

*Immortality
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Immortality Isn't What I Thought It Would Be

Christopher Kincaid

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Chapter 1

I hoped these heroes would ease my boredom. Three heroes stood before me, arrayed with so-called splendor as heroes of all ages like to do. Their various weapons—what age was it again?—gleamed in their hands. A sword there. A rifle over there. So gunpowder had been rediscovered. This armor. That armor. Some looked like new inventions, but I could see their quantum makeup if I squinted. Did they call it physics now or magic? It didn't really matter. Every so often they would (re)discover some new material on the periodic table. When the periodic table existed again. I was surprised to see a female warrior. Did the pendulum swing back toward some sort of equity again? Or perhaps was this one of the few ages of matriarchy? I should've paid more attention. Come to think of it, my servant Ellie ran the tower unofficially. Either way, it had been quite some time since heroes had arrived to kill me. Whatever time meant to me now.

A black-clad man pulled a long firearm and fired at me. The bullet zinged at me, and I watched it cut the air, creating ripples in the currents

as it rotated. So they had rifling again. Energy pulsed inside the long bullet. Perhaps I could call it a 50 caliber to use the measurements of a long dead age. But the black smoke billowing out of the rifle told me they still used some sort of black powder. Perhaps enhanced with “magic?”

The bullet struck my energy shield—divine radiance, whatever you wanted to call it—and burst into a shower of blue energy. I shifted on my throne, feeling some of the heat from the attack. I should ask Ellie to have pillows made. The hard wood was uncomfortable. But how would it appear if the world’s demon lord, villain, evil god, or whatever they called me sat on a hemorrhoid pillow? Not that I cared what people thought, but one had to keep up appearance for....some reason. Now that I thought of it, did it really matter if people who came to kill you saw you sitting on a pillow.

Gasps rang out from the heroes. I hoped that wasn’t their best attack. If so, my boredom had little hope. Did they not know about cancel resonance? It was fun when heroes used that magic, technology, whatever. Sometimes I would bruise and actually have to work when they canceled my shield. I noticed the men stood a distance behind the woman. Their body language spoke of distrust. So this wasn’t a matriarchal or equal rights age. I studied the woman. She had a darker skin than the men. Black hair to their blondes. I sighed. So it was one of those eras, the most common. Only in the eras where humanity all had the same skin tones did that particular quirk stop. No, didn’t stop. Deflected. It deflected to eyes or was it fingernail color that one time? Unlike the men, she didn’t carry any visible weapons.

“We’ve come to end you!” The expensively armored blonde man stepped forward. The quaver in his voice didn’t help him.

I shrugged. “You all say that. Trevor, I could use a little tea. Would you make some for our guests too?”

My servant stepped from his place behind my throne. I extended my divine protection around him. Good servants were hard to come by and Trevor knew how to brew a mean pot of sencha. I had made sure to keep tea and coffee the same over the millennia. Evolution and human cultivation often ruined things. Nuclear war liked to ruin things too. There had been only one that I remembered. It sat among my first faded and tattered memories. Civilizations no longer developed to that level. They made it to the industrial revolution and that was about it, even with my help. Now, I barely ever see them make it to that point. I supposed humanity had exhausted all the worthwhile fossil fuels. With how the first thermonuclear war had screwed up the tectonic plates—no one predicted that outcome, if I remembered right. That was also when I learned that I could direct the tectonic plates too. If not as immediate, but then entire continents being submerged into the mantle in a few scant years wasn’t a good time for humanity along with everything else nuclear holocaust brought. What was it, 100,000 years ago? I scratched my upper arm where one of my bio-implants sat under my skin. I didn’t remember what my life was like before my augmentation. I didn’t remember what it was like to be fully human.

“We don’t want tea. We’ve come to end your destruction,” the blonde man said. “Prepare yourself!”

“Certainly, my lord.” Trevor bowed. He drew confused looks from the heroes. Each of the heroes looked vaguely familiar. The woman in particular tugged at my memories. That happened. I sometimes saw people return as the ages rolled by. Trevor was something like the third edition. He had first been a peasant boy I saved back when I still did

things. The mistakes of those times still brought the heroes it seemed. I hadn't burned a city or incinerated a nation in a few decades. I had all-but given up making humans moral. Every time I save someone, I had made an enemy of someone else. I would only end a nation if they went on a path that would lead to humanity's near extinction or to slavery. I no longer tolerated slavery. That led to empires which led to population-depleting war, famine, and disease. While the nuclear war and the winter that followed gave birth to me had come the closest to ending humanity, I had a few other nasty close shaves when disease outbreaks swept the planet.

I didn't relish the idea of being alone forever, which is why I made sure a breeding population of humans always survived. It was another reason why I made a habit of keeping a large staff to tend my tower. People had no appreciation for how hard it was to maintain a tower tall enough to smite nearly anywhere in the world. I was glad I had rearranged the planet to make it a little easier, but I still couldn't reach to the edges from my throne room. The thin air had sucked for awhile, but I didn't really need to breath anymore, so I supposed it was fine. Come to think of it I wasn't sure how I could live on little or no oxygen. I didn't go that high in the tower anyway. My throne room was about halfway up.

"Scones would be nice too," I said as another bullet sparkled against my skin. The black-clad man held a smoking pistol. I waved my hand to clear the smoke. "That isn't good for your health you know. Second hand gun smoke can cause cancer."

"Very good, sir." Trevor nodded and left for the kitchen.

The heroes arranged themselves in some sort of attack formation, holding their weapons at ready. Again, the men kept apart from the darker-skinned woman. I sighed. "I suppose you won't be satisfied until

you try to fight me. But you are in luck, I don't feel like killing anyone today." I stood and walked toward them.

"We will be the ones doing the killing!" the blonde man shouted and charged me.

Do heroes always have to be so cliché?

Plasma and electricity snaked around his sword—no doubt the sword had some sort of name. Hero legends like their named swords. I could see they had somehow generated plasma around the edges of the blade using some sort of hidden mechanism. If I wanted to see the mechanism, I could've, but I wasn't a physicist despite what I could see the atomic and subatomic make up of everything whenever I wanted. In most ages, magic was just physics by a different name.

He swung the blade at me. I caught the blade with my bare hand. My skin burned for a nanosecond before it adjusted to counteract the plasma-hot weapon. For my skin to adjust to the weapon told me it was a clever, new design. My skin remembered what it had encountered better than my brain did. Interesting, nonetheless. It had been a long time since I encountered a new technology.

The blonde man smirked. "Let's see you try to stop all of us."

The other man slipped behind me with remarkable speed. The woman hanged back. The black-clad man rammed two knives into my back. I felt the different energy levels that coated the blades as they slid into my body. Pain followed the information about the blades and exploded in my mind. I watched the pain with curiosity. I hadn't felt pain since I stubbed my toe walking the stairs to my telescope last week. Or was it last month? Last year? Last century? I felt warm wetness soak my clothes. Did they know how hard it was for me to find a good tailor who didn't faint when

he recognized me? Fortunately, Trevor or maybe Ellie had hired one. It still had taken some time for him to get used to me.

The blonde man yanked his sword out of my grip and swung at me again. I strengthened my shields on my forearm and deflected the blade. Although my skin had by now adjusted—if only the other man would quit twisting those daggers in my back—I didn’t want to risk growing back a hand or arm. It was inconvenient.

“This is the end of you!” the nobleman said again.

“Tea is ready now, sir.” Trevor said. He glanced at me and raised his eyebrows. He pushed a silver cart with an Asian-looking teapot on it and English silverware. The simple plates dated from the Zorivian Empire. The black-marbled teacups came from the Ryvi era. I mostly preferred the dinnerware from my youth. He knew I enjoyed the contrast of such finery. The teapot was only from Teavana, but it was over 100,000 years old I supposed, so that would make it priceless.

I caught blonde man’s sword again. The black-clad man finally removed his blades and tried to stab me again. I felt my muscles and skin close as soon as the blade were gone. His next stabs didn’t penetrate. My body had adjusted. The closed wounds still hurt though, like stings from wasps. I never did like wasps.

“The tea will grow cold soon, sir,” Trevor said as he set the tea on round table off to the side of the chamber.

“Nothing we do is stopping him!” the blonde man said.

“Keep at it. He can’t take it forever,” the black-clad man said.

“Yes well, let us end this before the tea gets cold.” I closed my fist, snapping the blonde hero’s sword. He immediately drew a dagger and plunged toward into my chest. Unfortunately for him, my body had

adapted. The blade snapped against my skin. It punched another hole in my shirt.

“Do you even care that this was my best shirt?” I grabbed his wrist carefully. I didn’t want to remove his arm. The warrior spat in my face. I released him and wiped my face with my sleeve. Disgusting! What if I caught something? I may be immortal, but I still caught the damned cold.

“Enough!” I roared. The sound wave compressed the air around me, throwing the heroes away from me. The woman, who had only watched, was also flung backward. The men’s weapons clattered to the floor, and the heroes skidded across the stone. Their armor clattered. I had learned not to carpet the throne room. Carpet stain remover had stopped being produced too long ago, so blood was a hassle to clean now. I didn’t want to subject my servants to more work than was necessary.

I used air to lift the various weapons and pulled them toward me. They looked like normal steel blades but with various channels cut from the handle to the blades. The atomic makeup was that of normal, high-tempered steel mixed with a few other metals. The weapons didn’t have any batteries or other sources of energy. I had encountered something similar. I called out to my mental librarian and had him look at the weapons through my eyes. He nodded and went off to look for the memory.

I folded space, sending the weapons to my museum several floors below. I liked to call it Warp Fiving. I missed *Star Trek*. Teapots could last forever, but electronics didn’t. I wondered if I could reinvent them. I might have Nintendo cartridges somewhere (those proved to last forever) I could use as a start, but sadly *Star Trek* and movies were long gone unless I can find some solid state thingie. I didn’t really know how to store anything for millennia other than those types of etched chips. I

Warp Fived the rifle laying across the room too. Firearms didn't change across the centuries, unlike bladed weapons.

The heroes recovered themselves, pulling more weapons out. The woman moved away from them and didn't produce any weapons. Heroes were always too stubborn, but I supposed that is what made them heroes. They weren't interesting for me. The woman with her odd behavior, however, was. Why had they brought her with them? I noticed a pouch hanging from her belt and peered through the fabric's molecules. Inside the pouch sat a kit of various metal tools used for picking locks and disabling traps. When I gazed back up at the woman, I noticed a thin collar around her neck. The collar had similar channels as the blades. The collar didn't have a seam. I narrowed my eyes to peer through the collar and saw that her skin had grown around the collar. It had been placed on her with the metal still hot.

I no longer felt as charitable. "Oh, put those away." I waved at the heroes. I would hear them out first. "And let's have some tea." I frowned at my clothes. I needed to change first. Maybe I should start wearing throwaway outfits when heroes arrived. But I didn't want to disappoint their image of me after all their work. Such a dilemma.

The heroes shared a confused look. "Nothing we do hurts him, Edgar," the black-clad said to the blonde man.

"We can't give up, Clyde."

The woman remained silent.

Boredom returned with a vengeance. Only the woman kept me curious. Why were heroes always so fast to self sacrifice? It would be more interesting if they were selfish for a change, but I suppose they wouldn't be in my throne room if they were selfish. They'd just loot the lower floors

and leave. It had been a long time since I caught a looter now that I thought about it.

“Why don’t you just sit down to tea before it gets colder while I get into some clean clothes,” I said. It will just be a moment. I threw an air-and-electricity shield around Trevor—you could never trust heroes—and left. In my bedroom, I peeled off the clothes and used a washcloth that waited on the sink to wash the blood off. My body made no sense to me. It didn’t age, and it healed immediately except for getting colds and spring hay fever. I got hungry, but I didn’t need to eat. I felt sleepy, but I didn’t need to sleep. I wasn’t sure if I was a lab rat or if I was an accident.

Chapter 2

I ran my hand over my arm. Under the skin I could feel the bio-electronics. I had once cut myself to take a peak. I had similar machines throughout my body. Nanoprobes like the Borg maybe. I smiled. *Star Trek* got a lot of things right. Except for the whole imperfect human utopia thing. I had tried to “assimilate” someone by injecting them with my blood. They were near death, and the injection had revived them, but nothing else happened. It didn’t really matter. I was as I was. And I was bored of it. I also knew I couldn’t kill myself. That was a dark period in my everlasting life. I didn’t know how my body regenerated after the explosion. I had found a still-viable hydrogen bomb that hadn’t detonated. I should’ve been vaporized, but I awoke whole and hale and naked and hairless. I accepted my fate that day.

“Would the death of the sun end me?” It was supposed to engulf the earth, but then I also remembered one age saying the earth would move out as the sun expanded and then return to the Goldilocks zone after it became a white dwarf. “I may want to see that. But I don’t like being hot.”

I supposed I would fix the sun with my divine power—what else could I call the ability to mold reality to my will? But then, I had limits, so it wasn't truly divine.

I put on a soft white shirt with lace and went to join the tea.

The heroes sat at the table, looking uncomfortably at Trevor as he poured tea for them. Trevor, ever proper down to his white gloves (even I couldn't escape cliché) had laid out plates of scones and napkins. "It is not poisoned, I assure you," he said.

The woman remained standing.

I gestured for her to take a chair. "Please."

She shook her head. "I can't."

"You're my guest."

"I can't." She looked at the heroes.

"She should be thankful we tolerate her being in the same room with us," Edgar said. "If it wasn't for her skills."

I glared at him. He tensed. "I care not of your foolishness. Have a seat." I gently wrapped her with air and pushed her to the chair. She sat.

I flounced into my chair. I picked several scones and placed them onto my plate. Trevor poured my tea. "It has cooled, I'm afraid," he said.

I heated the tea in the pot and in all the cups on the table to the proper temperature. I sipped the tea. "Excellent as always." I gestured to the woman. "Please help yourself. Trevor, tea."

He poured her tea and placed a few scones on her plate. The blonde men glowered at him. She fingered the collar bound to her skin.

Trevor smiled, revealing his crooked teeth. "Very good. Please enjoy and call if you need anything else." He bowed and left me alone with my guests.

“As he said, nothing is poisoned.” I munched on a scone. No one could bake or cook like Ellie. She and Trevor were among the best servants I had ever had.

The heroes sat tense with confusion written on their faces. I could see their energy crackling around them. Heroes often had that sort of influence on matter. I didn't see anything like it when I looked in the mirror despite my abilities. But unlike heroes I hadn't tried to gauge my abilities. I rested my head in my hand as I studied them and munched on Ellie's scones. They still hadn't touched theirs. The assassin Clyde had his hand tucked into his black coat. No doubt gripping a weapon of some sort. I wrapped a thin wall of air around him, not enough to suffocate, but enough to keep him from breaking my teaware. While I didn't want stabbed again, I couldn't mend teaware this old. Where the heroes cultured enough appreciate the age of it? I'm certain they hadn't seen anything like it. The woman nibbled on a scone, and her eyes widened.

Edgar, the leader of the group, had the air of a nobleman. Nose in the air, blonde hair braided just so into a thick tail. Sweat had cut rivulets into his powdered face. I had noticed how the ages swung between men wearing makeup and women. The woman didn't wear any. I wondered if perhaps I should take to the white powder, but I wouldn't wear a wig. Never again! Edgar wore the best armor—I'm assuming—of the age. A blue-black steel laced with something I didn't bother squinting to see. It didn't have any “magic” properties I could sense without looking more closely, but I didn't really feel like it. It may have worked similar to his sword. Ellie's scones also remained a mystery. I didn't like knowing *everything*. It was boring. And I already was bored beyond endurance. Edgar's cape was fine too. Maybe I should consider wearing a cape again?

They were dashing, but they also got in the way. Tripping as I stood from the throne wouldn't do if more heroes came to vanquish me.

While Clyde avoided looking at me, and Edgar took snide glances, the woman met my gaze. As I looked at her more closely, my mental librarian aha'ed (he had dropped a tattered memory on my reading table) and ran to a dusty corner of my mind. Something about her was familiar, and not in the way I had seen Edgar and Clyde in the past. They were the tired archetypes that seemed to keep being reincarnated. No. She was something different with her dark skin and clear green eyes. There was the matter of the collar and how the men treated her. I sipped my tea and waited for my mental librarian to return. I could hear a bookstack collapse somewhere in the back of my memory. I hope he didn't hurt himself. He hadn't worked like that for quite some time. Perhaps he was the reason why these heroes offered enough interest for me to sit with them to tea.

Clyde tried to throw his knife at me. It swept a little distance before the thick air froze it in place. He had quite an arm for it to even travel that far over the table. I Warp Fived it.

"Please don't break my teaware," I said. "I'm not going to kill you or anything unless you force me, so just relax already. The tea is quite good. Trevor brews an excellent pot. So what do the people of this age say of me?" My mental librarian kept rummaging. I tried not to frown as I waited. Who did she look like? She seemed more than a passing resemblance too. I sensed something deeper in the familiarity. Maybe I had met her soul back when I still walked the earth? No. It seemed older than that.

Clyde spat, and the thick air caught it. His eyes widened as the spittle hovered in front of him.

“Apparently this age doesn’t teach manners.” I Warp Fived the spittle to the toilet. Plumbing was something I refused to do without no matter how many times I had to revive the technology. Fortunately, it wasn’t a complicated technology. Computers and video games required too much development. By the time people understood the concepts something happened to undo all my efforts. The lack of fossil fuels also didn’t help their development. It was hard to build an advanced society without their concentrated energy, but it was equally hard to move an advanced society away from them. And that was why oil no longer existed in civilization-supporting quantities and coal was not far from being the same. Solar, wind, and water could support an advanced civilization but their development, even with my help, prove difficult without fossil fuels to kick start things. The best I could achieve with water-power was an early industrial society. That experiment ended in a world war and a plague that almost ended human civilization. Again.

“So how does this age see me? In other ages I was seen as a savior.” I wasn’t seen as a savior as often as a tyrant, sadly, but hey, it happened a few times. Someone had to play the villain, I guess.

“Savior! What about the time you burned my home? The Kingdom of Faro?” Edgar asked. He balled his fists on the table. Without thinking, he downed his tea. When he realized what he had done he froze and stared at the cup.

I sipped my tea. It had grown cold again. I didn’t dare heat it a third time. It made it too bitter. “Just don’t break that cup in your anger please. It’s 100,000 years old. I think. Maybe older now that I think on it.” In my mind, I heard my mental librarian yell *Found it!* I supposed I took the mind palace idea to an extreme, but how else could I expect to remember anything? For all my enhancements, whoever made me hadn’t bothered

to expand my memory to divine levels. I supposed that memory book was long lost in my mental stacks, or my mental librarian decided to be spiteful and not bring it to me. He rarely brought me my earliest memories.

To his credit, Edgar put the cup down carefully. He frowned as he realized how he had done as I asked. Clyde had crossed his arms and glared at me. Suit himself. The woman studied another scone held between two fingers.

My mental librarian appeared with a tattered memory. He plunked it down in front of me, and I asked him to find out what I had done to the Kingdom of Faro. That took him only a moment. It was a slave-owning country. Which made me glance at the woman's collar. I didn't touch the other tattered memory book. Not yet. I didn't want to know about the woman quite yet.

"Oh, yes. Your kingdom was the slaving kingdom." Was it that recent? "I used my Divine Judgment to burn down the capital to teach you a lesson." I held up a finger. "Humans are not products to buy and sell." I smiled at the woman. She refused to look at anyone.

"You killed my family!"

"And how many did your slaver family kill?"

"The Uegh aren't human." He glanced at her with disgust.

The woman ate the scone.

"She's an Uegh? Why'd you bring her with you? She's a hero?" I asked.

"Of course not. She and all the others were to help us make it here," Edgar said. "What am I doing? I shouldn't be talking with you. I should be trying to kill you."

"All the others?" I didn't sense anyone else in the area other than my servants. "What happened to them?"

“What does it matter? They served their purpose.”

I glanced at the woman, and I read their fates in her eyes.

My jaw tightened. “Every age. People never learn. These Uegh have the same genetics as you do. Skin color doesn’t mean anything or any other social distinction.” My voice was flat. How many times have I said something like that? I glanced at the memory on my mental table. My librarian whispered that it was the oldest book in the library. The liar was still covering up how I became what I was and other, even older memories, but I didn’t challenge him.

I ate a scone to calm myself. Ellie needed a raise, but then she and Trevor already could use my fortune however they wanted. What was money to me?

Edgar glared at me. “You started a rebellion. You ended my way of life. You must die for it.”

“Well, I can’t die as you saw. I doubt even the death of the sun will kill me at this point.” I stood and ignored how everyone tensed. I strolled to the silver cart and lifted the teapot from its warmer. Good man, Trevor! He knew how my heating made the tea bitter.

“More tea?” I asked the woman.

She nodded.

I poured her cup. She smelled of sweat and fear. And she made no move at me. She looked away from me. That gesture told me how well the Uegh uprising went. Perhaps her people viewed me as a savior? They should! The proximity to her strengthened my sense of familiarity with her. I really needed to read that tattered book. Maybe I should just read it to them. It wouldn’t hurt. I had long ago gotten past embarrassment and

pride. What did those things matter when your outlived everyone? When they didn't know the real me?

My other guests didn't relax, such as they could, until I sat back down.

"We will kill you for what you did," Edgar said.

I enjoyed another scone. "You apparently can't hear well. Suit yourself. You aren't the first to say that. Just don't burn down my library. I hate it when people try to do that. Do you know how hard it is to recover lost technology and ideas?" I wasn't as much of a bookworm in the past, but over the eons I had developed a love for books. They were one of the few things to ease my boredom. Even immortality and the ability to deconstruct reality wasn't enough to learn everything there was to know. Not to mention I kept forgetting things unless I revisited them. Books stored things for millennia under the right conditions too. No electricity needed. I just needed to relearn the various languages, but all I had was time.

"I remember a few heroes who tried to burn down my home. The fire wiped out a section of my library." I was a fool then and kept all my books in the same place. Now I divided them among different floors—making sure to shore the floors up as I could—and kept the easiest to replace books in the lower floors. "I had learned that despite the Conservation of Information Principle, once a book was lost, I couldn't reconstruct it."

Fortunately, books didn't burn easily. After they became a fused lump of charcoal I was able to tease them open and have them copied, but some information was still lost. The event also taught me that while I could destroy, I couldn't create. I supposed I wasn't really a god, unless I was a god of destruction.

"I've had enough of this," Clyde stood. "You will pay for what you've done."

“Let me guess. Your people are the slavers too.”

“I don’t answer to you.” Clyde pulled out a pistol and fired. Sadly, my air shield wasn’t calibrated to catch bullets.

The bullet hit the teacup I held in my hand. The porcelain burst into shards that scattered everywhere. Tea orbbed in the air. Such a waste of a teacup and tea! The bullet hit my skin and set a shiver up my arm. So they did have field negation technology!

Edgar leaped up, brandishing his own pistol. “For my family!” The bullet hit me in the forehead, and the scone I held hit the floor as I slumped. Pain washed over me as my consciousness dimmed. Several bookshelves in my mind palace toppled, making my librarian curse. In my fading vision, a towering white door appeared, but it refused to open. No light, no warmth came from it. It just loomed over me, locked. I had once tried to force it open, but it ignored my abilities and my tugging. I supposed I was lock out of both heaven and hell, if that was what existed behind that door.

“Even a god can’t stand against justice.” Edgar’s voice sounded far away.

Ugh could he get more cliched?

“And now we can wipe the Uegh stain from the world,” Clyde said.

The white door disappeared. I wasn’t sure why death was always shown as a skeleton in a shroud carrying a scythe. It was more exciting than a white door, I guess. I groaned as I sat back up. “It’s been awhile since I felt anything like that.” He shook my head and ran a hand through my bloodied hair. I needed a shower.

Edgar and Clyde had backed the woman against the wall. She held a knife. In a flash of speed that surprised even me, she attacked Clyde.

Clyde danced back, but in an underhand thrust her knife arched upward and caught him in the throat. His eyes bulged, and he collapsed.

I had never seen heroes fight each other like this before. Interesting.

“With your death, your people will finally be wiped from the face of this world,” Edgar said. He held a short sword he had hidden somewhere.

“Well, that’s not fair of you. A knife versus a short sword?” I said.

Edgar whirled toward me. “But how?”

The woman lunged at his back, driving him to the floor. She plunged her knife into the side of his throat. Edgar stiffened, and I heard a gurgle.

I walked up to him and knelt. I watched the life fading from his eyes. Life, consciousness, was something my enhanced vision wasn’t able to decipher. “I can’t die even when I want to. So I will see you again sometime.” With a thought I severed his brain stem. I didn’t like to see anything suffer.

The woman pushed herself off him and gazed at me with caution. Her hair clung to her forehead, making her seem even more familiar. She tensed as I stood.

“They really hate your people didn’t they,” I said. “What’s your name?”

She frowned at me.

“I don’t like slavery or the other nonsense humans do to each other. Is your collar from your slavery?”

“Ugh are born only the serve,” she said. Her voice was soft. Damage from the color, I supposed.

I walked over and poured her a little tea. I punctured my finger with a thought and dripped a single drop of my blood into the tea. I swirled the cup and offered it to her. “Sounds like your throat is still dry. Drink.” I said the last word with force.

As I suspected, she took the cup and downed it without thinking. I had learned slaves would react with such a forceful command. When she realized what she had done, she grimaced.

“Well, you saved yourself. Let me free you from that collar. This will hurt for a moment.” I deconstructed the collar on the subatomic level, Warp Fiving the atoms to form a lump of metal in a storage room. Then, I broke down the scar tissue that had grown around the metal and seared the ruined skin. She cried out at the sudden extreme heat. The properties of my blood, the nanobots or whatever they were, sprang to work. The wound knit together with the same speed my own skin fixed itself. The effects were only temporary, but I found them helpful in a pinch.

When she touched her throat, her eyes widened. “It’s gone. What did you do?”

“You’re free. Do you have a name?”

“I expected to die with the rest of my people.”

I shrugged. “Well, now you don’t have to.”

“It’s Rea. My name.”

“Nice to know you. I’d give you my name, but I don’t remember it. You are free to do whatever you want. I will have Trevor offer you a room and show you the guest baths if you’d like one.” I waved and Warp Fived Edgar and Clyde’s bodies to the crypts. Come to think of it, I couldn’t remember where I had put the crypts. I frowned. Maybe it was better to return them to their families. I Warp Fived Edgar’s body to the old capital of Faro and cast an anti-decay spell on him. It didn’t take much effort. Microbes took less work to stop than Warp Fiving did. I did the same to Clyde. Someone would find them and build a shrine for the fallen heroes.

“I should’ve thought of that before,” I muttered to myself. “A hero’s shrine. Maybe it would keep heroes from trying to kill me if they knew

their fate.” Maybe people would forget about me and raise them to godhood instead. “Kinda hard to forget my world-straddling tower though.” I sent a mental summons to Trevor.

“Just what are you?” Rea glanced at where the bodies had been. I hadn’t removed the blood. That took more work than a brush and cleaner did.

“I really don’t know. I can’t say I’m human, nor am I not not-human.” Was I imagining my inner librarian smirking at me? “If nothing else, I know I’m insane.” I shrugged. “And bored. Same thing.” My inner librarian sighed and went to reorder the bookshelves the bullet had toppled.

Trevor arrived. “The good sir has asked me to show you to the guest rooms and bath. I will arrange for suitable clothing while yours are washed. Please follow me.”

“I wished we could’ve had a proper tea, but at least dinner won’t be interrupted now,” I said. “Ellie is making pizza tonight.” That was one recipe that I taught to all my cooks. Well, that and taco bake.

“So I’m a prisoner?”

“As I said, you can leave whenever you want. Although I would admit I’d be disappointed if you don’t stay for dinner.”

“No traps?”

“Did you encounter any traps or monsters on the way here?” When I had first built the tower I had set up traps and found wild creatures to act as monsters. Evolution did some interesting things. Humans had also evolved in interesting ways, but the standard homo sapiens hadn’t gone anywhere. All the evolutionary branches ended up dying off. Radiation from the Apocalypse had accelerated human and animal evolution for a time. I still didn’t understand how that one group of humans developed

purple skin and white hair. They lasted about a thousand years before they disappeared. I wasn't paying too much attention to the world back then. What was I doing? Probably building my tower. That took ages to engineer and a lot of trial and error. But in the end, the generic human species ended up surviving and populating what was left of the earth. In any case, once heroes started appearing, I started using the most fearsome and strange creatures to defend my tower. In retrospect, building a tower may not have been the best idea. It drew a lot of attention, but I liked watching the planet from on high. It wasn't as if satellites still worked. But the constant door knockers also got annoying. I had thought to test the heroes, to prove them worthy of facing me. But locking the tower when I went out got annoying. I often set off the traps after forgetting about them, and my pets were sometimes hard to feed with their special diets. Besides, they weren't good pets. They had to be mean to fight heroes, after all. Why do all that when a simple, strong locked door did the job?

"We had wondered about that," she said.

"As I said, you can go if you want, but I hope we could talk over dinner before you leave."

She crossed her arms. "Why? I'm not going to...do anything for you."

"I wouldn't think of it." I walked toward my rooms. "I just want to chat and share dinner with someone for a change."

I hoped she would stay, but I wouldn't make her. I didn't make any hero fight me, but come to think of it, I also hadn't sat down to dinner with a hero since I "ascended." I think that was the term people in previous ages said I had done. I had just built a home and tried to make the world a little less ugly. I aimed to keep humanity from collectively

killing themselves and the planet. Boils had to be lanced to be healed, right?

Chapter 3

I showered, dressed, and passed through the throne room. One of Trevor's staff worked at the blood. The young man nodded at me as I passed. Trevor kept a tight grip on the staff. He made sure they acted normal around me. I didn't want to be venerated, and I never asked any of them how they viewed me. A tower this size needed a small army of people to maintain it. The jet stream liked to blow dust from all over the world into my home. Trevor would also send some of the servants out to collect a tribute to me each year. I always made sure to cast a shield (I might as well embrace the magic terms at this point even though what I do is well within the realms of the old sciences) on them for when people tried to attack them. Good staff took time to train. Too many ruffians wanted to join just because they thought they could fight. I preferred to give a home to orphans, but I left the details to Trevor, Ellie, and my arms master Telos.

I followed the scent of pizza—goat cheese and spinach—to the dining room. Tomatoes, spinach, cows, and even goats had changed over the millennia. Evolution was annoying in that way, but the pizza still tasted just fine. The long table was arrayed on one end so Rea and I could sit across from each other. Apparently, she had decided to stay. I should've gotten rid of the huge table. At the most, Telos, Ellie, Trevor, and I would eat together, and rarely at that. Trevor and Ellie, especially, thought it inappropriate to eat with me. I never asked them how they viewed me. As a god, a demon, a lord, or just an employer. I hoped just an employer. All the rest got tiresome. Trevor already had the pizza on the table and waited.

“I also have news, sir,” Trevor said.

I sat. “Rea decided to join us?”

“I'm here.” Rea entered, led by one of the female staff. Rea wore blue pants and a loose white shirt.

“The Korvak Empire has mobilized.”

Rea paled.

“Idiots.” I sighed. “Can't they be satisfied with what they have? Where are they marching?”

“They send forces to all the remaining free states and toward us.” Trevor smirked. His smirks always looked wicked.

I groaned. I had left that empire alone because they seemed to bring peace where they went. They also had a version of a republic, but in recent decades they seemed bent on taking over everything. Which was fine if they ended the wars. Human civilization was the most stable under autocrats, sadly. Democracies, oligarchies, anarchies, and all the other -archies had proven unstable, flowering and full of promise at first, but always falling into destruction. Autocracies, at least when they have

philosopher kings, tended toward stability at the cost of freedom. Freedom and stability fought an endless tug-of-war thanks to humans' lack of mental evolution. If they weren't so selfish, which they never evolved beyond, other forms of organization would work.

Trevor's reports suggested the Korvak Empire was moving beyond the usual corruption nations had. And so the cycle continued. Civilization had an set expiration date. Even anarchies had expiration dates, eventually becoming autocratic nations like all others.

"We will continue to watch them. Anything else I should know?"

"Nothing else my contacts have found, sir. The empire functions as it always had otherwise."

"Continue to monitor them."

"Very good."

I pulled a large slice of pizza off the platter. The cheese stretched.

"So you aren't going to do anything?" Rea asked.

I gestured at the pizza. "Help yourself. No. I don't dabble unless I have to."

"Then why did you strike the Kingdom of Faro?"

"I don't tolerate slavery. It's wrong."

"And the Korvak Empire killing people isn't?"

"Eggs have to be broken to make a cake." I shrugged. "I can't say much after incinerating millions over the centuries. I don't like it, but a single world-empire is easier to manage than dozens or hundreds of small nations. It's a matter of logistics. Sadly those world empires don't usually last very long. The best ones last....two thousand years I think?"

Rea shook her head. "I don't understand. You can do anything, but you don't. You could rule the world."

“It’s overrated. Been there, done that. I had tried being an autocrat for a few thousand years, but it was too tedious.”

“Just want do you want?”

“I want someone to reinvent Pepsi.” I chewed. The pizza was good, as always, but Pepsi would make it perfect. Pepsi and a few other things from the old, old world had never reappeared. History rhymed but didn’t repeat. Sadly in the case of Pepsi, Nintendo, *Star Trek*, and space travel.

Rea looked confused.

I took a bite, and the cheese stretched. I wondered how much revenue my farms made. I didn’t really concern myself with such things anymore. At first, it was interesting, but when you were immortal and when compounding interest existed (it didn’t always!) money ceased to matter all that much. Besides, as nations died so did currency. There was a period when gold was worthless. What was the money back then? Iron? Shells. Yes, seashells had taken several stints as money. I vaguely remembered a time when salt and even barley, or whatever crop that word described at the time, acted as money.

Rea watched me.

“I suppose I want humans to stop killing each other. To stop being selfish. For pigs to fly.” I frowned. Wasn’t there an age when they did? I asked my mind librarian, and he dashed off to return with a book. I read the mind-book. “Huh, I guess that saying doesn’t hold up. The Barbins genetically engineered pigs to glide to allow herders to move them to uncontaminated areas. I wish I had tried the pork-wings back then.”

Rea shook her head and retrieved a slice of pizza using her knife and fork. “That’s a hard thing to want.”

“Tell me about it.”

She tilted her head and looked at me with a question on her face. “Tell you?”

I waved my hand. “An idiom. Means I agree.”

She cut off a bite and ate it. Her eyes widened. Grinning, I tore a chunk off my own slice with my teeth like a proper pizza veteran. Pizza was a one-handed food! Rea shot me a look and cut another bite, larger this time. For being a slave, she had table manners. She held a nice confident facade. If her hand didn’t tremble, I would’ve believed her bluff.

“I only kill when I must.” When did killing become easy for me? Well, emotionally easy. Life was fragile when you can deconstruct even the nucleus of an atom with your thoughts. “So tell me, what do people say of me now? I hadn’t paid attention to this age.”

She winced.

“I won’t be mad. Promise.”

She hesitated, pushing a bite-sized square of pizza around her plate. “The Forgotten God. That is what most people call you in the different languages.”

I grinned. “Well, I’m not very forgotten if you and your friends were sent to kill me.”

“They were not my friends.” She took a deep breath. “We haven’t forgotten you, but what you want. Why you kill us.”

“Pepsi would be nice, but I wouldn’t kill people over that. And I only destroyed that Faros Kingdom. That I remember anyway. The days kind of become the same, so do the kingdoms of humanity. So you were sent like all the other heroes to put an end to my terror. I notice the Korvak Empire hasn’t sent heroes.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t your servant say they had sent an army?”

I laughed. “Good point.”

She at the pizza square. “I never thought I’d be sitting here with a god eating...pizza?...and talking. I expected to die. Like the rest of my people.”

“And I expected to be bored. A day of surprises. And that doesn’t happen often when you’re me.” I grabbed a second slice from the platter. I wasn’t sure how much of my wealth Ellie used, but it wasn’t enough. She deserved the world for her cooking. Maybe I should reconquer the world and give it to her and Trevor for their service. But then I wouldn’t be able to eat pizza like this anymore or enjoy Trevor’s tea. “I bet she would be able to recreate the Pepsi, the classic formula and not the new ones, if I got her started at it. Close would be better than nothing.” I mentally frowned at my librarian. The things I remembered weren’t always that useful. He shrugged at me and disappeared into the stacks.

“Why are you doing this?”

“I’m hungry.”

She glared at me. “Why are you talking to me? Why don’t you just kill me like you did Edgar and Clyde?”

I pointed my pizza at her. “You killed them, remember?”

“You could’ve killed them with a thought. And me.”

“I could. Destruction is my ability. I have a few others, but that is my main one.” I reheated the slice to perfection. The cheese stringed as I ate. I reheated her slice.

Rea didn’t say anything. She ate, her thoughts passing across her face in a stream. I wished mind-reading was one of my abilities sometimes. The tattered book referencing a past version of Rea still waited in my mind and tantalized me.

“I’m not really a god, you know. I was once a regular man. I don’t remember exactly what happened eons ago, but the world was different

then.” I waved my hand in the air. “We built cities in the stars. And come to think of it, there may still be people out there. Our greatest achievement was a small man-made planet. Well, it was a ship built into an asteroid, and well, I don’t claim how it works.” My mental librarian plopped a book in front of me and turned to a picture of the ship. Nicknamed Death Star after the films. If he could bring me that, why couldn’t he bring me a book about how I was made?

“Then humans destroyed themselves. You like to do that. A lot. In any case, I was made then, or rather changed. How or who I was before then, I don’t know.” It felt good to speak to someone about this. I hadn’t in centuries at least. “But I ended up immortal as you saw and with the ability to destroy among a few other abilities. I suppose I was a test-tube baby.” I grinned.

Rea ate another forkful to cover her confusion. She was down to the crust.

“There’s more if you want.” I gestured at the pizza. “I’m not a god. Although, I suppose I could be considered a God of Entropy. I can’t create anything.”

“So why are you telling me this?”

“I want to. When you lived as long as I have, you start seeing people return, and you remind me of someone I hadn’t seen since I first awoke.” My mental librarian peered around a stack at me and grinned. I stuck my tongue out at him. “My first memory of myself.”

“People don’t come back from the dead, do they?”

“Maybe. Seems a part of them does if you wait long enough. People look the same as versions of them from centuries ago.” I looked into her green eyes. “Like you.”

She looked away. “I am me.”

I finished my slice and wiped my hands and mouth on my napkin. I stood, drawing her gaze up with me. “I can tell you are overwhelmed by all this.” I smiled. I hoped it looked kindly. “You are welcome to stay here as long as you want, or you can go if you want. No one will stop you. Speak with any of the staff and they will show you out or to your room. I hope you will stay, but if not, I will see you some age. Speak with Trevor before you leave. He will give you enough money to live the rest of your life.” I left the dining room, mentally updating Trevor with my staff orders. If only the communication method went two ways. Quantum entanglement didn’t like my efforts to control it.

My mental librarian seemed disappointed that I hadn’t opened that tattered memory. Not yet. It had rested this long, and while I felt anxious to have finally met her again, I didn’t want to push it. I didn’t know how life and souls worked, but I had time. I would see her again if she decided to leave.

I took the elevator to the top of the tower. I didn’t keep many rooms this high up. A few libraries rested on the upper floors, but I didn’t like trying to read in them. The air was thin, and the wind howled around the tower. The air was so thin that I didn’t allow any staff to clean up here. Dust coated everything. The tower swayed with the wind. Seasickness had been a problem for me after I first finished the tower. Even now the swaying made reading a pain. A few other rooms stored the various treasures I had accumulated over the millennia. I kept the rarest things here, survivors from the deepest past. I didn’t really seek treasure out, but over time you tended to pick up junk. I felt like I should’ve been tired by the time I reached my uppermost room. Tiredness was more a shadow of what I should’ve felt than what I actually felt. Almost like my body remembered what it was like before those aspects of life left it. Honestly,

if I didn't bleed and poop, I would've thought I was some sort of android. As for the highest room, I didn't really use it anymore. I used to make heroes fight and climb their way to this apex. But the thin air wasn't fair to them. When they saw the curvature of the earth through the window, they would often lose their courage too. I used to pump oxygen into this part of the tower, so the staff and heroes could breathe, but I took to living in the midsection of the tower for the staff's convenience.

I took the stairs that led to the roof. I emerged on the roof. I stood on the edge of the planet's atmosphere. Several nanocarbon cables stabilized the tower by attaching to a few long-dead geosynchronous satellites. The curve of the earth could be seen. Lights dotted the distance toward the Korvak Empire. Even without the telescope I could see plumes of coal smog forming its own weather system. The empire was built on top one of the few remaining coal veins, which gave the empire its power. I doubted humanity could have another great space age. I gazed at the moon just in time to see one of the remaining asteroid cities orbit across it. I wondered if people still lived up there? I had never made contact with them, even when I had the technology to attempt communication. Energy and materials would've been a problem for those outposts.

If I could access any satellites that might still be working, I could better watch the world than using my telescopes. I gazed into the eyepiece, and with some adjustments, the hazy capital appeared. It was likely early morning there. I couldn't tell if it was busier than normal with the smog. I adjusted the zoom and scanned the surrounding horizon. I caught the sight of billowing dust. Troop movements. And large ones at that. I surmised they would have some steam-powered mechanized units.

I straightened and stretched my back. I supposed I would find out what they wanted when their army arrived. If they were foolish enough to

try to attack me, I would force them to remember their “Forgotten God.” I didn’t like the idea of people worshiping me. I wasn’t a god. Just close to it. I hadn’t met the real one yet (hiding behind the white door, no doubt), but from what I had observed over the eons, he was quite a software programmer. The way everything worked amazed me, especially with how the earth healed after I or humanity destroyed it.

I wondered if maybe it was again time for me to walk the world myself instead of relying on telescopes and spy reports.

“It’s not a bad idea. At least it would ease my boredom for awhile.”

Chapter 4

I sat down to breakfast the next morning—a bowl of porridge and eggs with sugared goat’s milk—when Rea arrived. I didn’t need to eat, but I had a century of hunger once. After that I decided to never skip breakfast. Hunger wasn’t comfortable, especially when it couldn’t kill you. I hadn’t expected her to stay. She looked refreshed.

I also knew for certain that I had met her before.

I smiled at her as she sat across from me. Trevor served her the same breakfast, which made her eyebrows raise. Was something culturally wrong with the meal? But she started eating with obvious pleasure.

“I’m surprised you didn’t leave,” I said after several moments.

She wiped her mouth on the cloth napkin. “My people need your help.”

“I am sorry about your people. I’ve seen it happen time and time again. Uegh and Faros and Korvak all share the same family. Peoples start as a single family and are fruitful and multiplied.”

Rea gave me a questioning look.

I waved my hand. “Not important. Then one brother kills another and it escalates into a mess of slavery and murder and reprisals. Your people, the slaves, used to be the powerful branch of the family that oppressed the others until the tables turned.” I gestured with my spoon. “Is that what happened?”

She stared at me. “You must be a god to know the secret history.”

“There’s no secret to it. It’s the fact humans never learn from history.”

She stood. “I have to return to my people to get everyone ready. The Korvak will be coming for them too.”

“There will be time for that after breakfast. I’ve decided I needed to stretch my legs. Sit and eat, please. There’s no real hurry.”

“There is if my people...”

“Just eat breakfast. I can get us there in a thought.”

She sat.

“Trevor has prepared us a care package for traveling. Food and clothes. I want to walk for a bit. To rough it.” I smiled and dug into the eggs. Cinnamon? Ellie was experimenting again. I didn’t know how to feel about it. The flavor wasn’t bad, but cinnamon and sugar wasn’t something I would expect in eggs.

Rea returned to eating.

“So what made you stay?”

“I-I don’t really know. Curiosity? The desire to kill you?”

I laughed. “You are the either the bravest hero or the most foolish.”

She chuckled. “Mostly I wanted to know why you think you know me.”

In my mental library, that tattered memory still waited. I laid my hand on the table, imagining the memory under it. My mental librarian had fixed the fallen bookshelves overnight and now worked at sorting in the

far corner of my mind. I still wondered what he hid from me. “I have a story to tell if you can wait to rush off to save your people.”

I felt anxious to read the memory myself.

She pursed her lips and rested her temple against her fist. “The short version.”

“I can read it in parts then. I’m not sure how long ago this happened. Long, long ago.” I opened the mental book and began reading. “I remember waking up in a field with the smell of cow manure and seeing....” I looked at Rea. “Your face.” I continued reading the memory:

“The woman’s concerned expression changed to relief as I blinked. ‘Are you okay?’ she asked.”

“I hurt. She sat back as I tried to sit up. I felt the warm sun on my body, and I looked down. I didn’t wear a thread, and it looked as if I had been shoved into a grinder and then kneaded like bread dough for good measure. I grimaced. ‘I seem to be alive.’ I didn’t remember what happened. In fact, I remembered nothing at all. Blank. My mental library contained books, but nothing about me. Knowledge of languages, of technology, or everything except who I was.”

“‘What is your name?’ she asked.”

“‘I don’t know.’ I forced myself to stand, aware of my nudity but also of the fact I didn’t care. My body felt disconnected, but strong and steady at the same time. A cow lowed.”

“The woman stood with me. ‘Well, we can’t leave you here. You look about the same height as my husband was. Let’s find you some clothes.’ She grabbed my hand and led me across the pasture toward an old farmhouse.”

Rea ate a spoon of porridge. “Did you fall from heaven or something?”

I looked up from the table, where the book sat in my mind's eye. "Perhaps in a way. I am a creature fused with technology." I touched my chest. "Inside me are machines, some too small to see. But I am also human in many ways." The nano machines and technology inside me didn't explain my abilities manipulate matter with little more than effortful thinking. Technology just can't channel enough energy to do that.

"Are you sure it was me back then?" Her voice fell. "I don't really like the idea I had lived before."

"I think to become a hero you have to have lived many lifetimes. Heroes have strong souls. Different energy about them." I squinted. Electrons and other energized matter swirled around Rea. No doubt people who neared her would feel the energy. I supposed I didn't because of what I was.

"I'm not a hero. I was just a slave trained in...various skills." She stirred her porridge. "Then why don't I remember any of my previous lives?"

I shrugged and looked down at the table. The book filled my mental vision. "Her name was Ara, and she had lost her husband and son in the war. Under her care, I healed quickly. Quicker than I should have considering whatever happened to me. To thank her, I helped her tend the farm."

"Please don't tell me this is going to be a romance," Rea said.

"I don't know what this memory is. I'm only remembering it as I tell you."

She shifted. "I would like to get back to my people."

"Just a little more. I will skip the details." I skimmed the memory book. It was detailed about everyday life. Ara apparently wasn't much of a

cook, but she was strong despite her petite build. I had spent several years with her, but as far as the book said, I didn't make any moves toward her. Although it seemed Ara had toward me. Those sections seemed uncertain. Likely they were projections. The book contained vivid photographs of Ara, and her resemblance to Rea was uncanny. During those years, I hadn't displayed any of my current abilities. I sweated. I slept. I even broke a finger that took time to mend.

I closed the mental book and frowned at the table. "I was human then. What happened?"

Rea watched me in silence. I couldn't read her expression.

I finished off my sugared milk and wiped my mouth with the napkin. "We should leave to visit your people, but I don't know where to go." I sent a mental summons to Trevor for him to bring our equipment.

"Corna would be best. I can talk to our council there."

"Before we go, I need to do something if you allow me."

Her eyes narrowed. "Just what do you need to do?"

Trevor arrived with two stuffed packs. The packs were from a different age, made of lightweight carbon fibers. Inside would be vacuum-packed clothing to save space, shelf-stable food, and other conveniences if I knew Trevor.

I gestured at him. "I need to set up a mind-bound like I have with Trevor."

She sat back in her chair. "No."

"I assure you," Trevor said. "It only allows the Master to tell me what he wants done."

"I haven't been able to make it two way yet," I said. "I can't read your thoughts. I can only talk to your in your head."

"No."

I sighed. “It’s not convenient, but I assume you considered this, Trevor?”

“I considered the possibility, sir. It is my job after all.” He pulled a tiny button from his pocket. “This device lets you hear and speak to others. You place it behind your ear. When you want to speak, you press it.” He turned his head and pulled his hair back to reveal one behind his ear. “It is removable.” He held it out to Rea. “I assure you, there’s no harm in it.”

“Those things still work?” I asked.

Trevor allowed a small grin. “We had to figure out how to make them ourselves, but I have a team quite adapt at such things. It makes it easier for me to manage the staff. I hope it pleases you.”

I waved at him. “You know I trust you. I’m just surprised you found people in this age to get it working.” I wondered what else Trevor and his people were doing that I wasn’t aware of. Maybe I should do a walk through of the tower more often once I returned. I had given them free access to all my libraries and storage rooms. Seems like they had worked out how to read some of the older books and tech manuals. Good people didn’t need someone to watch over them. Just give them a purpose, plenty of money and food, and give them free time and they surprise you. That part of humanity hadn’t changed, thankfully.

“We do what we can to serve you better.” Trevor pressed the button behind his ear. “As you can hear, there’s only a little distortion.” His voice crackled through the piece sitting in his palm.

“Fine.” Rea took the piece and pressed it behind her ear. After a moment, she removed it. Seemingly satisfied, she replaced it.

Trevor offered me a piece. I placed it and pressed it. “Hear me, Rea?” I whispered.

She nodded. “Louder than your whisper.”

Trevor handed me a pack. “When can we expect you home, sir?”

“I’m not certain, but send me a message when the army arrives. I don’t want you to engage them unless they attack.”

A wicked smile spread across Trevor’s face. “It will be their mistake.”

Did he look excited? He may have found a way to fix the tower’s old defenses. I doubted any army of this era could stand against radiant shields and plasma cannons. It wouldn’t surprise me if Trevor was planning on conquering the world for me. Although, if his people were redeveloping the old technology in the tower, maybe I should let him. The world was more peaceful when that technology ruled. Well, up until the nuclear holocaust happened. Although back then I didn’t have the tower nor the abilities I now had. Now, I could prevent such a nuclear exchange from happening.

Something to think about.

“I guess we aren’t going to walk,” Rea said.

“We will. Just not all the way there. Which city do we want?”

“I day ago I was helping others in their plan to kill you. Now you are helping me.” Rea slipped the pack over her shoulder. She seemed to expect it to be heavier. “Hoinheim is where the council is now.” She paused. “Maybe I shouldn’t have told you that.”

I knew that area. “If I wanted to destroy the city, I have maps. I don’t have any reason to. Despite what the stories may claim, I don’t destroy things for fun anymore. I need you to come closer to me.”

Rea narrowed her eyes at me, but she stepped closer. She muttered something to herself.

“Keep me posted, Trevor,” I said.

He bowed. “I have people everywhere, sir.”

I nodded. He was a regular M. I wondered if he was a James Bond or a Douglas Docraft or a Frize Opplin. Funny how those archetype movie characters kept reappearing through the ages if under different names.

I lifted my hand and drew a spellform, for a lack of better word, into the air, arranging and energizing nitrogen, oxygen, and hydrogen into a glowing circled filled with runes and interlocking shapes. I grinned at Rea. “Dramatic isn’t it? People expect a show from me.” I let runes fade. “It isn’t necessary to do all this.” I winked.

Rea crossed her arms and regarded me.

My mental librarian laughed at me from somewhere. I grimaced and teleported us. Teleportation used a combination of the Conservation of Information principle, quantum entanglement, and other physics thingies I didn’t bother to understand. Essentially, I deconstructed myself and the people and objects around me and transferred the energy through a quantum lattice to my destination. I then reconstituted the energy to matter at that location. Einstein had been only partially right. You didn’t need the speed of light to run the energy-mater conversion. Just the speed of quantum thought. It was all gibberish to me. My librarian came up with that explanation. But I had to be entangled with the area for it to work. In other words, I had to have visited the location sometime in the past. I had once tried to use this method to end myself, refusing to reconstruct myself, but my energy snapped back to matter of its own accord. I had experimented with it in various other means, and each time whatever object I tried to hold in limbo would snap back to matter. It was a different mechanism than obliteration, which also didn’t work on me. Tried that too. That white door refused to open.

The walls of my tower melted away around us as if they were made of wax. Rea made a noise. As soon as the walls hit the floor, everything

wavered, giving way to grass and fresh air. Trees reverse-melted into shape and everything locked back into place. I didn't know how else to describe the sensation. Teleporting worked differently than Warp Fiving, which folded space-time. It had the added benefit of not needing to have visited the location. Sometimes it was refreshing to rebuild yourself from a whole new set of matter, rather than transport your old matter around. Like putting on a fresh set of clothes.

Rea examined herself. No doubt she felt the freshness of new everything. It had the added bonus of removing diseases, cancer, and other problems when I filtered for those corruptions in a person's matter makeup. "We really had no chance against you," Rea said. "How do you do it?"

"It would take too long to explain. I just can. Its similar to how your heart beats. It just does by its design."

"The legends are wrong. You really don't have a weakness. Our sacred blades didn't do anything to you."

"They cut me. That's more than most can do. So don't feel too bad. Not even what is basically a miniature star exploding can kill me. I tried it." I gazed at the awakening sky. "Immortality itself is a weakness you know." I gazed at her sidelong. "I get to watch everyone else die over and over and over again. Boredom rarely leaves you too. Nor insanity."

"You don't seem insane."

I smirked at her. "Insanity taken beyond itself becomes sanity."

Rea studied me a moment longer before turning away. "The town is this way."

Chapter 5

We walked for an hour. I took the time to try to notice the environment around me. How long had it been since I had left the tower? Trevor had come to me one day when I pattered about the tower grounds. I didn't really consider that leaving. Maybe I wouldn't be as bored if I walked the earth again and shared knowledge. I hadn't done that for centuries, and this age seemed poised to accelerate into another golden age if it could jump over the fossil fuel shortage problem.

I sensed neutron radiation coming from a hill. I stopped.

"What is it?" Rea asked.

"Do you know of anything in that hill?"

She frowned and squinted at it. "I can see faint lines of magic."

"You can see magic?"

She nodded. "Only some. I can't really weave it though. Some can start fires using it."

Powers like mine? "Let's see this hill. But just a moment. This magic can hurt you in large doses. Hold on a moment. There should be some

shielding nearby.” I cast my senses into the earth and found metal everywhere around us. As I suspected, I found an alloy that protected against radiation. I grasped my hand as if I grabbed the metal and lifted it.

The ground to our right exploded into a shower of dirt and rock. It was buried further than I thought. A twisted vehicle crashed to the earth. A single-personnel attack vehicle that seemed even older than my tower. The technology seemed similar, but nature only allowed so many ways of doing things.

“Try to warn me before you did that again.” Rea came out from behind a tree. She looked at the vehicle. “I’ve seen something like that before in the ruins.”

“Ruins?” I walked over the the door and dissolved the hinges. It would make a shield for her.

“Where we found the sacred blades. My people are said to be born there.”

I felt a little disappointment. They hadn’t made the blades themselves. I handed her the body-sized shield I molded. It was crude, but it would work. “Stay behind this when we approach the hill. I would like to see those ruins after we speak with your council.”

Rea looked at the gaping hole and the fallen trees around it. “Only if you promise not to kill them.”

“Sure.” It didn’t matter to me either way.

Rea carried the heavy shield ahead of her with little difficulty as we approached the hill. The radiation grew stronger, and I could see the particles leaking from the hill as we closed. Anyone who would get close would suffer from radiation sickness in short order. Yet the rate of decay I could sense seemed different from the last age of high technology.

“The magic is coming from it in waves. I think I might be able to...”

A tree exploded to my left, showering the air with splinters. Rea gasped.

That wasn't me. I couldn't sense any other humans in the area. Just birds, squirrels, and other small mammals. “Did you just do that?” I asked her.

“I-I just thought. I reached out with my thoughts as the Elder showed me and grasped the magic. I—”

“Do it again.”

“I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—”

“No. I'm not mad. Just do it again. I want to see what happens. Pull as much energy—magic—as you can.”

“A-all right.”

I squinted at her. I could see the halo of energized particles dancing faster around her.

Rea planted the shield in front of her, closed her eyes, and let out a breath. Nothing happened for a moment then suddenly I felt a surge of energy pull from the hill and toward her. I didn't sense radioactive decay, just highly-charged energy. I didn't think the two could be separated! The energy haloed her, growing frantic and shifting in color in my vision. It didn't touch her skin, but swirled scan millimeters from her. The electrons in the air surrounding her hummed like a swarm of angry bees.

Her eyes shot open, euphoria flooded her face. The energy around her began to shudder. Her euphoria changed to a look of pain and horror. The energy burst from her, heating the air around her to plasma. The plasma shot out in all directions, burrowing into the dirt, instantly uprooting trees and burning them to charcoal. The impact of it shattered my shields. Agony flooded me as my skin burned. I felt myself flying with

the shockwave to land hard against a boulder. My back and neck snapped, and numbness descended across my body.

Rea collapsed to the patch of untouched grass under her. The shield had melted, and a ring of char extended around her up to where I lay a hundred meters away. The shockwave had burrowed into the hill, revealing a metal door that somehow withstood the blast. A few lights blinked above it.

I groaned as I felt my vertebrae knit. The remaining patches of muscles and skin began to extend and crawl, rebuilding my burned body. As I endured returning sensation and the pain that came with it, I wondered if I had actually come close to truly dying. Not even a plasma cannon could break my shields as this blast had. But then I hadn't seen the white door, so I supposed not. The moment extended as my body rebuilt itself. I knew it took only seconds, but it felt like a long century. Funny how time perception changed. I laughed after my jaw finished growing back. Unfortunately, the front of my clothes had seared off. My regrown body cracked as I removed the extra clothes Trevor had packed and dressed. I deconstructed the remnants of my clothes. No use in littering.

I strolled toward Rea. The muscles didn't want to work well yet. Rea grasped the grass. "The way that felt. I—I didn't mean to."

"No harm done. Weeds will cover all of this in just a few months. And you saved me from digging out the reactor. Just don't do that again for a while, yes?"

She gazed up at me, swallowed, and nodded.

"You melted your shield, so stay here." I also didn't want her to have a reaction closer to the reactor. With the door exposed, I could sense the crack in the reactor core that allowed the radioactive isotopes and energy to leak.

I left her to settle down. And she said the Elder and perhaps others could do what she had just done?

Interesting.

The blast door had blackened but didn't seem any worse for the explosion. Jutting from the soil that remained around the door were several plastic bottles. I opened the locks with a thought and stepped inside, closing the door behind me. A few remaining lights still cast shadows in the concrete and metal hall. Wires and ducts hung from the ceiling. The air smelled ancient, dead, and metallic. The reactor wasn't too far down the hall. I followed the neutron radiation flow to a second locked door designed to stop radiation leaks, but time had worn down the seals around the edges, allowing some of what I sensed out of the room beyond. Written on the door, in a language long dead, was a warning. A faded flag stood under it. Faint red and white stripes with a square of blue flecked with a dense constellation of one-hundred white stars.

“How can something this old survive? Beyond plastic bottles anyway.”

Inside was a maelstrom of energy that would've turned anyone else into a block of carbon. It sparked against my skin, tantalizing my vision with a kaleidoscope of color. Broken and burned out screens flanked the reactor. Debris and broken objects, and yes pop bottles, scattered across the floor. Conduits hung from the ceiling. The giant circular door to had broken off its hinges, exposing the fuel rods. Whatever coolant was used had long ago leaked out. The heat of the rods rivaled what Rea generated, and despite expecting it, I had cool the air between me and the reactor. I didn't recognize the material used to make the rods. Something that active and old should've melted down as soon as the cooling system failed. I had my mental librarian take notes of the radiation signature and atomic composition of the metal. I would have to see if I could find

anything in my home library. The flag and writing gave me a time frame at least.

I knew I should destroy the reactor after what I had seen Rea do, but I sensed it had a key to helping me understand myself. I honed the air and lifted the door back to where it should be. I channeled some of the energy from the reactor to weld the door shut. The radiation levels dropped immediately, but to make it safer I collected all the other metals that made the door and melted a second wall. If I wanted to return I'd have to melt my way back through. Annoying, but I wanted to be safe. I left a finger-sized hole to allow some energy to trickle through. It would eventually build up and escape through the broken seals in the exterior doors, but it would also allow me to more safely test Rea's abilities if I decided to later.

After I shut the exterior door and pulled the hill over it again, I found Rea waiting for me. She looked tired but steady.

"You found the source of the...the magic?" she asked.

"I did. It is older than I expected it to be. We can still use it for tests in a few days if you want to try that ability of yours. I must say, I am interested in your abilities because they are much like mine."

She shook her head. "I don't like how it made me feel, but maybe I should learn to control them."

"You said others can do that."

She shook her head. "N-nothing like that. Just a small flame. Useful but...nothing like that."

I smiled. I realized I was no longer bored. "Well, maybe they didn't try hard enough. I'm pleased."

"You're pleased?" She crossed her arms. "I-I might be dangerous. What if I hurt the others?"

“You had to work to channel the energy. It wasn’t easy right?”

She nodded. “But it felt...too good. Powerful.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine. Believe in your god’s word.” I laughed.

She pressed her lips together. “We should get away from here.” She turned away from me.

We hadn’t walked far when I sensed a large group of people. They emerged from the tall grasses of the plains with various rifles and spears and blades pointed at us. The men had their faces painted and wore clothes designed to blend into the field. One of the men approached us.

“What happened back in those woods? We saw an explosion. Speak filthy Uegh.” The man resembled Edgar and Clyde’s ethnicity under all the paint and mud.

Rea tensed. Now that we were clear of the trees, I saw tendrils of smoke rising from where I supposed the town was. The smoke held the molecules of destruction, not of wood and life.

“Not friends of yours?” I asked.

“A slaving squad.” Rea shifted her feet. “You attacked Honeheim.”

The man’s white teeth stood out against his face. “Now that Faro is gone, we can cut out the middle man and handle things ourselves. We should’ve done it sooner. Honeheim promises a lot of profit.”

Rea attacked. She closed the distance with a flash of speed. Before the man could move, she drove her knife across his throat. Blood fountained, but she was already out of range and onto the next man. The men fired at her and at me. Rea zigzagged so fast that I almost didn’t need to extend my air shield around her.

I regarded the men who fired at me. “You apparently don’t know who I am.” With how Rea was slicing through them she was going to forget to take one for questioning. I held my hand out to the youngest looking man

and encased him in air and deconstructed his rifle. His eyes widened as he felt the air band around him.

The firing waned as Rea did her work. A few bullets sparked against the shield I placed around her. I walked over to the struggling captive and placed my hand on his shoulder. “Think any different about Ueghs after seeing her work? She’s a hero you know.” I smiled at him. “And I’m known as the Forgotten God. The one who burned down your kingdom.”

The man went limp. If the air wasn’t holding him in place, he would’ve collapsed. I squeezed his shoulder. “What’s your name, son?” Old men who wanted to be friendly called young men *son*, right?

“Lye.”

I hoped he wasn’t named for what he did.

“I won’t hurt you if you answer my questions and promise to repent of your sins and make amends to the Ueghs.”

The man spat. “There’s nothing to repent about. They are born to be slaves. We are just putting things right.”

Rea stalked toward us. Blood matted her hair, splashed her face, and soaked her clothing. “The Faro are beyond redemption.” She brandished her knife.

“She’s a hero you know.” I told Lye. “But I’m sure you could guess that with how fast she killed your fellows. Now if you don’t want her to gut you, you will answer my questions.”

“Where is the slave train? North?” Rea asked.

Lye spat at her.

“Such a dirty habit you have,” I said. “I sense you attacked the city three days ago, yes?”

“I’m not going to tell you anything.”

“I can make him talk,” Rea said.

“I’m sure you could, but you would make him bleed too much. Not that blood seems to bother you. But I think it’s too barbaric to do it that way. Blades and all.” I ran a finger down Lye’s face, searing the top layers of skin from his temple to this jawline. The method cauterized the skin. Lye screamed and squirmed. “You see, my method means I can do it almost endlessly. No blood loss.”

Lye gritted his teeth.

“We just want to know where the slave train is. Is your life worth money?” I ran my finger down the channel again, searing off another layer.

“Can’t you just read his mind or something? This it taking too much time.” Rea wiped her knife off and sheathed it.

“I could but it would reduce him to a blithering idiot.” I couldn’t, but Lye didn’t know that. It would be easier if I could! I gave him a smile that I hoped looked wicked. “He would be reduce to drooling and living on the mercy of others. Wetting and soiling himself.”

Lye shook, and I notice he really had wet himself. I gestured. “Yes, like that.”

He swallowed. “Yes, north. Three days north.”

“And the army?” Rea asked.

Lye glanced at me. “Toward Tople.”

I patted his shoulder. “Good man. You should’ve told us that first and saved yourself a scar. Although I’m sure the ladies will like it if you make up a good story. Like how you fought the hero Rea to a standstill or something. Just don’t be too outlandish. Don’t worry, it will heal clean. Anything else to add, Rea?”

“Let me kill him,” Rea said.

Chapter 6

“What sort of god would I be if I broke my word? Besides we have your people to liberate yes? I still want to see those ruins you speak about too. Oh, one more question, Lye. I take it the heroes Edgar and Clyde’s bodies were found?”

“How do you know?”

“It helped convince your leaders to attack I suppose?”

“I don’t know. I’m not told these things.”

“I suppose not. Learn the error of your ways, and stop killing and slaving, all right? If I hear that you don’t, I will teach you the punishment of hell.” I ran a finger down his cauterized skin. I released the air around him, and Lye collapsed. He scrambled away and ran into the tall grass.

“I will leave the freeing part to you, Rea. I will direct their attention.” I cast my senses north. The distance a horse could travel in three days marked the edge of my abilities to sense energy. I found the slave train fairly easily. I couldn’t tell the exact numbers, but the energy I felt

suggested perhaps one thousand to fifteen hundred people. “Found them. Ready?”

Rea shouldered a rifle she had collected from one of the soldiers and adjusted a short sword. “Ready.” I marveled at her adaptability in such a short time. She was a special soul.

I teleported us to the woods close to the rear. I wanted a fresh body after the explosion and the exposure to neutron radiation. Both had left me feeling yuck. Rea could’ve used a cellular-level restoration too, so I made sure to filter her matter reconstruction. As I expected, the army had a significant rear guard. I really should’ve leveled more than their capital city. My action hadn’t taught them the lesson I had hoped. Still, it was strange to put such resources into slaving when an empire marched on you. Unless they had some vassal treaty or something I wasn’t aware of. That made sense. A line of young women and children marched, roped together at their waists. The older children and the women carried the youngest children. No men marched among them.

“I will place a shield around you, but it won’t take too much damage before it collapses. Wait for me to distract most of them. Ready?”

Rea nodded.

I stood up and walked right toward the soldiers.

“Stop! Who are you?” The rear guard shouted, pointing a rifle at me.

“Humans and your guns.” I deconstructed the rifle in the man’s hand. It disintegrated into metal and wood dust. His other men fired at me. I kept walking, weaving a thin air shield around the Ueghs to protect them from any ricochets. Otherwise, I ignored them.

I strolled with my hands behind my back, listening the the shouts of the soldiers and the pops of their firearms. Several men charged me with blades. I swatted them with air as I would a mosquito. The men flew from

me and into their fellows. The slaves huddled and cried out as I drew more soldiers to me until a tall man with what I supposed were marks of rank stepped forward. He held up a hand, and the soldiers ceased their attacks.

“Are you the one causing all of this?” the commander asked.

“You attacked my people correct?” I gestured at the Ueghs.

The man squinted at me. “We collected cattle.”

“You must be thinking how a man walked through all your men despite all the gun fire.”

“I know who you are, Forgotten God.”

My eyebrows raised. “Oh, you do? You had better let my people go then.” I grimaced. Who was I? Moses? I doubt anyone here knew that story after so many thousands of years.

“I’m not a fool.” The commander pulled a pistol and fired.

The energy the pistol emitted was far beyond what should’ve been possible. It had the same signature as the reactor I had sealed. My shield shattered and the pulse hit me between the eyes. My vision flicked out, and it happened so fast I felt nothing. I hit the ground.

“Some god he was.” I heard a soldier say.

I heard shouts from behind and gunfire.

My mental librarian complained about the mess. Apparently, the blast had blown apart most of the stacks and scattered my memory books everywhere. At least he didn’t have to worry about the books actually burning or disappearing. By all rights the energy blast should’ve destroyed everything in my mind. But I was still conscious. I really should’ve given more thought to how I worked, but you never paid anything much attention until after it was gone.

“Form a line and get that attacker. We can’t allow the slaves to escape.” I heard the commander say. “And someone dispose of this trash.”

I forced myself to sit up. I couldn’t yet see. Instead, I cast my sense out to feel where the soldiers were. Their energy felt different from the fugitives’ signatures. Theirs felt small against the soldiers, weak. Cries of alarm rang out as people noticed I was standing up. I could also sense the plasma cartridge in the commander’s hand. I severed the commander’s spinal column and Warp Fived the pistol to my tower armory. Just how did they get hold of something like that pistol? The commander’s signature winked out. I proceeded to drop each of the soldiers around me in the same way. I wanted to make a bloody spectacle of the soldiers, but the captives had already seen too much. My face began to reconstruct itself as I snuffed out each soldier’s life force. Fortunately, my body would adapt to whatever technology the pistol had held. It wouldn’t be able to harm me again.

I allowed the soldiers who ran to get away. Maybe if word spread, the Faro would think twice about their slaving habits, but it also could flush out more of the weapons. But why in this age would such old equipment appear? The pistol had felt as old as the reactor. I had to see Rea’s ruins.

As the last soldier dropped, my vision returned. I blinked to clear it and saw Rea surrounded by the former captives. The children and women regarded me with fear and awe on their dirty faces.

“Did we get everyone?” My mouth felt odd. Twice in one day. I just hoped my tastebuds worked as normal. I could use a pizza.

Rea nodded. “The Faro killed all the men and elders. Apparently, they moved quickly to attack all the border villages and towns.”

“I suspect they put up too much of a fight.”

“Only some of the Faro used strange weapons,” Rea said.

A woman in her twenties stepped forward. She carried a bloodied spear and a bandage wrapped around her shoulder. A few other women carrying various other weapons flanked her. All had wounds. Rea had had some help with the soldiers after all. “They fired blue lightning that turned everything and everyone to ash.”

Well, I would need to adjust my shields from now on. While my body would block the next similar attack, Rea and any others wouldn’t have that good fortune. My librarian grumbled at me to stop relying on my adaption abilities and to make shields instead. Did I know how long it took to reorganize everything?

“The Faro are going to Toplin next,” Rea said. “We need to stop them. Can’t you use your Light of Judgment to destroy their army?”

“It’s hard to aim it because of the distance. If they were close to the tower, sure. But I have a better idea.” I was curious about the weapons, but with my mental state scattered it would take time for me to properly analyze them.

I addressed the woman and her war band. I didn’t know how else to think of them. “What’s your name.”

“Unea.”

I frowned at Rea. “Does your culture name all women the same way?”

“Yes. What’s wrong with that?”

I pointed at the woman behind Unea. “Name?”

“Oea.”

The next. “Piea.”

Well, that wasn’t going to be confusing! I shook my head. “Whatever. Rea told you who I am right?” They nodded. “Unea, you and your girls are going to help us.” I opened a portal to the tower. There were too many people to teleport. Portals took more energy. I was folding space and time

and holding it that way, often making space-time rubberband in ways that I didn't really like. I didn't understand any of it enough to experiment. I may be immortal, but floating out in nothingness or getting trapped in a black hole didn't appeal to me. I knew I was limited and would rather not test my limits in those ways.

The women looked at Rea. Rea nodded at them. Unea gestured and the women around her left to speak with the people. "We thought we'd never see you again, Chosen," Unea said. "We still serve."

"We need to protect what's left of our people. What's going on with the Faro?"

"They have become a part of the empire, but that has only made them worse," Unea said. "As you can see. What will come of us?"

"Our god will protect us," Rea said.

I grimaced at her. I never made that sort of promise.

Unea glanced at me and her eyes widened. She and the other women around her fell to their knees and bowed to me.

I waved them off. "None of that. We don't have time." The portal opened, and I sent a message to Trevor about what I wanted done. "Take everyone through. My people will meet you on the other side and make sure you are cared for." I looked back to see all the captives staring at the portal with fear. Children cried and cowered behind the adults. Even Unea and her posse stepped back.

"It's okay. The Forgotten God's word is good. You will be safe there," Rea said. She gave me a look that made me shrug. Honestly, it didn't matter to me if they took the offer or not. They might be useful staff members and Unea's group looked particularly useful. I just wanted to see those ruins and figure out where all this new technology—and Rea's abilities—were coming from. And stop the Faro from their nonsense.

They hesitated, but then an older woman walked through the portal. The rest began to follow.

Speaking of Rea's abilities. "Unea, wait," I called.

The woman and her group stopped walking toward the portal.

"Are you able to use magic like Rea?" I gestured at Rea, and she made a noise behind me.

Unea shook her head. "Only the Chosen like Rea can."

That word again. I didn't know anything about Uegh culture. "But they might be able to learn as you did, Rea?"

She crossed her arms. She really needed to change out of those bloody clothes. "Maybe. We all have the same blood. I'm pure-blooded." She narrowed her eyes. "What are you thinking?"

"Your people needs to protect themselves. At least what's left of them. Besides, heroes that can use magic may prove entertaining. Since meeting you, I haven't felt bored." I realized that tattered memory book and the table in my mind were blasted away by the commander. I hoped my librarian fixed that mental jumble soon. I sensed him glaring at me from a dark corner.

"Will you be coming with us?" Unea asked Rea as the fugitives shuffled past her.

"Soon. We have to destroy their army first."

"Let us go with you!"

"My Head of Staff will meet with you," I said. "I want you to follow his directions."

"You need to look after our people. Don't trust anyone except our god's people," Rea said.

Unea straightened and thumped her spear against the ground. “I will, Chosen.” Her group saluted Rea in various ways. Well, I knew where their loyalty was.

“Chosen?” I asked her.

“It’s a title I had before I was...taken.”

“I gathered that much. You will have to tell me about *my* people’s customs sometime.” I grinned at her.

After the fugitives passed through, I closed the portal with a relieved sigh. I felt tired and wondered how tired I had to get to actually need to sleep. I hadn’t really tested that. Back when I was active, I would burn cities and armies all day long, but that took less energy than bending space-time. I never had much use for armies. Maybe in this age I could become a general. But that seemed like too much work against just incinerating the enemy myself. Perhaps I should consider the fun of it instead of focusing on efficiency. Unea and her group could be the seed. The army didn’t have to be large to be effective.

Rea was watching me. “I won’t let you use my people for anything.”

“But it is fine to use me, correct?” I used air to pull our packs from where we had discarded them. I offered Rea’s first. I was a gentleman after all.

She shouldered the pack without a comment. “Can you find the army?”

“They are beyond my senses, but we can hop until we find them. But first, I don’t like litter.” I turned to the bodies strewn all over the field and waved my hand. Uniforms, weapons, and bodies burst into their basic elements. The wind caught them and carried them away. “For dust you are and dust you will return.”

“You could’ve done that while they were alive?”

“Yes. It’s harder because a soul resists me. It wants to keep the body together. But can you imagine that feeling of every atom separating from your soul all at once? Even I am not that much of a monster.”

“So you say.” Rea pointed. “Toplin is that way.”

“It would be easier to wait for the army at the city anyway.” I folded space-time in the direction of the city. We entered a wheat field, and I could sense the city’s life density. I folded space-time again to get us closer.

Chapter 7

The city's white-washed walls appeared. The sun glinted off wall-mounted cannons. The gate was closed, and shouts of alarm rose out of the watch towers above the gate. Smoke lifted from the chimneys beyond the wall.

"The Faro built this?" I asked.

"They took it from us generations ago, and we took it back. This was where we first took back our freedom."

The soldiers on the walls bustled. Two people appearing out of the air would do that. Moments later, the gates creaked open and a grizzled soldier came out flanked by two other soldiers with hard gazes.

The grizzled soldier approached. "Do my eyes fool me? Rea?"

"Grandfather." Rea embraced the man. "The Faro are coming this way."

"I never thought I would see you again." He held onto her a long moment before he grasped her shoulders and stepped back. "We know. We received word. And who is that with you?"

“He? Well, he’s—”

“I’m who you call the Forgotten God.”

The soldiers raised their rifles. I sighed.

The grandfather’s gaze iced. “That is not a joke to tell.”

I shrugged. “Believe me or not. I have nothing to prove to you. You do have a most interesting granddaughter, however.”

“Rea?”

“He’s telling the truth. I was taken by the heroes along with the others to help them get to him. To kill him.” Rea looked at the ground. “Only I survived.”

“All the Chosen?” The grandfather ran his hand through his graying hair. “Damn them.”

“The Forgotten One wants to help us against the Faro,” Rea said.

I shrugged. “I already burned their capital city down once.”

The soldiers behind the old man looked at each other.

“Well, it wasn’t recently,” I said. Humans had surprisingly long memories sometimes, longer than mine even.

“The stories are true,” Rea said.

What stories? I wondered.

Rea continued. “You told them to me enough. But if he wants to help us...”

“You know he will eventually turn on us as he had in the past.” The old man glared at me. Gutsy old fart to talk about someone they consider a god as he did.

Huh, when did I do that? What people group did the Uegh come from? Not that it mattered. People groups came and went. I alone remained. The fact pained me. No doubt every group saw me as a savior and a devil at some point in their history. I chuckled at the thought.

“See? He admits it!” the old man said.

“And if I did,” I said. “Just what do you think you could do to stop me?”

No one said anything.

“You don’t have to worry,” I said. “Your people interests me as few others have.” I put my hands behind my back, knowing the pompous effect was diminished by my dirty clothes.

“Your defenses won’t stop the army that approaches anyway,” I added.

“He’s right, grandfather. They are using weapons similar to our sacred blades. The walls won’t stand against them.”

The old man grimaced. “That’s why we are evacuating everyone from the city and into the mountains. We can make a better stand in the mines.”

“You have me now, so you don’t have to worry,” I said.

“I prefer to trust to my plan than in a god that doesn’t listen to prayers,” the old man said.

“You need to speak louder. My home is a bit far away.” I laughed. “I like you! I can see where Rea gets her spunkiness. It will be a few more days before they arrive. They will attack as soon as they do. There’s no need to siege with their weapons. But they haven’t met me yet. Until then, I could use dinner. Where’s the best place to eat, Rea?” I wanted to appear down-to-earth for them. I sniffed the air and cast my senses out. I caught the sensation of a bakery deeper in the city. It was making hard bread for the journey, but maybe I could convince them to make some pastries for me with a flash of divine power.

“Gods eat?” one of the soldiers with the old man whispered.

“I don’t have to, but I like to,” I said. “Food is one of the pleasures of ever-life.”

“You will eat with us.” the old man said. “We have much to catch up with, Rea.”

“Suits me.”

The old man led us inside the city and into the garrison attached to the wall on the other side of the gatehouse. Long tables lined with chairs filled the room. A plate of hard bread and water sat at one of them. No one was inside.

“Your meal?” I gestured.

“All our food is being sent to the minds. Not good enough for you?” The old man sat down.

I plunked my pack down and rummaged around. Rea looked at me with curiosity and sat across from her grandfather. I pulled out several sealed food packets. Plastic? Trevor and his staff were really taking advantage of the equipment and books I had to develop plastic again! But the litter. I would have to make sure they worked out how to recycle it too.

“Have any plates or bowls?”

The old man frowned but fetched a few plates. I tore open the pouch and heated it to the right temperature. Pasta with a light white sauce slipped out. Truly impressive. I offered it to the old man who refused it.

“I will eat the same as my men.”

I shrugged. “Your loss.” Rea accepted it. I made myself a spinach pasta dish from the other retort pouch. Trevor and Ellie needed a raise for rediscovering such a technology.

“Tell me what happened to you, Rea,” the old man said.

I let them talk while I ate. The food was saltier than what Ellie usually made, but it was definitely her recipe. The granddaughter and grandfather discussed family and events in the town, all but forgetting

about me. Which was fine with me. My brain was too scattered to do much deep thinking, so while I ate I helped my librarian put things back in order. He didn't really like the help. I didn't know his organization scheme, but I could read the labels on the memories and information. I soon had my area in order that made the librarian nod at me. I wondered if sleeping might help speed things along.

I didn't like to reflect too long on myself or the state of existence. If I dwelled on them too long, I could see how little truly mattered. People suffered and died. They were reborn and died again. All without lasting purpose or influence. Even stories and memories were forgotten outside of what was stored in my head and in my libraries back home. Although that reactor and those weapons were proof that some things made by humans could last.

I also was proof.

I Warp Fived the Faro commander's pistol from my tower's storage room to the table while they continued to chat.

"What is that!" The grandfather stood back from the table, reaching for his short sword.

I floated the pistol on ribbons of air. The energy cartridge radiated the same signature as the reactor. The firearm was different from the one Clyde had used. That was a black powder model. This one used electromagnets to propel its energy-infused projectiles. I could see depleted uranium made up the head of the bullet. Between that and the antimatter that suspended inside the chamber just behind the head, it was no wonder it shattered my defenses. It was impressive that the antimatter containment had lasted as long as it had. There wasn't much in the chamber. My birth period hadn't been able to produce antimatter in large quantities. If it had, Earth wouldn't have survived. The

thermonuclear war would've looked like a firecracker compared to an antimatter war. It seemed the chamber held anti-hydrogen atoms, for a lack of better term. My quantum senses were always skewed by the opposite nature of those atoms. Either way, 100% matter to energy conversion wasn't anything to play with. I wondered if a sufficient quantity of antimatter could end me. It stood to reason that it would.

"The Faro commander of a slave squad shot me in the face with this."

Rea stared at it with wide eyes. She paled. "Am I sensing that right?"

"You can sense the power too?" I rotated the weapon in the air. "This is the sort of weapon the Faro will attack you with soon. Where they found these things is the question. And how many."

"Since the....incident...I haven't felt right. I thought it was the lingering effects, but I'm not sure," Rea said.

"What incident?" the old man asked.

"She used what you call magic. Blasted half the forest," I said. "She might be like me with training."

Rea smacked the table. "I won't be like you."

I tapped the plasma pistol and sent it spinning in its helium bubble. "You are the first who had anything like my abilities. Ironic that it would be you, the first person I remember."

"I don't know what you are talking about, but don't get my granddaughter involved." The old man stood. "I have work to do yet. You will be under watch, Nameless One."

"Interesting way you speak to your gods. Not that I am one, really. Is that another name for me? I rather like it!"

"Please rest, Rea. I'm sure you're tired after everything." The old man grimaced at me and left.

"Cheerful isn't he?"

“Please forgive him. He’s worried about our people.” Rea shifted sideways, rested her head in her hand, and scrutinized me. “Just why are you doing this?”

“As I said, I was bored, and you are someone important in my past. I must say, I am glad you all don’t fall to her knees and worship me. I hate it when humans do that.”

“She wasn’t me.”

“Your soul might be the same. I don’t claim to understand how it works. It could just be genetics output the same looking people. Like twins separated by centuries. Or maybe the body morphs to fit the soul.”

She slapped the table. “Would you stop saying such things! I’m me, and not some dead woman from who knows how long ago.”

“At least 100,000 years ago.”

“I don’t care. I’m me. You don’t care about any of this. You can’t care.”

“I like how you speak to me as if I’m normal. Even yelling at me!” I smiled. My smile faded. “You’re right. I don’t care really. When you lived as long as I have, you learn now trite everything is. Everything is dust. Except me and my boredom. Civilizations and peoples rise and fall. Different names. Different cultures, but the same problems. The same sufferings over and over. I deplore slavery. I suppose maybe I was a slave before I became a god. But I intervene whenever I learn slavery is a part of a culture. Otherwise, nothing I try makes you humans learn. You keep repeating the same mistakes, the same selfishness. It doesn’t matter if I guide you or not. You do the same damn stupid self destructive things. Over and over and over. All for money, which is dust. All for fame. Everyone is forgotten in the end. Have you heard of Abraham, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, Bhavia, Corandar, Telvic? No. They were all the

founders of great religions that taught humans to be better. All forgotten to time. Humanity never learned their lessons.”

I touched the weapon to stop its spinning. “For a time my age, the last great space age, was different to a point. Humans had stopped squabbling over scraps enough to reach into the stars. They still reached for selfish reasons like profit, but still they reached. They may still be out there. But just as they touched greatness, they destroyed themselves.” I regarded her. “You can’t imagine my disappointment. They learned there are limitless worlds out there. Planets to colonize and form into paradises. And they threw it all away. They burned the world. That was when I had enough and built my tower out of the wreckage and finished rearranging the planet so I could keep an eye on things.”

“But you are different. You are not only my first true memory. You are also the first to be similar to me, even in just a little. You see things differently don’t you? Since the reactor. I sense this age might be different, so until I understand I will protect your people from the Faro and from the Korvak Empire if need be.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Sometimes I see flashes of light around you.” She squinted. “A storm of light that fades in and out in my vision.”

“We will have to wait and see how this develops. What you are seeing is the reality of reality. The quantum and atomic level.”

“I don’t understand.”

I laughed. “Don’t worry. I don’t either. Everything is made up of usually invisible elements and empty space. Most of existence is empty space, and everything is energy. That’s all I really know, but you don’t need to know to manipulate it.”

She sagged. “I’m tired and need to sleep.”

After she left, I studied the firearm. Stamped on the barrel the same flag as in the reactor. I had missed it because it was so faded. I wish my librarian would give me more details about that age. I remembered the space cities and the destruction. I studied the weapon a while longer, tracing the mechanisms with my senses and memorizing the energy signature. I opened a small portal to ask Trevor to research more about the weapon and sent it to him. I urged him caution and told him how dangerous it was. I Warp Fived the device to him.

I sat back in the wooden chair. All I had left to do was wait for the Faro. I was good at waiting.

Chapter 8

The Faro army arrived two days later. I stood on the wall with Rea and her grandfather as the army arrayed itself just out of range of the wall cannons. The first rank of the army had smartly uniformed men carrying long versions of the weapon I had sent to Trevor. However, my senses told me that the weapons had lower power output than the pistol had. They couldn't level the city, but the stone wall would provide as much protection as a sandcastle wall.

I smiled and sheathed the wall with an charged air shield designed to neutralize the energy output of the rifles. The city garrison stood ready and unaware they wouldn't have to do anything. Young men fidgeted and look toward the old veterans who stood steady.

I had prepared a show few would forget.

A man marched from the Faro army. Within shouting distance he stopped and said, "Here are the terms. Surround and submit yourselves to your nature. Resist, and we will kill all the men and enslave all your women and children. What do you choose?"

“Some choice,” I muttered. “They must be confident in those underpowered weapons they have.”

The old man’s voice rang out. “We choose neither. This day will be the end of you, Faro!”

“Is that your final answer?”

To punctuate the old man fired a cannon. The round exploded a short distance from the messenger, showering the man with dirt. The man didn’t even flinch.

“I will relay your message.” The man turned and took his time marching back to the lines.

“If you are going to do anything, Nameless One, better do it now,” the old man said. “Men, ready yourselves!”

“I can see you did something to the walls,” Rea said. “They spark like embers from a fire.” Her grandfather leaned his head toward her to listen.

I looked at her. “You can see it?”
“Only sometimes. It fades in and out of my vision.”

“We really need to find out how many of your people have the same potential as you, Rea. And how far that ability can develop.”

She bit her lower lip and grasped her forearm.

The front rank of the Faro army marched forward and knelt, placing the plasma rifles against their shoulders. The commander’s voice rang the command, and a simultaneous blast of energy shot out. It hit my shield with a force that concussed the air. Hot wind roared up.

I grinned.

The riflemen stared in apparent disbelief at the undamaged wall. But the commander’s shout soon had them ready themselves for another volley. I sensed the last had depleted the energy stores of the weapons.

They apparently didn't know how to regulate the output. Several of the rifles had less than a full round in their cartridges.

The second volley flashed. My shield shivered with the energy and transferred it into the earth, sending up another blast of heated air. Muttering drifted from the Faro army, and a few of the garrison on the walls cheered. I supposed it was my cue.

I climbed up to stand on the wall's crenelation, and I felt everyone's gazes.

"What are you doing?" Rea asked.

I smiled at her. "Being a god."

I stepped off the wall while I wove hydrogen, oxygen, and carbon dioxide dense enough to support my weight. I walked along the solid bridge of air toward the Faro army. The rifleman commander pointed at me and the rank fired a scattered volley. I didn't bother to shield myself from it. Their plasma cartridges were spent. The bursts zipped past me and dissipated harmlessly in the air. My librarian noted that the energy burst had a limited range before it lost integrity. As I walked, I energized the air ahead of me into a rune-laced circle. It pulsed with blue light. It wasn't necessary for the Light of Judgment, but I wanted the survivors to have a story to tell.

I amplified my voice. "Here me, Faro. These people are mine. Anyone who attacks them must face me, the Nameless One. The Forgotten One." I forced myself to keep from laughing at that foolish name. They remembered me well enough. "You have one chance to flee."

In response, a plasma burst arched toward me and bullets scattered the air. I had to give the humans of this age credit. They weren't easily intimidated. By all rights, they should've ran at the sight of me. Several smart soldiers did break ranks and ran.

My circle of runes flared as large as the gatehouse, and I converted various matter into energy, forming into a beam of blue-purple. I directed it with an outstretched hand. Again, just a part of the show. The beam seared into the earth, cutting a great rut into it, and vaporized the men it touched. The Light of Judgment always made me think of burning ants on a sunny day with a magnifying glass.

The Faro ran now.

I swung the beam to burn the largest groups. I didn't want to kill all of them, so I left the individual runners alone. Someone had to live and tell the story. With luck—and maybe I was still being overly optimistic—their story will change the mind of their countrymen. Those runners would be the best survivors anyway. They showed they didn't follow the crowd mindlessly. It took only a few moments to destroy the army. Smoke rose from the gouges I cut into the fields. Using my senses, I found the rifles I hadn't destroyed and Warp Fived them home. I wondered if I could use the hillside reactor to refill the energy cartridges.

I walked back toward the wall, lowering the shield in the process. The garrison cowered or watched me with awe. Rea's grandfather watched me with a mix of fear and distrust. Whatever. Let him think what he wanted. Their opinions of me didn't matter.

Rea was pale and her mouth twisted as I stepped back onto the wall.

"Well, that's done," I said. "You said your sacred ruins aren't far from here? After all that I could also use lunch."

Her grandfather was as pale as Rea. A few of the men behind him fell to their knees and groveled toward me. I crossed my arms and frowned. I hated when humans did that. "Could you make your men stop doing that? Don't they have work to do?"

The old man recovered himself, turned, and barked orders at his men. The fact the old veteran didn't grumble at my suggestion told me how much I had shaken him. After today, I would likely have churches and shrines dedicated to me again if the Uegh didn't do that already. I sighed at the thought.

"I could sometimes see what you were doing. The energy of it," Rea said. Her voice held a tremor. Of excitement? Of fear?

"Do you think you could recreate a tiny portion of it? All you have to do is splice a few atoms and then contain that energy using electromagnetic energy."

She shook her head. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Just magic talk. The fact you can see the electron flow is impressive enough. With practice you might be able to manipulate the fields." I started toward the stairs. "Let's find some lunch. I can't be much help to you learn honestly because I just think it, and it happens." Did I really want to teach her what I could do? It would be nice not to be the only freak in the universe, but she could well try to kill me with her new knowledge. I doubted she would succeed—after all not even the nuclear holocaust or a plasma pistol shot to my face could do it. Maybe only a surge in antimatter would allow me to hope that damned white door. But the possibility was there. I didn't care one way or the other. Death might prove more interesting than immortality.

Already, the streets filled with celebrating and chattering soldiers and townspeople who decided to stay. Stories about what happened swirled, and a few men who had seen me up close fell to their knees as we passed. Rea glared at me with a question wrinkling between her eyebrows.

"They can do what they want," I said. "But I've never demanded worship. I'm not that vain."

“People need something to believe in.”

“Don’t believe in me. One man’s hero is another man’s villain.” I grinned at her. “You were my villain.”

Rea didn’t reply. She took the lead, and I followed her to a tavern with a sign that read *Mi’s Pub*.

People liked their short names in this culture.

The interior stood empty. Without saying anything, Rea walked up to a window set in the wall and began talking to whomever stood behind it. I supposed it was something like a primitive drive thru. I found a seat and asked my librarian why all my references dated to that long dead period. I didn’t think or make references from other periods.

Just tell me. Was that when I was really born? I asked him. He regarded me from my memory. He looked like me, of course, but with glasses. Librarians needed glasses, and he was frazzled from working all night righting the bookshelves. My memory felt fresher, more organized and defragmented. I frowned at the word as it hovered between us. *See? That is an ancient reference. Why did that computer term come to mind before any other? Why not bioelectric calculation systems or as orderly as soldiers standing in rank? After all we’ve lived through, why do I keep going back to that one age?*

My librarian straightened his glasses. *I only know what you know. I’m you, remember?*

You are hiding something. Will I find the answer in those ruins? What about those weapons? The reactor?

He pulled a book from the shelf, opened it and read. *They do come from the time we suspect we were created within.* He looked up. *But can we be sure we were created and not born? Or even fallen?*

Fallen? What do you mean?

“Mi’s stew is excellent.” Rea dropped a bowl in front of me and sat opposite of me. The stew smelled delicious. I resisted the urge to analyze it and create the recipe for Ellie. I had learned to respect the privacy of chefs, even if it meant the dish disappeared to history.

I ate, leaving Rea to sort her thoughts. My librarian had went back to work transcribing today’s events. The lamb stew had carrots and other vegetables I didn’t recognize. It had peppers and heat to it that made me sweat a little.

“Can you show me what you did with that light? Without destroying anything?” Rea asked.

I held out my hand and created a small, contained ball of it. It pulsed, wanting to be freed.

“It’s like its alive.”

“Energy hates being contained. It wants to flow.”

“Where does the energy come from?”

I squinted at the struggling ball. It had a similar signature as the reactor, and the pistol, and the rifles. Which made sense. Atomic energy was atomic energy. “From the environment. Reality is filled with tiny invisible...balls...if you want to think of it that way. Those balls compose everything from the air to the table and to you. They are actually energy, magic, but they appear solid unless you convert them into their true state.” My librarian pulled out a scratch notebook and jotted down the thought.

Rea studied the ball. I felt something tug at my electromagnetic field from her as if she was reaching out and trying to snatch it from me. I held the ball steady but loosened the field just enough to let her tug and poke at it with her mind’s energy. That was one form of energy I couldn’t see, sadly. Her face crinkled with concentration. And a thread of energy

snapped off the ball as if she was unraveling it. The energy quivered as its balance collapsed. My electromagnetic field shuddered and began to fail.

“That’s not good.” I Warp Fived the energy ball into the sky above the town, and the building shook from the blast, knocking dust loose from the ceiling.

Rea gasped and swallowed. “That was...I did that?”

“You just unbalanced the field that kept the energy trapped. I expected it with how you poked at it. When you deal with energy, you have to wrap your hands around it, not poke your fingers at it.” I ate a spoonful of stew.

“I could feel and see the thread of power. I think I could almost make one myself. I don’t know how or why, but I feel as if I could. I don’t understand.”

“Breathing, heart pumping, kidneys, digestion, healing. Most of life is automatic, yet when we are mindful of it we can control or help along much of it,” I said. “I think this ability of mine, of yours, is also like that.”

I gestured at her with my spoon. “I’ve never met a person like you. Well, I have met you twice, but no one else has eased my boredom with everything as you have. Maybe you should call me Teacher.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m the Chosen. I should lead my people. And this power could give me the means to protect my people.”

“It might. I’m having fun at least. The stew is good.”

“Having fun?”

I waved my spoon in the air. “I told you before that I was bored of immortality. Nothing is really interesting. Humans kept doing the same dumb things. Just before they could take their place—their god-assigned role—as the gardeners of the universe, they destroyed themselves. Time and time again. With or without my help. Maybe I’m a fool, but I hoped

the Korvak Empire may prove different. They might just be able to take over everything. Maybe that would offer enough stability for humanity to stop squabbling over nothing. And then they marched against me.” I sighed. “And then you and your people, Rea, have changed my math.”

“How? Why?”

“Because of what you might be able to do.” I crossed my arms and leaned back as I organized my thoughts. My librarian laid out his neat outlines on the table in front of me. “Nothing matters because it all decays and dies. Humans don’t live long enough to learn what they need to learn to move beyond their baseness. Even I haven’t lived long enough to learn everything I need to learn. Bored with life or not, I know this. But if everyone was immortal like me. Unable to die or be destroyed, then they would have long enough to learn how to act and think properly.”

“Properly? You kill and destroy armies and cities.”

“Only because that is what humans understand. Immortals would be punished too but live to learn from that punishment instead of dying and forgetting.” I steepled my hands. “I’m not saying everyone should be immortal. I’m saying those of your people who are like you. With immortality, we could colonize the stars. The distances and time it takes to travel anywhere in the universe requires we never die. It can take millions of years for light to travel to us from the stars. But imagine if humanity can live long enough to go there. We could garden the universe. Your abilities might be the key to it. They are for me. Well, that and a good helping of cybernetics. We may be able to skip that part for you.”

“I don’t know about all that. I just want my people to live in peace without worrying about slavers or empires or the Faro.”

I rubbed my chin. “Although immortality and floating in space would suck. I don’t know if I could survive a star or a black hole or anything else like that. With my luck, I probably could. Being trapped in a black hole until it evaporated wouldn’t be fun. Life is boring without some risk or discovery.”

“If I could learn how to use this power to protect my people. I will,” Rea said. “But I’m not sure about the immortality part.”

“I’m not sure about it either. Don’t worry too much. It’s not likely with the technology we have available. It’s just a thought.” I finished the stew and dropped the spoon in the bowl. “We should visit these ruins of yours and practice. I need to burn the Faro’s capital again.” I paused. “I didn’t bring any money. I hope lunch is on you today.”

Chapter 9

“These are the ruins?” I asked.

We stood in a field with just a few overgrown stones. Cattle lowed from the neighboring pasture. I cast my senses around, but I didn’t find anything unusual. No power sources like the reactor or anything interesting. It just felt like a field with some old stones. Rea didn’t reply. Instead, she walked to the largest of the stones, the remnants of a square pillar. A weathered knot design etched the surface, but I didn’t see or sense anything special. Rea placed her hand, fingers outstretched, around one of the etches and pressed. Next to the pillar, the ground shivered and lifted on a pair of mechanisms that unfurled, revealing carved stairs.

“Below are the ruins,” Rea said.

I cast my senses down the stairwell, noticing that they couldn’t penetrate the walls or the stairs. The stone held something that I couldn’t identify. When I squinted to activate my enhanced vision, only standard granite composition appeared in my vision. I frowned. Granite never

caused me problems before. Either my senses were dulled from the plasma blast or some new material blocked them.

Rea lit the lantern she carried and proceeded down the stairs. I followed, holding my quantum senses out. As we descended into the surprisingly dry hole, my senses closed off to my immediate surroundings. I felt Rea and the stale air. I could see the usual nitrogen, oxygen, and other components of air. But I couldn't extend further. It felt like I was in a box small enough that I couldn't extend my arms. How was that possible?

"I need to try something. Wait a moment." I told Rea. She stopped and looked back at me with a question between her eyebrows.

I faced the wall and channeled a filament of destruction toward the wall. I intended to bore a small hole into the granite block to see what was inside it. But as soon as the filament hit the granite, it evaporated. The atoms of the granite didn't even react. I laid my hand on the smooth surface. It felt cool and dusty. No heat. No reaction. I gathered a little hydrogen from the air and ignited it. It flared and died, blackening the stone. So I could affect it, just not directly.

"What are you doing?" Rea squinted at me with a hand to the side of her head.

"Just testing something. I'm finished now." I had just found another limit and another mystery.

"Warn me next time you do anything like that." She blinked.

The stairs continued through several landings as they led deeper into the earth. Somehow, the hall remained dry even as it descended. Just as I began to feel claustrophobic, we reached an opened blast door and a large chamber beyond it. In the darkness, I sensed dead machines and electronics awaiting electricity. Rea walked to the wall and a switch

clicked. White light flickered awake and an electric hum filled the air. Some of the dead computers bleeped and a few screens shined with flashing cursors waiting commands. The electricity humming along the power conduits had the same signature as the reactor. Could the reactor be powering this place?

“We found the sacred blades over here,” Rea walked to a metal table that stood empty.

I walked the room, letting my senses stretch across the devices and other machines. They felt familiar, so familiar that my librarian disappeared into the stacks to frantically search my memory for why. I stopped at the keyboard in front of one of the working screens. The cursor winked at me, prompting me to login. Not understanding what I was doing, I laid my hands on the keyboard and typed. For some reason, it felt as if my librarian had went downstairs in my mind. Nonsense, yet my fingers moved of their own accord. I struck the enter key.

The screen accepted my keystrokes one of the nearby panels on the wall slid open, revealing swords that resembled the blade Edgar had used and rifles resembling that the Faro used. All of them had full charges.

“You’ve been here before,” Rea said.

“If I had, I don’t remember.” I mentally called for my librarian. He didn’t respond. That troubled me. So did the fact that I hadn’t felt the energy in the weapons until after the panel opened. The panel seemed a standard alloy of steel, but no steel could stop me from sensing its atomic makeup. It was definitely something new.

Interesting.

“Who know this is here?” I asked.

“The Elder and me. No one else I know of. The Elder showed me this place and helped me get the sacred blades.”

I didn't know who this Elder was, but I let that question rest.

I examined the weapons in the panel. Each had a pristine red, blue, and white flag inscribed on them. If I was attacked by all of these and if each of their bullets had full antimatter charges, I might even have some problems with them. I removed one of the pistols and took it to the metal table. Rea joined me.

"That's just like the weapon the Faro had," she said. "They must have their own ruins."

"Caches like this must be buried all over. The question is why would they surface now after all these ages?" I lay the pistol on the table and cast a shield over it. I should've thought about trying this with the Faro. "Step back." I waited until Rea did and then sent a the same filament of destruction I had with the granite into the pistol.

Nothing happened.

I wrapped the filament around the pistol and even tried to breach the energy cartridge. I might as well have blew on it for all the more it reacted. I removed the magazine. I couldn't sense a bullet until after I removed one from the magazine. The depleted uranium bullet had a cartridge filled with antimatter, far more than the Faro round had. My sense of it disappeared as soon as I slotted the projectile back into the magazine. The weapons seemed to be designed to deal with people with my abilities. My librarian appeared, looking disheveled, and rushed over to take notes. *Write down that I can only work indirectly with these weapons. Warp Fiving works too.* I told him. Warp Fiving was indirect too, so it made sense.

I lowered the shields and handed the pistol, grip first, to Rea. "For you." The ruins had remained safe for this long, and I doubted I could destroy the facility even if I wanted to. At least not enough to destroy

anything else that stood behind the blast-shield panels. If they had developed armor using the mystery materials, I would be in trouble.

She looked at the pistol.

“You could blast through a stone wall with one shot from that.”

Had whomever made this facility intend to kill me? Everything looked too new. How could computers even work after 100,000 years? Could I trust my sense of time anymore? Did it really matter?

I shrugged. I seemed to do that a lot lately. I wondered if my skin’s adaption process would work on a fully-charged blast. The energy signature was the same, but the resulting energy transfer would be a lot stronger than the weaker bullets the Faro were using.

She hesitated a long moment before taking the pistol.

I turned to the terminal. My fingers typed the command of their own accord and the panel closed. My librarian and I needed a long sit-down. I heard him snickering from the stacks and claiming he didn’t know anything. *The mechanic handles things in the floors below, he said. And he’s mad for you never visiting. You hadn’t used him like that in far too long.*

My body handles itself well without my input, thank you very much.

Only because he does all the hard work keeping it going! He wants to be thanked by being challenged more, like typing that password.

That I never knew. I glared at the librarian.

Rea was watching me. “What were you saying?”

I blinked. I realized I was muttering to myself. “Nothing. I just hope you are right about no one else knowing about this place. Tell me, what do you sense?”

Rea squinted and gazed about the room. “It’s not clear, but I see blue light flowing along the ducts and inside the metal things. The usual halo around you.”

“Anything in the walls?”

Her brow knit, and she stared hard at the panel I had closed. Finally, she shook her head. “Nothing. Why?”

“Your abilities are developing quickly.” So her abilities were blocked the same as mine. I glanced at the flag on the pistol Rea held. The entire area seemed far too targeted at me and people with my abilities to be coincidence. The era matched..

Once we were back in the hall—Rea switched off the power and relit her lantern—I closed the blast door.

“Do you know how hard that was to open?” Rea asked.

“It’s better than the Faro getting in.” The lock still worked, so I used that. I considered using oxygen to weld it shut, but with such a small space, that could’ve gone bad quickly.

After climbing the stairs back outside, Rea closed the door. We only had to stamp the sod down to hide it again. I had to admit that it was a clever construction. I had my librarian note the location if I needed anything. Trevor’s team may be able to use the technology down there, and likely discover something more that I had missed.

“Do you think the Korvak Empire has weapons like these?” Rea asked.

“I haven’t seen anything beyond basic combustion engines, but I would count on it. If a small nation like the Faro had a cache, an empire as large as the Korvak would know of many more. If they had survived.” But why this age? Why would this technology surface as I met Rea? Why hadn’t this appeared in the past?

Unless we had, and we didn't pay attention, my librarian said, holding an open book. According to my notes, during the Cenac Age, people said to have manipulated alchemy and magic existed. Such people were always said to have existed. That's one reason why we didn't look into it.

My librarian turned a page. Myth and legend always builds on small truths. Our memory goes on to say these people had served kingdoms as wizards and mercenaries, wielding swords of blue light that could cut through anything. He snapped the book closed. Plasma swords like the ones below!

Possibly. I stroked my chin.

Rea waited for me. She must have been getting used to my spacing out. "In any case," I said. "I would like to speak with this Elder about how we can see how we can free the rest of your people."

Her eyes tightened. "The Faro sold us even to the Korvak Empire and to the Distant Nations."

"If we create a country for your people, they will come on their own. Tell me, do you believe your people would want to live close to me?"

"And give up their homes here? No."

I held up a finger. "But if they don't have homes. I've seen the farms here. You can't feed everyone with the land you have available."

"My people deserve to live together." She crossed her arms. "We will make do as we always had."

"You saw some of what my home offered. What if I offered all of it to your people?" I could imagine Trevor and Ellie's annoyance and excitement with such a challenge. Come to think of it, I hadn't tried to make a nation of my own in a long time.

But Rea's people. They had the potential to make the world I had dreamed of. The paradise of immortal universe gardeners, assuming

Rea's abilities were linked with mine and that they also linked to immortality without all the cybernetics. But then, if I put my mind to it, I might be able to replicate or find research about the technologies inside me. But by then, Rea would long be dead of old age.

"Do you have a map to show me where your elder is?"

"Only if you send me to him alone."

"Don't trust me?" I smirked.

"A god who defends my people only on a whim? No, I don't trust you."

I laughed. "Well, I trust you, so that's enough for me. I will have to finish telling you my story about your incarnation sometime."

She held up a hand. "I'd rather not. Everything I've believed has already been shaken around like a kid's *mapopo*."

I wasn't familiar with that word.

She pulled out a map—prepared for anything like the hero she was—and pointed to a city. "Here." She pointed to a village outside the city. "I want you to take us here and to wait for me."

"That's rather boring."

"Do you want to meet the Elder?"

"Fine."

It took several portals for me to find the village she wanted. We walked into a fenced field full of a vegetable I didn't recognize. Fortunately, no one was around. Rain threatened on the horizon. It didn't matter what age it was, farming was farming. As long as the earth wasn't poisoned, farmers did their thing. Even when the earth was poisoned, they still tried to do their thing. I surmised the leafy vegetable surrounding me came from those hard periods of radiation and pollution. I was glad the earth had cleansed herself. That age was among the worst I had lived through—and the loneliest.

Rea shielded her eyes and glanced at the sun to get her bearings. “I don’t know how long I will be. The Elder can be hard to find for good reason.”

“Take your time. I have all the time in the universe.” I chuckled at my own joke. “At least until the Sun incinerates the Earth in a few more billion years.”

Rea made a face.

I tapped the communicator behind my ear. “The signal from this should reach me out here. In the off-chance you need me for something.”

Rea blinked. “I never thought I’d be speaking with you like this. So casually. You are not like any god I know.”

“And you know many gods do you?”

She grinned. “No. I don’t know of a single one now that I think about it.”

I laughed.

She tested the communicator before leaving me standing in the field, wondering what I could do to entertain myself. Now that I knew the location of the village, I could teleport back from home. I wanted to check up on Trevor and eat one of Ellie’s dishes—I didn’t care which one. I missed her cooking already. I wondered how Unea and all the other –eas were doing, but I also didn’t want Trevor to think I doubted his abilities by checking up on him. He worked better with me staying out of his way. He and Ellie were the best staff I had found. And that was saying something.

I gazed at the rain clouds, feeling the wind pick up. Could Trevor and Ellie learn what Rea could do? Would that be the first steps to immortality? I didn’t want Trevor nor Ellie to die. Oh, I would eventually find their incarnations again, but I didn’t want to do without them if I

could help it. I suspected humanity would finally evolve if they didn't need anything anymore. If material things became unimportant—just as they were for me. They were nice, but not necessary. Oh, some new immortals would hoard them. I wasn't naive enough to think they wouldn't. I had! But as centuries passed, such souls would start to learn what mattered and what didn't. Material things wouldn't matter as much. Humanity's greatest flaw, perhaps, was its short life span. A span 70 to 100 years was no where near long enough to mature. As I thought of myself, even a scant 100,000 years wasn't really enough time, except for the boredom problem. But then if humanity wouldn't keep destroying itself, the universe may solve that. I gazed up into the sky. There's endless mysteries to unravel out there. You just have to live long enough to do it. Oh, and relativity with its different flow of time wouldn't pose a problem when time didn't matter.

The discover of Rea's powers had my hopes up for the first time. While I had no idea if those abilities, and my own, were truly linked to my everlasting life, a hunch whispered they were. That others had the same cybernetic implants as me but even they are long dead. I looked for my librarian, but he was elsewhere in my mind.

I walked from the field in into the sparse cluster of farm houses. Villagers worked their various tasks: taking down laundry, wrangling children, threshing, and all the other tasks of old-world farming. I didn't see a machine anywhere. All of the villagers were the bright colored sashes the Faro culture seemed to favor. A few looked up at me, but most ignored me. I supposed this close to the city they were used to travelers.

Just outside of the village, a group of men wrestled with a wagon trapped in a deep rut. The axle had also snapped.

“We should’ve filled that rut yesterday,” one of the mustached men said as he heaved.

“I know. I know.” His neighbor strained.

“Could you use a little help?” I asked.

“Suit yourself if you want a backache, stranger,” a younger man said.

Without thinking about it, I wove air and lifted the wagon out of the rut. It floated a foot above the ground. “Where do you want it?”

The men fell back and stared at the wagon. I floated the wagon a short distance off the road and set it down. The villagers nearby all watched me. The silence was broken only by the sound of the wind in whistling between the houses.

Well, I had done it now.

The mustached man stood up and stared at me. After a moment, his eyes widened. He wrung his hands, which looked odd on such a large man. “Rumors have circulated. The way you look. You match the statue in the old shrine.” He straightened with obvious effort. “Are you the Forgotten One?”

“I’m called that I guess.”

A gasp ran through the gathered villagers. A few fell to their knees.

Lovely.

I ran a hand through my hair. “I guess I’m called that.”

The man collapsed into the dirt road and kowtowed. “Please have mercy on us!”

Chapter 10

“Get up. You’ve done nothing wrong,” I said.

The man continued to bow in the dirt.

I sighed. I hated when people did this. “Get up already. If you want to do something, bring me an apple pie.”

The mustached man sat up. “Apple pie?”

Apples had gone extinct some time ago. “A pastry of some sort. I want something sweet. That’s all I want.”

“Something sweet?” The man’s brow furrowed, and he spoke slowly.

“Preferably a family recipe. Homemade pastries are the best. If I like it, I may even ask for the recipe.”

“Someone tell Ophelia. Hurry!” the man said. “Please accept this offering and spare us.” He bowed again.

“Would you stop doing that? Stand up already. All of you, stand up.”

They obeyed with some hesitation. I touched my communicate and whispered, “I hope you don’t take too long. I have an entire village bowing to me. It’s annoying.”

I pointed to a tree standing alone in the field. “I’m going to nap over there. When the pastry is ready, you can bring it to me.” Without waiting for a response, I strolled away. It likely looked more like stalking than strolling to the villagers. I couldn’t hide my irritation with it. I thought I had destroyed all those old statues of me.

The irony of calling me the Forgotten One since even farmers out here seemed to know me at a glance. Although floating a wagon didn’t help matters. I wondered again what stories circulated about me to trigger such a jump to conclusion. Farmers should’ve guessed I was a warlock or a wizard or something. Not jump to exactly who I was.

I flopped under the tree and stretched out on my back. Other than the approaching rain and the annoyance of the villagers, it was a fine day. I dozed off in the comforting shade, allowing my librarian time to transcribe his notes into the different memory books. I didn’t need to sleep, but it felt nice to enter the void. I supposed I dreamed, but none of them ever made into a book. Sometimes, I wondered if the librarian conspired against me. As for the mechanic, well, maybe I should visit him more. Although I supposed he grumbled when he had to rebuild my face.

Rea’s voice came from the communicator, waking me from my sleep. “Clyde! Clyde is somehow alive.” The communicator picked up on her hard breathing. “He has the Elder!”

My eyes shot open, just as a young woman approached, holding a steaming pastry on a pristine white cloth. She squeaked and jumped back, almost dropping the pastry as I shot upright. I used my senses to grab the communicator’s radiowaves as if it was a string connecting my ear to Rea’s.

I stood and smiled at the scared young woman. “Thank you for baking that. It smells divine, but something came up. I have to go. Uh, all is

forgiven and all that.” I waved my hand vaguely in the air. “Live in peace.” I then teleported, using the radiowave to guide me.

The fresh manure scent of the farm changed to the murky, heavy scent of an industrial city. The acrid scent of coal smog hit me. I wondered how long the few remaining coal reserves would last. Rea gasped for breath, leaning against a brick wall in front of me.

“Clyde is alive? I snapped his brain stem. It isn’t possible,” I said.

She shook her head. “It was him. I know how he fights.” I noticed she had a cut on her sleeve and blood dropped from her hand. “He must have followed me to the Elder.”

I examined her arm. “It’s deep, and you are losing a lot of blood.” I smirked. “You don’t mind a scar do you? Or we can visit a doctor.”

“Do we have time for games?”

“Fine.” I used a tendril of power to cauterized the cut. She twitched but didn’t make a sound. “Which way?”

“Toward the castle.” She pointed toward the fortress that dominated the skyline. It peaked through the smog like a mountain through storm clouds.

I reached out with my senses, feeling hundreds of lives nearby and within the fortress. I sensed a strange energy overshadowing the more familiar pulse of a hero. I surmised the strange energy had to be the Elder, and the other had to be Clyde. However, Clyde’s pulse felt off, even sickly. If it had a color, it would be blue laced with a noxious green-brown. It was like the scent of a sewer mingling with a field of flowers.

Suddenly, their energy signatures winked out.

“What happened?” Rea asked.

I smoothed the astonishment from my face. “I found them, but they disappeared. There has to be other ruins in this city. It’s the only thing that explains it.”

“Just take us where you remembered.”

I warped us where I last sensed Clyde. As soon as we materialized, my skin shivered with a plasma blast. A second one followed. Ahead of us stood a blast door, similar to one in the ruins. A plasma rifle hung from the ceiling, training on my movement. I couldn’t sense anything from the machine.

I snatched Rea’s hand and shoved her ahead of me. “Run!”

The third blast seared across my skin. The polarity of the plasma had changed. An adaptive automatic system. It would hit a signature my skin hadn’t encountered yet. I’d rather not have to rebuild myself again. I reach out to deconstruct the machine and felt nothing. It too was designed to counter me. I wove a wall of air between us and the rifle. I snatched Rea’s wrist and we tore down the concrete corridor, lit by overhead lights, and dove into a crossing hall just as a fourth energy blast flashed behind us.

“What was that?” Rea held her pistol ready.

“Clyde or whatever he is doesn’t want anyone following him, I suppose.” I looked around the hall. Unlike Rea’s ruins, everything here seemed well maintained. The lights held steady and the power radiating through the conduits felt strong.

Rea hissed and pointed. Further down the hall a drone scuttled on four legs. The machine had a broom attached to its underside and swept dust into a tray. Several arms jutted from the top of its body. It ignored us. I felt my eyebrows lift. How had such tech continued to survive and function?

“It’s a janitor drone.” I couldn’t rule out the Faro had their version of Trevor’s research team. But unless they had access to a library that rivaled mine, I doubt they could reverse engineer the technology of this place. Anyone could use the technology—that was the point of it—but not just anyone could repair or make the technology.

When I poked my head out, the mechanized rifle trained on me. I snapped my head back in. No blast.

“Rea, I want you to take a look. Watch to see if the thing on the ceiling trains on you.”

I moved away from the wall, and she peered around the corner. “It’s not moving.”

“I thought as much.” Someone had designed these facilities to defense against me and everything I could do. But why go through such effort? Well, I suppose the fact I had rearranged the planet once would be a good reason, but that was well after the age this technology dated from. *You know something don’t you?* I yelled at my librarian. *Tell me before we get Rea killed.*

My librarian didn’t respond.

“I am going to distract it. I want you to shoot it. That pistol should be enough to destroy it.” I layered my shields, using air between each to insulate and conduct the energy that would hit them. I took a deep breath. I’d rather not have to grow back yet another face. “Ready?”

She nodded.

I stepped into the corridor and gathered a ball of hydrogen. The mechanized plasma rifle followed my movement and fired. This blast shattered my first shield despite the reinforcement. Whatever controlled the machine had decided to increase the power of each shot. I gritted my

teeth and ignited the hydrogen, funneling the explosion toward the machine. My layered insulation deflected most of the heat.

Another plasma blast shattered another shield.

As the smoke cleared, I saw the machine was singed but otherwise in one piece. Whomever designed it had guessed I would use indirect attacks. Anything larger would engulf the hall and Rea. I saw Rea scurry out and take aim with her pistol. At the same time, I launched another funneled ball—this time, oxygen—at the machine. I ignited it just as Rea’s plasma burst hit the machine. Hot air rushed from the explosion, driving me back several steps. Rea grunted behind me. I wove air to clear the smoke and heat, revealing pieces of the machine sparking on the floor. The arm it had hung from sparked on the ceiling.

Rea coughed and brushed herself off with her free hand.

“Nice shot,” I said and strolled to the blast door.

This one had a keypad next to it. Like the blast door of the other ruins, I couldn’t sense anything about it, so I knew my ability wouldn’t effect it. I squinted at the keypad to read any residual body heat Clyde may have left, but the blast had heated the keypad too evenly.

“Looks like I will have to find a way to force this open.”

“Wait a moment.” Rea’s hand moved across the keypad. “We ran across something like this in the other ruins, and the Elder pressed this combination of buttons.”

“I doubt someone would use the same password for two different—”

The blast door swung open.

“We need to hurry.” Rea slipped inside.

“I bet it was *password1* she typed,” I muttered and followed.

Metal and glass cylinders inset the walls of the chamber. Everything hummed and monitors with various readouts waited for information. A

cleaning drone worked at repairing one of the cylinders. It had a panel freed and worked at sorting and reconnecting multicolored wires inside. For some reason, the place made me think of how a womb must feel. Just not as full of amniotic fluid. The machines emitted a regular thrum like a heartbeat, and the air felt warm.

Rea walked ahead of me, peering about cautiously with her weapon ready. I joined her. Now that we were inside, I could sense the strange energy I assumed was the Elder, the sickly energy of Clyde, and one normal signature. “There are three people ahead,” I whispered.

We came to a regular door and slid it open.

A single glass and metal cylinder stood in the center of the room. Inside it was a young, bald man. An middle-aged Faro wearing a sky-blue sash typed at a keyboard with two fingers while Clyde stood with his arms crossed, watching.

“How long is this going to take?” he asked.

Rea leveled her pistol and fired before I could react. The burst took Clyde square in the back, dropping him where he stood. “Free the Elder!” She pointed at the young, bald man. Then, she dashed into the room. She grabbed the middle-aged Faro by the back of his neck and slammed her pistol against his head. He crumpled.

That young man was the Elder?

Clyde groaned and stood. A deep hole had burned through his back. The edges of the wound wiggled as the skin, bone, and muscle began to close.

Well, that was interesting.

I wove air tight around Clyde and dragged him toward me, turning him so he could face me. “Tell me, hero. How are you still alive?”

Clyde showed his teeth. “You have to die to become as a god, right?” I felt a surge in him. My ropes of air shredded, and he grabbed my throat.

I regarded him calmly. “You know I don’t need to breathe, right?”

“But you do need a head.”

Power flooded his fingertips, and my skin’s defenses rose in response. I sensed destructive filaments, similar to the ones I used, if less refined, dig into me. My skin shuddered, and it felt as if someone had thrust a thorn into my throat.

I smiled. “I see you don’t know your abilities yet.” I formed a blade of air and laid a sharp edge of plasma along it. “Children should respect their elders.” My librarian winced at the cheesy line.

Hey, I’ve always wanted a chance to say that!

I sheared Clyde’s arm off at the elbow. He clutched at the stump and screamed as he fell back. I brushed a droplet of blood from my throat. “Rea came far closer to killing me than you just did.”

Clyde thrust out his remaining hand, throwing a mess of random atoms and energy at me. The mess swirled and fought against itself. I bottled it with an electromagnetic field and let it float in the air to fight itself.

“Nothing I do. Just like before.” Clyde sent another blast of mess followed by another. I caught each and let the atoms settle on their own.

“As an assassin, you should know you have to train to use a weapon well,” I said. I really didn’t know what to do with Clyde. I couldn’t contain him, and I didn’t want to kill him. He was far too interesting for that. If he had such powers, why hadn’t he used them the first time? No, the chamber and the Elder had something to do with it. “There’s no reason for you try to kill me anymore. Look, I could show you how to control—”

“I don’t need anything from you other than for you to die.” Clyde leaped at me, driving his regenerating stump into my face and grabbing my shirt. The world upended and I landed on my back. Clyde was on me immediately, driving his palm into my throat and my face.

“You of all people should know that doesn’t work with creatures like us.” I sheathed my finger with destruction—I really needed to come up with a better description—and drove it into his rib. It broke through his defenses and made him grunt. I didn’t use enough to kill him. “For being an assassin, you aren’t very well trained.”

“Stop being so condescending, you bastard. I will replace you as the god of this world.”

I caught his fist. “Is that really what you want? Can you really be that cliched?” I heaved and threw him off of me, sending him crashing into the wall.

He flipped to his feet and drove his knee into my chin as I stood. My shield deflected the force of the blow, transforming it into heat. Clyde struck at me with the palm of his hand. Feeling annoyed, I conjured another blade of air and cut off his good arm, making sure to vaporize the resulting blood spray this time.

“We really don’t need to fight,” I said. “I don’t want to be a god or anything of the sort. We—”

A plasma burst took Clyde in the side of his head, searing off half. He dropped to the floor and the scent of cooked meat and metal filled the air. Rea stalked forward and fired another round at Clyde’s head, vaporizing the rest of it. Before his body could drop, she fired two more rounds into his torso. The seared lower half of his body thumped to the floor.

“You’ve thought about doing that to me haven’t you?” I asked her.

She kept the pistol on what remained of Clyde, but she smiled. “I still might.”

“You didn’t have to kill him.” I didn’t feel anger or sadness. When you’ve been alive as long as I had been, you realized lost chances always came back around. I walked closer to the remains. “He was a baby in his powers. I could’ve made him understand. He could’ve been the second gardener.”

“Clyde knew nothing but death. He would’ve been worse than you. I can’t allow any Faro to become a god.” She turned to the young man. “Do you hear me?”

“Rea, such anger will only destroy you,” the young bald man said.

“I know, Elder, but—”

“I was expecting some old guy with a name like Elder.” Clyde wasn’t going to regenerate it seemed. I wrapped a shield around Clyde’s remains and ignited oxygen to incinerate them.

The Elder smiled. “I am older than I appear, though not as old as you are.”

I shrugged. “Old doesn’t mean anything other than you’ve been alive a long time. So who is this wannabe scientist?”

“You are him.” The Faro looked up at me with wonder. “The ancient scriptures discussed you.”

“Ancient scriptures?”

“They told us about this place and how we too can become as gods.”

“I’m not a god. Just close to it.”

“But only the few can.”

“By the few,” the Elder said. “he apparently means people with Uegh blood.”

My librarian listened and jotted notes. He had better.

The Faro's mouth twisted. "Why only you people can harness it is infuriating. But only I know how to use these machines, so you need me."

"I'm sure the Nameless One has someone else who can," Rea said. "So watch yourself."

I walked around the room, stroking my chin. Only the Uegh. Could they be related to me somehow? I had had my dalliances, after all. That would explain Rea's powers. She'd be my great-great-great-great—well, so on—granddaughter. If Clyde wasn't full blooded, that would explain why he was so weak. "So these machines brought Clyde back from the dead."

"Yes. They can heal anything. Anything at all," the Faro said. "If you are a half breed or a full Uegh."

I gazed at him from the corner of my eye. "Sounds like you've tried it on many."

"Criminals and orphans. It's the only way to learn. I'm sure you understand!"

Rea made a disgusted noise, and the pistol quivered. A bead of sweat rolled down the Faro man's face as his gaze slid toward Rea. "You need me! Clyde came up with the idea of trying it on your Elder. It was better than executing him as the Council had ordered. We were going to give him immortality."

"Seems like he's already close to it. How old are you, old man?" I asked the Elder.

His smile made him look even younger. "Two-hundred and three this year. My father made it to nearly five hundred."

"See? I'm only trying to help," the Faro said.

“We need to talk, Elder, but first.” I stalked toward the Faro man, forcing him to look up at me. He shrank back. “Where are your sacred papers?”

“A-a copy is by the control machine.” he swallowed.

I opened a small portal to tell Trevor he had a prisoner arriving, one with information he will find useful. “You are now my employee. You are about to meet someone I trust. You will tell him everything you will tell me. Don’t think I will kill you if you don’t. Death is too easy a punishment. Do you understand?”

The Faro man’s eyes were huge. He nodded. “I-I will prove myself useful.”

“We will see.” I Warp Fived him to the prisons located deep in my tower.

Chapter 11

“It seems you are indeed the Nameless One,” the Elder said.

“Are you sure that was wise?” Rea asked.

“Did I say I was letting him go? Trevor is going to squeeze him of everything he knows. I will decide what to do with him then. It doesn’t strike me as the for king-and-country type, anyway.” I found the papers on the desk. The Faro must have reinvented the printing press, judging by the look. Strangely, they hadn’t translated the papers into their language. How had they learned to read such a long dead language?

“Does their sacred writings actually tell us how to use the machine?” Rea asked.

I leafed through them and read a line. “Using bash type sudo dot slash start.” I laughed. “They think a user’s manual was sacred?” I waved the papers at Rea and the Elder. “I wonder how many people over the centuries tried to make that into a prophecy or something.”

My mirth died as I gazed around the room. “I think we may have just found my mother.”

“Your mother?” Rea asked. She frowned.

“I don’t have any memories before I met you, Rea. Well, the previous you. Whatever you want to call it. But if I was a test tube baby it would make sense that my memories would be limited.” I gestured at the cylinder in the center of the room. “This had made Clyde pretty close to me. I may have been born here, or a lab similar to this one.” It explained the way the structure limited my senses and seemed designed to counter much of what I could do.

I turned to the Elder. “Tell me, old man. Can you see atoms, the elements?”

“Do you mean the true nature of reality?”

“Whatever you want to call it. Rea told me you shown her how to do a few limited things.”

“Elder, when we encountered a place like this one, I sensed and saw enormous energy coming from it. But when I channeled it, I lost control.” She paused. “The power I felt.”

The Elder leaned against one of the desks. “From time out of mind our people has had a legend. That our people are the children of the angels of heaven.”

“You mean that story isn’t just a child’s tale?” Rea asked.

He created a small ball of fire in the palm of his hand. The controlled burn of oxygen impressed me. “The angels had something of the Ancient of Days’s power over creation, and they passed it to us. But over time, men began to fear us. To burn us as witches and as demons. Though to be sure some of us were. But soon man also began to harness us and learn how to make us stronger.”

I crossed my arms. I wasn't a fallen angel. At least, I didn't think I was. Angel's didn't bleed or have physical bodies according to the long-dead religions. My librarian gave me a thumbs up for remembering.

The Elder smiled at me. It made me think of how a grandfather would smile at a grandson. It looked odd on such a young face. "There's still more to the story. As men used technology and knowledge to control us and turn us into weapons, they discovered that not all the angels had returned to heaven. Some had been forever cast out and lived among us. As wars broke out among the nations, each used these angels as weapons. Men used their technology to enhance and to control the very angels of heaven."

He laid a hand on Rea's shoulder. "As you can guess, our family descended from these angels."

Yep, totally my grandchildren. Fancy story, but across all my centuries I had never encountered anyone else like me, let alone these angels. Stories changed, especially one this old. The collective consciousness and all that stored some stories in humanity's genetics. My librarian gave me a thumbs down for that thought.

"You don't remember anything?" Rea asked me.

I glared at my mental librarian. "Your face was my oldest memory. At least the oldest that I'm allowed to see."

"You are one of the angels of heaven," the Elder said.

I snorted. "Well if I am, God doesn't seem to miss me."

"Isn't it blasphemous to claim to be a god?" Rea asked.

"I never made that claim. Humans did. I could very well be just have been made by this machine or another." For some reason I preferred that idea over the possibility I could be some sort of fallen divine being. "Does it really matter?"

Rea gazed at the cylinder. “So if I step into this, I could become like you?”

“That wouldn’t be wise, granddaughter,” the Elder said.

“I know. I still have more to learn first.” Rea dropped her hand from the machine. “But we also can’t allow the Faro keep this.”

“I’m not going to destroy it.” I leafed through the manual. “But I can change the passwords so no one else can get in or use the machines.” I keyed the commands and typed *IlikePepsi&Pizza4ever* as the password. Beyond the system using a language few knew, I doubted anyone knew what Pepsi was. I typed the command the shutdown the computer and everything winked off. Gotta save on the electric bill.

“We’d better get going,” I said.

As we left, I entered the command to change the door’s keypad, thanks to the user’s manual. I didn’t want a super long password for that one, so I entered *IlikeCoke*. I didn’t take sides on soft drinks.

You had better not forget these, I muttered at my librarian as he scribbled his notes in my memory library.

“Now no one else can get in,” I said.

“Unless they made more people like Clyde.” Rea shivered. “I don’t like how these machines can bring people back from the dead.”

“He was still more dead than alive. You felt that.” The Elder laid a hand on Rea’s shoulder.

“I’d say this course is cleared,” I said. “Another hero is dead. Dead again. We found my origin story, angel or test-tube, which is good enough for me, and saved the Elder. I’d say we go home for dinner.”

“We aren’t done,” the Elder said. “The Faro still have their slave houses filled with our people. I was trying to free some of them when the Faro caught me.”

“The Elder has worked in the underground here since before I was taken,” Rea said. “We can’t leave without saving them.”

“I wish I could claim to be more successful,” the Elder said, “for all the years of my trying.”

Rea turned to me. “We can free all of them if you help me.”

I scratched my head. “I don’t know.”

“You said you hated slavery. That you consider making us into a nation. Help us.”

The idea of using the machines to finally make the race of immortal universe gardeners excited me more than anything. If I freed the Uegh, they could act as the seed for my plan, especially if I found my great-great-great-so-on grandchildren.

“Alright.” I pointed at the Elder, “But you are going to my tower where it is safe.” Before he could say anything, I Warp Fived him into to one of my guest suites. I sent a mental message to Trevor just before the space-time fold snapped back. “Do you know the way, Rea?”

She nodded and bit her lower lip. “I do.”

I Warp Fived the user’s manual to my room. Then, I folded space to take us outside the castle and back into the alley. A cat screeched and hissed at our sudden appearance and darted away. Rea gazed about, almost as if she was sniffing the air. “This way.”

The Faro city streets bustled with people going about their daily business. Even the poorest people wore colored and patterned sashes. Many had faded from frequent washing. Children followed their parents. Vendors hawked their wares above conversations and each other. The air smelled of close living and of industry. People cast looks at Rea, but never more than passing. Other foreign dressed people sauntered around the streets with Ueghs walking, head down, beside them. Everyone went

about their day, not knowing that just hours before I had considered burning them out of existence. I wondered if the people knew the Korvak Empire marched toward them.

Rea led us into the market district. A raised circular platform stood in the center of the square, no doubt the platformed served to showcase slaves. Some kids played on it at the moment. The air hummed with bartering, and I caught the scent of bread baking. Rea stopped, looking confused.

“Lost?” I asked.

She ignored me and gazed at the buildings. “This way.” She angled toward a side street. I supposed the slave warehouses weren’t too far from the auction block. Business efficiency and less risk of losing merchandise. My mouth twisted at the thought.

I had expected the warehouses to be close pits of misery, but when Rea announced we had arrived, the block of identical buildings surprised me. Made of red brick, the warehouses had windows and stood three stories high. The windows had bars on them and red-uniformed guards stood at the entrances and patrolled the area, but otherwise, little else distinguished them from the residences we had passed on our way to the market district.

“This isn’t what I expected,” I said.

Rea’s hands clenched. “Products need to be high-quality, but don’t be fooled by how this looks.”

A group of men and women exited the nearest building. They carried books and had the air of teachers about them. “Do the Faro educate them?” I asked.

“Some.”

I stroked my chin. “It would make sense for the slave sellers to invest in the care, feeding, and education of their...merchandise.” Rea’s look at me held as much heat as the energy she had channeled from the reactor. “It is clever of them, allowing them to charge more and have the competitive advantage on the market.” If anything these Uegh had the potential to live better than the free Faro. Only the rich could afford educated, skilled slaves. While I agreed with Rea. Slavery was slavery, I had to wonder if in some cases it was a better life than scrubbing in the dirt. Of course, I’m sure the Faro also sold dirt scrubbers too. All products had a quality range and a budget model.

Was my plan for the Uegh that different from what the Faro were doing to them? I planned on giving them education and immortality—if I could get the machines working and my hypothesis worked—and aim them toward building a civilization that could colonize the galaxy. They would have more freedom in some ways, but they would still be educated to follow what I wanted them to do. Just as the Faro seemed to be educating their merchandise.

“There’s nothing clever about it.” Rea stormed toward the first house, and I could feel the energy building around her. Beyond her usual hero-aura I could sense a more chaotic and destructive vein—like a seam of coal set in pristine stone.

The guards stepped forward and called a halt. “Who do you serve?”

“Myself.” She moved and the guards toppled unconscious.

I rolled my eyes at the melodramatic line. “She is getting faster though. I could barely see her thump their heads.”

“Can you make a portal?” She called back.

“Single file them.” I conjured a portal to the exterior of my tower and told Trevor he had many more guests coming. I needed to go home and

speak with him about my plans. No doubt Ellie was in a tizzy over everything.

The Uegh that emerged from the prison were clean and dressed in simple cotton shirts and pants. While they didn't appear abused on the surface, they gazed about with hollow, hunted looks. Their shoulders hunched as they walked on bare feet. All of the first building were women in their teens and twenties. The line froze and bunched as they saw the shimmering slash of the portal and the plains beyond it.

"This will take you to freedom," I said. "It is a little unusual I know, but it works just like an open door. I'll show you." I stepped through the portal. The scent of the fields and wildflowers of home wrapped around me. I paused and savored the feeling of home as the fugitives watched with fear, awe, and hope.

"Great One!" A call came from the tower. Unea jogged toward me with a few of her girls in tow. They each wore the uniform of my staff and carried spears topped with what looked to be plasma blades. Trevor's research team either worked impossibly fast or I had some in the armory that I had forgotten about.

Unea and the two other women fell to a knee. "Welcome home!"

"Looks like you've settled in."

"We want to be useful to you."

"Well, if that is what you want, stand up and help me bring your people through." I gestured at the portal.

"Is that Porea?" one of Unea's girls asked. Inea I think. I would never keep their names straight. Maybe I should require them to wear name tags.

Unea stood and saluted with a hand across her chest—something Trevor made up? "Yes, Great One."

“Don’t call me that. Be sure to watch for guards. Make it fast.”

Unea and the other girls rushed through the portal. In short order, a steam of refugees appeared, looking about themselves with wonder and at me with fear. I supposed I couldn’t expect everyone to take such weirdness in stride like Rea and her other -eas did.

I left the rest to Unea and to Rea, and teleported into my tower. The feel and scent of home—a faint pine scent—welcomed me. Using my senses, I walked the halls toward Trevor. He had a hand to his ear—his communicator no doubt—and was issuing orders in his even, calm voice.

“I hope I’m not making too much work for you.”

He jumped and whirled. “Sir, I hadn’t expected you at this moment.” He bowed.

“I decided to bring the start of a nation with me.”

“So Unea told me just now. You seem...energized since you met the young mistress.”

“Young mistress? Oh, you mean Rea. Yes, well, I’ve been having more fun than I had in a few centuries. Has your research team been enjoying the new information and toys I’ve provided? I saw Unea has a prototype.”

“It is a little unstable and has limited charges, I’m told.” Trevor picked a hair from his immaculate suit. “But the researchers had been working on that project since before our mistress and her...friends arrived. The blades you gave us helped us solve a problem we couldn’t solve before.”

“About the manual and machines I mentioned. I think I can finally realize a long-held dream. Do you have time to share some tea with me?”

“The staff are preparing rooms for our guests. Although we will have to build houses soon.”

“We have prefabs in storage.” I repeated my librarian’s words aloud. “We can use them in the mean time. Storage Room B23.”

“I will have someone see to it. A moment.” He pressed behind his ear and issued the orders. I took the moment to study Trevor, wondering if the machine would work on him. He was the best Chief of Staff I’ve ever had. But he lacked the features Rea and Unea and others had. He wasn’t one of my children.

A few moments later, Trevor and I sat in my parlor. A young staffer I didn’t recognize brought tea. The young man’s hand shook as he poured tea under Trevor’s watch. Trevor wore a faint frown, but he didn’t say anything. The young man seemed more nervous about Trevor than about me.

I sipped the tea. It wasn’t as good as what Trevor made, but it was a good attempt. I nodded. Trevor dismissed the young man and sipped his tea.

“I’ve had this idea for the last millennia.” I told Trevor my dream of turning humanity into an immortal space faring and colonizing race. I outlined the obvious problems of technology and my original plan to have to Korvak Empire act as the incubator. “But now we can handle it ourselves. With the lab Rea discovered under the Faro capital, we could potentially create more people like me.”

Trevor’s face remained impassive as he thought. “Would it be wise to make people who could challenge you, my lord? This Clyde might have been able to do you harm if he had more experience with his abilities.”

“That is the risk, but imagine the gains! We could live long enough to explore the stars. We would have the abilities necessary to survive and to shape the universe.”

“If I may be frank, I would prefer you as the only being with that ability. I wouldn’t trust humans with that power.”

“With time, they will learn. Right now, humans can’t live long enough to learn what they need to learn to live properly. Even I am still learning.”

Trevor sipped his tea. “If that is what you want, my lord.”

“Is the Portal Frame project finished?”

Chapter 12

“It needs tested,” Trevor said, “but the theory seems sound from the books you’ve given us.”

“We will test it now. I want you to secure the lab and select subjects to test the equipment with from the Uegh I’m migrating here. Be discrete.”

“I will see it done. Erik will be a good person to head this program.”

“I also want him to figure out if people other than the Uegh can be used. I’d rather like to keep you and Ellie on as long as you both want.”

“Until my life ends, my lord.”

I smiled. “Eternity it is then. What of the Korvak Empire?”

“They should arrive in a few days. We are ready for them. They also march on the Faro and the Faro from what my reports.”

“Their treaty seems to have been a farce. Big surprise. I suspect they know of the technology caches. The Empire will seek to secure them. There’s few other reasons they would wait until now to march.” I poured myself another cup of tea.

“I’m sorry, my lord. I should’ve saw you had run low.”

“I can pour my own tea, Trevor.” I didn’t really know what to do with the Korvak Empire now. Should I still keep to my original plan for them? But now that I had the technology caches and Trevor’s research team have made such strides, I didn’t need them.

“My sources confirm that the Faro-Korvak treaty has been in disarray since before you became involved. Not quite open war, but soon. The Faro are also in disarray with the recent assassination of their High Oligarch.”

That explained the strange troop movements I saw among the Faro. “Convenient time for a civil war.”

“Indeed, sir. The Korvak quietly supports each faction.”

“I should’ve paid more attention to what your teams have been doing and your reports.”

Trevor shook his head. “What we do is beneath your concern.”

If anyone else said anything like that, I would’ve thought they hid something, but Trevor spoke what he believed. I stood and opened a portal to the research floor. “It’s about time I take a look at your progress.”

“If it pleases you.” Trevor sat his tea aside and followed me.

The research floor of the tower resembled the lab under the Faro capital. Power conduits lined the floor and metal panels covered the walls. I could sense the energy behind them and see their atomic composition. In the rooms beyond, I could feel the people going about their tasks. The Faro lab had felt more stifling than I had thought at the time. My home’s research floor felt like smelling wildflowers after suffering from a stuffy nose. We walked only a short distance when a young man approached. He was dressed in grease smeared, rumpled clothes. His short hair stood at in all directions.

“Director Trevor, I hadn’t—” His eyes widened when he saw me. He dropped to his knees and bowed to me. “My Lord.”

“Our Lord wanted to see your progress on the Portal Frame and other systems, Erik,” Trevor said.

“I would be honored.” He bowed again and stood. “P-please, this way.”

The researchers, a mix of all ages, genders, and ethnicity froze with shock and fell to their knees as Erik took me to each lab. He explained their progress. He became more confident as his passion wrapped him. Each lab contained research centered on a collection of books I had given them decades ago. In one, they researched computer systems—semiconductors and other long lost electronics. Another lab researched energy sources. They also maintained the tower’s reactor. I would need them to study the reactor Rea and I had found after I made it safe. One lab studied the plasma technology and other weapon systems that my tower used and now what we had found from the Faro. The excited leader of that team, a middle-aged woman with blue-black hair, told me the Faro technologies were similar and therefore easy to replicate. The energy systems fascinated her because they used different concepts.

As Erik chattered and showed me every department, I realized just how far advanced my people were compared to the rest of the world. I saw several researchers with children walking with their spouses. Grandmothers and grandfathers worked beside what could only be grandchildren, teaching them different ideas and concepts. People were having families inside my tower, lives, and passing down their knowledge. All without me paying them any attention.

“I really don’t pay attention to what any of you do,” I said.

Erik looked at me. Trevor didn’t say anything.

“I’m sure you have far larger concerns than us,” Erik said. “We are just grateful you give us a home and protect us and give us a chance to learn. You provide us with our everything.”

“Has anyone sold our technology to people outside the tower?” I asked.

“I can’t say it hasn’t happened,” Erik said. “But the people outside have limited knowledge. They can use what has been sold, but when it breaks or runs out of fuel, it becomes useless to them.”

“I also have anyone who is caught doing so executed,” Trevor added. “I hope that pleases you.”

“It does.” An entire advanced society existed beneath my living floors that I paid no attention to. “Our technology is too powerful for just anyone to have.” Erik’s assessment wasn’t accurate. People weren’t stupid. It would also explain why the Faro had such knowledge of ancient technology. The Korvak Empire would most certainly have technology my people developed. I kept the thoughts to myself, however. It was what it was.

Erik took us to a lab in the back. “And this is my lab and my assistant Jennifer.” His blonde assistant gasped at the sight of me.

I walked to a metal frame standing in the center of the lab. Conduits and other devices extended from it, making the metal door frame resemble an octopus.

Did octopi, or was it octopuses, still exist? “This this the Portal Frame?” I scanned the device with my quantum vision.

“Yes. But I can’t get it to create a portal. But I’m close!”

Trevor touched his ear. “Please excuse me a moment, sir. I’m receiving a message.” He walked to the side.

“No, you’re not, and it’s not your fault.” A mix of emotions crossed Erik’s face at my words. “Not even all the energy in the tower could open

a portal. But your machine should be able to hold a portal open.” I could sense the right mix of energy pulsing to the frame. “And that is what I need.”

“Bending space-time does take a lot of power from everything I’ve read,” Erik said. “But I had hoped—”

“You’ve done well. Turn on the machine, and let’s see if it works.”

Erik nodded and fiddled with various dials and mechanisms set on the metal frame. I felt energy increase. In my vision, the energy extended like hooks all along the machine. “Yes,” I said. “This will work.” I opened a space-time rift (which worked differently from a fold but I won’t get into how) to the Faro lab just outside the blast door. I felt relieved that it worked. While warping space-time should’ve be affected by the mystery alloys that blocked my senses, it was like trying to embroider a quilt at arms length with your eyes closed. Memory and experience were my only guides. I latched the portal onto the energy latches and released it. The portal tried to close—the universe hated holes ripped into it—but the device held the wound open like surgical retractor. I didn’t like ripping space-time using portals, but my goal was more important.

“I-it worked!” Erik went to the portal and stuck his hand through it without hesitation. “The theory worked!”

As long as the machine ran, the hooks would hold. When the Portal Frame turned off, I would have to create a new rift. I wondered where I drew the energy necessary to do it. It took at least a supernova to tear space-time. I just thought it, and it was done. The Portal Frame allowed me think about something else. The fold I had opened outside the tower required me to give it a sliver of my attention to sustain.

“Thank you for your work, Erik,” I said. “Through the portal and on the other side of the blast door you will see your next assignment. This one is

of special importance to me. But Trevor has every confidence in you. As I do after the work you've shown me."

"My Lord," Trevor lowered his hand from his communicator. "The Uegh are under attack."

"By the Faro guards?"

"No. They are distracted. The Korvak Empire is attacking the city. By air."

"Air?" I asked.

"Zeppelins, sir."

I didn't know this age had zeppelins. "Trevor, under no circumstances are they to take the castle. Do you understand?"

He nodded. "They will not." He touched his communicator.

"We will speak later, Erik." I could've stepped through the portal, but I didn't want to feel the sensory silence of that area so soon. So I teleported outside the tower and stepped through the portal I had left open for Unea.

Zeppelins flew overhead. The behemoths darkened the city, and the whistling of falling bombs tore through the air. Smoke and char twisted in my nose. As I gazed upward, a strip of light lanced from the top of one of the slave apartments and into the zeppelin's blimp. It exploded into a shower of fire and of hydrogen in my vision.

Unea and her squad raced up to me. Soot blackened her cheek. "Nameless One, the Korvak Empire were using those things." She waved at the air. "To land soldiers into the city. The Faro are fighting them, but they were caught by complete surprise. What do you want us to do?"

The sight of the zeppelins reminded me I had underestimated the progress of the Korvak Empire and this age in general. But I also felt pleased at their progress. War pushed technology as peace didn't. "How is

the Uegh evacuation?”

“We almost have these apartments finished, but the Chosen says we still have the poor warehouses to empty.” She lowered her spear and tensed as she gazed behind me.

Soldiers in black-buttoned uniforms marched into the street. They held bolt-action rifles at their shoulders. The hodge-podge of different technologies gave me a headache. Zeppelins, plasma-edged swords, bolt-action rifles, plasma rifles, depleted uranium antimatter rounds. It was as if every age’s technology had decided to appear all at once. I just needed some neolithic people throwing rocks at me again.

The men formed up. Some kneeling and others standing. Unea and her squad showed no hesitation. They charged. Rifles cracked, and I barely had time to stop the bullets with air. Unea ripped into the soldiers. Their plasma-sharpened blades slashed through flesh. To their credit, the Korvak soldiers held their ground to the last. When the last soldier fell, Unea and her women breathed hard, and blood painted them. They saluted at me.

I hoped they didn’t get too cocky. Next time, I may not be around to stop the bullets. Primitive or not, lead balls could kill just as easily as any fancier projectile. On the building, I felt a surge of electrical energy in the air and saw another bolt launch into a zeppelin. The energy signature shared more in common with my own Light of Judgment than with any technology I had seen so far. Not that that mattered with how many different technologies were coming out of the woodwork.

“Finish evacuating this area,” I said. “Then, I want you to report to Trevor and tell him I want you to help defend the lab.”

Unea nodded. “Defend the...lab. What about the Chosen?” She hesitated.

“I will find Rea. You have your orders.”

They saluted and ran off to usher more people through the portal. I frowned at the zeppelins. I couldn't allow the Korvak Empire to have the lab inside the castle. While I didn't know for sure if they knew about it, I had to assume they did. The Faro castle wasn't designed to stand against air power. The zeppelins clustered around it like flies around a turd. I could swat all of them, but another grander idea tugged at me. I wish my mental librarian would just be upfront instead of whispering in my ear as he did.

I watched the people rushing into the portal. Several panicked Faro citizens raced into the portal with the remaining Uegh to avoid the falling bombs and debris.

Rea appeared. Dirt smeared her face and clothes. She breathed hard, and her mouth twisted. “Did you know the Korvak were going to attack here?”

“I didn't.”

“We need to stop them. At least until we can empty the last of the slave warehouses.”

“They had already bombed that district.” I didn't really know that, but with all the smoke billowing from the city, it wasn't an impossibility.

Rea paled. “I have to see if there are survivors.”

“We've saved who we could.” Again, not a lie.

“You can stop the Korvak better than I can. You can destroy their empire if you wanted.”

“I could.”

She gazed at me. “What does that mean?”

“We have a chance to change humanity, Rea. Finally.” I folded my hands behind my back. “Your people can be the ones who do it.”

Chapter 13

“The lab?” Rea asked. “You don’t mean to—”

“Immortality, Rea. Or close to it. I don’t know if it will work, but I have to try. This is the first time in eons I’ve been excited and hopeful. Clyde’s strange appearance offers proof that it might be possible. We could finally live long enough to be fruitful and multiply across the universe. We don’t have the technology to travel across the stars yet, but we can develop it. We had developed it in the past. But human lifespans are too short for them to learn. For humans to improve. As soon as they start to live as they should, they die from disease or age.”

“I don’t know...”

“No one would have to die anymore. Well, at least not as easily.” I smiled. “Wouldn’t you like that? To be able to learn forever and to finally evolve beyond this.” I swept my hand to the destruction. An explosion in the city punctuated my statement.

“I need to get to the other warehouses.”

“I will give you an hour.”

“What do you have planned?”

“We can’t allow the lab to fall into the hands of the Korvak Empire. Or remain with the Faro.” I surveyed the destruction of the city. I smelled the smoke and sensed the fear of people in the area. “I will bury it so only we have access to it. This city will be gone.”

“But...”

“I’m sorry, Rea. You have an hour to do what you can. Best use it.” I Warp Fived to the top of the Faro castle.

I materialized beside a Faro defender aiming at a zeppelin with a black-powder musket. The man jumped and his shot discharged well into the air, sending a plume of black smoke right into my face. I coughed and blew the smoke away.

“W-where did you come from?” he asked.

“Looks like you Faro aren’t doing so well.” Throughout the castle complex below, Faro and Korvak troops fought. The colored-sashes didn’t look to be faring too well. Far more lay unmoving at their posts and on the ground than the blue-uniformed Korvak soldiers. Zeppelins floated close to the ramparts, allowing more soldiers to leap from platforms designed for just that. Brave and ingenious in the same amounts. “I suggest you gather your buddies and flee the city. You have an hour before I reduce it to slag. Spread the word.”

The man hesitated, but something about my expression must have made him believe me. Or maybe it was the fact I stopped out of a hole in reality. He dashed off. I watched the city burn below. How many cities have I seen like this? They always smelled and felt the same. I smelled smoke—acidic, metallic, sweet. I heard screams and shouted orders. The pop of gunfire. I sensed the fear, the death, the desperation, and the doubts in the wavering energy signatures of the people below.

The claimed reasons justifying the destruction were always the same, and always produced the same result. Freedom. Justice. Superiority. Humans failed to see how they were all itch leaf over the groin. But I finally believed they had a chance to change. To live as they should have since creation. To garden the universe. But every garden required tilling. I supposed that was my role. I had to kill the weeds, clear the plot, to allow Eden to grow. Then, I had to plant the seeds. I supposed the emergence of Rea and the technology that allowed for this was divine providence. Out of all the souls to be reborn, hers was the one that could break me from my malaise. To make me act just as the means surfaced. I didn't really care about my past anymore. If I was a test-tube baby or a fallen angel as the Elder suggested, it didn't matter. I had a purpose.

I finally had a purpose.

I supposed Rea was destined to be the Eve for the new humanity. I didn't claim to be an Adam or anything so arrogant. I was just a gardener getting everything ready for those who would follow. Rea would be able to better guide the people than me. I would provide them wisdom—such as it was—and teach them their powers. Those who had them anyway. And also act as the peacekeeper. Despite what Trevor may think, I wasn't naive. I knew some we would elevate would need punishment until they finally learned. Many people functioned at such a low level I wondered how they breathed. But I had faith that even they, with enough centuries, could learn how to live without selfishness. After all, when you are immortal, your perspective changes on wealth and materials. I've outlived thousands of monetary systems. I had seen gold become worthless and wheat become valuable currency. I had seen money based on nothing but a promise and on military strength. I had even seen currency somehow

based on my threat of force. I wasn't sure how that worked because I had no intention of leaving my tower during those centuries.

But in the end, I outlived all of them. Money had no place in the future. Empires also had no place in the future.

The hour passed slowly as I watched and thought. My mental librarian was drawing and recording the battle and my thoughts. Everyone ignored me. Once a zeppelin hovered close to me, but no bullets or anything else came my way. I stood alone at the top of the Faro castle, watching the beginning of humanity's end (again) and what I hoped was the rise of something better (finally). As the time passed, I came to a conclusion, realizing it was finally time to do what I had considered many, many times over the thousands of years I lived. Everything was in place. I had my people with the Uegh—quite literally my people if they were descended from a few of my youthful dalliances—and with Trevor and with the families that lived in my tower. My tower was originally intended to be an ark for the future. I now had the means of making humans immortal.

It was time to start clearing the garden.

The hour passed, and I continued to wait. To think and reconsider. There was no going back if I went forward. Over the millennia, I had considered this plan when I was in the depths of disgust over humanity, in the depths of disappointment. I now considered it out of hope for the future. The effort would be similar to when I rearranged the planet. Working with the magma flows deep inside the earth, shearing tectonic plates, took a lot of effort. I suspected this would require equal effort if a different sort.

I could still sense Rea in the city. Perhaps I would need to give her more time. I would save this city for last. But first, the zeppelin. I reached

deep into my wellspring of power, where my mechanic worked. I really needed to thank him after this. As the energy flooded me, I wondered if I was wrapped in some sort of divine light. Not that it mattered. I was in no mood for theatrics. My librarian sat in my mind with his notebooks ready to record history through my eyes.

I wrapped myself with dense helium and floated above the city until I was level with the highest zeppelin. The crew froze in place and stared at me, an apparent human floating of his own accord. I didn't want humans to suffer. I had to do this quick. They would be reborn eventually as an immortal, perhaps on some distant world around a star on the edge of the universe. We could live long enough to go there if everything went well. Of course, I hadn't lived for a million years yet. I wasn't sure I could, but even several hundred thousand years would be a step in the right direction.

I reached out, feeling the life of the crew pulsing in my senses. No. I didn't want them to suffer or to feel anything at all. Not fully understanding what I was doing—my librarian whispered about channeling antimatter—I killed. One after another, the crew members on the ship just disappeared in a flash of heat and light. No smoke. No ashes. They were there, and then just gone. I expanded my sense of life as far as I could, and snuffed out the other crews using the same method. It was easy.

I supposed I was the God of Destruction.

I wrapped the zeppelins in shields and ignited the hydrogen they carried in their blimps and fed the conflagration with oxygen to minimize what would fall back to the earth. Following my senses, I flew toward the Korvak army that approached, taking a moment to snuff out villages and towns I felt within my range of senses. It took little effort to kill them. The

strength of the life force I sensed designated age, with young adults feeling the strongest and the young and old feeling the weakest. I couldn't tell the difference from an infant or an elderly grandfather. It didn't matter anyway. It would take some time to cover all the land. I would miss some humans, but as long as I could till most of the Earth, I could hit my goal.

The Korvak army marched beneath me. I had to be wary of the Empire. I couldn't spare energy for defenses, and if they had any of the plasma weapons the Faro had, I would be in for difficulty. I supposed I could even die if enough hit me. Although, I had my doubts. After all, I straddled a hydrogen bomb and ignited it during one of my darker moments. That hadn't ended me.

I struck, as I had with the zeppelin crew. In a flash of light and a roar of heated air, the army winked out of existence. Their weapons, and other equipment fell to the ground or stopped moving as their operators disappeared. Horses looked about in confusion as their riders suddenly disappeared. I made sure to free them from their saddles and bridles.

So I flew onward, toward the Empire first. I couldn't give them a chance to strike me, or to give any hero a chance to either. I had felt a few hero-like life signatures—stronger, steadier pulses of life that resisted my efforts to extinguish—as I flew. As I entered Korvak boundaries, I began to follow the grid pattern I had worked out so long ago. The pattern would make certain I could sense the most people with the fewest overlaps and misses. The Korvak Empire felt densely populated. Great cities belched smoke from their industrial districts. They had advanced further than any civilization had since the last space age and the nuclear holocaust that ended it. I would have to make sure humanity didn't try to exterminate itself a second time. That's the trouble with space faring

technologies. They could also be used to sterilize an entire planet. And, man, humanity came close then. Closer than even my weeding will do.

Even though I flew quickly and snuffed out human life as I felt it, the sun had set and rose again by the time I finished with the Empire. I knew missed some of the more remote villages and farmsteads, but 90-95% would be good enough. It was still better than the nigh 99% kill rate of the nuclear destruction and centuries of winter than followed. Once this was all finished, I could focus on building. I moved to the next nation and to the next, following my plan. It helped that the Earth was mostly one landmass now. A few islands existed in the Great Ocean, but they didn't concern me with their tiny tribal populations. It would take me about a week to cover all of the land, including the great central deserts that had formed when I changed the weather patterns with the tectonic shifts I had made those centuries ago. I lost myself in the task, watching the landscape and architecture of the cities change as I ended all the human life I sensed. I encountered many heroes. A few in the more populous cities must have gotten word of me because they stood in knots of energy. But I was flying too high and too fast for them.

When I finally returned to the Faro capital, I couldn't sense Rea. The city hunched as it waited its fate. No doubt word has spread of the disappearance of everyone. A week would allow some news to travel on horseback or whatever other means people had used. Signs of the battle still lingered with destroyed buildings and bodies laying in the streets. This city and my tower would be the starting point of new human life.

I winked out the life I found. The flashes of light burned like distance stars for just a moment before disappearing. I landed in the castle, feeling as tired as I had when I changed the planet. This had taken longer and

required more effort. The Earth had natural processes I used my advantage. Here, every life resisted me.

I listened to the silence. Bird sang, and insects buzzed, but the sound of human activity—the artificial, constant drone—was gone. For the second time since humanity arose, the Earth enjoyed silence. And this time she wasn't scarred by nuclear devastation. This silence had a peace to it.

Now to start the real work.

I didn't look forward to the stifling feeling the lab gave me, so I walked. It felt good to use my body, and I felt tired from my efforts anyway. Not that I needed to sleep. This tiredness was more a residue of my humanity, of the state I should've been in after so much effort.

When I entered the underground halls, my senses choked off. After spending a week sensing everything, the sudden collapse of range felt claustrophobic. I ignored the feeling and continued. The portal still stood open down the adjoining hall without me needing to extend any thought to it. I had made sure to keep the portal Rea was using open throughout the course of the week. Erik's device was really a wonder. I continued toward the lab, supposing Trevor had shared the passcode I had mentally slipped to him with Erik and his team.

Rea stood in front of the blast door with the pistol pointed at me. "I should've never trusted you."

"Hello, Rea. Did you get everyone settled at the tower?"

"I heard reports from everywhere. Trevor told me. How could you kill everyone? Everyone!"

"You have to clear the ground to plant a garden or a farm. Your people will never have to be slaves again. Now they can inherit the Earth and the stars thanks to that device behind you."

Tears filled her eyes. “No one asked for it. We just wanted to be safe with our families.”

“And now you can be.” I gestured at the ceiling. “Your people—our people—can now live forever, or at least long enough to visit new worlds among the stars. They can be safe forever. Explore forever. Learn forever.”

“I trusted you too much. I wanted to use you to help my people, but the Elder was right, you are misguided.”

“The people I killed will be reborn, just as you were, Rea. That is the cycle of the universe. Nothing really ends. Energy is neither created nor destroyed. It only changes form. So too with souls I had learned.”

“Quiet! I am not the person you think I am. I wasn’t some woman that you met centuries ago.”

“More like a centum millennium. Souls are never completely the same when I meet them again. I had wondered why it took so long for you to be reborn. Maybe it is a necessity of becoming a hero?”

She aimed the plasma rifle at me. She wasn’t being rational.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. “Edgar and Clyde were right. If they had killed you, everyone would still be alive.”

I rolled my eyes. “The failed hero cliché. It wasn’t your responsibility, but I suppose that answer is cliched too.” I chuckled. “Besides, do you think Edgar and Clyde would’ve killed me, knowing what I can do now?”

Rea fired. I opened a small portal and the uranium-antimatter round went inside to smash into a hillside. The antimatter didn’t ignite since the soil acted as a cushion to prevent the uranium from breaking its electromagnetic containment. The entire round depended on hitting something solid to trigger its reaction. Rea fired until the magazine was depleted, and I folded each bullet to make sure it didn’t hit anything solid

enough to trigger it. A smart design, but a flawed one. It assumed my skin would have adapted to the depleted uranium head and so broke the glass, so to speak.

Rea tossed down the useless pistol and extended her hand. Energy built around her in a familiar pattern. The Light of Judgment shot out. Pain exploded from my arm, and I heard a wet thump. I glanced down to see a cauterized stub where my arm had been. I had never been struck by my own weapon, so my body didn't know how to stop it. Now it did.

"I will kill you," Rea said.

Another beam shot at me, searing through my shirt, but my odd skin deflected its energy around me and into the hallway. The power tore through the granite casing and revealed black metal.

Rea fell to her knees. Sweat dripped from her face, and she breathed hard. "Nothing works against you. How could you do it? How could you kill so many?"

My arm was already rebuilding itself. I felt my flesh and bones crawling and growing. It hurt. "It's still less than humanity did to itself so long ago. You have to plow the fields before you can grow anything. Your people need you, Rea. They will need you and the Elder to help them grow. There's enough of you, along with my staff to repopulate the planet with genetic diversity. Will you lead them?"

"I...hate you," Rea said.

I smirked. "That's fine. If everything goes well, you will have eternity, or until the universe itself dies, to hate me. You will see everyone again with enough time."

Rea stood up and glared at me with tears streaking her cheeks. She wiped her cheeks. "Will you promise to not kill the Uegh as you did...everyone?"

“You are my family. Maybe, anyway.” I shrugged. “I look forward to exploring the stars together.”

Rea walked past me and toward the portal home. I chuckled and followed.

It looked like I wouldn't have to wrestle with boredom ever again.

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