The 1K
by Windryder1

Summary

William Kade and Terra Kitridge - two kids abducted from Earth among 1,000 children - have to avoid capture by the Regents and the Xox as they roam the galaxy with a pair of outlaws to figure out who and what they have become.

Notes

*Each chapter will contain a random fact about the characters or the world, for fun. :) They will always appear at the end of the chapter.
Happy reading! ^_^

Link to the video that started this whole thing, made 10/16/2018.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFQdtTeHr6E
Chapter Summary

William Kade always dreamed of traveling to space. However, his and 999 other kids's lives are changed dramatically when an unknown alien race kidnaps them hours before the turn of the 21st century.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 1

December 18th, 1999. Southern Ohio. Earth...

The chunky television in the living room played a news report through the old farmhouse.
“What’s out there? No one really knows. Man has speculated for centuries, mapped our star system, named the planets, and created gods in order to explain the vastness surrounding our blue world.”

Will watched from the round dinner table through the archway between the rooms. He shoveled a spoonful of Mac and Cheese into his mouth, barely registering the fact that it was food and not just a simple motion. The ten-year-old’s attention rested solely on the screen. His big brown eyes took in every frame behind his glasses.

“We look up at the stars, we listen to Carl Sagan speak of the cosmos, and study Stephen Hawking’s discoveries. We dream about what we might encounter among the billions of stars burning in the heavens, and we send satellites into orbit and beyond to be our eyes and ears into the unknown. The Hubble telescope has already shown us incredible images we would never have otherwise witnessed. Why? Because we are earthbound. But although we are young, we are curious and brave. In the words of Carl Sagan, ‘We wish to pursue the truth no matter where it leads. But to find the truth, we need imagination and skepticism both. We will not be afraid to speculate, but we will be careful to distinguish speculation from fact.’

“That is what drives the path-finding team of scientists and engineers at NASA. With the invention of the new Solar Nexus - a net of satellites in high orbit maintained by the International Space Station--, we can harness energy from our sun to power the world’s first inter-system ship. This ship will be capable of transporting not only goods and machinery to our closest neighbor, Mars, but transporting people, and someday, be the vessel that leads us into a new age of a lunar colony and life among the stars.

“The prototype --the Nova Star-- will be open to the public at Cape Canaveral for only one day. Scientists, astronomers, and space enthusiasts from all over the world will gather to get an up-close-and-personal look...at the future of mankind.

“Join us on New Years Eve for a live broadcast as we take you on a tour of Earth’s first inter-system vessel, and usher in the new millennium. Welcome to the new era of space flight.” He couldn’t keep the smile from pouring through those monumental words. “And now back to Fred in the studio. Fred?--”

The picture winked out.

“Dad,” Will whined, “I was watching that.”

“It’s daydreams and nonsense,” his father flicked the paper, folded it, and rested it next to his own plate.

“It’s cool! It’s a new era in space flight! He said it! We can have a space ship! We can explore the galaxy and be like Indiana Jones, but in space! I wanna fly it.”

“Indiana Jones fought Nazis. Not aliens,” his father countered.

“We don’t know that. Those face-melting angels were probably aliens. They went after the Nazis all like, ‘Rawr!’ And they were all like, ‘wuuuah! Blaarrrg!’” Will dragged his fingers down his face, making guttural sounds and pretending to melt into a puddle of goo.

“No face melting at the table,” his mother chided gently. “It’s hard to get out of the carpet.”

Will stopped the dramatics of a grim death-by-ancient-relic, and went back to eating. “Can we watch it on New Years Eve?”
“We always watch Dick Clark. It’s a tradition.”

“Yeah, but,” Will’s voice huffed with the blandness of repetition, “this is cooler than an old man! It’s space! Please, dad?”

“Charlie, let’s watch it,” his mother nudged her husband in the side. “Even if the space ship doesn’t work out, I have to admit it is pretty neat. Like when Kirk landed the Enterprise in the middle of San Francisco.”

Charlie rolled his eyes. He knew his wife was a sci-fi nerd, but he’d hoped she’d at least settle down some after Will was born. Thanks to her, he now knows most of the script to Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home, and Star Wars IV, V, and VI.

“See? Mom gets it,” the young boy gave a cocky smile in victory. “Oh! I forgot. Last night, I picked up that weird signal again over the radio.”

“I listened to it once already. It’s white noise.” Charlie said.

“No it’s not! There’s a weird blippy pattern to it.” Will spoke around a mouthful of macaroni and cheese. “Noise is all ‘kkkrrrrr!’ This was all ‘kkkrr beep boop bleep!’ and something that sounds like a million people talking at once. I read that stars emit radio waves. Maybe this was--”

“Noise.”

“It wasn’t noise!”

“I was a member of the US Signal Corp for 20 years. When I gave you my old CB radio, I wanted you to learn how to navigate the airwaves. Not keep your head in the clouds.” He picked up the paper. “Besides. If it’s that important, the guys at NASA probably already picked it up. If it’s something of serious importance, I’d have gotten a call.”

“You were their best communications guy, dad. Can you listen to it again? Please?”

“Leave it alone, Will.”

Will reached over for the remote, but his dad smacked his hand away with the paper. He grumbled, pouted, and said, “Whatever. Not like you’d believe me anyway.”

“Will,” his mother scolded.

Charlie leaned forward. “Repeat yourself, son. I don’t think I heard that,” but by his tone, the muffled slightly clearly reached him.

Will glanced up to his dad, but kept his mouth shut.

Charlie reclined back in the chair again. “That’s what I thought. Go to your room.”

Will’s jaw dropped. “But--”

“Now!”

Silenced, Will slammed the spoon against the plate. The chair scratched against the old linoleum floor as his feet thundered up the stairs. The sound of his bedroom door slamming against its frame echoed downstairs.

Molly sighed. “Every time. Why can’t you two get along?”

“We have to fix the problems here on the ground before we go looking for problems out there,”
Charlie’s face softened. “He needs to understand that. If we can’t fix ourselves, we can’t go anywhere.”

“It’s because NASA built the ship, isn’t it,” she uttered softly, knowing full well she was treading on emotional hot coals. “It’s been three years. When are you going to let this go?”

“Hughes is an idiot if he thinks this will work. He doesn’t see the big picture. He never did.” Charlie dropped the paper onto the round kitchen table -- signaling that the conversation was over --, picked up the remote, and moved to the living room to watch a football game.

Molly picked up her son’s half-finished dinner. “Maybe letting him dream is a way to fix ourselves.” She covered his plate in plastic wrap and stuck it in the refrigerator. Her son could down twice this much food in one sitting. He would be hungry later.

Will turned on his small t.v., picked up his SNES controller, and dropped cross-legged on the floor surrounded by a dirty clothes strewn across the rug. The sounds of Super Mario World covered the silence. Snow drifted lazily to the ground outside the window, so he couldn’t go lay out on a blanket in the backyard like he usually would and get lost staring up at the stars. Well, he could, but he didn’t want to get pneumonia.

He abandoned Blue Yoshi at Star Road and shut off the game, flopping to his back. He’d begged his parents for ages for an N64 or a PS1, but both had said ‘no.’ That is until his father told him he could earn an N64 if he could find a new hidden code.

It was a game his father had played with him since he was five years old. If he could find a code his father would hide within noise, then he would get a predetermined prize. As he grew up, the codes became more difficult to hear. The latest one would come soon. When the fated day arrived, he would be ready. His gaming and social acceptance future depended on it.

Curious about the other odd transmission, and a little bored, he turned on the old military radio and worked the dials carefully. He listened through monitor headphones too big for his head for a half hour before finally tossing them onto his desk in frustration. Nothing. Maybe his dad was right. Maybe it was just noise.

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December 31st, 1999. New Years Eve…

Y2K theories had circulated for years. No one knew where it started, but the concept that the Earth’s fledgling internet, and every digital system on the planet would shut down frightened some enough into preparing for DoomsDay. Most people shrugged it off and went about their lives. Others feared the global shut down would set off every nuclear weapon on the planet, wiping out humanity. But everyone knew that instant ramen manufacturers had never seen a greater profit rise in the entirety of their companies’ existence.

Will didn’t buy into any of that, no matter how much the old people in their small town ranted
about the end of days. He was sure the clocks would just turn over, and that would be it. He and his mother had gone to the local market to pick up a few groceries, but found that the paranoid apocalypse conspiracy theorists had bought all the milk, most of the meat, a ton of non perishable goods, and first aid. If those people had a specific nomenclature, he didn’t know it. His family just called them idiots. There was no way the entire world would end just because the clock ticked over to a new millennium. It was amazingly fantastic to be alive at this specific point in time - to witness the turn of the new century.

Frustrated at the lack of grocery choices, she purchased what she could, and made the trip in their SUV to the next town. Fortunately, they faired a little better. They enjoyed lunch at a local Denny’s, and made it home to have an uneventful night.

That is, until 11 pm rolled around.

Will was over the back of the couch in seconds, and had the t.v. tuned into the news. The reporter had just started going on about the details of the Nova Star. Will was entranced. He was so excited, he’d put on his long sleeved black henley with a small NASA meatball logo embroidered on the left breast to feel like he was part of it. His mother gave it to him to his father’s chagrin. “This is awesome! Hey, dad, aren’t those the guys you worked with?”

“She’s some new faces.” Charlie put on his jacket and went to the backyard to chop wood. He’d tried to let his son enjoy this, but he didn’t want to have anything to do with the Nova Star project anymore, not even watching them parade their work to the media.

Molly sat next to her son with a bowl of popcorn. Will didn’t hesitate to take a massive handful and shove it into his mouth as he watched the tour of the Nova Star begin.

With everything that her only child held an interest in -- video games, computers, that old radio-- they had their shared love of space, and Indiana Jones.

The media crew had lead their viewers through the cockpit and down to the living quarters of the ship, showing off all of the exciting wonders of the newest space-faring technology when all the lights in the house went out. It plunged the remote homestead into darkness.

The shock of sudden darkness sent fear spearing up Will’s spine. He knocked over the popcorn bowl and curled up around a pillow.

“Molly? Everything all right?” Charlie called in through the back door.

“We’re fine!” Molly called back.

“I’m checking the breaker box. Bring a light!”

“I’ll be right there!” She brushed her hand over Will’s hair. “It’s ok, Will, it’s just a power outage. Probably a tree branch took out a power line. It happens in winter.” She knew that even though he could pick up almost any insect, amphibian, and fearlessly explore the areas around their house, the only thing that would terrify him was complete and absolute darkness.

She felt her way to the kitchen to get a spare flashlight out of the junk drawer and handed it to Will. He turned it on.

“Guard the house, Indiana. I’ll be right back.” Molly ruffled his dark hair and got a second flashlight and her coat from the entryway closet. She went out back to help her husband check the fuse box.
Molly held the flashlight as her husband flicked all the switches.

“Well, the breakers check out. There’s just no power,” Charlie threw each switch again for good measure.

“I was right. It was probably a downed tree.” She turned off the light and walked out to the backyard. She folded her arms tightly around her middle for warmth. Without the convection layer of clouds, it made being outside that much colder.

Charlie put his arm around her. “So much for New Years Eve; Dick Clark, spaceships, or otherwise.”

Her eyes rested on the arm of the Milky Way galaxy draping through the center of the clear night sky. “You know, without all the lights, it’s really beautiful.”

Charlie exhaled. “Yeah.”

“What arm are we in again?”

“The Orion-Cygnus arm. We’re not facing the core of the galaxy right now, but we will in summer.”

“Will comes out here, you know. He’ll sit out here and just stare.”

“Mnhmm. You used to do that as a kid, too. He gets his love of space from you.”

“No,” she shook her head. “He gets his love of nerd stuff from me. He gets his sense of adventure from you.”

He chuckled at that. “A hell of a combination.”

“Well, look who he’s combined from,” she smirked.

He chuckled at that.

“Maybe the new century is a good time to start a new resolution. Start off small. Who knows what he can do if we let him.”

“Molly…”

“He’s smart, Charlie. Work with him. Take him to NASA. If you want him to see the world that you think needs fixing, then show him. He might be the one to fix it, but he needs you. As smart as he is, he can’t do it alone.” She brushed her hand down his face, feeling the stubble of a five o’clock shadow beneath her palm. “None of us can.”

Charlie grumbled. NASA’s headquarters wasn’t a place for kids, but she was right. It was part of the real world, and Will needed to see it. “Fine. I’ll take him after the holidays. But if anybody asks, this was your idea.”

She smiled and leaned in closely. “I’ll take full responsibility.”

He couldn’t help but kiss her and run his fingers through her long black hair. That gentle smile always warmed his heart.

The two stared up at the sky for a moment before she shivered and nudged her husband to head back.
A pulse of red light struck them in the back, and Charlie and Molly fell to the snow.

Will scooted off the couch, keeping a vice grip on the flashlight. This was his home -- he’d lived here since birth -- but in the darkness, it felt like he’d entered another realm.

The house creaked around him. He spun, looking for whatever made that sound, then shook his head. “Get a grip, you dumb dork.”

A light static and crackle split the deathly silence. He aimed his flashlight at the stairs and swallowed. That sounded like his radio. He should check it out. Indiana Jones wouldn’t run away.

Will’s feet didn’t move for a good ten seconds.

Stealing his resolve, he went upstairs to his room.

The green light of the radio exuded a dull, eerie glow throughout the room. What scared him more were the sounds coming from the radio itself. Without power, the light shouldn’t be on, let alone the radio receiving a signal. His heart pounding with fear, but his curiosity overpowering it, he turned the knob to clarify the signal. The electronic beeps were still present, but were more like morse code than before. He could pick out different letters, enough to hear ‘246. Kade,’ but any speech in the background remained unfamiliar syllables and plosives.

Kade... That was his last name, but what did 246 mean? Someone out there was using morse code and talking about them for some reason. He had to tell his dad. This was definitely not noise.

Abandoning his fear, Will hurried downstairs, put on his winter coat and boots, and rushed outside into the cold snow. His warm breath clouded in the air. “Dad! You gotta hear this! Dad!” He ran around to the back of the house to the breaker box. “Dad? Mom?” They were gone. No one was there. Will shone his flashlight on the ground. The melted snow beneath the overhang protecting that part of the house showed their footprints walking away.

He peaked around the corner. “Mom?”

His parents lay on their backs with their eyes open.

“Mom!” Will hurried as fast as his small legs could carry him to the middle of the large yard. He dropped at his father’s side. “Dad! Are you ok?! Mom!”

Neither moved, but light puffs of warm air escaped their mouths. They were alive, just paralyzed. Charlie’s mouth moved slightly. “Run,” he whispered.

“Dad, no!” Will pulled on his father’s hand to try to pull him to his feet.

Charlie’s hand trembled as he fought the paralysis. Molly twitched beside him, fighting her own battle.

A glaring light lit up the wintery yard, blinding him. Will covered his eyes and stumbled back. He blinked upward as enormous spotlights shone down on their position.

“Run!” Charlie screamed.

Will instantly took off across the yard. A red pulse hit the snow at his right, forcing him to dodge in an arch. He evaded one more hit to his left, but the third landed its mark. Will’s entire body
froze. He struggled to move even a finger, but it had him completely paralyzed.

A rush of warm air blasted the snow into swirls of white clouds around them. Will faced the lights from a craft larger than his house as a long ramp lowered and a single individual descended it quickly. It looked like a man in a dark armored uniform, but his face was covered by a protective mask with orange tinted eyewear.

Will’s heart threatened to explode from his chest as he breathed rapidly in fear.

The man removed Will’s glasses, passed a scanner over his wide brown eyes, then put his glasses back on and spoke. The language mirrored that of the transmission Will had received off and on for the past few weeks.

A sharp pain pricked in the soft space behind his right ear. Will let out a small squeak of surprise. He felt a tingle brush through his mind like someone had taken a feather and gently swiped it all over his brain. The sensation died seconds later.

The man said something to him.

Will couldn’t think straight.

Irritated, the man rolled his eyes, grumbled, and then said it again, more impatiently.

Will’s eyes shifted to stare at his mother and father fighting the paralysis.

The man said something else in frustration then gave up and picked him up.

Will struggled to fight, but his muscles refused to obey him. He watched his parents helplessly as he was carried up the ramp. The panic built, and he did the only thing his body would allow: he let out a terrified, wordless scream for help. The ramp closed, shutting his parents and home out of sight.

The ship’s atmospheric thrusters sent more snow clouds billowing through the air as it rose above the trees, pivoted, and disappeared across the sky.

All of this took no more than two minutes.

Molly and Charlie were left alone in the winter stillness of their yard. They could move enough to grip each other’s hands as the bind gradually wore off, but remained in the cold staring at the empty sky.

The power returned ten minutes later.

They continued to lay there even as the news switched over to the countdown.

“...5...4...3...2...1…”

A hot tear streaked down Molly’s face to drip into the snow.

“HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

* * *

tbc
(I really wish I could translate what the alien said as he carried Will into the ship, but it would break the mood. The alien said, “246 Acquired. Let’s go. It’s colder than tits out here.”)

Chapter End Notes

FUN FACT #1: William Eric Kade. Will is half Japanese, half American. ‘Molly’ is his mother’s Americanized name. Her native Japanese name is Kaori Yukimura. She moved from Kyoto to Ohio with her parents when she was 5yrs old. Will’s father, Charlie Kade, is a blonde haired, blue eyed American of nordic/germanic descent -, born and raised in Williamsburg, Ohio. He and Molly were childhood sweethearts.

Will was born in Williamsburg, and lived there for the first year of his life. His father moved the family to Florida so he wouldn't have to be away from home for weeks at a time working on the Nova Star project. When he left his job at Cape Canaveral, he moved his family back to their hometown when Will was 3yrs old to his family's old farmstead, and got a part time job working as a mechanic for a local shop for a little extra income on top of the money from NASA. He kept himself available to help with the project if the newbies who took over his old position got stuck on a problem. Charlie was a genius.

Will is incredibly adept at picking up minute changes in audio frequencies, and he wears glasses due to having severe nearsightedness, abliopia of his left eye, and an astigmatism. Because of that, he could never be a pilot, even though his dream was to fly the Nova Star. He doesn't like anyone to hear him, but he knows how to sing, and he's pretty good at it.

((Giving him the name "Will" was something I always intended to do. I've been very close to giving previous story characters that name for years, but none of them really fit until now. This IS my Will. This is finally his story. - but having his home town called Williamsburg was a pun I couldn't resist.

The character of Will was in my head in various formations for many years, but now this is the time for the true Will to shine.))
Chapter Summary

Will panics, unable to speak until one person pulls him out of the grip of fear - one person who becomes part of his life forever.
He, the 49 other abducted children on the Morning Star, and the fifty children on board each of the other 19 alien ships witness the grim outcome of Y2K.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(art of Will and Terra commissioned from mis-matching art - tumblr. - http://mis-matching.tumblr.com/ )

Chapter 2

Will’s world became a blur of unfamiliar sights, sounds, and smells that assaulted his senses.

The recycled air held a slight metallic tang. The bright rectangular lights lining the top edges of the corridor his attacker carried him down created a strobe effect, flashing over him as each one took him deeper into the alien craft. He was carried around a corner toward a double wide door split down the middle like someone had cut it at an angle. The man tapped on a lit interface lock and the door ´wooshed´ open.

The sounds of crying swallowed him whole.
Children just like him sat on unusually designed cots, huddled by cargo crates bearing writing that wasn’t like anything he’d ever seen in his young life. Some of the children hugged each other, and a few others stared at the walls, emotionless --or in so much shock that they couldn’t feel. A few of the older teenagers comforted some of the smaller children, and each other, but even they shook from fear. A girl about seventeen hugged a six-year-old boy crying for his mother in Spanish. She tried to console him in Japanese.

He caught bits and pieces of English through the melange of completely unfamiliar languages as well.

A small handful of men and women dressed in green and blue uniforms moved among the kids, speaking to them in a weird language, and trying to calm the ones buried in pure panic.

Will’s mind froze.

He’d been abducted by aliens.

Spirited away from his home, warm bed, and family in the middle of the night. The cacophony of whimpers, cries, and the subtle deep bass of the craft’s engines became a whirlpool of confusion.

The man laid him down on a vacant cot, then turned and said something to a woman with short dark hair, wearing a blue unarmored uniform. She nodded in understanding of his explanation, then looked to Will. Her subordinate hurried out of the room. She said something in her weird language as she walked over.

Will struggled to move, but the paralysis kept its ice-cold grip on his muscles.

The woman asked him a question, waited, then asked again. She pressed a slim metal tube to his neck and clicked it once.

He felt a pinch, but that was it.

She used another similar device, and his muscles relaxed. Whatever she administered the second time counteracted the paralysis. The first injection was a mystery.

She spoke to him with a concerned expression and reached out to touch his face gently.

Terrified, he scrambled back. He rolled and fell off the side of the bed, scooting backwards away from her. He pulled the flashlight from his pocket and turned it on directly in her face. Shining a light in the darkness kept the monsters away. Even though the room was fully lit, it was all he could think to do.

She winced from the light beam, then said something else in a soft tone, but a voice from another man working at a console in the corner stopped her. She exhaled, shook her head, and went to speak to him. Two other men carrying a thick rifle-like gun kept a keen watch on the children.

The air inside the ship was decidedly warmer than the freezing cold of his backyard, but Will shivered regardless. He scrambled back up against a crate and pulled his knees up, keeping the flashlight trained on the dark haired woman.

He couldn’t understand half of the kids in this room. He couldn’t understand his alien captors. His heart raced, and his breathing became so rapid, he felt he would pass out. The room began to tilt as he felt dissociated from reality. He’d been abducted by aliens. This couldn’t be happening. This had to be a nightmare.
One of the women in a green uniform approached him. His mouth opened to scream, but he was
locked in absolute terror. He couldn’t think, couldn’t remember his name, and couldn’t even make
a sound.

“You have to say something,” a high pitched, young voice broke through the mad rush of panic
flooding his mind. He blinked and snapped his attention to her.

The woman in green stopped and watched.

“She’s asking you to talk.” A girl about his age sat down to his left. She locked her large green
eyes on him. Strands of straight, chestnut brown hair loosed from her ponytail, and she tucked them
behind her ear. Her eyes were puffy and red from crying. “If you talk, you can understand them.
You can understand everyone.”

Will’s mouth moved as he tried to force his overloaded mind to calm down, but his voice locked in
his throat. He tried to speak, but all that came out were small gasps and sounds.

She got up and brought over a purple backpack, unzipped it, and pulled out a red CD player and
headphones.

Will stiffened when she placed them over his ears and pushed play.

The soothing sounds of Eric Clapton’s ‘Change the World’ drowned out the audio maelstrom. He
blinking. If she was trying to settle him down, it was working. He focused entirely on her-- on her
dirtied, warm-toned, multi colored striped sweater, purple jeans, and pink converse, and on her
soft, but tear-filled gaze, and the room’s full lighting on her hair. The music surrounded her and
drowned out the room. The whole scene locked into his memory. This was her song.

She waited until his breathing had calmed down and he slid the headphones off.

“I like that song. Did it help?” She scooted closer, half because she wanted to comfort this boy, and
half because she didn’t want to be alone. Something about him drew her to him. He tried to protect
himself and find a way to fight back, showing that he was brave, but he was also frightened, and
she didn’t want to see that. “My name’s Emma. What’s yours?”

“W-Will,” he managed. He licked his dry lips.

The woman in green smiled slightly and left to tend to another child.

At that moment, another teenage girl, an eleven-year-old, was brought in and laid on a cot. He
watched the alien woman remove her paralysis. The girl said something in Russian, which he
couldn’t understand. The woman consoled her as best she could, and the girl nodded.

“Say something else. You need to talk more, or it won’t work,” Emma poked him in the shoulder.
“What’s your favorite color?”

He swallowed hard. “Blue.”

“And your favorite movie?”

His mind forgot any of them, so all he said was, “I-Indiana Jones.”

“How old are you?”

“Ten… a-and a half.”
“Me, too.” She sat at his left, shoulder to shoulder, and sniffled. “You’re really scared. I’m gonna stay here.”

“No. I—I’m not,” he lied.

“Well, I’m really scared.”

“Wh-why do I have to talk just so I can under...stand...everyone...?”

As he spoke, the languages from the other kids morphed into English. His jaw dropped as the two adults conversing at the console in an alien tongue gradually shifted into recognizable syllables and plosives. Everyone in the room now spoke his native language with perfect fluency. He couldn’t look more confused if he tried.

“Hey! Shut that light off, you little shit, or I’ll do it for you,” one of the teenage boys that had originally been speaking Mandarin snarled at him.

Will clicked the flashlight off instantly.

The teenager frowned, ran his hand through his hair, and paced the room.

“I don’t get it. What’s going on?” he remembered the fuzzy feeling crawling through his brain at the moment of abduction, and recalled some of the sci-fi shows he’d watched growing up. He touched the back of his right ear, but felt only the tiny point where the needle pierced his skin. His kidnapper had spoken to him, and Will realized he had been trying to get him to respond in order for the tech to calibrate to his language. “A translator?”

“That’s what the lady told me,” Emma looked toward the adults. “She said these bananites listen to what we say, and then they help us understand people after that.”

“N-nanites. Not...not bananites.”

“I like ‘bananites,’” she frowned. “It makes them less scary.”

He could empathize with that. There was now alien technology in his brain that he had no control over. It creeped him out.

Another child about age seven was brought in and laid on a cot. The woman administered the same treatment to remove the paralysis. The little girl cried for her family and curled up into a ball on the bed. Her long black hair fell over her face.

Emma was about to get up to help her like she helped Will, when the grumpy teenager moved over, glared at the woman, and picked up the girl. She clung to his neck like he was long lost family.

Will kept his grip on the flashlight just in case. “What do they want with us?”

“I don’t know. They haven’t told us anything. I’m number two-twelve. You’re two-forty-six.”

“Two-forty-six...?” he muttered. That was the same number he’d picked up over the radio along with his last name. So, the transmission came from this ship, and they were discussing him as their next target. “How did you know?” he asked.

“It’s on your bed,” she pointed to his cot bearing a small screen at the head with the number 246 in green text. The other cots bore the exact same feature. All but two of them were green. The last two were red. These were designations by their captors to make it easy to keep track of them.
Terra’s bottom lip trembled and her fists closed around the fabric of her sweater. “I’m scared, Will.”

He bit his lip and feigned bravery, like he hadn’t just been on the verge of wetting his pants. “I—I’m not.”

“Liar,” she wiped her arm across her eyes.

“Shut up,” he muttered halfheartedly. He watched as another teenager about thirteen was brought in next and given cot 249. Only one cot remained empty. He counted fifty in total, and could finally processes thoughts clearly enough to see they were all kept in a converted cargo hold.

The last child, a blond-haired, blue-eyed ten year old was brought in a few minutes later.

Before the kid even made it to his cot, the man at the console tapped in a command into the computer, and an electric spark flashed around the edges of the wide cargo bay door. “All fifty Terrans are accounted for, captain.”

“Good work,” the woman said. “Notify the Polaris. This is going to be a close one.”

A fourteen-year-old Indian girl stepped forward. “Why did you kidnap us? What do you want?”

She gained approval support from a few of the other kids who’d calmed down enough to test their bravery.

“Anahita Navari,” the captain checked the list on the console, then stepped forward. “Two-Oh-One.”

“I am not a number!” she trembled, her anger overriding her fear. “Explain yourself! We deserve that much at least.”

“Are you going to experiment on us?” a kid with shaggy blond hair and blue eyes behind round glasses asked fearfully. “Is that what that other shot was?”

“I don’t wanna be probed!” his friend with short dark hair and blue eyes covered his own buttc heeks.

“That won’t happen,” she gestured to the blond kid, “and don’t be ridiculous,” she motioned to the other. ”That first injection was an inoculation for your safety. But you are right, Anahita,” she conceded, learning and forgoing their numbers. “We rescued you.”

“From what?” Will found the question squeaked out before he could stop it.

At her wordless order, the cargo bay door unlocked and slid upward. The blue spark from before formed a force field that kept the atmosphere locked within the ship.

Will’s eyes widened at the expansive panoramic view of space--cold, clear, and dark. The light of the sun beamed down on the opposite side of the massive cerulean orb of Earth slowly pulling away from them. … Or rather, they were pulling away from it.

Everyone turned, immediately speechless and entranced.

Will stuffed the flashlight in his pocket and slowly got to his feet. Emma stood with him. The sight completely mesmerized him. He didn’t want to blink. He could make out the Arctic circle and the shapes of North and South America covered in a spiderweb of lights. He’d never witnessed
anything more stunningly beautiful in his life.

A small fleet of spaceships the same as theirs were leaving high orbit with them like darts fired from a gun. In fact, his ship was the furthest behind. Satellites drifted by.

He was in space.

Emma gripped his hand tightly.

One of the older teenage girls with dark skin covered her mouth beneath wide brown eyes and gripped the hand of another teenage girl with red hair beside her. Both held onto each other as though that bond would keep them from falling into the abyss.

The woman’s expression fell when she answered Will. “From that.”

They watched in anticipation. After a tense moment, a slow moving blackout rolled across the globe like someone laying a velvet blanket over the continents. A few bright explosions of orange light began to flare up one after another for a full minute in sparse points, adding an eerie pinprick luminosity, and then suddenly...nothing. The planet existed in a haunting silence.

The Earth’s armageddon had come moments after midnight.

Someone screamed.

A few began crying. Some called out in horror for their parents. Most simply stood, stunned, and not knowing how to react.

Even if it physically remained, and humanity could rebuild, the world they knew was gone.

“Captain,” the officer at the console got the woman’s attention. “Terra’s power grids are offline. Multiple nuclear explosions detected, but not enough to plunge the planet into a nuclear winter.”

The woman exhaled in relief. “Thank god.”

Everyone stared, dumbfounded and absorbed in the mind-numbing shock.

“Take us back,” Anahita whispered. “I want to go home. Take us back now!”

The woman shook her head. “We can’t do that. If we took you back, the galaxy would lose more than just a planet.”

“Why?” Anahita demanded. “You haven’t given us a straight answer yet!”

“The Xox have entered the system, Captain,” the officer announced.

“Close the bay door.” She ordered. She addressed the room. “As long as all one thousand of you remain off world, Terra is safe. If we take you back...what you just saw will be a scratch in comparison to what the Xox will do.” she paused. “You won’t have a world to go back to. I’ll explain more in detail later. For now, you’re safe.”

Her com crackled to life with a stiff male voice. “This is Captain Torm of the Polaris. All ships make the jump to the first point as soon as possible. We’ll rendezvous at the fourth point.”

She pressed her finger to a node behind her right ear. “This is Captain Linell of the Morning Star. Acknowledge. Bridge. Get us the hell out of here.” Her jaw tightened. They’d almost been too late in getting the children off world.
Will watched a few of the ships disappear into streaks of light. Seconds before the massive metal barricade shut out the view of the darkened planet, he caught sight of a massive, ship in the distance as large as the moon, backlit by the sun. Its deep curves sported jagged barbs like porcupine quills, and parts of it were hollow resembling the bones of a skeletal arm. Streaks of electric blue glowed within cracks on its black surface, like it was alive. The nightmarish ship cemented in his mind forever.

He wondered if anybody else saw that.

Captain Linell’s tone lilted down to a more somber sense. “I am truly sorry about your planet. You have the condolences of the Regents, the Masakan Federation, and the entire galaxy.”

Her heart broke for them. They were humans, the same as her own people, albeit Terrans. Regardless of their birth place, they were still innocent children who had just lost everything. “We’ll bring you something to eat, try to help you adjust, and mourn the loss of your families properly.”

She smiled sadly, trying to offer them comfort, then bowed before she left to return to the bridge. The armed guard and the officer remained to watch over their precious cargo.

However, her words held very little effect on the traumatized group. All fifty children broke out into various floods of sorrow; some loud and emotional, and some torn and silent.

Will continued to stare at the cargo bay door. The last thing his parents heard was his terrified scream for help. His mom and dad, his school, the greenery of home, NASA and the Nova Star spaceship, his friends… all were either gone, or now living in a post apocalyptic world he could never return to. And he didn’t even get to say good-bye.

“Terra,” Tears spilled down Emma’s pink cheeks. “My name is Terra,” her voice cracked. “I don’t want to forget, Will.” She sniffled. “I don’t want to ever forget.”

Will wanted to jump from the ship with Emma...no...Terra, and swim back to Earth to get home so badly his chest ached. He wanted to grab his parents and anyone else who survived and save them. He was barely aware of the tears creating paths down his own small face beneath his lenses. He gripped her hand. She suddenly became a powerful, tangible source of comfort and stability when all he wanted to do was scream as loudly as his voice would allow. She was now everything he had left.

Unable to keep control over her sorrow anymore, she hugged this boy who was a stranger not long before, and cried. Will was now the most important person in the galaxy to her, and all she had left.

The Morning Star jumped smoothly to FTL, and left the Earth behind for the aliens to decide its fate.

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tbc

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Chapter End Notes
FUN FACT #2: Emma "Terra" Ann Kittridge
Terra was picked up by the Regents in a playground on her way back from her friend's house in Marina del Rey in Southern California. (What we call "Playa Vista" in our reality is part of Marina del Rey in this reality. It extended over to the marshlands and into the old Howard Hughes airfield where developments were built in the 90's. Unlike our reality where it wasn't developed for residential use until the 00's).

She was born and raised there. Her family was well-off financially. Her parents have been divorced since she was 3yrs old, and her mother had custody. The neighborhood they lived in was relatively safe, so she had the freedom to come and go from her best friend's house on the next street over as much as she wanted. The playground was on a lot between the two streets. Terra gave the Regents a good chase, but they caught her at the jungle gym. All on-lookers were too terrified to leave the house. She was picked up at 5pm pst, and never got to see her mother that night.
The one thousand children abducted from Earth learn exactly why they were spirited away, and are given a chance to say good-bye.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 3

Six hours later...

All twenty of the space craft met up at the pre-designated rendezvous point as planned. They dropped out of FTL between the fourth and fifth jump points. The bright rift closed behind them, leaving them in the middle of a stellar spectacle - a nebula swirling with hues of cool shades flecked with pink. The yellow sun of the solar system shone at its edge.

However, the most beautiful and alluring feature was the slash of the neighboring spiral galaxy.
It’s core glowed brightly, and billions of stars trailed out to either side like a shock wave frozen in time. Though it appeared close enough to touch, no civilizations alive in this galaxy had extended its reach into those stars. Not even the Xox.

None of that mattered to the fifty Terran children kept in the cargo bay of the alien craft.

Most of the crying had died down. They were all now in a state of numbness. Occasionally, someone would sniffle and sob, but it wouldn’t last long. Another person would comfort them. During the first few hours, the Regents had given each child a medical check-up in the ship’s medbay. They were told it was a basic procedure to identify and treat or cure any illnesses - like cancer, diabetes, and colds or the flu. Any child with a chronic condition, more serious condition, bound to a wheelchair, or who lost a limb were given priority to be treated on their new homeworld at the highest level. The Masakan’s prosthetic technology - along with many others- were far beyond Earth’s advancements. They couldn’t cure everything, but by comparison, Earth was in the medical dark ages.

Will and Terra were no exception to the exam. Being scanned and poked quickly for a painless blood draw within a futuristic setting (to their understanding) kept them on edge.

An eight year old in the bed across the room from them cried, “I don’t want to be here! Get away from me! I want to go home! Mom!” He had to be lightly sedated so they could complete the exam.

He felt bad for him and just as scared. He didn’t like hospitals, and this was just another one, but in space. A space hospital.

Will tried not to squirm on the soft bed when they asked him to lie down for a portion of the exam. Semi-transparent screens lit up to either side and over him. He couldn’t help feeling like he was the victim of a malicious alien abduction, prepped to be probed, implanted, and experimented on. He was abducted, yes, but the medical staff couldn’t have been more careful with him and understanding of his trepidation. His exam went smoothly. Aside from his severe nearsightedness and astigmatism, he was in perfect health.

He was told that his eyesight couldn't be repaired onboard, but he would be taken immediately to a medical facility on his new homeworld. He asked where they were sending him, but they stayed silent. Either the kind doctor didn’t know, or she was under orders not to tell him.

The start of a flu virus Terra had contracted but hadn’t shown symptoms of yet was quickly destroyed, and she was given a clean bill of health.

Within this time, everyone had formed a group, or found a single friend so they wouldn’t feel alone. It was a natural human reaction to surviving the mental stress of confusion, chaos, loss, and fear.

Terra sat with her new friend and family cross legged on the floor in front of the bay door. Will hadn’t moved much from that spot since they made the jump to FTL inside their home solar system - aside from the trip to the medbay.. He only got up once to use the single-occupant bathroom.

She shivered.

Will shifted a little to remove his winter coat and wrapped it around her shoulders. He mimicked what he’d been taught by his father on how to be a gentleman, and how he’d watched his father care for his mother.
“Thanks,” she muttered. Her eyes were dry, but she had a headache from crying so much.

He did, too, but said nothing.

She tucked her hands into the warm jacket pockets. Her fingers brushed against a cardboard surface, and pulled out a deck of Uno cards. “What’s this?”

“Oh, I forgot about that,” he took the cards and opened them. And that’s when he realized the contents of his pockets was all that remained of his life as a regular kid from a small town public school. It took him a few moments to recover from this truth. “My dad gave this to me for my birthday last year. He taught me how to play. He also taught me how to throw a card.”

“Can you show me?” she sat on her knees.

He opened the skinny box and slipped one card free from its place. It was a blue “1.” With a practiced motion, he gripped the card between his index and ring finger long ways, angled it slightly in front of his face, and flicked his wrist.

The card spun through the air on a straight path like a shuriken and struck the thick metal door. It drifted harmlessly to the floor.

“Cool,” She smiled.

He paused at that. This was the first time he’d seen her smile without the static of fear behind her eyes. Of course they were both still terrified of what would happen to them, but in this moment, he saw another reason to keep going. Nothing else of Earth or his life remained, but this person who brought him back from the cold grip of losing his mind to fear was right here beside him, He could be strong for her, and protect her, and save that smile. He could be like Indiana Jones; protecting the thing he valued most.

“Wanna try?” He offered her a card -- a green ‘4.’

She took it tentatively. “I don’t know…”

“It’s easy. Here, lemme show you. Just hold it like this between your fingers. Focus on one point on the wall, pull back your wrist, and throw it.”

She flicked the card. It fluttered up, and pinwheeled to the floor.

He handed her a blue ‘Reverse’ card. “Try again.”

She bit her lip in concentration on the point above his blue card and flicked her wrist. The card sailed through the air in an arch and hit the door. It fell directly over the blue card.

A giggle of delight left her. “Was that right?”

Will’s jaw slacked. He pushed up his glasses by the right side. “Uh...yeah. That was perfect. You’re really good at this. It took me a week to get that down.”

She simply shrugged. “I’m good at darts.”

He smirked. “Ok. Then I challenge you. Whoever hits the same spot the most wins.”

“Oh.” She accepted half of the deck.

Uno cards shot across the space and collided with the door like colored frisbees. The two poked
each other to try to throw one another off, or made faces to distract them. A rainbow pile quickly built. Terra landed three quarters of her cards. Will only landed half.

“I win!” Terra cheered.

“I let you win,” he jabbed.

“No you didn’t.”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Sore loser.”

“Am not!”

“Wanna go again?” She grinned.

“It’s on like Donkey Kong.” He hurried over to pick up the cards and handed her half the deck.

Cards flew once more. A few of the other kids even started cheering on their favorite. It was something positive to focus on, and they desperately needed that small psychological sanctuary.

Once more, Terra’s cards hit their mark twice as frequently as his.

Their audience responded with cheers for Terra, ‘get her next time’ to Will, and ‘you suck, nerd,’ along with ‘she schooled you, dude,’ and ‘I wanna play!’

Will huffed as he sat down with the cards in hand and offered her the blue ‘Reverse’ card. “Best two out of three?”

She just giggled.

“What? I don’t suck that much.”

“No,” she smiled. “You were laughing. I like it more when you’re happy than when you’re scared.” To her, that sound meant more than simple joy at a game. She’d protected the part of him drowned out by the horrors of the past few hours. This boy had saved her sanity. She’d lost everything, as they all did, but now she had Will, and he’d given her a reason to fight: a family. She always wanted to make sure he smiled and laughed. No matter what happened from now on, she wouldn’t leave him.

He shrugged. “I guess. You...you, too.”

Her smile turned mischievous as she held out her palm for her half of the deck. “But you’re gonna cry when I beat you again.”

“I should get you a bowl, ‘cause you’re gonna eat those words,” He held out the cards to her, but as she reached out to take them, the wide door sealing them off from the rest of the ship split open. 

An athletic man exuding confidence through his navy and black uniform addressed the group with his hands clasped at the nape of his back. His pistol-like weapon secured in a black thigh holster. “Everyone, if I could have your attention, please.”

All conversations stopped, and everyone turned to the three armed men and two officers that strode in. Two sentry guards remained just outside the door. Any mirth the children managed to find vanished.
Will and Terra stood as the adults took up a central position in the converted cargo bay.

“Thank you. I am Commander Antarius Flin. This is Lieutenant Cree. This ship is the Regent vessel, Morning Star. I realize you’ve just suffered through an experience no living being should ever have to face, and I respect that. You’re being incredibly brave in the face of this situation, and that is a credit to yourselves and your people.”

The dark-haired boy - Derek - spoke up. “Who are you people? What are we doing here?”

His friend, the shaggy blond haired kid, spoke up, pushing up his glasses. “The Captain explained it, but it’s still confusing.”

“She didn’t explain shit,” the angry Chinese kid from before barked. He received a chorus of ‘yeah’ from those around him. The little girl, also of Asian decent, held onto his hand. He’d realized her translator hadn’t been calibrated when they brought her in, and she was screaming in Japanese. He spoke three languages before the translator nanites were injected into his body, -- Japanese, Mandarin, and English. He helped her overcome her fear. “Our planet was baked in nukes, and all she said was ‘I’m sorry.’ Fuck that. I want a real answer.”

“Li,” Anahita pushed long strands of her dark hair out of her face and stood, facing the angry kid. “Calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down, Ana. We were abducted by aliens! Doesn’t this concern anyone?!”

A kid with a round face raised his hand slightly. “I’m a little concerned.”

“Who are you?” Someone called out.

“I want to go home!” One of the six year olds demanded. “I want my mommy!”

“Why can’t we go back?!” A teenage girl shouted out.

“Hold on. Just everyone hold on. Let’s at least hear him out. We’re still alive, aren’t we? We need to stay that way, and for that, we need to learn about our situation.”

“They’re pointing guns at us!” Li argued. “That does the opposite of making me relax!”

“Of course they are!” she shot back. “You attacked one of them after you were brought on board! We just lost everything! You’d have a gun pointed at us, too.” She turned her voice to a pleading tone, but with persuasion. “My father used to say that nothing is more dangerous than a man with nothing left to lose, so in their eyes, we’re dangerous. Please, Li... I’m as heartbroken and angry as you are, but we need to try to stay calm. For everyone.” Her eyes drifted to the seven-year-old clinging to his arm. “For Keiko.”

He grumbled, but she was right. Something in her eyes pushed its will through to him.

“A natural leader,” Flin regarded Anahita coolly. “Wise for your years, and brave. I can see why you were on the Xox’ list.”

“Yeah, about that... Who are the Xox?” Will spoke up. “Why are they after us?.”

“These are all very good questions, and you will have answers. There will be a ceremony to formally honor your families and your planet in ten minutes. Everything will be explained then. We will escort anyone who wants to attend to the observation deck. No one’s forcing you. We’ll let anyone who stays view it from here, but it’s all we can offer you at this point.”
A few grumbles and murmurs washed over the crowd.

Commander Flin stood patiently and waited.

Anahita, her new friend, Kathryn, Li, and Keiko stepped forward, as did the two boys, Derek and Nick, and Will and Terra. A few other kids numbering about thirty in total agreed to go. The rest wanted answers, but couldn’t bring themselves to take that step just yet.

Commander Flin nodded. “Very well. Lieutenant?”

“Aye sir,” The younger man gestured toward the door. “Follow me.” He lead the group down the hall that curved around and split in a T-intersection to cross into different areas. The other three armed crew members staggered themselves within the cluster of kids.

They passed by a few doors with wall panels displaying words in a language Will couldn’t read. The nanites translated for them, but did nothing for optical information. He wondered if there was tech to compensate for that, too.

The stifled sounds of their footfalls against the thick metal floor made the corridor feel enclosed despite the double-wide girth of the light grey walkway.

Will and Terra were at the head with Anahita, Li, and Keiko. They kept ahold of each other’s hands the whole walk. Fifteen of them squeezed into an elevator tucked away down a stretched out alcove in the middle of the hall --a freight elevator, or so it appeared. A smaller elevator in an alcove across the hall seemed to be for personnel only.

They squeezed in with the others. Will squinted at the bright lights inlaid at the top making the round tube too bright.

The trip to the observation deck lasted only a few seconds. When the doors slid back, they revealed another corridor the same height and breadth as the ones in the bowels of the ship, but the design was taken up a notch.

The walls were a light gray - almost white - in hue with a blue stripe halfway up each wall. Long, thin lights were wedged into the upper edges providing constant luminescence, and the doors were no longer double wide. They were a standard size that anyone could find on Earth. The floors had a soft layer of flat grey fabric that seemed like carpet with a tiny bit of plush -- enough to absorb their footfalls. The ship appeared more like people lived here rather than worked here. Had this not been an alien vessel, Will would have sworn he’d just walked onto the set of a science fiction show.

That had him wondering how much of what he saw on t.v. was based on actual experiences from people recounting their lives as fiction for entertainment.

The Masakan Federation was clearly an advanced civilization.

Lieutenant Cree lead his entourage down the hall, around a corner, and through the first double wide door any of them had seen on this deck.

What greeted them was an open room stretching out longways with a single step up by the windows. Multiple seats adorned the middle with a couple of tables. The raised area at the back created a half moon shape around the center. A wide panoramic window spanned the entire length of the room, offering an unhindered view of the nebula and the far distant galaxy.

Most of the kids gasped at the breathtaking sight.
Will’s jaw dropped. He stepped to the front of the crowd and gazed with wide eyes.

Two planets smaller than Earth drifted far to the left and right. The green world to the left had two moons - one of them broken in half-, while the other planet made of mostly water and islands wore the belt of a sapphire blue ring and pulled along one larger satellite moon than the others.

What Will couldn’t see above their ship was a third double-mooned world with a red hue. The three sister planets formed a slow cosmic dance. Eventually, the worlds would collide, but that would take millions of years. As for now, there was an immense amount of space between them.

The other nineteen Regent ships drifted in sight within the vast open space at the center of the planetary triad.

The captain stood in front of the majestic view at parade rest and faced the children. “Please, come in,” she gestured to the few seats.

All fifteen entered the room and the door closed behind them. Her short dark blond hair was neatly kept, and her sharp angular face accented her purple eyes. Despite her chiseled features, she didn’t come off as cruel. She gave off an air of superiority, like she could quick-draw that laser pistol strapped to her thigh and shoot anyone between the eyes with lightning reflexes. This was a woman who didn’t need to prove herself.

“Is that the Andromeda galaxy?” Will asked before he could sensor his awe.

“No. That’s our closest neighbor, the Aphyrius galaxy. This system is named after it because of this view. It’s about thirty thousand light years across.”

“Have you ever been there?”

A light chuckle left her. “It’s not that close.”

“How far away is it?”

“It’s about seventy thousand light years.”

“Cool.”

“Hm,” she nodded and moved to leave when he caught her with his voice.

“About the translator… um… how does it work? You’re not from Earth. How do I know what you’re saying?”

Since more of the young Terrans were still arriving, she had time to grant him an answer. “It’s programmed with a singular function to decipher language based on various linguistic syntax, sentence structures, and rules. It needs to be calibrated to your language to learn these rules and your voice. Once it has a base, it creates a network that accesses the area of your mind that understands language, and,” she thought of how to put this so a child would understand, “downloads your native speech. Every word you’ve heard is stored in your mind whether you can recall it or not, so the nanites ‘talk’ to each other in order to learn, adapt, build sentence structure and meaning, and translate almost any words you hear into ones you understand. Some species only communicate through sounds like chirps, or squeaks, or growls, so those are pre-programmed into your translator.”

“Wow. Are there aliens out there that it can’t translate for?”
“Oh yes. I assume hundreds, if not thousands.”

“How many nanites do I have?”

“The network we gave you is comprised of about five million.”

He couldn’t fathom that there were that many in his brain, even though he knew they were the size of individual cells.

“It is the most advanced version we have. Together, they contain multiple terabytes of memory,” she noticed his disbelief. “Don’t worry. It’s basic technology. If any of them malfunction and repairs can’t be made, they’re cut off from the network and flushed out of your body. You’re never aware of a thing.”

“That’s so cool.”

She smiled down at him. “You’re very inquisitive, aren’t you.”

He shrugged. He had more questions about the ship and the tech he’s seen so far, but he was so torn about how to feel that he didn’t want to say anything more.

Moments later, the rest of their group arrived. She welcomed them. “Please relax. You’re safe here.”

“Are we?” Li eyed the guards posted at the door.

“Yes,” Captain Linell stated in full confidence. “It is our duty to ensure no harm comes to you. You have my word, Li Chen.”

He choked on his words. “How do you know my name?”


“Terra,” she interrupted.

The captain tilted her head slightly down to the little girl up front wearing a coat too big for her, and gripping the hand of a boy four-feet-three-inches tall - an inch taller than her. “I’m sorry?”

“It’s Terra, now. I changed it,” she lifted her chin to look up at the captain.

She understood. This child found a way to hold her lost home forever. It was admirable, and to her, showed heart and courage. “I see. Very well, then, Terra,” she accepted the change. “I am Captain Tevara Linell of the Regent vessel, Morning Star. Allow me to formally welcome you to my ship.”

“Welcome us?” Derek, the boy with short dark hair and blue eyes clenched his fists, his voice quivering. “You abducted us!”

Keiko pushed bravery into her small, trembling voice, “if you’re aliens, why do you look like us?”

“My people are the Masaki. We have subtle differences to Terrans, but we and two other similar species are considered Human, like you: The others are the Mik, and the Kes.”

“What’s the difference?” a twelve year old kid piped up out of curiosity. “Are you super strong? Can you fly? Do you have laser vision? Can you freeze stuff?”
She smiled slightly. “No. It’s more internal. Purple eyes are not a Terran trait, but they’re as common to us as brown is to you. Aside from that, the only difference can be seen in a genetic scan. We also live about fifty years longer than you do. The other two human races have differences as well. The Mik are taller and stronger, and the Kes have mostly green eyes, are more lanky, and have incredible intuition.”

“How old are you?” someone blatantly asked.

“Never ask a woman her age.”

“My grandma says that,” Derek muttered to Nick next to him. He then frowned sadly. “Said.”

A girl around his age, Kathryn, rubbed his shoulder in comfort. She’d been raised by her grandparents, too.

“It’s a cool ship,” Nick mumbled. Those next to him just glared at him. How could he think anything was cool at a time like this? “What?” He blinked big blue eyes behind his round glasses. “You guys are gonna stand there and tell me it’s not?”

“You’re a moron, Frodo,” Li growled.

Nick scowled at him. “Don’t call me that.”

“Leave him alone, Li,” Derek defended.

“You too, Samwise. You and shortstack here don’t get it.”

“He’s coping, Li,” Captain Linell intervened. “As must you all.” These kids were all at the end of their threads, and anything could push them into an outburst. Li’s anger, specifically, was on the verge of explosion. He’d already lashed out once at one of the guards, leading them to have two armed officers guarding the cargo bay. She understood his anger. He had every right to be.

“I don’t wanna cope,” Kathryn, the slim girl with long red hair and green eyes said. “I wanna go home.”

“I’m afraid you can’t go home anymore, Kathryn.”

Kathryn didn’t know how to react. She’d always been able to go home after school, or from a friend’s house. Running freely with her favorite horse was her safe haven when things became too much.

“You said we couldn’t go back because it would endanger Earth,” Anahita spoke up. “Why would our being there make a difference?”

“Because you will make a difference. And that’s the problem.” The captain turned to view the other ships. “Each of those ships harbors fifty children from Terra; one-thousand in total. I am happy to say we were able to rescue all of you.”

“But why?” Will asked. “We’re just kids. We haven’t done anything wrong.”

“It’s what you will become that the Xox fear. We don’t know the exact reasons, but we know that they foresaw the end of their two-thousand year dominance because of what you begin. They destabilized your civilization, and were willing to destroy your planet just to destroy you. And if they find even one of you on that planet...” She let that sink in.
“...Boom?” Nick risked in a shaky voice.

“Boom,” she confirmed.

“How do you know?” Terra asked.

“Because we’ve seen it before.”

“I guess,” Will began, thinking of Earth pockmarked with nuclear explosions, “they’re not afraid of us now.”

“On the contrary. We predict they are even more anxious, because you are no longer bound to a planet.” Captain Linell corrected.

“Who are the Xox?” A fourteen year old boy spoke up from the back. “How did they even know about us?”

“The Xox are an advanced race older than our own with a hierarchy consisting of a monarch, generals, and Seers who advise the ruling monarch. They are mostly a hive mind, but can operate independently. Their seers took months to narrow the source of their vision down to your planet, and pinpoint you.”

“Oh,” he bit his lip.

Will didn’t know how to process the fact that an aggressive alien race wanted him dead for something he hadn’t done yet, or even had the slightest idea of what he could do to warrant that level of hatred. Once more, a chill passed through his core.

Terra gave him back his jacket, which he put on.

One of the crew dressed in a similar uniform, but with a single downward-facing chevron over three circles on the left upper arm approached the captain and spoke softly.

She nodded, and her subordinate left.

“The fleet is in position.”

During the Q&A, the other ships had formed a ring with their observation decks facing the center. The lights in the lounge dimmed, making the starlit nebula, the galaxy, and the planets brighter.

“Commander Flin,” Captain Linell spoke into her com, “Whenever you’re ready.”

“Aye, captain,” his voice responded for all to hear. “We’re synced with the fleet. Receiving the signal from the Polaris now.”

Captain Linell stepped aside. What replaced her was a hologram of a tall, slender woman in a long, sleeveless, white formal gown that hugged her body like it was part of her. Her long, thick, brown hair fell in a complicated braid down to her ankles covered by the dress, and wisps of stray fly-aways brushed in front of her bright purple eyes.

The recording played on a screen in the cargo bay as well.

She folded her hands gracefully at her front. “Children of Terra,” her voice held a mezzo musical purity, leading anyone who heard her to instantly cease their current activity and listen. Those three words along with her visage were enough to silence everyone in the room, ”or as you call it, Earth.
I am Chancellor Urza, leader of Masaka, and head of the Regents of the Masakan Federation. Allow me to offer my most sincere and humble condolences for your loss. No living being deserves to suffer this experience, and I am heartbroken that you children must carry the burden of losing your native home.

“I’m sure you’ve been given a brief explanation of why you’re here. I will elaborate and hopefully ease your questions.

“You are here for one highly complicated reason,” she affixed them - or rather, the recording device - in her gaze. “The Xox high command saw something in every one of you that threatened them, and they want you dead. If even one of you returns to Terra, the Xox won’t hesitate to destroy it. To take you back would be to condemn your entire race to genocide. We could not allow that.”

“The Xox used the paranoia generated by your calendar’s turn to a new century to bring fears of armageddon to fruition. Their plan was to push Terrans to the brink of extinction. With your planet reeling from devastation, the Xox would descend upon your world, and if any of you managed to survive, they would obliterate your planet to ensure you never start the ripple that alters the balance of power in the galaxy.

“I regret that we didn’t find out about your existence until it was too late to stop the Xox’ plan. In order to save you and what will remain of Terra, we had no choice but to take you away from your homes, your families, and your loved ones. We did not come to this decision lightly. But, to protect the promise of hope against the Xox Dominion rule, and to save both you, and the fourth Human species in the galaxy,...it was our only choice.”

Her voice remained somber.

“Sadly, yours is not the first planet to succumb to this fate.”

A hologram of a green and water world appeared with two orbiting moons.

“Four hundred years ago, a world called Ephypso saw its end at the hands of the Xox. Its survivors scattered across the galaxy like ashes in the wind. We learned decades later that they had discovered a new form of energy,” she gracefully brought up her right hand and opened her palm. The planet disappeared, and a hologram of a metal sphere exuding brilliant blue light formed over her long fingers. “It could be used for anything - from ship propulsion, to city-wide power grids, to weaponry, and simple batteries. And...it was stable. We were able to reverse engineer it and integrate it into our own technology, starting a new era for our people. Ephypsan cores are now used in the FTL and jump drives of almost every ship in the known galaxy.” She closed her hand and the image evaporated into a cloud of photonic sparkles.

“However, Ephypso is now an asteroid field. That’s where we learned that it wasn’t the discovery of Ephypsan particles themselves the Xox were aiming to destroy. It was the people who created the technology to harness it, and those that would grow because of those people. Their influence could change the galaxy on a far greater scale than their technology. Which is why the Xox haven’t attacked a civilization since, despite the widespread usage of this power source. Until now.”

Urza continued. “They have officially begun a galactic-wide hunt for you. As long as you’re still alive, you’re a threat to them.”

She paused long enough to exhale and segue into the meat of her message. “Which is why our ships will scatter you to various points in the known galaxy.”
A surge of confusion erupted from the group.

The same reaction echoed among the children on all twenty ships.

“Together, you’re a target and easier to find. I know some of you may have already formed bonds due to your shared trauma, and that is to be expected. We’ve anticipated that, so we will do the best we can to keep those who want to remain together as such. But there is no guarantee. For the safety of yourself, all Terrans remaining alive on your planet, and the promise of hope in the galaxy,... you must be separated.”

Will felt Terra’s grip on his hand tighten. He adjusted his so their fingers locked. A new fear washed through him. He could lose her.

Keiko wrapped her arms around Li’s waist and buried her face in his shirt.

Nick and Derek glanced to each other in dread.

Anahita looked around her as everyone suddenly feared they would lose more than just Earth. She put her arm around Kathryn’s shoulders for comfort. Her eyes and Li’s locked for a moment.

“We’ve assembled a group of volunteers willing to bring you into their homes. They will care for you as they would their own children. They are Regent officers, scientists, inventors, artists, politicians, and teachers. We aimed to keep all of the volunteers of Human origin, but that wasn’t possible. Some of you will be placed with humanoid aliens. Don’t be afraid, though. Each person has been vetted to the extreme, and all live on Federation worlds. These individuals have my utmost confidence. Those who will take you in understand you will need time to grieve.

“It will be no simple task hiding you from the Xox. Any scanners updated with Terran biological information will detect the Terran origin marker within your genetic structure. If that occurs, you will automatically obtain immunity.

“But there are those who’s fear for their own lives will override this law, and they will ignore it. For this reason alone, you must exercise extreme caution with whom you choose to share your status with.

“Every person who agreed to give you sanctuary is well aware of the risks they’re inviting. They know that saving your lives saves the lives and future of an entire species, and offers the galaxy a hope it desperately needs.

“From this point forward, you and any of the remaining people of Terra, are under the protection of the Masakan Federation. We have yet to know the extent of the destruction at this time, though if our scientists are correct, that effect is global. If there is anything left to salvage, we will do what we can to help heal your civilization. Until then, I’m afraid Terra is considered lost.”

A few sniffles escaped in the heavy, solemn atmosphere.

Urza placed he right hand delicately over her heart. “May your loved ones find peace, and may your hearts retain hope. Those who are lost will live on forever within you, within your memories, and your breath. Your threads are tied through the stars, and so the love you feel has no boundaries. Keep them with you. Always.”

Streaks of golden light burst from each ship in the circle. They converged in the center in flares of energy that increased in brilliance and size, growing stronger and more dense until its core became a solid sphere of plasma. Aureate tendrils of power crawled across its surface, mixing with glacial blue energy that began rotating slowly.
The streams ended.

A beautiful golden orb with blue ripples within it three times the size of the largest Regent vessel glimmered in the backdrop of the nebula and the distant galaxy.

“An Aurora Star,” the hologram of Urza said softly. “An orb of pure Ephyspan particles, created for you in memoriam of Terra...of Earth. It will burn for a thousand years. Let all who witness this star remember you, and the sake for which it was created.”

They watched it spin on a lazy axis, adopting its new place in the cosmos.

This was meant to be a true good-bye, and that meaning wasn’t lost on the children in the cargo bays and observation lounges on every ship.

“The paths you were initially traveling have irreparably changed forever. However, your potential has not, and those paths remain.”

Urza’s holographic figure smiled caringly. “You are the One Thousand. Nothing can take that from you. Stay true to your heart. Stay kind, and never lose hope. Thrive, and may the stars guide you.”

The hologram fizzled out, leaving the room bathed in the new small star’s golden-blue hue.

The reality that they truly could never return home, and that they faced an unknown future among aliens in a galaxy too vast for them to comprehend, reached a few of the kids. Some dropped to their knees and sobbed. Others stared in shock. All hope of seeing their families, or going back to their lives again had evaporated. And now they would be scattered like leaves on the wind to alien worlds. The heaviness of the ambient atmosphere compressed in on them.

Captain Linell retook her position at the front. “Stay here as long as you like. When you’re ready, all officers on this ship have instructions to escort you back to the cargo bay.” With that, she stepped aside to speak softly with the lieutenants present. One of them left at her instruction.

“We’re cargo,” Nick mumbled sadly.

“No,” Derek shook his head at his new friend, his new brother, then looked back to the star. “We’re refugees.”

Will stepped up to the window, the only person yet to do so, and stared out at the abyss of space beyond his reflection. A single layer of glass, or whatever material this was made from, protected him from the freezing vacuum.

There it was. A tiny newborn star, created as a memorial, a gravestone for Earth. “Captain?” his voice remained soft.

She walked up to the young boy and glanced down. “Yes?”

His sights remained fixed on the orb of pure Ephyspan energy. “How far are we from Earth?”

“Ten light years,” she matched his tone.

“That means...it’ll take ten years for Earth to see this. Why here? Why not in our solar system?”

“We backtracked through jump points as far as we could.”

“Backtracked? How far did we go?”
“Eighty light years.”

“Why?”

“Because we wanted you to have this place,” she turned her attention to the viewport. “Those worlds are inhabited by pre-FTL species. Like yours once was, they are completely ignored by the Xox.”

“Won’t the people on those planets see this?”

“Yes. It’ll be a small new point of light for their astronomers to study for the next millennia. This is for you more than your planet. This is your Aurora Star. It belongs to all of you.”

“My Aurora Star,” he whispered. He’d never thought he’d have a star, but if the destruction of his home planet was what it took to obtain one, he didn’t want it.

“F—from the sun,” Will swallowed hard, fighting back tears in the only way he knew - talk until something he said made sense, “it—it takes light eight minutes and nineteen seconds to reach us. The edge of our solar system is one-point-eighty-seven light years from the sun. Now we’re…”

“A lot farther than that,” she rested her hand on his slim shoulder and squeezed. She knew he was trying to hold back, but in her experience, that was toxic. He needed to take this moment to grieve for his life and planet. She offered him a ray of optimism. “It’s a big galaxy out there, William. It’s a hundred-and-five-thousand light years across. We’ve only explored half of it. Maybe someday you’ll go farther than we have.” She smiled, then left him alone to his thoughts.

His jaw tightened. He couldn’t speak anymore, barely able to hold it together. Part of him wanted to know what lay out there beyond the stars. That’s what the Nova Star project at NASA promised. The other part of him, the part screaming for his family, wanted to collapse.

Terra stepped up to his left. She folded her arms as a way to shield herself. “First mom and dad, now this. I don’t want to leave you, Will.”

“You’re not gonna,” he choked a sob down through the words. He was terrified of the same thing. “We’ll look out for each other. We’ll stay together forever.”

“Promise?”

“Yeah. I promise.”

She shook her head and held up her right hand. “Pinky swear.” She couldn’t risk losing anything else, or anyone. This was far too important for a verbal confirmation.

He hooked his pinky finger around hers. “I swear.” This was a sacred promise that could never be broken.

Behind them, Derek and Nick, Anahita and Kathryn, and Li and Keiko watched the memorial star. Will absorbed the scene, sealing every sense into his memory.

“Look,” Kathryn pointed at the window.

One by one, the other ships steadily broke the ring. They angled in different directions in four dimensions, and one by one, vanished into FTL, taking their precious cargo to different points in the known galaxy. He had never met anyone on those ships, but he felt the pain of losing them.
He wondered if he would ever run into any of them again, or if this single instance in time was the only moment the One Thousand would ever share together.

The Morning Star’s engines fired up, and Will watched the Aurora Star, the planets, the distant Aphyrius galaxy, and the serene quiet of space pull away into starlines taking them deeper into their new fate.

* * * *

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Chapter End Notes

FUN FACT #3 Anahita Navari
Anahita speaks Garhwali - a hilly dialect originating from Hindi. She was on her school's debate team, and had plans to compete in Delhi for a scholarship to the United States. She's fluent in English, because that is the language of business and commerce. She is the third of five children. Her favorite color is purple, and her favorite holiday is the Festival of Color. She had three dogs who were all puppies from the same litter - Parvi, Poola, and Pakah. Now she can't say that the middle child didn't get attention.
Chapter Summary

Will and Terra meet some non-human crew members on the Morning Star, and the ship is diverted back to Masaka, the homeworld of the oldest human species - the Masakans - and home of the Masakan Federation and the Regents.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 4

That night…

The children were confined to the cargo bay, but if they asked, they could be escorted to the observation deck. Many of them couldn’t sleep, as they were plagued with nightmares. The Regents assigned a small number of their crew to care for them, providing an ear, food, water, or forms of entertainment to keep their minds occupied. Eventually, sleep won out for most of them, and they curled up on their cots or against one another.
Will laid on his cot, number 246, and stared at the ceiling. It looked to be made of panels that could be removed like puzzle pieces. A set of stairs were pulled up at the side so the new occupants of the cargo bay couldn’t climb up to the catwalk.

They’d given him a clean set of clothes to wear, but he left them folded up on the floor. It was a small rebellious act against being forcefully matriculated into ‘space society,’ or whatever they wanted to call it. A few of the kids taken while they’d been asleep in their homes took the new clothes in order to feel less exposed, and warm. They were soft, but the fabric didn’t smell right.

He never thought he’d miss the smell of detergent so much.

What were they going to do now? Where were they going? He wondered which family had agreed to take him in, and if he would like them, or ever get used to being forced to call an alien world and an alien foster family ‘home.’ Would any of the kids here be in the same city, or on the same planet?

Everytime he closed his eyes, he saw the faces of his parents paralyzed in the snow watching an alien abduct their son. If they survived the apocalypse, they’d be worried about him. And he had no way to tell them he was alright.

If they survived…

Heat welled up in his chest again, and he bit his lip against it. So far, he’d managed to keep from breaking down completely. He had to be strong for himself, and for Terra.

He glanced to her across the way toward the bay door on her own cot, curled up beneath a blanket. If she’d managed to fall asleep, she’d accomplished something that cruelly eluded him.

His stomach grumbled lightly. He sighed and rolled over. They’d given him food, but all he did was pick at it. Eating was difficult, plus it didn’t taste like anything he was accustomed to.

The Regents were human, and everything on this ship was designed for humanoid anatomy in mind, but all of it was off enough to feel completely foreign.

Someone pushed gently on his shoulder.

“Will?” At some point, Terra had gotten up and made her way over. “Are you awake?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled and sat up, and put on his glasses. “I can’t sleep.”

“Me, either.” She sat on the bed. She’d taken her hair out of its ponytail so the straight light brown locks fell over her shoulders. He noticed she hadn’t changed into the new clothes either. “You didn’t eat.”

“I’m not hungry.” His stomach promptly betrayed his lie. He grimaced. He was starving, but felt ill at the same time. “I can’t eat it. It’s weird. It doesn’t taste right.”

“Yeah. But I’m hungry, too. Come with me?”

“And go where? A Cracker Barrel?”

Her lips pursed in a pout.

“Sorry,” he apologized. He’d give anything for their homemade soup right now.

“I guess they won’t let us out, though,” She kicked her feet.
Her melancholy made him steel his courage. “We won’t know unless we try.” He hopped off the bed. “Come on.”

Terra joined him and took his hand. They approached the security guard stationed at the door and looked up into the face of the 6’ tall man.

“Um...hey,” Will tried. “We,...do you...is there a cafeteria or something?”

“Couldn’t eat?” The guard simply guessed.

He nodded.

“It’s gross,” Terra murmured.

“Hm,” the guard chuckled. “Well, you’re not the first. Those pre-packaged meals they gave you guys taste like sand.” He glanced over to the console. “Hey, Jen. I’m taking Two-Forty-Six and Two-Twelve to Delleen’s.”

Lieutenant Nashae standing at the console nodded. “Go ahead,” she took in the dimly lit room, and her voice husked in empathy. “These poor kids are too worn out to try anything.”

“Copy that.” He tilted his head down to the two short children. He noticed the boy kept himself slightly in front of the girl and kept a tight hold on her hand. “Ok, you two, follow me. And stay close.”

They nodded and did as they were told.

As they walked down the hall toward the elevators, Will noticed there were scarce few crew members around. “Where is everyone?”

“It’s the night shift. And we’ve told all non-humans to avoid you if possible,” the officer glanced back.

“Why? There are other aliens here?” Will’s curiosity began to spark.

“A few humanoid ones. We know Terrans aren’t space-faring yet, so we didn’t want them to scare you.”

“I’m not scared,” Terra feigned bravery and clung to Will’s arm.

“Me, either.”

He smirked, knowing it was a complete lie from both of them. “I’d say you bunch are the bravest beings in the galaxy with what you’re going through.”

The elevator let them off on a deck identical to the design of the observation deck with screens next to the doors displaying the room’s designation in the Masakan written language.

The officer tapped on the control of a single door, and it slid open. He lead the two children through.

It was a rounded room with a back door leading to a kitchen and bar off to the left side. Tables and chairs spread out in the center, and two wide windows separated by an angled support beam with two sets of cushioned seats with a table in front of each. Starlines streaked by the windows.

Terra stopped in her tracks and squeaked lightly in fear behind him. She grabbed his jacket. They
weren’t alone here.

Two humanoid beings with blue skin sat chatting over plates of piled, noodle-like food with a Masakan male at one of the inner tables. The aliens’ gold irises instantly settled on the two newcomers.

The other three aliens - one woman with tan skin and dark brown spots angling in on her cheekbones, and with pulled-back dark hair, a normal looking human female with blond hair and four small light brown spots running down the center of her forehead, and a male with short brown hair and thick brow bones curving outward toward his ears with small spots adorning the edges - ceased their conversation.

The bartender and cook setting out a plate of food on the counter top didn’t bat an eye. She adjusted her thick bun of white hair, and continued her work. She had air-brushed blue tint lines running along her cheekbones and down the sides of her face and neck into the collar of her outfit.

Will’s eyes widened. These were the aliens he’d expected had kidnapped him. Not other humans. He was curious, but at this point, too afraid to move much further into the room.

“Delleen,” the officer called over. “Think you can find something for these kids?”

Her voice was smooth, calm, and easy on the ears. And yet that angelic tone held salt. “That makes ten to come up here so far. What did you guys feed them? Borca root?”

“Might as well have,” he retorted with a chuckle.

Delleen sighed and pulled out two plates. “Set them up by the window. I’ll fix them something warm.” She headed back into the kitchen, and Will caught her grumbling, “They’re children, not cattle. Stupid, irresponsible--”

“You heard the woman,” the officer planted his hands on their back and ushered them in.

One of the blue skinned aliens twisted his fork in the bed of noodles as he watched the kids hurry by. “Babysitting the preschoolers, Ehnik? Might as well have them running all over the ship if you keep letting ‘em out.”

His companion gave him a death glare. “They lost their planet, Pliq. Cut ‘em some slack.”

“You’re not afraid of them, are you?” the Masakan crewman needled.

“Pha! Hardly. I’m not afraid of a bunch of brats.”

He poked his fork toward his peer. “I dunno. The Xox are.”

Pliq folded his arms. “The Xox can suck my big fat toe.”

The other blue skinned alien grinned. “Censoring yourself? That’s new.”

“They’re kids,” Pliq scooped up some noodles onto his fork. “And you’re an idiot.”

Will and Terra took a seat across from each other at one of the window tables.

“Don’t listen to them,” Ensign Ehnik consoled. “The O’alli can be a little abrupt.”

Moments later, the white-haired cook placed two plates in front of the children. “One of the younger ones earlier wanted something called a ‘Pop-Tart.’ I convinced them to eat pancakes
instead. It appears these are universal.”

Will and Terra looked to each other, though neither moved. They were afraid it would contain poison, or alien food would make them sick.

“I didn’t make these to be stared at,” she urged with a smooth strictness to her voice.

Hunger won out. They gave each other a nod, as if silently telling the other it was ok to eat, and tentatively took a bite. It was delicious and reminded both of home. They dug into the pancakes with new ferocity.

“Let me know when they’re ready to leave,” Ensign Ehnik said. He tilted his head to the others. “Make sure these guys don’t bother them.”

“No one makes trouble in my bar, Ensign. If they do, I’ll show them the door.” Her tone indicated the troublemakers’ would find themselves effectively thrown out on their asses no matter how strong they were.

Knowing her, she didn’t need to prove herself for that statement to hold weight.

Will’s eyes soaked in every detail about the aliens and the room. He was both frightened and fascinated. “What...what are they?”

“Morons, most of the time,” Ehnik joked. He gestured to the table of blue skinned aliens. “Those two are a race called O’alli.” He nodded next to the woman with the dark spots on her cheekbones. “She’s Enkai, the beautiful but sassy one with the forehead spots is a Felorian, and the guy next to her who can’t take a joke to save his life is a Taldig.”

“Those are weird names,” Terra blurted out. She clapsed her hand over her mouth beneath wide, horrified green eyes a second later. “Sorry!” she whimpered.

Ehnik smirked. “They’re kind of weird people. It fits.”

He turned to leave when the starlines outside folded into the pinpoints of normal stars. “Huh?”

The others in the small galley were just as curious.

The Masakan male tapped at the com node behind his ear. “Quinn to the bridge. Report. Why did we drop out of FTL?”

A clear feminine voice responded. It wasn’t the captain’s, but the senior officer in charge while Quinn was on lunch. “Emergency orders from Chancellor Urza, Lieutenant. We’re being rerouted.”

“Where?”

“Masaka.”

He frowned and stood. Something was wrong here, and it didn’t sit right with him at all. The other officers thought it was off, too. They shouldn’t be heading back home for another five or six months. “Wake the captain. I’ll be there in two minutes.”

“Yessir.”

Without another word, the Lieutenant left the bar. Ensign Ehnik returned to the cargo bay.

The two kids watched him and three others leave. At least they now knew where they were going.
A small part of Will settled with disappointment that FTL wasn’t called ‘hyperspace’ or ‘warp,’ even though that’s what the Ephypsan drives did: warp space to allow them to travel faster than light.

“Is everything all right?” Will asked.

Delleen walked up to their table. “I’m sure it’s fine.”

Knowing the name of their destination still didn’t ease his fears or sorrow. In fact, it made it worse. Who knew how far away Masaka was from Earth. It could be on the other side of the galaxy, hundreds of light years away. He set his fork down next to his half eaten fluffy pancake and slouched.

Terra had stopped eating as well. She’d thought the same thing.

“You know, that’s an old recipe from where I came from. My favorite when I was a child always had sweet pears cooked into it. I had a feeling you’d like these.”

“What do you know about us?” Will snapped. He tilted his head up to look her in the eye, taking in her whole alien appearance. “Your planet wasn’t destroyed because of you, and you’re not stuck on an alien ship with an alien race hunting you just because you’re alive.”

She remained calm in the face of his storm. “You’d be surprised just how similar you and I actually are,” she stated softly. Her words held a vast amount of hidden history and knowledge that the two couldn’t begin to understand.

It left them confused.

“Eat up. There’s plenty more where those came from,” she tapped the table to indicate the food still on their plates, offered them both a soft smile and went back to tending her kitchen. She’d cook up a stack of pancakes, because these kids would not be the last she’d see tonight.

If they were traveling all the way back to Masaka, that meant multiple jump points, and five days of total travel. This would give her a chance to make full meals for the kids. Cooking for the crew whenever they’d come here instead of the standard galley on deck five was normal. Making these lost children decent meals gave her a way to help them, and give them something of substance to bring them comfort. She would speak to the captain in the morning. Her race didn’t require as much sleep as Humans.

However, detouring directly to Masaka worried her. These kids were supposed to be split up and dropped off on various worlds. The entire trip would have taken them six months to travel from sector to sector. These children should not be in the same place at the same time. Their separation was of the utmost importance to their safety. Something about this sudden change in plans didn’t feel right. And she’d learned long ago to listen to that instinct.

She watched the children for a while as they ate and shared very few words. They would often reach out to touch the other’s hand, and had a fork fight over the last piece of pancake. It made her chuckle. Not even a full day had passed, and the bond these two shared was already deeper than friendship or family. The thought that a soul connection that strong still existed among people as far away as the backwater world of Terra warmed her heart.

The ship jumped back into FTL minutes later.

Will and Terra finished their meals, and scarfed down seconds. Tired and full of pancakes, they were escorted back to the cargo bay, passing four more of their companions on the way.
Almost everyone was asleep by the time they returned. Terra hopped up onto her cot, took off her pink shoes and laid down. She heard the rustle of fabric as Will sat on the floor. “Those were really good pancakes,” she whispered.

“Yeah,” he had taken his shoes off and left them on the floor next to him. He yawned. “That lady was weird, though.”

“Totally. She was nice. And I liked her skin. It was pretty,” she sat up and slid off her cot to join him, scooting up next to him. He didn’t move away. Both wanted the comfort and contact. She closed her eyes and rested her head on his shoulder. “What do you think Masaka looks like?”

“I don’t know. Green, maybe? Lots of water, and forests, and cities with flying cars like Deloreans, and buildings so tall, King Kong can’t reach the top.”

“That sounds beautiful,” she whispered. “I wish my mom and dad could see it.”

“Yeah.” He just wanted to tell his parents that he was ok. “Mine, too.”

Sleep claimed her far faster than before. As long as she knew he was there, she felt safe.

He stayed up to guard her from any nightmares. Her weight on his shoulder felt reassuring rather than hindering. He fished the blue Uno ‘Reverse’ card from the deck in his jacket pocket and held it up. If only he could use this to reverse the whole ship and send them back home.

Eventually, he, too, lost the fight against sleep. He felt someone pull a blanket over them, but didn’t care to see who. He was too exhausted to care. As long as Terra was here, he felt safe. Whatever happened from now on, they’d get through it together.

Both children shared a cot from that night on.

* * * *

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Chapter End Notes

**FUN FACT #4: Kathryn Madison Everette**

Kathryn is 15. She has long red hair, green eyes, and is 5’5”. She’s Canadian - from Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia. She grew up around horses, and competed. She has excellent reflexes. The Regents had to shoot her and her horse with a bind to get her to stop running. The Regent who acquired her had to act fast and throw a portable sustaining field under her when she fell from the horse. It cushioned her fall so she remained uninjured. She was taken early that night around 7pm est.

She forms a connection with Anahita Navari.
Chapter Summary

The Morning Star arrives at the planet Masaka, but something about this reroute to her homeworld doesn't sit right with Captain Linell. Will lets go for the first time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 5

Five days later...

Within these days sailing through space, Will taught Derek and Nick how to play Uno. He and Terra held matches with them so much so that the four became friends. On the third day, the three finally convinced Will to change into the clothes the Regents gave them when his own began to smell.

The strangest experience Will had was the sonic shower. It cleaned his body thoroughly, but the
sensation only hammered home that this was an alien vessel, and he had no choice in being on it. He never thought he’d miss water so much in his life.

Although it was only a five day journey, it felt like an eternity to all of them.

The Morning Star dropped out of FTL over a green world mottled with sapphire blue water, and shimmering polar ice caps. Storms loomed in drifting white clouds swirling over the surface, brushed as though with an artist’s touch.

Will and Terra’s mouths gaped in awe, as did the other children who’d asked to watch their arrival from the lounge. They lined up at the vista window, and a few of them placed their hands against the glass, including Will.


The planet Masaka glowed in the star-speckled sky. Golden lines of light striated the surface leading in and out of cities of various sizes, and even spanned across the waters. Jutting up from the equator like an arrow lodged in a melon, was a thick orbital tether secured to a massive station. Ships of exotic, jagged, and smooth makes and models buzzed around the station. Larger space craft not suited for atmospheric maneuvering were docked, awaiting their next mission. Most of the star craft were of similar streamlined designs. Will assumed those were Masakan.

The planet’s two moons drifted on a lazy orbit in a continuous chase. The largest of the two held a light blue tint and very little atmosphere, while the other resembled Earth’s solitary satellite. Both hosted lunar bases. The blue moon glittered from rings of civilization like polka dots.

Sunlight began to drape slowly over the horizon, bringing the night-side they were headed toward a new day.

“It’s one of three inhabited worlds in this system. Pretty, isn’t it,” Delleen stepped up behind the two ten-year-olds.

“It’s like a jewel,” Terra whispered. “It looks like Earth.”

“But it’s not,” Will’s jaw tightened. As beautiful as it was, as vast and advanced, it would never be home.

“No, it isn’t,” Delleen agreed. “Nothing ever will be. A new adventure is often painful in the beginning.”

He didn’t know what to make of that, so he said nothing. The view of the approaching planet captured his amazement quickly enough to dash any reply anyway.

The Morning star dove into the atmosphere at the sunlight broke between night and day. Their destination came into view as the ship slowed to atmospheric speeds and angled toward the dawn-lit towers of a glistening city at the edge of an ocean.

“Wow,” Nick breathed in awe. The others mirrored his amazement.

“What is that?” Kathryn asked.

“New Cerilia. The capital city,” Delleen said. None of the children noticed her hair-fine change in expression to one of worry. These children shouldn’t be together on the home planet of the second greatest galactic power so soon after their planet’s destruction. Maybe later, but not now.
“You were right, Will,” Terra smiled slightly, completely unaware of Delleen’s concern. “It’s beautiful.”

A futuristic metropolis spread before them like Christmas lights on a black silk canvas. Lines of flying cars, colorful billboards, and connecting bridges between the tallest buildings wove between spires of smooth designs intermixed with older ones with rugged edges. These pierced upward like a bed of nails stretching out to the horizon. Although this was clearly a highly advanced capital city among many, the world retained vast, undeveloped areas of verdant fields, snow-capped craggs, deserts, and forests. The Masakans seemed to understand the importance of sustaining a natural ecosystem.

This was an extraterrestrial planet. A real, non-fiction, thriving and breathing civilization. Will thought this could have been Earth’s future had the Xox’ Y2K plan never happened.

Being a larger vessel, the ship couldn’t impede on traffic. Instead, it sailed over the bustling city, and looped around to an area of interconnected buildings with open balconies just outside the city limits. The Morning Star landed gently on a broad tarmac in the midst of the complex.

The crew ushered everyone back to the cargo bay. Once they had their things gathered - if anyone had originally been abducted with belongings in hand, or on their person - the bay door opened. Sunlight poured into the ship, making all fifty children squint or cover their eyes. Crisp, cool air rushed in to replace the artificial atmosphere. A ramp extended and lowered to the ground.

Derek held his breath for as long as possible, afraid the alien atmosphere might poison him.

A group of ten armed soldiers flanked two middle-aged people in neat, pressed attire. The woman gripped a silver datapad, while the man folded his hands behind his back.

Captain Linell held up her hand to keep everyone onboard the ship. She strode down the ramp with Commander Flin at her side. “Senator Degull. I didn’t expect to see you.”

“Captain,” he flashed a serpent’s smile, his voice as slick as his dark silver-streaked hair. “It’s a pleasure as always.”

“I wish I could say the same,” she responded with ice-cold loathing.

He let her animosity slip over his shoulder with a politician’s grease. “How’s your son these days? Doing well in the academy, I hope?”

“He’s among the top in his class. He’ll be graduating next year. Why are you here, Senator?” she batted down his small talk like the words were an annoying fly buzzing in her ears. “With the urgency of the message, I expected to see Chancellor Urza.”

“The Chancellor sent me in her stead to collect your cargo.”

“Then I assume she sent you with more details before I hand these children,” she emphasized the word, “over to you.”

“Are you refusing to comply with the Chancellor’s direct orders, Captain.”

“On the contrary. It is well within my right to obtain full disclosure for a reroute home regarding these particular Terrans. Their importance and safety is paramount. Our mission is to ensure they remain safe and are allowed to grow up in peace.”
“And that hasn’t changed. They will grow up to be something remarkable, I can assure you. The galaxy will owe them everything,” he dropped his smile. The wind rustled his long blood-red coat of status as though taking his words with it. “Now. Are you going to escort these...children,’ he said with false delicacy, ‘into the complex, or should I have my men do it for you?’

Everything about this screamed ‘turn around and get the hell out of there,’ but she couldn’t disobey a direct order from Chancellor Urza. This walking pile of dumpster fire excrement, however, she’d be reprimanded for disobeying, but wouldn’t hold any regrets.

“Commander,” She called back. “Escort the children inside.”

He felt as she did, and this showed in his forced dutiful reply. “Aye, Captain. All right, everyone. Let’s get you guys settled in.”

It took a little time to convince them - more-so the younger ones - to leave the ship, but they eventually moved down the ramp in small clusters.

Li held Keiko’s hand as Anahita and Kathryn walked ahead of them.

Will and Terra locked their fingers together. They wanted to make sure they wouldn’t be separated.

Derek and Nick formed their own duo.

Their first steps onto the surface of a new world had them all looking around in every direction, soaking in the sunlight, the feel of the breeze, and cementing in the knowledge that this wasn’t home.

Delleen stepped up beside the captain. “Tevara…”

Will and Terra passed by the two, though Will caught part of their conversation.

“I know, Delleen. Something doesn’t sit right with me about this, either, but this isn’t the time to make reckless decisions.”

“We never choose our time.”

“No, we don’t,” she inhaled. “We do the best we can.”

Will moved too far away to hear anymore. What were they talking about? What about this seemed wrong other than the fact that all fifty of them were here at the same time? Surely the Xox couldn’t pinpoint this few on an entire world teaming with human and alien life. He didn’t even know how they’d found them on Earth in the first place.

The group thinned into a haphazard line as the troops from Degull’s side and the crew of the Morning Star ushered them across the expanse into the wide double doors of the complex. The doors ‘wooshed’ open to greet them with well-lit halls decorated with potted plants.

The woman with the datapad hurried by. She pulled a slim com node from her green, two-toned skirt pocket and stuck it behind her ear. “Nera here… Yes, Senator Runell…I’ve made arrangements for tomorrow, exactly as planned. Should I expect you? ...Of course, sir. I understand. We’ll see you at Strafsend. I’ll inform Senator Degull.”

She quickly split off down a hallway and out of sight.
Will’s head turned to look at the serious expressions of the Masaki around him, and that’s when the reality of his situation became painfully clear. In this case, He, Terra, Li, Keiko, Derek, Kathryn, Nick, Anahita, and the rest of the One Thousand scattered across the galaxy like leaves in a storm were…

“We’re aliens,” he mumbled.

Terra gave a questioning sound as they were lead to an elevator that took the kids up in groups of ten at a time.

“We’re like the Ephypsans,” Derek elaborated. “We don’t have a home planet anymore. They call us Terrans, so we’re all the Terrans the galaxy gets to see right now. No matter where we go, we’ll always be the aliens.”

“Oh,” She gripped Will’s hand more tightly as their group entered the elevator and the door closed. “I hope others come out here so we won’t be alone.”

The soldier glanced down to Terra.

When the doors opened, a woman in an a-line cut pale blue dress with a high collar waited for them. She held a transparent data pad in her right hand. Sunlight streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows at her left running down the length of the wide hall to a door at the other end. The previous group of children entered the room.

The morning light illuminated her disarming smile. “Welcome to Masaka,” she kept her hands visible to help her guests feel as comfortable as possible. “You must be tired from your journey.”

“Nah, I’m good,” Nick said. “A little depressed maybe…”

Her smile remained. “Follow me, please.”

With the officers herding them forward, they did as they were told.

“Where are we going?” Will asked

“To where you’ll stay until the transport picks you up tomorrow morning.”

“Wait,” Kathryn held up her hand, “transport? What transport? We just got here.”

The woman stopped at the door split diagonally at an upward angle. “To your new home,” she answered simply, as though discussing the weather.

“All of us?” Anahita asked. “Together? I thought we weren’t supposed to stay together.”

“Yes. All of you. In this case, that rule is not in effect. Special arrangements have been taken to accommodate all of you.”

“Will any of the other ships be coming here, too?” Li spoke up.

“I’m sorry, but no. It’s just you.” She keyed in a code at the panel adjacent to the doors and they slid open. The interior was bright, welcoming, and filled with comfort. She waited for the kids to enter. “I know Terra wasn’t terribly advanced, so I assume you’ve experienced a sonic shower onboard the Morning Star. Am I correct?”

Terra giggled. “It tickled.”
Will, however, shivered in dread of facing that experience again. “Don’t you guys just have normal showers with normal water and normal soap? Like normal people?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, we do,” she chuckled. “What is ‘normal’ is relative in your case, however. Although sonic showers are the most efficient way to be completely cleaned, many still prefer the old fashioned way. Now, I must greet the next group. You’re allowed to move freely through this part of the complex. We’ve provided various forms of entertainment to keep you occupied. Relax. You’re safe here. Someone will come get you when breakfast is ready.”

Li shuddered a breath. “They keep telling us we’re safe, but I just can’t believe them. All this is...too well planned. It’s too thought out. It’s like they were expecting a large group of people to chill here.”

“You think there’s something more to them bringing all of us here instead of going with their original plan,” Anahita frowned. “I have the same feeling.”

“Me, too,” Will hugged his bundled up regular clothes balled up in his arms. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

“We’re kind of messed up, Skywalker,” Nick walked by him. “I don’t know what I feel anymore. Nothing is right, and it all feels like a dream. A really long, exhausting, real dream.”

“Delleen looked like she was going to throw up,” Terra hopped up on the back of a couch and dropped her backpack and regular clothes on the cushion. “I wonder what was bugging her so much.”

“You noticed that, too?” Will’s eyebrows raised in surprise. “I thought it was just me.”

She shook her head from side to side.

“Yo, look at this screen!” Derek launched himself over the other couch and up nose to nose with a flat screen embedded in the wall. A few of the other kids had figured out how to turn it on, and were channel surfing. “Holy shit, this thing has a thousand channels?!”

“Where’s the porn?” a teenager asked.

“Ew,” a cluster of little kids rang out in a chorus of disgust.

Anahita rolled her eyes.

“Yeah,” Li let go of Keiko’s hand so she could join the other kids her age. “It’s probably pay-per-view anyway.” He grimaced when the fourteen-year-old elbowed him hard in the ribs.

“Boys are so gross.”

“Guys, look at this!” Kathryn hopped down into a sunken in area of the room. The opposite wall was lined with windows, giving the living area a homey, yet sterile feel. “It’s a holographic block game!” She jumped into the square along with two other kids, and a blue cube appeared over her head.

“Get the blue ones,” a girl with a green cube above her instructed. “Marshal!” she yelled at the other kid, “I need orange. We need to fill in the line or we’re going to lose!”

“Three dimensional Tetris?” Will blinked. “Ok, that’s cool.”
“Oo!” Terra leaped off the couch. “I wanna play! I can Tetris anything. Mom bought a turkey for Thanksgiving last year, but it didn’t fit in the fridge, so I Tetris’d the fridge. Some eggs broke, but it all fit. Eggs count as a straight bar.”

In all honesty, it looked like a blast. All of the technology here fascinated him. He’d play later, though. Right now, a normal H2O shower called his name.

He headed for what he assumed was a bathroom based on what he’d seen on the ship, and walked past the sonic shower door with his middle finger discreetly over his jacket angled in the evil chamber’s direction.

Figuring out the shower controls was fairly simple. There was a single rectangular window at head height, but he could only see the partially cloudy sky. The water soothed over him, and for the first time since this whole nightmare started, the tension in his muscles began to ease. Maybe he could give Masaka a chance. Maybe. It had blue skies, green hills, cities, and fresh air. The gravity was perfect, and the solar system had one sun, just like Earth’s.

If he closed his eyes, he could pretend he was home in the upstairs bathroom, his mom making dinner in the kitchen, and his dad schooling the newbie over the phone who took over his job at NASA. Will had begun to learn how to identify different codes over the military radio his dad gave him when he was five. He’d quickly become fascinated with tech, and showed’s exceptional ability at detecting minute changes in audio. He’d wanted to go to space to hear everything the galaxy offered, and to explore it. His father wanted him to stay on the ground and use his skills to fix Earth first.

He wanted to run to his room, turn on the radio, and spend time scanning the frequencies to see if he could pick up anything new.

...Like the Masakan transmission.

He’d picked it up throughout December. They must have been communicating with one of their own hiding out on Earth, possibly coordinating the kidnapping of the One Thousand. If only he could have deciphered their code, he could have warned everyone. He knew the concept was impossible - he was just a kid, and no one would believe him -, but the invading thought that he could have done something drove its nail into his mind anyway. Why wasn’t he smart enough? Why couldn’t he figure it out and contact NASA directly?

Why couldn’t he save them?

He wanted his mom. He wanted to hear her voice, and feel her warmth, and see her smile. He wanted his dad. He wanted to be picked up and spun around and sit on his shoulders even though Will was already too big for that. He wanted his room, his crappy school, his computer, his N64 and the old t.v., his swing set in the backyard, and his warm bed with the space comforter.

He wanted to go home.

But he couldn’t. He never could again. His planet would be blown up, and everyone would die if he did - if they weren’t already dead from the nuclear explosions.

Will’s small hands planted against the shower wall and he curled over as heat burned at the corners of his eyes.

Here, alone with the rain-head shower cascading over him with its quick percussion needling against the tile, Will let go for the first time since his abduction, and openly wept. He slid to his
knees and wrapped his arms around himself. Once he’d started crying, he couldn’t stop. The anger, frustration, sorrow, shock, denial, loss, and helplessness poured out of him like blood, and he was at the mercy of their blades.

Terra had run up to the sliding door and was about to knock and ask when he’d be done so they could play with the 3D games, but stopped. She heard the muted, muffled sobs filled with agony, and her little hand lowered. She’d known he was in just as much pain as the rest of them, but he’d remained strong even when she’d broken down and tear-stained his shirt more than once.

She sat against the wall under the door controls and pulled her knees up.

Kathryn and Nick ran in to yell at him to hurry up so they could all play, but stopped when they heard the sobbing as well. They bit back their demands. They all knew what he was going through, and in their tiny group, he was the last to fold. Kathryn gently pulled Nick away by his arm.

Terra remained. Her friend could take all the time he needed to cry. She’d be here waiting. And if he needed to cry outside the shower, she’d be here for him, too.

* * * *

tbc

Chapter End Notes

FUN FACT #5: Nick Edward Alden is 12. He has shaggy blond hair, blue eyes, wears round-rimmed glasses, and is 5’ even He’s from Lockhaven, Pennsylvania. Li Chen gave him the nickname ‘Frodo’ for being short. He loves science fiction stories and wanted to write a famous novel. He had a cat named Chester, and was raised solely by his only surviving relative- his grandmother. She taught him how to sing, and he has a nice voice.

Derek Andrew McLaughlin is 14. He has dark brown hair, blue eyes, a penchant for dad jokes, and is 5’5”. He's Irish, born and raised in Dublin, Ireland. He loves video games, and wanted to be a computer programmer. He's athletic and enjoyed running in the morning. He's very introverted and didn't have any friends. Li Chen gave him the nickname "Samwise."

Nick and Derek connected since they were abducted by the Regents one number apart, and became brothers.
Chapter Summary

A second rescue is attempted, only this time the enemy lies within the political structure of Masaka, and even closer to the children. Will and Terra find out just how close that betrayal gets.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.


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Chapter 6

The next morning...

The sun rose on the city of glistening, streamlined towers. Vehicles followed pre-programmed sky lines of traffic to their destinations as usual, taking their passengers to their jobs, or engagements, or out shopping - as usual, and the megalithic city faced a new dawn as a shining beacon of prosperity - as usual.
Will had fallen asleep in his normal clothes on one of the wide half-moon couches in front of the slanted windows. The first beams of light crossed over his eyes, pulling him out of his nightmare of the gargantuan dark ship he’d witnessed before they left Earth’s solar system.

He sat up and rubbed away the sleep. Why did the sun have to be so glaringly bright?

He slipped on his glasses, shielded his eyes, and squinted through the space between his fingers.

It was morning, but the eye-blazing light wasn’t from the sun.

A vessel half the size of the Morning Star hovered like a stalking predator, shining a floodlight through the windows.

The other kids were waking up to it as well, and groaning at the pain.

Terra sat up, having fallen asleep head-to-head with her friend. She and many of the others had changed back into their regular clothing.

Mumbles of confusion and panic bubbled up throughout the room.

“What is that?” someone’s voice quivered.

“Don’t move,” Derek whispered. "Its attack might be based on movement."

“It’s a ship, not a t-rex, you moron,” Nick whispered back.

“You never know.”

Regardless, as the two closest to the windows, fear and curiosity kept Will and Terra paralyzed in place.

The light shifted suddenly to the ground multiple floors below them, and bolts of red particle beams rained down.

Everyone screamed and scrambled away.

“The Xox?” Kathryn cried out in panic. “Did they find us?”

Without the blinding light, they got a clear look at the sleek design. “It’s a Regent ship,” Derek noted.

“Why are they firing on their own people?” Nick exclaimed. “What the hell is going on here?”

They all felt helpless. They were locked in this section within the main living area exposed entirely to windows. Any of those shots could crash through and mow them all down.

Some of the kids banged on the door, demanding to be let out.

The control panel burst into sparks, sending the kids scattering back in yelps of surprise.

The doors ‘wooshed’ open, and a dozen soldiers in Regent blue and black uniforms barreled in.

A loud, dissonant klaxon blared to life as the room’s interior lighting shifted to red.

Chaos exploded throughout the room.

Children ran and hid behind couches, chairs, the table - anything they could find. A couple,
including Li, held up their fists, ready to fight, and some were too shocked to move.

The two Regents that had been assigned to guard the door were collapsed in a heap.

Captain Linell addressed the frightened kids with stern urgency. “Get your things as fast as you can and follow me.”

No one moved. They were too stunned to see the captain of the Morning Star burst in guns-a-blazing, and still trying to process the situation.

“I said move! We don’t have much time.”

“Captain?” Anahita could barely speak. “What’s going on?”

“Our divergence here wasn’t approved by the Chancellor. I’m getting you all out. Now, please. They need your leadership, Anahita.”

Speechless, the young girl’s head bobbed up and down. She swallowed to clear her voice and put on her bravest tone even though she felt the tightness of fear in her chest. “Everyone! Get your stuff and go with the captain! Stay together!”

“I knew we weren’t supposed to fucking be here.” Li demanded.

“Language,” Captain Linell scolded, then she and the officers went about helping the kids and rushing them out the door.

Li blinked. “Did you just—” he turned to Anahita, “Did she just—”

“Yup, she did. Help me.” Anahita ordered. The two corralled the kids under age ten.

Captain Linell picked up a six year old and handed him over to an officer. “We can get you all onto the Delphi. We’ve cleared a path, but it won’t hold.” She handed a gun from her hip over to Li, handle first. “It’s a Pulse pistol. Point this end at the other guy and shoot. It’s set to Bind.’ Don’t touch the settings.” She locked eyes with him to ensure he understood she was trusting him to guard the children with her on their escape.

He nodded. “Right. Like target practice back home.”

She grinned. “Exactly.”

Will and Terra were in the last cluster of kids to run out into the hall. “They’re trusting you with a gun?” Will sassed toward Li.

“Shut your pie hole, Skywalker,” Li snapped back. He pressed his palm against Will’s back to move the younger kid forward.

Will could feel his hand trembling. Li acted tough, but he was just as scared as the rest of them.

Lieutenant Nashea tapped repeatedly on the elevator controls. “It’s down. Cree, did you get to the ground floor?” she spoke into her com.

His voice came back. “Affirmative. The Bind is starting to wear off. We’ll keep them busy as long as we can. How many are left?”

“Six,” Nashea replied.
“That’s the only way out,” Terra panicked. “We’re trapped!”

“We’re not trapped,” Captain Linell rested her palm gently on the child’s small face. “There is always an alternative.” She ran back into the holding room.

Everyone followed her.

“What happened to an alternative to kidnapping us?” Li argued.

“That was the alternative,” she snapped back.

He shut his mouth.

“There’s no way out through here,” one of the kids explained. “We looked already. It’s air-tight.”

“This is a refurbished former consulate venue. All of the living quarters have an emergency escape route. Degull’s men couldn’t destroy the routes,” she pulled a bed away from the wall and tapped in seemingly random places, then placed her thumb against one point, “Nashae?”

The tall lieutenant adjusted the settings on her pulse pistol, took aim when her captain cleared the way, and fired one precise shot.

A blue bolt of highly concentrated energy impacted the exact point Linell’s thumb had covered, creating a small hole. Two more shots revealed a door panel. Two more, and the wall disintegrated revealing a single slim door.

“But they can hide it,” the captain tapped the door panel. The building’s security alert systems had locked it down. She placed a small disk against it. Ten ‘legs’ extended from it and pierced the console’s surface, emitting an ice blue electronic charge that overrode the controls. The door slid open. She put the tool back in her pocket.

Dim red lights lit up the skinny corridor beyond leading to a dark pit at the end where metal stairs descended to the floors below.

“Cool,” Will’s jaw dropped.”It’s like the secret passageway in Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom.”

“What is that thing?” Derek gestured at the small device.

“It’s an EM node,” the captain explained. “Strong enough to disable the electronic systems of any individual relay for five minutes. I put a modified one under the engine of my ex husband’s car once. It reactivated every time he started the ignition. Left him stranded at a charging station in the middle of the desert for two days before he figured it out.”

“Nice,” kathryn smirked. “Sounds like he wasn’t the sharpest crayon in the box.”

“You have no idea.” She didn’t get the reference, but it’s underlying tone was clear.

Captain Linell entered the escape route. “I’ll go first. Li, take the middle. Lieutenant, bring up the rear.”

Li paused by Will. “You got a bad feeling about this, too, Skywalker?”

“Actually, yeah, I do.”

Li brushed him off and went ahead.
Nashea paused by Will at the back, who looked like he wanted to punch someone. “Why does he keep calling you that?” she’d heard Li use it before, and this nickname seemed out of place to her, and it obviously irritated the kid.

“It’s a guy from a B-rated sci-fi movie my mom liked. Never took off.”

Everyone hurried through the hall and down four flights of stairs.

Captain Linell used the EM node again on the door leading to the first floor. The red lights cast an eerie glow in the suspense-filled atmosphere, but they were alone. She silently ushered everyone forward.

The halls were too quiet for her liking. She tapped the com unit behind her ear. “Commander. Report.”

“The last group met with some resistance, but we have everyone except you,” Commander Flin responded.

“Get ready to fly. We’re almost clear of the facility.”

“Aye, captain.”

Red strikes of pulse gun fire impacted the wall to their right. The kids cried out in fear.

“Move!” Captain Linell lead them quickly through the hall to the main doors as Lieutenant Nashea unleashed blue bolts of energy at their pursuers.

The targets struck by the blasts screamed in pain and fell to the floor. The Bind had worn off, and another so soon would be half as efficient. She was shooting to mame, and possibly kill if she had to - though she didn’t want it to come to that.

They were now running for their lives.

The light of the morning sun blazed down on the white concrete of the building’s front entrance. The eight remaining people crossed the distance to the grounded Delphi. It’s engines were lit and ready for take-off at a seconds notice. Crew members fired past them into their pursuers. Darts of blue and red lasers impacted the ground. The red didn’t cause any damage, but the blue sent up plumes of dust and grit into the air.

Lieutenant Nashae ran backwards at the rear of the group, firing deadly rounds into the ground to create a blinding dust screen to give them more cover.

Captain Linell reached the ramp and stayed at the bottom while the children ran up into the belly of the ship.

Ensign Ehnik waited at the top with a handful of crew to receive the Terran children and administer first aid if need be.

Five massive blue bolts struck the ground at the base of the ramp, sending the children toppling forward, and the captain hurled to her side. She stood quickly and scanned the thick cloud of debris. Derek and Nick coughed and sputtered out of the cloud with their arms over each other’s shoulders and back for support.

“Where’s Will and Terra?!“ Anahita demanded fearfully.
“Captain,” Commander Flin’s urgent voice pierced her ears. “More troops are closing in. We’re showing a ship en route. Degull called reinforcements. We have to leave now!”

“Not without all of them.” Linell ground her teeth.
“Captain!”

“Come on, Nashae,” she muttered.
“Captain!”

Lieutenant Nashae limped into sight with the boy in her arms and fell to the ramp.

Ensign Ehnik quickly helped them inside and laid Will at the back for medical personnel to treat him. Lieutenant Nashae collapsed. The wound in her right side bled severely. “The girl,” she gasped. “They got her.”
“Shit.” Captain Linell ran headlong into the settling dust. “Ehnik!”

Without hesitation, Ensign Ehnik followed his captain onto the battlefield.

Will’s ears rang so loudly, all other sounds bowed to its will. “Terra,” he tried to get up. She’d been right next to him. They’d been at the back running hand in hand.

Everyone on board watched the cloud light up with colorful bursts of blue. Neither side were shooting to bind or stun anymore.

Then all went still.

Tense seconds lived within the settling dust.

Lieutenant Nashae painfully sat up, taking her gun in hand, and mentally prepared herself for the pain of running while injured back into battle.

Captain Linell burst through the cloud, wounded in her left leg and carrying Terra in her arms. Ensign Ehnik followed behind. His face marred with blood. The firefight may have stopped, but in that silence, a brief fist fight had ensued.

She lost strength in her leg and dropped to her knees, setting Terra down gently on the ramp. “Go, Commander! Fly!”

“Two regent vessels on fast approach, commander,” the helmsman reported.

“Close the bay ramp. Haul ass, Mathis.”

Lieutenant Mathis expertly keyed in manual control. He would need to stay low while the ramp closed, carefully maneuver, and keep them from being shot down. He couldn’t trust that to a computer, no matter how sophisticated it was. He wasn’t the best in his class for nothing.

Will forced himself away from the nurse - who barked at him to come back - and stumbled over to drop at Terra’s side as the ramp slowly raised and the ship lifted off the ground. He pulled her up to a sitting position and held onto her tightly. “Terra. Terra!”

Her eyes fluttered open. Once she realized who held her, she clung to Will for security.

The Delphi turned ninety degrees away from the city and compound toward the less populated hills and valleys. Their escape meant staying out of metropolitan areas.
Ehnik, Linell, Will, and Terra held onto the ramp as it closed.

“Thank God,” Ensign Ehnik got to his knees. “We got everyone. They’re safe.” He wrapped his arms about both kids - one in each arm, and stood. “And so is the galaxy.” He launched himself backward, letting the inertia of the ship and gravity pull him with the children out of the Delphi.

Will’s glasses flew off his face. He cried out as he watched the ship grow smaller. He and Terra screamed just as a blue bolt struck Ehnik in the chest in the small space between them.

Lieutenant Nashae lowered her arm with a contemptuous glare, and the ramp closed. She’d hit her target, but they’d lost the children.

Ehnik gurgled a final breath with the two kids still tangled in his arms.

The nearest Regent vessel ignored the Delphi completely, and angled beneath the falling trio. Twin doors slid open at the top of its hull. The pilot, angling the ship perfectly, caught them, simultaneously activating a suspension pocket. It slowed them to a stop before they hit the floor.

The sudden shift from free-fall to a halt made Will want to throw up.

The field lowered, dropping them a foot to the floor. They had enough time to squirm out of the dead man’s arms before the doors opened. One Regent officer with sharp purple eyes and dark hair aimed a pulse pistol at them and fired two shots.

Red bolts struck Will and Terra. Only unlike the minor levels used to paralyze them and anyone around them during their abduction from Earth - the bind - this was a level higher, strong enough to stun them.

Will’s vision blurred just as he saw Terra fall to her side. He reached for her, and blacked out.

It’s mission complete, the Regent vessel abandoned its chase of the Delphi, and sped off at full thrusters towards the sky.

Betrayed and pissed off, Captain Linell got to her feet and headed for the bridge. “After them!”

The Delphi dogged the heels of the Regent vessel, dodging spits of blue pulse canon fire that needled the sky around them. Ripples of energy flowed across their shields from each impact they couldn’t avoid. They fired back. It became a race as to who’s shields would hold the longest. The chase took them between craggy mountains, over wide valleys, and skimming across lakes. Waves of blue-green water plumed outward from the force of their thrusters.

“Shields at fifty percent.”

“I don’t care if they’re at zero,” Captain Linell stood at the bridge, wounded, but feeling only anger. “We’re not letting them leave this planet with those Terrans. Focus on their right engine. That’s a Zephyr class. They’re frontal assault vessels. Major fire power and protection in the front - not much in the backyard.”

The Delphi’s pulse canons concentrated all of its firepower as instructed. A pinpoint hole appeared long enough in the other ship’s shields for a single bolt to pierce through and take out the engine. It burst into a plume of smoke. The ship listed to the right.

A second later, her ops officer called out, “They’re powering up their FTL drive.”

“They’re jumping to light speed in atmosphere? They’re insane,” Commander Flin mirrored his
captain’s stunned expression. No one in their right mind attempted this move on an inhabited world.

“Fire at will!” Captain Linell ordered. “Ground them!”

The Delphi’s firepower pummeled the ship.

The Regent vessel’s interstellar engines flared to life, and in a heartbeat, it vanished into the sky.”

The crew of the Delphi were left stunned.

“Track them.” She breathed.

“There’s too much interference,” the ops officer said. He paused. “They’re gone.”

A deathly silence overtook the bridge.

Two of the One Thousand Terrans destined to bring hope to the entire galaxy had just been kidnapped by a splinter cell within their own forces. The children would likely be transferred to a different ship, possibly two or more considering who they are, and spirited away to secrecy. It was a common move for the Regents to protect anyone of high rank under threat of assassination.

On top of that, Ensign Ehnik, one of her own and a trusted friend, had committed the ultimate betrayal not just on the Regents, but on the entire galaxy.

Captain Linell’s jaw tightened. “Make sure the Terrans are informed. They have a right to know about Will and Terra. Return to the capitol. I will contact Chancellor Urza.”

“Captain?” Commander Flin folded his arms at his back.

“We are still responsible for the lives of these children. Our primary duty hasn’t changed. We will see them safely and without harm to their predetermined homes.”

They had been sent by their leader to rescue the children from Degull after Linell contacted the chancellor with her concerns regarding the shift in orders. As it turned out, the message to divert the Morning Star back to their home planet came from Senator Degull, hijacking the Chancellor’s personal subspace transmission code. And Senator Runell was an accomplice.

She held a tacit reaction. Only vengeance rested in her purple irises. “We will find out where Degull is taking them, and retrieve them safe and alive, or we will die trying. You have the bridge, commander.”

The Delphi broke off pursuit and headed back toward the city of Cerilia.

* * * *

tbc

Chapter End Notes

FUN FACT #6: Li Chen is from Shanghai, China. Li is 17. He had a little sister, Annchi, whom he would protect with his life. He studied martial arts, but was
notorious at school for getting into fights against bullies, which often got him written up for starting the fights once he heard what someone was doing to a younger student. Li lived with his father. His mother died in an earthquake. He was looking into getting a degree in robotics in Tokyo. He was a fighter with a short fuse, getting lost in building robots calmed him down. Although he was abducted in the middle of the street among many witnesses, everyone in the area was hit by bind blasts, so many others fled. As with every pick up, as soon as Li was on board, the ship was off to the next target before any forces could be scrambled. The Regent ships were spotted all over the globe. Each extraction took mere minutes, so Earth's air forces never had a chance.

At heart, Li is a warrior and a protector.

Keiko is 7yrs old from Kamakura, Japan. She was in her home, in bed when the Regents shot her parents with bind blasts, bound her, and spirited her away.

Li speaks fluent Japanese and English. He 'adopted' Keiko because of how much she reminded him of his little sister.
The Ties that Bind

Chapter Summary

Will and Terra experience a strange shared dream on a ringed planet. They wake up in an unfamiliar place to find everything they knew gone, including their names. However now, a weird blue energy is changing them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 7

Terra...

The memory of watching her fall from the pulse shot flashed hot through his mind in time to a heart beat.

The images scrolled along currents of blue energy that spit and lanced around them in an invading force the same shade as the deadly laser bolts.
He forced his mind to slow the images down, though the sapphire energy remained, consistent and insistent that it lived there, now. Will focused until he could watch a scene where they were sitting on the floor of Delleen’s lounge on the Morning Star, looking out the window at the star lines of FTL and talking about their favorite things. She loved Cheeze-Its. They always made her smile when she ate one. He loved Cheetos. He liked to lick the cheese dust off his fingers.

Her laugh rang through his head.

Time slowed to a stand still where it existed, frozen. It began to fade away in a monochrome hue. It would be the last image he saw...forever.

No! Desperate to keep it alive, he focused all of his energy on maintaining it. He didn’t want it to end. He wanted to go home with her, and he wasn’t going to stop fighting until that happened. If he lost, he knew he would live in darkness forever, and that terrified him. Throughout all of this, Will’s one great fear was still ‘the dark.’ But now another added to it.

Losing Terra.

She was his bravery and his heart. And he found courage because he wanted to protect that.

The image slowly regained its color.

A spiral of blue energy swirled like an electrical current around it and him. It felt warm and reassuring, like it heard his cry. It brought the image to full clarity, and time began to move once more. The energy moved like it had a life of its own. It fast forwarded through the memories of his life. It wanted to learn about him, so it forced every moment he drew breath out in a flurry of images and emotions. It slowed on the week he’d been away from home until it brought him back to the present.

He sat up within the memory and pulled his way out from under Ehnik’s heavy arm. The room tilted slightly, and held a blue vignette. Nothing was clear, like it was distorted in a foggy mirror. He wondered if it was a side effect of being shot with a bind blast powerful enough to knock him unconscious.

He scrambled over to free Terra from Ehnik’s hold, only she didn’t wake up as he did. Adrenaline spiked through him in terror. What if the shot had killed her?

Terra! Wake up! Come on. We gotta go. Please wake up! Wake up! Terra!

His voice sounded far away, like in a dream. He wasn’t over the loss of his planet, or losing his family, and now he may have lost his new family, and closest companion.

A sharp pain crawled from a hot point in the back of his neck to ride the veins throughout his body. He yelped, cupping the sore area. Every part of him heated up, like he’d been forced to sit too close to a bonfire. He scrunched his eyes shut against it and curled over as the pain spread out from his veins to the rest of him, piercing through every cell, tying its threads through his DNA, through his very structure, and reaching further inward to his soul. The blue energy flowed in thin lightning-like tendrils across his skin, leaching out from his center. It wove through his mind, through the very basic elements that created him, and knotted tightly. Tears slipped from his eyes. It hurt. He fought against it, but that seemed to make it worse.

“Relax,” an unfamiliar woman’s soothing voice broke through the pain. “Breathe. That’s it. Just breathe. It’ll be over soon.”

Will shuddered a breath. It took a few moments - or hours, he couldn’t tell- for his eyes to open. He
wiped away the tears.

The room was gone, as was Terra. Everything had vanished. He wasn’t on the Regent vessel anymore. He wasn’t anywhere. All that surrounded him was a dark, empty void.

He started to panic.

A ghost-like image of his own arm illuminated in blue lifted out of his body for a second like a burn trail after staring at a light bulb for too long. He shook his arm up and down. The more he moved, the easier it became for the image to match every twitch of his muscles until it synchronized perfectly with him and he couldn’t see it anymore. “That was weird,” he mused.

[That was weird,] his voice echoed back.

That struck him as odd, as there were no surfaces for sound to reflect off. “Hello?” He called out. [Hello?] an identical echo replied.

“How anyone here?”

[How anyone here?] The echo sounded less like an echo and more like it was asking him that question. Someone else using his voice was answering by way of mimicry.

“I don’t know, but I’m scared.”

[I don’t know, but I’m scared.] The timbre of the echo held the pure emotion of confusion.

“How does it hurt? What’s happening to me?”

[How does it hurt? What’s happening to me?] The copied reply exuded uncertainty.

Will widened his eyes in an attempt to see any sort of landscape, but failed. What he could see of his body was blurry. He’d lost his glasses. The darkness swallowed them up forever. He began to panic. “I can’t see!”

[I can’t see!] It sounded slightly more panicked.

His eyes teared up without warning and burned like his mother was cutting an onion in the kitchen. When it passed, the surroundings were still as black as night, but he could now see his own body perfectly.

The new visual clarity helped to calm him down. Whatever caused his eyes to burn had fixed his vision. He looked around, hoping he could find his friend. “Where’s Terra?”

[Terra?] the echo only caught the second word.

“My friend.”

[My friend.]

“I can’t lose her. I have to find her.”
I can’t lose her. I have to find her.

“I made a promise.”

[I made a promise.] Each repeat sounded like it was accepting his truth completely as its own.

“Help me.”

[Help me.]

Will looked around for the source of the person copying him. Now he knew it wasn’t simply a reverberation of sound. He was speaking to someone else, and that person...no...presence was just as confused as himself. “Who are you?”

[Who are you?] The echo wasn’t exact this time. It put the emphasis on ‘you,’ which he hadn’t done. Almost like it was learning. And that let him know he was definitely talking to someone else.

“I’m Will.”

The echo accepted the identity in a unique, definitive, absolute tone. [I’m Will.]

Figuring he might be speaking to someone who only knew how to reply via copying him, he took a risk to engage it further rather than become defensive. Whoever it was used his words to communicate. “Where are you?”

[Where are you?]

“I’m right here.”

[I’m right here.]
He turned in a slow circle. “Will you help me?”
[Will you help me?]

If he put a sense of willingness to cooperate into his answer, the other voice might as well. And so, he accepted this other voice. “Yes.”

The reply held that same, final acceptance. [Yes.]

Pinpricks of color and lights blurred into focus in the darkness.

What replaced it filled him with awe.

He was in the open vastness of space.

Will floated among the stars in just his normal clothes, without a protective spacesuit, completely exposed to the deadly, cold vacuum. He should be turning into an icicle, and yet he was breathing, and perfectly warm.

Vibrant nebulas and glittering stars surrounded him as though he were suspended within a jeweled marble. Planets drifted lazily in the distance. The sight was more lucid than any dream he’d ever had, and rivaled the stunning views of wakefulness. He’d never seen anything more grand, awe-inspiring, and amazing in his life.

His mind reeled with confusion. Sensory overload kept him from speaking. He glanced down to try to walk in zero gravity. Logically speaking, there was nothing to push against, no atmosphere, no wind, and no physical object. Without external inertia, he would drift forever.
He tried anyway out of curiosity to see what would happen. As he moved, strings of the blue energy pulled out of his foot to coalesce into a small disk concentrated beneath his shoe. The surface was hard, though promised give if he needed it to. Curious, he stepped forward where another disk appeared beneath his right foot. He continued this way, slowly walking through space.

What was this blue light stuff? Was he creating it? Why did he feel like it was alive?

“Terra,” His voice echoed into the expanse, but no one answered back. Was she here? Did she see this, too? “Terra! Where are you?” he ran forward, then used the disks to angle himself in a different upward direction. ...No, every direction in space was up. He existed in four dimensions. “Terra!”

“Will?” her voice held a slight reverb.

“Terra?”

“Will! I’m here!”

“Where’s here?”

“I can hear you, but I can’t see you! Where are you?!”

Determined more than ever in his life, he broke into a run. He would run through all of the cosmos to reach her if he had to.

As if answering the strength of his heart, the galaxy warped, pulled itself into star lines, that slingshotted him along a roller coaster einstein-rosen bridge. It hurled him beyond planets like they were standing still, beyond solar systems, quasars, pulsars, nebulas, protostars, through asteroid fields, stellar nurseries, and around the glowing event horizons of gravity wells. What felt like ages rushed by in seconds. He screamed. Something else was in control.

Will landed effortlessly on a grassy valley. The blue disks dissipated at his feet after a few stumbled steps to keep his balance. A warm breeze swept through the soft, knee-high verdant grasses and combed through his hair. There were dark foothills to the east and a vast horizon to the west, giving him plenty of area to view the sky. Starlight feathered the edges of bulbous storm clouds over the hills.

A thick blanket of stars speckled the inky night, swelling in the center with reddish blue dust to form an arm of the Milky Way galaxy. Without any light pollution, it gave the air a cool blue tint aided by the glow of a full moon hovering over the hills.

An island floated in the sky far to the west. He could make out its shape, but not much more than that. It resembled a massive, wide shark’s tooth.

He was dumbstruck at the sheer clarity of the scene. But what made his jaw slack was a sight he’d never witnessed beyond artwork and movies.

Two thick, striated planetary rings separated by a thin dark line arched across the sky slightly to his right, cutting through the Milky Way at the edge of the horizon. It glowed softly like a watercolor rainbow dipping into the storm clouds.

His eyes widened, trying to take in every nuance of color, trying to process the enormous astrological phenomenon splitting the sky.
“Whoa,” he breathed. He didn't want to blink. There was too much to learn, too much to take in, and he wanted to absorb it all. It was so vivid and clear, it may as well be reality. He felt like he could scoop out a handful of the sky and have it drip through his fingers like paint.

The light from the starlit rings glinted in his dark eyes.

“Will!” Terra ran toward him.

He snapped out of it. “Terra!” The dreamscape became secondary. He ran toward her and hugged her tightly. “You’re ok! Don’t do that to me, you idiot.”

“Me? You got shot! I watched you. Are you ok? Are you hurt?” she placed her hand against his chest where she saw the red bolt strike him. Energy snaked across her hand as well as his shirt.

“Ah!” She recoiled and held her arm up. It didn’t hurt, but it felt like pins and needles. Oddly enough, it felt familiar. “What was that?”

“I don’t know,” he clutched at his shirt. Whatever electrical charge came out of him reacted to her—not in an aggressive way, but with a strong need to seek out and connect with the identical energy from her hand. “...I saw it before. First I was in space, and then I could run on these blue disks that came out of my feet, and then I was in FTL, and now I’m here on Saturn with a lawn.”

“I was floating in space, too,” she said. “All this blue lightning attacked me. I heard my voice echoing everything I said, and then it suddenly stopped and I was fine. Then I was thrown here.”

“Me, too. What was up with that?”

She turned in a slow circle to take in the ethereal world. “Where are we?”

He glanced around, worried now that they were stuck on another alien world alone. What would Indiana Jones do in this situation? “We should try to find someone who can help us. Maybe they can tell us where we are and help us get back to...” he cut off his words before he could say the name of the one place he could never return to.

She finished his sentence sadly. “Earth?”

He looked up at the sky and frowned. “I don’t know what else to say. If we can’t go back to Earth, then where? We have nowhere else to go.”

She stared up at the rings. “What about here? I’m not scared here.”

As mysterious as it was, he wasn’t afraid of it, either. It was like being in a memory of a place he should know.

“Once we do find someone to help, we’ll ask them to help us find Delleen and the Captain. They care about us. We can go to them.”

She’d managed to find hope where he was lost. Using that strength from her, he nodded. “Ok. Let’s go--Ah!” He gripped the back of his neck again as another shot of pain washed through him.

“Ow!” the same hit her. Both dropped to their knees.

“Heart rate is rising,” The same woman’s voice sounded like it was underwater.

“The boy is regaining consciousness,” a man said.
“Keep them sedated. One more treatment should do it for now,” an older man ordered with confidence.

“Sir. Their pulse monitors are in sync. We didn’t anticipate this.”

“They’re not in the same room. How is that possible?”

“Their vitals are erratic,” The voices belonged to three distinct people.

“Keep going.”

“Doctor, we must use caution. We can’t afford to lose them.”

“They have already returned from cardiac arrest once. They can handle this.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Phase One Inclusion at ninety percent.”

“Just a little more…”

Both ten year olds felt a sting at the back of their necks again. It brought tears to their eyes, but this time, they grabbed each other’s hands. The pain dissipated far faster than before.

“Inclusion at one-hundred percent. Phase one mergence complete. No sign of rejection.”

“Excellent,” the older man’s smile could be heard in his voice. “We’ve done it. After all this time, we’ve succeeded. Stabilize them.”

The ringed world faded back into clarity.

“Doctors?” Terra bit her lip. “I hate doctors. What is ‘inclusion?’ What does that mean? Does that mean I’m dreaming?”

Will shrugged. “I’m dreaming, too, but we’re here. I guess we’re having the same dream.”

“What if...what if we’re dead?” Terra muttered fearfully.

“We’re not dead, so shut up,” he snapped, more to convince himself than her.

She pouted.

“Sorry. Listen, we’re not dead, ok?”

“Ok,” she nodded. “We’ll be alright.”

“Yeah. We’re together, so we’ll be fine.” He took her hand, picked a direction, and started walking toward the floating island. It was a good place to start, and he wanted to see it with more urgency than the hills.

“The island looks cool. I wonder if anyone lives there.”

“Maybe they can help us. Indiana Jones would be all over exploring a world with a ring.” Will said. He wanted her to relax, and talking about his favorite adventurer always worked for him. When it got too dark, he imagined what Indy would do to escape danger.

“What are those rings made of?” Terra asked. She did the same to calm him down, knowing he
was fascinated by space, even after what happened to them.

“Anything that gets pulled into a high orbit around a planet and maintains that orbit stays there. Saturn is hit by falling ring debris all the time.”

“What kind of debris?”

“Asteroids, exploded moons, pieces of comets, ice, dust, space junk, pies—”

“Pies?” she chuckled, amused at his humor.

He instantly banked on this key to making her smile. She liked his humor. “Corndogs, bicycles, pickles, trees, clowns…”

She joined in, “Kick balls, ducks, books, giant, huge piles of --”

“--boogers!” they both laughed.

“I wish Earth had a ring.”

“It probably would in a really long time. It would be made of satellites and rockets and ...space...junk,” he stopped.

“Will,” her hand slipped from his. “I feel sick.”

His eyes widened as he saw her start to fade away.

“Will, help!”

“Terra?” He reached out for her seconds before she disappeared. In that moment, he felt weak and light headed. “Terra!”

****

Will’s eyes snapped open.

The round ceiling light above was turned off, but even so, the white room still reflected anything that exuded illumination.

He rubbed the back of his neck from residual phantom pain from the dream.

The dream…

He sat up and looked around. He’d been put into soft, white pants and a long sleeve shirt, and he was barefoot. The room had two seats and one oval shaped bed with a side table bearing a cup and water pitcher on it, but nothing more in furnishing. It looked like a hospital waiting room, though was definitely of alien design. That thrust it home more that he wasn’t on Earth.

Plus, everything was in full crystal clarity, and he wasn’t wearing his glasses.

He hopped off the bed and chugged a cup of water.

One large window spanned the wall to his right, revealing a room of identical design.

Terra sat on her bed looking around in the same confused state.
“Terra!” He banged his fist against the window.

The noise caught her attention. “Will!” She was at the window in seconds. “Are you ok? I had the freakiest dream.”

“Me, too. You were there --”

“--and there was a planet--”

“With a ring,” they both said.

He stopped for a beat. “Freaky.” He looked around. “Do you know where we are?”

She shook her head. “uh-uh. I just woke up. Hey. Where are your glasses?”

“I lost them, but I can see. I don’t know how.” He hated that they were separated by a wall for no reason. “Hang on. I’m going to try something. Back up.”

She did so as he pulled one of the chairs over, and strained to lift it. This looked easier on t.v. He managed to hoist the chair a few inches off the floor, but he was too weak to do more than a feeble toss. He panted, feeling sick and covered his stomach.

“It’s ok. Stop,” Terra placed her hand against the window. “You tried.”

He stumbled over and rested his hand against hers with the glass separating them. “I’m ok. Don’t worry. I’ll break through this. I’ll try again and--huh? Whoa...”

In that moment, fine tendrils of blue energy, the same from their dream, leached out of their skin toward each other as though attracted by magnets.

Will jerked his hand away, watching the lines dissipate. It left a warm, tingling sensation in the tips of his fingers. A dream was one thing, but he was awake now, and this has never happened before. He knew he hadn’t hit puberty yet, but from what he was told to expect, blue lightning coming out of his body wasn’t on that list.

Curiosity’s strength claimed him again, as it usually did. He placed his palm against the glass. Terra mirrored him. Both were too shocked to speak as the energy reached through the glass like it didn’t exist and wrapped around their hands. The threads from her absorbed into his skin.

Will’s nausea gradually disappeared.

The energy seemed to dance delicately with a life of its own fed by the two children. They watched it, entranced.

The sensation of it pulling out of her arm made her cry out in panic. She pulled away and stumbled back. The threads melted back into her. “What was that? What’s happening to us?” she wrapped her arms around herself.

Will stared at his hand as the energy disappeared. There’s no way that could be real. It was a dream. Elements of a dream couldn’t cross over into reality. It was impossible. But he couldn’t deny that he felt much better. “Whatever you did, I think it fixed me.”

She stepped forward, afraid to touch the glass again. “How? I...I just wanted you to be ok.”

“I don’t know. But we need to get out of here and find Captain Linell. She’ll know what to do.”
“Captain Tevara Linell is dead,” that same confident male voice boomed its baritone behind him.

Will spun around at the man who appeared from the door in his room. “What do you know, you jerkface! Captain Linell isn’t dead. She tried to save us.”

“No, she tried to kidnap you,” he schooled the young boy as though he’d answered every question on a test incorrectly. “Linell, Flin, Delleen, Mathis, Quin, and Nashea disobeyed their direct orders to keep you safe. She was going to deliver you all to the Xox.”

“That’s a lie,” Terra pounded her fist against the glass. “They would never do that!”

“You’ve been a refugee from that backwater planet for two weeks, and you already know the captain and her subordinates like you’re old friends, hm?” He smiled.

“It’s only been six days,” Will argued.

“You’ve been kept in a coma for one galactic standard week,” he explained. “To give you a time reference, by a Terran calendar, that would be...two weeks.”

Will’s jaw dropped.

“You were feeling sick just now, yes? It’s because you haven’t had solid food in your stomach for that entire time. Over exertion will make you ill. I suggest you refrain from extraneous activity for a while”

“You’re a horrible man,” Terra spat.

“My dear, that’s where you’re wrong. You both will start to feel hungry very soon, so we’ve prepared meals for you of specific nutritional value to compensate for the demands of your current physiology.”

She grit her teeth. “Get away from Will! Don’t touch him, or I’ll--!”

“Turn down the heat, Two-Twelve, I’m not going to hurt him or you. In fact, I’ve saved you. Were it not for the sacrifice of Ensign Ehnik, you’d be at Linell’s mercy and halfway across the galaxy by now.”

Will dove at the side table and snatched up a thin hand-sized tech tube to use as a weapon. “Who are you?”

“I’m Doctor D’Sev Barakan. I’m the one who gave you a purpose.”

“We already have one. W-we’re The One Thousand. We’re--”

“--Going to start an uprising of hope in the galaxy that might take hold in one or two generations? It was enough to scare the pants off the Xox into blowing your planet to incremental bits, is that right?”

“Blow it up…?” Will whispered.

“They didn’t blow it up,” Terra argued. “Earth is still there.”

“No,” the doctor reached out fearlessly and swiped the cylinder from Will’s hand. He tapped a button on the side and a transparent screen pulled out like a scroll, locking to form a solid data pad. He pulled up a video. “It’s not.” He handed it back.
Will took it. Terra watched from over his shoulder. The Earth lit up like a coal in a furnace, cracked, splintered, and shattered. Pieces of the once green and blue world hurtled into space.

“The Regents left a ship hidden in the Terran system to observe the Xox, then check on your people once they’d gone. This is what happened. I’m afraid the one thousand of you rescued are the only Terran Humans left in existence.”

“You’re lying. This..this is CGI. It’s fake. Sci-fi shows do this all the time. I’ve been watching shows like this since I was a baby,” Will narrowed his eyes.

“It is not ‘Cee-gee-eye,’ I assure you.”

Will watched it loop, showing the explosion over and over. “It’s a lie. It’s not real!” Blue electricity sparked over his hand as he threw the tech at the scientist. “You’re a liar!

It shattered against the wall to Doctor Barakan’s left. He glanced down at the dark grey pieces. “Hm. Interesting. Do that again, Two-Forty-Six.”

“Earth is still there, and Captain Linell will find you and kick your ass!” Terra shouted.

“Language,” the doctor scolded lightly. “If you want to know about the good captain, check your datadot, Two-Twelve.”

“My name is Terra,” her fists clenched.

“I’m aware you changed it,” he dismissed the information. He noticed the power flicker over her hands, and simply waited.

Terra ran to get her own datapad and turned it on. The same footage played. “No,” she shook her head violently and dropped the tech. It clattered against the tile floor.

“You’ve been lied to from the start,” the doctor purred. “We couldn’t reroute the other ships, but we could reroute yours thanks to Ehnik. I’m sorry about the rest of the Terrans on the Morning Star, but we were only able to rescue you. The Regents lied to you. They lied to everyone, even Chancellor Urza. And that Ephypsan with them can never be trusted.”


“Delleen. Her planet was destroyed by the Xox four hundred years ago. Sure, the Regents placed an Aurora Star there, but that will never be enough for her. She wants to eliminate the Xox, and she was willing to sacrifice your lives to do so.”

That’s what Delleen had meant when she’d said they were more alike than he’d thought.

“No,” Terra cried. “Stop it, please.”

“You don’t believe me? I figured you’d be brainwashed. They’re good at their jobs. Two-Twelve, push the red button on your datadot. It’ll bring up a news feed.”

She tentatively did as she was told and moved so that Will could watch from his side of the glass.

The female Masakan reporter from GNN (the Galactic News Network) spoke in a stiff, standard media tone. “Tevara Linell, former captain of the Morning Star and one of the fleet’s most notable names, was apprehended today in hiding for the attempted kidnapping and relocation of fifty of the One Thousand - the Terran children hunted by the Xox. The Regent high council convicted her and
her subordinates of high treason to Chancellor Urza, and labeled them as traitors to the galaxy. They are scheduled to be executed within the week.

“Thankfully, all the Terrans were rescued unharmed. They were immediately sent to their predetermined homes across the galaxy, and allowed to live their lives in peace.”

The transmission cut out.

Terra stared at her reflection in the dark screen.

“That was a week ago,” the doctor added.

Her hands trembled. “But they were so nice to us. Delleen gave us pancakes, and...and the captain told stories of her adventures.”

Will placed both palms against the glass. “Don’t believe it, Terra. It has to be a lie. The captain is still out there, and so is Earth. She’ll rescue us,” Will tried, but he was falling as well.

Doctor Barakan kept his distance. “I’m sorry. I wish it was a lie.”

Will backed up against the glass. “Everyone... Nick, and Derek, Anahita, Kathryn, Li, Keiko...they’ve all been sent to other worlds?”

He nodded. “Scattered across the known galaxy like dust. It’s unlikely that you will ever see any of them again.”

“W-what about us? What’s going to happen to us?”

“This is your new home, now. You two have a far greater destiny to play out.” The scientist’s smile grew almost to his bushy brown eyebrows.

Will lifted his hand. The energy wasn’t visible anymore, but he could feel something present, alive within the cells of his body. It was more a sense than a physical thing. “What did you do to us?”

“I am giving you a gift. You have a rare opportunity to avenge your planet, your families, your friends from the Morning Star, and get revenge on everyone who betrayed you. I am giving you the power to fight back.”

The only person Will truly had now was on the other side of this window. He felt the energy from before tingle up his spine. It made him shiver. “Screw you!” He shouted, clenching his fists against the sensation. “I’m not going to do anything you say! You’re a liar! I hope you trip and fall into a huge steaming pile of dog shit!”

“Seriously, who taught you this language?” Doctor Barakan sighed. “I was hoping the truth would be enough to unlock your potential, but it seems for now, we’ll have to take drastic measures. Once that barrier is broken, progressing should only be a matter of time and patience.”

The door to Terra’s room slid open and two men in green rubber uniforms walked in. They scooped her up by her arms.

“No! Put me down!” she screamed, kicking and flailing. “Will!”

“Terra!” He tried to push through the window. “Let her go, you dumb gorillas! Where are you taking her?! Give her back!”

The doctor ducked out of the room.
Will found himself alone.

Seconds later, a loud ‘boom’ from an explosion flickered the lights in the room and rattled the cup and water pitcher on the table. Will felt the shock wave. “No… No! Terra!”

The doctor walked into her abandoned room moments later and simply watched.

“You big, fat, butt-faced, jerkwad!” Will slammed himself against the glass, bouncing off and landing on the floor. His head spun. He felt sick, but he ignored it. “What happened to her? Where is she? Give her back!” He rammed his fist against the glass. “Please! She’s all I have! Give her back!”

“No.”

He hit the glass repeatedly. Helpless, defeated, frustrated, and angry to the point of seeing red, Will balled up his fists and did the only thing he could think to do to release the pent up energy swelling like an angry wolf within his chest. He screamed.

A blue shock wave exploded from him, shattering the wide window as though it were made of sugarglass. Both chairs were blown up against the wall from the kinetic energy, and the nightstand, cup, and pitcher flew across the room. The light flickered, dimmed, and came back on.

Will dropped to his knees, exhausted, scared, and crying.

Doctor Barakan allowed a grin to crease his thin lips. “Excellent, Two-Forty-Six. You’ve done remarkably well. I’m very proud of both you and Two-Twelve. You’re exceeding expectations.”

“My name… is Will,” he rasped.

“Not anymore,” the doctor turned his back on the emotionally wrecked Terran boy and left the room.

Nera - the same woman from the consulate building with the datapad - met him in the hall. She now wore a laboratory coat. “The girl is just as strong. Both of her handlers suffered concussive injuries. To think the activation trigger would be as easy as separating them.”

“They’re highly attached to each other. This could pose a problem. We’ll need to keep a very close eye on them.”

“Yes, doctor.”

“I was promised fifty of these children,” he grumbled, irritated that his plans - four years in the making - had to undergo heavy adaptations at the last second. “But I can work my magic with two. We’ll need to keep them drugged during the phases. For our safety and theirs, of course.”

“Imagine what they’ll become when the inclusion treatments are complete.”

“Inform the staff and contact Senator Runell. Whatever these children need, we’ll provide. Two-Forty-Six and Two-Twelve are now the most important beings in the galaxy.”

“Perhaps we should call them by their names, Doctor,” Nera suggested as he started walking away.

“That will only let the staff get attached. These two have only one purpose to fulfill. Let’s begin Phase Two tonight.”
“Yes, Doctor.”

He paused and addressed her more softly. “Set up a separate bed in one of the rooms for now, and make sure they’re taken to connected living quarters. Bring their meals as well. I might be out to save trillions of lives with the lives of two, but I’m not heartless.”

She nodded.

Will was too weak to fight the rubber-clad assistant that picked him up and carried him out of the damaged room. Blue energy coursed along his skin, flickered, and died.

He was barely aware of being set down on another bed, this time in a decent room that looked livable and furnished, and even had a window with rounded corners looking out onto a well-kept, green lawn with small blue wild flowers. Even their personal belongings were set neatly on a shelf. The room was made to be comfortable, clean, bright, and inviting. A single door led to another room to the left of the window next to a door leading outside.

He dropped sluggishly to the floor. He couldn’t see straight, but he was drawn toward the cushions in the middle.

Terra shuffled across the cushions where they’d laid her and embraced Will, meeting him halfway. They were both drained, and the mysterious reason frightened them. A scarce few threads of energy lived and died within breaths around them.

Their friends were gone - scattered across the galaxy. Their world was now an asteroid field. Their families were dead. And the captain they’d trusted to keep them safe betrayed them.

They wanted the only family they had left, the only connection left to themselves and their identities. So they held onto each other for their lives, and their sanity.

Doctor Janna Malarei frowned sadly from behind the security camera monitor. The image of the two small kids reflected in her purple eyes. These might be Terrans - the fourth and most juvenile of the known Human species - but they were still children, and they needed to heal from all this damage. She would make sure they had ample time with a psychiatrist.

Thankfully, time wasn’t an issue. They had the whole of their lives here to recover.

* * * *

Chapter End Notes

FUN FACT #7: The burning sensation in Will's eyes was the product of Phase 1 reacting to his panic, also panicking, and responding by repairing his bad eyesight.
Chapter Summary

Meet Yune Darrak: smuggler, outlaw, thief, adventurer, explorer, and cookie-loving, finger-gunning smart-ass.
While in the capital city of New Cerilia on the planet Masaka, Yune's day ends with some information that he hopes may change his life.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(song for club reference: Bad Guy - Billie Eilish)

Chapter 8

One year later...

Masaka presented a pristine streamlined, clean, and bright image to the galaxy, and for the most part, that was the truth.

Remnants of ancient structures, and cracked walls from the days when the war infected the planet
can still be found across its surface despite the republic government building skyscrapers over it like gravestones.

While Masakan society was utopian in most regards, it simultaneously covered the scars of its past within the cracks of older cities, tucked away down narrow, darkened streets, and among shady establishments, back alley deals, and underground criminal activity.

Most of the Alliance worlds used ‘Marks’ – the accepted galactic currency. Whenever the Regents would receive payment for services rendered in a species preferred method of payment, they would stockpile it away and use it whenever they needed something from that species in return, since they had no use for it themselves.

The only race out of the three FTL capable human species to hold onto a monetary system was the third youngest: Mik. Money still controlled much of Mikra’s corporations and heavily populated and developed mega cities. As a result, Mikra still held the highest rate of crime, and it’s most war-devastated city of Qora Ness was at the top of that list - peppered with syndicates, cartel holdouts, and smaller thieving dens.

Once more, Yune Darrak found himself driving his hover bike through the pocket of murk in Cerilia’s south-end surface level. ‘Murk’ was putting it lightly. This was clean in comparison to what he grew up in.

Still, the surface of Masaka’s metropolis was not a place you would want to take a walk through alone at any time of day.

It reminded him a little of home. All it was missing was the burnt carbon-solder smell clinging to the walls, the rubble that had yet to be cleaned up in the past thirty years, and the crime. Not to say the entire planet of Mikra was a slimy, gritty, larceny and gang-riddled life trap. No, that was just his home town of Qora Ness. The rest of Mikra was still trying to rehabilitate the scum city, but having the Mikran industry's main source of income be shipyards and other tech manufacturing facilities put a toll on the planet and its people. Especially those unlucky enough to live in the wrecked city.

Areas of his homeworld were still beautiful, and some of the cities did their best to stay hygienic with more and more Masakan influence. He, however, rarely saw any of that green utopia beyond vids and photos.

He parked the bike outside a club, locked it, and pulled down the hem of his brown jacket. He strode confidently toward the unmarked metal door and the built, mocha-colored, four-armed alien bouncer guarding it. A laid-back bass beat muffled out of the dimly lit club surrounded by holographic billboard signs, and spasming neon lights. Humans and aliens loitered around outside smoking, talking, or in the case of a green-skinned Aq’zed couple, making out with their slim, twin, slick cranial tendrils extending out from behind their ears under their straight hair entwined just out of the street light.

He flicked a silver coin to the bouncer. “Hey, G’mork. Long time no see. How’s the wife and kids? You...are the one with the kids, right? I can never remember if it’s you or your twin brother. You’re both just so gosh darned handsome.”

The unamused and annoyed Quadralorn held the coin between two meaty fingers and tapped the surface gently. The number ‘500’ appeared in the center. He nodded down once to the human and pushed the door open.

“Appreciated,” Yune adjusted the goggles set over his hair and flashed a salesman-esque grin.
“You were always my favorite.”

The Quadralorn’s lower right hand planted against Yune’s chest, covering his upper torso. A deep growl rumbled in the back of his thick throat. “No funny business, Darrak.”

Yune casually pushed the alien’s hand down with both of his. He wasn’t short, but even at six feet tall, he had to look up at the intimidating seven-foot tall alien. “Funny business? Who do you think you’re talking to? It’s me.”

The bouncer growled dangerously close to his face.

He cleared his throat, aware he’d put himself in hot water. “Easy. I promise I’ll be on my best behavior,” he planted his hand over his own heart. “You have my word.”

“You said that last time,” G’mork growled in his native, consonant and grumble-heavy language. “I had to clean up your mess.”

Thanks to Yune’s translator nanites, he understood every word in his native language: Masakan. “Hey, that was in self defense. Look. I promise I won’t be the one to start a fight this time.”

G’mork lowered his arm, though kept his dark eyes glued to the outlaw’s back.

“You’re my number one guy, G’mork,” Yune flashed him a set of finger guns with a wink - a convivial gesture he’d picked up from a Terran while visiting their planet nine years ago. He liked it so much, he adopted it.

G’mork huffed in irritation.

Yune walked through the dim, green-lit hall toward the music bleeding out of the club.

He paused to take in the establishment, observing where people sat, the lighting, how long it would take to escape in a fire fight -- the usual situations.

The sultry, breathy, smooth female vocals from the live band did their job of immersing the room in a haze of pulsing, melodic tones to accent the beat.

His dark-toned clothing let him melt in with the scene. Most people here didn’t want to be found, and he was no exception. He strolled up to the bar. “One Virudian Hyper Zone.”

The Quadralorn bartender - still just as tall as, but nowhere near as buff as the meat mountain sentry outside - quickly mixed the requested drink, and handed the small glass to the Mik. One would never guess the two aliens were related. Let alone twins.

Yune set down another coin.

The bartender pocketed the mark.

He sipped the turquoise, fizzing liquid. It popped and bubbled like a creature thrashing to escape. “Ah, that hits the spot every time,” he mused. This was his favorite drink for a reason. He listened to the synth and drums accompanying the ghostly-white-skinned alien woman’s clear vocals and that of her two backup singers.

All were of the same race - Idrians from the sister planets of Idriolara, Idriosura, and Idriokera. They were bald with skulls that looked to be molded upward from clay, leaving the grooves of ‘clay’ converging at the upward tip of their heads. They weren’t too keen on sunlight - as their pale
blue eyes denoted - and their lithe forms made them look like endyr wood branches. They were the only aliens to remind him of the vanilla-colored trees from his home planet.

“You know,” A man with half of his hair shaved and the other half resembling the bushy tail of a startled mammal settled up beside him, “I came here to relax, have a few drinks, forget about my wife kicking me out, but what do I find instead?” he frowned, “you.”

“Nice to see you again, too, Zaf,” he sipped his drink, not looking at his tall, wiry companion.

“And here you show up just as I was starting to enjoy myself,” Zaf glared.

“Don’t let me stop you. Honestly, your wife is kind of a noc. Let me pay for some time for you,” Yune went to remove a mark chip from his dark pants pocket when the other’s skeletal-like fingers gripped his hand.

“Not necessary.”

“Ok,” he shrugged and went back to his drink.

“What are you doing here, Darrak?”

“Having a drink.”

“No, you’re not.”

“I…” Yune glanced to the drink, then to his impromptu companion. “I know my eyesight is bad, but I have corrective contacts for that. What’s your excuse?”

“You only come here on business,” Zaf hissed softly.

“Maybe my business is done.”

Zaf put venom into his slow words. “Not likely.”

Yune took another sip, enjoying the bubbles tickling all the way down. He let the empty silence linger in order to frustrate the other human. “Look, Zaf. You’re a good friend, one of the best in the business, and I respect you. But if I were in the middle of work, and you weren’t already part of it, you aren’t gonna be. So let me enjoy my drink, and buy you some time with one of the pleasure aids, hm?” He planted his hand on the other’s shoulder. “Your wife left you. It’s the least I can do for a friend.”

Zaf snarled and accepted the offer. “Twenty minutes.”

“Ten.”

“Fifteen.”

“Deal.”

The bartender served up the kes human’s’ preferred drink, a simple Masakan whiskey.

A moment passed where the two old friends simply sat in each others company.

“I gotta hit the head. Watch my drink.” Yune got up and walked to the men's restroom.

Zaf sniffed his friend’s drink and grimaced. “Uch. Disgusting.”
Yune entered the men’s room, did his business, and waited for the other occupants to finish up and leave him alone. As soon as they did, he placed a scrambler on the door pad, and keyed in a code that temporarily locked the door for five minutes. It was long enough to complete his task, but not too long for anyone to suspect more than a brief lock malfunction.

He removed a small kit from a pouch hidden on his belt beneath his jacket, and extracted a palm-sized scanner from it. He held it up to his eyes and scanned his irises. The tech picked up the information stored within the gold ring along the outside of his contact lenses. He plugged the scanner into the port on his datadot and transferred the information over. A video of the club from his point of view played back on the screen. He paused it and zoomed in on the back corner where a half-open curtain hid a familiar green and orange jacket on a man with blond curly hair pulled up in a top knot.

He grinned. “Gotcha.”

Satisfied, Yune put everything away and unlocked the door.

A short alien with fins on his head burst in covering his genitalia, and dove into a stall. The door slammed against the frame, but didn’t lock and drifted open.

“Sorry, friend,” Yune apologized to the sound of relieved urination. “The lock jammed. Watch that door, buddy.”

“Thank you!” the alien responded in a deep, gruff voice.

Yune hesitated in mild surprise. He did not expect that intimidating voice to come out of a being that only came up to his waist. He returned to his seat and called the bartender over. “Hey. Give my man here fifteen minutes.”

The bartender took the money and passed a keycard over to Zaf.

Zaf nodded his approval, grinned, and headed for private room Orion.

Once his friend was gone, Yune handed over another mark. “And, uh, see that guy in the back booth over there? Well, I bet him a thousand marks that he couldn’t get a genuine shocked response from Zaf. Now, you know how Zaf is. Nothing surprises him. Do me a favor and give fifteen minutes to my friend there in the same room. But wait 2 minutes before sending him in.”

The bartender eyed him suspiciously. “And if I don’t?”

“Come on, it’s a harmless prank. You get twice the money for one room, and I get the satisfaction of seeing my friend eat his words. And I become one thousand richer.”

The bartender accepted the currency. “It’s been a boring night. Why not. Leave your weapon at the bar before going in.”

He sighed and grudgingly handed over his pulse pistol. “I’d better get this back.”

He made a note of where the Quadralorn stashed his gun and waited.

A confidant of the establishment pulled back the curtain slightly to inform the man in green and orange of the pleasure aid rental, and directed him toward room Orion. The man grinned, said something that Yune couldn’t hear, and left the two people he was sharing drinks with to enjoy some...quality time.

Yune got up to follow in his blind spot and kept himself out of view as the man opened the door
and entered. His poor, unsuspecting friend would absolutely get the shock of his life. He waited five seconds, then cracked open the lock.

The door slid open just in time for him to hear Zaf scream, “What the F--!”

“Who are you, and what the hell are you doing in my room?!”

Yune shut the door, jammed the lock, and set the noise reduction to ‘max.’ Before either man, and the poor blue-skinned O’alli woman could say a word, he hauled off with a strong right hook across the other man’s jaw.

The man reeled to the side, only to meet with Yune’s fist rammed into his gut, and another to his face.

He grabbed the tall human’s arm, twisted, and hurled him over his shoulder.

Yune hit the bed between Zaf and the pleasure aid. “Sorry, miss. S’cuse me. I need to borrow this.”

He picked up a pillow, and flung it in his target’s face as a distraction, then swiped a sheer purple veil covering the woman’s breasts, coiled it like a whip, and launched himself at his foe.

The woman scrambled to the back of the round bed and wrapped a blanket around herself in seconds. She screamed. However, the noise cancellation meant no one could hear it. And if they did, they’d assume the person inside was having a really, really amazing time.

Yune ducked a punch thrown to his face, came back with an uppercut to the man’s jaw, then coiled the scarf around his neck.

The man grabbed at the fabric, but Yune twisted it behind his neck and pulled.

“You said you wanted in on my work,” Yune grunted to Zaf, keeping his choke hold, “now’s your chance.”

Zaf slid off the bed and crushed his fist into the man’s face.

Yune kneed him in the back, let go of the scarf, and slammed him down onto the bed.

The man gasped for breath, and was ready to headbutt the tall mik across the room, when the charge-up whine of a pulse pistol froze him in place.

Yune glanced to Zaf in disgust. “They let you keep your gun?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s not fair.”

“I’m not you.”

“...Ok, that’s fair.” Yune turned his attention back to his target with one hand clamped around his neck, and the other clenched in a fist ready to turn his face into ground muvine beef. “You don’t know who I am, but--”

“You’re...Yune...Darrak,” the man licked at his bloody lip.

Yune paused, then tilted his head slightly in approval. “So you have heard of me. Great. We can skip the introductions and get to the point. Where’s the Eye?”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the man muttered.

“Please. I followed you here. I’ve been tracking you for a week, Avik. You stole the Eye of Shora from a bunch of monks on Feloria two weeks ago, and they want it back. So cough it up, and this won’t be the day you stop adding to your bar tab.”

“You gonna pay it?” Avik locked his purple eyes on both men, but mostly the barrel of the pulse pistol.

“I...no, I mean, you’re gonna pay it. And your life is the...currency…” Yune exhaled. “That sounded better in my head.” He tightened his hold. “Tell me where it is, and my friend here won’t blast a hole through you and ruin these nice pretty sheets.”

Avik smirked. “You want the Eye?”

“Um...were you not paying attention? Yes, I want the Eye.”

He chuckled. “Then you should have shot me first.” In a quick motion, Avik pulled a pocket pulse pistol from inside his coat and fired at his assailant.

Yune ducked out of the way just in time, but the blue bolt sheared his cheek.

Avik unlocked the door easily overcoming the jamming sequence, and barged out into the club.

“How come he got to keep his gun?!” Yune balked.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were after the Eye?” Zaf barked back

“Hah! I knew it! Your wife didn’t kick you out, did she!” Yune ran after his target.

“No, I left! She’s a noc!” Zaf fired off three shots at the retreating Masakan.

People screamed and ran as the fire fight poured into the bar.

Yune dove behind the counter to retrieve his pulse pistol. “You guys had a fight?” He powered up the gun and fired off red bolts at a setting higher than Bind: he set to stun.

Avik and his two cronies, however, didn’t bother to care for lives and set theirs to kill. Blue bolts zipped by Yune behind the bar.

“She hired a gardener,” Zaf hit one of the men in the chest knocking him back. “That’s a capitol offense!”

“On what grounds?!” Yune argued. He dodged into the room, flipped a table to its side and took cover behind it. “Hah! See what I did there? ‘Grounds’ ‘cause you’re a gardener--”

Zaf simply glared at him, and fired off a shot into his peripheral at a man firing at them from a booth.

“Right,” Yune conceded. All Kes loved greenery.

“That was my garden,” Zaf snarled. “And now someone else has their dirty paws all over my Blue Pippins.”

“I’m gonna assume those are flowers.”
“Rare ones, to be precise. What did you think I was talking about?”

Yune smirked.

Zaf rolled his eyes. “I swear, you’re eternally twelve.”

Avik burst through the door and down the hall toward the street.

“Dammit.” Yune took off after him. He stopped at the doorway, spun, and fired at one of the wide hanging lights, severing the safety hook and cable. It crashed to the floor, blocking the exit. “Good luck with your wife and your Pippins!”

“Darrak!” Zaf cursed. Friends or not, Yune had slowed him from going after the score by one expertly placed shot.

Arik stumbled out into the street toward the nearest intersection, seeking an escape, and fast. A man parking his hoverbike outside a street cuisine shop became his unlucky target. He knocked him out, stole his ride, and blasted off down the street.

Yune quickly followed. He glanced to G’mork, who pointed right, and growled at him.

“I know, I know. But this time it wasn’t my fault!” he defended. Before the big guy could introduce his face to the pavement, he ran to where he’d parked his hoverbike, unlocked it, and sped off after Arik.

Arik fired back at his pursuer. Blue laser bolts hit signs, stands, and other vehicles.

Yune returned fire, keeping his gun set to stun.

The chase took them through the seedy underbelly of the capitol city, weaving through the maze of streets, and barely avoiding collisions at the intersections.

A stray bolt from Arik struck an electronic billboard, showering sparks down onto those below.

People screamed and scattered to avoid them, but Yune lowered his goggles and drove right through. One of the sparks singed his right sleeve. “This is my favorite jacket! Limited edition!”

He angled his bike upward where the navigational controls connected to a sky lane, merging him in with traffic. However, he didn’t want to keep a steady pace with everyone else living their normal daily grind. He had a top thief to catch. Yune broke through the navigational computer’s hold, reverting it to manual - ignoring the blaring alarm of the system telling him he was nuts - and dove back down. He kept Arik’s bike in sight as he veered around buildings, and avoided near catastrophes with other vehicles heading up to join the sky lanes.

The thief took a page from his pursuer’s book, and shot up into a higher lane.

Both darted through traffic at a dangerously high speed, firing at each other. If they didn’t take this back to the surface soon, the Masakan police force would be on their tails in seconds.

Yune piloted the bike with one hand expertly through traffic, changed the power level of his pulse pistol to max, took aim, and fired at Arik.

The blue bolt whizzed between four cars and slammed into the rear engine of the bike.

Arik abandoned his attempt to shoot holes through his Yune’s chest in favor of controlling the bike’s descent.
Arik spiraled down away from the lane, leaving a smoke trail in his wake.

Yune followed, closing in quickly. He balanced himself on the seat of the bike, waiting for the right moment, and leaped off into the air. His bike rammed into Arik’s a second after he hit the other, yanking him free of the vehicle.

Both bikes crashed into the parking deck of a restaurant, destroying two cars that burst into parts and flames, and left a scorch mark on the concrete.

The two men grappled in their free fall, clawing at each other’s faces, and throwing punches where they could.

The ground rushed up to them as the wind roared in their ears.

Arik’s face contorted in a scream of rage.

Yune tried to move his other hand to his belt, but Arik had it locked under his arm. Thinking fast, with seconds left before they would become a double smear on the street, he rammed the back of his right hand into Arik’s face, breaking his nose, and used that second to activate a personal suspension field.

The two stopped five feet above the ground of a city park. Yune deactivated it and dropped to the patchy grass. Both men groaned from the sudden stop and impact.

Yune got up first, hoisted his foe by his jacket collar, “This is for my bike,” and cold cocked Arik across the face. “And my jacket. There’s only one guy that makes this, and now I gotta go back.”

Arik sprawled unconscious on the ground.

Breathing hard from the fight and adrenaline, Yune took a second to reorient himself and searched Arik for the Eye of Shora. He found a small pouch within a pocket inside the other’s coat, and fished it out. Finally, the reward was his. He removed it from the back and held up his prize. The faceted ruby surface glinted in the city lights. It felt warm, and not due to body heat. It emitted a very soft hum that he found odd, but shrugged and returned it to the bag. He tucked it into his own jacket inner pocket.

Something sharp pierced his neck. His hand instantly snapped up to protect the area. His vision blurred, the city spun, and he fell to his side.

A pair of dark grey boots stepped up beside him. He lolled lazily to his back in curiosity to see who they belonged to. Someone else besides himself and Zaf were after the Eye, and he’d dropped his guard. How could he be so stupid? And yet when his eyes scanned up the body of the one who took him down, he grinned.

A woman with amethyst eyes that could cut a man to pieces glared down at the scoundrel outlaw. Her long red hair draped to either side of her freckled face. “And that’s for my car.”

“Ah scere,” Yune chuckled in a drunken manner. “Marci. I didn’t know you were in town.”

“There’s a reason for that,” Her sharp retort sliced through the attempt at conviviality.

“It’s been a long time,” his words slurred.

“Save it. You have something I want.”
“You broke my heart and stole a five thousand mark chip from my pants...on the floor, and then tried to steal my ship. What else do you want?” Though he already had a very good idea.

“That was a small consolation for the crap I had to put up with from you. And it’s my ship.”

He grinned. “You abandoned her. She’s mine. Can’t we remember the fun times? No surface of the Horizon was safe - except the galley,” He struggled to move, but his limbs became heavier, like two full grown horned Harlbeast bulls had sat their large, furry, rumps on his body.

“Good...times…”

“The more you struggle, the worse it gets,” she paused. “Please keep struggling.”

“Aside from the obvious goods, I got nothing to offer. Just my apologies, and maybe a romantic date above the rings of Lasria Five?”

“After what you pulled on Enkai Prime?” she snarled, pressing her boot on his chest. “You’re lucky I don’t shoot you right now.”

He grinned upward. “This is a position I kind of miss.”

She pressed harder into his chest, causing him to grunt in pain. He grimaced as the pressure from her boot increased. “Ow, my ribs…”

“Give me the Eye.”

“You shot me. I can’t move. You screwed up,” he answered, or at least tried to. Now he felt like his tongue had swollen, though his breathing remained unhindered. His speech suffered as though someone had shoved rocks in his mouth.

“What?”

“I said, you screwed up.”

She crouched next to him. “Seriously. Relax, or we won’t get anywhere.” She waited while his breathing evened out, and he forced himself to simply lie there without trying to escape or break the hold. His determination, drive, bravery, and foolish nature to jump into a threatening situation always amused her.

Yune licked his lips when his regained his ability to speak and not sound like he’d been stung by a bee. “What did you hit me with?”

She pulled the needle out of his neck. “It’s a drug created from the venom of a South Alosikian pit viper. Its numbing agent is extremely powerful, but short lived.”

“Well, good job, because I can’t move to get the Eye.”

She rolled her eyes. “I wanted you to tell me where it is so I wouldn’t have to touch you again.” Marci knelt down and rifled through his pockets. Once she found the bag with the stone, she removed it and held the red gem in her hand. It was easily the size of a fist. “Thank you, Yune. This should cover the cost of a new car, very, very nicely. And maybe a small moon to call my own. And a new wardrobe--”

“Please, just kill me now.”

“Oh, and,” she leaned over him, “you will give me my ship back.”
He chuckled. “Yeah. Not happening.”

“Fine.” She stood and turned to walk away. “I’ll just find where you parked it and steal it back.” She paused. “You weren’t really going to return this to the Ai Hiri, were you?”

“I’m not you.”

She smirked and tossed the gem lightly in the air to catch it. “Word has it that you delivered counterfeit frost to the Ba’ri. A bold move angering them.”

“Black Star scammed me, and tried to kill me. I explained this.”

“Yeah, they didn’t buy it. There’s a price on your head that this little baby would easily erase and thensome.” She pocketed the gem. “Because this is currently worth more than your life, I’m letting you go. But next time, the Night Wraiths won’t be so merciful. You’d better hide, or find a way to pay them back.”

“Hello, Marci,” Zaf strolled into view with his pulse pistol aimed between her eyes as he walked forward, closing the gap between them. “I’ll be taking that, now.”

She raised her right arm bearing the dart gun and smirked. “Hm. Didn’t expect a family reunion. It’s been a while since we were all together. What, five years since the crew broke up? Selke’s not going to come flying out of the bushes, is she? Hm. Well, how’s the wife, Zaf?”

“A noc as usual, but after seeing you again, I’ll forgive her for the gardener mistake.”

“She hired a gardener?” Marci frowned. “Rude.”

“I know, right?” Yune laid still, waiting for the drug to wear off. His limbs were slowly returning to his control as long as he didn’t fight it. “Completely insensitive.”

“We should really catch up over hot chocolate,” Zaf gave a hint of nostalgia for the Terran drink the rest of the human worlds adopted from its discovery on that rock four hundred years ago, “but today is not that day. Hand over the Eye, and I’ll let you go.”

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“Let me think about it.” She raised the dart gun, “Eat scret--”

Zaf fired a red bolt clean into her chest, stunning her. She dropped to the ground unconscious.

He took the stone from her hand and pocketed it.

Arik groaned getting to his knees. “You people need serious help.”

“We’re aware of that,” Zaf aimed the pistol at his head. “You need to get going now.”

He got to his feet stumbled, and growled. Sore and humiliated, but a hundred percent done with Yune and Zaf, he staggered away, cursing their names, their families, and their future children.

Yune sat up carefully. Apparently, Arik didn’t know what the Eye of Shora was made of. All the better, or there would be another shoot out. “I don’t suppose you’ll hand over the Eye, will ya?”

Zaf holstered the gun and shook his head. “Sorry, but my employers are insistent that it be returned to them.”

“You didn’t tell me the Ai Hiri hired you, too.”
“I was in the middle of work, and if you weren’t already involved from the start, then you wouldn’t be.”

He accepted Zaf’s help to his feet and leaned on the other to keep from collapsing, at least until the drug wore off completely.

“I had a feeling you’d show up. When you did, I knew exactly why you were there.”

“So you let me do the dirty work and followed?”

Zaf shrugged. “It’s just business. But, I didn’t expect you to literally hand him to me.”

He pointed at him with a knowing glint of mischief. “I got you good, though.”

“Yeah, you did.”

Yune chuckled. “Do me a favor at least. Gimme a ride to the port.”

“I’ll do you one better. You’re not getting the Eye, but I did hear about a score that makes this one look like chump change.”

“You know what you’ve got? A couple million marks worth of pure amoradite, and you’re telling me about a score that’s bigger than that? Why aren’t you going after it yourself?”

“Because I’m not suicidal. However, you’re a crazy enough bastard to take this on.”

“Ok, I’ll bite.”

“You know that whole thing about those Terran children?”

“The One Thousand? Yeah, who doesn’t? It’s all I’ve heard people talk about for the past year,” he didn’t bother hiding his annoyance at how everyone was enamored of these kids, and how many within the outlaw circuit thought they could buy better lives by kidnapping and selling one of them.

“Remember the fifty that were brought here?”

“Yeah. They were rescued and scattered. No one knows where they are now except the Chancellor.”

“The ones who orchestrated their kidnapping were Senators Runell and Degull. Degull was executed for high treason two months ago…”

“I heard.”

“But Runell scurried away down a meep hole into hiding like the scumroach he is.”

Yune began to walk more confidently on his own. “You’d better be getting to the ‘I’m gonna be rich’ part.”

Zaf stopped. “I have a lead on where that hole may be.”

Yune thought about it. If he could bring in Senator Runell, he would be considered a hero for the capture of the man who put the galaxy’s hope of freedom into jeopardy. Such a bounty would gain him high favor with Chancellor Urza, he could have his records completely expunged, and the bounty would result in a massive, absolute unit of a payout. He could pay off his debt, shine up his
ship, and be a rich man with ultimate freedom. “How sure is your source?”

Zaf couldn’t stop the grin from taking over, and he laughed. “I knew it! You’re going for it!”

“I want to know how sure your source is first before I go knocking on Regent doors.”

“He heard it from his sister’s cousin who works at a bakery downtown, who heard it from a customer, who said the housekeeper of a friend of his was on a cleaning crew to clean up Degull’s estate, and she found an open datadot on his desk that was unlocked with the name and location on it. Degull left it on when he ran.”

Yune simply stared. “Okay… my question still stands.”

Zaf regarded him seriously. “Eighty percent.”

Yune pondered those odds, pitting them up against previous jobs, and his history with Zaf. The Kes might be softies for flora and fauna, but his friend had rarely steered him wrong. “That’s enough to check it out at least.”

“If anyone can find this rimrat, it’s you.”

“Yeah, true.”

“I’ll send the details to the Horizon.”

“If it doesn’t work out, I’ll just steal the Eye back from you and collect my reward.”

Zaf squeezed his friend’s shoulder painfully, eliciting a small yelp from the other. “Not likely.”

* * * *

Chapter End Notes

FUN FACT #8: If you’re wondering why they have hot chocolate in this galaxy, the Masaki, Kes, and Mik are human space faring species that have visited earth countless times due to their ease of blending in, and brought stuff back to their home planets, including chocolate and coffee. :) Also, where do you think purple eyes in humanity comes from? Purple eyes are a Masakan trait, and extremely rare on Earth. Undoubtedly, there were some Masaki, Kes, and Mik who fell in love with a Terran, had children, and perhaps stayed to live the simple life.
The Secret of Straßend

Chapter Summary

Yune checks out Zaf's information on the traitorous Senator Runell's whereabouts, but discovers something he hadn't counted on.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 9

The next day...
Yune’s ship, the Horizon, slowly scouted around the specified radius within the remote Mosskiri mountains.

Crepuscular rays pierced through dark clouds trailing the last of a heavy snowstorm on the winds. Sharp peaks speared into the sky, while small green valleys nestled at their bases. Their sides told the stories of ages-old glaciers that carved paths through the ancient range, creating the many lakes pockmarking the landscape.

The Masakan government left this area in its virgin state to preserve its beauty, with understanding of its necessity for life to thrive.

Flecks of snow drifted past the Horizon’s half-moon shaped viewport that extended over the pilot and copilot’s seats. The panoramic and deep peripheral view was immeasurably useful. Four humans could sit in the cockpit comfortably, and one or two humans could stand behind the ops and tactical stations, but it didn’t have much in the way of walking room. The crew just needed to get in, sit down, and do their jobs.

Yune studied his sensors for signs of any electromagnetic activity. He circled the outside of the zone carefully, turning up his scanner to its most sensitive level to pick up trace amounts of an active ephypsan core. If the Regents had a base hidden away up here, they would need to power it somehow. And if he knew them the way he did, they wouldn’t be using two sticks to light a fire. The Regents, and especially the highest heads of the government, couldn’t live without their creature comforts. Finding them shouldn’t be a problem -- unless his target was heavily shielded.

Here’s hoping the sensor modifications he recently bought and installed on Corthal lived up to the seller’s hype of tracking down a core as small as the one used on his ship.

One hour into searching, a red ‘ping’ illuminated on the topographic map on his console. It pinpointed the source from a highland flat area stretched between two mountains -- a loft valley. That ping meant a good sized energy source. And an energy source that big meant people.

“Well, hello stranger,” he zeroed in on it, but kept his distance just in case it was a military installation and not a bunch of anthropologists, geologists, and horticulture nerds. If it were the Regents looking to hide something, they’d be keeping their eyes on the skies for any incoming unwanted visitors.

The loft valley was a rare geographic formation from ancient riverbeds that filled with lava, hardened, and created bridges. Earthquakes had caused the mountains to rise over millions of years, trapping these ‘loft valleys’ in rings of rock and leaving the barren land beneath open as a dark passageway. Boulders had loosed from the peaks and tumbled down to pepper the edges of the valleys.

Yune groaned. There was no way to tell if this was a Regent facility, which meant he would have to get out and walk.

He set the old ship down in an adjacent loft valley behind one of the twin peaks, and set the power levels to die down completely as soon as he was clear. He didn’t need anyone picking up his ship’s signature.

The Horizon rested like a grey and blue, thick, giant diamond moth: the Mikran insect that inspired the ACC-1200’s design. With three decks, roomy crew quarters, a spacious cargo hold, and a small shuttle - the Zephyr - tucked into the back of deck two between the rectangular twin engines, the
All purpose Cargo/Crew transport light freighters were popular, so these ships were a credit a
dozen. This old girl held the stories of her adventures on her hull despite one or two new coats of
paint. The Horizon had endured multiple upgrades and modifications, and as such, looked cobbled
together - including the oddly out of place dorsal twin pulse canon accessible by a ladder in the
middle of deck three. Upon first glance, one might lose faith in its ability to function, but Yune
kept her running like a slick Enkai yacht. Parts rarely failed on her. ... rarely.

The Mik might be master engineers, but they loved melding functionality with livable areas and a
few well placed windows to appreciate their first love: space.

He zipped up his jacket, put on cold weather gloves, lowered his goggles, and wrapped a cloth
around his face.

He descended the ramp from the nose of the ship into the snow, and instantly regretted his decision
to come here. He shivered. “It’s colder than tits out here.” The ramp closed as he hiked around the
mountain toward the loft valley. “This had better be worth it,” he grumbled to himself.

It took him an hour to make the trek through knee deep snow and over jagged rocks. Were this not
at the end of winter, the loft valley would be rich with verdant grasses, colorful wildflowers, and
high altitude wildlife. It would be a stunning picturesque example of the beauty of nature.

However, all Yune saw was a landscape of snow.

That’s it.

Snow.

Cold, flakey, and pointless.

He hated snow. It got in his shoes and made his socks wet. Talk about a miserable existence. At
this moment, he’d gladly trade in this geographical nightmare for a thunderstorm over his
hometown.

The location dot on his datadot map continued to ping insistently that the energy source was in this
valley. He smacked it a couple of times to make sure it wasn’t malfunctioning, but still it
persisted.

Going along with it, Yune settled at the edge of a boulder and scanned the valley. Snow curled up
from tiny eddies, but other than that, it was barren. However the clear signature emitted by an
ephypsan core now burned like a flame on the map.

Whatever was here, he was right on top of it.

Whoever it was didn’t bother to shield it. Likely it was just a bunch of academic nerds studying the
Mosskiri ecosystem and freezing their bits off in the process. Shielding from outside detection
wouldn’t be necessary.

The snowfall finally ceased.

A minute later, a gaiser of air erupted from the center of the valley, blasting the snow in a wide arc
of powder upward into the sky.

Yune shielded himself from the sudden brief blizzard until it died down, and the valley was once
again calm. That was odd. His scanner didn’t pick up a hydrothermal vent. These mountains were
supposed to be comprised of a massive cluster of dead and dormant volcanoes.
The cleared center of the valley shimmered from an obtuse iridesteele dome wide enough for the Horizon to land in.

His curiosity overcame any urge to run, though he needed to get closer without triggering any perimeter alarms. Regent protocol was to set up a sensor line a hundred yards out from the target location.

He inched as close to that line as he dared to get a detailed, birds-eye look. And to get a clearer recording through his contact lenses.

He tapped at the right edge of his goggle frames, activating a zoom function.

The dome covered a man-made, perfectly round sunken area two levels deep carved into the ground. Fifty windows, each with a closed door next to it, encircled a painstakingly kept emerald green lawn edged with a few flower beds and shrubs for aesthetic appeal. The dome had cleared off the snow so anyone inside the habitat bubble could view the open sky. It was as though they had trapped spring in a bottle.

By the smooth white design, Yune could tell immediately that this was a Regent facility. The presence of two Regent troopers in blue and white armor standing guard off to the side only clarified that he’d found the right spot.

He grinned. All he had to do now was get an idea of the layout, the number of troops, find a way in, and retrieve Runell. Then collect a hefty reward to pay off the Dyne, and a life of total freedom would be his.

As if in answer to his problem, the rock face of the mountain to the right of his location suddenly pulled upward. Seconds later, a personal transport shot out of the lit interior beyond the door. It buzzed quickly over the center of the loft valley and took off out of sight.

The wide-mouthed door lazily began to close.

Going in that way would be suicide. Any Regents inside would shoot him first and throw away any questions. No, he would do this the smart way, with stealth and silence through a back door.

He shifted to start his search for a rear entrance when a flash of blue light from within the dome caught in his peripheral, and snared his curiosity. He zoomed in on the pocket of sunshine carved into the snow.

Two small people dressed in white were running in sporadic patterns throwing a glowing blue sphere back and forth. He zoomed in further.

They were children. A dark-haired boy and a light-brown-haired girl in identical clean white clothes tossed a sapphire blue glowing orb to one another, catching it with their bare hands, and returning it. Whenever one of them missed, the ball hit the ground and burst into a brief, small plume of light.

He watched the boy smile slightly and say something to the girl, though his lips moved in a pattern he couldn’t recognize from here. They were speaking a different language. Without any audio, he had no way to decipher it, so lip-reading was out of the question.

The boy held out both hands to the front, though wobbled slightly like he was sleepwalking, shook his head, and focused. Another palm-sized sphere formed out of thin air. He tossed it easily to the girl, who caught it, and the game began again.
Yune huffed. “A zephyr ball.” It was a popular toy among children. If they missed, it would dissipate on the ground in a shower of harmless glittering sparks, or if they didn’t catch it on the diode on their hands, it would give them a light tingling zap like carpet shock. He didn’t remember the energy orb creating a burst of light like that, though. It must be an updated model.

He watched them for a moment longer. They moved like they knew where the other would throw it before they did. The girl caught the orb, spun around, and launched it high into the air. It came back down into the boy’s hands where he seamlessly tossed it around behind his back, and threw it back to her.

They were probably children of the Regents. However, he found it odd that they weren’t wearing normal clothing. Plus, they were barefoot.

Something about this didn’t feel right.

The children’s play came to a sudden halt and they turned as if someone had called their attention. They seemed to stumble as they walked backward, though he noticed the boy kept ahold of the girl’s hand.

Yune was about to dismiss it when the children stopped. The boy held his right palm out and widened his stance. He yelled something unheard and kept himself in front of the girl. It was very much a defensive ‘don’t come near me’ posture.

The girl placed her left hand on his shoulder, then held up her own palm the same way.

In the next second, they dropped to the ground. The two troopers ran into view, scooped up the kids, and carried them out of sight in opposing directions.

Yune’s eyes narrowed. That wasn’t right on any planet. They were attacked in the middle of playtime, and hadn’t visibly misbehaved. Those weren’t children of scientists or staff.

They were captives being guarded by armed military.

That settled it. He would find Runell and force him to explain what the hell was going on here.

Yune returned to the Horizon, powered it up, and sailed up into the atmosphere to make a call.

If he was going to get into a secret Regent facility and get out alive, he would need backup.

And he knew just the felorian to call.

* * * *

tbc

Chapter End Notes

FUN FACT #9: Masaka is larger than Earth by 1%. The rotation and orbit around the sun is longer, which is why GST (galactic standard time) is based on their time frame. It has a weather control system to keep the various regions in a state of normality and predictability specific to those areas. i.e. no long, harsher-than-usual winters, no tornadoes within populated area, and no droughts. They let nature take its course, only
intervening when conditions become erratic, unstable, or endanger the populous. They are currently working to implant tectonic regulation technology to predict and/or decrease the number of earthquakes in volatile regions. The Mosskiri mountains are a dormant, high elevation, volcanic system.
Chapter Summary

Yune Darrak enlists the help of an old friend, a felorian named Selke Kellnaris, to break into the secret rogue Regent facility in the Strafsend loft valley, kidnap Senator Runell, and collect the reward for turning in the galaxy’s most wanted criminal to the Regents.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 10

Four days later...

“Are you sure this is going to work? This plan sounds crazier than your usual ideas,” A fit felorian woman a few inches shorter than Yune pulled her wavy light brown hair back in a low ponytail.

“It’ll work. Trust me,” Yune pulled up the zipper of the Regent officer uniform and tugged at the
waist-length hem. It was slightly too short. The lieutenant it originally belonged to lay stripped to his underwear unconscious on the floor.

“They’re going to see right through this.”

“Not if we’re careful.”

“We’re basically walking through the front door.”

“Exactly. They won’t expect anyone to be that ballsy.”

“We could find a back entrance and sneak in that way. All Regent facilities have one. I’m willing to bet Runell has a meep trail leading straight to an escape shuttle. We find it and sneak our way in.”

“And then what? The place is going to be crawling with Regents protecting his slimy carcas. We need to get in, move around freely, and get out.”

She gave him a surreptitious look. “No offense, but you’re as stealthy as a boulder falling off a mountain.”

“Offense; taken.” He dragged the former uniform owner by one hand to a storage room where a second half naked companion laid sprawled on his stomach in the same situation, and locked the door.

She held up the boots from the officer she had knocked out with a well-placed stun blast to his chest, scrunched up her nose in disgust, and put them on. The rest of the uniform fit to her frame well enough to allow for freedom of movement.

They faced each other, donned in their undercover uniforms. In that heavy moment where anyone else would have suffered heart palpitations from knowing how truly risky this plan was, he sent her a finger gun of confidence.

She shook her head and headed to the cockpit of the stolen transport ship. “You’d think after nine years, you’d stop doing that.” Selka slid easily into the copilot’s seat, while Yune sat in the pilot’s. As eccentric as he was, she couldn’t deny that her long-time friend was one of the best flyers she’d ever met. “You picked up the strangest habits from Terra.”

“I’ll take my finger guns to the grave,” he started up the pre-flight sequence.

“If this fails, you will.” She checked the data within the log. Just as the docking port’s computer specified, this ship was scheduled to bring supplies to the Regent facility called Strafsend. “You remember your training, right?”

“I thought you had faith in me,” he smiled at her. “Besides, if I didn’t, you’d never let me live it down.”

She leaned back in her seat. “You’re damned right.”

“Come on, it’s not like we haven’t done this before. Getting into Regent controlled areas was my specialty before I got in the pilot’s seat.”

He smoothly used the ship’s thrusters to clear docking bay five in Donathakiri - the closest civilized town to the Mosskiri mountains - and angled the ship leisurely toward the wilds.

“It’s a good thing you were still on Ilthall. Would have taken me forever to find you if you’d
moved. It took me two years to find out you were on that planet. You know how to disappear.”

“So do you. Getting caught is an occupational hazard.” She became serious. “‘Running jobs, and stealing relics from bases and outposts is one thing. Breaking into a secret Regent facility on their home planet on the assumption that the galaxy’s most wanted criminal is hiding in it is on a whole new level of ‘risky.’ If this works…”

“We’ll be rich. And we’ll be heroes, free to go anywhere and do anything we want,” he grinned. Her old friend was predictable. “I’m not interested in being a hero.”

“Then why’d you agree? You missed me that much?”

She answered cleanly. “I’m just here for the reward.”

He sobered up. “You owe a debt?”

“Plain old greed isn’t good enough?”

“That was Marci’s territory. Not yours.” He simply eyed her with a knowing ‘yeah right’ glance. He could see past her. She was never just about the money.

The prodding sense from him needled at her. “All right, fine. I need to get my ship back, if you must know. The Dyne impounded the Tapheila as payment for a debt.”

“That’s why you wanted me to pick you up. You were stuck on Ilthall without a ride.”

“I would have gotten my ship back. Eventually.” She had spent the few days before Yune’s call formulating a plan, which she kept as a ‘plan B’ in case this bounty hunt went sour.

He smirked.

“We’re coming up on the valley,” she prepared the necessary data, ready for when they would need it. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.” Yune waited until the Strafsend loft valley came into range on the sensors. A little further in, and this ship would ping on theirs.

A clear female voice crackled over the com. [Approaching vessel, this is a restricted fly zone. Identify yourself.]

He activated the communications array to signal the facility, and read back the ship’s information. “This is P-three-eight-one-two-one, transport vessel, Lockri, carrying medical supplies and consumables. Requesting permission to land.”

[Transmit your access code.]

“Acknowledged. Transmitting now.”

“Having second thoughts?” Selka asked.

“No.” But he couldn’t hide his anxiety from her. Felorians were empathic, and difficult to lie to. As a result of this and their personal history, Selka Kelnaris was one of the few people he trusted most, and one of the most infuriating. She was always the one to call him out on his bull scret.

Tense seconds passed, and then… [Transmission code confirmed, Lokri. You are cleared to land in
“Copy, that.” Yune exhaled a breath he hadn’t been aware he was holding. “See? I told you we’d be fine.”

The ship landed gracefully inside the landing bay cavern carved into the mountain and the door closed behind them.

“The Horizon’s on standby. We’ll need about fifteen minutes while they clear the inventory to get Runell and get out. Stall as much as you can. You ready?”

She grinned. “Let’s go get rich.”

The two left the ship, and Selka handed the manifest datadot over to the officer in charge of double checking the cargo.

Yune calmly walked away to leave his companion to deal with ‘business,’ and gave a slight wave to the officer at the door, who nodded back and let him pass.

He waited until the side hall he entered was clear. Taking his chance, he checked an office door and casually ducked inside. Evidently, they didn’t think any intruders would get this far, so they didn’t bother to lock it, or even post more than the minimum troops required in the entire facility. Their mistake.

Yune typed quickly at a touch screen console, closing the screen saver of fluffy, long-eared zabbits hopping through a field of wildflowers. It instantly brought up the security protocols. He broke through them one by one until he reached a map. There, he scanned through the personnel logs.

Senator Runell’s name lit up to him like a burning tree in the middle of a dark forest. “Got him. His quarters are on level four. And I was right. There’s a back door with an unguarded shuttle. Convenient.”

Selka spoke softly. “Keep it in mind, just in case,” She eyed the back of the men walking down the ship’s ramp with a hover pallet of crates.

He closed the search results, but paused at an encrypted file. “Top secret, huh? Don’t mind if I do.” Whatever they’re doing here might be worth some pretty money to someone. Curious to know what Runell was hiding in this place, he opened it.

Headshots of the two children from earlier topped the file, along with other photos of them in the midst of experimentation showing up periodically amid the text. He scrolled through it without reading so he could scan the whole thing into his contact lenses, and look at it in detail later.

The door’s lock disengaged.

Panicked, he closed down everything, brought up the screen-saving frolicking zabbits, and hurried to the back into a recessed area behind a counter. He ducked down out of sight.

A man and a woman lip-locked with their hands groping at each other’s white and blue laboratory uniforms poured into the room and shut the door.

Yune listened to the lovers tryst as they knocked a couple of canisters from the desk onto the floor in their lust. As long as they didn’t need anything from the supply area, he would get a free audio show. He cursed his contact lenses for only recording visual data and not audio.
Still, as fun as it was to listen to the sounds of a secret happy-time-galore rendezvous, he was on a tight schedule. He didn’t have time for this.

The universe answered his silent cry for the two get it over with already.

The door opened again, forcing the lovers to pretend nothing had happened.

Nera and Doctor Barakan stood in the doorway. “What is this? Doctor Malarei? Doctor Lysand?”

Doctor Malarei smoothed down the fabric of her uniform. “Administrator, I can explain--”


The two embarrassed scientists quickly vacated the room.

Yune’s fight-or-flight reaction kicked into gear, but he kept still. He missed the happy-time couple already.

Nera locked the door with a high security code. “We need to go into phase six immediately.”

“Absolutely not. This is their rest day,” Doctor Barakan argued. “They are taking to the treatments far more easily than an adult - as we speculated -, but the inclusion process is still strenuous on their bodies.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“If this is going to work at maximum efficiency, we cannot rush the phrases. The soonest I can promise them ready to accept phase six is by the end of next week.”

“Keeping them mildly sedated is slowing us down. Take them off the drug.”

“And risk the lives of my staff? Absolutely not. If they were the original fifty I was promised, then it would be a possibility, but all of our resources split only between two makes them a far greater threat. I will not take off the drug until they trust me. They’re still exhibiting signs of rebellion. You remember what happened during the EPE test.”

“Doctor Solen was badly injured, Yes I remember.” Everyone present for the Ephypsan Particle Endurance test would never forget the untamed power that exploded from both subjects after prolonged exposure. The radiation didn’t harm the subjects, but their reaction to being overcharged left the scientist in the protective suit in the chamber with them covered in burns. He was still undergoing dermal regeneration treatments in the capital city.

“We can’t take them off the capathacin until they have control.”

Nera bore her urgency into her words. “I just received a call from Chancellor Urza. The Xox were spotted in the Vomora cluster in the Kestra system. You know; our neighbors. She wants the inclusion process completed immediately so their training can begin. If the Xox enter our system, she will have no choice but to deploy the fleet and keep them away from Masaka. We’re running out of time.”

“The Xox haven’t attempted an attack on Masaka in twenty years. I will not have years of my research destroyed on account of the Chancellor’s fear.”

Nera snapped back with just as much vice. “I’ll have you remember Degull was killed to ensure the Project continued as planned. Runell willingly became a wanted criminal across the galaxy just to
preserve this hope and your work. The two we have here are invaluable to ending the war. Anything regarding these children is the Chancellor’s call. Now,” Nera’s voice lowered to a powerful snarl, “Two-Twelve and Two-Forty-Six must start their training immediately.”

“We’ve been at war for a hundred years. She can wait two weeks.”

Administrator Nera stared him down. “Begin phase six now, Doctor, or I will execute the order for you.”

If their eyes could burn lasers, both would be piles of ash on the floor.

He grumbled and pressed a com button on the desk computer. “This is Doctor Barakan. Are the children in the Inclusion chamber?”

“Yes, doctor,” he gained a reply from a male scientist. “Analysis of phase five is in the green. So far there are no complications. We were about to let them go back to their rooms.”

“Begin phase six immediately.”

“What? But, they're still recovering. Is it wise to--” a confused female voice took over and replied.

“Don’t argue with me, Doctor Tinen. Begin the final phase without me. I’ll be there shortly.”

A concerned, “Yes, Doctor,” was his only reply.

He faced Nera. “If this results in the deaths of either of those children, then the Project is as good as scrapped. We only have one shot at this. Phase six means we won’t get a second chance.”

She paused. “You’re telling me you used every ounce of resources we have?”

“You’re not the only one who’s been pressured by Chancellor Urza,” he took a deep breath.

“I see,” Nera mused. “I’ve been watching them. They’re remarkable, strong-willed, but highly dependent on each other.”

“Yes. That dependency has already proven to be a problem.”

“On the contrary. They will survive phase six, because both will ensure the other lives. Once the phase is complete, they will no longer need each other in that regard. At that point, we will separate them. The Chancellor will see to that herself.”

“They had better survive this,” Doctor Barakan snarled, “for the sake of us all.”

Their conversation ended, and the two left the private office.

Yune processed everything he’d heard. This wasn’t just a hidey-hole for Senator Runell. It was a scientific research facility, and those children were the experimental mice.

He peeked around the corner, insured it was safe, and moved back to the computer. He opened up the map long enough to find the inclusion room on level three - one level above Runell. “Dammit.”

This bounty hunt mission just became more complicated. He called Selka. “Hey, you’re gonna love this one, but funny thing just happened: we have a change of plans.”

* * * *

Yune
Chapter End Notes

FUN FACT #10: Only 60% of the galaxy has been charted.

Yune went to Earth in Terran year 1978 to hide from a bounty hunter chasing him down for snagging an ancient artifact first and selling it to a collector for a brick load of cash. To let the team get away, they split up and he went to the pre-FTL human world to live in Los Angeles. He met up with the old team two Terran months later, but while he was there, he adopted a few Earth customs, had fun with some of the looser ladies, and developed a love of funk music. He picked up a collection of records that he was able to record into the ship's computer. For a while after he left Earth, it wasn't uncommon to hear The Commodores and other groups playing on the bridge of the Horizon.

He still has his bell bottoms and platform shoes.

The first time he went to Earth, he pretended to be mute until he picked up basic phrases in English. His Mikran dialect stuck out, but no one could place where he was from.

He went back in Earth year 1988 for a week to see how things were going with the music, to take a break, and to work through a personal crisis. He took a smaller ship, because at that time, the Horizon was still being used by the whole team. They didn't split up until 1994.
The Rescue

Chapter Summary

A battle to rescue Will and Terra from the Regent facility in the loft valley of Strafsend ensues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 11

“Excuse you?” Selka hissed as she turned away to avoid anyone overhearing her conversation. “There is no ‘change of plans’ here.”

“There is now. I’ll be waiting for my ride on the front lawn. Be ready for anything,” Yune hung up and left the room, but not before planting a small explosive charge beneath the desk. He hoped the lovers wouldn’t come back, because this room would soon be a hot spot in more ways than one.

“Darrak!” she growled softly. “If he dies, I’ll kill him.”

A cargo bot rolled by, glanced at her with its upside-down bowl shaped head, beeped in curiosity, then disregarded the disgruntled Regent as inconsequential to its task and carried on pushing its load on the hover sled.

Yune tailed a group of scientists to an elevator and blended in. No conversation passed between them. They assumed he was just an officer on his rounds. Once the elevator opened at level three, he casually split from the group into the hall and straightened his stolen uniform.

The Inclusion room resided on the other side of the donut-shaped underground compound. Yune moved as quickly and casually as he could along the obtuse curved hall, stopping once at a wall panel to pretend to check information when a duo of officers passed by.

The door to the Inclusion room was locked by a keycard. He could place an EM node at the door to fry the circuits, but that might draw too much attention too soon.

Instead, his opportunity arrived in the form of a distracted scientist staring intently at a datadot as he walked toward the room.

“Hey, just the man I needed to see!” Yune draped his arm convivial over the man’s shoulder, noting the name from his badge.

“Uh...what?”

“Someone in section A-seventeen told me to come find you. Said they had the final results for some kind of project you two were working on?”

“Who are you?”
“Just an errand boy,” Yune lead him into a nearby hall and opened the closest door.

“This is a storage roo--”

Yune’s fist slammed across the other’s face, knocking him into the room. At the same time, he followed through, and closed the door. “Yes, it is.” Yune removed the magnetic badge and saluted the unconscious victim. “Thank you,” he read the badge and groaned, “Palstice Sneeble.”

He patted the guy’s arm in honest condolences to the plight that was his entire name, and left Palstice to the company of redundant lab equipment and boxy metal crates.

A brief swipe of the card in front of the control panel, and the door to the Inclusion room opened.

He expected to find a standard laboratory with tables covered in beakers, computer screens, and boxy equipment with blinking lights running analysis on samples, or projects in various states.

Instead, he entered a room with two long desks that cut at an angle to his right and left facing a clear protective partition. Various monitors and a control panel adored each one. The first area was for observation of the events in the main room beyond. A half-full mug sat abandoned on the desk to his right, like the owner had rushed off in an emergency. The liquid inside was still hot.

The area beyond the partition is what gave him chills.

It was easily the bastard brother of a twisted surgical room.

The boy, dressed in a white long sleeved tunic and matching pants, lay on a bed with his hands and bare feet secured to the frame by leather belts. A golden holographic representation of his body drifted over him like a ghost. Clear terminals angled upward from the sides of the bed reflected scrolls of information. A suspension field formed by six slim, joined arms kept his head immobilized even as he twitched and writhed in the restraints. Every time he moved, points of blue lit up all over the hologram. He tried to cry out, but the sound was weak. They had him heavily sedated.

Yune looked at the desk monitor where an image of a double helix lazily spun. Half of the code lit up blue, and the other half remained gold. A portion of the gold flared and another notch lost to the blue.

“Heart rate?” Doctor Barakan entered from another room adjacent to this one. For a quick second, the girl was visible on a bed in a twin state.

“Erratic,” The woman from the Happy Time Couple answered. “Two-Forty-Six is dangerously close to cardiac arrest. Readings from Two-Twelve are identical. It’s too soon for this. We have to stop.”

“We have our orders, Doctor Malarei,” he said. “Keep going.”

She frowned, but did as she was told and tapped in a sequence on her console.

No one noticed the fake lieutenant watching from the observation area. They were all intently focused on their subjects.

Yune ground his teeth together. By the way they spoke, they had the power to end this at any time, so these children weren’t here undergoing a life-saving procedure. They were experiments.

Time to make sure they remembered him for the rest of their lives.
“I’d listen to the woman if I were you,” he stood in the archway leading down to the examination room with his pulse pistol leveled at Doctor Barakan’s head. He’d kept his favorite gun tucked away at the nape of his back beneath his clothes, and was grateful the officers here didn’t pat him down. Either they didn’t care, or they were highly confident in the remote location of this facility that no one could ever find it, let alone get inside. “Shut it down now, or I blast everything in this room into shrapnel.”

“Who the hell are you?” Doctor Barakan demanded. “Call security!”

Doctor Malarei dove toward a control terminal, but instead of doing as she was ordered, she dumped the tools off a metal tray, and slammed it upside the doctor’s head with a battle cry.

Doctor Barakan stumbled into the bed. Another hit knocked him to the floor.

She breathed hard and pushed her brown hair out of her eyes. “I’ve wanted to do that for months.”

“Um...great?” Yune hadn’t anticipated any betrays in the group, but he wasn’t going to ignore outside help. He noticed the other three scientists in the room. One of them held up her hands in surrender while another man rushed him from the right. Yune fired off a red laser bolt into his shoulder, knocking him to the floor. He sent another stun blast into the other’s chest, leaving himself and Doctor Malarei. “Help me shut this thing down.”

She typed at the console. “I assume Captain Linell sent you,” she asked.

“Yeah,” he lied. Now wasn’t the time to say ‘Hey, I’m really here for your boss, so if you could hand him over, that would be great.’

“Good. She got my message. Whatever you do, do not take the children to the capitol. Get them off this planet.”

He continued the ruse. “I have the rendezvous coordinates.”

The hologram above the boy brightened without warning and he screamed.

The mangled shriek shred itself straight through to Yune’s marrow.

A needle pulled out of the back of the boy’s neck, but his screams continued. He writhed and thrashed as blue light flowed from that point in the hologram like liquid, swallowing up the gold lines without eager hunger.

“What?” Doctor Malarei rushed to another terminal. “They activated it from the other room,” Her face whitened. “They used all of it at once. No… No, no, no, no, this will kill them.”

“All of what? What did they do?”

“They just injected both children with every DNA sample we had. That should have been done in four treatments over the next week.”

“Get him out of that thing!”

She typed frantically. “I can’t shut it down.”

Yune pulled her away and fired two blue blasts into the console, killing the system in a shower of sparks. The hologram over the boy’s body fizzled out and the sustaining field around his head deactivated.
The boy continued to writhe, screaming. A kindred cry of pain echoed from the other room from
the girl.

Doctor Malarei’s fists tightened. “We’re too late. The process has already begun. Whether they
survive it is up to them, now,” she lamented.

Yune rushed over, removed the straps keeping the boy immobilized, and lifted him into a sitting
position. Will’s entire body spasmed in his arms. “Easy, kiddo. I’m getting you out of here.”

Doctor Malarei pressed an injector cylinder to the side of his neck. Will’s screams eased back to
whimpering.

“What did you give him?”

“A pain killer.”

“T-T-…” Will tried to say Terra’s name.

“What?”

Doctor Malarei clarified. “His companion. If you’re going to get them out, you need to move now.”

“And you are…?”

“Doctor Malarei,” she rested her palm gently on Will’s face. “A friend.”

Yune accepted it. He left the boy in her care and burst into the other room. Three stun shots from
his pulse pistol took care of the scientists therein, and he returned with the girl in his arms.

Doctor Malarei quickly gave her the same shot.

Terra calmed down, though her cries muffled into Yune’s jacket.

She worked at a nearby computer. “I’ve disabled the security in this section. The doors should
allow access to anyone for the next few minutes before they figure it out.”

He was impressed. “Thanks. Here,” he handed Terra off to her, and picked up Will.

The rogue doctor removed a vile and a small metal cylinder from a drawer, pulled the liquid from
the vile into the injector, and pressed it against the necks of both children. “This will counteract the
sedative, but it’ll take a few moments to take effect.” She moved ahead to open the Inclusion
chamber’s door and scanned the hall. “No one’s been alerted yet. I can get you to the elevator, but
from there, you’re on your own.”

He followed her down the long curving hall.

She reached the elevator and pushed the button.

“Give me the girl,” Yune set Will on his feet. The boy wobbled drunkenly, wrapped his arms
around his stomach, and threw up.

Yune scrunched up his nose. “Uch. Nice.”

She handed Terra over and used the edge of her lab coat to wipe off Will’s mouth. He barely
acknowledged it with his glassy-eyed stare. “They’re in the process of the final phase. We don’t
know how this is going to affect them. Whatever you do, do not separate them until the phase is
complete. It is critical they remain together.”

She pulled out a pen-sized injector cylinder from her pocket. The scientists closely involved with the children carried them as a safety precaution. “Take this. It’s a sedative called Capathacin. It’s the most effective drug we have that works on them. This contains six doses. Use one dose each. Put them back to sleep once you get them out so they can withstand the phase. Being completely aware for this is like torture. Head up to level two, rooms twenty-four and twenty-five. I’ll cause a distraction.”

“Don’t worry about that,” he took the sedative. “I’ve got it covered right about...Now.”

Nothing.

He sighed. “I really need to work on my timing.”

A massive explosion ripped through the vacant office on the first floor. The concussion wave rattled the facility. That should pull most of the Regent officers up to that level to investigate the commotion.

He pointed upward. “There it is.”

The two kids whimpered in fear and confusion.

Yune took aim at her chest with his pulse pistol, holding Terra in his other arm. “Thanks for your help, Doctor Malarei,” he tried to convey his need to save her from punishment by adding her to his trail of stun victims so she wouldn’t be singled out as aiding the intruder.

She didn’t run or put up a fight. In fact, she seemed to understand his actions. “Take care of them. Give me your word they will be safe.”

He nodded once, “You have my word.” He promised, then pulled the trigger.

Doctor Janna Malarei dropped to the floor unconscious.

“Janna?” Will slurred. He looked up at the tall man who’d shot their teacher - the closest thing they had to a mother in this god-forsaken place - and debated running away even if he could barely stay on his feet.

They were being kidnapped. Again.

He holstered the weapon, grabbed Will’s hand, and pulled him into the elevator. “If you vomit, don’t vomit on me,” he mumbled to the girl.

The doors closed, but in that second, the lights went out, plunging them into darkness.

Will panicked.


Blue light suddenly strobed through the small lift, lighting it up.

Terra squirmed in his arms until he set her down. Her voice barely produced a squeak thanks to phase six. She wrapped her arms around Will instinctively, and he to her. Sapphire threads of energy coursed over them almost too fast to see, but in the pitch blackness, it lit them up.

The strange occurrence lasted only a few seconds before the power came back on.
He whispered in disbelief. “What did they do to you...”

The two kids used each other to keep from falling over.

The doors opened on the second floor.

“Come on, Sparky and Squeaker. We’re gonna be late for our ride.” He picked up Terra again in his left arm, and kept ahold of Will’s hand, nearly dragging the kid along.

A duo of officers round the corner from a nearby hall.

Yune fired off multiple shots. He hit his targets, and somehow manage to avoid being stunned by the enemy.

Will stopped and covered his head.

“This isn’t gonna work. Ok. Up. Hold on. Keep your head low.” Yune bent down so Will could climb on his shoulders, and stood with his right arm supporting his leg.

Carrying two children like this would put a strain on a normal Masakan or Kes, but thankfully he was a Mik, and his people were stronger than the other two human offshoots due to the slightly higher gravity of Mikra. That was one of two main reasons he went in to retrieve Senator Runell instead of Selka.

He moved quickly down the hall passing numbered doors.

A red bolt zipped past his right from behind.

He fired multiple red bolts into a trio of Regent officers chasing him down. He ran until they reached room twenty-four, and burst through. He locked the door behind him, and set the kids down.

This was one of the fifty windows looking out into the central environmentally controlled green yard tucked down into the snowy loft valley.

“I don’t feel good,” Terra promptly threw up on a floor cushion.

Yune looked disgusted. “This is gonna be a fun trip home.” He tapped at the com node behind his ear. “Selka, where’s my ride?”

“A little busy,” Selka fired off multiple shots at the Regent officers in the landing bay. She bolted up the ramp and closed it before reinforcements could arrive. “What did you do?! Why does this always end in a firefight with you?”

“I love the action,” he replied.

“We need to find you a new hobby.” She locked down the ship, and dove into the cockpit to fire up the thrusters. Pulse lasers struck the hull. She looked for any kind of weapons, but the transport vessel didn’t have a single pulse canon or shields. But at least it was heavily armored. “Perfect,” she cursed in irritation. She swiveled out of the chair and dashed to the protection of the shuttle and raised the cargo hold ramp at the back.

Yune leveled his gun at the door and dug for the EM node in his pocket. He saw Will and Terra moving sluggishly around the room gathering a few things. Will put a bag down and shoved a few inside it. “Are you packing?”
“I’m not leaving it behind,” Will’s words became more clear. He zipped the red bag closed and flopped over on it, breathing hard. The sedative was wearing off.

He noticed Terra had sat down with a purple backpack clutched in her arms. “I don’t believe this. Now you come with actual baggage.” He sarcastically thanked Doctor Malarei for sending them here so the kids could pack before their escape. How considerate of her.

Terra put on her backpack and shuffled to the door. She braced herself against it with one hand, and pressed the other against the control panel. A spark lit beneath her palm. Dozens of thin threads of energy like an electrical current shot out along the panel, fusing it closed.

“Huh. That works.” Yune pocketed the disruption device. This girl was an EM node.

She whined and dropped to the floor. “I don’t wanna go back to the Inclusion room,” she cried. “It scares me.”

“You’re not going back, Squeaker,” Yune promised. “But we’re not in the clear yet. Stay strong a little longer.”

She looked up at him through stands of long chestnut colored hair and blinked green eyes. Her expression read of distrust, though it quickly broke when she wrapped her arms around herself. “It hurts. I wanna go home.”

“I’ll get you somewhere safe and report this place. They’ll get you home.”

“Liar!” Will snapped. He staggered to his feet, clenching his hands into small, tight fists. Tears slipped down his face from his emotions and the sense of phase six. “We can’t go home! Ever! So stop lying!”

“Whoa, hey, take it back to One, Sparky.”

They could hear the Regents attempting to break through the door. Terra backpedaled away.

Yune spoke to his companion on the other end of the frequency. “Company wants my autograph real bad, Selka. Any time would be nice...”

A shadow darkened the green grass.

The Lockri crashed through the dome, sending shards of the clear structure raining down along with blue weapons bursts from a modified handheld tractor beam generator used for transporting heavier equipment She’d secured it magnetically to the ramp, connected it to the ship’s computer, amped up the power, and lowered the ramp to provide cover fire. Selka grinned from the pilot’s seat. “I made a gun.”

Yune grinned. Sometimes, he really loved that woman. “Ok, let’s go.” He hoisted Terra into the crook of his left arm again, and took Will’s hand.

Selka set the ship down and ran to the ramp to provide manual fire power as Yune dashed across the dangerous open area with...

She paused.

Were those the kids?

“Where’s Runell?” she barked. Blue laser blasts hit the ship, causing further damage to the hull.
“Remember that change of plans? Say ‘hi’ to the change.”

“You gotta be kidding me.” She blinked at the boy carrying the red duffel. “Is that luggage? You stopped to pack their things?!”

“I got railroaded.”

Will stumbled and fell to his knees.

Yune turned around. “Now’s not the time for a nap, Sparky. Move it before I shoulder you again!”

Will struggled to get to his feet when a commanding tenor male voice froze him in place.

“Two-Forty-Six!”

Will’s head snapped up at the man barking the number that became his name. His heart lurched into his throat.

Senator Runell strode alongside a wobbly Doctor Barakan onto the lawn with two dozen Regent officers flanking them.

“Whelp,” Yune quipped, “found Runell.”

The tall, slim senator spoke with firm authority. “Return Two-Twelve to us immediately. Two-Forty-Six, return to your room at once. These criminals will be killed for attempted kidnapping of Masakan Alliance property.”

“We’re not property!” Terra shouted back.

“Yes, you are, Two-Twelve. Every cell in your body belongs to Chancellor Urza.”

Will shivered, sweating profusely as his vision blurred.

Doctor Barakan took slow steps forward. “What you’re feeling is the final stage of the gift I’ve given you to save the galaxy. It’s changing you into something extraordinary. Only I can teach you how to use it. You have a greater destiny to fulfill, and you’re turning your back on our purpose here,” he burst out in anger, “on your planet!”

“No…” Strands of dark hair fell in front of Will’s face. He felt like his heart would shred itself to bits inside his chest, then set the bits on fire. He clenched his teeth from flashes of light behind his eyes.

Terra buried her face in Yune’s neck from the same experience. She wanted to sleep forever, but this stranger told her stay strong, and she had to remain awake for Will. He needed her, and she needed him.

“Phase six is the most potent. The more you fight this metamorphosis, the more agonizing it will be. Let go, Two-Forty-Six. Come back with me, and I’ll make the pain go away.”

“No,” his voice rasped.

“You are in no condition to leave here. Without proper treatment, this phase could kill you. Do you want Two-Twelve to die because of your stubbornness?”

“She won’t. I won’t let her die,” Will snarled the promise. “Ever.”
Senator Runell stepped up. “Then do as you’re told, Two-Forty-Six! Return to your room immediately!”

Yune’s eyes flicked to each gun trained on them, but the Regents weren’t advancing. They should have shot him by now. Then it hit him like a thorned ridgeback’s tusks to the gut:

They were afraid of the children.

These trembling, tiny kids elicited enough caution to keep grown, trained officers at a distance. Faint threads of energy flickered within a second over Terra’s hands clasped around his neck. It tingled beneath the surface of his skin. He suddenly felt like he had a bomb in his arm that needed hugs and a sippy cup.

Will’s breathing had increased to near hyperventilation, but it wasn’t only from the repercussions of phase six working aggressively through his body.

He was pissed. He wanted revenge.

Will let the fire from the inclusion process fuel his anger at his captors, his tormentors. For everything they had done to himself and Terra in the past year, for the pain, the agony, the repeated separations from her, the experiments, and the isolation in a sensory deprivation chamber...for all of it, he wanted them to hurt. He wanted the whole place to burn to the ground.

“Two-Forty-Six!” Runell bellowed again.

“Stop calling me that!”

“That is your name!”

“No!”

“Then what is it?!”

“No!” The word existed in his mind, but refused to push beyond the number. Denial was all he could force himself to do.

“Say it!”

“No!”

“Enough of this insolence!” Runell raised his arm. “Ready your weapons!”

Will shot them the most dangerous glare an enraged, cornered animal could create, “Leave us ALONE!”

A blue shock wave exploded from him straight for the Regents. It skimmed along the ground, tearing up wads of grass, and hammered into the officers, Runell, and Doctor Barakan. Every window hit by the wave shattered.

The blast sent them screaming up to the first floor level like dolls. Some slammed into the walls, while others fell back to the ground. All twenty-six people crumpled.

It swept through Yune, who flinched when his vision blurred, darkened, then spastically flickered back to life. He’d felt that wave wash through his brain and left him momentarily dizzy, and with a sudden pounding headache.
Will collapsed. The pulse drained him completely of energy. His entire body, even his fingernails, hurt. He gripped the grass, feeling a tingly sense of energy from it - of life - and instinctively pulled on it with greedy need.

Yune was left speechless for once.

He really needed to read that file.

The headache began to slowly subside. Good, because he needed to think clearly to get out of this alive. He set Terra down on the ramp for Selka to take her inside, ran back to the boy, scooped him up, and hurried back to the Lockri. As soon as he was inside, he hit the control panel to raise the ramp.

“What was that?” Selka exclaimed.

“It was the boy,” Yune set him down against the bulkhead behind the cockpit and slid into the seat.

Will and Terra huddled together.

“What? How?”

“Hell if I know.”

Selka fired up the thrusters. Most of the victims of Will’s energy blast staggered back to their feet. Yune wordlessly took control and used the time the boy had bought them to maneuver the ship straight up through the broken dome. Sapphire pulse fire from the Regents speared up at them. The hull took major damage.

The right engine blew. Yune fought the controls to set the ship down in the same adjacent loft valley he had left the Horizon in before. The Lockri hit the ground hard, tearing up clods of dirt and sending plumes of snow billowing high into the air.

They skid sideways to a stop. The debris and snow clouds took longer to settle.

He let go of the controls and leaned back with a heavy exhale and a smarmy grin. “Nailed it.”

Selka got up to check on the kids. She reached out to touch them, but jolted back when threads of energy like whiskers pulled from one into the other, as though they were exchanging or sharing it.

Yune stood and quickly put on his jacket. The rest of his clothes could be replaced. This was his favorite.

His vision flickered, then returned. He shook it off. As long as he could see - even in spurts -, he could fly. “Let’s get them to the Horizon and off this rock before they can track the ship.” He picked up Will. The boy’s body temperature was high enough that he could feel the heat through the fabric. That tingle washed through his skin again.

They hurried through the snow toward the hulking grey and blue light freighter parked on four landing struts. Yune unlocked the ship and the ramp beneath the nose lowered. They ran inside, up the U stairs to deck two, and placed the children on the floor of the Horizon’s cockpit behind the four seats.

Yune quickly activated all systems from standby mode in seconds. Snow blasted away from the thrusters in white billows as it lifted off the ground and the struts retracted into its belly. The
Horizon pivoted toward the space between mountains, and shot into the sky.

Thankfully, the Regents didn’t catch on that the intruders in Strafsend were Yune Darrak and Selka Kellnaris. A few members of the underbelly of the galaxy knew of their reputations as daring thieves and smugglers, so sometimes he could use his to his advantage. However, that meant he’d also crossed paths with the Regents more than once.

As for Selka...he had no idea what she’d been up in the past three years outside the handful of jobs they’d done together.

He blinked repeatedly at another spastic flicker of his vision.

She sensed his rising trepidation and concern. “Are you alright?”

“That blast glitched out my contacts. My eyesight keeps flickering. Don’t worry. I can see … ish.”

Her faith in their ability to escape plummeted. “‘Ish’ is not comforting.”

Four Archer class single seat fighters took off into the sky from the city of Donathakiri right for them.

“So, they were ready. I was about to be disappointed. Hang on.” Yune throttled up the atmospheric thrusters as far as he could while weaving around blue pulse fire.

He lead them on a bee-flight chase into the upper atmosphere, bursting through the towering plumes of clouds.

They found more company waiting once they reached high orbit.

“Ok, definitely not disappointed. Just how hot are these kids?”

The com pinged to life from a message from Chancellor Urza on all Regent frequencies. [Attention all Regents. A Mikran transport vessel has kidnapped two of the One Thousand.]

“The One Thousand?!” Yune and Selka gaped synchronously.

He cursed. “Son of a--”

[Disable that ship at all costs. Return those children to the safety of our home.]

Laser blasts from the nearby ships sliced through the air. The Horizon’s shields took a few direct hits, but held. Yune’s piloting skills kept the majority of their shots continuing on their route into space.

His vision flickered, went dark, then returned in the span of two seconds. Two seconds too long as far as he was concerned. He bapped the heel of his palm against his temple attempting ‘engineering 101’ on his eyes. “How are they doing back there?”

“The boy threw up,” Selka reported.

“Again? Ugh. Great. Now I gotta clean the floor.”

Thankfully, the Horizon wasn’t the only Mercury class out there. This freighter was so well favored at being roomy, easy to handle, yet small enough to be fast and maneuverable, as well as customizable that it was the most popular design of that class until about eight years ago. Tracking down one beat-up ship would be a daunting task in any port unless someone knew exactly where to
look.

Which was just what was happening at this moment. Masking his signature to pretend to be another freighter right now would be pointless.

A cruiser nearby joined in the chase, but others had been dispatched to intercept. “E need to get ahead of any possible blockade formation.”

“We need to jump to FTL.”

“We have to drop the shields for that.”

He called up coordinates from the navi computer. “It’s a one-second drop. We’ll be fine.”

“Not if they have a gunner who knows how to aim.”

“Thankfully, we do. Get on the turret.”

“Just don’t get us killed.”

“Don’t worry. I can avoid ‘em.”

“With your glitchy eyesight?”

“I know a few moves. Just make me a hole.” A shot rocked the ship. The shields held.

Yune dove the ship under a consumer transport vessel heading for one of the permanent jump points. The Regents followed within a flurry of pulse fire.

With his vision cutting in and out like his eyes decided to blink without him, he was forced to go by his gut feelings and skill to compensate. In this moment, trusting his reactions, he felt his instinct to fly had increased. It was a sense he knew how to touch into, and had saved his life on numerous occasions.

Selka rushed up to deck three and climbed the ladder in the middle that separated the living quarters from the lounge and galley up to the gunner’s seat, activated the controls, and tightened her fingers around the grips.

The Regent ships darted in and out of her green crosshairs. She angled the gun around and upward to catch any that crossed her path. She wasn’t aiming to destroy, only disable. Neither she nor Yune killed unless they absolutely had to. If the regents attacks became fatal, so would theirs. However, with their current cargo, that was unlikely to happen. She just needed to give them a hole to escape through.

Bursts of ion charges peppered space around the Horizon like fireworks. They were trying to kill his ship without destroying it. That boiled his blood. This was his baby and home. Not only that, he was on it, and did not look forward to a life sentence in prison, or the more likely outcome in this situation: death.

A few well-placed shots from gunners who aced ‘aiming’ at the academy hit their shields at the weakest point, causing them to fail. He pushed the ship’s sublight engines to their limit.

“Selka, at least try to hit something!”

“Maybe you should fly better!”
'Maybe you should fly better,’ he mouthed-mocked. “Coordinates set,” Yune’s finger rested over the jump control lever. “I’m making the jump in three...two...now!” The Horizon shot into lightspeed, and fled the system, leaving the Regents in the dust.

* * * *

tbc

Chapter End Notes

FUN FACT #11: Selke's people - the Felorians - are slightly telepathic, and have a matriarchal society. Although all Felorians are considered equal, the majority of those in power are still female. Selke never bought into the 'women are better than men' idea.

Felorians get 'vibes' about people, but can't read minds, connect with another telepathically, or heavily sense emotions without an outside amplifier called a Micathyst crystal. They call these crystals the "Eye" due to giving them the ability to see into the other person. These are harvested from the stomach of a massive, thick, six-legged space dwelling creature called a Ceenak. Ceenak's feed on matter within asteroid fields, latching onto the larger rocks and leaving deep indentations in them, or consuming the smaller ones. It is a slow, but necessary process. If space had an ecosystem, they're integral to it. Like space whales. They have no eyes. They are docile, travel in small groups that live in asteroid fields, and ignore anything else in the galaxy unless it attacks them first. It can take hundreds of years to get every ounce of nutrients from an asteroid field.

In order to extract the crystallized deposit, the Ceenak must be lulled into a state of trust by the person wishing to extract the deposit, achieved by the Felorian's telepathic abilities. While in this trance-like state, the person enters the massive creature, removes the deposit from its stomach lining, and exits. The creature is then lifted from its trance, and goes on its way without being the wiser. This method was discovered by accident. Before then, Felorians would lure one away from the group, kill it, and harvest the deposits. The new method was a much better way to coexist and ensure the growth of new micathyst deposits after they realized they were hunting the creatures to extinction.

The only other stone Felorians can use to amplify their abilities is Amoradite, found on comets. They avoid using it, since the connection it creates with their target is so strong, it can be damaging to both. Only the Acolytes of Shora - monks who've trained their entire lives to hone their abilities - have high telepathic prowess and can read minds without the aid of a micathyst crystal. Only they will dare to use the palm-sized amoradite gem known as the "Eye of Shora."
Chapter Summary

Yune and Selke read the project file Yune's contact lenses recorded in Strafsend. They learn about the experiments, the reasoning behind it, and feel the gravity of their decision to rescue Will and Terra.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 12

The minutes that passed while the ship soared through the wormhole were filled with a solid silence between them.

As soon as they exited FTL, he scanned the area. No other ships were in range of the sensors. They were alone amid space dust and a distant comet.

“We’re clear.” He activated the ship’s automatic helm control.

“The guns were a little sticky. What did you do to them?”

“Sticky? I ran a systems check before going to Masaka. They’re fine.”

“Tell that to the reaction time.”

“Maybe you’re just rusty.”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.” She climbed down from the turret. “You need to buy a service bot to help you keep this ship running.”

“I don’t need a bot. I do fine on my own.”

She noted the dirty halls, the empty food containers scattered on the lounge floor, table, and couch, the unsanitized dishes settled in the small galley food reclamator, the bits of cargo and parts scattered around, the missing bulkhead panels here and there that he’d used for repairs elsewhere, and the overall bachelor-ship look. It was a wonder he survived on his own for three years. “I can see that.”

She entered the cockpit. Even though she hadn’t called this ship ‘home’ for a while, seeing it in this state still pained her. She checked the status of the ship’s operations from the console. “That last hit took out our lateral thruster control. I’ll go see if I can fix it.” she started for the aft section on deck two, though paused and added as she looked down at the barf mess on the floor, “and get a mop.”

He got up when she left, but looked down at the two reasons why he just had to make a risky jump for his life. He didn't want to deal with this right now, and began to walk away, but stopped. He
recalled what Doctor Malarei had said about enduring a phase without sedation. The children looked to be in great pain despite the medication she had given to them.

Their screams echoed through his memory.

He removed the injector from his pocket and knelt in front of them.

Will’s weary gaze rested on the unit. Distrust and fear shone in them. A spark of blue streaked across his brown irises.

“It’s ok. I’m not gonna hurt you.” He knelt and pressed the unit to their necks with one click each.

Their eyes closed to the will of the sedative. The two now breathed more easily.

He pocketed the injector, and dropped into the seat behind the pilot’s chair. Now that he had time, he scanned his contact lenses and uploaded the data to the ship’s database so he could get a good look at that file from the facility’s office computer. He wanted answers.

His vision flickered quickly, then returned. He whispered a frustrated curse. Getting these fixed wouldn’t be easy. He would need to either endure the glitching, or find a way to get back to their creator on Masaka.

Considering what they had just narrowly escaped from, the odds of the latter were slim. He would need to try to fix them himself, or deal with this random, intermittent blinking.

Selka retrieved a datadot from the medical bay across the hall from engineering in lieu of moving the kids. These were extremely common and used for multipurpose scanning.

After she had checked on the damage to the ship, she returned to the cockpit and found Yune hunched over in the seat reading. Ignoring him, she checked their new passengers for any injuries. The datadot came back with fluctuating readings of stress indicative of someone currently undergoing a traumatic experience. What baffled her was their genetic readout. They scanned as human, but the computer was unable to verify their terran markers as claimed by Chancellor Urza. In fact, it couldn’t identify the other half at all. The scanner could be malfunctioning. They would need to go to med bay anyway for a complete physical, so she would run a more in-depth scan there.

He pulled up the data file, only instead of the lengthy report including graphs and stills, it only held the initial first page showing headshots of a solemn Will and Terra in their white clothing above their personal description stats. Beneath that were two very strict rules the staff needed to abide by:

Alternate subject 1.

Name: William Eric Kade
Galactic standard Age: 8
Terran age: 10.5
One Thousand Designation number: 246

Alternate subject 2.
Name: Emma Ann Kitridge.

Galactic standard Age: 8

Terran age: 10.5

One Thousand Designation number: 212.

Subjects will be referred to in all variances by their One Thousand designation numbers. Their given names are to be expunged from their psyches. All staff will comply with this ruling. Any deviance will result in expulsion from the program. Any mention of the project and/or facility beyond its walls will be met with imprisonment for insubordination.

Age testing revealed their cellular structures to be 8 GSY. Terran age of 10.5. Terran age to be expunged from their psyches. All staff will comply with this ruling. Any deviance will result in expulsion from the program. Any mention of the project and/or facility beyond its walls will be met with imprisonment for insubordination.

IMPORTANT: It is imperative to the safety of the subjects and the staff that training will not begin until after phase six - the final phase - is complete. Until that point, use of their abilities outside of testing will not be encouraged. By order of the Chancellor.

Beneath that lived the simple line SOLO FILE.

Which meant this file wasn’t on the facilities network. It lived solely within the office computer that Yune’s explosive blew to bits.

He cursed to himself. The information in that file could have sold for thousands of any currency.

Yet, he couldn’t help but wonder about the confidential nature of what they had done to these children, that even in a remote mountain laboratory, there was only one copy of the project file.

Selka returned and leaned on the back of his seat to get a look over his shoulder. Her jaw slacked in disbelief. ”The chancellor signed off on this? For what reason? Training for what?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t stay long enough to ask,” he quipped back.

Both glanced back to the two nine-year-olds, then to each other.

Even though he didn’t believe in the One Thousand’s supposed ‘destiny,’ he wasn’t ignorant to their value. Yune felt the sudden weight of the universe park itself on his shoulders and have a drink with his two new friends; Shocked-Beyond-All-Logical-Thought, and Regret. “Scret.”

She tapped on the console. “Looks like there was more.”

“A lot more. I scanned through all of it, but this was all that copied over. That blast must have
affected the iris data storage and wiped the rest. Whatever they were doing, we’ll never know. It’s gone.” He leaned back. “If I’d a known what they were instead of just kids, I would have left them there.”

“No you wouldn’t,” she slapped down his attempt to hide behind his roughened rogue mask. “You’re not heartless.”

He grumbled and sank back in the seat. “Yeah, and look what that got us? We need to drop them off somewhere fast and run.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. A Tehrellian starbase. They can deal with them.”

He and Selka watched the two children slumped on each other against the wall, clinging to each other for their lives. Wisps of energy flared in and out of existence around them in azure threads, instinctively reaching out to save the other.

The fact that the Regents had experimented on them fully knowing who they were, meant that these two were invaluable to the Masakan Alliance, and the galaxy.

“Why would the Chancellor do this to two of the One Thousand and risk breaking whatever destiny they hold?” Selka mused. “The One Thousand are to be protected. This… This doesn’t make sense.”

He didn’t believe in any kind of destiny - his or the kids taken from Terra. But he did believe his decision to rescue them and run would give him the highest bounty known across the stars in the history of space travel. They and the kids would be hunted by the Regents, bounty hunters, the Xox, and any other governments or groups looking to either sell them to the enemy - or highest bidder - in exchange for immunity, or return them to Chancellor Urza.

This was not how today was supposed to end at all. They were supposed to be given clean slates, a boatload of money, and dubbed heroes of the galaxy.

Now he had two of the One Thousand on his ship, and a target the size of the Kelset maw cluster on his back.

* * * *

*tbc*

Chapter End Notes

**FUN FACT #12:** *The Altair Project was originally called "Project: Cloak" due to the fact that this intense power intended for catastrophic destruction to the Xox is hidden perfectly within the seemingly frail bodies of two humans. No known scanning technology could detect it. They could carry this ‘weapon’ in broad daylight without anyone becoming the wiser.

The space-fairing species that are part of the Masakan Federation follow Galactic Standard Time. It is a construct set by the Masaki to use as the generally accepted time frame in agreement with these species 1200 years ago. A Person’s age is defaulted to*
fit within GST. Their age on their home planets vary greatly due to different rates of
revolution of their homeworlds around their stars. Having a standard time for space-
fairing species makes everything easier.

*GSY = Galactic Standard Year
*TY = Terran Year.
1 GSY = 1.30 TY.
New Normal

Chapter Summary

Will wakes up to find Selke and Yune arguing about what to do with them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 13

Space...

The muted plosives of arguing worked through Will’s ears into his mind like raindrops on leaves, and pulled him out of the meager sleep he’d managed to snag.

He cracked his eyes open. The blurry warm lighting held a blue vignette at the edges of his vision. He blinked to bring the ceiling of the Horizon’s lounge into focus. Gradually, the blue edge faded away. His body felt heavy and sore, like someone had made him run ten miles without rest.

Terra curled up next to him with her arm over his chest and her head against his shoulder. Both of them lay on the lounge couch cushions set on the floor. He rested his hand over her arm and tried to remember how he got here, or even where ‘here’ was. Will forced his memory to go back far enough to put the pieces together. When they did, he wished he hadn’t tried.

They’d drugged him, injected him with the same substance he’d been subjected to for the past six months. He remembered the escape, the confusion, fear, and laser bolts zipping by him. He recalled the intense emotions that pulled the energy pulse out of his body, almost out of his control - like something else inside him reacted to his state and fought back. He recalled the exhaustion that followed. The rest of the experience came in flashes that made very little sense. But he clearly remembered the pain, the twisting, incomprehensible sensation of every inch of him changing into something else, like he was Legos that someone was attempting to restack into a different form.

The sedative the stranger gave him calmed him down. Terra’s presence and shared energy may have been the only thing to get him through it. Eventually, the worst of it passed, and he’d fallen asleep.

Will moved her arm and sat up. That sense had faded drastically, but remnants of it remained. Compared to what he’d just survived, ignoring it was easy. But where was he now?

The steady ambient rumble brought back memories of the Morning Star. He looked to his right, and could see pinpoints of light within a black abyss through a wide three-sectioned window facing the couch.

The rumble belonged to a spaceship’s engines.
He was in space. Again.

The arguing continued from down the ship’s chunky hall. He could barely decipher the words. He wondered if this phase was affecting his translator. He tried to say ‘translator: off’ and then ‘translator: on’, but his voice wouldn’t work to give the restart commands. Until it obeyed him, he strained to pick up the few words he could interpret. The nanites translation quickly grew worse and worse.

“We cannot take them back to Masaka. If the Regents get their hands on them--,” Selke snapped.

“I’m not saying we hand them over,” Yune countered. “But we have to find someone to take care of them who can handle...this. That’s why I saw drop ‘em off with the Tehrellians.”

“The Tehrellians might not take them. Dealing with children of different species is considered meddling in the affairs of another race. You know how neutral they are. If they were still just part of the One Thousand, maybe we could find someone else, but...,they’re not even full Human anymore.”

“Not...Human?” Will glanced down at his hands. He looked fine. He didn’t have extra appendages, horns, a tail, or anything. He swallowed. His throat was dry, but it felt normal. He even tested his teeth with his tongue in case he grew fangs. He had all twenty digits. Everything was where it should be and as it should be. He knew whatever Doctor Barakan and his team had injected them with had given himself and Terra some kind of superpower, but they were never told more than, ‘This is a tool for you to use to save the galaxy.’

Yune and Selke were in a room to the right of the lounge with a table in the middle and cabinets to one side tucked into alcoves in the bulkhead. It resembled a kitchen. They had left the door open.

“Fine. Then what do you suggest we do?” Yune folded his arms. “We can’t take them back to Terra, and we can’t trust anyone we know.”

“As much as I know Zaf has a good heart, he’d crack under the pressure of a Regent interrogation. And there is no way in hell Marci is finding out about these kids. She’d sell them into slavery to the first person to offer her enough money.”

Yune’s voice lowered with a sigh. “There’s literally is no safe place for those kids anywhere.”

“That’s not... entirely true,” Selke began.

“Don’t take this where I think you’re taking this…”

“We know the stakes.“

“Oh no.”

“You said it yourself: they have nowhere else to go.”

“No.”

“Yune--”

“They are not staying on my ship.”

“Then we’ll keep them on the Tapheila.”

“That bird can’t outrun a Regent ship. No offense.”
That was her beloved home for the past five years. She glared. “Offense: taken.”

Will got to his feet and padded barefoot across the cold metal floor toward the arguing.

“Look, why don’t we just find this Captain Linell the hot doctor talked about and take the kids to them. They had a plan to break those two out anyway.”

“They’re Regents. No.”

“Then what are we supposed to do? Do you have any idea what kind of trouble this invites on us? We’ll be wanted in every system in the galaxy! By Everyone! Even more so than usual!”

“I thought you wanted to be a hero.”

“And rich! Not broke and ranking on the top of the Regent’s hit list. Because of them, I have to completely overhaul the Horizon. Getting a new ident code is harder than removing a micathyst deposit from a Ceenak’s stomach! Trust me. That’s not a vacation.”

”Yes. I know.” She had kept the beast calm while he retrieved the gem. She also remembered how it went wrong. “You’ve obtained a new code before for lesser reasons than this. Don’t go blaming them when you’re the one who decided to grab them instead of Runell.”

“You didn’t see them strapped to that table. You didn’t hear them scream.” He forced his heightened emotions down ran his hand through his short hair. “As you were so quick to point out earlier, I couldn’t walk away.”

“Because you still live up to that part of the oath. You always have,” she stated calmly. “I checked them over in med bay while they were asleep. They no longer scan as Terran Human.” Her voice faded to a whisper to push the severity of her findings. “They scan as something we don’t even have on record.”

He pointed at her with one finger. “The answer’s no. I still vote the Tehrellians.”

“Yune…”

“Our lives will be over!”

“So will theirs! At least with us, they’ll have a chance to live.”

Yune worried his face.

“They lost their world - literally and figuratively. They were experimented on to extreme violation. Everything they knew is gone. They’re going to try to rebuild their identities as best they can. The Regents knew this. They knew how easy it would be to offer up a place for them to belong, a purpose, and then mold that new identity into something to suit their needs. We can’t let that happen.”

He pointed at his own chest. “I am not an example to follow, and you know that.”

“Yes, but we’re it.”

“We have no idea how to take care of them. They’re eight years old. They’re basically babies. We drop them off with the Tehrellians, and that’s final.”

“I’m not a baby,” Will’s high pitched voice interrupted with concern. It cracked as he strained to use it.
A lead weight crushed their conversation as both locked their attention on the small boy. Even for a Terran human, he was still barely pushing four-feet-three-inches.

“Ah,” Yune rubbed the back of his neck, “Hey, Sparky,” he pasted on a smile. He fumbled through a cabinet for a bag of snacks and pulled out a brown disk. “Cookie?”

Will remained taciturn.

Yune lowered is hand. “How long have you been standing there?”

Will remained serious. He didn’t understand a word of that, but he knew it was about them. The Mikran language was different from Masakan, but held similar syllables. He felt a buzzing sensation in the back of his head, and heard a click. He rubbed the area like that would fix the problem.

The tense seconds ticked by.

“So,...you have a name, kid?” he tried again.

Will blinked. “Huh?”

“A name. You know, what your parents called you?”

Will’s eyes shifted between the two aliens, looking for any clues that might give him a hint as to what the taller man was saying.

Selke rested her unblinking gaze on the small human. “Can you understand us?”

Her language was even weirder. Nothing about it held any familiarity. Will continued to rub at the back of his head, and then stuck his fingers in his ears as if he could pull the nanites out with his earwax.

Yune figured it out. Both of the kids’ bodies had been producing large amounts of energy. That along with the shockwave Will used could have disrupted their translators. Or, it could only be a byproduct of phase six. If they’d gone through five of the phases before hand, and no one made note of this interference in the project report, he had to set his bet on Phase Six as the culprit.

“Thought so. His translator’s wet the bed.” He dug a small tool out of his pocket that he would use on his contact lenses and reached out to Will.

Will eyed him suspiciously and backed up into the lounge. He stopped and looked down at Terra still curled up on the floor, then to Yune. He moved to stand between them.

“It’s ok,” Yune tapped on the back of his own head, then pointed to his ears and made sure to speak as disarmingly as possible. “This won’t hurt.” He approached him slowly, keeping his hands visible the whole time.

Will held out his right hand in defense. Small lines of blue energy moved from all points of his hand to his palm.

Yune stopped. “Whoa, hey, easy, Sparky. Put it down.” He tried another tactic and switched to Masakan, of which he was fluent. “I get that you’re scared. I'm not going to hurt you. I’m going to fix your translator. Do you understand me?”

Will blinked, lowered his hand, and recalled the energy. “You’re Masakan?” he replied in kind.
“No. Hold still.” He set the device close to Will’s right ear, parting the strands of shaggy dark hair out of the way. "Talk to me for a second in your native language. What Terran language do you speak?"

"English."

"How much Masakan do you understand?"

"A lot, I guess. I can read and write pretty well. They taught us."

“In six months? You’re fluent?"

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Sometimes they say stuff I don’t understand.”

Either they were already adept at absorbing information, or that in conjunction with the Altair DNA had given them a boost in that area. "All right. What about your favorite vid?"

"Why?"

"Humor me."

"Um... I don't...remember."

"Try. The nanites need to re-calibrate to your language. Describe what you recall."

He pondered it for a moment. "Um...ruins, a temple...It was about an adventurer, with a brown jacket like yours, and a hat that he never left behind. He was cool.” His eyes widened when it shot back to mind. How could he ever forget that? "Indiana Jones!"

Seconds later, Will heard the click again, and the same buzzing sensation.

Yune lowered the tool and switched back to his native language. “That should do it.” He held up the tool, and Selke took it from him so she could fix the girl’s translator when she woke up. “So,” he stood. “Let’s start over. What’s your name?”

Will’s mouth opened, but the first thing to come to mind wasn’t his name. It was his number. He refused to let it find a voice. Only one person in the past six months ever said it to him. Their names lost meaning, and became a code only they used to refer to one another. They made sure the other wouldn’t forget, but the constant bombardment of their numbers as personal identifiers was steadily boring through their attempts. He hated it, but he responded instinctively to that number.

Yune’s worry went up a notch. That wasn’t a good sign. “I’m sure it’s not Two-Forty-Six.”

“It’s not,” Will blurted out automatically.

“Then what is it?”

“It’s...it’s...”

Yune waited patiently.

“W-Will.”

He’d known from the file, but he needed to hear the boy say it first. However, it seemed to be difficult, and that concerned him. It meant the process to erase their names was working. The fact that he had trouble recalling parts of his past meant they were erasing that, too. “Will...what?”
Will was silent. He couldn’t remember. It as one word, but it hovered just out of reach.

Yune knew he had to remember it on his own. “Don’t give yourself a headache. Give it time, Will.”

That was the first time he’d heard anyone besides Terra say his real name. It sounded and felt weird. And yet a mist of relief settled over him, as though this stranger had just returned his stolen individuality.

“Who are you?” he finally asked. “What do you want with us? You said Captain Linell’s name. Why? Why did you shoot Janna?”

Yune frowned. “I shot her to protect her.”

“Did you kill her?” Will’s voice lowered.

“No,” Yune answered resolutely. “Just take it easy, kid. You were out for a while. That phase hit you pretty hard.”

Will clenched his fists as a wave of tingling pain washed through his body, sending a blue haze across his vision, and buzzing in his brain. His breath hitched. He felt like being sick again, but it was nowhere near what it was before.

Yune frowned, seeing the blue tint shift quickly across the boy’s sclera, then corrected himself. “Scratch that: it’s hitting you pretty hard.”

Will breathed hard, waiting for it to pass. He looked up at them once he could speak again. “What are you going to do with us?”

“Well, we don’t…really know yet,” Yune stumbled over his words. He didn’t want to lie. Enough of that damage had been done already, and Will exhibited signs of trust issues.

Selke poured a cup of water for the boy and handed it to him.

Will stared at the clear liquid, sniffed it, then drank it. It soothed his raw throat. He looked up to the tall woman with the four light brown spots lining down the center of her forehead as she took the cup to refill it and handed it back. “You’re a Felorian, right?”

She nodded. “That’s right.”

He looked to Yune. “If you’re not Masakan, then what are you?”

“I’m a Mik.”

Will paused, biting his lip and stared into the cup for a moment before finally asking the one question he truly wanted an answer to. “And… what am I?”

The two didn’t know how to reply. This was incredibly delicate, and if all of the coffee were spilled at this point, it might cause more psychological harm than good. For all they knew, Phase Six hadn’t ended yet. These kids had already lost everything. Losing what remained of their identities might be too much.

“You’re…well…,” Yune glanced to Selke, thinking back on their conversation. He didn’t want to admit it out loud, but she was right. His next words would change his life forever, “You’re one lucky kid, Sparky. You and Squeaker get to live with your Uncle Yune and Aunt Selke.”
Selke couldn’t stop an amused smile. “‘Aunt Selke?’”

“This was your idea. And I sure as hell ain’t calling myself ‘Dad.’"

“Here? On the ship.” Will glanced around.

“Well, you don’t see a planet out the window, do you?” Yune moved over to rest his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “First lesson of living in space: you can only trust the news as far as you can throw it.”

“But you can’t throw the news,” Will said, confused. “Exactly.”

“Wouldn’t ‘Don’t leave the ship without a space suit’ be lesson one?”

“Listen,” Yune pointed his finger in Will’s face, “Who’s the adult here, kid; me, or you?”

“Right now, my money’s on the kid,” Selke leaned against the counter with her arms crossed, and her feet crossed at the ankles.

Yune grumped out of the lounge back to the cockpit one deck below: his home and comfort territory.

Terra sat up just in time to see the grown man storm away like he was five years old. She rubbed the back of her head from a weird buzzing sensation and heard a click. “Will?”

Selke checked the setting on the modulator. “Round two. Can you tell her it’s ok?”

Will knelt down next to her. “Something about the phase screwed up our translators,” Will explained. “This is Selke. She’s gonna fix it.”

“Does it hurt?” Terra kept her eyes glued to Selke, though the woman didn’t advance.

He shook his head. “It just feels funny.”

She nodded.

Selke knelt down next to her and performed the same repairs. She noticed Terra kept a hold of Will’s hand. “Will, ask her a few questions, please.”

“It’s like back on the ship. You have to speak for the ...bananites...to work.” He used her term knowing it would help her relax.

“Ok.”

“What’s your favorite color?”

“Pink.”

“Where did you live on Earth?”

“Marina del Rey. I used to go to the ocean. I used to ride my bike there.”

“What’s your favorite song?”

“‘Mmm Bop.’”
“Ew, why?”

She slugged him in the arm.

“That’ll do,” she couldn’t help but notice the way they interacted. It was definitely reminiscent of siblings, but she got the sense their connection went deeper than that. She stood.

Will’s stomach growl broke the atmosphere. He wrapped his arms around his middle. The inclusion processes always left him starving.

“Sit down, you two. I’ll make you something,” Selke grabbed a couple of nutrient packets from the cupboard and stuck them in a small recess surrounded by buttons on a flat screen. She entered in a desired meal and a blue light illuminated the inside. Like everything else, it was powered by Ephypsan energy. Moments later, the packets had morphed to a steaming bowl of rice with meat draped across the top. She gave it to him, then made another for Terra.

Will sniffed it, then took a bite. It tasted like someone heated up jerky in water and called it beef. The bits that resembled rice were slightly crunchy. “What is this? It’s terrible.”

“You’ve been awake for five minutes and you’re already insulting my cooking. Congratulations. You beat Yune’s record by a minute.”

Terra scrunched up her nose, but took a bite. “Gross. It tastes like styrofoam.” It resembled the meals the Regents fed them on the Morning Star.

“Reformed food is never as good as home cooked. We’re a little low on resources right now, so we’ll have to make do with this until we can pick up supplies.”

“The food at Strafsend was better,” Will mumbled.

“Then perhaps you’d like to go back?” She had no intention of going through with the threat, but the boy needed to learn how to be grateful. He was a child, and this was a small step.

Both children stared wide-eyed and shook their heads rapidly from side to side.

“Good,” she diffused the tense fear coming from them, “Don’t worry, you’re not going back. Eat up.”

She watched them pick at it, and slowly eat out of necessity. The medical scan had showed their bodies using massive amounts of energy to process phase six, so she knew they would wake up famished.

“Who was that?” Terra asked.

“That’s Yune. This is his ship.”

“He looked mad.”

“He’s not so bad once you get to know him.”

“I don’t want to get to know him,” Terra stared at her food. “I want to go home.”

Her voice softened. “I know you do. You also know why you can’t right?”

She nodded. “Yeah.” It wasn’t even there anymore. It was an asteroid field. The memory of the recording remained clear. She didn’t want to voice it. There were only one thousand humans left
“Life isn’t going to be easy for you for a while, but try to make the most of it.” Selke smiled. She gestured down the hall. “There’s a couple of unused quarters you can use.”

“We get a room?” Terra asked.

“Why wouldn’t you? This is your home, now. If you’re going to live here, you need your own space.” Selke waited for them to finish eating, and walked into the hall.

They looked to each other with hesitation. The last person to say ‘this is your home now’ was Doctor Barakan. And now they were hearing the same thing from more strangers. They felt like lost items people just picked up and claimed.

The two scooted out of the chairs and followed.

“I assume you’ll want to stay together for now.” Selke rounded the corner. “Pick one of these rooms, and we’ll clean it out.”

Terra glanced to Will then back. “Does it lock?”

“Yes.”

“Can we disable it?”

“Why?”

Terra and Will said nothing.

Their silence screamed louder than words. This was another reason for her to hate what Runell and Chancellor Urza had done. “I’ll disable it.”

“At least they won’t have anywhere to ground us to,” Will mumbled under his breath to Terra.

“There’s no ground, though,” Terra whispered back.

“Don’t take it literally,” Selke called back. “Besides, we have a holding cell for that.”

Both said in tandem, “A holding cell?”

Selke walked back into view and rested her hand on her hip. “We pick up bounties from time to time. Where do you think we keep them? The lounge?” She gestured for them to follow. “Come on. Pick a room and help me clean it up.”

The kids obeyed. Both decided on the room to the right. Yune had been utilizing all of the unused quarters as extra storage space, and they were packed with junk. The four of them spent the next couple of hours hauling out pieces of equipment, crates, boxes, and parts, and tossed them into the other vacant rooms.

By the end of a standard day, their new personal space was clean and ready to be lived in. It offered up a full size bed up against the rectangular window. Thankfully, it was wide enough that the two small kids could comfortably fit side by side.

Selke showed them how to wash up in a sonic shower - which Will was very vocal about hating, they ate something for dinner, and changed into their normal clothes from Earth.
Once Selke was sure they’d been properly settled in, she left to assist Yune with the ship’s functions in the engine room.

Terra sat in front of the wide viewport in the lounge, staring at the star lines streaking by. Her shoes set off to the side. She felt drained from the day, and still a little shaky from the residual effects of phase six. Whatever this one included, it had lasted longer than the others.

She clenched her fist from a surge of energy that crawled over her skin, and pulled her knees up. This had been happening to her and Will off and on all day. They’d had to stop a few times to let it pass, and Selke had been very patient. Phase six kept making itself known in brief waves that were becoming less frequent. Every time one hit, she was afraid it would shoot back to its previous epic level where she thought she would die were it not for him.

Part of her expected a scientist to come collect her for more tests, so she remained tense. Any second now, they would draw blood, or make her form an energy sphere and hold it for as long as possible until she failed. Or take her to the inclusion room for more tests, or deprive her of sleep to see how it affected the blue energy, or take her away from Will, or make her study Masakan history.

A familiar sense moved up behind her and she relaxed.

Will sat down at her right, removed his shoes and wiggled his toes in his socks. Both had gone barefoot the entire time they were at Strafsend, and became used to it. “I found something that looks like cookies in the kitchen. Here,” he offered her one of the thick, brown disks. “The box had some funky writing on it, but it was with the rest of the food, and I saw Yune eat one earlier, so it should be ok. I ate one to be sure. I didn’t die.”

“ Weird alien cookies?” She took it, sniffed it, and nibbled. It tasted like gingerbread. “It’s good.”

“Yeah,” he crunched on another one. “Living here might not be so bad.”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “It’s cold.”

“It’s space,” he shrugged, as if that explained everything.

She stared out at the expanse and seemed distant, but he knew what plagued her. The same thoughts inflicted him as well. He hated seeing her like this.

“I keep thinking they’ll come get us, too,” he picked up on her worry. “I don’t want to go to sleep, ’cause I might wake up and they’re gonna be over my bed again.”

“Selke called me by my number when you were in the bathroom. She wanted to know my name. I told her. Then she said she was sorry. She used my name a lot. I hate that it sounds weird when someone else says it but you.”

“Yeah. Yune only called me by my number once, too. It feels...weird, like my name belongs to someone else, now. I got used to being a number.”

She pursed her lips. Like him, she’d begun to get accustomed to being referred to as her One Thousand designation, and more readily responded to it. “I want mine to be normal again. I just want something to be normal again.”

“Well, we’re not normal anymore. But, what if we make our own normal? We’re out in the middle of nowhere. Literally,” he tried to cheer her up. “There’s no one else out here. We’re probably hundreds of light years away from the nearest Regent. They can’t find us anymore.”
“I know,” she pulled her knees up, "so why am I still scared that they will?"

“I don’t know,” he admitted to his own confusion at his emotions and reactions. He stared out at the stars. “We might be dreaming all this. That always happens during the inclusions. Our dream always feels real. If we are, I don’t want to wake up.”

She reached over and pinched him on the arm.

“Ow!” He rubbed the sore spot. “Hey!”

“We’re not dreaming, you nerd,” she snapped him out of it.

“Ok, ok,” he grumbled, but was grateful she’d shot down his theory completely. “I am glad I got to kick their butts before we left, though. That felt good.”

“That was really cool,” she agreed. “What are you gonna call that?”


“The Regent’s names were stupid,” She frowned. “‘Energy Sphere’ and ‘Threads’ were all they could come up with.”

“Lame,” he laid back to stare at the ceiling. It was mostly insulated save for a few depressions that held pipes and wires. “We can come up with something a hundred times better than that.”

“Like,” she thought, "Ultra Baseball.”

“I said a hundred times better, not a hundred times worse,”

She poked him in the ribs. He laughed and took it, knowing she would strike back at the joke, and he would do nothing to stop her.

She finished the cookie. “I never thought I’d be living in space. After they abducted us, I thought we’d be on a planet in a house somewhere looking up at the sky trying to find Earth. It feels weird, like we really don’t have anywhere to belong anymore, so we’re just...here.”

He sat up.

“We were lied to, Will. I don’t know who to believe, or who’s right. I want to trust Yune and Selke, but I can’t. “ She held up her hand. “This is a gift to save the galaxy, but how do we do that? We’re just kids,” her fist closed and she hugged her knees. “I don’t even know what we are anymore. I can’t even remember my last name.”

“Neither can I, but... But we’re still us, I guess,” he shrugged. “We’re Will and Terra. We might be different, but we’re part of the One Thousand. We still came from Earth, so we’re gonna have that forever. And we’re always gonna have each other.”

That helped her feel a little better.

He got up and stood in front of the window facing the nebula. “I’m glad we’re not stuck on an alien planet. I’d be looking at the sky all the time if we were, wondering what’s out there. At least on a spaceship, we get to see it.”

“We could...find other nebulas?” she tried seeing the future of his design.

“And other aliens.”
“But not scary ones.”

“And discover new planets.”

“And comets.”

“And we’ll name one after ourselves.”

“Maybe we can find the others. They’re out there, too.”

“We can look for them while we explore. We’ll all get a ship together and travel the galaxy going on adventures. We’ll search for hidden secrets, and relics, and get into awesome space battles...and be just like Space Indiana Jones.” For the first time since the news crew took them on a tour of the Nova Star, a spark of excitement lit in his eyes as his imagination exploded with dreams of a new life in space. He looked over his shoulder at her and offered a smile. “We’ll explore the galaxy together. I won’t do it without you.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Good,” She smiled. “Cause I’m not gonna let you do it without me.”

“And we pinky swore, remember?”

She remembered that moment clearly. “Yeah. You can never, ever break a pinky swear,” It was a promise she would hold dear. He was right. No matter where they were in the galaxy, as long as they were together, even on a rust bucket ship like the Horizon, they were home.

A wash of dizziness accompanied by needles of pain took him back to the floor.

She knelt in front of him in a heartbeat. Terra lifted his right hand and laced her fingers through his. He had always taken the phases harder than she did, but she didn't know why. Altairan energy drifted in thin lines to him, and he accepted the aid. This act came far more easily and automatic than it ever had in the past. She didn’t even have to think or try. It simply sensed her desire to bring him comfort and obeyed.

The unseen Legos within him were rearranging themselves again. “I almost wish we were there, so they could tell us what’s happening.”

“Not me,” she shook her head lightly. “I never want to go back there again.”

His dizziness faded within moments.

She’d figured out that, even though she could sustain her power longer than he could, the output in his was always greater. He had the strength, but not the finesse. “Let’s go find that planet with the rings. I want to know if it's real.”

“Ok,” he promised. The wave settled back down and he relaxed.

Will fished the Uno deck out of his jacket pocket. He moved to let go of her hand when it suddenly tightened around his.

Phase six had struck her again, too. She bit her lip against it, but said nothing.

She didn’t have to. He scooted slightly to the side with his arm crossing his body, and picked up a
card with his free hand. “I’ll beat your score this time.”

“You say that every time and lose,” she picked one up, keeping hold of his right hand, and began their favorite game of flicking cards at a spot on the window.

He flicked a card, but it sailed to the side. “I should have used my right hand,” another card missed its mark, “I suck at the left.”

“Then let go,” she giggled at his excuse.

“Nah,” he answered calmly. He kept his fingers locked around her right hand until he was sure she would be ok. He knew his power output was greater than hers, so he had it to spare. Even if he didn’t, he still wouldn’t let go.

“Nerd,” she teased lightheartedly.

“Dorkface,” he teased back. He got up long enough to gather up the cards, then took her left hand this time and began the game again. Even with his dominant hand controlling the cards, he still lost.

“Hey!” Yune’s voice carried from the kitchen. “What happened to all my cookies?!?”

Both kids gave each other the dreaded ‘oh no’ look that they were caught. They quickly gathered up the cards, and barreled past him down the hall to the stairs leading to deck two.

“You two!” He had to side step to keep from getting knocked over. “Stay outta my stuff!” He bellowed. Yune tossed the empty bag into the trash shoot, and went for his secondary stash hidden in the wall that not even Selke knew about. This ship was filled with hiding places, and he made good use of them. “I regret this decision already.”

* * * *

Chapter End Notes

*Location: Space...
*Reasoning: Author doesn't know where the hell they are. They're just in space. Use your imagination.

FUN FACT #13: Selke met 22 yr old Yune in a bar on Mikra. The vibe of him being at odds with himself drew her to start up a conversation. She could use a man of his skills on the team, regardless of his young age.

Yune made his decision that night. He, Selke, Marci, and Zaf stole the ship that would be renamed the "Horizon" and Yune began his new life as an adventurer, explorer, and outlaw.

As of this chapter, Yune is 36.
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