“They’re not intelligent,” Vairya said, “not in anything more than the most instinctive way. They multiply, and they assess everything they come across to see if it can be utilised to help them spread. If it cannot, they transform it. They don’t strategise beyond that. They wouldn’t think to seek out a different ship, for instance, but if they came across one, they would put it to use.”

“Why haven’t they mended their original ship?” Meili asked.

“We must have completely incapacitated it. They can’t create, only replicate and imitate. If they reach the city engines, they could copy them.”

Reuben nodded. “And the same with any ships, I presume? We need to leave our dock and put some clear space between us and the city.”

“They can build bridges, so it will need to be a significant distance.”

“How many other ships are docked here?”

“Only about twenty. We’d just had a large trade convoy leave, and we put out a quarantine signal as soon as I realised what had happened.”

“Eskil,” Reuben said. “Can you get onto those ships and fly them out of the dock?”

Eskil nodded. “I can transport in and out. Might take a few hours, though.”



“Get started,” Chanthavy told him. “Can we keep them from the main engines?”

“Only by slowing their progress. If they’re following their normal pattern, they’ll be moving along the surface of the city and only digging into underground areas in the second stage. If we c-could e-expose those areas, they will go back to convert them again.”

“By expose, you mean...?” Eskil asked.

Vairya clenched his fists into the hem of his shirt. “There are more warheads, if we can access Defence Command. We can—” He swallowed hard.

Reuben reached out and took his hand. “Your people are safe in your memory. What is left is just bricks and steel.”

“How do we access Defence Command?” Chanthavy asked, eyeing Reuben with a faint air of disapproval.

“I can get you into the network from here. Do any of you have any experience with long-range weapons?”

“We have the ability to defend ourselves,” Chanthavy said. “If we cannot access your missiles, we have some of our own, although not of similar strength. I can fire them.”

“Good,” Reuben said, looking at Vairya. “What else?”

“It’s dangerous.”

“I don’t care.”

Vairya’s hand tightened around his. “I do.”

Meili sighed impatiently. “And that’s very sweet, but we’re dead anyway, and I want to come back as a lion next time, not a virus. Give me something worthwhile to do so that actually happens.”

Vairya squinted at her. “*That’s* your theology?”

“Works for me.”

“The dangerous task?” Reuben prompted before they got distracted.

Vairya sighed. “They spread by two means. The first you have seen. Cell by cell, they transform matter, drawing out what they need to replicate themselves before they turn it into diamond and sweep onwards.” He quirked a humourless smile at Reuben. “Breeding lilacs out of the dead land.”

“And the other means?”

“They have—well, I hesitate to call them either humans or cyborgs. They were human once, centuries ago. When they became diamond, they kept their form but became servants of the controlling impulse, automatons with no minds or will of their own. They roam ahead of the tide. Whatever they touch becomes infused with fresh nanites, and the tide grows again.” He closed his eyes, swallowing hard. “That was how my creators fell, and my brothers and sisters who never escaped Earth.”

“Zombie apocalypse,” Meili said, nodding sharply, even as Reuben murmured, “Hollow men.”

“‘Shape without form, shade without colour,’” Vairya agreed.

“How do we kill them?” Meili demanded.

“How did someone as bloodthirsty as you ever become a doctor?” Reuben asked.

“I like eradicating bad things, like plagues. What’s your excuse?”

“Pretty much the same,” Reuben said. “Vairya, do they have a weakness?”

“If you hit them hard enough, they’ll shatter.”

“How hard are we talking?” Meili asked.

“There’s an armoury on the lower rim where we keep shoulder-mounted grenade launchers.” At Meili’s wide-eyed stare, he added defensively, “We had some problems with pirates sending remote drones into our atmosphere to hack our defences.”

“No excuses needed,” Reuben said. “Eskil can beam Meili and me down there.”

“I’ll come too,” Vairya said.

But Reuben had been thinking about this. “No. You have your entire people inside your head, and we need someone up here who can have an overview and transport us out if we need to change our strategy.”

“And send you down there *alone*?”

Reuben dragged a smirk out. “I won’t be alone. I’ll have Meili.”

“But—”

“If we’re going to do this,” Meili interrupted, her voice harsher than her expression, “can we do it now, before I lose my nerve? Cooper, kiss your boy toy goodbye and get your mind in the game.”

Vairya was afraid again; Reuben could see it in his eyes. There was nothing he could do to solve that, so he kissed Vairya, ignoring Chanthavy’s pursed lips, and then stepped away to suit up as Eskil transported out to the first ship. He and Meili checked each other’s suits, the familiar routine calming him a little. When they were ready, he turned back to Vairya. “We’re on coms. Can they hear us?”

“No,” Vairya said, not looking away from him. “And they wouldn’t understand if they could.”

“Then keep talking to us,” Reuben said and moved to stand beside Meili. “Ready when you are.”

“I’m ready,” she said. He couldn’t see her face through the screen of the helmet, but he could hear the determination cracking her voice.

“Transporting you on three... two... one...”

The bridge of the *Juniper* blurred and went milky around them, fading into white light as the transport disassembled and remade them.

The light faded into shadows, and Reuben breathed in quickly as the cold and broken landscape of the real city came into focus around him.

He had forgotten, lost in Vairya’s gardens, just how bad it was down here. The city had turned towards the sun, noon local time, and white light spilled across an airless landscape that glittered with ice. They stood before a high door, cracked cobbles stretching out before them to fill a courtyard which must have been pleasant once: there was an iced-over fountain in the middle of it, and blackened vines covered one wall.

“I have you on camera,” Vairya said. “You’ll need to go through the door behind you. Normally it would need a DNA scan and a keycode, but I’m adjusting the programming. You should be able to get inside in a few seconds.”

“No rush,” Meili said. “It’s not as if, oh, our air supply was limited.”

“Patience,” Vairya said, and the door slid open. “You need to go to the end of the corridor and enter the room on the right. You’re looking for a Thierry-Ng Mk 12 Propulsion Unit and the accompanying ordnance. I can try describing what it looks like.”

“I’ve seen them before,” Reuben said and started into the armoury trying to keep his steps as short as possible so he could check the entrances to the other rooms.

“The place was locked,” Meili pointed out, bounding past him. “Stop being so paranoid.”

“Better paranoid than dead.”

“Don’t bicker, children,” Vairya said.

Reuben glimpsed a body in one of the rooms they passed, slumped in front of a dead wallscreen. His first instinct was to go in, discover who it was, and how she had died.

But the time for counting the dead was over. This was war now.

He found the grenade launchers easily enough and helped Meili strap one on. There was plenty of ammunition for them too, and he slung two extra ammo packs around his waist.

“Lighter than I was expecting,” Meili commented, hefting it.

“It’s designed to be lightweight, and we’re in reduced gravity. You’ll find the recoil is worse than you’d expect in normal gravity.”

“You ever shot one of these before?”

“Only on the practice range.”

“Oh, this is going to go well,” she muttered. “Vairya, any idea where we should start?”

“I’ve lost cameras in the transformed areas, but I’m picking up some movement at the city centre end of Commercial Avenue. I can put you down on a side road about a quarter of a mile off.”

“Sounds good,” Reuben said.

“Be careful.”

The world blurred around them again, and then they were in an alleyway. It contained the first graffiti Reuben had seen in Caelestia, an inevitable cock and balls sprayed onto the side of a dumpster. Carefully, Reuben crept to the mouth of the alley, trying not to kick up any trash which might drift out to betray their position.

He peered around the corner and along the road. This was one of Caelestia’s main avenues, stretching along the entire length of the station, from the docks,

past the Senate, and out into the residential districts beyond. It had been the first road they walked along when they entered Caelestia, the first place where they had realised the scale of the disaster.

Further along the road, a shining figure was running forwards. The sunlight broke through it, wreathing it in rainbows and making it too bright to focus on. Behind it, swelling out like the wake of ship, the road was changing, first the ground and next the surrounding walls fading and then becoming transparent and glittering.

Reuben's vision dimmed suddenly as his suit adjusted his screen to protect his eyes, and for a few seconds all he could see was shadows.

When his vision cleared, the creature had covered half the distance between them.

"How fast do they move?" Meili gasped.

"Too fast," Reuben said and steadied his weapon, reminding himself that this was the enemy, no matter that it held no weapons of its own.

He fired, and the recoil pushed him back into the alley. Meili pulled him down smoothly, and they crouched as the air around them flashed brightly and then shook around them in a soundless wave of destruction that belled outwards from the place where the runner had been.

When it stopped, Reuben peered out of the alley again.

The shining runner was gone, though shards of crystal were still sinking slowly towards the ground. As they touched the road, each one glimmered and then melted. From each, a gleaming puddle spread, and then began to roll back to rejoin the main sweep of diamond, transforming everything in its path.

"Time to go," Meili said.

Reuben agreed. Bounding after her, he rasped, "Vairya, we have a kill. Those things are fast."

"We need more distance if you transport us in again," Meili said and brought her knees up on the next step, turning in the air to swing her weapon round. "Incoming. Cooper, get down!"

He threw himself backwards instead, out of the path of her shot, and watched it go arching along the side street ahead of them, where another runner was approaching.

They had no shelter this time, and the flash and shockwave blacked out their helmets and sent them rising from the airless street.

Reuben twisted as he rose, until he managed to push his feet against what felt like a piece of wall, and he went arching away, his gloved hands brushing what could have been the ridge of a roof. He could only see glimmers: the bright sky, Meili's suit moving beside him, the dim outline of walls.

They came back to the ground in a different road, the whole world still as vague as a pencil sketch but growing steadily more distinct as their helmets adapted.

"Vairya, we're blind," Meili said. "Can you see us?"

"You're off camera," Vairya said, sounding frightened. "Reuben!"

"Still here," Reuben said, turning to look around. "Air and gravity would be good. Our suits are working against us."

"Let me see what I can do. Okay, there's private security cameras on the buildings around you. Searching, searching. Got you. You're in a courtyard behind warehouses, no sign of trolls. Sit tight."

"Trolls?" Reuben asked, amused.

"They're evil, made of stone, and killed by big flashing lights. Got a better idea?"

"Trolls it is."

Meili sighed. "Am I going to have to put up with this all mission?"

"Almost certainly," Reuben said, smiling behind his helmet. "Keep talking, Vairya."

"Concentrating here. What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to keep talking so I know immediately if we lose coms."

"Oh."

He could see Meili swinging round to face him, but all she said was, "I'm glad one of us has some idea what we're doing."

"Did you hit your head?" Reuben demanded. "What was that? Respect? From you?"

"Fuck off, Cooper."

“Yeah, she’s fine,” Vairya said. “Reuben, I do need to concentrate on this. The city systems have been chewed apart by this stuff. You get something I have memorised, I’m afraid.”

“Should keep us going for a while if we go through every poem in your head,” Meili muttered.

“And by a while, you mean approximately thirteen centuries,” Vairya said, and then his voice shifted, losing a little warmth and humour to recite, ““So all day long the noise of battle roll’d among the mountains by the winter sea—””

“Could you not find anything less morbidly sentimental?” Reuben asked acidly.

“Always a critic. Would you like me to find something a little more jolly? I have plenty of limericks in here.”

“Adventure,” Meili said, “if you’re taking requests. Something with some good fights. I need inspiration.”

Vairya chuckled. “Fine. ‘I sing of the wrath of Achilles—’”

“Fuck off,” Reuben said mildly. “I’m not putting up with nine books worth of chariots and tantrums.”

““This day is called the feast of Crispian—””

“No.”

“Stop interrupting the man, Cooper,” Meili said. “He needs to concentrate. Go back to the original, Vairya. I’ll shoot Cooper if he keeps whining.”

“I hate Tennyson,” Reuben muttered, but she was right, and he was being a fool, demanding Vairya’s attention just because he wanted to hear that wry tone turned at him.

““Until King Arthur’s table, man by man, had fall’n in Lyonesse about their Lord...”” Vairya continued, and Reuben sat and listened as his vision cleared, and the world around him filled with sunlight again. It was bright today, pouring over them with a fury that made him glad they were suited up. How much closer had the city carried them? How soon would it be too hot for anything to survive?

When the light changed, he assumed it was his helmet again until Vairya paused in his recitation to say, “Atmospheric shields up and secure. Working on the air supply and gravity now.”

“Good,” Reuben said. “Let us know as soon as we can get these helmets off.”

“Will do. Eskil’s got four more ships away. Now where was I? Ah, yes. ‘Such a sleep they sleep—the men I loved. I think that we shall never more, at any future time, delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds, walking about the gardens and the halls...’”

Meili sat down on the cobbles, laying her gun aside. “Okay, you were right. Don’t you two know any poetry which isn’t depressing and tedious?”

“Barbarian,” Reuben said, but it lacked some of the venom he might have used a few weeks ago.

It could have been half an hour later, or even an hour, when Meili held up her hand and showed him the atmospheric scanner in her glove. It had changed from red to amber, and was already green tinted.

“Good systems,” she said.

“Gravity’s about to come back on,” Vairya said. “Brace yourselves. Oh, and Reuben, I’m about to start on *Paradise Lost*.”

“Only ever read extracts of that,” Reuben said, cheering up a little.

He felt the lurch and sudden drop of his stomach as the gravity kicked in, and swallowed back the urge to vomit into his helmet.

Meili checked her scanner again, and said, “Seriously, Cooper, what is the appeal of all this? You trying to read everything ever written?”

“Just the highlights,” Reuben said, “and I never got much beyond one language and two millennia.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“Cooper.”

He looked up at the blazing sky. “Because they didn’t know anything. They didn’t know what the stars were, or how planets circled the sun, or why our hearts beat, and our bodies grew old. It didn’t stop them, though. They loved, and they lived, and they never stopped wondering what it meant to be—”

It was more than he had meant to say, and he stopped himself.

“To be?”



“Human,” he finished. “What it meant to be human.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Did they find an answer?”

“No. No one ever has. That’s not the point.”

“Then what is?”

“They never stopped asking,” he said. “That’s the point.”

She was quiet, and into their silence, Vairya said, his voice soft, “You have breathable atmosphere at ground level.”

“Thank you,” Reuben said and stood up to peel his outer suit off. “Keep monitoring. We’ll need instant extraction if we lose air again.”

“Understood.”

The grenade launcher was heavier now, and he couldn’t carry quite so much ammunition. Nonetheless, it felt good to breathe in deeply and rub some of the gathered sweat out of his hair. The air was hot, and he was glad of the inner suit, which would still offer some protection from the sun.

“Where next?” he said.

“I’m still having trouble maintaining a complete camera network,” Vairya said, “but I’m watching the spread of the diamond across the city. There are outlying spars in the Chahar Bagh district, ninety-five degrees clockwise and three kilometres from your position.”

“On our way,” Meili said and led them out of the courtyard.

After a moment, Vairya started, his voice whisper soft, ““Of Man’s First Disobedience, and the Fruit of that Forbidden Tree...””

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## Chapter Nine

They found the next few trolls before they'd even reached the area Vairya had identified, and from then on they were running and fighting without break, taking turns to fire while the other loaded more ammunition frantically. The trolls were fast, and there were more and more of them with every strike.

"Vairya, tell me they're not hydras," Reuben gasped as he ducked behind a decorative tower on the edge of a small park. The smoke was still clearing from their last hit, and he couldn't see if there were more coming, or where the edge of the diamond was now. "Tell me they don't multiply when we cut one down."

"They don't," Vairya said. "They have to copy an existing body."

"The streets are full of the dead!" Meili gasped, from the other side of the tower. "Cooper, guard the door. We need to see."

"Go," Reuben said, and she dashed up the tower, her feet clattering on the metal stairs.

He heard her gasp, and then she said urgently, "Vairya! We're cut off. Diamonds on every side. Get us out!"

"I can't see you," Vairya said frantically. "There's too much smoke, and the net just cut out in that district."

"Get one of Eskil's drones down here," Reuben said, peering through the smoke. He'd thought he'd seen a flash of light out there, the now too familiar shimmer of rainbows.

"Cooper," Meili said, her voice suddenly thin. "Get up here. You're about to lose the ground beneath your feet."

He leapt for the stairs as the light flashed again, and he saw what she had seen. The dead grass was turning pale and brittle, as if a tide of ice was sweeping over it. "Vairya!"

"I'm trying!"

He went up the stairs three steps at a time, aware of the glitter of the floor changing below him. Meili was there to grab his arm and drag him out onto the roof, and then they both bent to wrestle with the fastenings of the stairs.

The last bolt came loose as lines of diamond came streaking up the banisters, and the stairs went crashing away.

“It’s coming up the walls!” Meili cried.

“Get in the middle of the floor,” Reuben said, dragging her away from the parapet. For a moment he regretted the full gravity, which stopped them from simply leaping off the edge to propel themselves away from the untouched roofs of the neighbouring buildings.

Then, with a buzz, a drone cut through the smoke, its faceted eye blinking red.

“I see you,” Vairya said, and the world went milky around them.

They rematerialised on a low hilltop, further out of the centre of the city. Dead trees stood in a ring around the lower slopes, but Reuben could see right across the hollow of the station from here. Smoke blurred the air near the centre, but behind it, as far as the eye could see, there was only the gleaming, dead expanse of the transformed land.

“We’re losing,” he said.

“We’re only playing for time,” Meili reminded him, wiping her grimy face with her sleeve. Sweat ran in cracked lines down her cheeks. “Vairya, where do we go next?”

“I’m not sure,” Vairya said, his voice tight with frustration. “I’ve completely lost the net now, and I’m relying on the *Juniper’s* scanners. I’m going to put more drones out, but stay put until I have a better idea of what’s happening. I can barely see you, and if you move, I’ll lose you completely.”

“Understood,” Reuben said, but Meili was staring past him, into the blackened woods.

“That could be a problem,” she said.

Reuben turned and saw what she had seen.

The trees were turning clear, and through their whispering, shimmering leaves, ten gleaming figures were climbing towards them, arms outstretched.

“Transport us,” Reuben said. “Now.”

“I can’t get a lock,” Vairya said. “Run!”

Reuben was already moving, bringing his gun up to fire, as he stumbled over the other brow of the hill. Meili was racing ahead of him, fleet footed and graceful, but the air was too bright to see carefully.

He saw her fall, and grabbed her arm as he raced past her, throwing his gun aside to drag her with him.

Below their feet, dry leaves slid and rustled, and then went cold and hard.

Meili screamed, stopping so hard she bent Reuben's arm right back. He turned to shout at her to move, and saw the terror blazing across her face.

Around her feet, there were crystals rising, locking over her boots, and then running up her legs in spars.

"Run!" she screamed, even as he tried to pull her free. "Run, Cooper!"

And then the diamond closed over her face, and there were trolls coming at him from every side.

"Vairya!"

"I can't see you!"

There was nowhere left to go, and all Reuben could do was wrench a broken branch off the nearest tree and swing wildly at the nearest troll.

It bent and broke against the troll's clear shoulder, but it paused in its run to turn and stare at Reuben.

For the first time, Reuben believed that it had been human once. The ghost of that long-lost face remained, in the rough stubble of a long jaw, and narrow lips. There was nothing left there now, though, no light in its eyes as it reached out and seized him by the throat, lifting him.

For a moment, it held him up to the light, as if unsure what to do.

Then, as if it had lost interest, it dropped him and turned away.

Stiff with relief, he tried to speak to Vairya.

And realised that he couldn't move his throat.

He could still lift his hand, though, and he brought it high enough to see as tiny flecks of diamond began to move across his palm, washing all the colour away.

It hurt to breathe, his body growing stiffer with every breath.

"I can almost see you now," Vairya said triumphantly, and Reuben heard the buzz of another drone. "I see... Reuben."

Only the pure should live, Ahrima had told him once, and he had regretted ever since that he had listened to her. If she could see him now, would she consider this blasphemy or revenge?

“Reuben!” Vairya screamed.

Reuben wished he still had a voice, that he could speak something to ease that grief, say, perhaps, “Sing no sad songs for me.”

But then Vairya was there, appearing over him with the milky flash of transportation.

*No!* Reuben thought at him desperately, but Vairya was already falling to his knees beside him, all the colour draining from his face.

“Reuben,” he whispered and reached out, but his hand stopped before he could touch Reuben.

*Go, Reuben thought at him. Don't waste the time you have left.*

But, as he watched, Vairya's face changed. Once again, as he had been in the garden, he looked too fierce to be human.

“I was made to remember,” he said softly, “and to protect what should never be forgotten. What use is remembering if everything just dies?”

And, with a swift, unsettling grace, he turned on his heel, and reached out to seize the troll's wrist.

Reuben wanted to shout his protest, but could only watch and stretch his still working hand out feebly, as Vairya tightened his grasp, tighter and tighter and tighter.

And the troll's arm broke off in his hand.

Vairya stepped forwards, lifting it like a club to bring round to slam against the troll.

It stumbled under the blow, cracks webbing across its face, and Vairya hit it again and again, gasping with the effort, his face contorted with rage.

“Don't,” Reuben tried to say, and then, “Move!”

For Vairya was no fighter, for all his strength and rage, and he didn't even see the next troll coming down the hill towards him, not until it hammered its fist into his back, hitting so hard it broke through skin to reveal the metal of Vairya's spine, and then again and again as Vairya stumbled, until Vairya fell under the impact, still trying to turn and hit back.

And then, as Reuben struggled and fought to reach Vairya, throwing the last of his willpower into just moving, moving enough to stop them, the first troll turned around and reached out with its surviving arm.

And they pulled Vairya apart and let him fall to the shining earth, cogs, bloody skin, and dulling eyes scattered across the lifeless leaves in countless pieces.

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For a long time, Reuben lay there, waiting to turn completely into stone, craving the moment when nothing would hurt any more, when he wouldn't be able to see Vairya's blood pooling across the ground and know that he had failed again, that he had never been able to save anyone, let alone the one who most deserved to live, the one he wanted, above all, to save from this.

There was so much blood, only the faintest silver sheen to suggest it wasn't human.

So much blood that wasn't being transformed, just like Reuben himself was still half-alive when the tide of diamonds had swept over everything else around them.

Silver in Vairya's blood, silver in the shooting stars of Reuben's imagination, silver in the cool bottle of nanites they had taken from the fridge only two days ago.

And, so simply, Reuben understood that the battle wasn't over. There was one more way to fight, one more way to avenge Vairya and Meili and the people of Caelestia, one more way to stop the greatest Enemy humanity had ever faced.

Forcing himself to lift his still fleshy hand, he drew his palm across the sharp edge of the nearest glittering leaf, tearing it open. It hurt, and he could feel the damage, but it didn't matter. He would never wield a scalpel again, never lift a sword or gun in battle.

No, his weapons were of another sort.

As his blood slid across the cold ground, he closed his eyes and fell back into his mind.

He landed briefly in his imaginary infirmary, but it was ruined, its walls leaning at impossible angles and claw-like crystals breaking through the floor. Dismissing it, he walked towards the wall of shattered glass which had been a screen before and willed it to become a doorway.

It took him back to the corridor to Ahrima's study, but this time he was not afraid. He was not her tool, not anymore, but he would use the knowledge she

had given him to destroy these monsters. When the door opened, he walked straight past her, to the window, and looked down upon a darkling plain, where rows of nanoknights stood at attention, their faces masked and spears flung over their shoulders. Dark pillars rose from the pebbled ground, cupping flames that brushed the whole dim world with the colours of blood and destruction.

“Nanites,” Reuben said, bleak satisfaction rising through him. “Multiply.”

They divided as swiftly as a sigh, suddenly two in the place of every one, then again and again until the plain expanded around them to the furthest horizon.

Reuben smiled.

“So,” Ahrima said, coming to stand beside him, “you go to war.”

“Yes.”

“To purify what has been corrupted.”

He looked at her then, and found he no longer feared her. She was just another monster in his mind, a ghost bleating out the same old falsehoods.

“They don’t need to be purified,” he said. “They have tried too hard to do that to others. No, General, I’m just going to take all they have created and turn it into dust, and then I’m going to destroy them all. ‘Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.’”

Row upon row, field upon field, the nanoknights kept replicating.

“You impress me,” Ahrima said, laying her hand on his arm. “You always did.”

Reuben shrugged her off. “I don’t care. You are nothing but a drooling husk in a prison far, far away. I’m not doing this for you.”

“Then what are you doing it for?” she asked. “You should always know that, Reuben. I told you long ago.”

“You’re not my mentor anymore,” he said, looking out at the knights. “I don’t have to listen to you.”

“Yet you came to me when it was time to start killing.”

“You are the most efficient killer I know,” he said, staring at his reflection. He could see her face behind his, reflected faintly in the dim glass. “Where else would I come?”

“Who made you a killer, Doctor? Are you ready to be the death of so many?”

“Don’t talk as if they were human. They are nothing but the urge to replicate.”

“And what are we? Machines swim in your blood. You consort with those who have cut out their own flesh and replaced it with novelties of steel and silicon. You made love with a machine as if he were a man. What right have you to decide what makes a human?”

Reuben swung on her. “It’s our actions, not our bodies, that make us human!”

“And yet you come to me to learn how to kill.”

“Say what you mean,” he snarled.

“What *you* mean,” she parried. “I’m just a monster in your mind, remember, Dr Cooper?”

“Shut up!” he snapped, suddenly shakily angry again. “Shut up!” He swung away, and as he did, something in the front row of nanoknights drew his attention, something out of place.

He pressed to the glass to take a closer look, and caught his breath.

Two of the knights were not carrying spears. Instead, they had hoes propped over their shoulders.

*I thought helping things to grow suited their nature better than war*, Vairya had said.

“But this is the time for war,” Reuben said, pressing his hand against the window. His skin was stained with silver, shining streaks spreading over the brown like the roots of a tree. “What good will gardeners do now?”

Vairya had turned his people into flowers and sheltered them in the rose garden of his mind. He had told Reuben to run, had only fought when he was trying to protect Reuben.

*How did someone as bloodthirsty as you ever become a doctor?* Reuben himself had asked Meili.

He had always thought that medicine was a war, battles to be fought against disease and injury, pitting strength and will against the pull of death.

But Vairya had given him gardeners.



Vairya helped things grow. He did not kill.

The people of this city had become flowers, not soldiers.

War... battle... violence... They meant nothing in a sunlit garden.

Reuben needed to *stop* fighting, not wage war on the nanites of Old Earth.

Suddenly terrified that he was too late, that he had been too stupid to save Vairya after all, Reuben slammed his fists against the glass, thinking of the garden.

Vairya didn't need air to breathe. He didn't need a body to think. If his memory had survived, there was still hope.

On the glass in front of him, a faint outline of the garden showed and then faded.

"Is he really worth the effort?" Ahrima asked mockingly. "You could have ripped the station apart by now, sent us all tumbling into the sun."

"Vairya!" Reuben shouted. "Let me in!"

He thought of the garden, of the swirling colours of the roses, the faces in the flowers, the quiet peace of it.

It showed on the glass again, more clearly still, but all his attempts to step through failed.

Taking a deep breath, he tried to remember how he had done this the first time. The same nanites that danced in his blood were in Vairya, although they might be few in number now. So, he needed to strengthen the connection.

"Wake me," he whispered, and a shudder ran through him.

When he opened his eyes again, he was back in the real city, blood smearing from his hands to slick across the hard ground. He reached out, forcing his heavy body to move, and pressed his bloody palm against Vairya's wan cheek, trying not to see that one shoulder was gone, that Vairya's torso ended in a tangle of torn cables, that Vairya looked dead.

As his blood soaked into Vairya's skin, Reuben closed his eyes again and slipped back into his mind, imagining rows of gardeners in armour racing along the conduit of his blood to bind him more tightly to Vairya.

Vairya, who deserved better than a violent death.

This time the garden rose up before him, frail as ash, and Reuben went racing through the gates, roaring, "Gardeners!"

On every side, the roses were dying, their faces turning grey and wizened. Dust flew up beneath his feet, blurring the air, and fallen leaves crackled and broke under the weight of his steps.

“Tend the flowers,” Reuben shouted, as he glimpsed nanoknights moving between the plants. “Make them live! Make them all live!”

Ahead of him, someone was weeping, and he ran, leaping over every obstacle, until he burst into the central grove and found Vairya kneeling there.

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## Chapter Ten

He was as pale as a ghost, the gold faded from his hair, and his body a skeletal mess of metal rods. When he looked up, though, his face was still his own, and Reuben dropped down before him and caught his face between his hands.

“Reuben?” Vairya whispered, voice dusty.

“Live,” Reuben snarled at him and shouted over him to any gardener who could hear. “Make him live! Heal him!”

“You’re dead,” Vairya said, bringing his own hands up to cover Reuben’s. “I saw it kill you.”

“Nobody dies today,” Reuben said, and he felt all his will go into the words, boiling out of him in a silver tide. “*Nobody* dies!”

And he kissed Vairya, desperate and furious.

When he drew back, Vairya’s cheeks were shining where Reuben’s hands were bleeding silver, but there was colour in his lips, and his eyes were brighter, and his voice stronger as he said, “What’s happening?”

“Things got a bit complicated,” Reuben said, watching his face anxiously. With every second, Vairya looked a little more alive.

“I guessed that much,” Vairya snapped. “Why am I not dying? Why are the roses flowering again? Where did all these knights come from?”

“They’re not knights,” Reuben said. “They’re gardeners. I brought you gardeners. Garden knights, not soldiers.” He did look up then, because Vairya was starting to look a little wild-eyed.

There were silver gardeners filling up the avenues of the garden, crowded so closely that they were stumbling over each other. Every rose bush was being tended by two, and there were more lined up along the walls and jostling to get in the gate.

“Ah,” Reuben said.

“There are thousands of them!”

“Yes. Um. Garden knights, if you are not needed here, ride forth. Heal the city. Replicate as needed to complete your task.”

He saw the first shuffling movement, but then turned back to Vairya, who was still clutching his hands frantically.

“Reuben,” he said, voice shaking, “I feel very strange.”

Reuben’s heart sank. He believed that Vairya would survive, refused to consider the alternative, but how to tell him that he was crippled?

“You were hurt,” he started.

“I know that! I was there! My toes hurt. How can my toes hurt when I’m sure five minutes ago I didn’t have any toes!”

Reuben was pretty certain Vairya knew about phantom pain, but he was a little intrigued himself.

“Can you wake?” he asked.

Vairya swallowed. “If I do, will this be a dream? Are you really alive?”

“I am,” Reuben promised.

“Then let us wake,” Vairya murmured, and he closed his eyes.

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They awoke in a green and silver world.

Reuben’s hand was still resting against Vairya’s cheek, but grass had sprung up in the space between them, bright blades uncurling further as Reuben blinked.

“You’re silver,” Vairya whispered and sat up, staring at Reuben. “Your throat, your arms, your cheeks. You’re streaked with silver and I’m... I’m whole. I think.”

And he was, no longer ragged and broken, but naked and entire, skin covering even the places where he had been metal before.

“Are you flesh and blood now?” Reuben asked, reaching out to touch his chest.

“No,” Vairya said uncertainly. “I still have all my original parts, although they’re not all quite in the right places. Oh.” He grimaced. “Okay, now they are. That was really unsettling.”

“What happened?” Reuben said, looking past Vairya to where a scatter of cogs and casings were entangled with the grass. As he watched, the grass covered them, and then reached higher.

“Everything just clicked into where it was meant to be. What is this?”

“The nanites we gave you to fix your memory,” Reuben said. “They’re in your blood, and mine, and in the soil now. Think a command, and they will obey.”

“That’s rather unnerving,” Vairya said.

“We’re alive,” Reuben said.

“Us, the grass, the trees—those trees were very dead a few minutes ago.”

Reuben rolled onto his back, looking up. The trees were alive, every dancing leaf rimmed in silver.

Vairya crawled across to lean over him. “What are we? Are we like them, the Enemy?”

“The opposite, I think,” Reuben said and reached out to touch Vairya again, just to reassure himself.

Vairya pulled him into a tight embrace, and Reuben hugged him back, pressing his face against Vairya’s shoulder to reassure himself that it was real.

“Get a room,” a disgusted voice said, interrupting them, and Reuben jerked back to stare up at Meili.

“You’re alive,” Vairya said to her, his eyes wide again.

She shrugged, her face taut with frustration. “Stating the obvious there. Get me out of this!”

The sheet of diamond which had encased her was peeling away, drooping like petals, but her legs were still trapped. Reuben hurried to help pull the rest off, watching the sunlight catch on the flashes of silver dusting her hair and bare shoulders.

“Why are you the only one with clothes, Cooper?” she demanded.

“I didn’t die quite as much as the rest of you,” he said vaguely and regretted it when a spasm of panic made her face clench. To distract her, he said, with as much gleeful malice as he could summon, “If I’m breaking you out of your chrysalis, Meili, does that make you a beautiful butterfly?”

Her hand was free now, and she lifted a finger at him with a scowl. “Have you looked in a mirror lately, Cooper? You’re not one to be casting aspersions.”

“Been a little busy,” he said, and they all sighed in relief as Vairya dragged a limp leaf of diamond away far enough that she could step out.

“Where are the trolls?” she said, looking around.

“Now that,” Vairya said, “is a very sensible question. Have either of you still got coms? Drone eyes would be useful.”

“Nothing but skin and implants here,” Meili said.

Reuben lifted his hand to his ear to check his coms, and brought away a marbled mass of silver, diamond, and crushed wires. “No.”

“I can’t see anything through the trees,” Meili said, squinting around them. “Would they come back to tackle this?”

“Yes,” Vairya said, looking around as well. He was starting to look jittery.

“Up the hill,” Reuben said. “Let’s see exactly what is happening here.”

Vairya nodded and led the way. Reuben followed, and Meili fell in beside him, picking her way barefoot along the grassy path. She didn’t seem in the least bit self-conscious about her nudity, so Reuben tried his best to ignore it too.

“It’s silver,” she said. “That’s our nanites, isn’t it? Cooper, what the hell have you done?”

“I’m not sure,” he admitted and took a deep breath. The air tasted green and sweet, and it calmed him. “I didn’t want to be at war any longer.”

“Reuben!” Vairya called. “Meili! Quickly!”

He didn’t sound afraid, but Reuben ran anyway, grass brushing at his heels and the sunlight hot between the swaying branches of the trees, filling the world with warm shadows.

Out on the crest of the hill, it was hotter, enough to sting his skin and make Meili swear. Vairya was standing at the highest point, gazing down at the city with parted lips. Reuben stopped beside him and looked out.

After a few stunned moments, Meili whispered, a note of awe in her voice, “Reuben, what *have* you done?”

The diamond wasteland was turning green once more. Wherever Reuben looked, the diamond was dissolving, and grass was breaking through the cracks. After the grass came tiny trees, lifting their leafy heads towards the blazing sun, leaves shivering in delight.

And there were roses, twining over every still-shining wall in long briars, breaking into swollen flowers as he watched.

“Look for the trolls,” Vairya said, his hand gripping Reuben’s.

“Where?”

“The roses have them.”

Now Vairya had said it, Reuben could see them. The trolls of old Earth no longer roamed freely through Caelestia’s streets. Instead, they stood, imprisoned by thorns, as the grass rose up around them.

“Watch!” Vairya said, lifting his free hand to point.

At the foot of their hill, a troll lifted its arm, struggling to pull it free of the briars that were growing around it faster and faster. Then, as silver thorns pressed against its hard skin, it shuddered faintly.

And then it fell apart, shattering into countless shards of diamond that flew into the air like beads of water. They fell to the grass below, and then sprouted, not into new diamond warriors, but into green shoots.

“Come on!” Meili cried and went dashing down towards them.

“It’s not safe,” Reuben protested.

She looked back, laughing. “I don’t care. I want to know what’s happening!”

“I’m with her,” Vairya said and released Reuben’s hand to go running after her, their bare thighs flashing through the long grass. Reuben threw himself after them, laughing at the sheer madness of it all.

When he reached the bottom of the hill, they were both staring at the new plants, startled into silence.

Roses grew from glittering seeds, but they were strange in form, their stems ridged and twisted.

“They look like people,” Meili said uncertainly.

“Get with child a mandrake root,” Vairya murmured.

*Make them live*, Reuben had screamed at the garden knights.

“Vairya,” he said. “The only limit is your imagination. If you want them to be human, think it so.”

Vairya understood, of course, and he turned to stare at Reuben, his eyes bright with shock and doubt. “I don’t have your imagination. I don’t know how to—”

“Then remember,” Reuben said urgently, seizing Vairya’s hand and pressing it against silver-tinged rosewood. “Remember one of the people you saved. Remember!”

Vairya closed his eyes, breathing out slowly. For a moment, nothing moved, save the wind rippling through the newborn trees.

Then the rosebush changed, shuddered like a man rolling out his shoulders, and became human.

He looked like an ordinary enough man, middle-aged, broad, laughter lines around his eyes, and a farmer’s tan on his arms. When he opened his eyes, blinking, they were just an ordinary brown.

“Vairya,” he said, lifting his feet to shake off the last husks of his stem. “Is that you, lad? I had the strangest dream.”

Vairya’s eyes flew open, and he lunged forwards to throw his arms around the man. “John! It worked. It worked!”

The man flailed a little, holding his arms out. “Hey, that’s—kid, did you know we were both naked, and much as I like working with you—”

“Alive,” Vairya sobbed and pulled away to hurl himself at the next plant, pressing his palm to it in turn.

The first man rubbed his forehead and then looked at Reuben and Meili. He obviously noticed the state they were in, from his expression, but then he looked around them.

“I’m guessing there’s one hell of a story here,” he said, holding out his hand. “I’m John Ng. I usually work in the Botanical Gardens, but they seem to have overflowed. Who are you, and what’s happening?”

“Reuben. This is Meili. We’re doctors.”

“She’s a naked doctor.”

“It’s all the rage in Alpha Centauri,” Meili said and grabbed Reuben’s arm. “He did another one.”

A middle-aged woman was blinking at them with the horrified expression of someone who had never expected to find herself naked in the company of her



boss. Silver patterns were still lacing across her skin, like the veins in a leaf, but she seemed healed enough to say, “John?”

“Rupa,” John said, covering his eyes. “I’m hoping I’m still asleep.”

“No such luck,” Meili said, as two more people came pushing forwards to join them. “There’s been a bit of a situation—Cooper, where are you going?”

“After Vairya,” Reuben said, rolling his eyes because that much should have been obvious. “See if anyone knows how to turn the self-destruct off, will you?”

“Self-destruct?” a frightened voice said from the crowd, and Reuben left Meili to it. Vairya was still dashing ahead, seeking new plants, and Reuben could only follow, chasing him across the ever-widening garden as trolls became showers of light, and roses became men, and Vairya remembered and remembered and remembered, until his people were free again, free and safe.

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Eventually, Vairya woke someone other than gardeners and artists, and Reuben found himself striking out across the remaining wasteland with Caelestia’s Deputy Chief of Police and a very shaken city councillor.

Out here, the sun blazed off the diamond ground brightly enough to blind them. Before they had gone more than a few steps, Reuben rethought his initial plan to walk straight to Defence Command and reached out to the nearest crystal spear, touching it and imagining all the things it could become. Thin cloth was easy to pull from it and translucent visors for their eyes, and by then he had the trick of it and could simply will the nanites shimmering over every surface to give him shoes.

They set out again, the other two regarding him with fear.

At last, the Deputy Chief of Police cleared his throat and asked hesitantly, “What will the Fleet do to us when they arrive?”

“I don’t know,” Reuben said, “but if we keep heading into the sun, it won’t matter. Let’s hope the fact you’re all alive stays their hand.”

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## Chapter Eleven

It wasn't that simple, of course. First they had to get to Defence Command, past the last few stumbling trolls, ("Roses," Reuben whispered, "remake them."), and then they had to actually turn the self-destruct off, which should have just taken the codes and palm locks of the two Caelestians. Their input did turn off the sirens and flashing warnings, but didn't stop the thrusters from carrying them sunward.

Fixing that involved dragging Eskil down from the *Juniper*, frantic consultations with several newly awoken engineers, the commandeering of the *Juniper's* shuttle, and finally Eskil slamming his palm against the surviving diamond edge of the windowsill and snapping, "Infect me, then, if it's going to take magic!"

Reuben had thought that might be the end, that moment of sheer relief when the stars above them, just starting to show through the dusk, started to move in the opposite direction.

But Vairya was still conjuring his people out of rosewood and memory, and not all of the transitions were flawless. Reuben found himself beamed back to the woods to treat people whose bodies had twisted or flowered in strange ways, laying on his hands to guide the nanites in healing them.

Hours in, so long after it had begun that he had lost all sense of time, he looked up to find Chanthavy beside him, silver threads shining in her hair as she bent over a crying child.

"Captain," he said. "You too?"

"Needs must," she said, "but we must not forget why it was forbidden. I dread what will become of us, Reuben."

He nodded, sobered for a moment, but then saw Vairya coming towards him through the trees, and couldn't help smiling. Vairya looked exhausted, so tired his steps were slurred, as if he was dancing, but he was smiling, so bright with joy that Reuben felt a burst of new energy himself.

"They live," Vairya called to him as he got closer. "Every one of them who I saved. They're here! They live again!"

"I'm glad," Reuben said, holding out his hand to pull Vairya closer. "I'm so glad."

His patient, an elderly man who had returned with thorns growing along the top of his ears, looked up urgently. “Alive? How many? Do you know if Katya Lopez lives? Her daughter Femi? Sasha who lived in Old Park Lane?”

“Katya and Femi, yes,” Vairya said, and his smile dimmed a little. “Not Sasha.”

“How many survive?” Reuben repeated.

“Six hundred thousand, three hundred and forty-one,” Vairya said.

The word was spreading, murmurs and cries of amazement echoing around them. Reuben looked out across the crowd, watching the excitement and sorrow. Someone had put up hanging lights in the trees, and brought out sleeping mats. Some people, he knew, had gone back to their damaged homes, but most had stayed here, reluctant to leave, anxious for news or reassurance or just company.

“So many,” he said to Vairya.

“So many dead too.”

Reuben lifted Vairya’s hands, saw the grazes which covered them, the scrapes of thorns, and smears of sap and oil and kissed them lightly, willing healing upon them. “You performed miracles.”

“Not I,” Vairya said, leaning against him. “I wasn’t the one.”

The old man cleared his throat and said, “Will thorns in my ear kill me, Doctor?”

“I don’t know,” Reuben said and tried to drag his attention away from Vairya. “I don’t think so.”

“Then see me tomorrow.”

Reuben blinked at him. “It won’t take long, and there’s still a queue behind you.”

“Any of them dying?”

“No,” Chanthavy said, and he nodded. Meili was good at triage, and they were down to small wounds and aches now, and puzzling symptoms.

“In the morning, then.”

“He’s right,” Chanthavy said. “We should conserve our strength now the worst is past. You, Vairya, and Meili can come back in six hours. Eskil and I will stay here.”

“That’s not fair. You’ve done as much as—”

“That’s an order, Doctor.” She looked at Vairya. “Take him away. Or let him take you away, if that’s easier.”

“Aye, aye,” Vairya muttered, slumping further into Reuben’s side. He was still grinning, dreamy and joyous.

“Let’s find you a mat to sleep on,” Reuben said, amused.

“I own a bed, in a house, with a garden.”

“Right now that doesn’t narrow it down much. Take a mat.”

“I don’t want to sleep on a mat,” Vairya said. “I want to walk through my city, see my people, sleep in my own bed, and wake up with you.” He sagged against Reuben a little more, looping his arms loosely around Reuben’s waist and murmured, “‘A Book of Verses underneath the Bough, a Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou.’”

“A sip of wine would knock you out right now,” Reuben said, grinning through his own exhaustion. He’d forgotten how infectious happiness could be, and Vairya’s sleepy delight filled him with a slow, warm content, made him want to tease and flirt and kiss Vairya’s soft, sly mouth. “Eskil, are you still by the transporter?”

“About to head down and join you,” Eskil said. He’d been moving the injured and helping shift supplies for hours. “Why?”

“Any chance you could find out where Vairya lives and bounce us there?”

“We’ve got most of the city net back online now. Let me see what I can find.”

Vairya was putting more and more of his weight on Reuben, his breathing slowing.

“Before he sleeps,” Reuben prompted.

“Perchance to dream,” Vairya sighed and brushed a loose kiss against Reuben’s jaw.

“A lot of that area is still diamond,” Eskil said. “You sure?”

“There’s no place like home,” Vairya said solemnly.

“I’m sure,” Reuben said, and couldn’t keep the fondness out of his voice.

Eskil chuckled, and the world blurred and paled around them. They came out of the transport into a dark room, where the only light came from an outside light shining through the glassy walls.

“It’s not meant to look like this,” Vairya said and pulled away from Reuben enough to trail his hand along the wall. “It should be how I remember it.”

Reuben sat down on the hard bed, watching the subtle shift in the light as the wall transformed. “Give it time.”

“I want to sleep now,” Vairya said forlornly.

Reuben shuffled up the bed and stripped off his shirt. He rolled it up enough to make a rough pillow and held out his hand to Vairya. “Come here. It won’t be comfortable, but I’m warm, and we’ll find better accommodations tomorrow.”

“I like my house,” Vairya grumbled. “I’ve been living here for decades.” He crawled onto the slab, though, curling up against Reuben and pressing his head against Reuben’s shoulder. Someone had found him more clothes, and the soft fabric of his shirt pressed comfortably against Reuben’s side.

“I can have us transported up to the ship.”

“No, stay here.” Vairya sighed, his body going lax. “I was planning to kiss you again.”

“We’ve got time.”

“Yes.” His hand slid over Reuben’s chest to rest over his heart. “Both alive. How strange is that?” He tensed suddenly, his eyes reopening. “What if it was just a dream? What if we wake and everything’s still dead?”

“Then we will make it live again,” order, Doctor. it to be true. Maybe it was exhaustion, maybe it was relief at surviving, maybe it was Vairya, but something had left him feeling utterly peaceful. “Sleep.”

“Knits up...” Vairya sighed vaguely, “...ravell’d sleeve...”

“Sleep,” Reuben whispered again, smiling against the top of Vairya’s head, and then they were both drifting away.

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He woke to a soft bed, flowering vines hanging over the window, and morning sunshine streaming through the plants to turn the whole room green.

Vairya wasn’t there, and Reuben sat up, looking around for him. Someone had pulled a sheet up to his chin, and the bedroom door was open. Distantly, he

could hear someone humming softly, and he relaxed back against the pillows, looking around.

It was a large room, and had probably been light and airy before the plants grew over the window. The roof was high arched, with a slightly Gothic feel, and he grinned in amusement. Perhaps it had been no coincidence that Vairya built medieval gardens in his mind.

The window was deep enough to have a cushion leaning against its side, and Reuben imagined Vairya sitting there, reading or perhaps just accessing the stories in his mind as he looked out at his city. It was a very serene place, but simple and plain enough that it made him think of scholar-monks in their cells, and he wondered what Vairya's life here had been like, before the disaster. Did he have friends to share his flashing wit with or did he live apart from the world, with his memories and his gardens?

"You're awake," Vairya himself said, coming in. He was carrying a couple of steaming cups. "I brought you tea. No promises that it will taste right, as I'm sure it was diamond last night."

"So was I, in places," Reuben said and accepted the cup with a smile. Vairya was wearing another loose and flimsy robe, and he laughed, "Costume for a play, you claimed? I think you just like the style."

Vairya shrugged but blushed a little. "It's comfortable, but that didn't mean I wasn't horrified when they told me I was going to have to act in something that looked like my nightwear."

"Poor shy thing, aren't you?"

"Stop mocking me and drink your tea," Vairya said tartly and sat down on the bed beside Reuben, curling his legs up. "The garden has taken the whole city back, and everything is still growing."

"City net back up?"

"Not here," Vairya said and gave him a bemused smile. "The police have been driving through to check for structural problems, and they gave me an update. Most people are gathering back where we started things, but there are plans to get the main hospital open today and start setting up more local disaster centres in some of the schools."

"Back to normal, just like that."

Vairya drained his cup and put it on the bedside table before dropping his hand to Reuben's bare belly. His fingers were still warm from the mug, and

Reuben relaxed a little more. Vairya smiled at him again, and said, "It seems quite mad, doesn't it, but life must go on."

"I still don't understand what happened," Reuben said, tasting his tea. It was a little sweeter and weaker than he liked, but nothing about it tasted too strange.

"If you don't, nobody does," Vairya said, rubbing idle circles on Reuben's belly, his smooth hand catching on the line of hair there with a soft tug.

"I know what I did," Reuben said. "I just don't know why it worked. That tiny little vial of nanojuice in our blood shouldn't have been enough to overwhelm a whole city's worth." Vairya's touch was sending a trickle of pleasure through him, the sort that made him want to sink back against the pillows and purr.

"I think it was a combination of factors," Vairya said. "Firstly, their number was less than you might think. Once each transformation was complete, remember, the nanites would move on to change the next set of molecules they were in contact with. It was a leading edge, not exponential growth. Beyond that, the original command that was given to them back on Earth was not given to this generation. They must have replaced themselves over the centuries, which meant there could have been flaws in their command code. Finally, you told our nanites to grow, and then to heal, which meant they were replicating faster, and had a recent and open-ended command with which to overwrite the old code." He paused, looking sheepish. "I mean, I'm not an expert, but I do have all the records of what happened the first time. We were lucky we didn't end up replacing diamonds with grey sludge."

Reuben shuddered. "Scary things."

"With great power comes great responsibility," Vairya said, with the grin that said he was waiting for Reuben to recognise it.

"Sorry," Reuben said. "Some of us haven't read everything. Yet."

Vairya laughed, a gurgle of delight that was so ridiculous it made Reuben's mouth curl up as well. "I'll forgive you, but only because you saved my city."

"You did as much. I couldn't have brought the people back." He was getting hard, his body waking to the touch of Vairya's hand.

"Don't play it down," Vairya said, sliding his hand down to stroke Reuben's belly. "I wouldn't have realised that I needed to remember. Your talents are being wasted, you know."

“In dealing with unpredictable medical situations with limited resources? Medical exploration is challenging enough for anyone.”

Vairya paused, clearly thinking about it. “Fair point. I just thought it would be nice to see you doing something where you got more recognition.”

“I’m recognised too often,” Reuben said and put his mug down in a hurry when Vairya started undoing his trousers.

“I can understand that,” Vairya murmured. “Lift your hips.”

“Anyone would think you had nefarious intentions,” Reuben drawled but did as he was told.

“Well,” Vairya said brightly, “if you won’t seek glory, I should find a more private way to express my appreciation, shouldn’t I? The honour of the city demands it.”

“Oh, well, if it’s for the honour of the city,” Reuben said and kicked his trousers and underwear off the rest of the way. Vairya was already pulling off his flimsy robe, and Reuben groaned in relief as his cock sprang out.

“Well, then,” Vairya said, “what would be an appropriate tribute? We could erect a very nice monument.” He slid his hand down Reuben’s cock to cradle his balls. “Hang a medal around your neck? No, I think a pillar would be best. A nice thick pillar of hard stone.”

“All of human history,” Reuben gasped, reaching out to pull him closer, getting his own hands onto Vairya’s thighs, “and that’s the best innuendo you can manage?”

“You’re right,” Vairya said, working Reuben’s cock steadily. “Pillars are a terrible idea. People are always too tempted to climb up them and then slide down them, nice and slowly. You wouldn’t want me to do that, would you?”

“What kind of memorials do you have round here?” Reuben demanded. “Oh, god, don’t stop!”

“I wasn’t planning to,” Vairya said, shifting enough that Reuben could easily reach his cock too. “See, I even brought you a monument of my own to try out for size.”

Reuben couldn’t help laughing, though it tangled with the rush of desire rolling through him to come out as a snort. “Stop that. It’s terrible.”

“I thought you didn’t want me to stop?”



Reuben groaned. “Vairya, for the love of everything sacred, stop making terrible puns, and kiss me.”

“I can do that,” Vairya said—and did.

It was as good as their first kisses, making Reuben’s whole body shiver, but it lacked the terrible desperation. Without that, everything was so much sweeter that Reuben didn’t think he could bear it, was afraid he would just dissolve into nothing and go floating off into space in a rush of dust and silver nanites.

“I will never get bored of this,” Vairya murmured, trailing kisses up Reuben’s jaw. He was warm and heavy against Reuben, their bodies sliding together easily.

Reuben opened his hand and tugged Vairya down close enough that he could get a grip on both their cocks at once. It felt ridiculously good, and he still didn’t have the faintest idea whether this was nanites, the bliss of being alive, or just Vairya, but he wasn’t going to object. Trying desperately to marshal his skidding thoughts, he managed to say, “Well, that’s a relief. I thought I was going to have to keep saving humanity to keep your attent... *oh*, fuck.”

Vairya smiled against his throat, and then kissed his neck again, hand still playing behind Reuben’s balls.

“Fuck me,” he murmured, rocking forwards against Reuben. “I want to feel it.”

“Lube?” Reuben asked, shivering as Vairya nuzzled that sensitive spot on his neck again.

Vairya rolled off him with a sigh, and leaned to rummage in the drawer beside the bed. It presented Reuben with the long line of his back, and he remembered seeing metal through torn skin and shuddered. To force the memory out before it killed his lust completely, he leaned forwards and kissed Vairya’s shoulder softly, and then the top of his spine, his hip, those places where new skin now covered what had once been exposed metal. He missed it a little, and wondered if they could restore Vairya’s old appearance, if Vairya would want him to. He could still feel the soft pulse of the pistons below the skin, and he let his mouth linger there, his body growing hotter.

“It occurs to me,” Vairya said, a little hesitantly, “that this was probably diamond yesterday too. There may still be nanites in it.”

“Damn,” Reuben groaned and squeezed Vairya’s thigh. “I really want to—”

“It’s probably safe,” Vairya said hopefully. “The tea didn’t kill us, nor the sheets, and on reflection my arse didn’t exist yesterday, either, not in its current form.” He rolled over to frown down at Reuben. “That’s a really disconcerting thought.”

“I’ll take the risk,” Reuben said, and because Vairya was too beautiful not to touch, ran his hands up Vairya’s thighs, green dappled from the light through the window, and sucked the top of Vairya’s cock. Vairya tasted real enough, like sweat and come and the faintest hint of metal.

“You make a compelling argument,” Vairya said, his voice hitching. “Go ahead and deflower me.”

Reuben pulled back, shuddering at the thought, and snatched the lube from Vairya. “Deflower is for virgins.”

“Well, technically,” Vairya said, pressing close again, his arms around Reuben’s neck, “if this body is newly made, I am a virgin.”

“You are *not* a virgin,” Reuben said firmly and kissed him before he could come out with any more nonsense. Vairya laughed against his mouth and then wriggled closer, his cock pressing against Reuben’s stomach. Reuben rolled them over, so he could press Vairya back against the pillows long enough to slick up his cock, and then slid down again to suck Vairya’s cock back into his mouth.

“Oh, Sir Reuben—” Vairya gasped, with a hitched giggle “—what wicked things are you doing to my poor virgin dick? How debauched of—oh, *yes!*”

Reuben let Vairya’s cock fall out of his mouth, although he left his fingers exactly where he had just pressed them, barely inside Vairya. “Do you ever shut up?”

“Not when I’m happy, Sir Grumpy.” Vairya grinned and wriggled, pushing against Reuben’s fingers. “At least not until you fuck me so hard I’m just screaming.”

“You are the worse virgin in history,” Reuben told him, pressing more kisses to Vairya’s thighs, his balls, his flushed cock.

“I did—*oh*—tell you to deflower—”

By the time Reuben did press into Vairya, he was caught between desire, delight, and irritation. They were both laughing and clumsy, their bodies sliding

against each other as Reuben fucked into his merry garden knight, his breath coming fast, and joy shivering down his spine.

Then Vairya flung his head back with a cry, his hands clamping onto Reuben's shoulders, and suddenly they were both too breathless for laughter, every thrust and shudder pulling another noise from Vairya until Reuben was shivering at every bitten off gasp and soft groan, his whole body alive with it.

When he came, it was with Vairya gasping in his ear and suddenly spurting against his belly, and then Vairya's arms around him, clutching him so tightly that Reuben wasn't sure which of them was shaking harder.

Afterwards, lying in a sated drowsy tangle, Vairya said sleepily, "You're very prejudiced against virgins, aren't you? That's a terrible flaw."

"I've been accused of worse," Reuben pointed out.

"Ah," Vairya said, tapping him on the nose, "but those weren't true. You shouldn't be mean about virgins, Reuben. You were one once."

"You were *not* a virgin, and I don't care."

"Why not?"

"Because I really don't give a fuck about anyone's sexual experience unless I'm sleeping with them, and even then I don't care much, if it's not relevant to the situation."

"Well," Vairya began.

"I'm sleeping with you. You are not a virgin. I don't give a fuck about anyone else."

Vairya's voice went fond. "And I was starting to worry you'd gone soft on me."

"Vairya. Shut up."

He got a warm kiss brushed against his cheek, and Vairya threw his arm loosely over his waist, pressing against his back. "Go back to sleep. We've got time now. The world isn't about to end."

"If we had worlds enough and time," Reuben murmured, and sank back into a warm and pleasant doze as Vairya whispered the rest of the poem against his back, his lips soft against Reuben's skin.

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## Chapter Twelve

It was only a brief respite. The transformation of Caelestia had destroyed everything from infrastructure to food and clothing, and the new gardens springing up everywhere had created new problems. Everyone in the city had lost loved ones and the toll of grief and shock was beginning to rise.

Everyone worked until they dropped, building, pruning, healing, cooking. After the first few accidents caused by careless commands to the still multiplying nanites, the surviving police force put together a makeshift alarm system, and Reuben found himself giving frantic lectures in how to avoid unintentional creation.

By the third day, he was exhausted, overwhelmed, and newly terrified of the power of this technology. Even at the worst, though, he found himself looking up and seeing Vairya smiling wearily at his people, and that little sense of relief rose up around him again. They had done the right thing.

By the fifth day, most people were back in their own homes, and had water and power. Repairs to the city net were almost complete, and the main focus of their efforts was clearing trees from the roads and turning the gleeful abundance of the city's farms into a reliable food supply. The city authorities took over, and the crew of the *Juniper* finally got an evening off.

Vairya was needed at the council meetings, so Reuben found himself with nothing to do with his free evening except to go back to his cabin on the *Juniper* to collect a change of clothes. It seemed absurdly small to him after a week under the arched ceilings of Vairya's house, with its long kitchen and wide lounge, its shady veranda and tiled roof ("Gardener by choice," Vairya had said when Reuben had commented on the luxury of it, "not abstaining from all luxuries."). Next to that, his bare cabin seemed cramped and ugly, more like a cupboard than a home.

Chanthavy knocked lightly on the open hatch. "Packing up?"

"Just some clean clothes."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "If they don't destroy us, if we are free to fly again, will you still be coming with us?"

"It's my job!" he said in surprise.

"You have done good work in the city. I hear they gave you an office in the hospital."

He had been working there more and more. “Only so I had a place to keep my notes. Didn’t you get one?”

“Just you. They would give you a job too, if you asked.” She smiled. “They might even put you in charge.”

“I hadn’t thought of it.” He was thinking about it now, about staying in Vairya’s garden, the real, complex one that needed his help, thinking about staying with Vairya.

“Really?” Her next look made him feel like he was being measured. “The rest of us moved back up here on the second day.”

“I didn’t notice.” He hadn’t even considered that, not when he could simply sleep with Vairya.

“I admit that I was troubled at first. He was your patient and under serious emotional strain. Nonetheless, I must consider that I could have been too hasty.” She smiled faintly. “To quote your favourite poet, ‘let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments.’”

Reuben could only stare. Eventually, he managed, “I think that’s a little premature.”

She smiled at him. “Reuben, you have learned to smile this week. Do not rush to escape that.”

“It may all be quite irrelevant,” Reuben said gruffly. “The Fleet isn’t here yet.”

That evening, though, he sat out on Vairya’s veranda, enjoying the dusk. The people of Caelestia had shifted half their lives outside, preferring the new glades to the disconcertingly transformed interiors of their homes. They were still locked into a warmer orbit than before, and the city’s atmosphere had become more humid. Reuben knew there were meetings taking place about water consumption and environmental systems, but he wasn’t invited to those. He just enjoyed the experience of living such a verdant life.

He was alone for once, and that too suddenly struck him as strange for the first time. He hadn’t even questioned it before. In the middle of everything else, he hadn’t thought twice about making himself at home in Vairya’s house. Leaning back in his chair, he looked up at the stars and allowed himself, just for a moment, to dream.

He was roused by the sound of footsteps, and turned to smile at Vairya. “You’re late.”

Vairya grimaced and dropped into the chair beside him. "Committees."

"I'm happy not to be dealing with that particular brand of idiot," Reuben said. "My lot are more easily intimidated."

"I'm sure that says more about you than them," Vairya said, grin flashing out. "You'll have to start giving seminars in that too."

"And give away my secrets?"

"There's a secret to it? I thought you just growled, loomed, and shredded their self-esteem."

"No need to sound so happy about it."

"I think it's charming," Vairya said and leaned a little closer. "Feel free to growl and loom as much as you like."

"It's supposed to scare them into using their brains."

"I always use my brain." He tipped his face up towards Reuben. "Among other things."

"I've noticed," Reuben said and took the hint. Kissing Vairya was as easy as trading quotations with him, and he sank into it happily. By the time, Vairya rose up and offered him a hand to lead him into the house, he had forgotten all his hesitations.

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Later that night, he was woken by a sudden flash of light, followed by a low rumble in the sky.

"Thunder?" Vairya said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"Is that what it sounds like?" Reuben asked, rolling out of bed to hurry to the window.

Halfway there, another flash lit the room, and the sky shuddered again. Then, as they reached the window, it happened for a third time. They both leaned out, staring up in time to see a jagged slash of light cut the sky wide open as a battleship slid out of hyperspace right over the city. It swam across the sky as the city's shields shook and reverberated under the shock and took up a place beside its sister ships. They were so low in the sky that Reuben could see their weapons swivel down to face the city.

"They're here!" Vairya gasped, grabbing his arm, and Reuben braced himself to die.

But no lights kindled in those dark turrets, and no splintering forces came crackling down to destroy them. Instead the ships sat there, looming in the sky.

“What are they waiting for?” Vairya breathed.

“I don’t know,” Reuben said. He was afraid again. For the last few days, caught up in the rush of rebuilding the city, it had been easy to put the Fleet out of mind, to pretend that this idyll would last forever. But the Fleet had come, like all doom must, and they could only have one purpose here.

Then, two rooms away, music began to play softly.

“My com,” Vairya said, pulling away from the window with one last glance upwards. “The mayor, I should think.”

Reuben stayed where he was, willing the ships above to give them a chance, to hear their story, even as he heard Vairya pad away and pick up the com. “Mayor, I take it that... *Jibrail*?”

Reuben swung round, more at the sheer shock in Vairya’s voice than anything else.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Vairya was saying. “Things got complicated, that’s how I’m alive.”

Reuben lengthened his stride. Whoever this was, Vairya hadn’t been expecting this call.

“No, I don’t usually answer calls from the mayor in the nude,” Vairya snapped, “but as you might have noticed, I just got woken up by someone sailing gunships up to my harbour wall, so unless—”

He stopped, frustration dancing across his face, and after a moment, rolled his eyes at Reuben. “Jibby, you’re a prude. So, unless you want me to step back from the screen and show you components of me you never wanted to see, can we get back to the subject of the gunships?”

He glanced at Reuben and tapped the wall for a blank page, writing with his fingertip, *Get dressed, and bring me some clothes. My brother is here.*

Reuben did what he asked and then hurried back. Vairya was standing still when he returned, the com pressed to his forehead and his eyelids flickering. As Reuben started forwards in worry, he closed his eyes with a sigh. “Did you get that?”

“Summarise.” The voice was cool and sharp, with none of Vairya’s sly warmth, but there was something familiar about it, a hint of the same intonation.

“No Terran nanites are left, but we have a different nanite situation. Reports of the dead were vastly overestimated, through no one’s fault, but we all owe our survival to nanite-based medicine. We’re rebuilding but in need of aid.”

“Let’s decide if your city survives first,” the stranger said and then paused. “I hear an echo. Do you have me on speakers? Who is eavesdropping?”

“Yes,” Vairya said, taking the clothes from Reuben, “because I need my hands free to get dressed, and the only other one here is Reuben.”

“And who precisely is Reuben? Is this another of your foolish affairs?”

Vairya rolled his eyes. “They were in a rush when they built Jibby,” he said to Reuben. “They completely forgot to include a sense of humour.”

“Vairya.”

Reuben could empathise with that particular note of frustration, at least. Vairya had managed to pull his trousers up at least, although he still looked like a ragamuffin, so Reuben said to the house computer, “Transfer the com screen to the wall, Guillaume.”

It opened up swiftly, and Reuben found himself staring at a slender, stern man seated at a white console. He was as handsome as Vairya, in a lean, austere way, and looked mildly irritated. Where Vairya was the colour of marble and roses, this man was all bronze and copper, from the colour of his skin to the tight curls of his hair. Even his eyes were bright verdigris, too startling to be natural. He wore a plain suit, but on the bulkhead behind him was emblazoned the symbol of the Sirius Protectorate’s High Command, and to one side, Reuben could glimpse a window that revealed the familiar stars above Caelestia.

“Still living in that hovel, I see,” he said, pursing his lips.

“Still too high and lofty to actually set foot on real soil,” Vairya shot back.

Reuben drew in a breath, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. “Vairya, are you being rude to the man pointing planet killing weapons at us? Please don’t.”

Vairya shrugged. “This is my brother Jibrail. He won’t blow me up without very good reason.”

“I wouldn’t rely on it,” Jibrail said, and this time Reuben caught the humour in it, dust-dry as it was. “I have often been sorely tempted.” He looked up and away slightly, at some other part of his screen. “Dr Cooper, I presume.”



“Delighted,” Reuben said.

“I wish it was mutual.” Jibrail frowned a little. “Vairya, I’m running your memory files now, but this is all rather confusing.”

“Head injury,” Vairya said, waving his hand. “Not my fault.”

“Yes, I’m past that point. Dr Cooper, I will have some questions for you in a moment.” His eyes widened suddenly. “Many questions, actually. Revenants, Vairya?”

“They’re not zombies,” Vairya said sharply. “They live as they did before. Only their bodies have been reassembled.”

Jibrail wasn’t listening. Instead he had put his hand to his head and looked pained. “I have no idea what to do with you. You know nanotechnology is banned and why, more than any mortal. What possessed you to use it so extensively?”

“It was for my city,” Vairya said. “What wouldn’t you do for Sirius, if you were desperate enough?”

“Having seen this, we should pray I never find out.” He looked at Reuben. “Dr Cooper, I will need to talk to you and your teammates further, as well as the city authorities. Vairya, I will try to win you a stay of execution, but do not hope for more than three days.”

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## Chapter Thirteen

Then the screen went off, before either Reuben or Vairya could say anything else.

“Not one for the formalities, your brother,” Reuben said.

“Not so much, no,” Vairya said. “I love him, but he’s a dick. What did he mean, three days?”

“I don’t know,” Reuben said and sighed. “Well, at least he didn’t come in shooting.”

Vairya nodded. “He’s the most rational man I know. I was teasing him, but it would have been the most logical response to our original situation. There must have been something in your captain’s report which stayed his hand.”

“Or he was worried about his little brother. You are younger, I assume?”

“Yes,” Vairya said absently, “but that kind of sentiment would be terribly out of character. Maybe he could just see from space that we were green again. Curiosity is his weakness.”

Reuben hadn’t seen any hints of weakness on that stern face, but he would take Vairya’s word for it. Leaving Vairya to pace and fret, he started contacting the leaders of the city. Chanthavy transported down from the ship, and there were nine of them gathered in Vairya’s house. There weren’t quite enough chairs, and Reuben retreated to a windowsill to watch the proceedings.

When Jibrail called back, he looked pleased to see the gathering. “Ah, that’s almost everyone we need to interview. You have no objection to my using your screen to do so, I assume, Vairya?”

“Do we have our reprieve?” Vairya demanded.

“Yes,” Jibrail said, and everyone in the room relaxed a little. “By then the true extent of the situation should be obvious. We will remain in a stationary orbit in the meantime. My human companions are rather hysterical about the entire situation, so I have informed them that I will be your liaison for the next few days. You may rely on me to convey any information accurately and to inform all involved of any conclusions I draw.”

“You can too,” Vairya said to the room, not looking away from the screen. “Jibby, why are you here? I’d have expected you to be heading for the limits of human space with a cargo hold full of backups.”

“Binah is waiting on my signal to do just that. I thought it appropriate to see exactly what kind of trouble you had managed to get yourself into this time.”

Vairya looked both pleased and surprised. “Thank you.”

“Save your breath. Captain Som, I wish to clarify a few points from your initial report, if you would be so kind.”

Jibrail’s clarifying of points continued day and night. Every time Reuben went through the lounge, on his way to and from the hospital or just on his way between the bedroom and the kitchen, someone else was sitting in front of the screen, tense and nervous under Jibrail’s polite and relentless interrogation. Reuben got his own turn on the second afternoon, and answered every question as clearly and precisely as he could.

“An excellent report,” Jibrail said when he was finally done, “but you have a military background, don’t you, Doctor?”

“Yes,” Reuben said. There was no point in anything else. Jibrail knew who he was.

“My brother is not a violent man,” Jibrail said, his green eyes narrowing. “I would hate for him to become compromised by your extraordinary decision-making.”

“Are the barely veiled threats part of the interrogation, sir, or are you just trying to warn me off?”

“Would that work?”

“Not in the slightest.”

Jibrail glared at him. Reuben scowled back.

“Well,” Jibrail said at last, his sneer undiminished, “your courage, at least, is not at fault.”

“None but the brave deserve the fair,” Reuben said as mildly as he could.

“Dryden?” Jibrail said with a note of disdain. “Dead poets will not charm me, Dr Cooper. I am not like my brother in that respect.”

“I would have guessed as much.” Reuben raised his eyebrow. “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?”

“Amusing,” Jibrail said flatly.

“I have more where that came from. How many must I use before you learn to mind your own business?”

“Now who speaks rashly to power, Doctor?”

“Oh, I know that you are currently the angel with the burning sword at our gate. I only have to look at the sky to be reminded. I also know that you would not unleash that power carelessly, not when your brother’s life is at stake. Apart from anything else, you are too proud to be so petty.”

Jibrail regarded him silently for a moment. Then he gave Reuben a thin wintry smile and remarked, “You have the potential to be just as irritating as my brother, Doctor. It’s possible you may actually deserve each other.”

Then, while Reuben was still blinking with surprise, the screen blinked off.

“That’s as much a blessing as you’ll ever get,” Vairya remarked behind him. “I think he likes you.”

“I think too much sex has broken your brain,” Reuben said and sank back in the chair so Vairya could lean down and kiss him.

“Want to break it some more?”

“I have to get back to the hospital,” Reuben said with regret.

Vairya sighed. “I should get back to the reservoir then. So much to do.”

That night, on the edge of sleep, Reuben chuckled at a sudden thought and said, “Your brother should really wear a monocle. It would improve his sneer.”

Vairya grinned at him. “I’ll give him one for his next birthday. It gets hard to find new gifts after the first hundred years.”

“When’s his birthday?”

“Not for months,” Vairya said quietly. “I suppose it might not matter. Our deadline runs out tomorrow.”

“Have hope.”

“I’m afraid to.” He rose up on one elbow, though, and looked down at Reuben, his face solemn. “It feels like we have lived a lifetime in a week and a half, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” Reuben said. “More than many men see in their lives.”

“Yes,” Vairya said, still serious. “Reuben, have you thought at all about what you will do if we survive?”

“A little,” Reuben admitted. “I’ve been trying to avoid thinking beyond the moment.”

“Have you considered staying? I know it has only been ten days, but it occurred to me that you and I, we both have a gift for annoying people, but we haven’t annoyed each other, not in any way that matters, and that seems... well, I don’t know what it is. Despite everything I know, I don’t know what this is.”

“I have an idea,” Reuben said, his heart warm. He pulled Vairya down against his shoulder, putting his arms around him. “All that poetry in your head, and you don’t recognise it?”

“It’s absurd,” Vairya whispered. “Ridiculous. Preposterous.”

“You have a thesaurus in there too?”

Vairya pinched him in the side, looking affronted. “I’m having a life-altering revelation and you mock me?”

“And you love it,” Reuben pointed out.

“I do, for my sins.”

It could have become another game of quotation and allusion, but Reuben needed to make this clear, especially if they were to die tomorrow. “I am falling in love with you.”

Vairya sighed. “Yes. That’s exactly it, isn’t it? I am halfway in love with you.” His smile went rueful. “Please stay, Reuben, or I shall make a lovesick fool of myself chasing you across the galaxy.”

“I want to stay,” Reuben admitted. Life, and circumstance, had sent him to the stars, but he had always wanted to find a home one day. Until now, he had doubted he would ever be welcome to settle anywhere. “My reputation could cause you some problems.”

Vairya snorted. “Everyone in the city is alive because of you. I’m the one who will have to watch out for your admirers.”

“Nonsense,” Reuben said and kissed him.

When they finally pulled apart, Vairya was smiling. Leaning in so closely their mouths brushed, he recited, laughter in his voice, ““Come live with me, and be my love...””

Reuben kissed the words out of him, setting aside all his worries about tomorrow, to take this moment and live it to the utmost.

The next day was the strangest he had ever lived. No one talked about the impending deadline, but every few moments he would notice someone darting a glance at the sky. The hospital felt very quiet, and there weren't as many patients as he would have expected. There were staff missing too, and he couldn't begrudge them the chance to spend the time with their loved ones.

Meili had come to help out, and Eskil and Chanthavy joined them before long. None of them needed to talk about it, but he was glad to have their familiar faces close by. He was gladder still when Vairya appeared at midday, bringing them lunch and then sitting in the garden outside the waiting room, watching him through the window as he consulted with his patients and colleagues.

He needed to visit the wards, so he headed for the doors into the garden to let Vairya know where he was going. He didn't want to let him out of sight.

"Reuben," Meili said suddenly, her voice oddly tight. "It's not working."

"What's not?" he asked, turning to face her. She was standing in the doorway of one of the treatment rooms, looking strained.

"The nanites. They're not responding. I've tried and tried, and nothing's happening. Could you have a look? You're better with them."

Her patient was a boy with a badly broken wrist. Reuben knelt down beside him, smiling reassuringly. "Looks like you've done yourself some damage there."

"I told him not to climb that tree," the fraught-looking woman behind him said, "but it was there in the living room, and somebody just can't resist a challenge."

"Well, I can understand that," Reuben said, winking at the kid, and concentrated on the nanites. "Heal him."

Nothing happened. There was no flicker of silver over the child's skin and no answering hum in his blood. Puzzled, Reuben tried again, focussing all his willpower on it. Yesterday, he had been able to close wounds with a thought and mend a damaged spine with a touch.

Still nothing, and he nodded at Meili before splinting the wrist. "No more trees until that's healed."

"You too?" Meili asked.

"Yes." Reuben looked up as Vairya stepped inside, looking worried.

“I’ve got people calling me from all over the city, saying the nanites have stopped responding. More than that, things seem to have stopped growing.”

“Going backwards?” Reuben asked with a sudden sick clench of his gut. If everything they had fixed with nanites over the last few days failed, it would be catastrophic.

“No, just not changing any further.”

“Call your brother. Find out if the ships are doing this.” It could be some new weapon, designed to disable nanites before it blew up the city.

Vairya nodded, but his eyes went blank for a second. “Doing an internal scan first to see if I can detect what’s happening to the ones in my system. Oh.”

“What?” Meili said, clenching her fists.

“They’re all inert,” he said. “I can detect them in my bloodstream, but they seem to be dead. They’re completely unresponsive.” He looked up and said into his com, “Jibrail, are you there? Something strange is happening down here.”

“What time is it?” Meili said slowly. “I think... it’s been ten days, ten days exactly.”

“Since what?” Reuben asked.

“Ten days since we injected the first nanites into Vairya.”

There was a pale flash and suddenly Jibrail was standing in the garden. He looked shorter in person, and he was actually smiling.

“Ten days,” Meili repeated.

“Quite right, Dr Peake,” Jibrail said, bestowing an approving look on her. “Vairya, it is good to see you healthy.”

“What’s going on?” Vairya demanded. “Meili?”

“The original nanites,” she said, “the ones we put in you and Cooper, were *medical* nanites. All medical nanites have a time limit coded in. They die after ten days.”

“Precisely,” Jibrail said. “Of course, given the extraordinary use to which they had been put, and their assimilation of the older Terran bots, we couldn’t be certain that trait had been passed on. I did manage to persuade my colleagues to indulge my curiosity and hold off firing until the deadline had passed, and I can tell you with complete confidence that our scans have not identified any surviving nanite activity in Caelestia.” He turned an almost kind

smile at their shocked faces. “Don’t look so taken aback. Not everybody can remember everything.”

“We’re going to live?” Meili said blankly.

Jibrail’s smile softened slightly, and he said gently, “Yes, Doctor. You are all going to live.”

“And just as I was starting to enjoy having godlike powers,” Vairya said, but he was still looking stunned despite his jaunty tone.

Jibrail looked pained. “I believe that is precisely why they built in those very limits. Now, we have some emergency supplies to beam down, and I need to coordinate drop sites with the mayor.”

“Of course,” Vairya said, a little weakly, and squeezed Reuben’s hand.

Jibrail looked at them, and his mouth tilted up in an all too familiar smirk. “I understand it is good etiquette to invite your best man to speak at your wedding. I would appreciate it if you asked someone else to take on the role. I abhor public speaking.”

And, before either of them could do more than splutter, he strolled away into the hospital, already talking on his com.

“I, on the other hand,” Meili said, “love embarrassing people in public. I think I’d be outstanding at the job.”

“We’re not getting married,” Reuben said, before this got completely out of hand.

“Yet,” Vairya added dreamily and then blushed when Reuben stared at him.

Meili cackled and then darted forwards to hug them both, which was the strangest thing yet. “I might just miss working with you when we leave, Cooper. You weren’t so bad in the end.”

“We are actually dead, aren’t we?” Reuben said to Vairya. “This cannot be real.”

““For in that sleep of death what dreams may come’?” Vairya murmured, his eyes still wide. “If we are dead, it must have been two weeks ago, because nothing in my world makes much sense anymore.”

Reuben couldn’t resist. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Vairya, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Vairya narrowed his eyes at him. “Oh, you did not just do that.”



“Yet you still love me,” Reuben said, lifting his face to the sun.

“Of course,” Vairya said, “but that doesn’t mean I’m going to forgive you for mangling Shakespeare.”

Reuben smiled and brought Vairya’s hand to his mouth to kiss his knuckles. “But you won’t kick me out of your garden?”

“Never,” Vairya said and turned to kiss him, and somewhere in even this tiny garden there must be flowers, because Reuben could smell roses. Or perhaps the scent simply came drifting to him from this great garden city, Caelestia in the stars, which had flowered again and would now be forever his home, the place where the roses grew, tended by the garden knight he loved.

**The End**

## Author Bio

*Amy is a quiet Brit with a degree in early English literature, which she blames for her somewhat medieval approach to spelling, and at various times has been fluent in Latin, Old English, Ancient Greek, and Old Icelandic, though these days she mostly uses this knowledge to bore her students. Amy started her first novel twenty-one years ago and has been scribbling away ever since. Despite these long years of experience, she has yet to master the arcane art of the semicolon.*

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