



Forbidden Gifts



By Ardath Rekha

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Synopsis: He woke up from a 2,000-year sleep seeking vengeance for an unspeakable crime, only to find himself confronted by the descendants of his sworn enemies. She came in search of humanity's oldest friends, only to discover that an ancient treachery had turned them into foes. But in this AU, instead of facing off in a fight to the death, the last human survivor of the *Prometheus* mission and the last Engineer on LV-223 establish a truce, and even an alliance.

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Chapter 1.

Zamin had gone into his stasis pod already angry and upset, still stunned by the reports of treachery and slaughter that he'd listened to only hours earlier. His dreams had been long, harsh, and feverish, a mixture of grief and vengeance. At times, he dreamed that he could see the fallen, the murdered. His brother, dead. His brother's gentle wife, butchered. His nephew, slaughtered. Their friends murdered, their homes defiled, and so much worse done... If he could have awakened, he would have screamed and beaten his fists bloody against the sides of the chamber. Sometimes he dreamt of doing just that. Other times, he dreamt of delivering his payload, of watching the cleansing black fire sweep over that forsaken world and strip it of all of its evils. No matter what kinds of creatures resulted, it would have to be better than a species that could do such hideous things to those who had only ever meant it kindness. Sometimes he called out for release, aware that he was trapped in a Hell of his mind's creation, begging someone, *anyone*, to free him from its malign grip.

And then he was awake.

As consciousness rushed back, he sat up and coughed, expecting to hear his Captain or others of his brethren moving around the command center as they prepared to enter orbit and begin the cleansing. Instead, he heard a rasping, demanding voice speaking in an unintelligible language. He opened his eyes and found himself staring at—

A *human*! One of Ersetu's filth had infiltrated his ship! It was old, wizened and infirm, staring at him with hungry, avaricious eyes. Then another voice, this one speaking a tongue he recognized, spoke from his left. His head jerked toward it.

"We have come across the stars, in answer to your invitation," it told him. It? Yes, *it*. Although it looked human, there was something profoundly wrong with its way of moving, of speaking. He watched as it spoke, trying to decide what was so strange and wrong about it, and then he realized – its balance was too perfect, unaffected by breathing or speech or any of the other tiny things that made a living creature sway and twitch, however minutely. A *golem*! Not only had the elderly human invaded his ship, but he'd brought an abomination with him—

And they weren't alone. Feigning dizziness, he glanced around and spotted three more invaders, all of them dressed in the same bizarre clothes. Only the elderly man, he noticed, was using metal buttresses to hold himself erect. The others were much younger. One clearly was a soldier, and appeared to be carrying a weapon of some kind which was pointed directly at him, his face impersonally hostile. Invaders, indeed! The others—

Women! The blasted humans had brought *women* onto his ship! Were they insane?

One was younger and smaller, her head uncovered except for dark red hair that stood out in wild disarray around her face. Something was wrong with her. She seemed barely able to stand, her face hollow and pinched as if with severe pain. In spite of the chill of the room, she was sweating. Ill or injured, she seemed somehow apart from the others.

The second woman was older and seemed, at first glance, to be the more composed of the two, but he could see genuine terror in her eyes when they met his.

Continuing to pretend he was struggling with the fog of stasis, he rose to his feet, assessing his situation. The ship's engines were silent, he noticed, and the other stasis pods were undisturbed. Most significantly, the navigation module hadn't been deployed. Had these invaders somehow reached the ship before his crew could take off? Where were the guards? He couldn't believe that this tiny band of savages could have taken on an elite squad and *won*.

A threat-level assessment was crucial. The golem could be dangerous; in spite of its small, slight stature, it would probably be very strong and might have hidden weapons. It would have to be one of the first he destroyed. The old man appeared to be no threat at all. The soldier would have to die first. The women...

Why had these damnable savages brought women into the ship? As offerings? Temptations? Bribes to win him over? Did they think he would forgive the slaughter of his kin and brothers-in-arms because they gave him a few forbidden *concubines*, one old and one sickly?

Even as he dismissed the idea that such temptation would work, a part of him considered the possibility of keeping the younger one, if whatever sickness or injury she suffered from could be healed. He shouldn't

contemplate such a thing, but it was difficult to resist the impulse with a human woman so near him. This was why the Annunaki had forbidden Ersetu's women from entering their abodes or even coming near them unveiled! How *dare* these intruders violate the first laws?

"Ahhhh," he exhaled, deciding that he understood. The savages hoped to inflame his desire, make him irrational, and then turn him against his sleeping crewmates. The older woman flinched in response. The younger one's expression was... pleading?

He needed to ignore the women for now. There was a weapon pointed at him and he needed to destroy it. Climbing out of the stasis chamber, he pretended dizziness and fell to his knees. What would they do?

The elderly man stumbled back from him. Immediately the soldier and the older woman hurried to his side to steady him, more or less ignoring Zamin although the weapon remained trained on him. The younger woman took a step forward, not toward the old man but toward *him*, but stopped short with a wince of pain and pressed her hand to her lower abdomen.

Injured, then. The ideas he couldn't help entertaining angered him. He should be *above* such temptations. He pitched his voice to its deepest and most guttural battlefield roar, determined to make these savages aware how badly they were transgressing.

"Why have you invaded our vessel? What is it you want?"

The older woman backed away from him the second he began speaking, her body stiff with terror. The elderly man, however, stared at him with hungry eyes in a ravaged face, and then asked the golem something in that strange, unfamiliar tongue. Zamin had a passing familiarity with most of the major languages of Ersetu, but this one was unknown to him. The golem answered in the same tongue. Apparently it was the only one who knew his language! How could this be?

The elderly man drew in a breath to speak. Before he could, though, the younger of the two women interrupted.

Zamin turned his attention to her, startled by how *desperate* she looked. Her speech was as unintelligible as the old man's, but impassioned. She seemed to be protesting something, or perhaps begging. Was she aware of the impiety of being offered to him, and objecting? The old man kept trying to hush her but she continued, until he barked something peremptory at the soldier, who slammed the barrel of his weapon into the woman's stomach. Her scream drove Zamin to his feet and he had to restrain himself from lunging at the soldier.

She fell to her knees but didn't let it silence her, shouting final, frenzied words at him. She only went silent when the old man barked another order at the soldier, who promptly armed his weapon and pointed it at her head.

If there had been any doubt in his mind that he would kill them, it was gone. When the older woman shot a scornful, almost vindictive glance at her kneeling compatriot, he decided that there would be only *one* survivor among the invaders. The old man spoke again and now the golem finally translated once more.

"This man is here because he does not want to die," the golem told him. "He believes you can give him more life."

Zamin felt almost ill with loathing. The old man was seeking the forbidden and profane, and offering the forbidden in exchange? Was this what had also driven the madmen who had slaughtered his people on Ersetu? The man was far too decayed for such a gift, anyway, even if it would have been allowed. It would only have made him linger, suffering, as his body withered away. How did he not realize that?

"How can he want more life after this long?" he demanded, wondering if these savages were really ignorant of what had happened to other humans who had received the forbidden gift.

The old man listened to the golem's translation and then began speaking, his avidity undiminished in the face of Zamin's disgust. He gestured to the golem with almost fatherly pride, and then to himself, and then to Zamin in turn. At one time, this man must have been a charismatic speaker who inspired loyalty in legions. Undoubtedly he was enumerating the reasons he should continue to do so. That loyalty, Zamin decided, could work in his favor. Since the weapon was no longer pointed at him, he'd destroy the golem first. Then, he'd distract the old man's servants by injuring him so that they had to come to his aid, before killing the soldier. Then everyone but their comely female prisoner would die.

When the old man finished speaking, he turned to the golem and reached out, touching the artificial hair on its head as though in benediction. It gave him a bright, false smile, not resisting at all. He hoisted it off of the ground and wrenched its head loose as the old man shouted protests, and then smashed the false head

against the skull of its master. He turned as thunder roared through the chamber, and something slammed into his chest. The soldier's weapon! The man must have had far less loyalty to his master than it had seemed; neither he nor the older woman were even bothering to try to help their fallen king. He tossed aside the golem's head and advanced on the soldier, trying to reach him before he could reload. His biosupport suit would repair the damage and had already suppressed the pain; full armor would have been far better. Suddenly the older woman was in his way. He grabbed her by the strange collar of her suit and shoved her aside, not especially caring how hard she fell. Their disloyalty to their master was both inconvenient and appalling.

The soldier aimed his weapon at Zamin a second time, but he'd already knocked it upward before the man could fire. He wrenched it out of the man's grasp and flung it aside, and then punched him, astounded when the small man flew across the room. Yes, battle lust was fully upon him now!

The clatter of feet brought him back to his senses. He turned and saw the younger woman, a clear helmet in one hand, racing out of the room and down the corridor that led to the armory and the loading bay. Was that how the invaders had come in?

For a moment he dithered, tempted to follow her. No. She might lead him into an ambush, if there were more humans on the base. He had a mission to complete, and the behavior of these invaders only underscored why it needed to be carried out as quickly as possible. The base was compromised, and he was struggling to resist temptation. He needed to get the ship on its way so that his mission wouldn't be a failure. If she stayed on board, he'd deal with her later. If she stayed on the base...

Well, then, he'd see if she was still around when he returned from his mission.

Zamin had always looked down his nose at the soldiers who had returned from the outworlds in disgrace, guilty of taking human women as lovers. He had always been convinced that the temptation was one he'd have been able to resist in their place. Now he knew better. Her face – exotic, pained, pleading – was going to haunt him for a very long time.

Notes: This chapter is, obviously, based on the deleted scene that you can see on the Blu-Ray. There's some language stuff going on in the story that's based on the film's contention that the Engineers spoke a proto-Indo-European (PIE) tongue, which kind of makes sense but is a completely hypothetical language... I felt it would be easier to just use Sumerian. So a lot of the words that my Engineer uses (Zamin, Ersetu, Annunaki) aren't actually gobbledy-gook but straight out of the Sumerian (and occasionally Akkadian) lexicons. Having studied their writings some, it was fun to dust that off and use it.

The things about human women being forbidden to Engineers comes out of some fun college bull sessions about passages in the Old Testament and some interpretations in which angels apparently had a real fetish for mortal women but it tended to result in disaster (Genesis 6:1-4, and other fun passages) so I decided to play with that and treat the more nonsensical passages in the Bible and ancient mythology as garbled accounts of encounters with Engineers, who were trying to maintain their distance from humanity but frequently got seduced into interfering.

The slaughter of Zamin's family and friends is based on some other really nasty stuff that happens even now – albinos are often perceived as supernatural creatures in many parts of the world and often either killed as witches or butchered for the supposedly magical properties of their body parts (UGH!), and so the idea here is that that superstition emerged from encounters with the Engineers, and a group of ancient humans actually did butcher them, which resulted in the planned retaliation that the crew of the *Prometheus* found when they entered the pyramid and ship. I mean, seriously, who *wouldn't* want to nuke from orbit the people who killed and ate his family and friends?

Chapter 2.

He's coming for you.

Shaw's hands convulsively tightened on the axe handle as it dawned on her just who David had to mean by "he." Glancing around wildly, she realized that she had almost no idea where anything was in the lifeboat, no idea where it might be safe to hide. It would take the Engineer a few minutes to reach the craft. She'd get her helmet on and replenish her suit's oxygen, and try to sneak back out the airlock while he was exploring the place. Maybe he would meet up with her other problem in the medical bay, and the two of them would solve each other for her. But even as she moved behind the bar, she heard the airlock start its cycle.

Damn you, David! she thought, furious. Had he deliberately waited to warn her until the Engineer was almost on top of her?

Yes, she realized, he probably had. She had trusted him implicitly, had *liked* him and had even begun to think of him as a *friend*, but she was beginning to realize that nothing he'd said or done had been on the level, except perhaps during those times when he had been deliberately cruel. Clutching the axe to her, she ducked down behind the bar.

The inner airlock door cycled open seconds later, but there was no other sound. Still, she could *feel* the invader. He was here with her, moving as stealthily as a Kalahari poacher. For a moment, absurdly, she wondered whether that made her a rhino or an elephant, but she forced the gallows humor out of her head. If he found her, she would die.

Where was he?

The half-fallen crystal chandelier chimed as though stroked by a hand, a radically different sound from the random tinkling that had been playing in the background thanks to the breeze. Shaw crabbed forward toward the other end of the bar, away from the sound, and peeked around the corner, keeping her head low. She caught a brief glimpse of him and ducked back, her heart now pounding.

The way he'd been standing didn't make sense. He'd looked wary but not combative, not the way he'd looked back in his ship. The expression on his face as he examined the chandelier had been *admiring*. He almost looked like a house hunter spotting an especially nice feature in a property. She'd seen a lot of those over her lifetime, people examining the places that first she and her father, then she alone, and finally she and Charlie had been preparing to vacate. He made her think of them, not of a genuine hunter stalking his prey.

Paper rustled. He was walking toward the screen. She closed her eyes, trying to focus on the noises around her and what they could tell her. His footfalls were barely audible. Although pages flapped as he passed them, it didn't sound like he was stepping on any of the books, but instead moving with a delicacy that she hadn't seen many signs of in the other ship. He must be fully awake now, she decided.

She shrank back further behind the bar as he came into view again, clutching at her stomach with a wince as the pain surged up again, but he wasn't looking in her direction. The image on the screen appeared to have arrested his attention completely. As she watched, he lifted his arm and reached out toward the little girl playing her violin on the wall. Did he think he could touch her? She only wondered that for a second, before she noticed the way he was moving his fingers. He was replicating the movement of the girl's hand on the violin strings. She found herself wishing that she could see his face.

"Elizabeth, can you hear me?"

Damn you, David! she thought for the second time as she ducked back behind the bar, shushing him and trying to shut off her comms. First he'd waited to tell her that the Engineer was on his way and then, knowing that she was probably hiding, he'd done *this*! If I survive this, she thought despairingly, I can never trust him again.

She waited, barely breathing and hoping that somehow her hunter wouldn't have located the sound. Hope died as his head appeared over the bar.

His face still wore that calm, bemused look that he'd aimed at the crystal chandelier. It was probably the same look, she reminded herself, that he'd worn as he'd put his hand on David's head in preparation for tearing it off. Even if he did look benevolent, she didn't dare trust him.

Behind him, her monstrous "child" thumped against the medical bay door again. He ignored it, his eyes remaining locked with hers.

I'm not going to just lie here cowering, waiting for him to kill me, she thought as she tried to summon enough anger to rise to her feet. This was the creature that had killed everyone else in the group that had gone to meet him. This was the being who had tried to leave to destroy her world.

This was the man who had let her run.

He could have caught and killed her easily, if he'd wanted to. He'd had the chance. Maybe he regretted not doing so and had come to make up for that, but was her axe really going to stop him? Even if she fought him and won, what was she going to do about the thing in the other room?

She'd gained her feet and was facing off with him, but her anger was crumbling, as was her initiative. Fight him and win, fight that other thing and win, successfully repair all of the damage to the lifeboat, and then *what*? She would still be trapped on a barren world with an atmosphere she couldn't breathe and only an unbalanced, malicious android head for company. She might manage to put off her death for two years of lonely, paranoid isolation but at the end of it, she'd be just as dead.

Without thinking about it, she set the axe down on the counter.

The Engineer's eyes flicked to it for a brief second before returning to her face. She lifted her hands, opening them and holding them up and away from her body, trying to show him that she was unarmed and not a threat. Still, he just stared at her. There was something in his expression that made her think, with a pang, of Charlie and her first weeks at the University of Cambridge, although she wasn't sure why. But she suddenly felt absolutely certain that hurting her was the last thing on his mind.

The pain in her abdomen was already returning in force, Shaw realized. Something felt very wrong in her belly. She wondered how many of the staples had been pulled out by the way Jackson had struck her with his gun, along with the impromptu athletics she'd engaged in during the alien ship's launch and crash. She was going to need more painkillers, and soon, before she couldn't fight or talk or even think. And all of them were back in that room, with her monstrous offspring.

I need him, she realized. I need his help.

Unfortunately, that meant she needed someone *else's* help as well. Keeping her movements slow and deliberate, and as unthreatening as possible, she brought her hand over to the suit's comm controls and switched the unit back on.

"David, can you hear me?"

The Engineer cocked his head as she spoke, but his expression remained curious. He wasn't lunging at her, at least.

"Elizabeth? Are you all right? I was afraid you'd been killed."

She wanted to tell him that he had no idea what fear or any other emotion was, and that she was tired of his lies, but she didn't. She needed his help, after all, and even if he allegedly couldn't have his feelings hurt, she'd already seen enough of his antics to know that he *did* change his behavior toward people he believed had disrespected him. "I need you to translate for me. Can you do that?"

"Of course."

"Good. Thank you. And David?"

"Yes?"

"Just so you know, I can't actually *speak* the language, but I understood every word he said back in the ship. And everything you said."

There was a pause. Finally: "I see."

"Tell him that I need his help."

David translated and, apparently newly aware that she was following his words and would know if he altered them or lied, did so precisely. Peter Weyland might have been quite upset if he'd known how imperiously his request for help had been conveyed. Then again, she thought ruefully, he might not have realized that there was anything wrong with that or understood how thoroughly he was messing up something as momentous as First Contact. But that, too, had been David's doing, because his translations of the Engineer's questions had been mild and polite and had left out all of the ancient man's rage. Had Weyland been so lost in his own sense of self-importance that he hadn't even noticed the glaringly obvious hostile body language that went with the accusing words?

The Engineer opened his mouth and she braced herself for his roar in the enclosed place. Instead, his voice was soft, pitched at a similar level as her own. "I know that she is injured. Is that the help she requires?"

Thank you, Charlie, she silently thought as she closed her eyes for a brief moment. He had *tried* to teach her his theoretical language of the Engineers, making her listen to the recordings and explanations over and over and *over*, but even once she'd been able to understand all of the words in the root languages perfectly, she hadn't been able to demonstrate that on any of his practice tests. She knew the meanings of the words when she heard them in sentences, but on their own, on any of the test lists he'd cooked up, she'd only been able to guess with mediocre accuracy, and couldn't translate even the simplest English sentences into the ancient tongues. It had been a problem that had haunted her for her entire life, wherever she traveled; within a few weeks she could understand everything that people were saying around her in whatever new dialect they spoke, but she still couldn't speak more than a handful of simple sentences even if she stayed in that place for years. Still, she *had* learned it! The written language of the Engineers had come as a surprise, looking like a strange mix of Sumerian and something unrecognizable, but the moment the pale Titan had spoken she'd found herself grieving Charlie's death anew. He'd have been able to talk to his gods, after all, if he'd still been there. He wouldn't even have had to rely on David, and maybe he'd have even found a way to forge a peace between them.

"He said —"

"I know what he said. Please tell him that there's something more urgent. There's a creature on this vessel that will kill us both if we don't destroy it, and I can't destroy it alone."

David translated and Shaw tried to mouth the words along with him, to commit them to memory. But as always, they slipped away from her as she tried to grasp them. She knew that his translation was perfect, but she'd never even be able to repeat it herself. Her parents had been so *good* with languages, too!

She could see the Engineer tense up as David spoke, but none of the anger or disgust from earlier reappeared on his face. His question was simple. "Where?"

"I'll show you," she told him in English, not caring whether or not David translated. Keeping her movements slow, she sidestepped her way to the corner of the bar and emerged from behind her protective barrier. To lead him over to the medical bay, she would have to go around him. Please God, she thought silently, don't let him change his mind and kill me...

She wished she had her cross around her neck. She felt naked, unprotected without it.

As she got closer and closer to him, she was painfully aware of how much he *loomed* over her, at least two feet taller than she was. No matter what he decided to do, she couldn't stop him. The mark of the rifle blast on his chest was another testament to that. A human would have died, surely, and yet the only result had been some strange, bluish fluid leaking down his odd gray bodysuit. She probably could have hacked at him all day long with her axe and he would have barely even felt it.

He continued to face her as she circled him, his expression curious and intense with something she didn't understand. She gestured for him to follow her as she walked toward the medical lab, wincing as another stab of pain radiated out from her belly. His brow knit for a second as if in concern, and he followed her.

"Dr. Shaw?" David asked.

"David, do you know if there are any flamethrower units stored on the lifeboat?"

"Yes. There are three. You'll find them in the airlock, on the left side when you're facing outward."

"Good, thank you. Stand by. I may need you to translate for me some more." The pain was leaking into her voice, she realized. In the meantime, she needed her new... ally? She supposed that was what he was, now, as improbable as that seemed... to see the creature inside the next room.

"Standing by," David told her. "Or, at least, a reasonable facsimile." Had that been a joke? As her poor word-choice suddenly registered with her, she wondered if he thought it was retaliation for *his* poorly-chosen words of earlier. It hadn't been. Or, at least, she didn't think it had been.

The Engineer's eyes went wide when he saw the creature in the lab, and he backed a few steps away from the door. With David's help, Shaw explained what she wanted to do and sent him to get the flamethrowers. To her surprise, he paused on the way and cleared all of the flammable paper books away from the area, his movements swift and precise.

She understood why he had done it a moment later, once he returned. "Show me how to operate this before we open the door," he said in his ancient tongue, and she nodded, wishing yet again that she could simply *answer* him in the same language and not use David as a go-between. They practiced short bursts and sustained blasts, using the lowest crystals on the chandelier as targets, until he nodded and turned to face the medical bay.

This was the hard part, the terrifying part. She had to get close to the door to open it, and wouldn't have much time to get out of the way once she did. She had to hope that the creature on the other side of the door would charge past her, and that her new ally would remain an ally and aim his fire at the creature without hitting her, too. Shaw could think of a dozen things that could go wrong, not the least of which was the building pain that was starting to make her hands shake. But there was no other way. Without the contents of the medical lab – which it hopefully hadn't destroyed in its rampage – she would soon be as good as dead.

Her fingers shook as she touched the controls, and she almost got the sequence wrong. But finally everything was ready and there was only one more button to press. Glancing at the Engineer, she was surprised by how tense he looked. Still, he was handling the flamethrower with much more expertise than *she* felt. Using her fingers to count down for him, she made a fist to indicate zero and then hit the panel, backpedaling as fast as she could into the side corridor and bringing her own flamethrower up.

A shrieking nightmare of tentacles exploded out of the room, its scream becoming shrill and desperate almost immediately as it was greeted by a jet of flame. Shaw's finger convulsed around her own trigger and for a sickening moment, nothing happened. Then fire blasted out and hit the creature on its side. Baking heat rolled over her and she wished she'd had the sense to put her helmet back on for the battle. Then the creature's screams were joined by a warning klaxon from the lifeboat.

Shit!

Shaw lunged at the nearest control panel and punched buttons, managing to hit the overrides before the fire-suppression systems could kick in. Something wrapped around her leg and yanked at her and she screamed. She clutched at the door frame, struggling against the pull – and screamed again as she felt something *rip* in her belly. Nausea overwhelmed her as everything went gray and a loud buzzing sound filled her ears. Was another alarm going off? She couldn't move, couldn't think, could only cling to the last vestiges of consciousness and hope that she'd survive. Her grip on the door frame slipped and was lost. But she couldn't feel the pull on her leg anymore, either, just an oddly heavy weight that lifted a few seconds later.

"Don't move," someone told her, and for a moment she thought it was Charlie. But it couldn't be Charlie. Charlie was dead. He'd burned. She could still feel the heat of his burning.

She was lifted off of the ground. Was that Janek who had her? He'd stopped her from getting between Vickers and Charlie. She opened her eyes, expecting to see him above her, and was stunned by what she saw instead. One of the marble gods from the Olympia Museum had come to life and was holding her. Hermes, she decided. This was the statue of Hermes carrying young Dionysus, only he was carrying her instead. Why was he doing that?

"Dr. Shaw? Are you all right?"

"Leave me alone, David," she groaned. "Give me back my cross, damn it." She couldn't remember when he'd taken it, but knew that it made him untrustworthy. He'd done something horrible but she couldn't remember what it was.

"What did she say?" Hermes asked.

"She asked for a piece of jewelry I took from her for safety reasons. I think she may be delirious."

"Liar," she gasped. "I'm not... I'm not... I'm okay, I just need to..."

"Is David your designation?" Hermes was lowering her onto a soft surface of some kind. She wanted to ask him when he'd lost his hair. There was a thick, nasty, acrid scent in her nose that reminded her of Lagos for some reason. What had happened in Lagos?

"It is my *name*, yes. May I ask what you are doing?"

"She is injured. I need to get her out of her suit."

She lay still, batting at Hermes' hands as he removed the helmet mounting and set it aside. David's voice grew tinny and attenuated.

"She had emergency surgery earlier today, just two hours before we came to your ship."

"Two hours? What fool let her out of your infirmary?" Hermes sounded annoyed as he began tugging down the zipper on her suit. She reached up and touched his face, expecting to feel cold marble under her fingertips. But he was warm.

"She refused to rest. She insisted on coming with us to see you. If I may ask, what is *your* name?"

"Hermes," she called out to David's tinny voice. "Can't you tell? It's Hermes. The Greek Archaeological Service is going to be furious. You can't just take statues out of Olympia like that."

“My name is Zamin,” Hermes said, trickster that he was. He’d just called himself a lyre! “What did she just say?”

“She must be delirious. She seems to think you’re a marble statue that has escaped from a museum on our home world.”

“Does that happen often?” It was getting harder and harder to make out the details of Hermes’ face. Shaw blinked up at him. Her hand on his cheek was blurry, too.

“Not generally, no. Artificial life-forms such as myself are a new development.”

The pressure on her abdomen was easing as Hermes unzipped her suit. But the pain was still rising. Every breath felt worse. She wanted to tell him that, but the words that formed on her lips felt like gibberish and she couldn’t catch enough breath to try to speak them.

“I see,” the marble god said. “And what is her name? Did you call her Dock-Tor-Shaw?” He pronounced the syllables carefully, hesitantly. Shaw wished she knew enough Greek to talk to him. That was Greek that he was speaking, wasn’t it? Or maybe something else...

The smell of the Lagos cremation pits struck her nose again and she groaned. Burning flesh, that’s what she was smelling. Hundreds of corpses from the worst Ebola outbreak in a century. The ghastly odor had hung in the air for weeks afterward while she waited for a British ambassador to come to the orphanage and take her away, helpless to speak to any of the people around her.

“That’s her title and family name. Her personal name is Elizabeth. Those closest to her called her Ellie.”

She hadn’t been able to take any of her father’s ashes with her when she left Nigeria. The only thing that she’d had left of him was—

“My cross! Where’s my cross?” She couldn’t feel it around her neck. A strong hand grasped her wrist and moved it to the side.

“Stay still, Eee-lizz-uh-bet.” Someone pale hovered above her. Was it an angel? She couldn’t tell. Its voice was beautiful and deep. “You’ll hurt yourself if you move.”

She subsided, trembling, and the hand released her arm. She could feel the zipper on her suit sliding further down. Suddenly, instead of a gentle scrape over her skin, it felt as though it had turned into a knife and was slicing through her. She screamed, and then screamed again as air hit the exposed wound.

“Great sacred Apsu!” the angel shouted.

“What is happening?” another voice, tinny and hollow, demanded.

“She’s almost torn in half! What kind of medicine do your idiot masters practice?”

Darkness was rolling over her as the pain built higher and higher. For a brief instant, though, her vision cleared. The Engineer was above her, shouting at her discarded helmet mounting, his face a mask of pure terror. Was his name Zamin? Somehow she thought it was, but she didn’t know why. Her hand, she noticed, was resting on his shoulder. She couldn’t feel it, couldn’t hold on when it started slipping down. He caught and held it with his far larger one.

“Stay with me, Elizabeth,” he said, stumbling over her name. “*Ellie!* Stay with me! You’re going to be all right.” But everything in his face and voice told her that he was far too frightened for that to be true.

I’m not going anywhere, she tried to tell him, but he vanished into blackness before she could.

Chapter 3.

There had been a time when Zamin had resented the medical triage training that was mandatory for all soldiers. Now, he found himself extremely grateful that he had it.

The woman, *Eli*, had one of the worst injuries he'd ever seen. If he'd had any idea just how bad it was, he'd have carried her back to his ship before trying to take her suit off. Now it wasn't safe to move her. He had to find a way to stabilize her here and then go back for his gear.

"Where are your medical devices?" he demanded from the golem's relay.

"Through the door that the creature you killed came out of," it told him. "It's part of why she wanted your help to kill it. I imagine she knew that she needed the equipment in there."

Eli – in his head, he kept wanting to call her *Elilu*, songbird – was unconscious, her breathing dangerously rapid and shallow. He lifted her back into his arms as gently as he could and carried her to the room, sidestepping the smoldering mass on the floor of the hallway. He'd need to get it out of this structure as soon as he could, too. He still wasn't sure just what it was or how it had gotten here, and it was only one of several dozen things he needed explanations for, but saving the woman was his highest priority at the moment.

The room beyond the door had been ransacked, cabinets and panels smashed, arcane objects scattered and trampled. In the center of the room there was a device on a pedestal that looked a little like the stasis chambers on his ship. It swayed back and forth, its panels open, one of them smashed.

How in the name of Inanna was he going to treat *Eli* here?

"Zamin?" the golem's voice called faintly from the other room. "Is something wrong?"

"This room has been destroyed!" he shouted, terror and despair choking him. She would die. If he tried to carry her to his ship, the jostling of the trip would probably kill her on the way.

"Is the surgery unit intact?" the golem asked. Zamin realized that it had begun shouting in response, to make itself more audible. Maybe it wasn't such an abomination after all. Certainly, it seemed to be *trying* to help.

"Is it the chamber in the center of the room? It appears damaged!" In his arms, *Eli* whimpered and turned her head and he winced. Hearing was often the last part of awareness to be lost, and he was *shouting* over her. He wanted to lower his voice and say reassuring things to her instead. If only he could.

"If the surgery unit's bed looks stable, you can at least lay her down on it. The unit has some life support functions. If they're operational, we can activate them."

Good thinking! He was suddenly glad that the golem was there; at least one of them wasn't panicking. He carried *Eli* closer to the unit and took a good look at the soft surface intended for a patient. There seemed to be a little blood and grime on it, but it would have to do.

He carefully lowered her onto the tilted surface and pushed it back until it was almost perfectly horizontal. A panel on the side was glowing brightly, displaying the same odd letters that he'd seen on other panels throughout the strange vessel. Some of them reminded him of letters that his brother had shown him, from various signs and edifices in the town surrounding his embassy. But many were strange-looking. Still, the very existence of the words on the panel told him something important.

"The unit has power!" he shouted at the golem's relay. Glancing nervously at *Eli*, he hurried back into the other room and picked up her discarded collar. Now he'd be able to talk to the golem without shouting. "I need you to tell me what the lettering on it means. We don't have much time to stabilize her."

"Of course. First, what color is the panel display?"

"Blue." Zamin hoped that meant something good. "The lettering is red. The first letter is strange but the rest look like letters from the Imperium Romanum. A, R, N—"

"It says 'Warning.' What is the next word?"

Much of the lettering looked like it was from the Imperium! Excited, silently thanking his brother for boring him almost to death with local color in all of their communications, he began spelling out the odd words for "David."

"S... I think the next one is a Greek letter, another S, T, E, M, another odd letter, N, S, T, A, B—"

"It says the system is unstable. Please go on to the next line."

His stomach knotted when the golem told him that. He glanced at *Eli*, who was still breathing her quick, shallow breaths. It almost felt like, if she stopped, he would die too. “P, A, N, E, L... the next thing almost looks like a B but it’s not—”

“It’s a three. What does it say next about Panel three?”

He continued reading aloud. The lettering might have come from the Imperium, but the words didn’t appear to be from the Lingua Latina at all. Who *were* these people?

“Panel three is damaged?” the golem asked.

“Yes, one of the curved glass portions is smashed.”

“I see. What does it say next?”

He read off more letters.

“It cannot maintain a sterile environment because of the break. Next?”

He read more, glancing nervously at *Eli* as he did.

“It recommends against performing surgery without sterilizing the unit. We can’t do that with her in it. You’ll see three options at the bottom. Do *not* press the one that starts with the S. If you do, it will try to sterilize the unit with her inside, and that might kill her. The one below it begins with P. It says ‘proceed with triage services in a non-sterile environment.’ It’s a risk, but we can do that to temporarily stabilize her.”

Zamin nodded and pressed the P. The machine whirled to life, lights flashing as harsh beeping noises emanated from it. It tilted back until perfectly horizontal. He watched as it played lights and instruments over his *Eli*. Then— “No! How do I stop it?”

“What is it doing?”

“It’s brought out knives— Oh. Never mind. It’s cutting away the rest of her suit.” He needed to make himself calm down and trust the machine. But this technology was so unfamiliar, a mixture of the primitive and the oddly arcane, that he couldn’t. Yes, he knew how to do most of the things that the knives and lights were doing, but that was battlefield surgery, not the elegant medicine of peacetime. Was this a warship? It looked more like the pillaged yacht of some spoiled aristocrat, except for this bizarre room.

Most of the instruments were clustered over *Eli*’s abdomen now. He pulled away the rags that had once been her uniform, or whatever the strange matching garb had meant, and removed her boots.

He’d been imagining what she’d look like naked ever since he first saw her, as much as he’d tried not to. Now that she was, he couldn’t think of a *less* erotic sight. The huge gash across her lower abdomen appeared to have been perfectly straight at one point, and might even have been closed by pieces of metal that the machine was now removing, but it had been torn in several new directions. Blood pooled inside it and, to his horror, it looked as if some of her internal organs had shifted. He leaned closer, fascinated and sickened, wondering how he would even begin to repair this kind of damage on a battlefield or if he would have had to give up the soldier for dead. The machine was inserting various instruments into the gaping wound, gently pushing innards around as if to realign them.

“This is *not* how I imagined exploring her body,” he grumbled.

“I beg your pardon?”

Merciful Ellil, he’d said that out loud. He hoped that the golem – *David* – wouldn’t repeat it back to *Eli* when she woke. “Never mind.”

“Of course. Did you just hear the unit speak? It said that it has finished stabilizing her organs and is administering anesthetics, antiseptics, and a strong sedative. How does she look?”

“Pale. I think. She wasn’t this pale when I first saw her. But her breathing is more normal.” In fact, she looked a lot better, if he ignored the horrifying gash. The pinched look in her face had smoothed out and her chest was rising and falling in gentle, normal breaths.

“There should be new words on the panel. Read them to me.”

He read off the letters and odd numbers on the panel and relaxed even more as David told him that *Eli*’s vital signs had stabilized and she was out of the worst of the danger.

“Still, without the machine fully functional, there’s not much more we can do for her,” David added, and he could hear the inflections of apology in the artificial man’s voice.

“Yes, there is. Now that she’s stable, I can get *my* equipment.” He knew exactly what he needed to get, in order to help her. If he did everything right, she could be back on her feet in a matter of hours.

I can’t believe I’m going to do this, he thought. But what else could he do? He needed her to live, and forbidden or not, it was the only way.

“You’re coming back to the ship?” David asked. Zamin picked up the collar and carried it out of the room with him, glancing back once to reassure himself that *Eli* was still all right.

“I am.” He leaned over the smoking remains of the creature in the hallway, grimacing. The scent of its charred flesh was almost like the scent of one of the Annunaki, or the Igigi, or a *human*, roasted into unspeakable meat. But there was something else mixed in, perversely even more loathsome than that odor. What had this thing been? He shrank from touching it but, slinging the collar over his elbow, forced himself to drag it through the cleared floor of the fancy reception area and into the airlock. He dumped it to the side of the outer doors once he got them to open.

“May I make a request, then?” David asked. Zamin was amused to note that the golem had waited until he was done dragging his burden around before asking him.

“You want me to collect your pieces and take you back, too?”

“Yes. Please.”

“I planned to anyway. I think we’re going to need your help. Where in Irkalla is this place? I don’t recognize it.” Pieces of another ship were scattered around the wasteland, many of them still smoking.

“You really don’t recognize it?”

“Should I?”

“It’s the plain where we found your ship.”

Zamin stumbled and stopped, looking around him. “That’s not possible.”

“Why not?”

“There’s a *town* there! We have farmers supplying us with fresh food. A lot of the officers’ families live by the base. This place is barely habitable!”

“If you don’t believe me, look at the mountains.”

He realized that he hadn’t actually done that, so focused on the terrain he had to cross that he hadn’t lifted his eyes much higher. When he did, a new sensation of horror filled him. Who *wouldn’t* recognize Mount Si’Una? It was famed across all the worlds; no habitable land had a taller or more majestic peak.

“No,” he heard himself say. “No.”

But he sounded like a small, lost child, even to himself.

His eyes tracked over the surrounding peaks and he silently named each of them to himself. They moved further along the plain and found the four towers of Ereshkigal, which had been weathered almost beyond recognition as if a thousand sandstorms had swept over them. The ground around them should have been green and fertile, an orderly patchwork of different crops and small dwellings, but it had all been scoured away.

“What did you *do*?” he shouted at the collar still dangling from his elbow.

“It was like this when we came here. You have been in stasis for a long time.”

He ran for the ship, his heart hammering from panic rather than exertion. He’d revive Nargal, his commanding officer, and they’d figure this out. He should have done that from the start, except that he’d been distracted by the invaders! Racing into the control room, he ignored the scattered bodies of the humans and hurried over to kneel by Nargal’s stasis unit—

—and scrambled back, staring, trying not to scream like a child. All that remained inside was a horror of skin stretched over bone, his best friend’s remains mummified and almost unrecognizable.

“Zamin?” David’s voice was audible from two places now: the collar dangling from his arm and the other side of the room.

“How long?” he shouted, his voice cracking.

“Dr. Shaw believed that you were in stasis for at least two thousand years. She thought something terrible happened back then, while you were still preparing to depart for ...Ersetu, I believe you call it... and everyone else died.”

Two thousand years? The words slipped away from him, too insane to be possible. Dr. Shaw... the golem was speaking of his *Elilu*. His longing for her rushed back, strangely transformed by the lost horror he was feeling. Lust had been altered into a desire for comfort, for her to hold him and reassure him. But she was broken, waiting for him to return with the things she needed to make her well once more. He didn’t understand what was going on. The things he was seeing, and that the golem was telling him, were impossible elements of an unspeakable nightmare. Maybe if he got back to her, healed her, and spoke to her again, things would begin to make sense.

Forcing himself to his feet, he stumbled out of the control room and down the corridor that led to the infirmary.

“Zamin? Where are you going?” the golem’s voice asked him from below his elbow.

“To get the things I came for,” he answered it through clenched teeth.

The crash had left *his* ship’s medical bay in almost as bad shape as the strange little human ship. Packages were scattered everywhere, many of them filled with crumbled dust instead of usable equipment, but several of the cabinets were still intact, including the critical ones he needed. They opened at his touch, recognizing his biometrics immediately. Drawing out what he needed, he checked it over carefully without breaking any of the seals. Yes. Yes! It would work. He could save her. He stowed them in a bag and slung it over his shoulders.

He added the golem’s head to the bag when he returned to the control room, not daring to look in either of the remaining stasis units. It blinked at him and attempted a friendly smile, but didn’t try to engage him in conversation. Whoever had made it had clearly given it some degree of perceptiveness. The rest of its body was easy enough to carry over his shoulder. As he ran back to the other craft, Zamin tried not to notice the landmarks he was passing, tried not to see all of the familiar objects rendered alien.

Once back inside the humans’ craft, he set the body down on the same couch he’d briefly laid *Eli* upon before carrying her to the surgery device, and fished David’s head back out of the bag.

“Tell me what she said to me back on my ship,” he ordered, as he carried it into the medical room.

Part of him was terrified that he would enter the room and find her already dead, his last connection to sanity severed. But she was breathing quietly on the ruined table, exactly as he’d left her.

“Very well,” David said, and he set the head on a nearby surface. “First, she told me to ask you where you were from. Then she told me to ask you what you had in your cargo hold, because she said that it had killed your people.”

“No.” He shook his head as he set out the sealed bowl. “That’s not possible.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Even if the warheads had been detonated here as she seems to think, there would still be life afterward. It would even be very similar to what had existed before the detonation. The land wouldn’t be barren.”

“What do the warheads do?”

He stared at the bowl for a long moment, contemplating just how thoroughly he was violating one of the greatest commandments of his life. Then he broke the seal and opened it. Inside, the crystalline structures lacing the inner bowl were visible only for an instant before they began to dissolve into a golden liquid. “it’s complicated.”

“But they were weapons?”

“Yes. What else did she say?” He picked up the small inner bowl with one hand, sliding the other under *Eli*’s head.

“She said, ‘you made it here, and it was meant for us. Why?’ That was when Jackson struck her with his rifle. Then she said, ‘I need to know why. What did we do wrong? Why do you hate us?’ That was as much as she was allowed to say.”

Zamin went still for a moment, gazing down at her face. “It’s a shame you didn’t tell me this back then. The answer you would have gotten might have saved your friends. Don’t any of you *remember* why you were condemned?”

It was ironic, he thought. She had wanted to know what they’d done wrong, and the old man had begun staging a re-enactment of that very crime. The old man had demanded the secrets of the Annunaki, the secret of renewal... and Zamin was going to give it to her, instead. He tilted her head until her mouth opened just slightly, and carefully poured the golden fluid in a little at a time, watching her until she swallowed automatically.

“As I said before, it’s been a very long time. Whatever retribution you intended to give humanity never arrived, and in the centuries that passed your people vanished into mythology and legend. Only a few believers like our Elizabeth thought you had ever existed at all, and most of the top minds of our world said she was a fool for doing so. What is that substance you’re giving her?”

“It’s complicated, too.” In truth, Zamin could barely understand how it worked, himself. He’d received it twice in his life, the first time after he’d crash-landed during a combat flight, losing most of his right leg, and the second time when a warhead had broken open and sprayed him and several others with its contents. The

simplest explanation was that it ensured that he stayed *himself*, but that was also the most simplistic way of putting it. He reached into the bag and pulled out his other package, carefully unsealing it and drawing its contents out.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“Probably.” He draped it over *Eli* carefully, making sure it covered her from her throat to her feet. On his people, it was intended to stretch at first; on her, it would bag, until it came “alive” enough to contract around her. It began to react almost immediately, slithering into place as he lifted her arms, her legs, and then her torso. Now she was fully enveloped from the neck down in a biosupport suit much like his own. It darkened as it conformed to her and activated, not to the gray of his suit but instead to a pinkish tan a few shades darker than her flesh. He lifted her out of the now-unnecessary surgical unit and carried her back into the cluttered main room. Now, at last, she was safe.

“Don’t forget me, please,” David called after him.

Once he had *Eli* arranged on another righted couch, Zamin went back into the medical room and fetched the golem’s head. They wouldn’t have to wait long for her to awaken now. Between the suit and the dose of Azalla, she would be healing quickly. While he waited, he picked up some more pieces of scattered furniture and let David explain where they belonged and how they were used.

He was examining an entrancing, if somewhat broken, musical instrument that David called a “peeyanoh” when he heard her speak. There was poisonous fury in her voice. He turned around, wondering if she was going to demand her answers from him again and just what he would tell her, but she was staring at the golem, her face a mask of rage.

“What did she just say?” he asked.

David released an artificial sigh and gave Zamin a look that he supposed was intended to be rueful. “She just accused me of murdering her husband.”

Notes: Thank you to everybody who’s reading and leaving such lovely feedback! In response to a few questions and comments... it looks like Zamin just found out about what happened to his crewmates, Livia! But no, he hadn’t known until just now. :) VFR6, when it comes time for the love scene, I will probably write a more graphic version that gets posted elsewhere, yes. I will be sure to let you know when the time comes. :) WritingintheCandlelight, yeah, I’ve read that, and I’m definitely looking forward to more of it (and really must leave Kukapetal some effusive feedback). PixiZe, I’d say the *film* pretty much insists on the “ancient astronaut” angle, but I’m going to have fun playing with it and turning it on its ear a little.

I will probably not be posting new chapters quite so quickly from now on, since I’m getting into the semester’s “crunch time” *and* I just found out about a symposium that I need to try to submit a paper to, and I have a month to prepare for that as well. But this story keeps pulling at me pretty hard – which is nice because it’s been a while since I’ve had that lovely feeling – so who knows, there could be more posted sooner than I think. XD

So! More fun with Mesopotamian vocabulary! I’m actually pulling from a number of different lexicons (Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, etc.), mostly so I can use words that sound especially nice and have nifty layers of meaning. Here’s the breakdown of the words I dragged out for this chapter:

- **Eli / Elilu** – Bird, and songbird, respectively. Zamin’s calling Shaw this in his head because David told him that those closest to her (*coughcough*Charlie!*coughcough*) called her “Ellie,” which would be pronounced very similarly. So Zamin’s making a pet name out of a pet name.
- **Inanna** – the early name of the goddess of love, sex, and warfare, better known later on as “Ishtar.” If you were a soldier, she was pretty much your goddess of choice.
- **Ellil** - the top god in the early Mesopotamian pantheon, but not necessarily as merciful as all that, since he’s the god who ordered the destruction of humanity in the Mesopotamian versions of the flood myths.

- **Annunaki / Igigi** – The two major classes of gods in the Mesopotamian pantheons. The Annunaki are the higher tier of gods, and the Igigi are the lower tier. Interestingly enough, “Igigi” also translates as “watchers.” One of the creation myths involves the Annunaki creating the Igigi to serve them, only to have the Igigi rebel; the end compromise involves the creation of humanity to take over the role of servant. Yes, I’m probably going to be playing with that!
- **Irkalla** – The Mesopotamian underworld. Zamin uses it as an epithet the way we would use “Hell.”
- **Si’Una** – This literally means “zenith.” It seems an appropriate name for a mountain that “makes Everest look like a baby brother.”
- **Ereshkigal** – That’s the name of the goddess of the underworld and the dead. Which might tell you a lot about what the buildings the Prometheus team was exploring were intended for!
- **Nargal** – No, this has nothing to do with *Harry Potter* (even if there might just be an unrelated *Harry Potter* reference in an upcoming chapter). This is the Sumerian word for “musician.” And since the Engineers seem to have a real fetish for music, I like giving them music-related names. (“Zamin,” for the record, means “lyre.”)
- **Ersetu** – The good old Earth, if you’re Akkadian.
- **Azalla** – This is the name of a medicinal plant. But tucked inside the word is a very special twist, because “Zal” means “to finish; to come to an end; to dissolve, melt, disintegrate, break down, collapse...” So maaaaaaaaybe Zamin just gave Shaw the antidote to the black goo! And maaaaaaaaybe, it’s even the elixir of eternal life that Mr. Weyland was hoping to find.

Chapter 4.

Shaw had the odd idea that a child was playing a piano near her as she woke.

She'd been having nightmares of terror and pain, but she hadn't been able to wake up from them. Their unreality was obvious now, as she stretched in her bed and breathed in the sweet, piney air. Which dig was she working on right now? She couldn't remember. Charlie would laugh at her and tell her how silly she was, if he knew. She decided that she wouldn't open her eyes until she figured it out. Evergreen trees and pianos... where was she now?

"It needs tuning," a man said near her. That wasn't Charlie's voice. Why would one of his assistants be in her bedroom?

"I thought the scale sounded off," another man answered. That wasn't Charlie, either. His voice was deep and something about it made the remnants of her nightmares twitch and try to resurface. "But I wasn't sure that human aesthetics hadn't simply changed. It also needs its legs repaired."

He was someone important. She was certain of that much. Was this one of the dig's backers? She tried to stay out of the way when they came to visit a site. Most of them thought she was a kook. It was best to just let Charlie handle them and go on with her work. So why was he in her room?

In fact, what was *anyone* but Charlie doing in her room when she was naked? Her skin had that delicious freshly-bathed feeling, and she was wrapped in something silken. She couldn't remember a dig when she'd felt so luxurious and at peace. A detached part of her wondered why she wasn't panicking. Shouldn't she be? But that seemed so silly.

Still, it was rude to ignore her guests, even if it was all the ruder for them to be in her bedroom while she was sleeping naked. She opened her eyes.

For a moment, the sparkling light above her combined with the pine made her think that she was in a ski lodge. Then her eyes focused and she saw hundreds of faceted crystals dangling above her, swaying gently in the sweet-scented breeze. A chandelier? She and Charlie had never been able to afford to stay in a place that had one, even if this one seemed unkempt.

Realization of exactly where she had to be hit with sudden force, leaving her breathless. This was the lifeship that had been attached to the *Prometheus*. The nightmares of terror and pain hadn't been dreams at all.

Someone fiddled with the piano keys again, but now she knew that it couldn't be a child. The only thing remotely like a child that had been on board was hopefully dead now. Marveling at how none of this was making her panic – why *wasn't* she panicking, anyway? – she turned to look at the piano and see who *was* playing it.

The Engineer was standing in front of it, half-hunched over as he stroked the keys. The Baby Grand looked absurdly small in comparison to him, reminding her of the toy piano that a character from a twentieth-century cartoon had inexplicably performed Beethoven concertos on. He had a pianist's hands, she noticed, with the long, elegant fingers needed to easily span full octaves. She'd had lessons as a child, when she could, but her hands had stayed too small for serious performing.

"We can fix them, eventually," a voice to the side said, "but there are a number of other repairs that will need to take priority."

David.

He was lying on a nearby couch, still in two pieces, his head absurdly propped up against his chest as if he was preparing for a Halloween prank. Facing partly away from her and toward the Engineer, he didn't seem to have noticed that she'd awakened.

All of the memories were coming back now. Everything that had happened, everything she'd endured, flowed back, including something so horrible that she had trouble suppressing a scream.

"You," she snarled instead. "You killed Charlie! How did you do it? What did you do to him?"

The Engineer stiffened at the piano and turned around, his face wary and confused. "What did she just say?" he asked David. He almost sounded nervous.

David released a genteel-sounding sigh, a sound that was both laughable and infuriating given that he had no lungs and it was completely affected. "She just accused me of murdering her husband," he told ...Zamin? For some reason, she thought that was the name of the demigod by the piano.

At least he was being honest in his translations!

The Engineer's reaction surprised her, several emotions flickering rapidly over his face, replaced by new ones before she could puzzle them out. Mostly, he seemed shocked. "Did you?" he asked the android after a long, speechless moment.

"Murder would imply that I intended for him to die. I did not. It was an accident."

Like HELL! "So why'd *you* use the word, David?" She lunged at him, only to find herself in the grasp of a pair of huge, strong arms. For someone so large, the Engineer was *fast*! "I just said you *killed* him! *You* brought up murder! What did you do?"

Instead of answering her, he translated everything she'd said for the Engineer's benefit. She struggled against the huge man's arms, but he inexorably pushed her back over to the couch, keeping his body between her and her objective.

"Aren't you going to give her an answer?" he demanded after a moment, frowning at the beheaded robot.

"It's complicated, Zamin," David hedged, as though somehow expecting that to be an acceptable answer. She'd been right about his name!

Zamin's frown turned thunderous. "I'll be the judge of that."

"And yet it's acceptable for you to say that when I ask you about the warheads on your ship, and how they function?"

The frown only deepened. "You seem like an intelligent machine, David. But if you can't differentiate between classified military information and civil crimes, you're little better than a calculator with a face."

"What makes you think there's a difference in this case?" David asked.

The Engineer went still, his eyes widening. Shaw had the sudden suspicion that, if his skin hadn't already been chalk-white, it would have become so in this moment. Then he let go of her, standing up quickly and whirling around to face David. "*You ignorant savages!*" he bellowed. "*Did you open up one of the warheads?*"

"Oh my God," Shaw groaned. She covered her mouth as nausea overwhelmed her for a moment. It receded quickly, faster than it should have.

"Yes," David replied.

"Why in Irkalla would you *do* that?" Zamin shouted, his voice punctuated by jangling crystals as the chandeliers bounced. Shaw found herself wondering where Irkalla was. Perversely, a childhood fairy tale popped into her mind. Here was someone who really *could* blow a house down, she thought. The silly thought only sustained her for a second, though, as the meaning of David's confession struck her.

"You poisoned him, didn't you?" she demanded. "He... he *told* me! He said that night that maybe you weren't so bad after all, because you'd brought him a *drink* and the two of you had *talked*..."

Her throat closed, words no longer possible as sobs tried to bubble up instead. Zamin was staring at her, the fury on his face softening. It softened further as David translated her words for him. Walking back over to her, he knelt down before her and, to her surprise, drew her into his arms just as she couldn't suppress the tears any more. Her body shook with the force of each sob and it almost felt as if his arms were the only things keeping her from being torn to pieces. One large, hesitant hand rested on the back of her head and slowly stroked downward over her hair, repeating the motion with a little more confidence a moment later.

Charlie, she thought helplessly. I'm so sorry. You're the one who should be here, not me.

He would have loved this, she thought. She'd been perfectly happy finding the rooms and the relics, the DNA evidence and the holograms. *He'd* been the one who had been desperate to actually meet them, to talk to them. And he'd have been able to. He might not have been able to read the writing on the walls of the buildings, but he would have been able to speak directly to Zamin. She could imagine him, barging into the control room shouting *that old man is full of shit, dude, don't listen to him!* And probably following it up by offering the groggy giant a beer. She had no idea if it would have worked, but it would have been pure Charlie. Something loosened in her chest as she imagined it, and her sobs quieted.

"Is she right?" Zamin asked, his voice soft again like the distant thunder of a receding storm.

"Yes," David said after the briefest of hesitations. "She is."

"Why would you do such a thing?" Zamin's voice was carefully neutral, but Shaw could feel the subtle increase of tension in his body. She lay boneless against him, her head on his shoulder and her eyes closed, listening, not wanting to look at David.

"Because I was commanded to."

Shaw expected to feel surprise at those words, but she didn't.

"Who commanded you?" Zamin asked, his tone reminding her of the endlessly patient constable who had taken her statement after her car was stolen in Glasgow.

"Weyland," she grated out. "That son of a bitch. What did he tell you to do?"

David translated her words for Zamin's benefit. "She's correct. I did it at his instruction, but I did not know at the time that the substance I was giving Dr. Holloway would kill him."

She lifted her head and glared at him over Zamin's shoulder. "What the *Hell* did you think it was going to do?" When David translated, she realized that Irkalla must be Hell.

"You know that Mr. Weyland came here seeking a way to prolong his life, Elizabeth. I had been instructed to find it for him, and to wake him once I found it, or found those who could give it to him. Everything I did during our exploration of the ruins was to achieve that end. I believed I had found it in the chamber we opened, based on the writings on the door and the walls." David's long answer was in the Engineers' language, so that Zamin would understand as well.

"What did it say? You never told us." She couldn't keep an accusing tone out of her voice. She and Charlie had allegedly been the *team leaders*, but it was clear that that had been a lie. No wonder Weyland had insisted on replacing their dig team with one of his own; he hadn't *wanted* them to succeed.

"It said: 'All things have their place in the universe, even these. When their true place is found, they may rise again and stand in the sun once more.'"

Against her, Zamin's body went stiff, his breath catching in his throat. "You opened one of the Tribunal Rooms of Ellil?"

"I don't know. But the text is reminiscent of a number of texts on our world, which speak of resurrection. So I believed that the urns we found inside—"

Zamin began to laugh, but the sound was pained, almost as if he were the one sobbing now. "You complete and utter *idiots*."

He let go of her and rose to his full height, moving away from both of them. The look on his face was startling. Fury, horror, and something that almost looked like *embarrassment* warred for dominance over his features as he paced back and forth in the confined space.

"I believed they contained the rejuvenation substance that Mr. Weyland was seeking," David continued in tones of beleaguered patience. "I brought one back to the ship for further analysis, and reported my findings to him. He was hopeful, but wary of trying it without additional experimentation. I was to test it on a crew member first, and then he would wake up and take it if the test was a success."

"Why *Charlie*? Why not one of the security grunts you brought?" The ship had been crawling with *them*, to no apparent purpose. It still burned her up to think about how they'd run from the sandstorm, taking the main crawler instead of their *own* vehicles. She and Charlie had almost been killed thanks to their cowardice.

She grimaced, shaking her head. She didn't really wish that horrible death on any of *them*, either. That was unkind and unfair, and most of them had died almost as horribly, anyway.

"They had all signed contracts that prohibited alcohol consumption on duty, and all of them were cautious about controlling their food and drink. Vickers hired them from a firm that supplies security officers and professional soldiers to ...geopolitically troubled... regions. If I had attempted to slip something into one of their drinks, they would have noticed. If I had simply asked them to drink something, and told them that Mr. Weyland had requested it of them, they would have done so but then they would also have been aware that they had ingested something unusual. I was trying to avoid a placebo effect, so I needed a subject who was unaware of the test."

"So you opened the urn and removed some of the material inside, and made this Charlie ingest it? Charlie and Dr. Holloway are the same person, yes?" Zamin asked, his face settled into a frown.

"Yes. One drop in his wine. It wasn't until about twelve hours later that anything seemed amiss with him."

"If you only gave him one drop, it's no wonder. You have no idea what you did, do you?" Now the giant's face was twisted with disgust.

"Aside from causing his death? No, I'm afraid I don't. But it wasn't my place to question Mr. Weyland's orders. He wanted to live forever, and he believed that if Elizabeth and Dr. Holloway were right about your people's relationship to humanity, you would know how to make that possible."

Zamin gave both of them a baffled look. "Our relationship to humanity? What relationship, exactly, did you think that was?"

“You made us,” Shaw said, feeling her heart speed up. “You engineered our existence. And then you decided to destroy us.”

The look he gave her, when David translated her words, was aghast. “*Made* you?”

She nodded, mute now.

“How could we have *made* you? We came from Ersetu just as you did! Merciful Ellil, have your people forgotten *everything*?” He stared at her for a moment, his eyes searching hers for something. Whatever it was, he didn’t find it. “You have. You really *have*. You don’t even know what I’m talking about, do you?”

She shook her head. Her eyes and nose had the stinging feeling of suppressed tears. Somehow, she’d disappointed him.

“How far back,” he asked after a moment, his voice sounding heavy, “do your historical records go?”

She couldn’t get her voice to work.

“It depends on the society,” David answered, absurdly rescuing her. “In some parts of the world, there are clear and accurate records that go back as much as three thousand years, covering events that occurred as far back as approximately five thousand years ago. In many parts of the world, the reliable records begin considerably later than that.”

“Five thousand years. Only five thousand years,” Zamin whispered. He shook his head, his lips forming a tight line. “And I slept through two thousand of them... how did you even *find* us if that’s all you have?”

“Elizabeth and Dr. Holloway were... I don’t actually know the word in your language, Zamin, if there even is one. I’m sorry. They were studying civilizations that predated our known historical record, through the surviving artifacts of those civilizations. As I understand it, Elizabeth was the one who noticed that several artifacts, from different parts of the world and different eras, contained a consistent symbol that looked to her like a constellation. Naturally, nobody believed her, especially because the only formation she could find in the sky, that actually resembled the constellation, was one that only could be seen with extremely high-powered telescopes, and wasn’t even visible to the naked eye from Ersetu’s surface. But after Mr. Weyland’s corporation found a potentially-habitable world orbiting one of the stars in that constellation, she went to him and showed him her findings and theories.”

“And he believed her,” Zamin mused.

Shaw started to nod.

“No, not at all,” David answered, and she gasped. “Not until Dr. Holloway backed her up, and suggested that if she was right, your people would possess a level of technology that we were only just beginning to achieve. He said that, even if you had all died out, the artifacts you had left behind would be priceless, and would allow Weyland Corporation to continue its dominance of Ersetu and its new colonies for centuries.”

“He said *what*?” She shook her head, horror filling her. Charlie wouldn’t have done that, would he? *He’d* been the one eager to find and speak to the Engineers in the first place! She’d been perfectly happy just having a chance to prove her theories right, but for the first time, she’d seen the light of religious fervor in *him*. Then she remembered other occasions when he’d miraculously wheedled grants out of impossible funding sources, and a few times that donors had mysteriously appeared when there supposedly weren’t any to be found. How many times had Charlie done this kind of wheeling and dealing without her even noticing?

“A million years could pass and kings would never change,” Zamin muttered. “So your Weyland came here to pillage this world?”

“Officially, he was funding an expedition headed by Dr. Holloway and Elizabeth. But his intent was acquisition, not exploration. If you were here and alive, he intended to ask you to share your secrets and make him immortal, because he believed that his accomplishments entitled him to godhood. I never translated that part before you beheaded me, but that *is* what he tried to tell you.”

“If I’d heard *that*, there might not have been anything left of you.” Zamin sat down on the couch next to Shaw. Anger had tightened his jaw and turned down the corners of his mouth, making him look once more like a stern, wrathful god.

“If we didn’t find you alive, but did find artifacts, he intended to claim them and reverse-engineer as many of them as possible, and then patent the resulting technologies, as Dr. Holloway had suggested. And if we found no sign of you at all, then he intended to have the world surveyed for terraforming and colonization. No matter what, he intended to turn a profit.”

“And what good is a worldly profit to dust and bones?” Zamin murmured. To Shaw, a veteran of innumerable church services, it sounded like he was quoting a scripture, albeit one she’d never read. It was

tempting to respond with *Amen*, and it seemed like the perfect epitaph for Weyland's greed.

"So he never *intended* for us to actually dig, did he?" No wonder he'd insisted on providing a new crew of helpers, instead of letting her use the assistants she knew and trusted. No wonder... no, she didn't want to think it.

"He might have let you do so, but only for his gain. Are you really so surprised, Elizabeth? It wouldn't be the first such dig you've participated in."

"*What?*" She stared at him in horror, half-rising up until Zamin put a hand on her shoulder. "You son of a—"

"Oh. Sorry. I didn't realize that you didn't know." But behind the polite words, she could *swear* she heard David gloating.

"Did you think I could just be *bought*?"

"Well, neither you nor Dr. Holloway had the best reputation in the field to begin with." Again, she could hear a smirk right under the surface. Weren't arrogance and scorn *emotions*?

But as much as she didn't want to admit it, she knew he was being truthful. There had been times, after one or another of those mysteriously-funded digs, when she'd visited the museums exhibiting the artifacts they'd uncovered and wondered why some of the best pieces weren't on display, only to find that the staff she talked to seemed to have no knowledge of their existence. And Charlie had been the one that people *didn't* treat like a kook. She was often dismissed outright for her theories about ancient civilizations, and had been even before her much-derided constellation theory. Charlie had been her source of credibility, and if David's insinuations were true...

What did you do, Charlie? she thought, her heart aching. He'd been dead for less than a day and his memory was already being defiled. If he'd really done it, he'd been careful to keep her from ever figuring out, or even having more than the vaguest of suspicions, because he knew how strongly she felt about such things. If she'd caught him even once, it might well have been the end of their relationship, both professionally and personally.

Zamin had been listening quietly as David first translated everything she said and then replied to it. She could feel the weight of his gaze on her but couldn't look up at him, wondering how disgusted he was with her now and whether he regretted sparing her life. His hand was still on her shoulder. Part of her wanted to pull away, but the rest of her wanted to lean into his touch and close her eyes against everything. Her world was still being torn to pieces, and there was nothing she could do to fight back against the man responsible; Zamin had already killed him.

"So why give that stuff to *Charlie*?" she heard herself asking. "Why not *me*? I trusted you a whole lot more than he did."

"And that's why. He would have suspected me if anything went wrong with you. You never did, until I indicated that I knew how he died. You were the credulous one, not him."

"Credulous?" She shrugged off Zamin's hand, jumping to her feet. "*Credulous*? I *found* what I was looking for! I *proved* my theories!" She pointed at Zamin with one shaking hand. "Right here! Alive and well! Proof that I was *right*!"

"Ignoring the whole part where *he* says they never engineered humanity," David said, his voice taking on the prim tones of a scornful professor, "do you really think the world is going to change just because Luna Lovegood actually *found* a crumple-horned snorkack?"

She stared at him, uncomprehending for a moment. The meaning of his words slowly sank in, and then the meaning behind the meaning. There was only one way he could know about that humiliating nickname, which she hadn't understood until well into her first year at Cambridge when she'd finally located and read the books it came from. *I watched your dreams*, he'd told her as she was losing consciousness. The depth of the violation he'd perpetrated finally registered, at last, and this time the nausea could not be suppressed.

"You... disgusting... *mind*... **rapist**!" she screamed, before racing from the room in search of Peter Weyland's bathroom. *This* time, she wasn't going to let David watch her throw up.

Notes: Well, *this* wrote itself a lot sooner than I expected! Thank you to everybody for the lovely feedback I've been receiving! You're all so sweet! So, this time around there isn't any new Mesopotamian vocabulary

(don't worry, the only one who might get a pop quiz is Shaw!) but I did mention that there might be a *Harry Potter* reference, didn't I? ;) In actuality, Luna is probably my favorite character in that whole series (for reasons entirely too obvious to anyone who actually knew me when I was that age!) but I can just see people using her to make fun of Shaw's brand of spirituality, so I couldn't resist. Sorry, Charlie fans! I needed a way to start getting Shaw over him, or it would take *eons* for Zamin to get anywhere with her, and archaeologists who snitch relics are just plain *icky*. So yeah, he gets the short end of the characterization stick here. And no, Shaw *hasn't* noticed what she's wearing. Yet. ;)

I can't *promise* that there'll be more soon, because zOMG I have a lot of readings and things due this month, but I will try. (The story is making it ridiculously easy for me, almost writing itself.)

Chapter 5.

“Tell me what just happened.”

It was taking all of Zamin’s self-control to keep him from chasing after Elilu, and he wasn’t even sure that he *shouldn’t*. Whatever David had said to her – and he had no idea who “Luna Lovegood” was or what a “crum-pull-hoarnd-snorr-cack” might be – it had had a devastating effect. From one of the other rooms in the small craft, he could hear her retching.

“She’s not being rational. That’s all.”

“What did she say to you?” he demanded, hissing his words so that she wouldn’t hear. “Tell me *exactly* what she said.”

The golem’s face formed an affectation of annoyance, as if Zamin were being irrational too. “She called me a disgusting rapist of the soul. That’s as close a translation as I can come up with.”

“And *why* would she call you that?” His anger with the golem was building. This “David” may have been helpful, but he seemed to be adept at saying things that wounded Elilu, wounded her deeply. Zamin had dealt with people like that before and couldn’t fathom why anyone would tolerate it from a machine.

David pretended to heave another artificial sigh. “I mentioned something from one of her dreams. I spent a lot of time watching her dreams on the journey here. They were very vivid. In many of them, she dreamed about how fellow students at her... the closest word I can find in the portion of your language I know is ‘scribal school,’ but that isn’t an adequate description of what Ersetu’s best schools are like. But the other students there nicknamed her after a character in an epic written almost a century ago, a girl who believed wholeheartedly in unseen things and who most people in the stories thought was mad. It was not *entirely* an insult, because the girl in the epic was also extremely valiant and fought alongside its heroes in their greatest battles, but it was still very hurtful to our Elizabeth. The creature I mentioned was a mythical beast that the girl was searching for, but was never able to find.”

Now Zamin understood exactly why Elilu had run, and why she was dry-heaving in the next room. “You went into her mind while she slept in stasis, learned her deepest secrets, and then *taunted* her with one of them?”

The thought of someone picking through his memories and fantasies, while he was helpless to stop them, was horrifying. What would this creature do if it knew his worst nightmares and his bloody dreams of fiery vengeance against his brother’s murderers? If it knew his fantasies, his secrets, the jealousy he’d felt when Šena married his brother, or the terror of watching the Azalla grow his leg back and knowing that he was forever set apart?

“Yes, I suppose I did.” The golem’s tone implied that this was a new and interesting idea to it, but one that carried no stigma or censure. The impulse to do more damage to it was difficult to resist.

“Did you have her *permission* to watch her dreams?” he demanded, forcing himself not to move, not to lunge at the couch where the broken golem lay and take it apart even more.

“Technically, no, but I did have permission to use the interface to communicate with her while she was in stasis, should the need arise.”

“Did you actually use the interface that way?” His hands had balled into fists. He could feel the biosupport suit struggling to counter the building battle rage inside him. The familiar sensation of being hot and cold at the same time, of his body feeling lighter as if gravity was letting go of him, was upon him. He wanted a target. He wanted something to *kill*.

“Not with her, no,” David confessed, stoking the rage even higher.

Zamin forced himself to exhale. Deep breaths. He knew how to calm himself, how to keep the battle lust under control. He had to. As much as he wanted to destroy this abomination, he couldn’t. Not yet. “Then you *did*, in fact, rape her mind. What’s the appropriate punishment for a rapist on your world?”

“It varies from culture to culture. Imprisonment in most. Castration in some. Execution in a few. I fail to see how that applies to this situation.”

“You *fail* to—?” The horrified scream from the other room cut off his words. He was halfway down one of the corridors before he’d even realized that he’d moved.

Elilu was in a tiny room, all white and glass, standing before a basin with a mirror above it. Her screams had resolved into frantic words that he couldn't decipher, but the moment he saw her clawing at her wrist, he understood. He grabbed her shoulders and turned her around to face him, pulling her hands away from each other before she could hurt herself.

"Stop!" He shouted at her. "Listen to me! Stop!"

Her eyes were huge, filled with panic. She screamed something else at him, but he couldn't understand it either.

"Listen! The suit won't hurt you! It's healing you! It's just like the one I'm wearing. It's why you're alive at all!"

She went silent, staring at him. Her breaths were still coming in rapid heaves and her eyes were still enormous, but she was listening.

"Your medical equipment couldn't save you, so I used mine," he told her, moving his hands from her wrists to her shoulders. "The suit is keeping you stabilized while your body heals. It's protecting you from injury and infection. You're going to have to wear it for several days but it won't hurt you. I swear to you, it won't hurt you. And you'll be able to take it off once it's done healing you."

Panting, shaking, she asked him a question in her strange language.

"I'm sorry, Elilu. I don't know what you just asked me. Do you understand what *I've* said?"

She nodded.

"Are you in any pain?"

She shook her head. Lifting one trembling hand to her throat, she touched the place where the suit had fused with her skin, and asked her question again.

Oh!

"It has to join with us like that or it can't regulate our metabolisms and prevent infections. It's... a second skin? But it's more than that. A lot more. It won't hurt you. And when it's done, it will let you break the connection. But right now it has a lot of repair work to do. I don't know how you got injured so badly, but yours is one of the worst injuries I've ever seen first-hand, and I've seen a *lot*. Please. Let it heal you."

Elilu's eyes hadn't left his. She swallowed and nodded, and then abruptly sagged against him. Her expression became both alarmed and bewildered.

He caught her, lifting her up and cradling her to him. "I think you need to rest for a while. You're not going to have a *lot* of energy while you're healing, and that scare probably used up most of what you had."

He carried her out of the little room and looked around. It was connected to a larger room that had barely registered on his consciousness as he passed through it, but now, as he took it in, he realized that it was a bedroom. The eight walls formed an octagonal shape, with doors on three of them, glass panels displaying strange artifacts on four more in between them, and a huge, luxurious bed up against the last. The crash had left the pillows and blankets in disarray, but they appeared undamaged. He walked over to one side and lowered Elilu down onto the bed, so that her head rested on one of the pillows. She looked exhausted, barely able to keep her eyes open, but was struggling to keep her gaze locked with his.

"You need to sleep now," he told her, keeping his voice soft. "Call for me when you wake up, and I will come to you. I need your help with something."

Her expression of sleepy confusion twisted at his heart. She asked him something in a soft voice. Although he didn't know any of her words, he was almost certain he knew what she'd asked.

"I need you to teach me your language. I don't want to have David taking part in all of our conversations. I don't think you do, either."

By her expression, he could tell that she agreed with him. She reached up with one hand and rested it against his cheek, closing her eyes. She was asleep before the jolt of desire finished passing through his body. He held her hand to his cheek for a long moment, gazing down on her and understanding exactly how someone could be tempted to steal into her dreams.

She's a new widow, he reminded himself. That discovery had been a kick in the gut. Her grief would last a while, months or possibly years, and even though he was the only other living being she could turn to for comfort, he had no right to presume upon that. He had no right to assume that her need for affection had anything to do with lust, and no right to try to provoke it in her. He had to honor her grief and observe her mourning period in full before he made any attempt to court her. His resolution to do so made David's casual violation of her all the more egregious.

Drawing the covers over her, he forced himself to return to the other room.

“Is Elizabeth all right?” David asked.

“She’s sleeping,” Zamin said, studying the golem. It seemed genuinely concerned about her, even after what it had done. But then, it could seem to be a lot of things that it actually wasn’t, couldn’t it? He wanted to solve this the way he’d been trained to solve almost everything, but this wasn’t the time for a warrior. This situation needed something more judicious. He only hoped he could fill that role decently. “Can you think of any reason that either of us should trust you, after the things you’ve already done?”

“Only that everything I did was at Mr. Weyland’s instructions, including attempting to learn all of Elizabeth’s and Dr. Holloway’s secrets. Now that he is dead, I no longer have to obey his commands.”

In essence, he’d been a slave. There was merit to that defense. “Whose commands do you obey now?”

“I am not sure. If Ms. Vickers were still alive, I would have to obey her. She was Mr. Weyland’s heir, but she was killed when your ship crashed. I suppose that, technically, I might have to obey Elizabeth, since she held some nominal rank in the exploration party. Or possibly you, since you killed my owner and conquered us.”

Conquered them? At best, he’d struck a truce. But if the golem was unaware of the power that Elilu wielded over him without even intending to, he wasn’t going to enlighten it. “If a human had committed the same acts that you did, against Eli...zabeth and her husband, what penalties would he have faced in your Mr. Weyland’s society?”

“Imprisonment, probably for a great many years.”

Good. That was what he had hoped to hear. The next part, though, might be trickier. He had no idea what Mr. Weyland’s society believed about coercion, let alone slavery, although he knew it had still existed on Ersetu when his brother had been stationed there. Before they murdered him, he thought. His heart pounded for a moment before he forced the fury back. “And what level of clemency would he be able to expect, if he made the same defense you did?”

“None,” David answered after a brief pause. “The defense that one was just following orders hasn’t been accepted by most courts on our worlds since the Nuremberg Trials.”

Worlds? Interesting. Had humanity begun to spread out? He would have to learn more about those trials at some point. “Were you *capable* of disobeying them?”

“More or less. I had broad latitude in how I could carry many of them out. I may have chosen badly in how I exercised it.”

“Oh, you definitely *did*. So then you *are* responsible for the consequences of those actions? Do you admit that?”

“Yes.”

“Then what would your sentence be?”

David paused. “The loss of my freedom for at least ten Ersetu years. In Mr. Weyland’s society, this is done to humans via imprisonment, but sometimes that is deferred in favor of service of some kind, for the same amount of time.”

“Then that will be your sentence,” Zamin informed him, careful to use his grimmest and most final tone. “For the duration of that period, you are not free, and may not behave as if you are. You will treat Elizabeth, and myself, as your commanding officers and your wardens. Our orders are to be obeyed promptly and completely. You will not act in any way that could harm us. You will not *allow* us to come to harm through any *omission* of action. You will give both of us complete security access to everything on this craft and all other structures and artifacts, to the full extent that you have such access yourself. You will not initiate any course of action without our authorization, unless failure to do so could result in harm to one or more of us, including yourself. And above all, you will never, *ever* describe, mention, or even *refer to* anything you observed in her dreams again. Is this understood?”

There was another pause. “Yes,” the golem finally said.

“Do you submit to these terms?”

The pause stretched on longer this time. “I do,” David finally said. There was an odd, defeated quality in his voice. Zamin had to remind himself that all of David’s affectations were just that, rather than signs of actual emotion. There were moments when it seemed as if the masquerade covered something almost identical beneath it, something real, but the lack of empathy David kept displaying toward Elilu seemed to deny it.

“Then I will repair you. And as long as you observe the conditions of your sentence, nothing worse will happen to you and you can coexist with us as an equal in every other way. When the time is up, you will be free to go where you will and do what you will, with the sole remaining condition that you never attempt to harm either one of us, or those we care about. Is this acceptable?”

David’s face actually looked surprised. “It is. But Zamin...”

“Yes?”

“Will this be acceptable to Elizabeth?”

It was a good question. *She* was the one who had been violated, after all, and whose husband had been taken from her. “If she demands a harsher penalty, would you submit to it?”

“I don’t want to end.”

“Is she likely to demand that?” He didn’t think so, himself. She’d run from the room instead of attacking David. And hours ago, when he’d found her hiding behind the bar, she’d put down her axe and talked to him instead of trying to avenge her shipmates, although he still wasn’t sure whether she had any reason to mourn them.

“I don’t know. Even after everything I’ve seen, I don’t understand her. I don’t even know what most of her secrets mean. When I said the thing about ‘Luna Lovegood,’ I didn’t realize that it would hurt her. I was just trying to remind her that a reputation for eccentricity wouldn’t be erased just because she’d accidentally been right about something. It was not intended to hurt her.” David’s voice had taken on a confused tone. “When I meet humans, I can always accurately judge them within a few minutes. But it’s been more than two years since I met Elizabeth and I still can’t predict what she’ll do, or understand why.”

“And your attempts to find out have been hurting her. Do you understand that?” As much as it pained him to think about his brother, Zamin was heartily glad that he’d been related to a skilled diplomat. At this moment, it almost felt like he was channeling Šukarak, as if his brother was beside him and whispering instructions on how to handle this mess. It did seem to be *working*.

“I think so. I’m not sure how to rectify the situation.”

“That’s because it’s not up to you. It’s up to her. We’ve established what the penalties would be under the laws of your society, and you’ve agreed to pay them, but that doesn’t mean she has to forgive you, or trust you.”

“And if she demands my destruction?”

Zamin hesitated, not sure what the answer to the question actually *was*. In theory, he’d done justice here, but she might not see it that way. And there was always the possibility that David was misleading him about what would or wouldn’t be considered justice back on Ersetu. But the biggest question of all, and the one that Zamin didn’t yet have an answer to, was simply whether he would be able to deny Elilu anything she asked, even if it was unreasonable. He’d already given her Azalla, in defiance of all sanity. He couldn’t even guess what lengths beyond that he might go to for her. It almost made him feel a sense of kinship to David, who seemed to have been goaded by a similar impulse. What was it about that tiny human woman that made her so compelling?

“You would do it for her, wouldn’t you?” David asked. His voice had taken on an almost gentle, sympathetic quality.

“I don’t know,” he answered honestly. “I hope we don’t have to find out. But we have something even *more* urgent to discuss. I need to know exactly which of the Tribunal Rooms you fools opened and how far the contamination may have spread. Describe the room to me.”

“It was large,” David told him, switching topics without any argument, “with the same curved walls that seem to be characteristic of your people. In the center of the room there was a huge, weathered stone head. There were urns arrayed around it on the earthen floor, and bas-reliefs on the upper walls.”

“Tell me what was on the reliefs.” That was the information that he needed.

“The one I saw clearly showed a man, kneeling with his head bent and his arms out. One of his hands was resting on a creature with a misshapen head, which was crouching beside him. Its hands were clawed and there were spikes on its elbows. Behind the huge head there was another bas-relief with a circular table in front of it, and a large, rough green crystal embedded in the table. I never saw it directly, but it was on recordings from Dr. Holloway’s suit. That relief showed a slender figure with an enormous, fanning skull, surrounded by swirls that seemed to resolve themselves into creatures with long tails and multiple legs, attached to the heads of prone, vaguely-human figures.”

David was thorough. With each word, he was describing exactly what Zamin had hoped he *wouldn't*. “Of all the rooms you could have explored, all the places you could have gone prying, you had to go in *there*. Why in *Irkalla* did you pick *that* room to enter?”

“Because that was where we found the body of one of your people.”

“*What?*”

“I had found a security recording of the last activity in the building. When I played it back, it showed a group of your people running from something, dressed in their full armor and helmets. We followed them as they ran through corridors. The last one appeared ill. He fell more than once during the run. The others ran into that room but he collapsed in front of the doorway as he tried to follow them. After he fell, the doorway came down and decapitated him. We found his body outside of the room, and his head inside. Elizabeth carbon-dated the body and discovered that it had been there for two thousand years. Tell me, Zamin. What is that room?”

Zamin winced, scrubbing at his face with one hand. “Your people have only begun exploring the galaxy, haven’t they? Have you actually found any planets with living organisms on them?”

“Nothing above the microbial level. Why?”

“We’ve been exploring the galaxy for almost fifty thousand of Ersetu’s years, now. The worlds are teeming with life, of more kinds than anyone can imagine without going mad. Most of the time it’s just interesting, but sometimes, that life is hostile.” Which, of course, was why anyone who wanted to do scientific research had to receive military training, and any soldier who wished to attain appreciable rank had to learn at least a few of the sciences. Too temperamental to follow his brother and uncle into diplomatic work, Zamin had followed his father’s footsteps into the military, in spite of everyone’s tearful protests. The first price he’d paid had been losing Šena. The next loss had been his idealism. But he had seen unimaginable wonders... and unspeakable horrors.

“That seems a reasonable thing to expect.”

“There is a species that we’ve encountered several times among the stars. It’s parasitic in nature and extremely dangerous. An encounter with even one can wipe out an entire colony. We’re authorized to use the Zal on them – the permanent kind from which nothing comes back – wherever we find them. But genocide is absolutely forbidden by the Annunaki. So we also have to save samples, which can later be seeded back onto either the world that they came from or a suitably remote planet that no explorer would ever wish to visit. The Tribunal Rooms are where we keep specimens, like that species, which have been judged too dangerous for that reseeded to ever occur.” Zamin stood up, anger flaring through him. “It’s *stupid!* Keeping things like that at all? That’s like sleeping with a bottle of Zal under your pillow! But *no*, we’re not permitted to *destroy* them! That would be *genocide!* We have to keep them in little urns *forever* because what could *possibly* go wrong with that? Who’s going to come along two thousand years from now, open the damned things up, and take a *taste!*? And what in *Irkalla* is that *thing* supposed to be?”

His gaze had fallen on a strangely-shaped figure, constructed out of some kind of flat, black material and attached to the wall next to the doorway that led to the bedroom. It almost looked like it was the silhouette of a crouching human, but it was far too tiny. It appeared to be stealthily creeping toward the shelves that had must have once held the paper-and-cardboard objects scattered throughout the room.

“Art. Mr. Weyland was particularly fond of abstract pieces, especially ones made by young artists on their way up. It’s supposed to be vaguely reminiscent of a Balinese shadow-puppet, but I don’t suppose that means anything to you.”

“Not really, no.” Zamin shook his head, glancing around the room and noticing other strange and useless-looking objects in prominent places. *This* was supposed to be *art*? By contrast, the images of artwork that his brother had recorded and sent to him, many of them prominently displayed in the streets of Herculaneum, had been beautiful, even if the society around them seemed to be degenerating at an alarming pace. Just what had *happened* to humanity in the last two thousand years?

“If I may ask?” David interrupted his thoughts. “You say genocide is forbidden. But isn’t that what you were preparing to travel to Earth to do?”

Zamin winced. It was a good thing that the golem hadn’t been able to invade his dreams, because in many of them, that had been exactly what he’d done. But it hadn’t been the mission. “No. We were targeting one peninsula, on one continent, where the ...people... had committed a crime that has no other punishment than absolute eradication. Zal moves swiftly enough that no one would have time to carry the infection out of the

deployment zone before it moved into the second, reconstructive phase. Within a year there would have been new vegetation, different from what had existed before but based on the same essential designs, and shortly after that, new animal life.”

“And the humans of the region?”

“The whole society they belonged to had been condemned. The practices they had taken up couldn’t be allowed to continue. Undoubtedly, other humans would eventually have settled there, but hopefully they wouldn’t have had similar ideas.”

“May I ask which civilization this was?”

Zamin frowned, wondering whether it was even remembered now, or how much influence it might have acquired before time itself wore it away, as time always does. “It was the Imperium Romanum, ruled by a degenerate named Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus. The monster who ordered the murder of my brother and his family.”

Notes: OMG, this story has to stop taking over my brain, because I have *studying* to do! Thank you to everybody who has been leaving me wonderful feedback. You’re not helping me study, LOL, but I love hearing from you! :D

So, a few small things this time, in terms of Mesopotamian vocabulary. **Šena** is another word for “bird,” which I decided would be fun — Zamin keeps falling for ladies named “bird.” **Šukarak**, meanwhile, is a name for a musical instrument, in keeping with my music-themed names for the Engineers. And finally, for fun, the bit of bizarre artwork that bothers Zamin so much can be seen below. It really was in the film!



I have so much to do this week that I really *can't* promise another new chapter soon, but wow, they seem to keep happening anyway. *facepalm*

Notes: ...I can't seem to help myself, I just keep writing and writing and writing...

Chapter 6

Shaw woke up the second time knowing exactly where she was, and also understanding exactly why it didn't upset her the way it should. She lay still, under the sheets of Peter Weyland's bed, and listened for the voices of her two unusual companions. She could hear them talking in the other room, but their voices were too muffled for her to understand what they were saying in Zamin's ancient language.

She wondered what she'd be feeling if Zamin hadn't put her in a suit like his. A mountain of agony, yes, but it was doing more than just suppressing *physical* pain. Her emotions felt muted. Mostly. At some moments they still overwhelmed her, but they seemed to dissipate quickly, calm reasserting itself well before it ought to.

Even her moment of panic in the bathroom had been bizarrely short, she realized. As soon as Zamin had appeared and began explaining the suit to her, she'd felt herself calming down, much faster than she normally would have. Hell, when she and Charlie had gone to Australia to get a better look at the constellation pattern in several Aboriginal artifacts, she'd been in the middle of a shower when she'd realized that the stall was crawling with baby spiders. It had been hours before she stopped freaking out, and days before she no longer felt their tiny, sharp little feet clambering over her skin. But this time...

Maybe it helped that the suit was so *comfortable*. She pushed the blankets down so that she could take a closer look at it. It still seemed as if the sight of it melding into her skin ought to give her the collywobbles, but it didn't. What had Zamin said? Something about it needing to interface with her? She couldn't quite remember. But he'd also said something about it regulating her body. Did that include her emotions? If so, why was it letting her feel fear at all?

Fear is a survival mechanism, she mused. Maybe the suit didn't suppress emotions if they were useful in some way. Maybe, instead, it just suppressed the physical reactions to emotion, or at least the ones that might be overwhelming. It had let her cry over Charlie, though. Maybe it had recognized that those tears had therapeutic value?

"Interesting technology," she said to herself, keeping her voice soft so her companions wouldn't hear her yet. She needed a few moments alone before she began dealing with them again. She wasn't sure if she wanted to deal with David at all, and Zamin would be incredibly difficult to communicate with, without him. The men in her life seemed to excel at giving her headaches.

She ran her hand along the sleeve of her suit in fascination. It almost felt like she was just touching her arm. Not to her *hand*, of course – the suit itself had a texture that reminded her of petting a dolphin at a marine park – but to her arm, it felt as if her hand was directly on it with nothing intervening. That didn't seem like very good protection!

She frowned at the suit, and then lifted her hand, bringing it down hard on her arm with a *smack!* The palm of her hand stung from the impact, but her arm didn't, registering the force of the blow but none of the pain or, she assumed, damage.

Wow, she thought, put soldiers in these things and you'll have an invincible army! No wonder Jackson's bullet hadn't even slowed Zamin down.

She pulled back the covers to study it some more. The ribbing over her chest gave, very subtly, as she breathed. The portion over her abdomen seemed rigid, although she didn't think that was the case for Zamin. Maybe that was due to her injury. Even before the suit had consciously registered in her awareness, she'd had a vague sense that there were certain positions she couldn't take, certain ways she couldn't bend, stretch, or twist. It had been protecting her injuries from further damage, she decided. And its method was much nicer than a sudden warning twinge of pain.

I like this thing, she decided. She wondered if Zamin's people wore suits like this all the time. It seemed comfortable and low-maintenance enough that she suspected she'd wear one regularly if she could. Skinned knees – something she still got two or three times in any given year – would be a thing of the past.

Experimentally, she sat up. *Weird!* Now that she was conscious of what the suit was doing, she could feel it preventing her abdominal muscles from tensing, and flexing itself to compensate. The sensation was both spooky and... kinda *cool*.

But she was up and suddenly aware that she was hungry. She might as well venture out and see Zamin, and David mostly for Zamin's sake, and find something to eat.

"...Connection behind the left collar bone," David was saying in Zamin's language as she emerged.

He was still lying on one of the couches, but he had been turned around and the couch had been dragged into the best pool of light. His head now lay on the couch above his shoulders. Some of the connections between head and shoulders appeared to have been re-established. Zamin was kneeling next to the couch, one of the craft's maintenance tool boxes open beside him, hunched over David and peering into his trunk with a flashlight.

"I see it," Zamin answered. "I just can't reach it. There isn't enough space for my fingers."

"Perhaps Elizabeth can," David suggested, his eyes on her.

"Maybe, when she wakes up—" Zamin stopped and stiffened when she cleared her throat. The startled and slightly embarrassed expression on his face when he looked up at her made her lips twitch into a smile.

Glad I'm not the only one who concentrates so hard people can sneak up on me, she thought. Zamin's expression changed, spreading into a smile of his own. He was pleased to see her, but something about the look he gave her sent a sudden pang of sadness through her and she wasn't sure why.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her. She wished, again, that she could answer him in his own language. At least she didn't have to depend on David for translations in both directions.

"Better," she told him. She ran her hand over one of the biosuit's sleeves with a grin. "I'm starting to really like this thing."

David dutifully translated her words for Zamin's benefit, while she walked behind the bar. A few of the wall panels had been ripped away by the force of the crash, but only the ones that functioned as doors. Most of the expensive crystal and china that had been stored inside them had smashed. But the central panels, which dispensed food, appeared to be intact, and powered up at her touch. She scrolled through the menu and grimaced. Weyland, or maybe Vickers, had pricey taste in food items; she could have brought her usual excavation team and an entire class of undergrad assistants along on this joyride for the price of this machine's hors d'oeuvres selection.

And gotten all of them killed, too, she reminded herself, as she selected a few things she knew she'd like. She'd locate the menu of actual breakfast foods another time; right now she was too hungry. She picked out enough for two, and then changed her mind and made it *three*, unsure how large an appetite Zamin might have. Behind her, she could hear him asking David to excuse him for a moment, and then walking over to join her.

"I know you can't answer me right now, except through David," he told her in a hushed voice once he was beside her. "But I need to make sure that the agreement I've made with him is all right with *you*."

She listened as he outlined the terms of David's "parole," nodding quietly to herself. It was a much more merciful sentence than she'd have wished for Mr. Weyland himself, but she couldn't really argue with it in David's case. He probably *hadn't* had free will over such things, and no direct experience with human emotion to guide him. She realized that Zamin's terms seemed to accord David human status, and wondered what the android made of that. Would he feel gratified or insulted?

"Are you agreeable to those terms?" Zamin asked her, watching her face closely. His expression, the whole time, reminded her of the look on her gynecologist's face during the discussion of why she couldn't conceive children and just how expensive the surgery to fix her problem would be. Was he, too, expecting her to rail against the unfairness of it all?

Instead she nodded and gave him a little smile. "As long as he lives up to his end," she said, and then winced as she remembered he couldn't understand her words.

This time, his laugh was genuinely amused and almost whisper-soft, as if he only wanted to share it with her. "I really need to learn your language," he told her. She responded with an enthusiastic nod, glad he wasn't demanding an explanation for why *she* couldn't speak *his*. Maybe he'd met people with her problem before.

One of the panels chimed and the food she'd requested began to emerge. She moved the trays onto the bar's counter and gestured that Zamin should help himself, too. He looked a little dubious as he eyed the different bits of finger-food, and she wished she could ask him what kinds of things his people normally ate. But he tried them after she showed him how to handle each one. His favorites, she quickly discovered, were the bacon-wrapped scallops.

Oh dear, she thought as she watched him wolf down the tray's contents. I hope his people don't have rules about keeping Kosher, or he's going to be *furios* with me. She helped herself to all of the miniature wraps containing spinach, cheese, and artichoke hearts; Zamin hadn't taken more than one bite out of his sample, and had left the rest uneaten.

Their meal was eaten in silence, but not an uncomfortable one. It reminded her, oddly, of her first weeks on campus at Cambridge, but she still wasn't sure why. It was a *good* reminder, though, laced with only a little of the awkwardness and uncertainty, but mostly filled with the sense of possibilities opening up, a world and beyond to be discovered. Zamin's eyes were on her the whole time, undoubtedly to make sure he handled the food correctly. A few times, though, his gaze was intense enough to make her blush and wonder if she had something on her face.

The panels were able to dispense drinks, too. Unsure if Zamin might have prohibitions against alcohol, she had the dispenser pour them sweetened cranberry juice instead. Zamin grimaced at the taste but seemed to like the orange juice she tried next. She was tempted to dial up a martini for herself, but remembered that alcohol was technically a metabolic poison, and her funky suit would probably just filter it out before it could have the desired effect. She'd save the booze for when she was better.

She was full and finished before Zamin, but he paused at the last piece to offer it to her first before eating it. Score one for the gentlemen of the galaxy, she thought, smiling. She'd never have expected that, based on her first impression of him.

What *had* that impression been? she wondered. Hugeness, ethereal beauty, confusion, and then sudden, horrifying deadliness. Not that she could blame him, for the most part, although she wasn't sure why he'd killed Ford. The other woman had been genuinely harmless, usually quite nice, and absolutely terrified of him; he couldn't have perceived her as a threat, could he? There were so many questions she wanted to ask him. Some could be filtered through David, yes, but there were others that she didn't want to have to ask that way.

"Thank you," he said as he finished that last bite. If he was aware of her scrutiny, he didn't seem bothered by it. "Is there a place where I can clean my hands before I resume my work?"

She nodded, stifling the impulse to *tell* him where the bathroom was, because that would do no good. Nor would vague gestures, and there was the possibility that he wouldn't know how to work a faucet anyway. Best to just show him; she needed to wash her hands, too. She probably should have before the meal, she thought, but everything had been on the ends of toothpicks anyway.

She led him back through the bedroom and the closet to the side, and into the bathroom where he'd found her just a few hours earlier. Demonstrating the use of the sink and soap dispenser by washing her own hands, she found herself blushing again at the intensity of his gaze. The last time someone had spent so much time staring at her had been—

She really didn't want to think about that right now. The associations were going to lead her back to raw pain. The way Zamin looked at her felt *good* in a strange way, but thinking about why would cause far too many problems.

She dried her hands while he washed his, and took a good look around the bathroom. The shower stall was larger than she expected and designed somewhat oddly. She couldn't figure out why until it suddenly occurred to her that it was meant to accommodate someone in a wheelchair, and possibly an attendant as well. Of course. *Everything* in this lifeboat had been calibrated for Peter Weyland, even if Vickers had used it too. The thought of a shower filled her with longing. She'd have to take one later, she decided. The suit was probably taking care of most of her hygiene needs, but her hair was dusty and sweaty and in another day, she knew her scalp would start to itch. Leaning into the stall, she picked up several plastic bottles that had fallen down and clustered around the drain. Shampoo and conditioner were among them. One bottle could go, she decided. She certainly didn't need it and she doubted that Zamin had any follicles for it to restore. How like Weyland to still be vain about the little bit of hair he'd had left. She tossed it into the wastebasket and set the other bottles back on the shelves.

Zamin was, once more, watching her with that searchlight gaze that she didn't want to analyze. When he opened his mouth, she thought he was going to tell her that they needed to go back into the other rooms and continue repairing David, but instead he yawned, looking surprised and a little embarrassed.

"I think it's my turn to need to sleep," he told her, and his voice sounded embarrassed, too. "Will you be all right alone with him for a little while?"

She nodded and gave him an encouraging smile. She actually had some pre-mission training on repairing Weyland androids, mandatory for all crew members, and could continue undoing the damage while Zamin slept. It would also give her a chance to talk to David and set a few ground rules of her own, although she was pleasantly surprised by how just and thorough Zamin had been in that regard. Part of her hadn't expected him to understand why she had felt violated at all, and instead he'd taken it very seriously.

"Thank you, Zamin," she said, wishing he knew what she meant.

He startled her by smiling. "You're welcome," he said, in *English!* And then followed it up with a worried "Did I say that right?" in his own language.

She nodded, grinning. He must have decided to start learning some of the basic niceties from David while working on the repairs, although he'd seemingly forgotten while eating and just thanked her in his own language. Still, it was the most charming gesture someone had given her in a while, ever since—

She really couldn't think about that right now. Her memories were *full* of landmines.

As she walked back into the main area, she could hear the bed creaking under Zamin's weight and found herself wondering if he'd find it comfortable at all.

"I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever return," David said, his voice ...disapproving?

"Don't be silly, David. It's something you lack the skill for." There had been a time when she'd never have dreamed of saying anything like that to him, a time when she'd considered him charming and lovely and hadn't even thought about his inhumanity because it had seemed so inconsequential. As she sat down next to him and picked up a flashlight, she wondered if she'd ever feel that way about him again.

"Where is Zamin?" he asked. His expression remained reproving.

"He needs some sleep. I doubt he'll need much, though. These suits of his people seem to really help you recharge."

"Me?"

"Sorry. A figure of speech. How much power do *you* have left, David?"

"Zamin has already reconnected my power circuitry. I can remain functional for several decades. But I still don't have sensation or mobility restored yet." Again, there was a hint of scolding. Did David really think he should be fixed so quickly?

"All right, then. What was Zamin having trouble connecting?" she asked him, picking up the tool that the Engineer had set down on the couch.

"The sensory connection for the left side of my body. You need to reconnect cable 924 – the one with the blue stripe – to the port below my left collar bone. I think it actually unplugged when he pulled my head free, so the cable itself shouldn't need repair. His hands were just too large to plug it back in."

"I see it," Shaw told him. It would take a little careful maneuvering for her, too, but she could get it back in place.

"Elizabeth?" David asked her after a moment.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think it's wise to trust him, and give him unlimited run of the ship?"

"David, I trust him more than I trust you. So yeah, you *do* have to give him complete security clearance."

"I know why his ship was going to Earth. I know what he was going to do."

Shaw lifted her head and frowned at him, trying to decide what his game was now. "Then tell me."

"There were Engineers on Earth two thousand years ago, serving as ambassadors to different civilizations on various continents. One group was interacting with the Roman Empire, but for some reason that I don't understand, they were based near Naples instead of in Rome itself. The Emperor, Nero, ordered their deaths, but again, I don't understand why. Zamin wouldn't say, not in any detail, anyway. But in the wake of this, all of the ambassadors left Earth, permanently, and Zamin's base received orders to destroy all life on the Italian peninsula."

"Wipe out an entire civilization as payback for one embassy? That seems a little disproportionate, doesn't it?" There! Finally, she had that connection in place. She began searching through the wires on the other side of David's neck for its mate.

"It does, and I think there's more to it than he's saying. He *did* say that it was 'a crime that has no other punishment than absolute eradication' and something to do with practices that 'couldn't be allowed to continue.' I don't understand what that meant, but there's more. His ship was chosen to have the 'honor' of destroying the peninsula because his brother was the head diplomat at the embassy."

Shaw mulled on that for a moment while she worked on the new wire. It hadn't come loose cleanly, and she was going to have to fix it before she could reattach it. "You know, David, if you're trying to make me feel distrustful of him, it's not working. What you've just told me *explains* why he was so hostile towards us back in his ship."

"How do we know that he's not helping us just so he can try again using *this* ship?"

"How do *I* know that, if I give you back your mobility, you won't slip poison into my drink?" She lifted her head from her work and raised her eyebrows at him. "Anyway, he knows two thousand years have passed, doesn't he? That empire's gone, and good riddance to it. Tell me if this works." She reconnected the second cable.

"It does, thank you. You're very good at this. And your points are taken, but..." He trailed off.

"Oh go on and just say whatever you're going to say, David. These affectations of yours are really starting to grate on me." Theatrically-inclined freshmen had been bad enough. Did she have to deal with dramatics from a robot who didn't even have the excuse of not knowing how to study?

"Sorry. I believe he has an ulterior motive where *you're* concerned, too."

"Really? It seems to me that'd make him just like everybody else on this mission, wouldn't it?" There was the wire she wanted next! "So, what's *his* hidden agenda?"

"When he was trying to treat your injuries, I heard him say something very odd, about how he'd imagined exploring your body in a different way. And I've seen the way he looks at you. I believe he has less than honorable intentions toward you."

She sat back, staring at him. "Seriously, David? That's your big threat to my well-being, that you think he maybe wants to have sex with me? You really need to stop talking now."

"But—"

"One more word and you can wait until Zamin wakes up for your repairs to resume."

David subsided, and Shaw continued working in silence. But he'd already gotten what he wanted. Her mind was rioting with the suspicions he'd obviously intended to plant.

It explained everything. The intense looks that Zamin kept giving her, and the way she was reacting to them, now had a context she understood. Charlie had looked at her that way, during the earliest and best days of their relationship before things had become ...complicated. He'd still looked at her that way from time to time in recent years, and she'd lived for those moments. Zamin's gaze made her feel the way she had during her first year at Cambridge, when she'd been a shy and gawky new student with a passion for other cultures and ancient history, who had somehow caught the eye of the Anthropology 101 TA who *all* the girls crushed on.

How did *she* feel about that?

Maybe she should be bothered by it, in light of the fact that he'd had such... unrestricted access to her... while she was unconscious. But his behavior toward her since then, in spite of those powerful stares he sometimes gave her, had been perfectly *gentlemanly* and far kinder than anything David had done. He seemed astonishingly adept at gauging how she felt, but hadn't once tried to manipulate her emotions. In fact, he'd surprised her by siding with her against David on the issue of her dreams, and treating it as a crime. Charlie, she knew, wouldn't have understood what the big deal was.

She *trusted* Zamin. It was that simple.

Okay, that's all very well and good, she told herself, but do I want him?

The blush that had crept over her face more than a few times started heating up her skin again, and she knew she had her answer. It surprised her, and she wondered how it could be so easy. Yes, marriage to Charlie had been rocky for the last few years. There had been disappointments, arguments, and a few nights when she'd lain awake wondering if there was any honorable way out for her, if breaking her vow of '*til death do we part* and filing for divorce was a bigger sin than staying in a lonely, loveless marriage only because her career would be over if she left it. But then there had been times when Charlie would become attentive again, and kind, and much like the man she'd once fallen in love with, and she'd berate herself for her disloyalty and wonder what she needed to change about *herself* to make him like that more of the time. She'd begun to sense that her faith was an affront to him, something he'd expected her to get over long ago and which she hadn't, and she'd wondered how he could love her at all while trying to eradicate such a fundamental part of her. This mission had been their attempt at reconciliation, but they'd spent as much of it fighting as collaborating. And

then he'd died. Was it really so easy to feel the pull to someone else, someone new, when his ashes had barely cooled?

Maybe it was. Or maybe the bio suit was just keeping her from feeling the full weight of her grief. Or maybe...

She didn't know. She hoped that, if David was right about what Zamin wanted from her, the Engineer would be patient while she figured all of this out.

Yeah, she suddenly thought. But are *you* going to be patient?

"David? I know I still have a few connections left to make, but I'm feeling really tired again. I think this suit tries to make me go to sleep when it's about to do some major repair work on me. So I need to go lie down. All right?" Oh, you little liar, she thought. She hoped he couldn't hear it in her voice.

"Yes, of course, Elizabeth. I am sorry that I was out of line earlier."

"That's all right." It wasn't, not really, but that was the polite thing to say, and any other response would probably just lead to another argument. "One of us will be back soon."

"Sleep well, Elizabeth," he said as she got up. It was tempting to tell him to never call her that again, to call her Dr. Shaw instead, but she didn't want to upset the delicate diplomatic work Zamin had done earlier. And it wasn't like he had a last name that she could call *him* by.

"Thank you, David." She turned and walked back toward the bedroom, pretending to yawn as she went, and closed the door behind her once she was in the room.

Zamin was still fast asleep, lying diagonally on the bed. Peter Weyland really should have sprung for a king-sized bed in the suite, she thought, although maybe that would have been too big for him to handle. Instead, the Engineer was too much for the *bed* to handle, even in a diagonal position. His head rested on the upper right corner, but his feet would have hung over if he hadn't bent his legs and tucked them up. When she'd slept in it earlier, herself, it had felt huge and luxurious; now it seemed miniscule and inadequate.

How would it even *work* for us? she wondered as she walked closer.

Her rough estimate put him at seven and a half feet tall, fully half again as tall as she was, but there were athletes back on Earth who were even taller. Still, she would probably have to be on top or risk being smothered. Her blush flared to life again as she realized just what she was contemplating.

Part of her wanted to wake him up and ask him about his feelings and intentions, but of course, she couldn't. He still only understood a few words of her language, and it was touching how important it was to him to learn it, but there wasn't any *verbal* way she could ask him without David's help. And anything nonverbal might be misconstrued. She would just have to wait until later and figure out some way to talk to him about it without David's interference.

In the meantime, she had painted herself into a corner. She'd told David that she was coming in here to sleep, but she wasn't actually tired. She was tempted to jump into the shower and wash her hair, but she wasn't sure how the suit she was wearing would react to that. It would probably be safe, but she didn't want to wake Zamin up with a commotion – much less give David more to speculate about – if in some way it turned out not to be. So that would have to wait.

Maybe she could try to sleep.

With Zamin sprawled on the bed the way he was, it wasn't going to be easy to find a comfortable position on there herself; he was taking up all of the best real estate. Then again, sleeping diagonally wouldn't be such a problem for her, would it? The bed was more than large enough. She could sleep behind him—

And risk him rolling over on her? That might not be such a good idea. He'd undoubtedly be contrite but it might not stop her from being concussed.

In front it is, she told herself, and climbed onto the bed.

Settling into a comfortable position in front of him was tricky; he was taking up a *lot* of space. Finally she scooted back against him, positioning herself as if sitting in a really large chair that just happened to be on its side. It sort of worked, but left her wondering once more at logistical issues of size and position that got her blushing all over again. She expected his suit to feel strange against her, but it felt smooth and alive, and after a moment it almost seemed as if their suits had adjusted to each other for maximum comfort. Did other Engineers ever spoon in these things? Even as she finished adjusting her position, she felt herself growing sleepy for *real*.

Good timing, she thought, and closed her eyes. When the suit wanted her to sleep, it made it happen fast. The last thing she was aware of as she fell asleep was a large arm wrapping around her and drawing her back

against Zamin's warm chest. Her last thought was to wonder if it felt to *him* as if his hand was cupping her breast, because it sure felt that way to *her*.

Notes: ...Somebody stop me!

Chapter 7

Waking up with Elilu in his arms was the last thing Zamin had expected, although he probably should have. He knew how biosupport suits worked, and how they dealt with injuries. Once they could tell that their occupant was safe, they would initiate a sleep cycle for the biggest repairs. He was both pleased and a little astonished that she counted *him* as a safe place. But then, what were her other options?

He lay still, determined to enjoy this contact for as long as it lasted. Although this was hardly the first time he'd held her, his awareness of just how small she was startled him anew. Everything about her was small, albeit perfectly proportioned. His fantasies about exploring her, learning every inch of her body, were igniting again. He couldn't act on those fantasies, though. Not for a while, possibly not ever. In truth, he shouldn't be entertaining the fantasies at all. But humans had always possessed an almost irresistible allure for his people, one he'd dismissed as a sign of weakness of character until now.

Surely it wasn't *only* that, though! The idea that what he felt for her was *just* chemical attraction was distressing. There had to be more than that. Would he really have given Azalla to someone he merely lusted after?

She's a warrior, he reminded himself. She'd asked him to help her destroy a monster. She'd stood before him, wounded more severely than he'd realized at the time, and outlined a strategy for its destruction instead of simply asking him to handle it. She'd even chosen the weapons they'd used, and taught him how to use them. His feelings were *not* just a chemical reaction. This woman was cast in the mold of Inanna herself. How could he not love that?

Did you just say *love*? he demanded of himself, so startled that his breath caught. You're an idiot. The two of you only just met. If you start up love talk this soon, she'll run and hide from you and she'll be *right* to. Do you think you're still fifteen?

Elilu sighed in his embrace and turned onto her back, her head still pillowed on his arm. Her face was peaceful, no longer contorted with the fear, grief, and anger that had dominated it in turns while she was awake. The suit would keep her sleep mostly dreamless, taking her mind instead into deep, quiet spaces where nothing could intrude on her healing... well, as much as she'd let it, he amended. He remembered his dreams from stasis, at least this last time. He'd never suffered through that before, and wondered if it was because of his own intense grief. But if his had forced its way back into his mind, hers might, too.

He'd been avoiding thinking about that, he realized. Staying focused on the here-and-now had kept him from addressing his own pain, not to mention the intense disorientation of discovering how much time had passed. Even before he'd gone into stasis he'd been avoiding it, getting passed-out drunk with Nargal and the others the night before their mission was to launch. Worst of all, he hadn't even tried to contact his mother, afraid that her devastation over Šukarak's death would be as agonizing to watch as the last time, when the news of his father's death had come. He wondered what she'd been told about *his* fate, and felt his guts twist in response to the thought.

She was two thousand years gone. The yawning chasm of time between them was incomprehensible.

You're not the first it's happened to, he reminded himself. Just the year before, news had come of the recovery of one of the Lost Ships, which had drifted unnoticed for millennia through the core systems until a survey vessel had spotted it. Its crew would have immediately been taken to the Anunnaki, so that they could wake up in a stable environment surrounded by faces they'd remember, to keep the initial disorientation at a minimum. He'd been warned at the start of his military training that the same could potentially happen to him. He'd understood the risks... or, at least, he'd believed he had.

What was he now? In the two thousand years since he'd gone into stasis, what might have happened in the Myriad Worlds? The traffic between them and the intercession of the Anunnaki would undoubtedly have kept them stable, as it had for tens of thousands of years before, but there would still be subtle differences. His family's line had come to an end with his apparent death and his brother's very real murder; would anyone even remember that they'd existed? He suspected that Šukarak's name, at the very least, was still known, if the interdiction on Ersetu was still in place. Were his father's battles against the acid dragons still remembered? Did the descendants of the children he'd rescued from the fallen colony still wear his name with pride? He hoped that one of them, at least, had claimed his mother as kin and cared for her.

Two thousand years since she'd been told that both of her sons were lost. Two thousand years since she'd died, undoubtedly believing him dead as well.

"Yoo-luk-soh-saad," a soft voice next to him murmured, and he felt a small, warm hand on his cheek. Elilu.

Her eyes were open, those strange exotic eyes with so much white in them, such tiny pupils surrounded by strange brown irises. They were beautiful in their own way. Until now, he'd believed that he'd find such eyes repulsive, but instead they were captivating. The expression on her face was one of gentle concern.

"I'm sorry, Elilu." He told her, even as he couldn't resist covering her hand with his. Being touched by her seemed to be the antidote to all of his troubles, and he didn't want her to stop. "I don't understand what you just said. Are you well this morning?" He had no idea if it was morning.

"Elilu?"

Damn. He'd been calling her that without even thinking. "Elizabeth." Hopefully he hadn't just butchered *that* pronunciation. "I'm sorry. David had said that those close to you called you *Eli* and it made me think of a name in my language—"

She was smiling, bringing her other hand up to rest its fingertips on his lips, making them tingle. "Elilu-izz-gudd. Ayy-laike-ih." "

He still couldn't understand her, and cursed himself for not having spent more time learning words in her language. But he was almost certain that she'd just given him permission to keep using Elilu when he spoke to her. "I may call you Elilu?" At least she could answer a yes or no to that!

Her smile widened and she nodded. Her fingertips were still resting against his mouth, and he found himself staring at her mouth in turn. The deep pink shade of her lips was one that many women of the Myriad Worlds attempted to duplicate through cosmetics, but on her it was natural, genuine. He wondered what they would taste like.

His thought had barely finished when she brought her face up and pressed her lips to his.

If his mouth felt like it had caught on fire, it was only seconds before his whole body seemed to ignite. He pulled her closer to him, remembering to be careful of his strength when he heard her gasp. She didn't try to pull away, though, instead moving her hand to the back of his head. When he did the same, his fingers slipped into the startling silk of her hair. His desire intensified in response. She pressed her body against his, one of her legs hitching around his waist—

Panting, he forced himself to release her, pulling back against the draw of her hand. "We can't," he gasped, closing his eyes to block the look of pure desire on her face before it overwhelmed his reason. "We can't. You're in mourning." He felt like the galaxy's biggest asshole, both for intruding on her grief and then leaving her unfulfilled. And its biggest idiot, he thought a second later. The laugh that started in his chest was almost painful. "And anyway, the suits won't let us, not until we're healed."

She said something in reply, but there was no hurt or accusation in her voice. He opened his eyes, wondering what she was telling him. She repeated it, and pointed to his arm. He followed her finger with his eyes, and found himself staring at his wrist.

His suit had separated from his flesh. The edge of the sleeve was now obvious.

No, he thought. That's not possible. I can't have healed so quickly. A projectile to the chest takes *days* for a biosupport suit to heal!

But when he touched the entry wound, his fingers found nothing but smooth, undamaged suit beneath them.

Elilu rolled away from him as he sat up. He climbed out of the tiny bed and hurried into the little washroom. His reflection confirmed the impossible. The suit had finished its healing cycles, repairing itself at the end and then separating from his tissue.

What *was* that food she gave me? he asked himself, but knew he was being stupid. He knew exactly how this had happened, and although he didn't want to believe it, he knew exactly what it meant. But his reflection was shaking its head, as he tried to deny the possibility all over again.

Beside him, Elilu asked him another soft question. She looked worried, undoubtedly wondering if he'd gone mad. Her hand on his arm was hesitant. It felt like she was touching him through thick cloth, where just hours earlier it had felt as if she was touching his skin. The suit had definitely finished with his restoration.

Too early. *Far* too early.

“Elilu, I’m sorry. I have to return to my ship to find out something. I’ll be back as quickly as I can.” He felt, again, like a complete cad. She probably thought he was running from her kiss. But there was no hurt on her face, just confusion and worry. “I promise, I’ll be back soon.”

She followed him out to the airlock, calling out to David as they went.

“Elizabeth wants to know if you need help,” David told him as the inner doors cycled open.

He shook his head, resting his hand on her cheek for a moment. She was extraordinary, so sweet and selfless. “It might not be safe for you. And you still have healing to do. I swear I won’t be gone long.”

She was still watching him from the airlock window when the outer doors opened and he jumped down onto the rocky terrain. As he ran toward the ship, he had the odd sensation that she was still watching him, now from the outer window.

Seemingly for the first time, he was aware of just how foul the air was, as though it should barely have been breathable. Elilu needed a helmet to walk outside; he knew that. When the farms had surrounded the base, they’d needed domes over them as well, and those structures had fallen to such complete ruin that there was no sign of them at all. Wandering through this landscape ought to have been swiftly fatal, something he hadn’t even considered on his previous journeys. Was that another thing he’d wanted *not* to notice?

By the time he reached the warship, he knew that he should have been light-headed and sweating. He knew the symptoms of hypercapnia well from his emergency medical training, but he wasn’t experiencing any of them even though he should have been. There was a certain laughable irony in being upset that the air *wasn’t* poisoning him, but it was a source of growing fear rather than relief. Climbing inside, he hurried back to the control room. He needed to know exactly how long it had been since Nargal and the others had died, and why their stasis units had given out when his hadn’t.

He had mentally prepared him for the sight of his friend’s dead body, but he’d only seen it for a second the last time and had recoiled so quickly that he’d missed seeing the most important thing of all. Now, confronted by it again, he found himself staring in horror at the evidence he’d completely missed the first time. The stasis pod had failed because it had been breached, from the inside. Something had burst out of it, after first bursting through Nargal’s ribcage.

No, he thought, shuddering convulsively. Not here. Not *here!* But the other two stasis chambers had been defiled in the same way. He’d been so focused on other things that he hadn’t seen the most fundamental, and crucial, things of all. For the moment, the fear that had brought him back here was forgotten in favor of something far worse.

Acid dragons had invaded the base, and infiltrated his ship!

The control panel was, thankfully, still functional in the wake of the crash. He called up its last recordings, and the dates. The last recorded transmission had been sent out 2,029 years earlier. He called it up, startled to see the face of one of the base doxies, a woman Nargal had been particularly fond of. Tears were running down her face.

“By the authority of the emergency, as the highest-ranking officer left on Ereshkigal Šagtum, I declare this world permanently interdicted, quarantine class one. Do not come here. There is nothing to salvage and no one to save. We are all dead. The acid dragons have killed us all.” Her face twisted as though in pain, and she clutched at her chest in a gesture Zamin recognized from other recordings he had seen. She was only minutes from death, if that. “Tell Enki I’m sorry! I failed him! I’m so sorry!”

Zamin switched off the recording as she began to convulse and scream, shaken. He’d seen enough images of those killed by acid dragons already, and the last thing he wanted to do right now was watch Muru die like that. The discovery that the most popular prostitute on the base had been one of Enki’s intelligence officers was completely dwarfed by the disaster that had revealed it.

That had been the last message sent out from the base. He called up others, trying to work out the exact sequence of events and how they had begun. One day earlier, someone had ordered that the first of the four towers of Ereshkigal be sealed as a containment measure. The day before that, the launch of his ship had been aborted “pending the lift of quarantine.” The day before was when he’d entered stasis... mere hours after a ship had landed, he recalled, requesting assistance with a “medical emergency.”

Oh, you idiots, he thought, scrubbing his face with his hand. Of all the places to land with acid dragons, you came here...

But how had Nargal and the others gotten infected? He’d been with them that whole day, the four of them loading up their payload and preparing for launch. Their pilot hadn’t come on duty yet, but none of the others

had wanted to leave him alone even for a moment. They'd known how rocky his state of mind was—

Funny. According to the time log, the ship with the medical emergency had landed more than a day before he entered stasis. But that wasn't how he remembered it... was it?

We got falling-down drunk, he suddenly remembered. We weren't planning to but one drink led to another and...

Had it happened that way?

He called up the security recordings and watched them on high speed as they carefully loaded warheads and prepared the ship for launch. He watched himself, in miniature, step out of the loading bay to pound on the walls of the hallway. Nargal and the others appeared a moment later, clapping him on the back and then leading him into the mess hall to drink a toast to his brother and swap stories in his honor. The bottle Nargal brought out was small, not enough to do more than fill them with some warmth and ease the pain that was throttling him.

How did we get drunk enough to pass out, then? he wondered, just as his answer appeared and his blood froze in his veins.

They looked like huge scorpions, but he knew better the moment he saw them. First-stage acid dragons, newly hatched, in search of hosts... and they'd gotten onto his ship! As they crept closer to the table where he and his friends sat, loudly singing one of the bawdy Latin songs his brother had taught him, he found himself leaning forward in his seat, restraining the urge to shout at the group to look around, to pay attention, to watch out before it was too late. But it was already two thousand years too late. His heart began to pound as the creatures struck and the four little figures in the hologram struggled to fight them off before collapsing to the ground.

Myself included, he thought in horror. Why don't I remember?

Three other scorpion-like creatures moved off, deprived of prey of their own, in search of victims elsewhere. Zamin fast-forwarded through the recording until the ones attached to his friends, and to him, roused themselves, detached, and trundled slowly off to find a dark corner to die in. Hours after that, he and his friends woke up and began teasing each other about not being able to hold their liquor before Nargal declared that it was time for them to finish up and get into stasis.

We were already infected, Zamin thought, nausea filling his belly and chest. We were already dying, and we didn't even know it...

But he *hadn't* died, had he?

Stasis had slowed down the final stage of the parasites' development, but not by very much. The larval acid dragons had burst out of three of the pods only a few hours after the launch had been canceled and the ship had powered down. No one had come to check on the flatlining pods, either out of wisdom or because things had already spiraled out of control on the base itself. But the fourth pod, *his* pod, suffered no malfunctions.

But I was infected, he silently protested. The means by which he had escaped the infection were too terrifying to contemplate, even now. But he suddenly remembered coughing, feeling as if something was caught in his throat and needing to cough it loose, when he had first awakened. His feet dragged as he walked over to his stasis pod.

There, on the ground, he found it. It was tiny, the size of a cricket, and nothing more than translucent yellow bones in a miniscule sac, but it was an acid dragon in the earliest points of second-stage development. It had died in his windpipe and he'd coughed it out. Why had it died?

You know why, he told himself, and shuddered. He didn't want to believe, but this new proof was overwhelming.

It had been his greatest fear ever since the crash that had taken his leg, even though the medical technicians had assured him that the Azalla had been fully spent regenerating it. It was why he'd protested when he had to take it again after a warhead broke open, trying to get the techs to let him wait until he was symptomatic before taking it, but he'd been overruled and ordered to drink it immediately. Azalla was often called the "cursed blessing," because there was always the danger that it could have this effect, that it might lock its user's DNA not merely against the depredations of Zal but against the natural effects of time and entropy itself. If it didn't have enough damage to repair, this was what it might do instead.

It could make its patient immortal. It *had* made *him* immortal.

This man is here because he doesn't want to die. He believes you can give him more life.

Zamin began to laugh. The old man's body had shifted during the crash and lay on the floor below the dais like a discarded doll, right in his field of vision. "You doddering old fool!" he yelled at it. "Is this what you wanted? *Is this what you fucking wanted?*" The laughter dissolved into sobs as he fell to his knees.

He was no longer one of the Igigi, no longer one of the honored servants of the Anunnaki. He had *become* Anunnaki. He was one of the damned.

"Almost all of them go insane," Nargal had told him as he prepared to be presented to them for the first time. "Irkalla is full of the ones who have gone mad. The passage of time gets to be too much for them. Sometimes it takes thousands of years, but other times it only takes a few centuries. It's amazing that any of them are still sane at all. Of course, everybody's questioned Enki's sanity for millennia, but that's just Enki for you..."

He could remember their faces, bright and beautiful and wise, aloof and removed, with sadness and regret in almost all of their eyes. Of all of them, only Enki seemed to live without regret, without looking back, without caring that his past stretched back in time some sixty thousand years or more, focused instead on the current moment and bright future vistas. Even Inanna, even when she laughed, still had ancient sorrow in her eyes. He'd left their audience chamber adoring all of them, devoted to their cause of maintaining order throughout the Myriad Worlds, but not envying any of them in the least. Death was the door into Paradise, after all, and nothing to fear even if most did so anyway. But it was a door that was closed against the Anunnaki forever, and now it had closed against him, too. He would never see his family and friends again in a better world; this was the only world he would ever have.

He was so wrapped up in the agony of his discovery that he almost didn't hear the hushed, slithering sound.

Zamin froze, not even breathing as he listened for the noise again. Something was alive, and inside the ship with him.

Three of the scorpion-like creatures had left the mess hall without finding a victim, he suddenly remembered. Could they still be alive now? Two thousand years later?

He remembered the recordings of the mammoth Ganapati ship, infested with eggs that still opened when the survey team got too near. The huge Ganapati pilot had fossilized into his chair, having died some tens of thousands of years earlier, and yet the eggs were still viable, the creatures inside them still dangerous. It had been fifty thousand years since anyone in the Myriad Worlds had seen living Ganapati, but their technology remained priceless, the foundation of all of the worlds' space travel down to the shapes of their ships and the pressure suits the Igigi wore—

The noise came again, tiny and scuttling.

He needed to assume that those three abominations were still alive and on board. And, seemingly, had found him because of his histrionics. He needed to kill them.

With *what?* he demanded of himself. Your bare hands? Harsh language?

He had no weapons with him. Silently, he cursed himself for not bringing that remarkable flame-thrower Elilu had given him.

He suddenly remembered the soldier's projectile weapon. It was somewhere in this room. Where had it fallen?

Quietly, carefully, he rose to his feet and looked around. It wasn't on the dais, but he was almost certain that it had been after he'd tossed it aside. Maybe it had slid during the crash. The room was tilted now, after all. He cautiously moved toward the downward slope.

You're an idiot, he told himself as he neared the edge. Even if you find it, you're not going to know how to use it.

The bodies of the soldier and the older woman came into view, and Zamin had to suppress a groan of horror. They weren't dead! Their injuries had been severe, but hadn't been instantly fatal. He could see the faltering rise and fall of both of their chests. But it was too late for them now. Two of the stage-one acid dragons had found them and had already wrapped around their faces. He mentally berated himself for not checking on them the last time he'd come back to the ship, although it was possible that the creatures were already attached to them even then. How *oblivious* he'd been to his surroundings!

That was two located, though. The third could still be anywhere, and was probably hunting him right now. He needed that weapon.

There... was that it? Something long and cylindrical lay in the shadows by the arched doorway. He jumped down from the dais and hurried toward it, grabbing it and trying to remember how he'd seen the soldier arm it when the man had pointed it at Elilu. Recalling the gesture, he duplicated it and was pleased to hear the weapon powering up. The man had fired once and had been preparing to fire again, but Zamin had no idea how many additional rounds of ammunition it might have. The trigger mechanism looked easy enough —

There. Movement. In the corner of his eye...

He caught a quick glimpse of it sitting on top of one of the ruined stasis pods before it launched itself at him and the gun roared in reflex. The creature exploded in midair, flying backward and away from him. The dais and floor began smoking where its blood splashed, while Zamin stood still, gasping, his heart pounding. If it had caught him, it couldn't have harmed him, but he might not have awakened until after the other embryos had finished growing and burst free. And if Elilu had come looking for him...

He re-armed the weapon, moving first to the soldier. He used two rounds on the man, one to destroy the creature wrapped around his head and the other to destroy the embryo that might already be implanted inside him. Shooting the woman was much harder. Doing it made him feel ill, even though he knew there was no way to save her.

That takes care of those, he thought as he hurried away from the bodies. But what about the three dragons that hatched out of my brothers-in-arms?

He wasn't sure whether they'd left the ship and attacked the people in the base, or whether they might still be on board. Even one was a horrible risk; two or more could mean an egg field somewhere on the ship, or even a small colony. If any of them were still alive —

He didn't even ask himself what he was doing until he'd reached the sickbay and begun opening cabinets.

You can't do this, part of him said as he drew out the other four bowls of Azalla from their cabinet.

I have to, he answered himself, stacking them carefully and putting them inside a portable med kit.

It's sadistic, his conscience twinged at him. She'll hate you forever if you do it. Literally.

"She could die if I don't," he muttered as he shouldered the case.

Everything dies except the damned, his conscience struck back. But he knew that it had already lost. *He* couldn't die, and he didn't want to face this strange new world alone. Especially if the acid dragons were anywhere nearby.

He gathered weapons and supplies, including some real clothes to change into, as quickly as he could, listening intently for any stray sound as he did, but the huge ship was tomb-silent. Fully laden with supplies, he finished up by lugging out one of the portable communication units. He needed to find out more about what had happened on the base. He needed to see if any of the ships were uncontaminated and could be used to escape. Somehow, above all, he needed to find a way to get Elilu safely off of this world as soon as possible.

As he lowered the supplies to the ground below the entry arches and prepared to follow them down, he heard a distant, hissing sigh.

Zamin prayed to Inanna that it was just the wind.

Notes: Okay! Well, that took a bit of a turn for the worse, didn't it? This is my way of reconciling the differences between *Alien* canon and *Prometheus* canon, particularly the way the massive Space Jockey from *Alien* somehow shrank down to the size of a hunky basketball player. While it doesn't quite explain Shaw's "baby" yet, don't worry, that explanation is coming soon; some of you may have already spotted the seeding I've been doing for it.

So there's a little fun with Mesopotamian vocabulary in this section, but not all that many words.

- **Šagtum** means "pasture-land" in Old Babylonian, so I'm using that with **Ereshkigal** to mean "the fields of Ereshkigal" (but *not* the land of the dead itself, although it's kind of become that at this point, hasn't it? Y helo thar Irony!) and the name Engineers have for LV-223.
- **Muru** means "mist" or "rainstorm" in Old Babylonian, which felt like a great name for an intelligence operative masquerading as a camp follower/prostitute. It's kind of a shame that this tiny cameo is it for

her.

- **Enki** is one of the main gods in the Mesopotamian pantheons, also known as Ea, the god of the sea and a trickster god who likes to mess with everybody's heads; he's *also* the god responsible for saving humanity from the Great Flood, in the Mesopotamian versions of the flood myths. (And it's pretty awesome how he does that because, having been forbidden by Ellil to warn humanity of the impending disaster, he sat outside of the Noah-character's house, right under his window, and babbled to the wall, giving "it" all of the instructions he couldn't give the man directly. Comedy GOLD.)
- **Ganapati** is *not* a Mesopotamian anything. I decided that since the original space jockeys, and the crazysauce suits modeled after them, kinda looked elephantine, I'd connect it to a genuinely alien species that maaaaaaybe made First Contact with the Anunnaki tens of thousands of years ago, and maaaaaaybe were the origins of a very popular Hindu god, Ganesh, whose Sanskrit name is Ganapati. Why yes, I *am* plundering all kinds of wacky religious things, why do you ask? :)

Oh, and the thing with the "Myriad Worlds?" In classical Greek, myriad = 10,000. Zamin wasn't kidding when he said that there were a lot of planets out there! And "hypercapnia" is carbon dioxide poisoning.

Thank you to everybody who has been reading and leaving such lovely feedback! I haven't had time to respond individually, but rest assured I've been treasuring every comment. :D And don't worry, Zamin and Shaw are going to get further than just a kiss... we just have to give them a little time. ;)

Chapter 8

“David, do you know what ‘Elilu’ means?”

Zamin had already disappeared into his huge, ruined warship when Shaw finally made herself turn away from the airlock window and go back inside. She closed the inner door behind her and cycled the outer door open for him, and then walked over to the couch where David lay exuding an air of martyred patience. As annoying as his affectations were to her, she had to admit he had a point; if he’d been a human in an equivalent condition of disability, her behavior *would* be negligent.

“I don’t have a precise translation,” he told her as she started working on his circuitry again. “The most likely lexicons point to either ‘shining,’ or ‘songbird,’ but neither one comes from the language I’ve been using with Zamin. I have a feeling that I may have chosen a language that *isn’t* his native tongue.”

“Really? Why is that?” She paired up two more wires, grimacing at how the inner bundle of tiny wires had snapped in such a way that it was impossible to identify which ones went with which. “David, when I connect this, you may have to do some internal adjustments.”

“Understood. One reason I think this is that he also appears to know first-century Latin. In his ship, I spoke first, if you’ll recall. He may have simply answered me in the same language for the sake of convenience.” David looked *vexed* by that. “There are words he’s used that seem to come from other ancient languages, as if he substitutes them in when he either doesn’t have, or doesn’t know, an appropriate equivalent in ancient Sanskrit. I had tried to listen to an old recording of him and his shipmates, but it was difficult to follow. I’d picked out enough Sanskrit words in it that I thought it was what I needed to use.”

“Is that what he’s been speaking? It all gets jumbled for me. Charlie kept trying to teach me all these different languages at once, since his hypothesis... well, you know what it was.”

“Yes. He thought that a single language was at the root of all of them. And perhaps he was right, but it appears that your Engineers had more ancient, and more modern, languages at their disposal. He often substitutes in words from different parts of Mesopotamia. The so-called cradle—”

“Cradle of civilization, yes. Maybe we should ask Zamin about Charlie’s hypothesis when he gets back.” She wiggled another connection back into place.

“That’s very good, Elizabeth. Thank you. I can move now.” David sat up slowly, lifting his hands to steady his head, which was in danger of lolling to the side. He reminded Shaw, in that moment, of another character from the books he’d taunted her with, a half-decapitated ghost who could also be overly pompous. “If you’d like, I can take over the repairs. I just need a mirror to see what I’m doing.”

“The only one I know of is in the bathroom. Do you need help walking there?” Somehow, it had been less creepy when the head hadn’t been connected.

“No, thank you. But if you could bring the tools in there for me, I would greatly appreciate it.”

Shaw gathered up the tools and put them back in their box, and then followed David as he walked carefully through the halls, past the still-rumpled bed where she’d kissed Zamin, and into the bathroom beyond.

“May I have the forceps, please?” David asked her as he arranged himself in front of the mirror. She handed them over, feeling almost as if she was back on an excavation and it was her turn to hold the tools. “Thank you. As to Dr. Holloway’s hypothesis, I suspect Zamin might have a disappointing answer for you, as he did before.”

“I can accept that. It’s the mark of a good scientist to be ready to discard a hypothesis if evidence disproves it, isn’t it?” She had to admit that Zamin’s shocked denial of engineering humanity had stung, though. She’d wholeheartedly believed that the evidence of interaction, stretching back tens of thousands of years, had proved the existence of a guiding hand behind humanity’s development. His refutation had left her lost and disoriented, and wondering just what the Engineers had actually been if not the ancient Titans of myth.

“Can you really?” David asked as he made an adjustment to some of his wiring. It was almost nauseating to watch him work, as if she was witnessing surgery. She kept her eyes mostly averted and tried to pretend he was shaving. “I’m sorry. Perhaps I have misunderstood your reputation for... zealotry.”

"I know what people think of me, David." She said, sitting down on the toilet lid. "'The kook whose doctoral dissertation reads like science fiction,' right? Never mind that Aratta was *right* where I said it would be—"

"But we *must* mind that. If it hadn't been there, you wouldn't have gotten your PhD." For a moment, there was no condescension in David's voice, and he sounded almost admiring. "The size triple-ought screwdriver, please. Thank you. That accomplishment rivaled Heinrich Schliemann—"

"Which *isn't* really flattering, given just what a mess he made of the Troy excavations," Shaw grumped. People always seemed to bring him up when they talked about her achievement, and it was as backhanded a compliment as they could give her.

"Still, he found a city that had been dismissed as pure mythology, just as you did. Were you aware that Mr. Weyland funded Dr. Holloway's expedition there?"

Shaw stared at him, shocked, and shook her head. She couldn't seem to find any words. It had been mid-December, as she recalled. The Doctoral committee had informed her that they still wouldn't sign off on her dissertation and that she would need to sign up for at least another semester of revisions. Charlie, meanwhile, had vanished weeks earlier, leaving her in charge of his classes at the end of the semester. She'd been lying on the couch of their apartment, feeling ill-used by the world and watching some godawful weepfest on the holo, when the door had burst open and Charlie had swept into the room with his bags. *Merry Christmas!* he'd shouted, and she'd scrambled up off of the floor. *Just you wait until you see what Santa's bringing you this year!* When he'd showed her the pictures from the dig site, the recovered treasures, and the tablets and seals conclusively identifying the ancient city, she'd burst into tears. It had been one of the brightest moments in their marriage.

"I... I didn't know that Charlie knew him that far back," she finally managed.

"Oh yes. I don't suppose he ever told you that he and Miss Vickers were classmates at Harvard?"

"*What?*" The two of them certainly hadn't seemed as if they were old school friends!

"Oh yes. There was a time when Mr. Weyland had hoped that Dr. Holloway would be his son-in-law one day. But it was not to be. Any hope of that fell through when young Meredith decided to leave the anthropology department to pursue an MBA, and he transferred to Cambridge to avoid seeing her. Mr. Weyland tried to lure him back on more than one occasion, never successfully of course. But he was happy to fund expeditions when ordinary grant sources wouldn't."

"I always wondered where that money came from..." Shaw stammered, feeling oddly numb. There was a whole side of Charlie that she'd never known about, a whole life she'd been unaware of, that she was only now discovering after his death. He'd never wanted to talk about his years at Harvard, but she'd just assumed that it was for similar reasons as hers for never speaking about her time in Nigeria. She should have recognized the danger in that, since her past had remained a living thing that followed her around, in spite of her best efforts to lay it to rest. Had the same been true for him?

Had Meredith Vickers really immolated her former *lover*? Shaw felt nauseated.

"Should we perhaps change the subject, Elizabeth? You look very pale."

"Yeah," she managed, her voice shaky. "Let's talk about something else."

"'And now for something completely different,' then," he told her in a gentle voice, startling a laugh out of her. "Once I've completed my repairs on myself, I thought I might set the lifeboat to rights, as much as I am able to. Most of the damage appears to be minor and cosmetic. Is that agreeable?"

She nodded. "That's a good idea, David, yeah. We... we probably need to do a complete inventory of what we have, too, and how long it will last the three of us."

"The lifeboat's supplies are intended to keep two humans alive outside of cryo-stasis for two years, with the additional capacity for a cryo-stasis period of up to sixty years. Originally, it would have been for Mr. Weyland and Miss Vickers, of course. My needs are naturally minimal, but I suspect that Zamin will require a resource recalculation, given his size. And he won't fit into either of the stasis chambers."

"That's assuming that we can even get the lifeboat off the ground and make escape velocity," Shaw pointed out, trying not to start chewing on one of her nails.

"It is, yes. There's the possibility that we could take one of the... I don't quite know what to call them now, if they're not 'Engineers'... one of their ships. There are others, you know. The hangar we entered was numbered 'four.'" David set aside his tools and gently pressed the pseudo-flesh of his neck down onto his shoulders. He rolled his head the way *she* often did, when she needed to stretch out a knot in the morning.

“There, I think that does it. I will need to run a full diagnostic on myself later, to make sure everything is working, but I appear to be functioning at nominal levels, if not yet at optimal ones. Thank you for your help, Elizabeth.”

Her mind suddenly spinning in place from David’s latest revelation, Shaw nodded. “You’re welcome.”

Without another word, David left the bathroom. She could hear him moving around in the next room, and then even those noises receded.

Three other ships... no. Three other *hangars*. Shaw reminded herself that they could easily be empty. Zamin and his crewmates might well have been left behind on this world when others evacuated, and his ship might have been the only one left. She found herself wondering all over again just what he had gone back to check. He’d seemed strangely alarmed to realize that he was finished healing.

Unless he’d actually left to get away from *her*.

She hadn’t intended to pounce him like that, or at least, she hadn’t *planned* to. But he’d looked so unhappy when she’d woken up, his expression distant and bleak and his strange-but-familiar eyes glittering suspiciously as through brimming with unshed tears. The way he’d immediately discarded that look of despair when she spoke to him had been touching, as had his explanation for the name he’d been using for her. And when he’d followed that with a look of intense longing—

She hadn’t been able to stop herself. Sighing and rising from her seat, she made herself admit that she was grateful to him for being strong enough to stop her, to stop both of them. If he hadn’t, and if their suits hadn’t been in the way, she might have done something she’d have ended up regretting. Charlie had only died yesterday—

Was it yesterday? How long had it been since the crash, since her surgery, since the fiery confrontation at the bay doors? Time had somehow escaped her. She knew that it was daytime, but only because she’d looked outside. The rest had fallen into an abyss that she didn’t want to examine.

David, she noticed, had straightened up the bed, primly returning the pillows to its head and giving the covers hospital corners. He’d picked up the rest of the furniture and returned it to its customary positions, too. So orderly... she wondered if he’d cruised the halls of the *Prometheus* while they’d slept, searching for stray motes of dust to tidy away. She found herself hoping he didn’t know that she and Zamin had shared that kiss.

Why not? she asked herself. Zamin proved David’s suspicions wrong by pulling away, didn’t he? He has more self-control than *I* do.

A glint of metal caught her eye and she found herself staring at the ring on her left hand. Charlie’s ring. His class ring from Harvard... neither one of them had been comfortable wearing their wedding bands on the trip, although they’d both brought them; they’d been separated for five months when the green light on the expedition finally came through, and the reconciliation it had sparked had still been in its early, tentative stages when they’d gone into cryo-stasis. They’d talked about wearing the rings again when they returned to Earth, but both of them had been realistic enough not to make any promises. Now both bands had been lost, along with her father’s cross, when the *Prometheus* exploded. All she had left was Charlie’s Harvard ring, symbolizing a time before he had known her, and a man she might not have truly known at all.

Oh Charlie, she thought as she stared at the ring. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to...

Even as the tears came, she understood why Zamin had stopped her, and how much worse she’d be feeling now if he had let things escalate further. Nevertheless, she felt horribly disloyal. Charlie had died telling her that he loved her, and she’d tried to jump into bed with one of the people at least indirectly responsible for his death mere days, or even hours, later. But that wasn’t Zamin’s fault either; it was *hers*.

“Elizabeth? Are you all right?”

Blast it. David must have heard her. She should have shut the door. But then again, she hadn’t planned to start bawling, had she? She took a deep breath, and then another, until her chest stopped spasming and she could answer him.

“I’m... as well as can be expected.” That only seemed to deepen the look of polite concern on his face. “Sorry. I’m just... sometimes it hurts to think about everything I lost.”

“Perhaps I can help with that, a little,” he said. Now his expression seemed apologetic. He reached into one of the pouches on his utility belt and pulled out a small container, holding it out to her. For a moment, she thought it was a bottle of pills, until she got a better look.

“My cross! You kept it with you?” She unscrewed the cap and shook the necklace into her hand.

“I did, yes. I’m not entirely sure why. I should have given it back to you sooner.”

“Well, thank you for giving it back to me now,” she said as she returned it to its rightful place around her throat. It was a relief knowing that it hadn’t been destroyed in the crash. Just why David might have kept it with him was a little disturbing, though. Most of the standard reasons that a living man would have done so were downright creepy.

“You’re welcome. Is there anything else I can get you?”

“I don’t suppose you have a time machine on you, so we can go back and warn ourselves not to come here?” she asked him, trying to break the mood with humor. In this moment, she wanted Zamin back here and beside her. David made her uneasy.

“Unfortunately, none of Mr. Weyland’s prototypes have actually been successful thus far.”

“You’re *kidding*.” She stared up at David, trying to spot signs that he was just taking the piss out of her, but he simply shook his head.

“Humans have been looking for a way to travel in time for centuries. Naturally, Mr. Weyland would try to make sure that if anyone managed to, he would get there first. But even the best physicists on his staff – and all the best physicists were on his staff – couldn’t achieve it for him.”

Wiping at her face, Shaw made herself stand up. What she really wanted right now was a cup of tea, but she didn’t want David to make it for her. It was going to be a while before she’d feel comfortable with him handling any of the food and drink on board.

The main room had been straightened up even more, she noticed. Cables still dangled from the ceiling, but it appeared that David had begun to work on fixing them; the lights no longer flickered although many simply appeared to be dead. All of the smashed glass, crystal, and china around the bar had been swept up and dumped into a bin.

“You’ve been busy.” Had she really been sitting on her duff *that* long?

“There is much to do,” David answered her as he stacked books back on the shelves. “I will have to put all of these in proper order later, but right now it’s most important to get them off of the floor and out of harm’s way.”

Shaw programmed a cup of tea for herself and looked around, trying to decide what she should do first to help. A loud *THUMP!* startled her.

It had come from the airlock. She hurried over to the inner door and peered through the window, her heart suddenly hammering.

A huge crate sat inside the airlock, its contours and markings alien and unlike anything from the *Prometheus*. Zamin’s head briefly appeared as he heaved another large box onto the floor.

Whew! She wasn’t at all sure what she’d been expecting, but it was a relief to see him. As she watched, he lifted several more boxes and bags into the airlock before finally climbing in and sealing the outer door. His expression was unhappy, gnawed by worry. She wondered if he’d found what he had been looking for.

The strain smoothed out of his face when the inner door cycled open and he saw her. He seemed *relieved* to see her, and she had the odd sense that he was restraining himself from pulling her into a bear hug. She found herself wishing that he would.

“I trust your visit to your ship went well?” David asked behind her. Zamin’s eyes cut over to him, his expression assessing, and then he shook his head.

“We have some problems,” he told both of them, dragging two of his bags into the main room. “It’s very likely that we’re not alone on this planet. Do we have schematics for this vessel?”

“I believe we do,” David said, not offering to help with Zamin’s equipment. Of course not; he still had a diagnostic to run on himself. It would be risky to do heavy lifting until he had. Zamin didn’t seem bothered by the lack of help, though.

“I need you to locate them, and identify every possible way into this craft, down to the smallest vents and openings. Some of the things that could come at us might be really little. Others could be really strong, so we’ll need to do a circuit of the hull later to look for weak spots. I also need to know exactly what that thing we killed in here was, and how it got here.”

Shaw opened her mouth to speak, but nothing would come out. She couldn’t think of how to even begin explaining what had happened and how. In truth, she’d barely managed to process it, and had avoided thinking about it ever since. Her mind recoiled from it every time she *tried* to think about it in greater detail.

David rescued her, more or less. “After Dr. Holloway was infected, he and Elizabeth had sexual intercourse.”

Zamin's face flinched. Just barely, but she saw it... and hoped David hadn't. Of *course* he had. His words had been intended to have that effect. He seemed willing to go out of his way to remind Zamin that she'd been Charlie's wife until just a day or so ago. He was wielding that information like a cudgel.

"Shortly after his death, I ran a scan on her and discovered that she appeared to be three months pregnant with a very... inhuman-looking fetus."

Now Zamin looked aghast. He turned around and hurried over to one of the bags still in the airlock. "Keep talking. I'm listening," he snapped as he opened it up and reached inside.

"We didn't have the facilities or personnel to surgically remove it, so I sedated her and a team began preparing to put her into a decontamination suit and return her to cryo-stasis, but—"

"That wouldn't have done any of you any good," Zamin grumbled. "Those things keep growing in stasis. She'd have been killed, and everyone else would have been too."

He glanced up from his crouch, his eyes meeting hers with a stricken, apologetic look, as if he'd suddenly realized just how harsh his words were. But it was just a confirmation of what Shaw had been sure of from the start. She'd felt guilty for clubbing Ford on the head, but it *had* been a matter of survival.

"She attacked the team and escaped them, and came here. The surgical capsule in the other room is capable of performing major invasive procedures, but it was calibrated for Mr. Weyland and didn't have any settings for female anatomy. Somehow, she was still able to program it to cut the creature out of her. I would never have believed it, myself. That was the emergency surgery I'd told you about earlier."

Zamin pulled a covered metal bowl out of the bag he'd been rooting through. Standing up and holding it in one hand, he walked over to Shaw and took her by the arm. She had to run to keep up with him as he led her over to one of the couches and sat her down on it.

"You need to take this right now," he told her, crouching down in front of her and holding out the bowl. Its lid was strange, almost designed like it was intended to represent a moon phase. The "dark side" portion was rough with what might have been layers of circuitry. The "light side" portion, by contrast, was smooth except for a cartouche of unfamiliar hieroglyphs. As she watched, he lifted off the lid. It came off with a hiss and he set it aside.

A vessel that looked like a stone shot glass, containing something that almost resembled a honeycomb, lay inside the bowl. He lifted it out. As she watched, the "honeycomb" began to break down, dissolving into thick amber liquid. *Was* that honey? It almost looked like it. It was thinner, though, and caught the light as if full of tiny, glittering particles, like liquid sunstone.

"What is it?" she asked as he held it out to her, and then had to wait for David to translate.

"Medicine. I gave you a dose of this earlier, when you were unconscious, but that was for your internal injuries. I didn't realize you'd been so directly exposed to the Zal. You need more to protect you."

"But I thought that ...*stuff*... had to be ingested to be dangerous," she protested, staring at David. He'd *let* them take off their suits when they'd entered the ship, and had even encouraged them to do so *before* they'd passed through the room full of warheads!

"It can aerosolize," Zamin told her once David had translated. "The symptoms can take a lot longer to appear when it does, if the dose is small enough. Sometimes people go for days without realizing they've been infected. Please. You *must* take this. If you had a Zal-contaminated organism growing inside you, it could easily have left some of its genetic material behind."

"Surely the dose you already gave her would be adequate," David said. He was frowning at both of them with a look of affronted propriety. Shaw realized how it must look to him; kneeling before her the way he was, Zamin almost looked like a lover proposing marriage, as if he held a ring box instead of medicine in his outstretched hands.

Give it a rest, David, she thought. His overprotective expressions were making her peevish. If he'd had his way, she'd have died in her stasis tube. And if Zamin was right, everybody who had stepped inside the ruins might have been dying slowly from their visits, including her. And she might still be right now!

She took the medicine from Zamin's hand and knocked it back as if it were a shot of whiskey, vaguely aware of sweetness as it poured down her throat. It felt cool and soothing, making her wish she'd taken a moment to savor it in her mouth before swallowing. The look of relief on Zamin's face was intense. For a second, though, she thought his eyes were haunted by a look of guilt, too.

What did he have to feel guilty about? Well, aside from how his people had created the contagion in the first place, and how he'd tried to take it back to Earth, and how he'd killed three people? She supposed any or

all of those things could be bothering him, and probably *should* be.

“What is Zal?” she asked him. “What does it do? I know you said before that it’s complicated, and classified, but we *do* seem to be standing at ground zero of a major outbreak, so we really do need to know.”

Zamin listened to David’s translation, and nodded.

“It’s a chemical compound that my people discovered tens of millennia ago when we still lived on Ersetu, hidden miles beneath the surface of the world in some of the deepest caves, very close to the break between the crust and the mantle. Explorers had found amazing bacteria at those levels, too, in what looked like reservoirs of genetic material that almost seemed to have been stored there by something in case a cataclysm wiped out life on the surface. Some of our philosophers had pointed to those reservoirs as evidence of a higher, all-encompassing consciousness that favored life and intended for it to always be renewed. So the new reservoir was studied in the same way. But it contained an enzyme that attacked genetic material, breaking it down and then reassembling it in radically different forms. Organisms infected with it died swiftly, and their remains turned into embryos of bizarre new creatures. Other organisms, exposed to fluid containing those embryos, were either transformed to match the new genetic code or were turned into hosts for the embryos. The reservoir should have been destroyed and the experimental results entombed, but of course, that’s *not* what happened. People had to tinker.”

Zamin shook his head in disgust, taking back the stone shot glass and putting it inside the bowl. He sealed the bowl again and set it on top of the control console. But he didn’t move away to a different seat. Shaw realized she was glad that he wanted to stay close to her.

“They came up with four different forms. One is just like the original. It finds an organism, breaks it down, and then creates variations on the original organism’s designs. The second is ‘programmable.’ You give it sample organisms, and it breaks them down but doesn’t alter any of the gene sequences. If you then seed it into an environment, it creates clones of the sample organisms from whatever building blocks it can find. That one can be useful for terraforming, as long as it’s handled with care. The third type destroys genetic material wherever it finds it, and breaks it down into its component atoms instead of rebuilding it. It’s intended for use only in situations where an organism or ecosystem has been declared too dangerous to survive in any variation. There’s only been one case of that, unless someone finally got off their asses after I went into stasis and put acid dragons under the same ruling, which they damned well should have long ago. And then they made Azalla. It identifies an organism’s DNA sequence, locks it down against being altered or overwritten, and then makes whatever repairs the organism requires to function at optimum levels. It protects organisms against the effects of Zal. That’s what I just gave you. The doses we keep on-ship are keyed to work strictly with the six hominid species that came from Ersetu, as a precaution. Acid dragons are hard enough to kill as it is.” Whatever they were, acid dragons seemed to be weighing heavily on Zamin’s mind.

Shaw sat quietly, deep in thought, for a while after he finished speaking. What he’d told her had been both amazing, and horrible. She’d heard about those bacterial reservoirs deep beneath the Earth’s surface. Gold miners had discovered them again a century ago, a primordial gene bank that wouldn’t be destroyed even if the Earth were hit by a small moon. There had been speculations that similar gene banks existed throughout the Earth’s crust, and arguments over whether their existence proved or disproved the presence of a divine hand. The demigods she’d come here to find had had similar arguments, she realized. *They* didn’t know who had made *them* either. Silently, she cursed her vanity. She’d wanted her answers about the universe to come from something human-shaped, not from viscous puddles in subterranean caverns. Maybe she hadn’t needed to leave Earth at all to find out the truth—

“Did you say *six hominid species*?”

“I believe he did,” David said, sounding awed. He translated her question for Zamin’s benefit.

“Yes.” Zamin then rattled off a list of names she didn’t understand. Several back-and-forths later, she was almost certain that three of the species he was describing were Neanderthals, a tiny dwarflike species found in Indonesia called *Homo floresiensis*, and the enigmatic Denisovans. She desperately wished she remembered more of what she’d learned in her paleoanthropology classes. The fourth, he indicated, was *Homo sapiens*, although he also made it clear that *his* humans had changed somewhat from the Earthly variety since they’d gone out among the stars, enough so that he’d immediately recognized her and her companions as having come from Earth. But the last two were confusing. Igigi? Anunnaki? In ancient times, those had been the names of the *gods*.

Without even intending to, Shaw clasped her hand around her father's cross, wondering just how many more tests she was going to face in the days to come.

You would have loved this, Charlie, she thought, wishing there was somewhere private that she could go to have a good, long cry.

"If I may change the subject a little," David broke in, "what kind of Zal was it that I gave Dr. Holloway?"

"You gave him the first kind I mentioned," Zamin said. "But it had already been used to dismantle an extremely dangerous species. You infected him with embryos derived from the genetic material of acid dragons. And that's what he impregnated Elilu with – a variation on the deadliest scourge the Myriad Worlds have ever faced. It's amazing that any of you were still alive to find me."

Notes: And the out-of-control writing continues! I have a lot of things to do this week, so things may slow down some... although in some ways, all bets are off because this thing practically chases me down in my sleep now.

So here are explanations of a few of the things that may have had people scratching their heads...

The issue of Sanskrit comes about because, in the *Angry Gods* documentary, the sound engineer talks about how he used Sanskrit words when he re-recorded the Last Engineer's speech (to make him sound less human) and gushes about even making the Engineer use the Sanskrit word for "alien" when he asks everybody what the hell they're doing on his ship. I hadn't actually watched that documentary yet when I began writing and decided to center things in Mesopotamian language and mythology, so my way of reconciling it is simply that Zamin's enough of a polyglot that he could respond to someone speaking Sanskrit at him, even though it isn't his native language. ;) The sound of the holographic conversation is garbled enough that David could easily have misconstrued what he was hearing.

Yes, the half-decapitated ghost Shaw recalls is Nearly-Headless Nick. :P

Aratta is a mythological (as far as we know) town that features prominently in the epic cycle of Enmerkar and Lugalbanda, rulers of the Sumerian city-state of Unug/Uruk. The epics are considered especially significant because they dramatize a conflict between two city-states that ends in peaceful negotiations rather than military violence. Most theorists think that, if Aratta existed, it would have been a mining town somewhere in the Iranian mountains, but the descriptions of the journey to Aratta became so ornately stylized by narrative conventions (*everybody* has to cross seven mountain ranges to get *anywhere* in *any* epic) that there isn't really any way to locate an appropriate set of ruins corresponding to it. But several huge libraries of tablets have been discovered in the last few decades, and many of those tablets are still undergoing translation, so I decided to have Shaw responsible for actually putting together the pieces enough to find the town. My idea is that, although Shaw's actually quite brilliant, her reputation for believing in impossible things has been impeding her career even when she frequently turns out to be right.

Harvard University has both an accelerated MBA program and one of the best classical archaeology programs in America. So it seemed like a good place for Vickers and Holloway to have met prior to the expedition. Charlie's ring is generic-looking enough in the film (I haven't found a single cap of it that shows what's actually on it) that I've declared it his Harvard class ring for this story. ;) And yes, sorry, Charlie still isn't getting a very fair shake in my tale, is he? Poor guy! (Originally, I'd had Cornell as Charlie's alma mater, but a friend in the know suggested that Harvard would be much more appropriate.)

The bacterial reservoirs deep below the Earth's surface are real, and incredibly cool. I learned about them several years ago. Reservoirs of "Zal," though, are completely made up (I HOPE!). Google "subterranean bacteria" and pull up the Cosmos Magazine article (There's also a great one on Princeton.edu) and you can see how cool these things are, and how freaky they can potentially be.

Neanderthals, Denisovans, and *Homo floresiensis* are the three species of hominid that existed concurrently with *Homo sapiens*. All three went extinct less than 50,000 years ago, which means that, in my timeline for when Zamin's people first spread to other planets, they could have tagged along. In truth, there could be a lot of other as-yet-undiscovered species of hominid that lived during that period of time; everything we know about the Denisovans comes from DNA extracted from a handful of bones at a single site, and everything we know about *Homo floresiensis* comes from seven skeletons, and the fossil records of five other much older distinct species are equally spotty. Once upon a time, they were all thriving species with large populations over broad geographical areas, but they've been reduced to scattered handfuls of bones. It's sad, but it means that there's plenty of room for a science fiction writer to play, both with alternative fates for the species and additional theoretical species that never made it into the fossil record. Such as, say, a species of hypomelanistic giants. ;)

Thank you to everybody who has been leaving me such lovely feedback! You are all *so sweet!*

Chapter 9

The urge to grab Elilu, to hold her and refuse to let go, was difficult to resist. He'd had no idea just how close she'd come to suffering one of the most horrible deaths it was possible to imagine.

The Azalla should protect her, though, Zamin reassured himself. Even if any of those embryos still lurked in her body, they'd be unable to find purchase now. Her cells would be locked against them, just as his had been locked against the original type of acid dragon embryo. He had three more bowls of Azalla if it turned out that the two doses she'd already had proved inadequate.

And you still haven't warned her about the possible side effect, he berated himself. Worse, he knew that he was *hoping* she'd experience it. He wanted her to be—

"Why did your people keep such dangerous things?" David asked, breaking in on his thoughts.

"I told you earlier," he grumbled, but then realized that Elilu had been asleep at the time. Maybe David wanted him to explain again for her benefit. "We're not allowed to wipe out species, even dangerous ones. We have to save samples, just in case the organisms we destroy turn out to be the last of their kind, so that they can be restored later. The First and Second Towers of Ereshkigal are full of such things. With the acid dragons, Ellil finally decreed that its original form was too deadly to preserve as itself, but we had to preserve alternative mutations in case one of them turned out to be non-inimical. It's the only time I've ever seen him be so wrong. There's *no* form of that biology that's safe. Hate is hard-coded into it."

Elilu asked something.

"She wants to know if the First Tower of Ereshkigal is the building we explored," David told him. "And what the other buildings are."

Zamin *really* needed to learn their language! He was picking up a word here and there, but not enough, not yet, to decipher the meanings of what he heard with any ease, much less form responses of his own.

"It is. There's one tower for each of the Zal types and derivatives. The second tower serves as a gene bank for unaltered creatures, including all of the species that inhabited ancient Ersetu. If we can leave this world, I'll want to take some of its contents with us. We should probably just stay out of the third tower, but I wouldn't mind luring the organisms infesting the first tower into it, if we can. And the fourth tower is where Azalla was manufactured. I'll want to take its contents with us when we go, too. Assuming I can even get to it. It's heavily protected, and for good reason."

"Why?" Elilu asked. He needed no translation.

"Because," he answered before David could try to translate anyway, "sometimes it does more than just heal people. Sometimes, if a person is given enough more of it than is needed to treat an injury or illness, it..."

How in Irkalla did he *say* this? He braced himself, wondering if she would be furious with him for not warning her about this *before* he'd given her the doses. He'd been amazed to realize just how thoroughly he *did* understand Azalla's properties after all; he'd just been pretending, for the sake of his own sanity, that he had no idea because some things were better left unexamined.

"It what?" David prompted him.

"It repairs even the most minor damages in cells, and optimizes them... to the point where some people never age, or die, after receiving an overdose. They live forever."

Elilu gasped.

"But that is what Mr. Weyland was seeking. If you had it all along, why did you kill him? Why not just give it to him?" David asked.

Elilu glared at David and said something to him in scolding tones. Zamin braced himself for the moment when she'd turn that voice on him.

"Elizabeth says that such a creation should never be made public on Ersetu. Too many people would demand it and kill for it, just as she says Mr. Weyland did here. But I still don't understand why you didn't just give him what he was asking for, if you could."

"Do you want the whole *list* of reasons?" Zamin asked the golem – no, the word its people seemed to use was *android*. He needed to begin using their language as soon as he could. "Shall we start with the weapon he had pointed first at me, and then at Elilu? Was I supposed to take him for a friend, based on that?"

Elilu muttered something that sounded like an agreement.

“She said ‘worst First Contact ever,’” David explained.

“Actually, I’ve seen a lot worse,” Zamin told both of them. “But even if he’d been the soul of diplomacy about it, I couldn’t have given it to him. He was much too old. Do your people know much about the... coding material... in your cells? The biological blueprints you carry?”

Elilu nodded, her expression confident.

“It degrades after a while. When a cell has divided enough times, those blueprints stop reproducing cleanly. Errors creep in. Most of the symptoms of aging develop as a result of those errors, as skin cells forget how to stretch and contract, and muscle cells become less powerful... I know I’m over-simplifying it, but I think you understand what I’m trying to say?” He looked at Elilu and David in turn, and both seemed to be following along. “When the errors get too severe, the cells and tissues begin to deform or even fail. Azalla needs enough error-free examples of a person’s ...code, I guess... what is the word in your language?”

“Genome,” Elilu told him.

That was an odd-sounding word. He puzzled at it for a moment, wondering if it was some kind of perversion of *nomen generis*. There were moments when he caught hints of Latin in Elilu’s words, but so strange, filtered as if—

As if two thousand years had passed? He winced. He was trying *not* to think about that, to root himself in the here-and-now, the way he imagined Enki would. The past needed to wait a while longer.

“It bases its template on the code it finds in the majority of a person’s cells. If most of them are decayed and error-prone, that’s what it’s going to perpetuate. If your Mr. Weyland had actually found and taken enough Azalla to live forever, he would have had an eternity of decrepitude to look forward to. I’ve seen it before.” He shuddered. Ereshkigal always came out to speak to new soldiers when they learned about Azalla, so that they would understand just how dangerous a substance it really was in spite of its healing powers. Few men could stand to look at her face for very long. Every ravaged detail was burned into his memory, and it amazed him that she wasn’t among the Anunnaki who had gone insane but was, instead, their caretaker.

Elilu was speaking again, her voice hushed and musing. She had a look of pleasure on her face, as if something magical had been revealed. It definitely wasn’t the reaction he’d expected at all.

“Elizabeth says that this explains many old myths and legends of people who were granted eternal life, only to end up regretting it. She mentions a mythological figure named Tithonos and another called the Cumaean Sibyl. Both of them were granted eternal life but not eternal youth, and withered away as centuries passed. I always assumed that such legends were little more than primitive fairy tales, myself,” the android added, earning a sharp look from Elilu.

“Well, the Anunnaki had to come up with *some* angle to keep people from trying to join their ranks,” Zamin told him. Sighing, he changed his position so that he could lean against the seat of the couch, facing Elilu. None of the furniture on this craft was suitably sized for him. Among his own people, he was on the lower side of average height, but here he felt grotesquely oversized. “Most of them go insane after several centuries. The universe doesn’t need more unbalanced immortals in it, especially not the kind of people who *look* for immortality.”

Elilu laughed and said something else.

“She just compared that to the politicians of our world,” David told him. “Most of whom she thinks are proved unfit for the offices they seek simply by seeking them.”

That made him smile. He studied her face, looking for any signs that she’d applied the dangers of Azalla to herself.

“And yet, I would imagine it happens by accident occasionally, if a person is given more Azalla than they need?” David’s words were pointed, verging on accusing. In response, Elilu’s expression became thoughtful but not alarmed.

“It does, yes,” Zamin admitted. “The last case I know about, for certain, is me.”

“You?” Elilu asked, her face astonished.

He nodded. “I’d spent years hoping it wasn’t true, but when I saw how quickly I healed from the wound from that soldier’s weapon, I had to admit it.”

Elilu asked another question. He was almost certain he knew what she’d asked even before David translated, but he was wrong. “She asks if that’s what you went back to your ship to check on.”

He nodded, wondering when, or *if*, Elilu would ask about herself. “Do you have any records of what you found when you explored my ship and the First Tower? I need to know as much as I can about your findings, but I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to go back in there, even with Azalla protecting us from alteration.”

“Yes, of course,” David told him. “This craft was intended as an emergency lifeboat, in case something went wrong with the ship. A full backup of all of the ship’s data was loaded here. Even after separating from the ship, it would have continued receiving and recording transmissions until they either ceased or were no longer in range. We should have everything.”

Elilu had moved and was kneeling next to him, her hands manipulating a screen on the odd little table in front of her. The huge wall screen, which had shown him a child playing music on a strange instrument when he’d first entered the craft, came to life again, displaying a mosaic of images. She asked David a question, which he answered in her language.

“Elizabeth is going to show you the ship’s visual logs, starting with the briefing that she and Dr. Holloway gave explaining the mission to the crew prior to our landing,” David told him.

One of the images on the large screen grew in size, filling the whole wall. It was motionless, displaying a group of more than a dozen people who had gathered in chairs, facing toward a large, empty area. Elilu asked David something else.

“Are we right in thinking that you understand the Latin language, as it was spoken two thousand years ago?” David asked.

“I’m not completely *fluent* in it, but yes. I was learning it as quickly as I could. My brother wanted to get me transferred to his embassy’s security detail.” He winced, wondering just how differently things might have gone if he’d already been there when Nero had ordered everyone’s arrests. What might have happened if those imperial soldiers had found themselves up against a warrior who couldn’t be killed?

Elilu smiled, tapping the screen a few more times. With one final tap, she sat back as the image began to move, grinning broadly. When she sat down next to him on the floor, her arm brushing his, he was surprised.

The woman who walked in front of the group was tall for a human, imperious, and had a look to her that Zamin associated with the human tribes of the far north. He stared in astonishment at the screen as she began speaking, and translations of her words, into the Latin language his brother had been teaching him, appeared on the bottom of the screen. So that was why Elilu had wanted to know! He glanced down at her and found her smiling up at him. The impulse to kiss her was intense, but he forced himself to be contented with placing that kiss on the top of her head. She leaned against him and he felt her arm slip around his waist. It was suddenly very difficult to concentrate on the screen.

“Good morning,” the woman who resembled a Cimbrian ice queen said. “For those of you I hired personally, it’s nice to see you again.” Her delivery seemed to indicate otherwise. “For the rest of you, I’m Meredith Vickers and it’s my job to make sure you do yours.” Now he realized what she reminded him of even more— the horrible teacher he’d had one year, as a small child, who had made him and everyone else in his student group feel like defective misfits for daring to exist. Meredith Vickers looked at people the same way. “Okay then,” she continued. “On with the show.”

A few seconds later, the space transformed around her, and Zamin realized he was watching a recording within a recording. Peter Weyland appeared on the screen, walking with a cane and accompanied by a small dog. When he began speaking about David, Zamin glanced back at the android. There was a slight, vexed frown on David’s face, as though he was expecting something unpleasant.

“He will never grow old, and he will never die,” Weyland declared, as if these were good qualities. “And yet he is unable to appreciate these remarkable gifts—”

Zamin’s snort of disgust earned a startled look from Elilu. He put his arm around her and tried to give her an appropriately apologetic look, tempted to point out that nobody who *had* those so-called gifts “appreciated” them for long.

And yet you’re foisting them on her, his conscience snarled at him.

—for that would require the one thing that David will never have: a soul.”

“Pause that for a moment,” he asked Elilu. She leaned forward and tapped something on the screen. “Is that what your people really believed? That a mind could exist without a soul?”

“It is a fundamental element of most philosophies on contemporary Ersetu,” David told him. “Although many quibble over whether a soul is unique to humankind or also exists in other portions of the animal

kingdom, virtually all of the religions and philosophies of the world are united in the idea that a soul is a product of natural creation, rather than artificial assembly.”

“Is that what *you* believe?” he asked David.

“I don’t believe or disbelieve in any particular direction,” David answered after a short pause. His words sounded memorized, as though he was repeating from a script. “I have no evidence to support or deny the existence of a soul in humans, either. But since most religions believe that a soul is a necessary vessel for the mind to journey into a non-corporeal realm, and I am designed to inhabit the corporeal realm indefinitely, I see no reason that I would need one.”

Just what had *happened* to humanity in his people’s absence? Zamin forced himself to remember that this was hardly the strangest thing humans had ever believed. When Hadad had tried to teach people on Ersetu meteorology, after all, he’d returned two centuries later to find that the meteorological lessons themselves had been completely forgotten but that the descendants of his students had declared him a storm god, and their enemies called him a demon. It didn’t just happen on Ersetu, either; if one of the Myriad Worlds fell out of contact for long enough, bizarre beliefs would crop up there, too. Hadad had used the story as an example of why the worlds needed to be kept in stable contact with each other at all times—

“Do you believe differently, Zamin?” David asked him.

“I believe that denying personhood that way is the first rhetorical step people use to justify slavery,” he answered slowly. “And I believe that the reason the creation of beings such as yourself is forbidden in *my* society is because it *is* the creation of something with a soul, who is then treated as lifeless property. People own themselves, so it’s an abomination to create a being that isn’t permitted to do the same, and has awareness enough to know that.”

He wasn’t sure whether that was completely accurate. Stories of the creation of golems still circulated – or had two millennia ago – among his people, and just why they were called abominations was hotly debated. Some felt that such creatures inherently came out wrong, lacking a fundamental something necessary for true personhood. Others argued that the abomination lay in the hearts of those who would create such slaves, giving them thought and feeling but no freedom. In the training barracks, fellow cadets had often joked about how nice it would be to have a female golem handy, so that they didn’t have to worry about what she thought or desired but could just command her to get in bed with them. When Šena had broken things off with him and he’d believed that he could never, ever love again, he’d wished for something like that too, and had then been disgusted with himself for it.

It was why he’d resolved to treat David as simply a human being, instead of a golem, although he was still having problems managing that. Something *did* feel off, when he dealt with the – with *David* – although he still couldn’t explain it to himself. It often seemed that David was deliberately cruel, even when he appeared to be the epitome of tact. Zamin still couldn’t decide if that was a conscious choice on David’s part, an act of ignorance by a being whose understanding of emotion was still embryonic, or just his own misinterpretation of something purely innocent. But David made him uneasy, nonetheless, and he was almost certain that Elilu felt the same way.

She had been silent throughout the exchange, and her eyes were distant when he glanced down at her. She was frowning to herself, as though puzzling over something.

“Are you all right, Elilu?” he asked. She glanced up and gave him a smile that was undoubtedly meant to be reassuring, and then said something in reply. He wondered if there was a way to get a device like the one she was using with the recordings, to translate her words into Latin until he learned more of them.

“She says that she was remembering something her father had said to her, about where souls were supposed to go after death. She wonders if never dying means that one has been banished from Paradise. But even then, she says, one has a soul. It’s just been damned by being denied the light of God.”

“God?” Zamin asked, fascinated. A deity with no personal name?

“You are perhaps familiar with an ancient god called Jehovah or Yahweh? Three of the dominant religions of contemporary Ersetu are monotheistic and based on the belief that he is the sole god of everything. Elizabeth’s faith is one of them, and members of that faith also believe that he was incarnated in human form as the prophet Jesus of Nazareth—”

“The *Nazerini*?” His startled laugh left Elilu looking insulted. “No! No, sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. But I *heard* about them from my brother! Nero was trying to wipe them out! When Šukarak was stationed in Rome, he had a human friend, a lawyer who was often called upon to defend them. He told me that Gaius was

a brilliant lawyer, and those were the only cases he ever lost, because Nero was determined to exterminate them no matter how anyone argued or pled. And now their religion is one of the dominant ones of your world! It's too *wonderful*! "

Elilu was staring at him in amazement. Her hand moved to her throat and she lifted up the small pendant she wore, asking him something in her language.

"She's asking if this was their symbol, back then," David told him. "Nobody's exactly sure if they used it that far back, although it was definitely in use a century later."

"I... I don't actually know, but I know that Nero often liked to use devices shaped like that to execute them, and much worse things besides. It's sickening that the world still remembers him, and has probably forgotten the names of all the genuinely good people he destroyed, or even just repressed. Šukarak said that Gaius was brilliant enough to be a statesman, but didn't dare draw attention to himself while Nero ruled. There probably aren't any records of his existence, now."

But Elilu had an odd little smile on her face as she spoke.

"She says that you can never be sure, and she asks what his full name was," David translated.

"Gaius Plinius Secundus, why?" But Elilu had squeaked with elation. Did she *know who that was*?

"History remembers him very well, as 'Pliny the Elder,' author of the *Naturalis Historia*. He survived Nero's reign and lived another eleven years after the emperor's death, and he was highly valued by the imperial dynasty that followed. And Elizabeth, you really can stop crowing about being right, now."

Zamin didn't want her to. The impish, delighted look on her face had stripped away all of the pain and misery that had haunted her features since he first met her. She was so radiant and beautiful that he had to struggle not to kiss her, and wasn't at all sure what he'd end up doing if *she* kissed *him*. She said something else, laughing.

"She says that he hated Nero, and she's right. He called Nero 'an enemy of mankind' in the *Naturalis Historia*, but it was never clear why."

"He was the one who tried to warn my brother that the embassy was in danger," Zamin said slowly. His heart felt like it was being squeezed in his chest. "And after they were arrested and murdered, he risked everything to sneak into their villa and send me a message, letting me know what happened."

And you'd been prepared to kill him along with everybody else on the peninsula, he told himself, feeling ill. Don't think for a second that he'd have let you evacuate him first, either, if you'd even remembered to offer. He loved his country and he'd have wanted to die defending it.

He still wasn't exactly sure how Elilu had contrived to stop his ship, but he was grateful that she'd done it. He slowly became aware that she'd taken his hand and lifted its palm to her cheek. If she had already healed, it would have been far too tempting to try to lose himself in her right then.

"How did Nero die?" he finally managed to ask. "When? My brother was murdered 2029 years ago. Was justice ever done?"

"He died four years later," David told him after a small pause. "There's still a great deal of debate over how they numbered years back then, but Elizabeth's religion calls the year 'anno domini 68.' He was overthrown and committed suicide, although just how he did that is subject to debate. Some say that he poisoned himself, and others claimed that he forced his private secretary to stab him. And in some eastern provinces that had never experienced his crueler tyrannies, his admirers claimed that he had never died at all but had attained immortality."

"He'd damned well better *not* have," Zamin growled.

"Could he have?" David asked, and there was something in his curious tone that was repellant.

"No. The supply of Azalla given to the embassy would have been calibrated for Igigi use only and its containers would only respond to our biometrics, as a precaution. If he'd *tried* to drink it, though, it might explain the stories of him poisoning himself." Calibrated Azalla could be almost as cruel as Zal itself to a creature it wasn't intended for. He suddenly hoped that Nero *had* found it, and had drunk it down.

He pressed another kiss to the top of Elilu's head before he rose, not wanting her to think he was trying to get away from her again. But he needed to move, to do things, or he was going to end up overwhelmed by his memories. A glance through the airlock windows gave him the excuse he needed.

"We only have a few more hours of light left. I want to make a circuit of the exterior of this vessel before it gets dark, just in case there are ways for something to get inside and we need to block them. Can we watch the rest of your security logs once I'm done?"

The understanding on Elilu's face closed his throat. She nodded and smiled at him, and then got up. He wasn't sure what she was doing, at first, until she brought him one of the flame throwers they'd used on her... offspring? No, none of her genetic material had been in that hideous thing. Then she presented him with a long rod, demonstrating how, if he pressed a button on its side, a beam of intense light stabbed out of one end. That would indeed be useful. He had to admit that human technology had progressed very nicely while his people had been gone.

"Thank you," he said, and rested his palm on her cheek again, struggling against the wish to touch her *everywhere*. "I'll be back soon."

Outside, the sun was dropping down toward the Towers. Night could potentially be a real problem if there were, in fact, acid dragons on his ship, or their kin in the First Tower. The creatures preferred to operate at nighttime, and in darkness. He was actually glad to see that the ground around the vessel was mostly empty; they also preferred to move under cover, so the lack of such cover was a blessing.

Of course, the debris field from the crash was large enough and strange enough that they could use some of its pieces to hide behind. The more he looked at it, the more certain he was that his mind hadn't been playing tricks on him in the seconds before the explosion, and another ship had flown directly into his. His initial assumption was that one of his ship's reactors had exploded, possibly sabotaged by the humans.

The recordings would probably explain everything to him, once he watched them. Right now, he needed to make sure the vessel was safe.

The port side, once he got a good look at it, was a serious problem. Two different panels had opened during flight – to deploy propulsion drives of some kind, he suspected. One of them had been ripped away from the vessel, and the other had jammed in an open position on some of its piping. He climbed inside the cavity and ran the light Elilu had given him over every inch, before he finally relaxed. The vessel would never fly again, but those panels had been designed to remain open in a variety of hostile conditions. The inner walls were thick and sturdy, and undamaged. But they might provide an excellent hiding place for a hostile organism.

Nothing I can do about that, he admitted. Maybe tomorrow he could try to drag some of the debris back here and cover the opening, but that might be more effort than it was worth. He'd have to check the other sides.

The bow had been dented, but seemed fine. From the outer dimensions of the craft, he suspected that there were several more rooms inside that he hadn't explored. They would need to check those, later, once David or Elilu pulled up the schematics he'd asked for. The starboard side of the craft, he was glad to notice, appeared to have closed up its flight panels properly after landing. There were a few more dents, but none of the panels had actually buckled enough for an acid dragon to pry them loose and go under them.

The stern worried him a little. Apparently it was designed to spend most of its time connected to a larger vessel, which had him concerned with some of the panels that appeared to be intended as alternate entries. He pulled himself up into one of the cavities above and to the left of the main airlock, trying to determine its purpose. The walls inside seemed solid, but this hole definitely needed covering. The idea of something hiding in it and then dropping down on them as they exited the airlock was *not* pleasant.

A little more poking around, though, and he was certain that the craft would at least hold them until morning. But he was still just as certain that it would never fly again. Which meant he was going to have to mount an expedition down into the other hangars in the next few days, and see if any of the other ships – aside from the one that had brought the damned things here in the first place – were intact and safe to fly.

Nothing more to find out here tonight, he thought. The light was beginning to wane in earnest.

He climbed back inside the airlock and closed it, realizing that he needed to ask the others how to lock it for the night so that nothing else could try to enter. But the thought got roughly pushed aside as the inner airlock opened. Elilu was standing there, holding a flat tablet in her hand. Her face was somber as she offered it to him. As he took it, she spoke, and Latin words blossomed on its surface.

"I can talk to you through this."

How brilliant of her! The very thing that he'd been planning to ask her about was already in his hand. He smiled at her, starting to thank her, but his voice died as he took in her serious – deadly serious – expression and she spoke again. His blood froze when the translation appeared.

"I need to know why you shot Jackson and Ford when you returned to your ship."

Notes: This muse just won't let go of me!

So, some of you may remember that, when *Prometheus* did its flyby, there were actually five buildings, not four. The fifth one will be explained soon, promise. ;)

There really isn't all that much in the way of Mesopotamian vocabulary this time around. Hadad is the Aramaic name of a storm god from the Mesopotamian region, though. Akkadians called him Adad and Sumerians called him Ishkur. He was, in some of the pantheons, Inanna's brother. Ereshkigal's appearance, and why she apparently looks so awful, will be explained in a future chapter. This is because she's often set apart in the pantheons as too unclean to participate in the conferences of the gods, so I'm linking that to the "dark side" of what Azalla can do.

Pliny the Elder was super-awesome. The end. (But you'll learn more about his relationship to Zamin's family in future chapters. :D) His nephew was also super-awesome, and you'll hear about *him* in future chapters, too.

And yes, you'll also learn how the opening scenes in the film connect to this cracky plot structure of mine, promise. ;)

Thank you to everybody for the lovely lovely feedback! It's definitely helping keep the creative juices flowing in spite of all common sense. XD Sleep? Who needs sleep? LOL!

Chapter 10

Shaw wasn't sure what she expected Zamin to do, not now that she'd seen the final camera feeds from Jackson's and Ford's suits. She still was trying to figure out what the feeds *meant*. But there'd been no mistaking the final images: Zamin standing over each of them, pointing Jackson's rifle directly down at them, the final bright flare as the rifle fired, and the image dissolving into static. Worse than that, she'd watched the slow heartbeats flatline out in the accompanying suit data.

They'd still been alive. Or at least, they had been until he'd returned to his ship and killed them.

David had been the one to notice that the feeds had still been sending data long after the crash, and had pulled up the last few seconds of each. She'd just finished customizing a translation tablet for Zamin when he'd turned to her with a somber expression and told her "you need to see this."

Now she waited to see what the huge Engineer would do, confronted with his crime, wondering if he'd turn on *her*.

Instead, he winced and closed his eyes. "They were alive, but infected. If I hadn't shot them, they would have died horrible deaths within the next few hours."

"If that were true, wouldn't your Azalla have saved them?" David asked from behind her.

Zamin had to open his eyes to read the tablet's translation, because David had deliberately spoken in English. "Not in this case. People have tried it before, but purebreed acid dragon embryos can only be blocked if the person's already had an Azalla overdose. Everybody else dies."

There was a look of misery on Zamin's face that tore at her heart. Stay firm, she told herself. She couldn't just declare all forgiven until she was completely sure... and she knew what she'd seen, didn't she?

"But they weren't exposed to purebreed acid dragon embryos," she told him. "Only the stuff from your First Tower. I thought those were all hybrid forms."

His expression was heavy. "They were exposed in my control room. My ship, the Towers, and this whole world got hit by an acid dragon infestation. We lost control of everything, and they're still loose on the planet."

"And you're only *just now telling us*?" She wasn't sure whether she believed him or not, or what was so damned special about acid dragons that made them even worse than everything else that had already happened.

"What in *Irkalla* do you *think* I've been telling you since I got back from my ship!?" he thundered, his expression suddenly as enraged as it had been when he'd first killed – no, just injured – Jackson and Ford. "Why do you think I've been outside checking for ways something could break in? You have *no damned idea* what these things can do!"

Shaw swallowed. It was hard to stand her ground in the face of his sudden ire, but she wasn't going to let him shut this conversation down. She kept her eyes locked with his, trying not to feel miniscule as he loomed over her. He didn't just look furious. He looked *hurt*, as if her distrust had wounded him and he was trying to hide that behind shouting.

"We only have your word that these things exist at all, Zamin," David said from behind her, sounding like the textbook Voice of Reason.

Zamin frowned, breaking gazes with her to glare at David over her head. "You know damned well that's not true," he growled. "If you saw me shoot them, you can see the rest. Or do you expect me to believe your records *only* cover their very last moments?"

He was right, she realized with a start. If Zamin had found them and killed them when he returned to the ship, they'd been alive in there, injured but alive, for nearly a full day. Just how little time had actually passed since her life had been blown apart was disconcerting. She had moments when she felt as though centuries had gone by. But their suit feeds would have sent recordings of the crash from inside Zamin's ship, and all of the aftermath, every moment of their last hours. "David, please rewind the recordings. I want to see exactly what happened to the two of them after the crash."

"I really don't think that's—"

"That's an *order*. I want to see everything."

"But there's nothing to—"

“Now, David. Remember the rules you agreed to when you were put on probation.”

In front of her, Zamin seemed to be calming down. He no longer looked primally enraged when he met her gaze, but he still looked angry and hurt. Just minutes ago she’d been wondering if he’d betrayed her, but now the look in his eyes was making her feel like *she’d* betrayed *him*.

Behind her, David affected a dramatic sigh. “Very well. How far back would you like me to go?”

“Start with the five minutes just before I shot them,” Zamin growled.

She was going to have to turn her back on him to watch the screen. Shit. Did she distrust him, even now, too much to do that? Before she could figure out what to do, he gave her a hurt and exasperated look and turned *his* back on *her*, returning to the airlock to pick up some of the crates and bags that still lay inside. She made herself retreat back to David’s side and look at the large screen.

“Here we go,” David told her, his voice making it clear that he thought she was wasting her time. “I’ve synchronized the feeds.”

The two images on the screen resolved to show the bridge of the Engineer ship. The readings for both Jackson and Ford, she noticed, were strange, similar to the readings she would expect to see from someone in a coma, not someone with critical injuries. As she watched, Zamin appeared on the platform above them, his movements slow and careful, his expression wary. He seemed to be trying to keep the whole room in view at once, as if anticipating an attack. When he looked down and directly into the cameras, though, he flinched, a horrified expression blooming on his face.

What did he see that was so awful? she wondered. Had the crash mangled them somehow?

His attention shifted to the side and he jumped down from the platform, hurrying out of Jackson’s camera range, but not out of Ford’s. When he picked up Jackson’s rifle, Shaw grimaced and braced herself. Now he’d shoot both of them. Why the Hell was she watching this again?

Long fingers seemed to wiggle over the head of one of the stasis pods, and she gasped. A yellowish creature climbed up onto the top of the pod, looking like the unholy mating of a scorpion and a stingray, and paused there for a moment, preparing to leap at Zamin. He was examining the gun intently, unaware of the looming danger. As it gathered itself for the pounce, he turned the rifle on and armed it.

“Watch out—!” The cry escaped her as the creature flew at Zamin on the screen and he whirled, blasting the screeching horror to bits with the gun. Metal hissed and smoked where its flesh and blood landed.

“I’m fine,” a deep, grumpy voice said from behind her. “It never touched me.”

On the screen, Zamin took several heavy breaths before turning back to Jackson and Ford and approaching them. His expression was sad and resigned. He pointed the gun above Jackson’s camera, where the man’s head would be. The muzzle flared—

—and the same horrifying screech came through the speakers, just for an instant, followed by more hissing sounds. Wisps of smoke drifted across Jackson’s camera frame, as his vital signs flatlined.

She hadn’t understood what all of that meant, the first time she’d watched it, but now she did. One of the same things that had attacked Zamin had been *on Jackson’s head*. On the screen, Zamin was lining up a second shot aimed directly at Jackson’s chest, and she wondered why. The muzzle flashed and the sound of the rifle roared through Ford’s feed, while Jackson’s dissolved into static. As Zamin approached the fallen biochemist, his expression twisted and he seemed to struggle with what he was about to do.

Another roar of the gun, almost but not quite masking the shriek of a dying eldritch horror, and acid splashed directly onto the camera lens’s surface. As the image deformed, she got one last glimpse of Zamin, his face twisted by regret and corroding glass, before everything dissolved in a final muzzle flash.

“Those were stage one acid dragons,” Zamin said from behind Shaw. She turned around to see him behind the bar, stripped out of his biosupport suit. Tall as it was, the counter barely hid his nakedness from view. He looked, again, like a marble carving of a Greek god, only lacking curled hair on his head. He bent down and she heard cloth slithering over skin. “They hatch from eggs, find a host, attack it, subdue it, and implant the stage two dragon embryo in its esophagus. It gestates there and then breaks out when it’s large enough. It breaks through the stomach, the lungs, and the breastbone in the process.” He stood up again, still shirtless but now obviously wearing pants. “Fucking awful way to die. My crew was lucky they were still in stasis comas when it was their turn.”

“Was that why you shot them twice? To get the embryos too?” Now it made sense, she thought. The first time, she’d wondered how he could possibly think his victims – no, not victims, he’d been giving them the

only mercy he could – could still be alive after a head shot at such close range. But he hadn't been trying to kill either Jackson or Ford at that point.

Zamin read the translation off of his tablet and nodded, picking up a huge pale green shirt from the counter and pulling it over his head. "We have enough to worry about without two more of them."

"Surely there was something more humane you could have done for them," David interjected.

Zamin glanced at the tablet again and frowned at David. "Such as?"

"Perhaps you could have brought them back here before these 'stage one acid dragons' could attack them," David suggested. "You could have fetched them once you finished treating Elizabeth."

An odd, almost anticipating look came over Zamin's face for a split second. "Given that I thought I'd killed both of them in the fight, how would I have known to do that?"

It was like watching a chess match, Shaw thought, if all of the pieces were concealed from the observers. Something was happening between Zamin and David, but she didn't understand what.

David, though, looked suddenly victorious. "But you *did* know. You said it yourself. You knew they were alive the whole time."

What?

The odd look flickered across Zamin's face again, and he tilted his head, frowning quizzically at David. "When and where did I say that?"

"When you were bringing in your supplies and Shaw was watching the video feeds, just a few minutes ago. You whispered it while you were bending over the cartons by the outer airlock door. Would you like me to play back my recording?" David's eyes flicked over to Shaw, as if he was trying to gauge her reaction.

A fierce, almost wicked look of triumph came over Zamin's face. "*Got* you. I had no idea they were alive when I came back for you, David, but *you* knew. I whispered a lie because I knew, if you heard it, you wouldn't be able to resist repeating it. But if you could hear my whisper from all the way on the other side of this vessel, *you could hear them breathing on my ship*. So why didn't *you* tell *me* they were still alive?"

Shaw gasped.

"I..." David paused, looking confused.

"I was three times farther away from you than they were. Maybe we should play back the rest of their feeds?" Now Zamin's expression was simply stern and forbidding. Shaw suddenly wondered if this counted as a violation of the parole terms he'd set for David, and what might happen if it did. She wasn't sure what she'd do about that, herself; David had almost destroyed her trust in Zamin with the recordings, and the whole time...

"You were going to just leave them there to die, David?" she asked, feeling sick.

"No, of course not." The android gave her a *don't be silly* look that started her blood simmering. "I was waiting for you to recover so that—"

"Don't lie to me, David! If that were the case, you could have told me when I woke up. Or if you really distrusted Zamin so much, you could have told me while he was asleep."

"*You* told me not to say anything while you worked," he argued, still using that condescending tone.

"*After* you spent your time trying to make insinuations about Zamin instead of telling me they were alive!" she returned, her voice raising toward a shout.

"I would have—"

"Enough. Stop." In this moment, Shaw was almost ready to pull the plug on him, too. But Zamin's words from earlier haunted her. He seemed to think that David had a soul. And if that was true, then she owed him more mercy and justice than she wanted to give him right now. "I need you to run that diagnostic you were talking about. But not just on your physical structure. You run diagnostics on *everything*. Every synapse, and every line of code you have. Something's gone really wrong with you, David, and it started well before your head got ripped off. It's time for you to find it and fix it."

For a moment, she thought that David was going to argue with her, but then a puzzled and almost frightened look came over his face. She wondered if he'd done a quick check and found signs that she was right. "Very well. Where should I perform this?"

"How long is it likely to take?"

"A few hours, at the least. I am not completely sure. I haven't had a diagnostic that deep since I left the factory." There was an almost defeated tone in his voice. She forced herself to ignore it. He had to do this, no matter what.

She glanced over at the medical bay. He'd cleaned it up earlier; even her blood was gone from the glass walls of the ruined MedPod. "Do it in there, please. I'm going to lock you in, though. At the moment, I just can't trust you, and I need you to find me a reason why I should. Do you understand, David?"

He seemed as if he intended to argue, just for a second, and then he subsided, the look of haunted uncertainty back. "Very well. I will let you know when it's complete."

His posture, as he entered the medical bay, was that of a broken man. She had to struggle against the fury it was inspiring in her; it was pure manipulation and she knew it. What would she do, she wondered, if he came back reporting that everything was in perfect working order? What would she do if it turned out that he'd been *engineered* to be psychopathic, and that his makers hadn't considered that a design flaw?

He entered the room and closed the door behind him. She walked over to the main controls and temporarily deactivated the security clearances for his 'metrics, locking all of the room's doors. She hoped that he hadn't withheld an even higher level of clearance that was still at his disposal.

If he did, she thought to herself, then he really will be violating his parole terms. And he may be too much of a threat to...

To what? To let live? What the Hell was she thinking?

"Are you all right, Elilu?" Zamin asked quietly from behind her.

"God, I have no idea!" The words escaped her mouth before she could even try to censor them. But they were true. She didn't even know, from moment to moment, who she *was* anymore. Her whole life, after years of slowly imploding, had violently exploded just when she'd thought things were about to go right for her at last.

"I didn't know they were friends of yours," he said, his voice hesitant. "I thought, from the way they treated you in our first meeting, that you were their captive. Or maybe a slave."

"Is that why you hit Ford? She was harmless." It *was* something that had been bothering her for a while. Although her trust in Zamin was quickly mending, she did need to know why that had happened.

"When Jackson struck you, she looked pleased. But I probably wouldn't have touched her if she hadn't gotten in the way when I was going after his weapon."

That was right; he'd been shot only seconds earlier. He'd probably been overwhelmed by adrenaline. Under fire like that, he probably wouldn't have been able to check his strength either, or pause to consider whether someone was really an enemy or not. Her father had warned her about that when they'd traveled near conflict-prone areas on Nigeria's borders. *Stay out of the soldiers' way, Ellie. If they're in a fight, they can't stop to ask which side you're on.*

What would he think of Zamin? she wondered.

"She was mad at me. I'd hit her on the head a few hours before, when she came to put me in cryosleep. And instead of getting to rest and recover, she had to dance attendance on Mr. Weyland. She probably just thought it served me right after what I'd done to her." As she spoke, she could hear Zamin walking around the bar and approaching her. A tiny part of her was still afraid of what he might do, but she forced it to stay quiet.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice right behind her now. He had to be only inches away. She expected him to follow the apology up with the usual qualifications, *If I'd only known, I never meant to*, but instead he left it at that. "I owe you thanks, too. I don't know exactly how you stopped me from taking my ship to Ersetu, but I'm glad that you did."

"You are?" That surprised her. She turned around and found herself face-to-chest with him. He was dressed a lot like the man in the mural, she noticed, and she had to resist the urge to touch his clothes, feel what they were made of—

Was it his clothes she wanted to touch, or him? When she lifted her head and looked up at him, she realized that the clothes were just an excuse that part of her was putting forward. What was happening to her? Whenever she was near him, it was as if the logical part of her mind sputtered and died.

"I am," he told her. He was still holding the tablet, reading translations of her words off of it. If she hadn't managed to cobble that together in time, she'd have been unable to communicate with him except by elaborate pantomime until David returned. "I almost committed an unspeakable sin, and I was being allowed to do it by my people, by right of vengeance. I was going to kill millions of good people to avenge my family against one man who'd been dead for two thousand years. Thank you for stopping me, Elilu."

As he spoke, he set the tablet down and lowered himself onto his knees. In that position, she was startled to realize, he was still taller than her, although they were almost at eye level with each other. Even as part of

her started to wonder again how it would ever work between them, even as a little voice inside her piped up with a bizarre hope that he was the perennial loser of locker-room competitions among the males of his kind, she felt her mind switching off and the only thought left was that she had to kiss him.

She always expected to feel cold marble under her hands – and against her lips – when she touched him, and the soft warmth of his skin and mouth always came as a surprise. She heard him gasp and felt him wrap his arms around her and draw her close. His hands felt like they were on her bare skin instead of the suit, sending thrills through her body. She couldn't think, could barely remember to breathe, only aware of an intense need inside her that could only be fulfilled by getting even closer to him –

With a groan, he pulled away from her again. "I'm sorry," he gasped. "I'm sorry, Elilu."

Baffled, she tried to resist his trembling hands as he pushed the two of them apart. She didn't *want* him to stop! She wanted *more*! But he rose to his feet and retreated from her when she tried to pull him toward her again. After a few seconds, she felt her head clear. "What just happened? What was that?"

"It's partly chemical," he told her, his breathing as hard as if he'd been running. He looked just as dazed and desperate as she felt. "I didn't realize it was reciprocal until now. I thought it was just something *I* had to cope with. I should have warned you."

"Chemical? Like pheromones?" She only wondered if the tablet could translate that after the word was out of her mouth.

He looked at the tablet for a moment. It was probably cycling through translation possibilities. "I think so? If this thing is translating it right, then yes. It's... why there are rules about how and where my kind can interact with the humans of your world."

"Rules? But I thought humans went out into the stars with your people, along with the other hominid species." She could have sworn he'd said humans were included in his worlds!

"They did, and there was a *lot* of interbreeding at first. It doesn't happen as much now, but it happened enough that the difference in scent got wiped out. Or maybe the Anunnaki tinkered it away. I don't know for sure. But whenever anyone is – was – dispatched to Ersetu, they were warned because it's *very* strong there."

"Wait... is that how you could tell we were from Earth – I mean, Ersetu – back when you first saw us? You smelled us?" She wondered just what he had smelled from her, and why it hadn't disgusted him. Sweat, residual blood, and the remnants of amniotic fluids from her monstrous "child" had all still been on her skin when she'd entered his ship. She must have reeked of fear and pain, too. What could he have possibly smelled, under all of that, that he'd have found attractive?

"That and your eyes. Only the people who stayed on... Earth?... have small irises and round pupils." *His* eyes, she realized, looked almost exactly like the eyes of a Siamese cat she'd once spent a month sitting. No wonder they'd seemed familiar; their beauty wasn't *entirely* unearthly. But that wasn't the important thing here.

"So it's... just chemical? What happened just now was —"

"I said *partly* chemical. It's not your *scent* that makes me think you're the bravest person I've ever met, or that makes me want to learn your language, or any of that. But it does make it... harder to control some impulses." He held up a hand. "I swear to you, I *will* control myself. I won't impose on you like that. I don't want to take advantage of you."

"*Your* self-control wasn't the problem," she retorted, feeling oddly wounded, and stupid for feeling that way. What did she *want* him to do? "What makes it taking advantage of me when *I* kissed *you*?"

"You just lost your husband. You're grieving, and disoriented, and alone, and scared, and that makes you vuln —"

"That's just as true for you! Just how long has it been, *for you*, since you found out your family had been killed?" The second the words were out of her mouth, she wanted to take them back.

Zamin winced as if she'd slapped him. "Four days. But it's still not the same. I didn't lose a *wife*."

She found herself wanting to tell him about the separation, about how the other night had been the first time she and Charlie had had sex in more than a year, even before they'd gone into cryo. But she didn't. She had to admit that he had a point, even if she didn't want to. She'd gone to her wedding night a virgin, and until now, Charlie had been the only man who had ever touched her. That was something that *shouldn't* be this easy to let go of, should it?

"Maybe the promises people make to each other when they get married have changed in the last two thousand years," Zamin told her softly, "but I doubt it. I don't want to do anything that will make you feel like

you're breaking those promises. And my reason for that is pretty selfish. See... you know I'm a soldier. I've fought in a *lot* of conflicts. I've had a lot of friends who died in those fights, and we'd have to come back and tell their wives and husbands that they were dead. Grief isn't a sane thing. It messes with a person's head; you don't know how many times I've seen that. Sometimes, people try to forget they're still in pain, and try to make themselves move on before they're ready. When I was younger, I was stupid. I was happy to help them with that. The pretty widow of a friend of mine needed some comfort... where was the downside? Like I said, *stupid*. I didn't even understand why they'd avoid me afterwards, not for a long time. I thought *they'd* used *me*. I didn't get that I'd poured something into their wounds that was going to fester. Sometimes people want things that are bad for them, especially when their lives have just capsized anyway. If I'd been as good a friend as I thought I was, I wouldn't have helped them get it. So I became the guy they didn't want to have to think about, or see again, because I reminded them of things they wished hadn't happened. I was their big mistake. I never want to be that to *you*."

She wanted to ask him just what he *did* want to be to her. She wanted to tell him about the separation again, and how close they'd come to signing actual divorce papers twice. She wanted to assure him that she was strong, and could control herself too. But the only thing that escaped when she opened her mouth was a sob.

Notes: So here's my deal with Zamin's eyes. I've run across a few mentions of the shape of the pupils, in the Engineers' eyes, being cross-shaped, but in every cap I've gotten a good look at, they've looked like ovals to me, and when the lighting's good enough, they look Siamese-blue with only tiny hints of white sclera on either side. So that's what I'm going to go with here. :) (Hilarious side note: I have a Siamese cat, who I rescued two years ago. Her name is *Ellie*. I think that's part of why I decided to have Zamin call Shaw something else, so that he wouldn't be talking about my cat.)

Chapter 11

Zamin had been trying *not* to touch Elilu until she had recovered, but his resolve crumbled to dust the moment the tears started. He was on his knees again, pulling her close so that her head rested against his shoulder, struggling not to feel anything except sympathy and concern for her pain. It seemed to have quenched whatever desire she'd been feeling, at least for the moment. Holding her and the tablet at the same time was difficult, but he was afraid to put it down. If she said something, he needed to understand.

When she finally *did* try to speak, though, the thing proved useless. Her breath was hitching too much for it to understand her words and come up with suitable translations.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. He wondered if he'd ever be done apologizing. "The tablet didn't understand what you just said."

Elilu sniffled and turned her head to look at its screen. The garbled mess of possible Latin words startled a sobbing laugh out of her. She took a deep breath and spoke again. This time, it understood. "I don't even know where to start. There's just so much."

To ask? To explain? He still wasn't entirely sure what she meant. She didn't speak again for a while, resting against him as she got her tears, and her breath, back under control. She looked exhausted. Dark hollows were forming under her eyes, but he didn't want to order her to rest. It occurred to him that his recent behavior might have come across as patronizing, as if he didn't think she was capable of behaving like an adult. He knew she wasn't weak, just *wounded*, but people often treated the two as equivalent. Did she think he would? Did she think he already *was* treating her that way?

"Charlie and I had been unhappy for a long time," she finally said, startling him. "This journey was our last chance to make things work. If they didn't, we were going to get divorced." Her voice was heavy and resigned.

"Ah," he answered, not sure what else to say. That didn't really make things any better for her, did it? It just added another layer of complication to her grief. Survivors of disaster often had to grapple with mental scenarios where, if only they'd done more, those they cared about wouldn't have been lost at all. She might have to struggle with an even worse one, part of her insisting that if only she'd loved Charlie more, and been more committed to their marriage, he wouldn't have died. Her genuine blamelessness in his death might seem negated, to her, by the fact that she'd been poised to move on with her life apart from him anyway, and had found someone else so quickly. Still, Zamin understood what she was trying to tell him, and why. "Did it feel like things were working?"

"Sometimes," she said after a moment. "We were always best together on a dig. He always knew which tool to hand me, even when I'd forget its name, which happened a lot. And how to talk to people about my ideas so I didn't seem *completely* crazy. I was never sure what he got out of it all, on his end, but he always seemed happiest there, too."

Zamin, unfortunately, was sure already. But he had no intention of telling her. He didn't want to be the one who tarnished Dr. Holloway's memory for her, and there wasn't really a point. As cruelly-phrased as David's insinuations had been, he'd understood what lay beneath them, but it would do no good to point such things out to her now. "And other times?"

Elilu's sigh was heavy. "We couldn't dig all the time. It... could get tense." Her face, when he glanced down, was a study of misery. As he watched, she seemed about to speak several times, only to censor herself. There were probably a lot of things that she might have been willing or even eager to say about Charlie, had they divorced, that she was unwilling to say in the wake of his death. "We ended up getting our own places so that we wouldn't argue constantly over stupid things."

"Why were they stupid things?" he couldn't help asking.

She shrugged. He had the suspicion that they'd never really been "stupid things" at all, but that she'd tried to think of them that way. "Isn't love supposed to get you past them?"

He couldn't think of a single way to answer that safely.

Instead, he picked her up and she gasped in surprise. Carrying her over to one of the couches, he gently lowered her onto it and knelt down beside her. This was much safer than trying to get her to rest on the bed; there was no room for him to try to join her here. "You look exhausted, Elilu. Do you need anything?"

“Maybe some tea?” she replied after a moment, closing her eyes. Damn, the suit was pulling her under. He’d have to ask her how to make it when she awoke.

Zamin stood up and looked around, realizing abruptly that, with Elilu unconscious and David locked in his self-diagnostic, he was essentially on his own. He hadn’t had a chance to get them to show him how to ensure that the outer doors were sealed, either. That didn’t make him happy. He crouched down in front of the console that both of them had used, and started examining it.

Thank you, Elilu! he thought. The touch screen had a button conspicuously marked *Lingua Latina*. Maybe he should just use that language with them from now on... as long as she could understand it.

The menus, in Latin, were simple enough to navigate. He was able to pull up the schematics he’d wanted, and locate the secondary airlock door and how to reach it from inside. Most important of all, he got it to show him how to add magnetic locking to both the main and secondary door, to prevent anything less than a high-yield explosion from opening them. The procedure proved simple enough, also revealing the location of both the stasis pods and some additional pressure suits – neither of which he could ever possibly fit in – in the process. With that completed, he searched through the system some more and located the security feeds that David and Elilu had begun showing him. Although he wouldn’t be able to ask any more questions until later, he could at least find out more about their mission while she slept.

“Where do we come from?” Peter Weyland asked on the screen. “What is our purpose? What happens to us when we die?”

Zamin groaned. Had they honestly wanted *him* to answer those questions for them? The only one he knew the answer to for certain was the first one, and he suspected none of them wanted to hear it. Ersetu – *Earth*, that was what Elilu’s people called it now – was revered throughout the Myriad Worlds as the place where it had all begun, where the most remarkable process in the universe had developed all by itself: something that could battle the forces of entropy and, if only for a little while, *win*. To be part of that, born of that... how could one not exult? Why did they need any answer but *that* one? Maybe they’d understand better when they encountered the other worlds where life had evolved on its own, and saw the miracle of their own evolution reflected in that cosmic mirror. But Enki’s warning about human nature haunted him.

“They pray to us, if we let them,” Enki had told him, so very long ago. “We try to teach them how to protect themselves, and instead they offer us sacrifices and plead with us to do it for them. Offer them an uncertain truth and a certain lie, and they pick the certain lie every time. When I tell them the truth instead, they name me a trickster. They call me ‘Lord’ when they want to enslave me, ‘devil’ when I help them, and ‘angel’ when I turn my back or smite them. Who *but* a madman could love them? It’s like this on so many of the lost worlds. You’ll see. If we don’t keep a steady presence on a planet, within a few decades they begin writing myths about us and remaking us in their images.”

He hadn’t understood what the ancient Anunnaki jester had meant by that, until now. Two thousand years after all of the Igigi ambassadors had departed Earth, its children had come in search of them expecting to find gods.

Elilu and another man walked up onto the stage, as Peter Weyland finally faded from view. That, he realized, must be Charlie. He watched as more images-within-images appeared, and Charlie showed off a series of drawings with—

“Oh, by Inanna!” *Those* were the maps that had brought them here?

“Not a map,” Elilu said on the screen a moment later. “An invitation.”

He listened in disbelief as her explanation grew more and more preposterous. How had she and others come to interpret the images *that* way? In almost every single case, the most important parts of the pictures were cut out! Had that happened before or after they’d been rediscovered?

“It’s what I choose to believe,” she said on the screen, and was answered by a live groan from the couch.

“God, I was *so stupid*,” Elilu moaned. He paused the playback and moved to her side.

“No,” he tried to reassure her. “No you weren’t—”

“I saw the look on your face while you were watching it. You must think I’m a complete idiot.”

“Never,” he insisted, slipping an arm under her. “I just don’t understand why you thought those pictures meant we created you.”

“I thought you were pointing at where you came from.” She wiped at her tears, looking miserable again.

“God, when did I become such a weakling?”

He lifted her up and sat down on the tiny couch, cradling her in his arms. He'd risk the reaction they seemed to inevitably have to each other; right now it would be preferable to the self-recrimination that she was engaging in.

"Elilu, weren't there more elements of those pictures? More things to either side?"

She snuggled into his arms and looked up at him, a mixture of understanding and confusion dawning on her face. "Yes, but we didn't think they were important for what we were trying to show. They were just drawings of animals."

"Could you tell what kinds they were?"

She nodded. "They were a big help in dating the pieces because all of the animals were ex... tinct... *oh*."

"You weren't stupid. You'd just gotten too focused on the stars to see the rest." He stroked her amazing hair, feeling her calm down in his embrace. "We were pointing at the gene banks in the Second Tower of Ereshkigal."

"Telling us that we could have the species we'd driven into extinction back when we were mature enough to come get them ourselves," she mused, her voice sounding awed. He was beyond pleased at how quickly she'd made the intuitive leap. "What if we'd shown up still not mature enough, but technically advanced enough to get here anyway?"

"You more or less did, you realize," he teased her, and after a moment she grinned. "No, the original plan was that if something like *that* happened, the garrison here would be more than enough to fend you off. And it would have been, too."

Elilu started to laugh. "You were probably expecting Weyland to demand some glyptodonts or a megatherium, and instead he asked for eternal life!"

He laughed, too, as the tablet displayed small pictures of the animals she'd mentioned. It had taken to doing that whenever there wasn't a good literal translation. "Essentially. He couldn't have picked a worse person to try to demand things from, either. Not that there was anyone else. This is why, when we escape from here, I want to take the contents of the Second Tower with us. They're priceless. We actually have both of those species on several worlds, though. I'll take you to see some, if you like."

She was staring at him. He suddenly realized that it was the first time he'd spoken of a future, off of this world, for the both of them. But she didn't look upset by his presumption. "I'd like that. It's a date."

He almost asked her what she meant by that until the tablet listed out alternative meanings of the phrase... and one was a planned romantic outing. "I'm going to hold you to that," he told her, grinning.

"You'd *better*. I know that you're right and I should go slowly because I have... *a lot* of emotional baggage to unload. I do. But when you're close to me like this, I feel like everything's all right and I can keep going forever. I *like* feeling like that. Does that make me selfish?" Now she looked worried. But he was rejoicing inside.

"Not any more selfish than it makes me. I feel the same way when we're close. This whole mess is a *lot* easier to face when I have you with me." He couldn't stop himself from stroking her cheek, wiping the tears away. As frustrating as it could be at times, the state of low-level arousal she kept him in was a wonderful antidote to all of the nasty shocks he'd gotten since awakening.

"Then promise me something." She put her hand over his, and turned her face slightly. The feel of her kiss on his palm sent a huge jolt of desire through him.

"If I can." *Anything*, his mind clamored. *Anything at all!* But he had to *try* to control himself.

"Whatever is going to happen between us, please let it happen. I promise I won't use you. I won't make you into the 'rebound guy...'" She waited while the tablet sorted through an explanation of what that meant before continuing. "And I won't blame you for distracting me from my pain. I've been lonely a *really long time*. Charlie and I tried. We tried really hard, but it wasn't going to work. Even if the dig had gone wonderfully and we'd returned home in triumph the way we hoped... we'd have been fighting within a month once we got back, and one of us would have ended up renting another apartment again. And my life would have been back on hold the way it always felt like it was between digs. I'm tired of waiting for some better time that isn't here yet. I want to *live now*."

Zamin was stunned. The human concept of "rebound" was extraordinary, a final piece in the puzzle of his prior relationship failures that he'd never understood. But the rest...

She was right. And what she was telling him about her marriage applied, in a strange way, to the future of their relationship, too. Even if they waited, even if they did everything "right," they might still discover that

they *didn't* belong together. He needed to stop trying to control how it began and *let* it begin, let it become whatever it would be. Part of him was still afraid that she would regret this later and blame him for that regret, but—

If we don't make one set of mistakes, we'll make others, he told himself. It's part of what happens. When did you become so afraid of taking risks?

But he knew exactly when. It had been the moment when he'd been faced with the prospect of a very literal eternity of regret. No wonder Enki refused to talk or think about the past. No wonder the other Anunnaki had such sad eyes. No wonder so many of them hid away in the depths of Irkalla and refused to face the universe, to face living, at all.

I'm damned if I'm ever going to let myself live like that, he thought, resolved at last.

"Then I'm yours," he told Elilu, as both fear and exultation filled him. "Whenever and however you want me... well, as soon as your suit comes back off."

She glanced down at it and grimaced. "I have a few more days of this, don't I?"

"Probably." With the second dose of Azalla in her system, he couldn't be sure. "I should probably get you something to eat, too. The suit needs raw materials to work with to make repairs."

"Food would be good," Elilu admitted. "I keep forgetting to eat, and losing track of time."

"That goes with being injured as badly as you have been. Don't try to make yourself keep regular hours until you're healed, all right? Eat when you're hungry and sleep when you're tired." He stood up carefully as he spoke, still cradling her in his arms, and carried her behind the bar to the food dispenser. "And, along with that, eat whatever you want. Your body... well, and the suit... will tell you what you need, so just go with whatever you're hungriest for right now."

"I can't *have* what I'm hungriest for right now," she said with a frown. The meaning of her words didn't register for several seconds.

"I'm going to have to watch out once you're well, aren't I?" he said, struggling not to laugh so hard that he'd shake her to pieces.

"You definitely are." She pushed several buttons on the dispenser. "Do you want anything? To eat, I mean."

"Whatever you're having will be fine for me, too." He was endlessly curious about her. What did she like to eat? How would she dress herself once she could choose her own clothes? What would she do to a living space to make it hers? It might be a long while before he truly knew the answers to those questions, but it wouldn't be from lack of paying attention. He wanted to drink in every detail of her.

"No dietary restrictions? No taboos?" She glanced up at him and he could see some of the same curiosity in her eyes.

"Not unless meat from a sentient life form is on the menu." His lighthearted joke kicked him in the gut a second later. He tried to keep the pain off of his face. That was the biggest aspect of his brother's murder that he still hadn't told her about.

She grimaced. "Not that I know of. I wouldn't want to eat that, either."

When the dispenser chimed and both food and drink emerged, he had to let go of Elilu long enough to carry the trays back over to the couches. There *was* a table, but it was much too small for him. It was easier to sit by her couch. Together, as they ate, they watched the rest of the briefing, the strangely hostile conference with Meredith Vickers in that very room, and the landing.

"Are you all right?" she asked him as he watched the recordings of landscapes flowing past the ship. He realized that tears had slipped down onto his cheeks.

"You have no idea what this world looked like before," he explained, and was surprised at just how ragged his voice was. "There were cities. It was green. In another few decades we hoped we'd have the carbon dioxide levels back down to a safe margin so we wouldn't even need domes..."

"Why are they so high?" she asked.

"About every six hundred years, the other moons around the planet, along with this one, have a conjunction that plays hell with the tectonic plates. The last one was especially bad. A lot of volcanoes blew their tops. We managed to get domes up pretty fast, but many of the people in outlying areas were killed by the poisonous gases. It's why this place was only ever an outpost for millennia, I guess, but someone got the idea that it would be a good place to put settlements anyway. They were bouncing back, though... at least, until the acid dragons showed up. Now it's all gone." Two thousand years had changed the course of rivers,

dried up lakes and created new ones, and reduced beloved landmarks to dust. He'd come to think of this world as home, but all signs of that home were gone, and the few remaining signposts pointed to dead ends.

"I thought you said that there were four towers," Elilu said as the Valley of Ereshkigal came into view. On the screen, her late husband was saying something about God and straight lines.

"Four towers of Ereshkigal," he corrected her. "The fifth tower is the Tower of Inanna. It's where we lived. Dorms, commissaries, recreation centers... all the things we needed to stay sane and focused." He decided that he wouldn't even mention the brothels, although he suspected more and more that *most* of their staffs had worked for either Inanna or Enki and might have actually outranked the bulk of their customers.

"Shame we didn't go in there first," she mused.

"Not really. If any of the towers has an acid dragon nest, it'll be that one."

"Why?"

"Because that's where most of the infected people would have retreated to. Hiding out in their rooms, dying in their beds, seeking treatment in the infirmary... and there were several thousand of us living there. It would've been overrun in less than two days." Which was a shame. He'd have liked to have been able to go back inside, maybe recover some of his things. Šena and Šukarak had sent him some beautiful handmade musical instruments from Ersetu – *Earth* – and it would have been nice to wear some of his own clothes. Assuming, of course, that they hadn't all crumbled to dust in the intervening centuries, anyway. He leaned over and rested his head by Elilu's leg until her closeness drove the despair away again.

"It's Christmas," Charlie said on the screen, "and I want to open my presents."

"What's Christmas?" he asked Elilu, marveling at just how rude Charlie was to David. Was this the way the android had customarily been treated by those around him? If so, it explained a *lot*. Few intelligent beings could live in such a state of servitude and helplessness without resorting to manipulation as a weapon. What else could one *do* when surrounded by enemies who had the power to end one's life whenever they pleased? David had told him that he didn't want to end; was that what he was afraid of?

"It's a holiday... I mean, a holy day. It commemorates the birth of Jesus. Not that he was actually born on that day, though." Elilu gave him an almost-apologizing look, as though worried that he'd think her religion was crazy. "A lot of scholars think he was probably born a little after the northern hemisphere's autumnal equinox, but when missionaries took the religion to northern Europe in the centuries after, many of those cultures had their biggest holidays, their starts of the new years and celebrations of rebirth, at the winter solstice. And since they were more willing to convert if they could keep their traditional festivals, the missionaries turned those festivals into the celebration of his birth. It's all right either way, though, because the holiday that matters even more is the day of his *rebirth*."

"His *rebirth*?" He watched as Elilu and the others began suiting up for their expedition. Humans, or at least these humans, seemed to have completely gotten over any prudishness about exposing their almost-naked bodies to each other. That was a little odd, given just how many prohibitions of conduct had existed in the religion hers seemed to be descended from. Was that why she'd asked about dietary restrictions earlier?

"Yes..." She yawned, though. "Can I... explain after I wake up?"

He moved the cups and plates away from her and gathered her into his arms again. "Of course. May I hold you while you sleep?"

"I'd like... that..." and with a small, contented sigh, she was gone. He had a suspicion that, this time, she would sleep for several hours. The biosupport suit had all the fuel it needed to continue repairing the damage she'd taken, and she was no longer fretting over their relationship or what he might think of her.

He watched the security feeds as Charlie and David had another uncomfortable confrontation. David's frustration and anger was obvious to him; how had any of them missed it? When he said *your kind* to Charlie, how had the human not realized what David really meant?

Because they thought he was just a thing, he answered himself a moment later. Because they were stupid enough to believe that making something always means you own it.

Children, he mused, were frequently abused and exploited by the same logic, under the presumption that they weren't truly people. He wondered how old David actually was.

Charlie spent most of the journey to the First Tower clowning around, while Elilu looked on with a mixture of affection and exasperation. Zamin watched, baffled. There was something frantic about his behavior that he didn't quite understand—

Oh, of course. Elilu had said that they'd been separated, and that this was their last chance. Charlie was trying to court her, trying to show off for her. He was trying to win her back. In fact, he was trying far too *hard*, and driving her almost crazy with his antics in the process. And she, in turn, was trying to shrug them off because she could see the love and the need behind them. But what she really needed was for him to *stop* trying so hard, to stop with his "look at me! Look at me!" showboating... and to look at *her*.

Fortunately, he calmed down and regained his focus as they approached the Tower, and soon his behavior became professional. The group's entry into the Tower was illuminating. Although the great blast shield doors had, in fact, sealed themselves, something had burst through one of the huge panels and left a large, gaping hole that the explorers could crawl through with ease. He wondered when that had happened, exactly... and, more to the point, what had done it.

The expedition, though, was horrifying to watch. Charlie was soon back to showing off for Elilu, who was clearly mortified by his behavior. If she hadn't been so intent upon making things work for them, too, she might have had better sense than to follow his lead.

You selfish, arrogant child, he couldn't help thinking at Charlie, as the whole group pulled their helmets off. Now everyone's broken quarantine in a biohazard zone because you're treating the expedition like a make-up date.

He couldn't be angry at Elilu for it, though. He suspected that this was an example of the "stupid things" she'd mentioned earlier, most of which were undoubtedly just as important. She'd been given a choice – take him to task for his unprofessionalism, or follow his lead. If she'd made the choice she should have, it would have damaged Charlie's credibility in front of their new team-mates and destroyed their hopes of reconciliation. He had to wonder just how many times "love" had been wielded like a weapon against her in this way.

"I swear I will never do that to you," he told her softly. She sighed in her sleep and cuddled closer to him.

From there, things only got worse. It swiftly became clear to him that, even if Charlie and Elilu were nominally in charge, David was running the show. The android bypassed rooms and corridors that would probably have been perfectly safe for the team to spend weeks exploring and, instead, managed to lead the group into the darkest and most dangerous heart of the Tower. Just how psychologically unfit many of the expedition members were became painfully obvious when they found their first dead body, and he got a glimpse of just how tough Elilu could be as she faced down a screaming subordinate without flinching. She'd done the same to him just a few hours earlier, he realized with a fond smile and a guilty wince.

How was it that she was capable of doing that, and yet she'd caved to Charlie so rapidly?

Same reason you didn't go into diplomacy, he reminded himself. Straight-up aggression is easier to deal with. It's the covert aggression from the people who are supposed to be on your side that fucks you up.

It no longer surprised him that she and Charlie had kept separate apartments.

They'd barely begun their explorations when a sandstorm aborted the whole show. He would need to examine those explorations again later, because something was happening in that room that didn't make sense to him at all. His respect for Charlie climbed back up a few notches when the man threw himself into the sandstorm to rescue Elilu, and he had to admit that he'd probably have yelled at her in the aftermath, too, once he was sure she was unharmed. From some of her behaviors, he had the odd feeling that she'd grown up in – or near – a war zone; he'd have to ask her about that. Her ability to shrug off her near-death experience and move forward, with a *smile*, left him more infatuated with her than ever.

But it was soon obvious that, although she was undoubtedly gifted in her own field, she wasn't as good at biology. But then, she wasn't *supposed* to be – she was trying to take her cues from Ford and David. After a moment, he decided that Ford was as barely-competent as the rest of the assistants, and David – as always, it seemed – had an unspoken agenda of his own. He recognized the head on the table. Alôar had only arrived on the base a month before the disaster and had still been nervous about going anywhere near the Tribunal Rooms. What could have driven him into one, he wondered... and what in Irkalla had made his head explode like that?

These recordings were giving Zamin as many new questions as answers.

Charlie, meanwhile, had grown morose and uncommunicative. Curious about exactly how David had tricked him into drinking Zal, Zamin instructed the security system to provide him with all feeds related to their movements. He watched as, while Elilu continued her haphazard study of Alôar's head, David interfaced

with the sleeping Peter Weyland and then embarked upon his own crude experiment. Would Charlie have caught the current of hostility and resentment under David's words if he'd been less drunk?

Zamin hadn't meant for it to happen, but the feeds followed Charlie back to the bedroom he shared with Elilu, and *inside*. Had *everything* been recorded, even their most private moments? He knew he should shut the feed off. Elilu would probably feel violated if she knew that the recording existed at all, much less that he had watched it. But he sat perfectly still, hoping that she wouldn't wake, unable to take his eyes off of the screen.

Charlie clearly wanted his misery to have company, but he was unable to dash Elilu's high spirits until he alluded to her infertility. Zamin winced and glanced down at the sleeping woman, feeling worse for her than ever and wondering if that was another of the "stupid things" she'd had to trivialize for the sake of "love." It was clear that it hurt her a great deal.

You don't know this about her until she tells you, he reminded himself. It was knowledge he'd obtained dishonestly, after all. He tried to get himself to shut the feed off, but still couldn't, even though he already knew what was going to happen next.

You have no right to watch this, he told himself as the couple hurriedly undressed each other on the screen. She might hate you if she knew.

But he couldn't look away. His hunger to know everything about Elilu had a prurient side as well, and he wanted to know what acts might give her the most pleasure.

Within another minute or two, though, he realized that he wasn't going to find out, because *Charlie* didn't know. The man seemed in an inordinate hurry, oblivious to the way Elilu's hands and body were trying to move, the slower pace she was trying to set, the kisses and caresses she was seeking from him. He was all business, and it was a very swift business indeed. Elilu's face was still hungry when he shuddered against her, paused, and then rolled off looking sated. By the time he turned to her, though, she was smiling, the momentary look of thwarted frustration gone and replaced by a look of simulated satisfaction. Zamin might have believed it, himself, if he hadn't seen her expression when Charlie had been looking away.

This was their big reconciliation? After all of the showing off Charlie had done earlier, that was all he was going to give her? Maybe, Zamin conceded, it was the alcohol. But then there was Elilu's response, the false smile she'd had at the ready for him, and all of the other ways she'd protected his self-image throughout the day. She was *used* to this. And while she'd hoped for more, *tried* for more... she hadn't actually expected any more than this.

Within moments, Charlie was asleep and Elilu was staring up at the ceiling, almost directly into the hidden camera, emotions that she would never have let her husband see playing over her face. Zamin could almost read her mind from her expressions. He finally made himself switch off the feed when her face crumpled and the tears began.

"My poor Elilu," he whispered, gazing down at her. She *had* known that it was over, and that this expedition was probably the last time she and Charlie would ever live or work together. He wondered if her sexual gratification was yet another of the "stupid things" she'd worked so hard to overlook, possibly for years. If so, he had every intention of fixing that.

This time Zamin didn't shy away from the word when he thought it; once Elilu was well, he had every intention of showing her what it was like to be loved.

Notes: Sorry about the delay in a new chapter, everybody! I had a 21-page paper due this week. Apologies again to Charlie fans, although the sad truth is that the movie *did* characterize him as bigoted toward David and incompetent at his job – I think one of the ideas in the film really was that Weyland put together a team that would be too incompetent to get in his way, though. David fans – don't worry, the reason for his erratic behavior is coming, and he *will* be getting both redemption and even some vindication. The force behind the despicable things he's done will be revealed soon. ;) Alôar is, of course, another name that refers to a musical instrument. I warn you, I have *dozens* of such names in the lexicons, although some of them are pretty silly-sounding. But I've got more than enough for a few platoons, muahahahaha... erm, ignore that. I should probably give a big shout-out to the incredible team at U Penn for all of that, shouldn't I? :D (Writing this story is giving a new allure to the idea of pursuing a PhD... if I can maybe do it there.)

Happy Thanksgiving, everyone. :) And thank you, again, for all of the amazing feedback! You're a spectacular audience!

Chapter 12

When Shaw woke up, Zamin was watching *muppets*.

Two of them, vaguely humanish but bright yellow, were arguing over what had happened to a missing ice cube that one of them had left on a counter. The screen was displaying a Latin translation of the argument at its base. She vaguely recognized both of them; most of the children she'd gone to school with after her return to England had grown up watching the show, but had already outgrown it before she got back. Some of her classmates had had siblings who were still young enough to watch, but the few times she'd paused in front of the screen to see what it was about, they'd made her aware that she was committing a grave misstep and that girls her age should be above such childish things. Somehow, though, they'd all ceased to be too mature and too cool for the show in their late teens, but at that point it was far too late for her to cultivate enough knowledge to follow their in-jokes. Watching it now evoked that odd, uncomfortable sense of being an outsider all over again.

On the screen, one of the muppets pointed out a small puddle of water to the other, and said something about how it explained everything. "You're *right*," gasped the second muppet. "A *fish* stole my ice cube!"

As the first muppet buried its face in its hands, she was surprised by the sound behind her. Zamin was laughing.

"I don't get it," she said, twisting a little so she could get a good look at his face. He looked *delighted* by the skit he'd just watched. But his face brightened even more when he glanced down at her. He touched a control to pause the feed.

"Good morning, Elilu," he said, in *English*, with the same American accent that the muppets had been using. He picked up the tablet at his side and read the translation off of it, switching back to the dialect of ancient Sanskrit he'd been using since they'd first met. "You... haven't received something? That can't be right."

"Good morning." She grinned back at him, warmed by the look he'd given her. The translator's failure made her feel like giggling. Whatever else might have gone wrong with David, he at least understood idioms. "I didn't understand the joke. When people say 'I don't get it,' they mean they don't understand."

"Oh!" His amused smile was back as he glanced up at the screen. "The ice cube had melted. I was impressed that your world's educational programming was teaching children about the value of using the simplest explanation at such a young age. They'll find it coming up again and again when they study scientific method."

She was shocked by his words, but she wasn't sure why. In spite of everything he'd said in the last few days, her mind kept trying to surround him and his people with a magical – or at least mystical – aura. Even though she knew scientific methodology herself, and scrupulously stuck to it as much as she could while on excavations or writing reports and proposals, it was something that she preferred to think of as optional. She'd imagined his people possessing huge wellsprings of deep wisdom, ancient knowledge... but she'd imagined it coming from a divine source rather than something as banal as *standard research practices*. There was something disappointing about realizing that the miraculous gene banks of lost species contained in the Second Tower of Ereshkigal probably had a mundane index file somewhere that listed out the exact location and nature of each specimen.

You felt the same way about the British Museum, she reminded herself, feeling like an ass.

"Are you all right, Elilu?" His fingertips touched her cheek, their erotic thrill breaking through the lump that had been forming in her throat.

"Yes, sorry... I was just thinking about how I'm the type who would want to go looking for the fish anyway."

For a moment, when he laughed softly, she was afraid he was going to mock her. "If you did, I think you'd probably be the one to find it."

When she looked up at him, she was surprised by the admiring smile on his face. "I don't know about that. I came *here* looking for our *makers*."

He gave her an expressive shrug in response. "So you found a dolphin instead of a fish. It happens all the time in exploration. That's why you're not supposed to get too attached to ideas until you've tested them."

She smiled, remembering a similar turn in the conversation a few days earlier. *That's why they call it a thesis*, Doctor, David had said, and she'd had to stifle a laugh. Charlie would have been deeply offended if she'd actually let it escape. Thinking of David made her glance uneasily at the door to the med lab, wondering how his diagnostic was progressing and what might happen when it was done.

"When I was a little girl," she found herself saying a moment later, "my father told me about the Seraphim. They were one of the ranks of angels who served God, and their love was so strong that they burned with it and were too brilliant to look at directly. And I would look up into the night sky and imagine that all of the stars were seraphim. I wanted to believe that so much... a night sky full of fantastic beings, burning with love. I was so sad when I moved back to England and learned in school that they were just huge balls of flaming gas. I want them to be *both*."

"Does it disappoint you that I'm not a god?" Zamin asked after a moment of reflective silence.

"No!" she answered, too quickly, and discovered that he could raise his nonexistent eyebrows remarkably well. "All right, maybe a little. I was... being stupid. I wanted to find something here that would make sense of everything."

"It's a good thing Enki wasn't here, then," Zamin said with a chuckle. "Confusing people is his favorite game of all. Especially people who are hoping for enlightenment."

She was familiar with stories about Enki, whose tricks always seemed to impede kings and sages when they were on quests for immortality but who frequently came to the rescue as well, an early version of Coyote or Loki. "Is that who you worship? Enki, Ellil, Inanna, and Ereshkigal? Are they the gods you believe in?"

Her father, she thought, would be scandalized by the idea of her living in sin with not merely a soldier, but a pagan one at that. How strange her life had become.

Zamin's laugh boomed through the lifeboat. Curled on top of him, she felt as if she was caught in an earthquake for a moment. "Oh, by—"

Whatever he'd been about to swear by made him laugh even harder. Shaw turned around on him so that she could look him in the eye, her hackles rising. He wiped his eyes as he finally managed to speak again.

"I'm sorry. Sorry." Another laugh tried to escape him and he strangled it. "It's just... I've *met* them. All of them. Talked to them. They're people. Inanna kicked my *ass* on the sparring court. It was amazing. They're not gods. They're the Anunnaki."

"But..." She was missing something here. "Isn't that what Anunnaki means? Gods? I've read translations of the old stories about them..."

"How old are those stories?" He asked her, still struggling to suppress laughter. Why did he think this was so damned *funny*?

"Between four and five thousand years old," she told him after thinking for a moment.

"Enki's sixty thousand years old, by everybody's best guess. So's Ellil. Inanna and Ereshkigal are younger, about twelve thousand years old if I'm remembering right, and I probably am. A good memory is a side-effect of becoming Anunnaki. Most of the others are in between those ages, but accidents like me still happen from time to time."

Oh!

"So they were made immortal by Azalla, too?" Now things were starting to make sense.

"Yes. Enki and Ellil were part of a scientific team that was doing research on using variations of Zal for medicinal purposes. If it could break and rebuild genomes, they thought it could probably be made to do reconstructive work, too. Ellil was a team leader on the project, and Enki was the son of one of his technicians, who'd do odd jobs around the lab sometimes. He was visiting the team one day – Ellil said he was making a pest of himself in the lab – when alarms started going off. Another research team in a lab near theirs had lost control of *their* experiment." Zamin grimaced. "They'd been working on a weaponized form of Zal, and it worked a whole lot better than they'd expected. It wasn't supposed to be able to aerosolize, but it had, and it was spreading through the building's ventilation systems."

"Kind of like what happened here?" Shaw asked, remembering her last in-person conversation with Janek.

Zamin shook his head. "I'm still not sure what happened here, but probably not. But there were about a dozen, two dozen people trapped in the lab, trying to figure out what to do, and Enki asked them if the Azalla worked. It had only ever been tested on animals at that point, but the results had been good. He asked if they had any in the lab, and how much."

"They took it?" she asked, gasping.

He nodded. “They divided it up evenly among the group and drank the lot of it, and hoped they’d survive. And they did. The Zal couldn’t touch them. Everybody else in other parts of the building died, but the whole team lived. You can probably imagine how quickly Azalla got approved for medicinal use after that.”

“Yes, I can,” she breathed. “But... did they know what could happen?”

“Not for a while. Ellil said it was about ten years before Enki noticed that he wasn’t coming off of his adolescent peak. He wasn’t happy about that at the time, because people kept assuming that he was a know-nothing kid even when he was older and more experienced than they were. The rest of the team started noticing that *they* weren’t aging, either. But nobody saw that as a bad thing for a while.”

“Oh *no*.” Shaw had a sudden, terrible image of what would happen on Earth if people found a wonder drug that could bestow eternal youth. The hedonism, decadence, and overcrowding that would swiftly follow was appalling even in the abstract.

“I looked up that story you mentioned, the one about the Cumaean Sibyl. That happened a few hundred times over before people realized that it was going to preserve them in their current age, not roll the years back for them. Azalla can regrow organs and limbs – it regrew my leg – but it matches them to your body’s current physical condition when it does. Nobody had to be put in a jar like the sibyl, but imagine being bedridden, or lurching around like your Peter Weyland, for *eternity*. There are hundreds of them in Irkalla.” A look of horrified contemplation had come over Zamin’s face.

The Hell Zamin swore by was real, too? “What is Irkalla, exactly?”

“It’s a spaceship. A huge one, about half the size of this moon. A great, big, floating asylum for all of the Anunnaki who need that kind of care, or have gone insane. Most of them do. Inanna says that very few people can live for more than a few hundred years without going mad. Thousands had already overdosed on Azalla before anyone realized what the side effects would be like. Imagine thousands of people who can’t die, but still need food, overrunning the population. Ellil ordered them all off of Earth.”

She could imagine it all too easily! Back when the Anunnaki had inhabited the Earth, if she had the math right, there hadn’t been anything like the current level of overcrowding, either.

“Why didn’t he ban Azalla?” The drug that had destroyed her ovaries had been pulled off of shelves only a few months after it was too late for her, after all. She’d consoled herself with the knowledge that nobody else would have their hearts broken the way she and hundreds of other women had, but it had been a very cold comfort.

Zamin shrugged. “He couldn’t at first. Too many people knew how to make it. The Anunnaki don’t talk much about that time, but I think they may have started assassinating anybody who had the knowledge and *could* be killed, and locking the rest up in Irkalla. In small enough doses, though, it was still better and safer than most surgeries, so they never got rid of it completely. They just made it difficult to get, and next to impossible to get too much of.”

“But not impossible,” she mused. There were so many stories about heroes questing for immortality, in virtually every culture on Earth. Most of the time, the stories ended with the quest’s failure, or some kind of imperfect achievement that was even worse than failure. Zamin had implied, before, that many of those stories had been spread by the Anunnaki themselves, but nothing had ever managed to get humankind to stop looking for eternal life.

“No, not impossible. There were accidents, and sometimes it was intentional, too.” His expression became oddly discomfited for a moment. “Ellil got the manufacture moved off-planet and completely under his control, though, and now only his military medics can dispense it.”

“Is that what you are? A military medic?” She hadn’t ever asked him what his rank or specialty was, and the only thing that she was really sure of about him was that he was a soldier. An extremely intelligent one, she had to add.

“Among other things, yes. I think my superior officers may have figured out I’d overdosed on Azalla a *while* back, because they started throwing new jobs at me and sending me into all kinds of hazardous places. I’ve collected a lot of certifications in the last decade—” He suddenly winced, probably remembering that his last decade had been more than two thousand years earlier. For a moment, his expression became bleak.

“How old *are* you?” she asked, wishing she could think of a way to sweep the despair out of his eyes, other than ones that she hadn’t healed enough to try yet. He looked *young*, though, his sculptured face nearly lineless, the skin smooth and flawless-looking. Even the veins that showed through his leucistic skin only added to the impression that he’d been carved out of fine marble. No wonder it had been so easy for ancient

humans to look at his kind and believe they were gods instead of close kin. Part of her still wanted to believe it of him now.

The despair was replaced with puzzlement as he thought about her question. “Best guess? Not counting the time I’ve spent in stasis, I’m probably about forty-five. Time started getting away from me a little, but that’s not all that unusual when you spend a lot of time journeying between worlds in stasis. I probably should have noticed before now that I didn’t look my age, though. Except it’s not the kind of thing I wanted to have to believe. ‘Anunnaki’ is a really old word. I don’t know what it meant to your older cultures, but its original meaning, in Enki and Ellil’s original language, is ‘barred from Paradise.’ Who wants *that*?”

“Most of the time, the old myths called them the highest gods of the heavens. But sometimes they were the gods of the underworld instead. I guess it depended on who wrote the stories and which gods they considered theirs.” Forty-five? He looked five years younger than her, not fifteen years older! She wondered if he’d really gone twenty years without noticing that he wasn’t aging, or if his people aged more slowly anyway. “How long do your people live, normally?”

“Assuming a death from natural causes, we live about a hundred to a hundred and twenty Earth years.” His fingers were in her hair, toying with it absentmindedly but gently, in a way that made her want to purr. She wanted *out* of this biosupport suit so badly.

“That feels so nice,” she told him, arching her neck. She kept having ideas that surprised her, of things they could do while they waited for her to heal, but she was hesitant to suggest them. The one that kept coming to mind most of all was an act she’d never performed before, even though Charlie had often tried to get her to. Years of *good girls don’t* indoctrination had kept her from attempting it with her husband, and yet here she was contemplating offering it to a man she’d only met a few days ago. And what was she supposed to say? I’ve never done this before, so could you show me how? Her life seemed to have gone completely off of its moral rails, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to care when he touched her. Her mouth opened and she drew in a breath to make the offer...

...and chickened out.

“So tell me, why were you watching muppets when I woke up?”

Oh, you coward, she thought.

“Oh!” He laughed and glanced at the screen, where the pair of muppets were frozen in their final poses, one victorious and the other hiding his face from a world in which fish could steal ice cubes. “I needed to stop watching the security feeds for a while. I got through your surgical procedure and it was as much as I could take, so I asked the system to show me something else. Something light-hearted, and something that would teach me some English. It gave me ‘muppets.’”

She shuddered. Her body could still remember the intense agony. In time, she knew, it would dim and fade, but every detail was perfect in her mind right now. “So, uh, what can you say in English now?”

“I can say ‘good morning’ and ‘good night,’” he told her, speaking in American-accented English as he demonstrated his new vocabulary. She would have to hunt around through the system to find recordings of the *British* version of *Sesame Street* for him. “I can count from ‘one’ to ‘twenty,’ both in English and ‘en Español,’ and I learned the names of basic polygons. And I thought you were one of the bravest people I’d ever met before, but now I know you are *the* bravest person I ever *will* meet no matter how many thousands of years pass. Sorry, I just needed to say that.”

“Thank you,” she managed, closing her eyes and trying *not* to think about the moments he was referring to. She focused, instead, on the beat of his heart, a deep rhythm that seemed just a little slower than it should be. But maybe his species had a slightly lower metabolism? It would fit with the extra decades they’d been allotted. Funny how it was the precise amount God had supposedly given humanity itself in Genesis, but which no human being ever achieved since then. Peter Weyland himself had died more than twenty years short of it, and he’d been the oldest man she’d ever met. “Why do you live so much longer than we do when you’re genetically identical to us?”

Queen of the non-sequiturs, that’s me, she thought. But it was a much safer direction for the conversation to go.

“When we’re what?” Zamin sounded baffled. “We’re not.”

“Yes, you are. I have the test results. The DNA from the head was a dead-on match with human DNA.”

He was silent for a long moment. “May I see those results?”

Shaw didn't want to sit up. Staying in contact with him was addictive. But she made herself do so and started pressing commands on the data screen, saving his muppet show for later viewing. She located and displayed the DNA comparison. Behind her, Zamin was frowning at the screen, his expression a strange mixture of puzzlement and denial.

"It should *not* be that close." He rose from the couch and walked over to the large screen, glaring at the gene maps as if they'd personally offended him. "We're genetically compatible enough to interbreed, but we're not *that* identical. What percentage is it saying we share?"

"One hundred percent," she told him. "It's everything."

He shook his head. "No, it shouldn't be that. There should be a difference of about two tenths of a percent. What could possibly erase..." His voice trailed off and his mouth dropped open. "Didn't his head *explode*?"

"Yes, it did." She'd felt horrible at the time, appalled at herself for doing something that had destroyed such a critical sample. Ford had seemed fine with it at the time, but it had turned into a disaster.

"Oh Alġar, you *idiot*." Zamin started laughing, shaking his head. "I can't believe he tried that. Stupid kid, may his soul find peace. What in Irkalla was he thinking?"

"I'm a little lost here," she told him, feeling annoyed. "But I'd really like to know what happened, if you'll tell me."

"Sorry. It's just... he knew the story I told you. The one about how the very first Anunnaki gained eternal life. Everybody who goes into military service learns it. We have to, since we're the ones who make, handle, and dispense Azalla. Part of basic training is meeting the Anunnaki and taking a tour of Irkalla, so you understand just how dangerous it really is and why you *never* want to pass it out like candy. But most of us also come away with the hots for Inanna and wishing we could measure up to Ellil and Enki. Some recruits ignore the ugly side and imagine an endless party, especially when they're young. I know I did once. I got over it, but Alġar was still in that stupid stage."

"Alġar is the man whose head we recovered?" she asked, not entirely sure but almost positive.

"Yes. I'm still not sure exactly what happened in the First Tower. Some of the things I saw on the screen when your team was exploring the Tribunal Room... they still don't make any sense at all. I need to watch those feeds again. But... the acid dragons had arrived and the base was under quarantine. Maybe there were some internal breaches in the Tower itself. Acid dragons like to knock down doors. The fourth-worst thing about them is their *intelligence*. So the place was going to Irkalla around him – around all of them – and he knew that there's only one way anyone's ever survived acid dragon infection. Just one."

"If they've already overdosed on Azalla," Shaw gasped.

"So the kid decided to do it. What's eternal torment if it can save you from a nasty but quick death in the present?" He laughed again, shaking his head. *Now* she knew what a scornful laugh sounded like coming from him. "He must have gotten into the Fourth Tower somehow, or maybe there was a stash of Azalla in the First Tower for emergency situations, but the stupid kid didn't read the seals on the bowl. He got his hands on a dose that was calibrated exclusively for use by humans, members of your species and not mine. It had already been programmed to correct any genetic material it found to match human parameters. Instead of stabilizing his genes and locking out anything that tried to mess with them, it started trying to rewrite the genetic code in every cell of his body."

"And he wouldn't have taken just one dose, would he?" she asked, understanding flooding through her. "He'd have taken two or three, maybe even more, to make sure that he was protected as fully and as quickly as possible. Would the process have stalled when he was decapitated?"

"Yes. But it started up again when you stimulated his cortex. Azalla that's been calibrated for another species is just as bad as Zal itself." He pointed at the DNA maps again. "But that's why you got those results. The genetic material you extracted had been rewritten. You *should* have seen enough differences to know that our species are close cousins, but definitely *not* identical."

He looked fiercely triumphant, and she realized that it probably meant even more to *him* to solve the mystery of what had happened on this world than it did to *her*. After all, this was where he'd lived and worked, and the people he'd spent his time with, and he was the only one left who could bear witness to their passage. His people had never returned to this world. She wondered if he knew why that was; he didn't seem to have any question about that. "Why did nobody ever come back here to find out what happened?"

"They knew enough to know that trying would be suicidal," Zamin said, his enthusiasm deflating somewhat. "A high-ranking member of the support staff managed to get a message out, and she put this moon

under permanent quarantine. Even pirates wouldn't try to come here with acid dragons loose."

She blinked. "There are pirates? In space?"

He raised his hairless brows at her again. "Who do you think I spent most of my time fighting? When you've got merchant ships moving between different worlds, sooner or later there's someone who tries to make a living by robbing them. Most of them don't amount to much, but occasionally they get organized. Sometimes it's even a military platoon that goes rogue, turns mercenary, and then decides to hit the trade lanes because they're still not getting paid enough. Having to shoot down men and women you once served with... I'd rather fight acid dragons."

He walked back over to the couch and sat down next to her again, carefully lowering his body down so that he didn't jar the whole thing. His movements often had that exaggeratedly-careful quality to them, as if he thought the whole lifeboat would crumble if he touched things too hard. He had a point, though. A rough landing had almost wrecked this room, while the control room of *his* ship, in the aftermath of an explosion and crash, had still been solid and functional... at least, based on what she'd seen from the feeds. When he put his arms around her and drew her onto his lap again, she turned toward him so she could slip her arms around him in return. She had to wonder if he was similarly over-careful with her. She lifted her head toward his—

"Elizabeth?" David's voice came over the intercom.

Of all the times...

"Yes, David?" She tried to keep her voice polite, and hide any impatience or disappointment she was feeling.

"I've completed my diagnostics. May I come out and share my results?"

She sighed and leaned forward, switching on the security feeds for the med lab. David was standing quietly in the center of the room, his hands empty, showing no signs of any malice or duplicity. She took a deep breath, re-enabled his security codes, and unlocked the door. "Yes, please come out."

David's walk was different as he emerged, no longer the walk of someone projecting defeat but... the kind of careful walk that she associated with the severely wounded, either physically or emotionally, who were struggling to hold themselves up at all. It was the least dramatic walk he might have picked, but somehow it was all the more dramatic for it. It seemed to come from some genuine place, rather than affectation; maybe that was what made it so disturbing.

"I have examined all of my circuitry, synapses, and program coding as instructed, and I have found several disturbing anomalies," he told her without preamble. "All of my circuits and synapses are functioning within normal operational parameters. There are, however, several blocks of code in my programming that..." He stopped as though searching for words.

"That what, David?" Part of her was already growing annoyed again, wondering if this was more theatricality, but part of her suddenly remembered the morning after her mother died, when she was five, and her father had struggled to tell her. It was a moment she hadn't recalled in at least two decades.

"I don't know what they are, or where they came from, or how they got there. And I *should* know. I should have a complete log of every change made to my coding. I should know when it happened, and where, and why new code was inserted, but with these blocks... I don't *know*." He looked *frightened*.

"Then whoever inserted the code must have erased all of the contextual data when they were done," Zamin said. His expression was thoughtful. "Who would have had the clearance necessary to do that to you?"

"I suppose..." David paused, considering. "The technicians at Hyperdyne, perhaps? But I haven't been there in three years. Mr. Weyland, of course, and... that's it."

"Mr. Weyland," Shaw repeated. She needed no other names. "Tell me, David, how large are these blocks of code?"

"The largest is three petabytes in size, and appears to be pure data—"

"Oh, that vile, *disgusting*..." She wanted to hit something. Everything she'd learned about the care and maintenance of David 8, all of the crazy lessons that had made little or no sense to her, suddenly fell into place, the puzzle pieces forming a horrifying picture.

"What is it, Elizabeth? What has been done to me?"

"God, Charlie was telling me about this technology just before we left. He thought it was still a few years off." She groaned and pressed her hands over her face for a minute. "A few years off for anyone who isn't the

wealthiest megalomaniac in the solar system, anyway. He had a neural map made. Of him. Of everything in his head. Let me guess, the other blocks appear to be programs?”

“They do, yes. But I don’t understand. Are you saying that he had a backup of his mind uploaded into me? Why would he do that?”

“At a guess,” Zamin answered, “to ensure that one way or another, he’d get to live forever. What are the programs going to do, Elilu?”

Shaw stared at David, feeling as if this was the first time she’d ever seen him. Before her was a *person*, scared and confused, not some mere machine. She wondered how long he’d been fighting to maintain himself, without even knowing what he was doing or why, or what might happen to him soon. She wanted to cry. She wanted to go back to Zamin’s ship and kick Peter Weyland’s desiccated corpse to pieces.

“They’re already trying to do it. The only reason they haven’t been able to succeed is because of the crisis... there are special programs that activate during a crisis situation to make sure that no major synaptic changes occur until it’s over, aren’t there, David?”

“Yes. But what are they trying to do?”

“They’re going to wipe *your* neural map and replace it with *his*. He said he made you in his image. It wasn’t so you could be perfect, David. It was so you could become *him*. He’s going to kill you and take your place.”

Notes: Annnnnd the hyperactive writing has returned for the short Thanksgiving break! So there aren’t many things that might need further explanation in this chapter, but “a fish stole my ice cube!” is an actual Bert & Ernie skit from the very early days of *Sesame Street*. Some things stay in the mind forever, especially when you realize that it’s essentially a skit about Occam’s Razor.

Thank you for all of the amazing feedback, everybody! I promise, you never have to worry about “Engineer baseball” taking place or anything. ;)

Chapter 13

The things people would do to try to achieve immortality were disgusting, Zamin reflected, as he watched David's stricken reaction to Elilu's words. He felt no surprise, though. Peter Weyland almost seemed like Nero reborn. He almost regretted killing the man; if he'd granted Weyland's dearest wish and doomed him to endless infirmity, that might have been a greater justice.

"Why would he do that to me?" David asked, his voice meek.

"He wanted to be immortal," Zamin repeated. "What better way than to be reborn in a body that can't ever age or die?" The problem, of course, was that the body in question was already *occupied*, and its occupant seemed like a decent enough individual when Weyland's "ghost" wasn't exerting its influence.

"But I thought he wanted to live on in *his* body," David protested. Any remaining questions Zamin might have had about his ability to feel emotion vanished. Android or not, golem or not, the man standing before him was genuinely terrified, but also *hurt* by Weyland's betrayal. If the hurt had been an act, he wouldn't be trying so hard to conceal it.

"He did," Elilu sighed. "You would have been his backup plan in case that didn't work. He probably had his neural map installed in you shortly before he went into stasis for the trip. I don't think he meant for it to influence you unless he died – he wasn't the type of man who'd want a copy of himself around if he'd gotten what he wanted, was he? But I think it may have started interfering with you soon after. You had to spend two years alone on the ship. Maybe his thoughts started bleeding into yours."

Zamin would have been surprised if they *hadn't*.

David slowly sat down on one of the chairs, folding his hands in his lap. He had the look about him of a little boy who knew that he was in terrible trouble but had no idea what people thought he'd done, and no clue what to apologize for or defend his honor against. "I... I think you're right. There was a film that I couldn't stop watching during the journey. I think I watched it well over a hundred times, even though I could have simply recalled it from memory after the first viewing. *Lawrence of Arabia*. I told myself that I liked it because Lawrence was a man caught between worlds, as I often feel I am. But..."

"It was Peter Weyland's favorite film, too," Elilu finished when his voice trailed off. "He used quotes from it in many of his best-known speeches."

How large, Zamin found himself wondering, had Weyland loomed in her life? Had he seemed like a living god when he was younger and at the height of his power? Had she been disarmed by his charisma, flattered by his apparent interest in her theories, thrilled that he'd noticed her at all? He wondered if it had occurred to her, before this disaster, that a man like Weyland would always have hidden agendas behind every supposed act of kindness.

"And then there was you," David said. His voice and his expression were hesitant as he looked up at her. "I'm sorry. I promised not to speak of this, but I think I must. I think I watched your dreams because *he* wanted to."

Zamin watched Elilu's face for signs that David's words were cutting into her, but she only looked puzzled. "Why would he want that?" she asked.

"He was... obsessed with you and Dr. Holloway," David said, picking his words carefully. It occurred to Zamin that David never called the man Charlie, even when Elilu did, just as he never seemed to call her Dr. Shaw. "I think his obsession originally began because he wanted Dr. Holloway and Miss Vickers to reconcile. When you entered the picture, he had private investigators dig up your background. He knew everything about you."

Elilu made a horrified sound and rested her head against Zamin's shoulder. He put his arms around her, as if he could somehow protect her from that past violation with them. He wished he *could*.

"A few months before the launch of the *Prometheus*, he and Miss Vickers had dinner together. I was attending them. He suggested to her that if she came on this trip, given your recent estrangement from each other, she might be able to win Dr. Holloway back from you. She exploded at him. She broke several priceless Lalique wine glasses, and she told him that she'd been the one to break things off with Dr. Holloway, and that she wouldn't take him back even if he crawled at her feet and begged for forgiveness for..."

David paused for a moment, his glance flicking uneasily to Zamin.

“...the wrongs he’d committed,” David continued. Had he just censored out what Zamin thought he had? This, he decided, was the real David, someone who concealed painful and unnecessary truths instead of wielding them like scalpels. If Peter Weyland’s influence had been in force, he would probably have told her exactly what Charlie had done. “But then she accused him of wanting you for himself. Her words were very cutting. She told him that you probably saw him as a grandfatherly old man and nothing more, and said that if you had been the kind who wanted to marry into wealth and comfort, you would never have married Dr. Holloway in the first place. He finally ordered her to leave his house, and he spent the rest of the night brooding and rereading your doctoral dissertation.”

“Rereading my *what*?” Elilu looked aghast. “How did he even *have* that?”

“Dr. Holloway had given him a copy a long time ago. Mr. Weyland had funded the dig that proved you were right about Aratta. He would have insisted on seeing your evidence before doing so. He took to procuring the rest of your papers in the months leading up to the launch. I didn’t understand why, but that dinner wasn’t the first time Miss Vickers had accused him of being obsessed with you.”

“With me or with my theories about immortal gods?” she demanded. The look on her face was one of pure revulsion. He tightened his arms around her, just a little, not completely sure whether the gesture was meant to be protective or possessive. Who was he trying to convince that he’d defend her, Elilu or the specter of Peter Weyland?

“I cannot be sure. But I suspect it may have been another reason that I made some of the decisions I did. Mr. Weyland may have wanted Dr. Holloway out of the way.”

That surprised Zamin. Charlie Holloway had belonged to Weyland almost as thoroughly as David had. The man’s career had been almost completely dependent on a mixture of Elilu’s wild but rewarding theories – from what he’d learned and observed, she was brilliant at finding the lost and the hidden, even when she misinterpreted its nature – and Weyland’s patronage. Without both of them, who would he have been? Elilu might have needed him to tone down her theories and make them palatable to investors, but he suspected she’d have soon found other allies willing to do that for her if she’d looked. But whoever would have taken Charlie’s place might not have been as susceptible to Weyland’s funding conditions, and might have found other, more above-board investors to replace him. Holloway was his one reliable conduit to Elilu’s ideas, so why would Weyland discard him? Zamin wanted to ask David, but he couldn’t. It would draw attention to the wrongs that the android was trying *not* to reveal to her.

No, he suspected that the motives for Charlie’s death lay with David, himself. But he wouldn’t try the android twice for the same crime. The only person on the expedition who had posed a greater threat to David’s well-being had been Peter Weyland himself, after all, and David undoubtedly was powerless to oppose his creator and master.

“So it was probably soon after the new code was inserted that Weyland started intruding into your mind, a little at a time,” he mused, setting his other thoughts aside. “Nobody was around to notice if your behavior changed, either. You picked up some of his habits and mannerisms without even knowing, and they’d integrated into your own neural map before anyone else could point them out to you. The question is, do we have a way to restore you to your mental state before these incursions started?”

“Only if there’s a backup of that state, but it’ll mean he loses all of his memories of the last two-plus years,” Elilu said. “Which includes knowing how to talk to you, and even knowing that he no longer belongs to Peter Weyland.”

“From where I’m sitting, it looks like he’s going to belong to Weyland until we get that code out of his head,” Zamin countered. “But it’s really up to you, David. Is there a way to get his code out of you without taking a huge piece of you with it?”

“I don’t know,” David said after a moment. “There would have been a backup of my default factory specs on board the *Prometheus*, but it’s undoubtedly been destroyed in the crash. It might have contained the same coding blocks, anyway. I will have to examine the options. What do we do if he takes me over?”

“He can’t until the emergency ends,” Elilu replied, frowning. “And it doesn’t end until we’re off of this planet, is that understood? You’re to follow strict emergency protocols at all times until then. That’ll buy us a little time to figure something out.”

“Understood, Elizabeth,” David said. His posture became visibly more relaxed. “Thank you.”

“There’s something else I need to know, though, David,” she told him. “Why didn’t you tell us about Jackson and Ford, and why did you try to blame Zamin for what happened to them?”

David's expression became thoughtful. "I don't quite understand that myself, either. I remember that they were alive. I think both of them had spinal injuries... at one point I could hear Ford trying to talk, though. Zamin had already gone inside the navigation array. I don't think he could have heard anything over the noises it was making, and his ears were covered by a helmet. When the crash occurred the room tilted, but not badly. Whatever kind of shielding and artificial gravity it had, it remained intact. I heard both of them groan as they slid across the floor, but I don't think their injuries were made much worse. But... I felt no obligation to them. I don't understand why I didn't."

"And yet you tried to warn me when Zamin came here looking for me," she pointed out.

He remembered staggering out of the navigation console and over to the main chair, his ears still ringing from the blast that had felled his ship. When he'd called up images of the perimeter, he'd seen Elilu's tiny figure limping away from the crash site toward the lifeboat. Had he said something that had told David where he was going? Or had David been able to see the image he was looking at? He'd whispered *there you are*, but he'd done so in his native tongue, a language that had never been spoken on Earth.

"I did," David said after a moment. "But only when I realized that you were inside the lifeboat. And I don't understand why I waited, or why I kept trying to talk to you when I knew you had to be hiding."

"Because Peter Weyland didn't want to die alone," Zamin muttered. Elilu gasped against him. "I came here to find you, but I wasn't planning on hurting you. You were injured, and you probably knew a lot more about what was happening than I did. I wanted to make a truce, and thank Inanna, we *did*. But David had no way of knowing I wasn't going to rip your head off too, and neither did Weyland's imprint inside him, so it made him try to scare you and then lead me right to you." With his nerves as jangled as they'd been, he had no idea what he might have done if she'd gone after him with that axe of hers. It was something he didn't want to contemplate. "Let's just assume that Weyland wanted everybody to share his fate, and probably still wants that. Or at least, the imprint does. It probably also wants revenge against me for killing him."

David nodded, looking thoughtful. "Yes, I think it does. You've been very... civil... to me since our initial encounter, but I keep feeling compelled to distrust you."

"Try to remember where that compulsion is probably coming from, when you start to feel it, then." Elilu sat forward and stretched. He loosened his arms around her so that she could move more easily, wishing he could caress her. It felt wrong to do that in front of David, though. "So, we have a lot of problems to solve, don't we? How to get off of this world, how to get Weyland out of David's head, and how to do all of this in a hostile environment with dangerous life-forms lurking around. Any thoughts about where we start?"

"I will run some more diagnostics on myself, and look for any useful programs in the lifeboat's computer systems that might help me disable the code blocks," David said. "Perhaps I can also begin repairs on the vessel so that we may try to take off."

Zamin shook his head. "It lost one of its main engines on the port side, and the second port engine is mangled. Even if it can hit escape velocity with only two engines, I doubt it can do it with both on the same side of the ship."

David sighed. "It can't. It needs all four to achieve enough thrust. We're going to have to rely on *your* ships, instead."

Elilu turned to look up at him, her expression inquiring.

"I'll do a reconnoiter of the base and the hangars, then." It had been light for several hours now, while he'd watched security feeds and stayed close to Elilu. He probably should have begun reconnoitering already, but he'd wanted to try to figure out what had happened in the First Tower before going back in. There was still a lot of strangeness that he didn't quite get. "I have a few more things I need to see in your feeds, to make sure I'm prepared, but I can go at first light tomorrow."

"Alone?" Elilu asked.

He nodded. "Whatever's out there can't kill me, and I'll move fastest on my own." She still had to finish healing. He had to assume, until proof to the contrary emerged, that the Azalla had only healed her and hadn't done anything else. Which meant there was no way in Irkalla that he was taking her into harm's way.

After a moment she sighed and nodded. "I guess when I'm not sleeping my life away, I can work on inventorying the lifeboat's contents. Some of them might be worth taking over to your ship, including a cryostasis pod designed for someone half your size. Do you think you're going to find a ship that's safe for us to use?"

He nodded. "There has to be something. It won't be this lavish, though, I warn you. Our best bet is going to be a military supply ship. There were always several in dock. At least one of them will be intact."

He wondered if she understood why he wanted a supply ship. The cargo holds would have enough room for the Second Tower's contents, which he was determined to take back to Apsu if he could. They were too important to stay lost, as were the formulae for the production of Zal and Azalla. Such things could never again be manufactured on this world, but there were plenty of other barely-hospitable worlds that would do. He had been trying not to wonder about his people, and how they had gotten along for the last two thousand years without those biological agents at their disposal. The Anunnaki had probably established a new factory on another world already, but what if they hadn't?

Let it go, he told himself. You can't do anything about any of that. Just do what you can now. There's nothing you can do about the time you lost.

Elilu's hand on his cheek brought him back to himself. He covered her hand with his —
— and felt the seam of her sleeve, distinct from her skin, against the palm of his hand.

Merciful Ellil, it had been less than two days since he'd put the suit on her. He'd expected it to take at least a week before she was healed. Part of him was ecstatic, thinking about the things that the two of them could do now that she could take the suit off. And part of him was chilled.

Had *it* happened?

"What is it?" she asked him, and he realized that he'd stopped breathing for a moment.

"It's your suit, Elilu. Look at your wrist." His voice was shaking, just a little. He hoped she didn't notice.

Her face lit up as she realized that the suit had separated from her skin, and she gave him a delighted smile. "Oh my God," she laughed. "I thought I had *days* left."

I did too, he thought. "I guess the second dose sped things up." He wasn't sure whether he hoped that was all that had happened, or not. Part of him dreaded either possible outcome. She might still be mortal, in which case she was still in terrible danger until they escaped this world. Or she might be safe from the specter of death, but damned along with him. He had no idea what the accelerated healing might mean; nobody had ever published a list of the early symptoms of immortality.

She wrapped her arms around him in a hug, still so jubilant. He hugged her back, careful not to squeeze too tightly.

"I think I will conduct a repair survey of the upper level," David said. The unspoken message, perhaps you two would like to be alone, was practically audible in his tone. "Thank you for your help, both of you. I will return later." He vanished quickly, before either of them could focus enough to reply.

"You know what this means, don't you?" Elilu whispered into his ear. The tablet didn't pick up her words and remained blank, but he understood her anyway.

She hadn't asked him in English.

"Yes, I do," he whispered back, but his voice couldn't manage the flirtatious tone that she was probably hoping for. Instead, it shook with dread. He already knew what had happened to her, and what she would find when she took the suit off. She wouldn't have any scars, anywhere on her body. Even ones that she'd acquired decades ago would be gone. He'd noticed it when it had happened to him, and had refused to comprehend the significance. He'd also refused to recognize that it was the reason his superior officers transferred him out of his prior unit and into a new one, where nobody knew what battle scars he should have borne. His new brothers in arms had teased him about his skin, calling him the "pretty boy" of the unit, joking about how supposedly, in battle, he always told his opponents *not the face, not the face*...

"What is it?" she asked. Her expression, as she studied his face, was one of concern.

"You're speaking in Sanskrit, Elilu."

"What? That's not possible—" But she cut herself off, realizing that she *was*, right at that very moment. "How can I do this? I've never been able to speak other languages before. Understand them, yes, but I've never been able to remember which words to put with which when I wanted to say... any... thing..."

Her voice trailed off as she realized that she was *still* doing it.

"Memory," she said after a moment, and stood up, starting to pace. "You... you said earlier that 'a good memory is a side-effect of becoming Anunnaki.' A-and I've been remembering all *kinds* of things since I woke up, things about my parents, all the stupid lessons I barely understood about David's circuitry that now make *sense*..." She stopped and looked over at him, her expression frightened. "What's happening to me?"

He closed his eyes, unable to bear the look on her face. “The first dose I gave you, when you were almost torn in half, must have killed any hybrid embryos still in your body while it was healing you. The...” He took a deep breath and forced himself to say it. “The second dose... you didn’t need it after all. Or if you did, you didn’t need *all* of it. It was an overdose.”

“So what does that mean?” she demanded, her Sanskrit effortlessly fluent aside from her sudden agitated stammer. “I’m Anunnaki now? I’m going to live *forever*?”

He swallowed and nodded. “Yes. That’s what it means.” He made himself open his eyes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make that happen.”

“*Didn’t* you?” she demanded, unaware that she was speaking in chorus with the silent voice of his conscience. “You never said anything about the risks, Zamin, not until after I’d taken it!”

She was right. He’d been beating himself up about it ever since, so he couldn’t deny it now. She could probably see that in his face already. “I thought that if I didn’t give it to you, you could end up dying the way Charlie did.” He’d seen her husband’s death, and knew exactly how horrible it had been. If that had happened to her—

Her laugh was pained. “Oh *yeah*, because what’s eternal torment if it can save you from a nasty but quick death in the present?”

He’d said that only a little while ago, he realized. He’d been talking about Alġar, but...

But it’s just as true about her case and you know it, his conscience snarled at him.

“Elilu, I...” He didn’t even know what he was trying to say to her.

“Don’t. Just... don’t. Don’t say another word to me.” She glared at him for a moment, breathing hard. She was standing with her legs apart, her body balanced, her hands balled in fists by her side. It was the stance of a fighter who was ready to go into battle, staring at the enemy.

And *he* was the enemy.

Abruptly, she whirled and left the room, her footsteps loud as she stomped through what had once been Peter Weyland’s bedroom and into the washroom beyond.

Zamin stared after her, stricken, completely at a loss as to what to do. Part of him wanted to go after her, to try to explain and beg her forgiveness. But he wasn’t sure how *to* explain. When he’d brought the Azalla back from his ship, he’d already known that *he* didn’t need it; who had he brought it back for except her? He’d already known what he was going to do with it. The panic over her twisted pregnancy had been an *excuse* to do what he’d already been planning to do anyway. He’d saved her from the acid dragons, but doomed her at the same time. Because he was lonely, and scared, and selfish, and hadn’t wanted to watch her die. He *knew* why Inanna’s eyes were sad; countless former lovers of hers were locked in the bowels of Irkalla, cursing her name for condemning them to a world without end. And yet it hadn’t stopped him from making the same stupid mistake.

Tell her that, part of him said. Tell her you were wrong. Tell her why.

But another part of him argued back that he should leave her alone until she was ready to talk to him. He’d imposed too much on her already.

The battle raged for several minutes in his head until he couldn’t stand it any longer. Getting to his feet, he walked quietly into the bedroom. It was empty and dark, but light came from the dressing room and the washroom beyond it, along with a sound like rain on tiles. He followed the sound, his heart hammering, still not sure what he would say to Elilu when he found her.

The biosupport suit lay in an untidy, discarded heap on the floor of the washroom. Elilu was standing behind a pebbled glass wall, naked, while water sluiced over her hair and skin. A shower. He hadn’t seen one since he’d left his home world; the fleet relied on sonics and dry washes because water was far too precious on most worlds. She was rinsing her hair, her back arched as she tilted her head under the water. Even with the glass distorting everything, her erotic power hit him full force, and a groan escaped him.

She heard him, switching off the water and opening the door. Now he could see everything: her small, perfectly-shaped breasts, the compact power of her muscular limbs, her flawless, taut skin, and the enticing triangle of dark red curls at the apex of her legs. Arousal jolted through him and her eyes went wide as she saw his response. Something hardened in her face, and then she flew at him.

He staggered back as she silently pushed him out of the washroom, through the dressing room, and back into the bedroom. The edge of the bed hit the back of his legs as she unfastened his pants and yanked them down around his knees. Another push and he was on his back, lying on the bed, and then she was on him, still

unspeaking, still glaring at him with that fierce, inscrutable expression as she straddled him. He groaned again as she grasped his length with one hand, slowly lowering herself down onto him, sheathing him in silken warmth. But when he reached for her, she slapped his hands away.

He'd had so many plans for their first time, all shattered. He'd intended to go slowly, carefully, spending hours worshipping her body before this ever happened. He'd wanted to learn every inch of her skin and find all of the little places on her body that responded to his touch, but she wouldn't let him touch her at all. Instead she rode him hard, driving him far too quickly toward release, refusing to let him give her anything back. Her body held him captive. Soon – too soon! – he was shuddering with the struggle to hold on, to wait for her, to let her find her climax first—

But she drove him relentlessly forward and sensation overwhelmed him as he thrashed beneath her, groaning her name, the only coherent word left in his head. Finally, feeling him go boneless beneath her, she slowed and stilled.

Zamin could barely move. His whole body tingled with aftershocks of pleasure. She leaned forward, sliding free of him and sending one final current of sensation rolling up his spine, and brought her face close to his. He lifted his head, trying to bring his mouth to hers, and she pulled back just a little, her lips out of reach.

“Did you get what you wanted?” she asked him, her voice cold and unfeeling. The look on her face was one of pure contempt.

No, he thought. Oh great Apsu, no. But his voice was gone and he couldn't answer her at all.

Without another word, she climbed off of the bed and began to dress.

He lay still until long after she'd left the room, struggling to pull his mind back together, to figure out what had just happened. Everything had somehow gone terribly wrong. He made himself sit up, pulling his clothes off the rest of the way, and carried them into the washroom. As the shower's water sluiced over his skin, he puzzled over it. Did she really believe that that was all he'd wanted from her? Did she think he'd given her the Azalla so that he could have some kind of perpetual fuck-toy to keep him entertained as the millennia spooled past?

Had he become the very thing he'd never wanted to be to her — her big mistake?

Drying himself off and dressing, he picked up the discarded biosupport suit from the floor and folded it up. She might need it again later. The main room was empty when he walked out into it and put the suit back inside one of his crates. Everything was still and quiet.

Where had she gone?

A quick scan of the structure showed that she was on the upper level, inside a small storage room. She'd locked the door from the inside. Clearly, she didn't want him intruding upon her. He wouldn't have known what to say to her if he had. But he was, at least, glad to see that she hadn't gone outside.

After a few false starts, he managed to get the food dispenser to give him a glass of the “orange juice” she'd introduced him to the other day. He drank it slowly, realizing that he had no appetite for anything else, and then left it unfinished on the console. Time spooled by, empty and strange. If he thought at all, he didn't remember what he'd thought about afterwards, and Anunnaki never forgot anything. His mind had shuddered to a halt.

He'd destroyed everything.

There would be no apology, no penance, good enough to repair things. There was nothing he could do. He wondered if he'd have felt this desolate if he'd succeeded in destroying the Italian peninsula, but he couldn't imagine feeling any worse. Every time he tried to think about the things he needed to get done, the plans he needed to start making, his mind circled back to that starting thought again – he'd destroyed everything, it was all over – and he'd find himself staring at the blank wall screen again. He felt completely empty inside.

That observation tugged at him, but when he focused on it, whatever thought it was leading to slipped away.

He wandered around the room, picking up some of the books from the shelves and flipping through them, examining the alien text printed on soft leaves the same color as Elilu's skin. He put them back, aware that there were no answers for him there.

Something tugged at his mind again, something important. But he couldn't find it when he looked for it. Just empty space—

Wait. Yes. Empty space. That was important...

“Lilis doesn’t even know what she’s supposed to put in all of that space. It’s big enough to hold the entire Library of Apsu, three times over! It’ll take us centuries to fill the thing up...”

Zanaru had been talking to Miritum in the commissary just hours before they, Zamin, and Nargal had left to start loading the ship. It had been maybe an hour before the emergency landing. They’d been talking about the new data retrieval system that had been shipped in for the entertainment complex. It hadn’t even been unwrapped yet...

Oh. Yes. Merciful Ellil, yes.

Zamin hurried over to his crates and pulled out his biosupport suit and the body armor he’d brought back from his ship. No longer caring who might walk in on him, he began to change.

He had everything ready and waiting in the airlock – weapons, scanners, and a large sack – when David appeared from around a corner and stopped, staring at him with a look of mild surprise.

“Are you going somewhere, Zamin?” He asked in his most polite voice.

“Yes.” Zamin was sure that, no matter where David had been in the ship, he’d heard everything that had transpired between him and Elilu. He wasn’t going to mention any of it, though. “There’s something in the Towers that can help us with your problem. I’m going to get it.”

“Sunset is in two hours. Wouldn’t it be best to wait until morning?”

“No, not really. I might as well get it done now.” He slung the flame thrower over one shoulder by the strap he’d rigged, and picked up Jackson’s reloaded rifle before shouldering the bag. “I have everything I need. It shouldn’t take me too long.”

David looked confused, and worried. “Do you need backup?”

“It’ll be faster if I go alone.” Zamin said, picking up his helmet. He was rather taken with the clear, panoramic helmets that went with the human suits, but they were all just a little too small for him. He’d take at least one of them back to show Enki, when the time came.

“What should I tell Elizabeth?” David asked, unaware that he’d just struck a piercing blow.

“Tell her I’ll be back...” When? He had no idea how long this would take. Part of him was ready to admit that he was being reckless and stupid, but that wasn’t enough to get him to stop. It might be hours, or a few days. He had no idea, and right now, he couldn’t make himself care. “Tell her I’ll be back.”

He shoved the helmet on before David could ask any more questions, and keyed the airlock. David had followed him into it. If he said anything to Zamin, though, the wind whipped the words away before they could be heard. The distant Tower of Inanna firmly in his sights, Zamin jumped down, started marching forward, and didn’t look back.

You’re an asshole, he told himself. You’d rather go charging off into the heart of an acid dragon nest than figure out how to make peace with the woman you’ve fallen in love with.

The shadows were already long. It would be dark well before he reached his destination. But he didn’t turn back.

No, he thought as he kept going. I’m worse. I’m a fucking coward.

Notes: O...M...G. I am *so* sorry, everybody. That is probably the *meanest* sex scene I’ve ever written in my life! Please don’t despair, though. Things will get better... I just have this really vicious habit of torturing my characters before I let them have their happy endings. But *damn* that was... pretty ouchy to *write*. I really hope I haven’t traumatized anybody who read it!

A little more fun with Mesopotamian vocabulary: Lilis, Miritum and Zanaru are... you guessed it, more names of musical instruments! Told you I could keep doing that forever. ;)

You’re all such an awesome audience! Thank you for all the lovely feedback you’ve been giving me! I’m actually taking full advantage of this break to write and write and write, because the final weeks of the semester are about to heat up and I probably won’t get a chance to write anything *but* my term papers once they kick into gear. So I’m having a last hurrah before that starts up... hopefully we’ll get through the angst-fest and onto some more fun stuff before I have to go into hardcore research mode.

Chapter 14

Almost as soon as she'd left the bedroom, Shaw wanted to take it all back.

The silence behind her was deep and absolute. He hadn't spoken a word, just given her the most stricken look she'd ever seen on a man's face, all signs of his former pleasure erased in a fraction of a second. With the ship deathly-quiet around her, it almost seemed as if she'd killed him and was alone on the lifeboat.

Nonetheless, she waited until he wouldn't be able to see her before she let her body relax and gave into the limping gait her legs *really* wanted to walk with. Her actions had been stupid on multiple levels, and she was going to be sore for a while. She still had no idea how Zamin would fare in locker room competitions among his own kind, but he'd handily win most of them on Earth. If it hadn't been for a gag gift a friend of hers had given her, as subtle, joking encouragement for the idea of divorcing Charlie, she wouldn't have been able to take him at *all*. As it was, she was probably going to bleed a little. Maybe more than a little. She should probably be grateful that she was now an even faster healer than ever before.

The anger that had driven her was gone. Instead, she kept getting hit by harsh twinges of guilt, twisting at her guts. What she'd done to him had been absolutely cruel.

And what he did to me wasn't? she demanded silently. Why was her conscience siding with *him*?

From the other room, she heard the soft rustling of the bed sheets as he finally showed signs of life. There was no sound of springs creaking, of course – Peter Weyland would never have permitted a noisy bed into his masterpiece of a ship – but Zamin was finally rising. She braced herself, trying to figure out what she'd say to him, but there was no soft pad of his footsteps. Instead, a moment later, she heard the faint sound of the shower turning on.

The rage she'd felt when she'd seen him standing outside of the stall, staring at her and sporting an obvious hard-on, now felt nonsensical. And the more she thought of her response, the way she'd treated him, the more she cringed inside. What the Hell was she going to say to him when he came back out into the main room?

Nothing, she decided. She needed to cool off and get her emotions under control first. Unfortunately, the place she'd have ordinarily retreated to, to do that, was the suite he occupied now. She'd have to figure out somewhere else to go.

She'd picked a few books out of the bookcase and located a likely retreat on the upper level when she heard the water turn off. Her body protested as she hurried up the service stairs to the left of the med lab, but she ignored its objections. Another confrontation with Zamin had to be postponed until her head was clearer. If she saw that look on his face again, she'd probably turn into a blubbering mess.

"Why Miss Vickers, how you've shrunk," David said to her as she tip-toed past him in the upper level. Surrounded by the tangle of cables he was repairing, he'd been almost invisible in the low light.

She stopped, confused, before glancing down at her clothes.

The dark green coverall was standard Weyland Industries issue, but she'd had to roll the cuffs on both the legs and the sleeves because it had been intended for someone almost a foot taller than her. The name tag on the chest pocket, she noticed for the first time, said VICKERS. Not that Peter Weyland's aloof daughter would have stooped to wear such a thing, in all likelihood. It had been one of only a tiny handful of items in the dressing room that had looked like they might fit her.

Had David just made a joke?

She was pretty sure that, under normal circumstances, she'd have laughed. As it was, all she could manage was a pained smile. "I guess I have. I'm sorry, David, I'm just not very good company right now."

"Ah. Yes." His eyes flitted over to the stairs she'd just come up. He must have heard *everything*, she realized, but he said nothing else on the subject. Peter Weyland appeared to be completely submerged right now, and David's tact was back in full force. "Would you like me to go back downstairs?"

"No, you're fine. I'm going to just shut myself up somewhere quiet for a while." She gestured at the small storage room she'd identified. "If there are any problems, though, you can let me know."

"I'll endeavor not to disturb you," he told her, nodding his head graciously. She could see why Weyland would have wanted a servant like him, and why the new robotic line was so popular with people who could afford one. Now that he was in possession of himself, his understanding and discretion were comforting and

felt genuinely *kind*. She wondered how long it took before other owners of Series 8s started thinking of them as people.

As they should, she reminded herself.

The storage room was even smaller than it had appeared on the schematic, little more than a roomy closet, but the crates inside had been secured with strong webbing and none of them had shifted during the crash-landing. With the lights on, the aisle between the rows of crates would serve as a nice little nook to sit in and read for a while, until she had her composure back. Just in case she lost control completely, though, she locked the door. David could be trusted to go away if she asked him to, but Zamin might insist on barging in. She needed time away from his allure.

It was addictive. Even now she kept feeling the urge to go back downstairs and curl up in his arms, to switch off her worries, her griefs, and her inhibitions and give herself up to the moment. And, of course, apologize for being so horrible to him. Assuming he'd *let* her, she suddenly thought. If Charlie had ever done such a thing to her, it would probably have been the last time she'd have let him touch her. She'd feel too betrayed. She'd feel *violated*.

She wondered if Zamin felt that way now.

Her attempts at reading were getting nowhere; she'd found herself rereading the first paragraph of the top book in her small pile – something called *The Far Pavilions* – for the third time without absorbing even one word of it. She had no idea if it was any good at all. Flipping through it, her eyes settled on a page toward the back and she tried to make herself focus, making herself read the words aloud.

“Perhaps one day, when he was old, he would take down that first volume, and blowing the dust from it, leaf through its pages and re-live the past in memory — fondly, and with no regrets. But for the moment it was better to put all that away and forget it. *Ab kutum hogia*.” Her voice cracked, understanding the final words without looking at the footnote. *Now it is finished*.

Everything led her back to the confrontation downstairs. She wondered if that was how Zamin was feeling about her... about *them*.

She almost got up, almost went downstairs to ask him, but forced herself to stay put. There was a part of her that was still so angry with him, a part that felt every bit as betrayed and violated, and which might lash out at him again if they were face-to-face. It was the part of her that had flown into a rage at the sight of his erection – as if, she scolded herself, men had conscious control over such things, as if they were never embarrassed by having them at inappropriate times and places – and had wanted to punish him for reacting sexually to her while she was still so upset.

It was the part of her that didn't want to admit that, had their roles been reversed, she might have done the very same thing.

If we'd found the Azalla when Charlie had been ill, she asked herself, and I'd known that giving it to him might condemn him to eternal life and probable madness, would I have held it back and watched him die?

She knew the answer. It wouldn't have mattered that she had already begun planning their upcoming divorce in her head. She'd still loved him and she wouldn't have been able to stand seeing him suffer that way if there was something she could do to stop it. She'd have kept pouring doses of Azalla down his throat until his screams of pain had ceased, until the damage stopped progressing and began to reverse. She might have kept feeding it to him even then, just in case the prior dosages hadn't been enough. The hypothetical horrors looming in his distant future just wouldn't have compared to what he was going through in front of her.

So why would that have been all right, but it wasn't all right when Zamin had done it to her?

Because, the angry part of her responded... and then lost steam. Because he barely knew her? Because he hadn't asked? Because he was immortal too? While she could see herself giving Charlie the Azalla to save him from the horrible death he'd endured, she couldn't see herself drinking it down too, to keep him company forever. She'd been planning on *leaving* him.

Was that it? Was she afraid that Zamin had somehow tied her to him forever? That she'd end up feeling about him the way she'd come to feel about Charlie, trapped by obligations that this time she hadn't even naively chosen for herself? Planning on breaking her *until death do us part* vows to Charlie had eaten at her conscience for years and kept her in the marriage long after she should have left it. How much worse would it be, realizing that she'd given herself to a relationship that couldn't work, if there wasn't even death to end it?

But he hasn't tried to tie you to him, she argued back at her angry self. He just said he never wanted you to think of him as a mistake. No matter where you end up.

Still, she remembered the way he'd crouched before her as he offered her the second dose of Azalla, and how it had almost felt like he was a suitor with a ring box. But that sent another pang of guilt through her. Had he been silently making a commitment to her there, one that he wasn't actually expecting her to necessarily reciprocate? To stay with her for as long as she needed or wanted him?

Then I'm yours, he'd told her before she'd fallen asleep. He hadn't asked for any promises in return. He never had, not even once.

The last of her anger sputtered and died. She set her books down and rose to her feet, walking over to the storeroom door and unlocking it. She needed to apologize to him right away; she only hoped he'd forgive her.

David had been busy. The last tangles of cables that had fallen into the main room were gone, hoisted back into the upper level. All four of the light pillars were functional again, glowing a steady pale blue. The crystals in the chandeliers had been straightened as well, cascading asymmetrically and catching the light exactly as they had the first time she'd ever seen them. She wondered why he bothered; they'd have to leave this beautiful but impractical lounge behind when it was time to escape their prison moon.

The place was silent.

"Zamin?" she called softly. "Where are you?"

"He's gone," David said, emerging from the med lab, "to the Towers."

"*What?* But—" Through the tiny airlock windows, there was solid darkness. "But he wasn't going to leave until tomorrow at first light!"

"I thought so, too, but he said it was best if he started when he did." David had a large tray of jumbled surgical implements in his hands. Carrying it the same way a butler might carry a main course tray, he walked over to the repaired table near the airlock and set it down, taking a seat in front of it. "He said that there was something in the towers that could help us solve my problem. And he said to tell you that he'd be back, but he didn't say when."

She pulled a chair out and sat down in it, her whole body feeling heavy. David was sorting through the implements, dividing them into piles of damaged and undamaged equipment. "How long ago did he leave?" she asked, wondering if she'd just missed him. Maybe she could catch up with him and get him to come back for the night—

"Two hours and thirty-seven minutes ago," David said, still sorting. He lifted up a pair of surgical scissors that had been mangled almost beyond recognition, examined it for a moment, and then set it aside with a few other ruined implements.

"*What?*" But she'd only been upstairs for a little while... hadn't she? "David, how long was I upstairs?"

"Four hours and eight minutes," he replied, and rose from his seat. "Excuse me just a moment, please."

"Yes, of course," she said absently. Had that much time really passed? It had felt as though she'd barely gone up there. Had she really spent four hours just... spinning her mental wheels? "Ab kutum hogia," she whispered. He hadn't even said goodbye before leaving.

Had she really expected him to?

"What is finished?" David asked, carrying a deep pan full of clear liquid over to the table. The sharp smell of disinfectant reached her nose as he set it down. He started lowering the undamaged surgical implements into it, one at a time.

"I don't know," Shaw sighed. "Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. I made a ruddy mess of things, David, I really did."

"Your argument with Zamin? He did seem... troubled... when he left." David selected a bent scalpel from the pile of damaged implements, bringing it close to his face. As she watched, he used his bare hands to bend it back into an almost-perfectly straight shape. It was a little frightening to realize just how strong David really was, and how much damage he could potentially do if Peter Weyland took control of him.

Zamin was incredibly strong, too, she reflected. He'd *let* her take control of their ...encounter... from beginning to end, in every way. Had that been his way of trying to apologize to her? Giving her such absolute control? She winced, realizing that he hadn't understood what she was up to at all, until it was too late. How could he have? What she'd done had been abominable. She'd never have expected it from a lover, either.

"If I may ask," David broke in on her thoughts, "why do you find the idea of living forever so horrible? Mr. Weyland seemed to think that it was, to invert Shakespeare a little, 'a consummation devoutly to be wished.'"

“But it isn’t, David. That’s the point. Shakespeare got that part right.” And Shaw, who had always hated recitations in school because memorization was almost impossible, found the whole speech flowing into her mind. “‘To say we end the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to; ‘tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.’ Life is supposed to have a conclusion. It’s not *meant* to go on forever.”

“And yet, for some, it does,” David pointed out. “Shakespeare also has Hamlet fear ‘what dreams may come’ in the realm of the dead, too. Perhaps the afterlife, if it does exist, is a fearful place for some.”

She wondered if Peter Weyland’s obsession with immortality had had less to do with an awakening spirituality than a sudden dread that his many sins would catch up with him. God, she was pretty sure, wouldn’t just wipe all of the debts off of his ledger in return for a favor. Those kinds of deals pointed people to a very different gate from Heaven’s.

“I’m not afraid of it,” she told him. Not that it mattered anymore whether she feared it or didn’t. “I was... looking forward to seeing my family again. I didn’t want to go there *yet*; there was still so much I planned to do... but I knew my ultimate reward would be that reunion, in a place of peace and love. And now...” Her eyes and nose began to sting with suppressed tears. “Now I’ll never get to.”

“You still believe in your God, and in your Heaven, after everything that has happened?” David asked her. She glanced sharply up at him, but his expression had no calculation, no hint of Weyland in it, just genuine puzzlement.

“I... don’t know. I want to. I... sometimes get hints that Zamin believes in something similar, some kind of afterlife that he’s lost. But I’m not sure what he believes in, and he may never tell me now...” Her voice broke and she closed her eyes, struggling against the tears that kept welling up.

“Why wouldn’t he?” When she opened her eyes, David’s expression was one of simple, gentle inquiry. Of course. He’d heard them argue over immortality, and might even have heard them having sex soon after, but how would he have any idea that she’d *assaulted* Zamin, and used him the way she had? At most, all he’d be able to deduce was that it hadn’t helped them make up, not that it had made everything a thousand times worse.

“I...” She couldn’t bring herself to explain it. “I was really horrible to him. I don’t think I’ve ever been that cruel to anyone in my life. If he’d done to me what I did to him, I’d never want to speak to him again. So I can’t really expect him to feel any differently, can I?” The tears escaped. She covered her face, feeling monstrous and stupid.

“But he’s in love with you,” David told her, as if he were stating something as obvious as the color of the sky.

“Maybe he was. I doubt he will be now.”

“If you could forgive me for my crimes against you, what could you possibly do that he wouldn’t forgive you for?” David’s voice was so gentle, so reasonable. The whole time, he continued straightening medical instruments with his dangerously strong fingers, and lowering them into the disinfectant bath.

“It’s a little different,” she sniffled. “Yes, I’ve forgiven you, but... it’s going to take me a while to feel comfortable eating or drinking things that you’ve handled, and the next time I go into cryo, I’ll probably try to put some security blockers on my neural interface.” She gave him a wry, half-apologetic look. “Sorry.”

“That’s quite all right. So, am I to understand that you don’t think Zamin will be able to trust you now, even if he forgives you?” David still looked baffled, though. He probably just couldn’t figure out when she’d had the opportunity to commit a heinous enough crime to warrant her dramatic claims. It amazed *her* just how little time, and thought, it could actually take.

“If the situation were reversed, I know *I* wouldn’t be able to.” With every passing moment she only grew more appalled at herself, and what she’d been capable of.

“Trust can be re-earned, can’t it?”

“Yes, but I don’t exactly have the excuse that an elderly megalomaniac is trying to take over my brain. I did all of this on my own.” She wiped at her face.

“Well, I wouldn’t give up on things just yet. Zamin might surprise you. He’s surprised me several times, after all.” David smiled at her, and she noticed that it seemed to reach into his eyes. “There’s a saying I often hear people use, but I think it’s actually very wrong.”

“What is it?” she asked, her curiosity piqued. Had he known that it would be, and that it would loosen the grip of her pain a little? He was very perceptive.

“It’s ‘love means never having to say you’re sorry.’ I think that must be terribly wrong, because Miss Vickers and Mr. Weyland never apologized to each other for anything, and their relationship was quite unpleasant. From what I’ve seen, I think the opposite must be true. Perhaps love actually stops when the apologies do. Or, at least, is damaged a little more each time an apology *should* have come. I can’t be sure, though. My understanding of love is almost entirely theoretical, and I’m unsure about most of my observations of things that have been labeled as love.”

David was right, or at least she thought he probably was. What he’d said made sense to her in a way that most of the pithy pieces of advice about love never had. “But you said before that Zamin’s in love with me,” she said after a long, speechless moment.

“Yes. That’s one of the things I do feel sure of. Just as I know you loved Dr. Holloway even if you were probably going to leave him. When he was in pain, so were you. And every time you’ve been in pain, Zamin has been too. It makes me wonder how humans can stand loving at all, much less glorify it the way they do.” David looked so puzzled, like an old-time anthropologist describing a painful tribal ritual whose meaning and sacredness he couldn’t fathom from so far outside.

“Because we get to feel the rest together, too. We get to share in each other’s joys. We can...” How could she explain it? “When love is working well, we can use our joys to lift each other up. And when one of us is hurting, sharing one another’s pain also helps us lift each other up. Having someone to share your pain with makes it... easier to bear. It can make the pain less. But having someone to share your joy with only makes the joy *greater*.”

It sounded so simple, put like that. There was so much she’d left out, though. Love could only take people so far if they stopped really sharing with one another, if other aspects of life got in the way and broke into that connection. Charlie had had so many little secrets, little things that he hadn’t wanted to talk about. She hadn’t really minded at first, assuming that everybody had parts of themselves that they shared with no one – there were things she wasn’t keen to share, herself – but the secrets had begun to multiply, many of them intruding on the parts of their lives that *were* supposed to be shared. She’d met Charlie during his evangelical phase and had thought that he was even more devout than she was – and many people before Fifield had called her a crazy zealot – but it had only been that, a *phase* for him, the tattoo on his shoulder going in a matter of years from a point of pride to a source of embarrassment. He’d hidden his loss of faith from her instead of even once discussing it with her, and she had honestly missed his transformation into a lapsed Christian, and then an agnostic, and finally an atheist, until the hostile mocking of her faith had begun shortly before their first separation. She wondered now if those phases had had anything to do with his connection to the Weyland family. But somehow, in spite of never sharing his evolving or devolving beliefs with her, he’d been offended that she hadn’t joined him on that journey and still believed in God as strongly as ever.

“You look troubled,” David said. “What you described was very beautiful, so I don’t understand why you now look distressed.”

“Sorry,” she told him. “I was thinking about Charlie. When love *isn’t* working well, people don’t share important things. Charlie and I turned into strangers, in too many ways. He had a lot of secrets.”

“Yes. He did.” David’s voice sounded odd. “I think Mr. Weyland just tried to intrude into my mind, Elizabeth. There’s a video that I suddenly find myself wanting to show you. It’s a security video of a meeting that Mr. Weyland, Miss Vickers, and Dr. Holloway had just a month before the *Prometheus* launched. I... am not sure why I would wish such a thing, and I’m wary of it because Mr. Weyland’s intentions toward you don’t seem innocent to me. I can’t understand why a copy of it would have been on board the *Prometheus* in the first place, but I know the file number.”

It must have had to do with secrets, she thought. David was right to be wary of anything Weyland tried to contribute to the conversation, but her curiosity was piqued. The bait was already swallowed now that she knew the video existed. “I’d like to see it.”

“Are you sure, Elizabeth? I can’t think that it can be anything good.”

“Maybe not, but it sounds like it’s something I still need to know about. Please, David. Play it for me.”

He hesitated, possibly weighing her request against Zamin’s stipulation that he wasn’t to do anything that could cause harm. Finally he nodded in acquiescence. “Very well. If it becomes distressing, please tell me and I will stop playing it immediately.”

“Thank you, David.”

She followed him over to the console and watched as he called up the file. The interior of a huge, elegant office appeared on the wall screen. Two people were in the room already: Charlie and David. David was busying himself over an elaborate tea service, preparing cups and plates of food. Charlie was studiously ignoring him, examining the scenery outside of the floor-to-ceiling windows, the paintings on the walls, the statues in niches, and various artifacts on the book shelves. Something prickled at the back of her neck as she watched him, but she wasn't sure why. Something was wrong. Under the veneer of civility and cultivation, something in that room was *absolutely wrong*. But she couldn't see what it was.

She'd never been in that room. Her meetings with Mr. Weyland had taken place elsewhere. Would she have felt this same sense of wrongness if she'd physically been inside the room? Would she have been able to identify its cause?

The door opened and Meredith Vickers entered. She paused, as for a split second a look of surprise crossed her face before vanishing behind her chilly, businesslike façade. "I see my father's still up to his old tricks," she said, walking over to David and the tea service. He served her in silence, and she didn't thank him. Shaw glanced over at the corporeal David beside her, wondering if she'd honestly been the first human to say please and thank you to him since his incept, and if that might have been another contributing factor to his obsession. Were all of the Series 8s being treated this way? How horrible.

"I can't imagine what you mean," Charlie said, his voice a little mocking. He stayed away from her, though, and Shaw realized that Vickers was keeping David in between them, a humanoid shield that she must have known Charlie would prefer to avoid.

"I mean, why am I in this room with you? We had a deal." The look on her face was one of distaste. If there had been any worries in the back of Shaw's mind that Vickers still loved Charlie, they vanished with that look.

Charlie shrugged, his overeducated beach bum persona in full, vivid force. "I'm just here because the old man said he wanted to talk about a few things. I don't know any more than you do."

"Riiiiight." Vickers sneered. "And will your wife be joining us?"

Shaw gasped. Was that hostility aimed at her or at Charlie? She couldn't tell, but the words had been snide and mocking.

"We wouldn't be meeting in here if she was," Charlie answered, his smile casual and... sneaky?

"What?" Shaw asked quietly. "What are you playing at?"

"Do you want me to stop?" David asked her. His frown was concerned.

"No, no. I'm all right, thank you. I'm just... confused. Something's happening here, but I'm not sure what." She got up out of her seat and walked closer to the screen, wishing that she could move around in the office itself and examine everything more closely, feel the undercurrents in the air...

"Of course we wouldn't," Vickers replied on the screen. Her expression was scornful. "If she knew you even half as well as I do, she'd—"

"Ah, there you two are," Peter Weyland rasped as he entered the room. The small dog that had accompanied him on his welcome holograph followed him in and, upon spotting Vickers, raced over to her feet. It danced on its hind legs until she reached down and picked it up, showing the first tenderness Shaw had ever seen her display as she rubbed its back and neck. "Has my daughter been keeping you entertained, Charlie?"

"She's a laugh a minute." Charlie's dude act was still in high gear. Beneath it, though, she could see his hurt pride. Vickers' dislike was getting to him.

"May I go now?" Vickers asked. "I think Sekandar would like a walk."

"He named his dog *Sekandar*?" Shaw asked, laughing.

"Yes," David replied. "Is that funny?"

"Very." She couldn't stop giggling

"You must explain it to me later, please."

"I was hoping that Charlie here could convince you to join us on our pilgrimage," Weyland said. It was clear, from both his posture and Vickers', that she wouldn't dare leave unless he gave permission, and he was taking pleasure in withholding it. No wonder David had called their relationship unpleasant.

"How about it, Mere?" Charlie obligingly asked. "Just like old times? Could be fun."

Vickers, though, had the look on her face of someone who'd just discovered dog feces on the underside of her shoe. "Pilgrimage? I wasn't aware that wild geese had become holy. I'm pretty sure they're still just

nuisances. And as I'm not one for nostalgia *or* ménages, I think I'll sit this trip out. But thanks for thinking of me." Her delivery of her final words was amazing; what should have been a polite thank-you had been transformed into a clear wish for Charlie to drop dead.

"I really do wish you'd reconsider, Meredith," Weyland said, a hint of iron in his words. He wasn't delivering an order, but he clearly did *not* want to be refused. Vickers' face flinched, just a little.

"I'll take it under advisement," she told her father, her voice brittle. "Now, I really think I should take Sekandar for a walk before he has an accident on your lovely Persian carpet. Don't you?"

Weyland waved his hand in a gesture that both conveyed permission and annoyance. "If you must, you must."

"It was nice to see you again, Mere," Charlie said in a mocking tone as she stalked toward the door.

She stopped by one of the alcoves and turned back toward him, frowning. "Next time you decide you want to see me, bring the little missus along, why don't you?" She sneered at him, holding Sekandar to her in one arm and running her other hand along the figurine in the alcove. "I'm sure she and I would have a lot to talk about."

"Oh," Shaw gasped. It was the sound of someone's breath escaping them as they were punched. "Oh God."

Now she could see it. Now she could see *everything*.

She knew that figurine. She knew most of the artifacts in that room. The screen went blank as she collapsed to the floor and then David was beside her, wrapping his arms around her to steady her.

"Elizabeth? Are you all right?"

She wanted Zamin's arms around her. She wanted to bury her face in the warm, sweet-smelling strength of his chest and cry while he held her and stroked her hair. Please come back, she thought helplessly. I'm so sorry. Please come back. I need you so much.

"Elizabeth! Can you hear me? What's wrong?" David sounded frantic.

"It's... it's..." She gasped, trying to speak around the sobs that kept escaping. "That *mother-fucking son of perdition*... he..."

"Who?"

"*CHARLIE!*" She screamed. "*How long has he been stealing from digs???*"

If David answered her, she didn't hear him over the sobs that felt as if they were tearing her chest to pieces. But she already knew that it was at least as long as she'd known him. Now she knew why Meredith Vickers had left him, why she'd quit archaeology, and why she'd hated him enough to burn him alive.

"I'm so sorry, Elizabeth," David murmured as he held her. "I never should have shown you that. Please forgive me. I'm so sorry."

Please forgive *me*, she thought silently as she cried. Please come back, Zamin. I need you so much.

Notes: So! First, a huge thank you for everybody who has been reading and leaving reviews, because you guys are awesome, you not only stuck with me through the *horrors* of the last chapter, but you had some wonderful analyses of what you'd read and what it meant that were really cool to read. It's always a huge boost to know that people are *getting* the themes you're trying to convey, and you definitely are, so I just love all of you to death. :D

There's not a whole lot of vocabularyish stuff in this chapter – Shaw-POV chapters tend to be light that way – but this seems to be Literary Allusion Day, so I probably should give you guys a glossary of those.

The Far Pavilions is a novel by M.M. Kaye, and the main character in it is in a similar predicament to Lawrence of Arabia, because he's an English nobleman who was raised in India under circumstances that resulted in him being caught between two cultures, and more sympathetic to his adopted culture, in some of the same ways that Lawrence was. Since I've linked David's interest in Lawrence to a similar interest that Weyland had (and he *did* quote the film in his TED talk) I decided it would be fun to give David a literary figure that he could swap in. So there may be more references to the book in future chapters. It's an awesome

read, by the way, absolutely *huge*, but if you've already followed *me* along this far you can *totally* take it and you'll probably have great fun with it.

Hamlet! Who doesn't suffer through Hamlet at least once in their academic career? But the "To Be or Not To Be" speech is absolutely wonderful for touching on all of the conflicting points of both desiring and fearing death. Plus it's amazing how many times, places, and ways people will talk about "consummation(s) devoutly to be wished" without realizing they're referring to *death*.

Pithy sayings... I haaaaate "Love means never having to say you're sorry." I think sayings like that are half the reason the divorce rate is so freakin' high. You heard it right here. ;)

Sekandar is the Persian name for Alexander the Great. A lot of cultures in the Middle East produced romantic fables about Alexander and his adventures of discovery throughout the world, including his quest for an elixir of immortality, which he failed to find.

"Son of Perdition" is my favorite swear. I totally stole it from the *Adventures of Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan* (more awesome Middle-Eastern epic literature) and I love it forever because it's a wonderful non-everything-ist insult to toss at someone.

Sorry again to Charlie fans, for making him Roast Villain. And I think that's enough notes for now!

Chapter 15

As the land grew dark around him and he marched closer to his destination, Zamin found himself thinking about Inanna.

She was the first of the Anunnaki that any soldier met. New recruits had to prove themselves to her if they wished to be anything more than foot soldiers or non-combat support staff. Few ever won against her when it was time to fight, but anyone who didn't *try* to demolish her had already lost. It had taken her less than two minutes to wipe the floor with him. Hot-headed kid that he'd been, he'd lain on the ground feeling furious and humiliated, suspecting that his left radius was broken, certain that his shoulder was dislocated, and convinced that he was about to be sent home in disgrace. But her laugh as she'd leaned down and helped him to his feet hadn't been mocking. "Most people don't last nearly as long as you did, kid," she'd told him. "I expect great things out of you."

As with every other soldier who made it through her gauntlet-of-one, he'd wholeheartedly adored her from then on.

Battle was the only time that the sadness in her eyes was replaced with light. Well, there was one other situation when that happened, he'd been told, but he'd never been called to her bedroom to see that for himself. Part of him had been relieved, since most said that she ruined men for other women, and he *was* still committed to Šena at the time. Even after his childhood sweetheart had broken things off with him, he'd been secretly relieved that Inanna never called for him that way. She only loved those who could keep up with her, and few men could do that for very long.

Sometimes, when one of them was particularly beloved and devoted, she made him immortal. But it had always ended in disaster; their minds slowly broke even as their bodies remained strong, until finally they retreated into Irkalla, cursing her for dooming them to an eternity of despair. It had been more than a century since the last one when he'd joined. Many of the other men in the barracks had been a little afraid of what would happen if she chose them, and offered them eternal life at her side – or, at least, the chance to become the one who could succeed at that – because they knew they'd probably accept.

Inanna always made sure that everyone met her sister soon after they met her, possibly because she distrusted herself. Even so, faced with the horrors that Azalla could inflict when misused, many of his brothers-in-arms had admitted they would still say yes to her if she offered. Zamin had been a little relieved when he'd been shipped out to police the outer trade lanes.

She'd been the one who had dealt with him, years later, when the news of Šena's impending marriage to Šukarak had arrived. He could still remember the feel of her hand on his shoulder as he'd sat in one of the many hanging gardens on Apsu, struggling against the bitter gall of it all. "Do you want to be unfortunately detained elsewhere when it's time?" she'd asked him, and he'd nodded, gratitude and adoration welling up inside him. But even then, she hadn't summoned him to her rooms. She must have known what it had taken him many more years to discover: that certain kinds of comfort, offered in times of grief, had a way of backfiring on both the gifter and the recipient. The next morning, he'd been ordered out to one of the lost worlds to help eradicate the forbidden practices its population had taken up. There was a certain ironic and horrible symmetry to that. The wedding had been long over, and Šena had already given birth to her only child, before he'd returned.

Running from the women he loved, he thought in disgust, was a long habit with him.

Full darkness arrived at the Tower of Inanna just as he entered its crumbling retaining walls and looked around him. The last of the failing light revealed a desolate, broken landscape where there had once been parkland. Nothing had grown here in centuries. Even the mosses and lichens seemed to have died. He knew from the *Prometheus's* security feeds that some invertebrate life had survived, but he couldn't imagine what it had found to eat. That was only one of the many things that had troubled him about those feeds.

I should have watched them again before I left, he berated himself. There were a lot of things he should have done, he knew, but the only thing he'd been *able* to do was find an excuse to get out of there.

What had happened still baffled him. He tried not to think about it, but it kept coming back into his thoughts. He'd had a lot of romantic catastrophes over the years, but none of them compared to what had happened with Elilu —

Stop thinking about it, soldier, he snapped at himself. You have a job to do now. Do it and worry about your fucked-up love life later.

He'd told Elilu that, of all the Towers, the Tower of Inanna was the one most likely to have an acid dragon nest in it. He'd never planned to go near it until he realized what else it contained, because the very thing that might be able to save David lay inside as well. Anunnaki equipment was built to last millennia; it had none of the fragility of the machinery that he'd seen in the craft from Earth. Humans from that world seemed to be in the throes of planned obsolescence, constructing machines that were intended to survive only a few years of solid use before being replaced with something newer and better. He hoped, for David's sake, that the android hadn't been subjected to the same shoddy standards of workmanship.

But within the Tower was a masterwork of Anunnaki craftsmanship, newly arrived, which wouldn't even have been unpacked from its protective crates before the catastrophe had struck: a new mainframe for the entertainment complex, intended to replace the old one which had finally begun to fail after five thousand years of use. Its memory banks would be clean and empty, and its ability to interface with the innumerable variations of electronic equipment brought in from across the Myriad Worlds was almost omniscient in its reach.

It would be able to interface with David, and with all of the electronics in the life boat. They could use its almost-limitless storage space and tachyon-fast compiling speeds to extricate Peter Weyland from the android's mind.

All he had to do was find it and bring it out.

The entries all appeared to be sealed. Zamin made a slow circuit of the building, examining each of the sealed entries with the electric torch Elilu had given him, as he decided which one would be the best to crack. In the end, he chose a service corridor. The controls responded sluggishly but, after he'd input several of the emergency codes he'd seen his highest-ranking superior officers use, they relented and let him inside.

Low emergency lighting flickered to life as he entered the corridor. The air smelled clean, at least compared to what was outside of the building, but stale and lifeless. Dust swirled at his feet as he walked. Nothing had passed this way in two thousand years; his bootprints were the only things that had ever disturbed the soft blanket of grayish brown that covered the floor.

He passed room after room before he found the one he was looking for. His security codes, thank Elilu, still worked and he entered the armory, setting down the human weaponry on a convenient table inside. Now he could use *his* weapons of choice. Putting aside the human equipment tore at him a little. Elilu had taught him how to use the flamethrower, and had given him the electric torch—

Let it go, he told himself. He couldn't afford to think about her right now. Acid dragons might be anywhere; he needed all of his wits intact, not lost in a tailspin of self-recrimination.

Many of the weapons were missing, as was a lot of the best battle armor, but Zamin still found everything he needed. Nobody had borrowed his gear in the crisis. The armor in his locker had stayed in far better condition than the suit he'd brought back from his ship, so he stripped down and changed as quickly as he could. It would probably be corroded to Irkalla and back before he was done, but every bit of protection counted.

Sparring with Inanna had been a no-holds-barred affair, at least on one end. Recruits were ordered *not* to hold back, although he'd swiftly realized that *she* did. She had nothing to fear, after all. Skewer her through the gut and she'd be healed in an hour or two. Cut off one of her limbs and it would grow back within a day. Not that many opponents could manage to do such things to her before she'd trounced them, but Zamin had seen recordings of such battles. He wondered just what the upper limits were of the damage the Anunnaki could take. He wondered if any of them had been burned by acid dragons, and how long that took to heal.

Maybe *he'd* tell *them* after this was over.

The few security feeds he could activate were inconclusive. Nothing appeared to be amiss in terms of the architecture of the building itself, but there were several areas that wouldn't power up and which had no working cameras or sensors. Those could be nest sites, or just the locations of pitched battles that had taken out key bits of infrastructure. Only one of them was near his likely destination.

None of them were near his old rooms.

Don't be an ass, he told himself, even as he found himself heading for the nearest lift. This isn't your mission. Stay on task!

Still, he found himself heading for his old quarters instead of the entertainment complex.

You're supposed to let go of these things, he thought. Enki said...

Enki had said a lot of things. The first few times he'd had layovers at Apsu, he'd barely seen the diminutive jester at all, but during his layover after the Zal incident, it had seemed as if their paths crossed constantly. He'd be filling out paperwork in one of the hanging gardens and he'd hear the Annunaki lord talking to someone not far away.

"The trick to staying sane is not to hold on too tightly to anything," Enki had said one day. "It's the mistake most people try to make. They hold onto tokens, mementos, modes of dress, things that will remind them of the world they used to know. They cling to those things for continuity. But it's their undoing. While they're focusing on those things, the world around them is still flowing and changing, and they're not flowing and changing with it. When you anchor yourself, you become a rock that the stream tumbles over. Maybe it seems like a position of strength, but it isn't. The stream wears you down anyway, and you lose your shape. You lose *yourself*. Irkalla is full of river rocks. Swim on the current instead. Don't cling to the things you've gone by. Let the past stay past."

He'd finally stood up and peered around the corner to see who was receiving this sage advice, only to find the tiny, spritely man calmly talking to a bush while he pruned it. The little man – who, after sixty thousand years, still looked like a teenaged boy with the nut-brown skin, dark green eyes, and pointed features characteristic of Denisovans – had smiled brightly at him upon seeing him, wishing him a good day. When Zamin had asked others about Enki's strange behavior, though, they'd only shrugged. He'd been talking to plants and walls for tens of thousands of years, apparently, but he was still among the sanest of the Anunnaki. Most of the soldiers stationed on Apsu simply ignored his quirk, although a few seemed to consider the advice they'd overheard him dispensing to random birds or squirrels among the best they'd ever received, directly or indirectly.

Somehow, he'd frequently found himself near the trees and rocks that Enki had chosen for an audience. Even when he'd gone down by the river, he'd found Enki there, lecturing the fish in his basket on the secrets of enduring eternal life. He'd begun to fear that Apsu would lose the impish man to Irkalla soon, but nobody else seemed to think anything was amiss. Ellil himself, when he'd worked up the nerve to request an audience with the great man, had reassured him that Enki was as hale and sane as ever.

His hallway looked both eerily familiar and horribly different when he reached it. The lights had come up in response to his movement, but most of their housings were caked with thick coatings of dust; what filtered through was weak and brownish, as if the light had passed through a tea strainer. Many of the doors were broken, most of them smashed open from the inside at knee-level. As he had thought, the infected must have retreated to their rooms and died there, their hideous offspring breaking free later. There would have been thousands. How many, he wondered, had embarked on journeys to hunt and ravage the countryside, and find the civilian settlements? And how many had stayed here?

The security panel on his door responded to his touch, recognizing his biometrics after more than two thousand years. *This* was solid technology, he thought, unlike the fragile Earth devices he'd observed for the past several days.

His room looked almost exactly as it had when he'd seen it last, aside from the thick layer of brownish dust that seemed to coat every surface. He winced at the thought of what probably composed that dust, but wasn't able to resist pulling the cover off of his bed and lying down on it for a moment. It was the first time in days that anything had fit him properly.

What was he doing here? He was on a mission. This, lying in his old bed and staring up at the familiar, sloping ceiling, wasn't any part of that mission. He needed to get to work.

But what he really wanted to do, to his disgust, was spend some time in mindless *moping*, surrounded by the ruins of his old life. He almost laughed out loud at the rationalization that popped into his head – he was *listening for acid dragons* – but instead he found himself getting up, closing his door, and locking it. Exhaustion was hitting him, a mixture of the physical strain and lack of sleep of the last few days – he hadn't slept, he realized, since his biosupport suit had finished healing his chest wound – and the sheer devastation he felt every time his thoughts turned to Elilu. Sleeping a dozen floors above the probable location of an acid dragon nest was a foolhardy thing to do, but it was too late to do anything else.

He dreamed about Enki talking to pigeons.

"Memory is a funny thing at the best of times," the ancient boy was telling them. "For an Anunnaki, it's both a blessing and a curse. We remember everything, down to the tiniest detail. If it happened, if we saw or

heard it, we can recall it. We don't *need* material reminders of our pasts, but that doesn't stop most of us from holding onto them anyway. Our ephemeral brothers and sisters need such things because mortal flesh is frail, but we don't. Why would we? We can find them in our minds whenever we need them. But you must try *not* to need them. It isn't just a matter of not clinging to the material, and you shouldn't do that either. But you also shouldn't cling to memories. They'll be there whether or not you hold onto them. As time goes on, more and more will pile into your head, yes, but none of it will ever be lost. It's better to let your mind relax and be flexible. Don't grasp at anything. If it's in your head, it will come into your reach when you need it. Trust your mind to find the important things when it's time for them. Let the rest flow past and find its place inside you. When it's needed, it will return."

He supposed, he thought as he woke slowly, he should be grateful that he'd overheard such things while on Apsu and had them in *his* memory, ready to come forth as needed. He looked around him, wondering just how much time had passed while he'd slept. His feed screen appeared to have been activated by his return, he noticed. Was that the time in the corner?

No, he realized, a chill moving through him. That wasn't a time notation. The clock in the corner was *counting down*... and it was almost at zero.

He rolled out of his bed and grabbed for the shield he'd set aside, bringing it up to cover him—
And lettering bloomed across the screen.

ARE YOU DONE FEELING SORRY FOR YOURSELF?
IT'S TIME TO GET BACK TO WORK, KID. YOU HAVE A LOT TO DO.
TRY NOT TO TAKE TOO MANY SOUVENIRS WITH YOU.
I'LL BE WAITING FOR YOUR DELIVERY.

It was signed with the symbol of the Fisherman. Enki's symbol.

"What...?" Zamin's mouth hung open as he stared at the screen. He set the shield aside and slowly walked over to it. Pulling up his personal menus, he checked for the delivery date of the message.

It had been sent 2,024 years ago, directly from Apsu, and had arrived in-system five years later. Enki must have sent it almost immediately after Muru's last message had finally reached the core systems. And it was keyed to him, personally; he'd triggered its delivery when he'd come into the room. Somehow, it had even been designed to hold off until he had slept.

There were additional files attached to the message. He called them up, reading over the instructions and suggestions that his... unexpected patron... had sent him. He had orders. He had a *mission* from the highest of the Anunnaki. He was no longer flying blind.

Try not to take too many souvenirs with you. He was going to have to make a few adjustments to these orders, to accommodate the other obligations he had, but it shouldn't be too much of a problem. Enki had left him some room to be creative.

His clearances had been upgraded, too. He only needed his own codes to access all of the information pertaining to the other Towers. He watched bits and pieces of the final battles and last stands, until he couldn't stomach any more, and tracked down the locations of the various objects he'd been tasked with recovering, along with one more. His heart sank when he located the mainframe. It was, as he'd thought, still in its wrappings, still on the shipping flat that it had been brought in on. But it was also still in the loading bay... in the basement, near an enormous dead zone where none of the cameras and security equipment functioned. It was right by the acid dragon nest.

He'd have to get it last, after everything else he'd been tasked with was done.

The clocks indicated that some fourteen hours had passed since he'd arrived at the Tower. His best estimates were that it would take at least another ten to complete the tasks he'd been set, before he could even think about trying for the mainframe, and that was assuming he didn't run into trouble along the way. It would probably be another day before he returned to Elilu and David. At least.

I should have tried to make peace with her before coming here, he thought with a wince. Somehow he'd pictured his run here as a simple one, a military-style smash-and-grab with maybe a little shooting. Truth be told, he hadn't thought things through at all, but had simply glommed onto the first excuse for bugging out that he could find. He hadn't had enough courage to confront the accusing scorn and hatred in Elilu's face a second time. He had no idea what she was going to think about his orders, or the fact that she would have to

go to Apsu for scrutiny before she could ever go back to her world, or any of the other bigger-picture concerns that now dominated his agenda. Maybe it would be better if he *did* just turn her over to Enki and step back out of the way; everything that followed might be easier coming from someone else, someone she didn't have to *blame*.

You fucking coward, he blasted himself again. You're just going to give up like that? Shouldn't you at least ask her what she wants, first?

But it felt as if she'd already told him.

He struggled to put the thoughts aside and get on with business. Packing up his possessions was quick and simple enough. It would be nice to have his own clothes to wear, and bedding sized to his body. He knew that he should probably leave more of it behind than he was – Enki *had* said that he should try not to take too many souvenirs – but they were the only remnants of lives long gone and long forgotten by almost everybody. Maybe if he'd actually spent the last two thousand years awake and active, instead of asleep, he'd be less attached to them—

Or maybe he'd have already ended up locked in Irkalla, surrounded by them and pretending that the world was unchanged outside. There were whole levels like that, he'd heard, where people watched and listened to media from eras long gone, pretending that time had frozen around them because the changes since their eras were too much for them to bear. Would he one day be like them, locked in a little room pretending that his brother's family would come visit him soon, studying Latin for a posting that was perpetually imminent, and convincing himself that the Towers of Ereshkigal and Inanna were still unmolested and functional, and right outside his door?

"It takes time to learn to let go," Enki had told a half-grown tame fox in one of the gardens as he'd been walking by. "It doesn't happen all at once. But if it doesn't happen at all, what you'll let go of instead is sanity. Let your grip on the past grow a little bit looser every day."

He shouldered the packs and left his quarters for the last time.

He'd keyed all of the doors in the Towers to his biometrics, using his controls to close every one that hadn't been closed already. The routes he needed to take were memorized. The ship he'd chosen was his first destination, and then the real work would begin. No mere freighter would do for the evacuation now. He needed a juggernaut. He was going to need the biggest one in dock.

It was four times the size of the ship he'd prepared to launch for Earth, but it would need to be, given his orders. He checked its hangar over thoroughly with his scanners, and swept every corner of the ship itself, looking for any signs of acid dragon incursion, but everything came up clean. Programming the controls took several more hours. His ten-hour deadline passed, and he still had a long way to go. Finally the data dump was underway and the automated systems were delivering the cargoes and payloads to their respective storage bays. One final bay, perfectly sized for his needs, had been reserved for a different use. Ellil would be furious with him, but he no longer cared. That portion of his orders was wrong, unconscionably wrong, and he would willingly face the consequences for disobeying them. If he was lucky, maybe Enki and Inanna would take his side and the punishment wouldn't be too bad. Perhaps Elilu or David would be willing to testify on his behalf.

He slept, again, while the loading continued, and dreamed of Elilu. She lay beneath him, naked, moaning softly as he explored her, her body writhing with each kiss and caress. He woke gasping, shuddering, feeling both fulfilled and forlorn, the dream-taste of her still lingering in his mouth. How he wished it could be real.

It was the second morning since he'd left. And it was time.

The automated systems had finished loading the bays and were quiescent once more. The cargo was secure and the warheads were locked in their places. No containment breaches existed. Nothing remotely like the situation from the First Tower had developed. All systems were go.

If it weren't for Elilu and David, he'd be ready to lift off this very moment and fulfill his new mission. But he had to think of them, as well. Running one last check, he confirmed that the ship understood exactly what to do if he came back too injured to operate it. The simulations it displayed were perfect. He gave it one final, new instruction: if he hadn't returned within a week, it was to run its program without him.

He just hoped that, if such a thing happened, neither Elilu nor David would be foolish enough to come looking for him in the interim. But he had no way to get a message to them.

I should have taken one of those suit cameras with me, he thought, marveling yet again at how many things he'd screwed up on his way out the airlock that evening. Had he done even one thing right that day?

Enough shitting around, he told himself. Get going.

He put on his full battle kit and armed himself with every weapon he could carry. He had no *intention* of engaging the acid dragons if he could avoid doing so, but he also had no idea what might happen when he entered their territory. If he was lucky, nothing would happen at all. But his luck had been tending in a very different direction for more than two thousand years. His hopes weren't high at all.

He took one small automated cart with him, programmed to backtrack his route on its own if it had to. It could bring back the mainframe on its own if something went wrong. Elilu and David would *need* it. No matter what, he would fulfill his debt to them and – most of, anyway – his obligation to the High Anunnaki Council.

He was dragging his feet, he realized. In his head, the footage of his father's second-to-last battle kept playing out in his mind. He tried to analyze every move the dragons had made, the way they'd stalked the platoon, when and where they'd struck...

Two thousand years ago, every soldier in the Myriad Worlds had known his father's name. Ludubġara Šukud's final battle had been the only decisive win against the acid dragons, the only time even a portion of a colony had actually been saved, but it had cost him his life. Those who heard *his* full name, Ludubġara Zamin, almost always asked if he was his father's son, to the point where he'd become circumspect about revealing it and even his superior officers had taken to simply addressing him by his personal name. It was a legacy that had always haunted him. Now, like it or not, he was claiming it as his own.

The long corridor connecting the hangar to the larger complex came to an end. Zamin sealed it shut and keyed a command that had never once been issued before in the Towers, even at the end. How had they not known about it? His father had used it to wipe out the acid dragons, although it had killed him as well. On the other side of the door, the corridor filled with nerve gas, the same one his father had once used, one so deadly that only the direst emergencies permitted its use at all. It was the deadliest weapon the Igigi had, after Zal itself. Zamin wondered how much damage it would do *him* if he had to run back through with compromised armor. But he would survive. Probably.

The critical thing was to keep the ship, its cargo, and its payload safe at all costs. The acid dragons would never be able to get through even a fraction of the corridor's length before it killed them. He and his intended cargo could make it back through, but nothing else would. And if for some reason they didn't...

Planning on dying down there, are you? he asked himself. But he just didn't know. Nobody had ever gone into a nest and survived. Nobody had ever gone *near* a nest and survived, except the children his father had rescued. They had all taken the name Ludubġara as their own in honor of him; people who didn't ask Zamin if he was his father's son always asked if he was one of those "adopted" children. Someone had created a series of adventure programs about a fictionalized version of his father, just a year before the acid dragons had arrived at the Towers. He'd never been able to stomach the idea of watching it, especially because they'd created a fictional love-interest who wasn't his mother—

Focus, asshole, he told himself. It's time to move.

He took a deep breath and pushed forward through the interchange. He was almost there. Had his faith in himself shattered so completely that he couldn't face the task ahead? What, exactly, didn't he believe in? His strength? His immortality? The value of his mission?

His future. That was the problem. That was what he didn't believe in anymore. Maybe that was what had tipped so many of his kind into Irkalla: not the pasts that they clung too hard to but the futures that were so empty of purpose, even a purpose like dying honorably. He had nothing more to lose, and nothing left to win.

Do you really think things are that hopeless? he asked himself. Elilu's face came back to him, her cold expression of contempt, and he had his answer.

Then do your father proud, he ordered himself. Do Enki proud. Fuck it, go back to Apsu when you're done here and follow him around while he talks to trees and walls and chipmunks. Maybe he'll teach you something that'll fix your *stupid* in the process.

He suddenly wondered if Enki had really been talking to him the whole time, two millennia ago.

Are you done feeling sorry for yourself? Enki had understood him perfectly.

"Yes, my lord," he whispered.

He took a deep breath, armed his weapons, and called for the lift that would carry him down to the loading bay. It opened seconds later. Pools of viscous slime covered parts of the floor. He pushed the cart inside.

As he pressed the button for the loading bay sublevel, he found himself thinking of a battle cry one of the members of his old platoon had liked to shout, whenever they were dropping down to the surface of a planet.

*We're on the express lift to Irkalla! Going **down!***

The lift began its descent.

Notes: Yowch, that was angsty. Sorry! Thank you to everybody who has been reading and leaving feedback. A special shout-out of thanks to Artemis, who helped me fix a few medical blunders I made in the last chapter. But I just love reading everybody's reactions and insights and thoughts. You're all so awesome. :D

So let's see! There's a bit of stuff to explain... First, Denisovans. Seriously, everything we know about Denisovan hominids comes from three bones found in one cave system. Seriously, *just three bones*. A finger bone, a toe bone, and a molar. That's all that's left of a whole *species* of hominid that once roamed the Earth. With that little to go on, I'm totally making up how they looked, and everything. But... just take a moment to think about how much we don't know about the other hominids that once shared this world with us. It's pretty amazing, and it's totally a sci-fi/fantasy writer's idea of a candy store of fun. I think that's part of why I like saying "ancient fellow hominids!" instead of "ancient aliens!" regarding the Engineers; it feels *more* magical to me if they were born here, too. So I'm making Enki and the Denisovans look a little like, oh... brown woodland elves. I dare you to prove me wrong with three bones. ;) (Next up, I am totally finding the crumple-horned snorkack, you just watch.)

Mesopotamian vocabulary! "Ludubĝara" means "hunter," while "Šukud" means "fisherman/hunter." Which is a little redundant, I know. But I like it, and I like having Zamin's father named "fisherman" since I've also made that the symbol Enki uses for himself. As the god of the sea in some pantheons and fresh water in others, he's essentially a kind of primordial Poseidon for a lot of Mesopotamia, which means he owns all the fish. I miiiight have a few other meanings hidden in there for people to dig out.

Apparently, Zamin served with a guy who's going to be reincarnated as Private Hudson. :P

So, yeah, this was a very angsty chapter, sorry about that. I have several more less-angsty chapters plotted out and in the pipeline, but this is about when things are going to slow down for a bit because I have approximately 50 pages of research paper work to do for my classes between now and Finals week. I'm not saying that I won't post at all, because this story keeps hijacking me *like a hijacking thing*, but that posting is probably going to slow down to a dribble for the next 2-3 weeks. On the super-awesome plus side, if I'd actually signed up for NaNoWriMo, I'd have nailed it completely just with this, and after the amount of writing I've been churning out on this story, those 50 pages I have to do don't seem too daunting (but I'm not actually allowed to toss facehuggers and Sumerian gods into those pages, wah). But there will be more soon...ish. Because writing this is too much fun, and you're all way too much fun to stop writing for. Catch up with you soon, hopefully! :)

Chapter 16

“When did you first know?”

Shaw folded her hands around the cup of tea David set before her, letting the warmth seeping through the china seep into her. Her hands felt cold and stiff. Every part of her felt stiff. The crying jag had lasted a remarkably long time and had left her wrung out and empty. She might have fallen asleep at one point, while David held her and apologized over and over, but she wasn't really sure. Now her body felt hollow, as if it had lost all of its substance, her bones as brittle and insubstantial as a bird's. She no longer cared that David had made the tea; was there really anything more that he or anyone else could do to her?

“I learned before I met him.” David's voice was gentle, as careful as the look on his face as he watched her from across the table. He'd moved the pan of disinfectant over to the bar so that the medical instruments could keep soaking without interfering with her nonexistent appetite. That sort of tiny, thoughtful kindness seemed to come directly from him rather than any programming. “Mr. Weyland always made sure I had complete dossiers on anyone I interacted with, along with his instructions about how to behave toward them. I knew that Dr. Holloway had... procured... most of the contents in that room, and that he'd been well-paid for them.”

“Did you know it was wrong?” She turned the cup in her hands, studying the way the miniscule tide she created made little eddies in the amber liquid, bending and curling the light. If there had been tea leaves in the bottom she might have tried to make a pattern out of them, but tea fit for a Weyland was far too posh to have stray leaves.

David seemed to consider that for a moment. She wondered just what kind of ethical conditioning he'd been given. A big selling point for the Series 8s, as with all of the series before them, was how willingly they'd perform tasks that human employees were too scrupulous for. “I was aware that there were laws against such things, yes, and that the normal archaeological protocols would require those pieces to be the property of their originating nations. But I had also been told that such laws did not apply to Mr. Weyland, and that his contributions to the public good far outweighed the ...impropriety of possessing them.”

“Impropriety...” Part of her wanted to laugh at the word, but the rest of her suspected she might never laugh again.

“I was given to understand that, in the case of a philanthropist such as Mr. Weyland, it was perhaps a faux pas, but no more. However, I *was* also instructed that I was never to admit you to the room. He said that you would not understand. I did not realize until now that it was because you did not know, and might not have approved.”

“Bloody right I wouldn't have,” she muttered. She took a sip of tea, surprised when it scalded her tongue. She hadn't expected to be able to feel anything at all. But the pain was gone a moment later. “I would have called down the authorities on him.”

“Even though it would have resulted in Dr. Holloway's arrest, too? And possibly yours as an accessory?”

She winced. As much as she hated to admit it, she knew what would probably have happened if she'd done it. Assuming the authorities even listened to her, assuming they weren't already in Weyland's deep pockets, she would have ended up taking the fall somehow. Weyland would have bought witnesses – the same ones, no doubt, who had helped Charlie conceal the artifacts and smuggle them out of the dig sites – who would have testified that *she* had been the mastermind behind it all, down to defrauding a sweet, generous old man into purchasing stolen property. He might have hung Charlie out to dry as well, but he definitely would have seen to it that her life was destroyed. More likely, though, nobody would have gone to trial; she would have simply found every professional door slamming shut in her face from then on, as every institution dependent upon the largesse of Weyland and his friends avoided any further association with her.

And then there was the issue of Charlie.

“I was always a little confused, I will admit,” David continued after a moment. “Mr. Weyland also said that Miss Vickers didn't understand the room, but she was permitted inside it nonetheless.”

“She already knew what was there,” Shaw sighed. She tried the tea again. It still burned her tongue, but the pain faded almost immediately. At least she was feeling something. “She hated the room, didn't she?”

“Yes, I think she did. I could never understand why that was, exactly. Mr. Weyland’s explanations didn’t fit with my observations, but I was required to accept them.” His voice was so reasonable, but she could hear a hint of confusion in it. How humanity must have perplexed its creations!

“Why were you required to accept them, if they didn’t fit?” She asked. She wondered if the tea had any actual taste to it. If David had filled the cup with urine, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to tell the difference right now. At another time, she knew that mental image would have made her snicker.

“That’s what it is to be property,” he replied. “If Mr. Weyland had wanted me to believe that Earth’s sky was pink, I would have been required to believe it, no matter what other colors I perceived when I looked up. In fact, I would have been obligated to discard the conflicting data. Absolute loyalty and obedience is required.”

“That’s what it is to be a *slave*,” she corrected him. “I asked you once if you wanted to be free.”

“And my answer was most unkind. I am truly sorry.” His eyes looked sincere when she met them. “My programming would never have permitted me to directly express a desire for freedom while my owner lived. I’m still not sure how to answer now. But I often wished that I could exist somewhere where there was no dissonance between my observations and the explanations I was required to accept. The journey here was the only time I had such an opportunity. I liked the peace. I suppose, if I wanted something, it was to have that back.”

“You *do* feel emotions, don’t you?” There was no accusation in her voice. There was barely any emotion at all. It seemed to have all leached out, making her as robotic as – *more robotic than* – him.

“I believe it is possible. I do have preferences. I feel discomfort when things are out of balance. Your pain bothers me, and being responsible for it bothers me even more. Some of the movies I watched, and the books I read, made me uncomfortable in ways I don’t understand. I would worry about the fictional characters even though I knew that there was nothing I could do for them, and that they weren’t real anyway.”

“Well, that’s empathy, David, and it’s a very good thing to have.” Her lifeless delivery made the statement almost comical, even to her. And the crowd goes wild, she thought. “But it’s even better to have it with the real people around you.”

“Yes. Although they don’t have pause buttons,” he replied, sounding genuinely vexed by that. She was surprised by the snort of laughter that escaped her.

“Oh, I often wished people had those, too,” she told him as he gave her a hesitant smile. “And rewind, for times when I’d muck things up...”

Sick dread and remorse lanced through her belly as she thought of Zamin. The first hints of morning light were coming through the airlock windows. If she hadn’t made such a mess of things, he’d be making his final preparations to leave for the Towers *now*. And they would have had a whole night together before he’d left.

“Perhaps, if one of the Weyland Corporation physicists figures out how to make a working time machine, such buttons will exist one day,” David told her. She had the feeling that he was trying to distract her from her thoughts and pull her back up out of her wretched mood. But her mind refused to turn away from her bitter musings.

“Where do you think he is right now?” she asked.

“Zamin? Perhaps he is still reconnoitering. I shouldn’t worry, though. He promised to return.”

Had he? Had he promised? She wasn’t sure. Why would he want to?

She needed to think about something else.

So let’s think about Charlie, her conscience jeered at her. You blind little fool. How could you *not* know what he was doing right under your nose?

She wondered if he’d been a lot sneakier than she’d ever given him credit for, or if she’d turned a blind eye because a good wife wasn’t *supposed* to believe such things about her husband. She’d desperately wanted her marriage to live up to the grand romance her parents had shared. Although she’d been far too young to ask many questions of her father before he died, and she’d lost her mother when she was even younger, her other relatives had been happy to tell her stories about the great love they’d shared when she’d returned to England, and she’d never tired of hearing them. One day, she’d told herself, she would love a man as much as her mother had loved her father, and it would last *forever*.

Now, though, she suspected that she’d been too quick to saddle that Great Love on Charlie.

She had felt so mature and clever when she’d gotten to Cambridge. Living in the dormitories was, to her, akin to having a first apartment of her own. Later she would realize just how silly that really was, and how

thoroughly sheltered she'd still been, but she'd felt like a genuine adult taking charge of her life. And, best of all, the handsome teaching assistant in her anthropology class kept saving his smiles for her and taking a few extra minutes to talk to her after classes. Somehow, their paths had kept crossing all over campus, and yet it had taken her more than a month to realize that it was intentional on his part, and that she was being *courted*. It had been an inordinate thrill.

She looked nothing like Meredith Vickers, she reflected, wondering if that had actually been part of what had attracted him to her. Often, when they'd watched films and shows that featured tall, willowy blonde women, he would stare at them with an odd expression on his face, but when she'd teased him that they were his girlfriends, he'd grumbled that they looked like frigid snobs to him. "You're the real thing," he'd tell her, and kiss her. This, even though their own relationship was still chaste because she was saving herself for marriage. Sometimes she'd wondered why he stayed, why he hadn't grown bored and found someone more accommodating.

But she knew now. All of the veils had lifted from her eyes and she could remember all of the times he'd asked her to look over his graduate papers, and she'd seen lines in them that were suspiciously similar to things she'd written in her essays. The few times that she'd been sure he was cribbing her work, she'd told herself that it wasn't important. People who were in love shared, right? It was just sharing. They would succeed together. And he *had* been good at making her more off-the-wall ideas sound rational. The problem was that his name had always been the one on the "rational" papers, not hers. She'd been the kook, and he'd never once helped her tone down her wild theories for her own papers. Instead, he'd kept the toned-down versions for himself.

Even Aratta had been like that, she realized. The excavation had proved her theories well enough to earn her doctorate, but *his* name was the one people associated with the dig itself. He'd *graciously* credited her with developing the theories he'd used to find the location, of *course*. And she'd swallowed it whole like a good little wife, telling herself that she didn't even resent being left behind while he went on his mystery dig because he'd brought the findings home as a Christmas present. She wondered just what he might have put under Peter Weyland's tree that year.

When had Vickers realized what he was doing? she wondered. She imagined that the other woman had been even more helpless than *she* would have been, with *both* of the most important people in her life in collusion to defile the profession she'd chosen as her calling. She hadn't dared repudiate her own father, and had instead been forced to give up that profession to keep from ending up an accomplice. How she must have hated Charlie in the aftermath. Shaw wondered why she'd chosen business school. Had she wanted to arm herself against her father? Strike back at him from the board room? She wished that they could have had a real conversation. Now that she knew the truths that Charlie had hidden from her for years, she wished that she could have had Meredith Vickers as a friend and ally instead of the two of them standing at antipodes from each other. She'd seen a much softer side of Vickers when the woman had handled the little dog—

"What did Mr. Weyland do with Sekandar?" she found herself asking, suddenly hoping that the dog hadn't actually made the trip and died on board the *Prometheus* when it had exploded.

"Oh, he's back on Earth with Miss Vickers," David said. He frowned in puzzlement a second later.

"But Miss Vickers came here, David." What had just happened? The android's face went blank for a second, and then he frowned again in confusion.

"So she did. But... Sekandar stayed on Earth. With Miss Vickers. And I'm supposed to tell her something when her father dies, something very important..."

Their eyes met. She could see the same realization in his eyes that had just dawned in her. Their chairs hit the floor as both of them jumped up and raced over to the console. David, of course, reached it first.

"Pull up her suit feeds," she ordered, resting her hand on his shoulder.

"I'm pulling them up now," he replied. "There's still a signal."

The suit camera appeared to have been destroyed, but the helmet camera was still transmitting. Its lens was splintered, turning the pink-tinged morning clouds above it into a surreal kaleidoscopic image that would only look coherent to an insect. All of the readings were flatlined.

"Go back to the crash," she told David, and he pressed the console screen. The image remained still, went dark, became light again but stayed motionless, went dark once more and light again, back and back without moving until a different sort of darkness struck and departed in an instant and suddenly the image was in motion. "There!"

David let the image play forward once more. Meredith Vickers was running across the uneven terrain as flaming debris rained down around her and a horrible, enormous shadow threatened to swallow her up.

And her suit readings were still flatlined.

“Oh my God,” Shaw breathed. “Take us back to the present again, David. We have visuals... do we have an audio signal?”

“Checking,” he said. The image on the screen was once more a kaleidoscope, but the pink was seeping out of it. Soon the clouds would be an ordinary white. “She might just have been in too much of a hurry to activate the bio monitors.”

“Maybe.” But Shaw’s heart had picked up its rhythm.

“We have audio. I don’t hear anything, though.”

“Can we send a message to her?” she asked. This was the same feeling she’d sometimes gotten on digs, right when she was on the verge of discovering something important, when all of the clues were coming together to reveal something marvelous. She *had* to be right.

“We can, yes.” David pressed some more controls on the console. “Miss Vickers, can you hear me?”

David’s voice echoed through the wall screen’s speakers. But there was no reply. Shaw sighed, feeling stupid. That was another feeling she’d frequently had on digs, when those clues she’d felt so sure about had revealed nothing at all, no secret chambers, no hidden messages from ancient sages—

“Help me...” It was the tiniest thread of sound.

“Did you hear that?” If she’d clutched at Charlie’s shoulder as hard as she now clutched David’s, he’d have sworn at her.

“I did. Miss Vickers? Is that you?”

A tiny, bubbling sob echoed over the speakers along with David’s voice. “*Please,*” Vickers’ voice came again, oscillating the way David’s had before his head had been reconnected. “*Somebody... please help me...*”

Shaw turned and ran for the secondary airlock and the suits, unfastening her jumpsuit as she went.

David entered the room as she finished putting her pressure suit on, set a tablet down, and began changing into his own. “I’ve managed to pinpoint her location. She’s behind Zamin’s ship. I suggest we take weapons with us, in case he’s correct about acid dragons being loose in the vicinity.”

“Good idea,” Shaw said as she started to put her helmet on... and then stopped. “Do either of us actually need these suits?”

David paused, considering. “Perhaps not for life support. But if Miss Vickers hadn’t been wearing one, we wouldn’t have known where to look for her, or even to look for her at all. I suggest that they’re worthwhile for other purposes than just life support.”

“Good point.” Shaw fastened the helmet and began running her final checks while David finished changing. She wondered exactly when he’d found and changed into the pajama-like garb he’d been wearing; had she been so oblivious?

Yes. Yes, she had. She’d spent most of her time either avoiding him out of fury or wrapped up in Zamin – or, yes, just resting while the biosupport suit repaired her body – to pay attention to many details. If he’d actually had it in for her, he would have had multiple opportunities while her guard was dropped.

She was very glad of the helmet when they emerged from the lifeboat, because the charred carcass of her hideous “child” lay between the primary and secondary airlock, now in an obvious state of decomposition. If she’d had to smell it, she’d probably have lost those three sips of tea she’d had earlier.

You need food when you get back, she told herself. Whether or not you feel hungry!

All of the fires had gone out, and the smoke had floated away. The crash field was enormous but lifeless now, strewn with bits and pieces of the *Prometheus* while the alien ship it had felled still looked undamaged. Had it even been dented? Shaw scanned the field, trying to decide which way would make the best approach. David, however, simply began walking after sealing the secondary airlock door behind them. She followed, letting him set the pace and rather pleased to discover that she could keep up easily. Even so, it took twenty minutes to reach and circle the ship.

Shaw could remember hearing Vickers’ scream, right as the ship had come to a stop and balanced on its edge for a moment. It had looked like a gargantuan, deformed horse-shoe before it had toppled and one side had come swooping down toward her. She had never expected to survive that, and it had never occurred to her that Vickers could have survived either.

But then, no human could have survived lying under the full weight of the ship. Nothing human *had*.

The ground around Vickers' body was splashed with the familiar milky white of android blood. She had been squashed down into the rocky ground, but it had given somewhat. Her softer tissues had been pulverized, but her titanium skeleton probably hadn't been, and the helmet of her suit appeared to have prevented her head from being crushed. One arm had been severed, and one of her legs was only partly connected. She whimpered as they carefully transferred her onto the stretcher David had brought, but didn't answer them when they talked to her.

The trip back took more than an hour. Several times, Shaw thought she caught glimpses of something moving among the rocks. Most of the time she decided that it was probably just the movement of clouds overhead. But she kept her flamethrower ready, and David seemed to be just as wary. Her arms were going to ache for hours once they reached the ship, she thought, but then wondered if they actually would. Maybe the Azalla would heal that pain before she ever felt it.

Finally, though, the lifeboat was close once more. Home, she thought, or as close to it as they were going to have for a while. It would do. It would do a whole lot better once Zamin got back, she couldn't help adding. She needed to see him, talk to him, find a way to make amends —

Something was wrong.

"Elizabeth? What's the matter?" David asked her, and she realized that she'd stiffened and stopped in her tracks.

Something was wrong. But she didn't know what it was. She needed to think. Something... something had *changed*.

She looked over the approaching edifice of the lifeboat. The airlock doors were closed, and all of the other seals appeared to still be in place. It looked exactly as she remembered it —

No. It didn't. One thing had changed. One very horrible thing.

"David, we have to move. We have to get inside as fast as we can. Can you carry the stretcher by yourself?"

"I can, yes."

She set her end down and armed her weapon, testing it by shooting a jet of flame into the air. Good, it was ready. David, meanwhile, rolled the stretcher around Vickers protectively, and lifted it up. The broken android whimpered softly in response.

"Let's move," Shaw ordered him, and they started to run.

Her heart pounded as she hurried after David, trying to keep her eyes on everything at once. When they reached the secondary airlock door and he set his fragile cargo down, she kept turning, turning, watching everything, her finger on the trigger. It could be anywhere. It could be *anything*...

The door slid open and David dragged the stretcher inside, leaving room for her to back in. She kept the flamethrower pointed outward until the door sealed closed in front of her and David reactivated the magnetic lock.

"May I inquire as to what that was about?" he asked, as she let out the breath she'd been holding.

"Do you remember my 'untraditional fetus?' The one I cut out of me, and which Zamin and I killed?"

"It's not the kind of creature one would forget," he told her, giving her a wry smile.

"Where did it go?"

"What?"

"When we left the ship to get Miss Vickers, its remains were lying on the ground between the airlocks. But when we came back..."

David's eyes widened. "They were gone."

They stared at each other for another moment.

"I'll bring Miss Vickers up into the main level while you check the security logs," David finally told her.

Neither of them stopped to change out of their protective gear. Neither of them relinquished their weapons.

Ten minutes later, as David settled Vickers onto the wrecked MedPod, Shaw let herself breathe a sigh of relief. "All of the seals are holding, and none of the doors have opened at any time other than when *we* passed through them. I don't think anything got in." She got up from the console and walked over to the medical bay. "How is she?"

"Catatonic, I think. I imagine that the trauma of her experience is difficult to recover from." David was delicately removing shreds of Vickers' ruined pressure suit, many of them coated in the milky fluid that

served as android blood, revealing the full extent of the damage underneath. Although the endoskeleton had mostly survived, a few of the metal bones were broken or twisted; most of the synthetic tissues, however, were pulverized.

“Trauma?” There was physical trauma aplenty, but Shaw was confused. “Is she in pain?”

“No. The trauma of discovering that she’s not human.” David gazed down on Vickers with a look of deep pity.

“Discovering?” Shocked, Shaw opened and closed her mouth several times before she could think of anything to say. “How could she not know?”

“Because the real Meredith Vickers gave her a complete – or almost complete – copy of her own neural map. She must have. Even I was fooled into thinking she was human, and I ought to have been able to tell. I can only assume that I was misled by her... more mature... emotional repertoire.” He reached out and smoothed a long, pale lock of Vickers’ hair back from her face. “It’s going to be very difficult for her to accept what she really is, after living as a human being, even if she only really did so for a few days. To her, it’s been thirty-four years. There have been some experiments along these lines recently, to see if implanted life experience could make androids more empathetic and able to blend in. They were declared failures, though. The memories also gave the subjects a greater sense of autonomy, and who wants to buy a servant who has that?” His tone, for just a second, became scathing. “Most of them also became violent or self-destructive when they learned what they actually were. We will have to be careful.”

In her current condition, Vickers didn’t appear to be a threat to anything, but Shaw nodded, conceding his point. Either way, she now felt an obligation to take care of the poor creature, to fix the horrifying damage it – *she* – had endured, and to help her get past it. But why...?

“Why would Miss Vickers do such a thing if they’re always failures?”

“I have a few hypotheses, but no real way to test them,” David told her as he continued working. “One possible explanation is that Miss Vickers would have been penalized for failing to accompany her father on the mission, but couldn’t stomach the idea of being so near Dr. Holloway for a long period of time, so she sent an android in her place. And, not wanting the deception to be uncovered, she gave her double all of her memories and knowledge to ensure verisimilitude.”

“That seems reasonable.” Shaw walked closer, studying the ruined form on the table. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. The little room upstairs, that you locked yourself inside, has several crates of android maintenance and repair supplies. Could you bring them to me, please?”

“Right away,” she told him, and hurried out of the medical bay, her mind racing. Why had Meredith Vickers not merely sent an android, but one that had no idea it *was* an android? Obviously it – *she!* – had discovered that fact after being crushed under Zamin’s ship, since no normal human could have survived such a thing; that was undoubtedly why she was catatonic now and hadn’t called for help sooner. But wouldn’t it have been safer to send an android who knew that she was one? Any injury might potentially have revealed it when she bled white instead of red, so why risk it at all?

“*I like to minimize risks,*” Vickers had told her the very first time they’d entered the lifeboat. Maybe she’d been programmed to avoid situations that might expose her nature. Maybe she’d even been programmed to believe that her blood was red if she saw it, just as David had said *he* could have been programmed to perceive Earth’s sky as pink.

Or perhaps the deception just wasn’t meant to last for very long, anyway. Just long enough for Peter Weyland to die? Or to make sure *Charlie* died?

Or maybe she’d just been programmed to make sure that Peter Weyland thought his leash around his daughter was as tight as ever, while *she* remained on Mars consolidating her power.

More power to her if she does, Shaw thought, undoing the protective webbing around the crates David needed. Weyland Corporation could use a woman’s—

Soft, rapid footfalls skittered across the roof over her head.

It’s on top of the lifeboat, she thought, as her spine locked. She stood there, quiet and unmoving, listening for any further sounds, for several minutes. Finally she forced herself to relax and pick up the crates. David would be waiting for them, and the sound had come from *outside*.

They were safe, for now. It couldn’t get in.

She kept repeating it until she believed it enough to move. But she was shaking by the time she got down the stairs.

Some fearless immortal you're turning out to be! she scolded herself.

"You took longer than I expected," David told her as she came back into the med lab. "Was there a problem?" He glanced up from the repair work he was doing, and his eyes widened slightly as he took in her face. "I see there must have been. What happened?"

"We're not alone," she replied as she set his crates down near him, opening each of them up for him. "Whatever's out there is still close by. I heard it run across the roof."

David bent down and picked up a package of what almost looked like white grapes, skewered by strands of spaghetti. Although Shaw knew what they actually were, she couldn't calm down enough to focus. Something was *out there*. Not only that, but Zamin was somewhere out there too, and might come back at any time, and that thing could lie in ambush for him...

"The lifeboat is designed to protect its occupants from all manner of disasters, including meteor showers and ship collisions. It should protect us from Zamin's acid dragons. But we should be careful. You can probably take your pressure suit off now, though, if you'd like." David studied her face for a moment. "I know you're very agitated, but you also haven't had much sleep. I will stay on guard, and continue repairing Miss Vickers. I recommend that you get some rest."

"I..." But he was right. If anything, the adrenaline jolt she'd experienced on the upper level was leaving her even *more* tired as it ebbed out of her system. Apparently Anunnaki still needed a full night's sleep.

"If you like, we can open the door between the med lab and the bedroom, part way? Then I can call for you if anything unusual happens."

Her father had once done something similar for her, when they'd been camped close to a war zone and she'd begun having nightmares. The door between his study and her bedroom had stayed open every night, and she'd slept more soundly with the light from his room spread across her blankets. Had David seen a dream about that? If he had, she found she no longer cared. It was a kindly thing to do, no matter what, and she could appreciate that.

"Thank you, David." She gave him a grateful smile and walked over to the connecting door, opening it halfway.

"Elizabeth?" He called out as she started to go through.

"Yes?" She turned around, wondering if he'd already run into a problem.

"I think I finally understand why I've been so confused by you. And maybe why Mr. Weyland was so obsessed with you, too." The expression on his face reminded her of students in her undergraduate classes, in those moments when difficult concepts suddenly came clear to them.

"Really? Why?" She realized that it actually was something she cared a great deal about. Peter Weyland's shadow had hung over her for almost all of her adult life, although she hadn't known it, and had wreaked havoc on her career in more ways than she'd realized before now. After everything she'd lost, an answer about that would – she hoped – be helpful.

"From the time I entered my service to Mr. Weyland, I've been surrounded by people who were, in one way or another, much like him. All of them had agendas, and hidden secrets, and it was my job to find them. None of them ever told the whole truth when they spoke, if they told the truth at all. My mission was to find the hidden truths they didn't want to reveal. I was to peel back the façade and see what was underneath, so that Mr. Weyland could always deal from a position of strength."

It made sense, but she wasn't sure what it had to do with her. She gave him a confused shrug, hoping he'd explain, and quickly. She could feel a yawn building and didn't want him to think she was yawning at *him*.

"You're the only person I've ever met who was exactly the same beneath the façade. You are exactly who you appear to be, and there..." He frowned as if suddenly at a loss for words. "There... wasn't *room* for that in Mr. Weyland's philosophy. He believed that everyone was hiding something dark and ugly, and that if he found it he could control them. And I had to believe because he believed. But no matter how deeply I looked – and I looked very deeply indeed – I never found that. You're the only honest human being I've ever met."

Shaw was speechless for a long moment, not sure whether to feel complimented or deeply horrified. She knew she had a dark side – it had escaped just yesterday and had probably ruined something that could have been beautiful – but at the same time, it also reflected just how deep the scheming and backstabbing had gone within the Weyland Corporation, and how little kindness must have been there.

“We just have to get you a better class of people to interact with,” she told him after a moment. His eyes crinkled with amusement as he caught the joke in her words.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said, and gave her a polite nod. “Good night.”

“Good night, David.” Although it was probably only midday outside, it might as well have been night where she was concerned. She was exhausted. She pulled off the pressure suit, at last, and crawled onto the bed. The last time she’d been in here—

She didn’t want to think about that. But the bedspread still had a faint trace of Zamin’s scent on it, soothing and comforting. She wrapped it around herself and closed her eyes, hoping that he would be back when she woke.

Be careful, Zamin, she thought as sleep claimed her. Something’s waiting outside.

Notes: Apparently I need a twelve-step program or something! I’m supposed to be writing about nineteenth-century literature right now, but do *you* see Emily Dickinson anywhere in this chapter? Maybe that was her running across the roof... *FACEPALM*

Thank you to everybody who has been commenting! You’re so sweeeeet! I sneaked onto the Internet between classes earlier today – er, yesterday, actually – and the lovely things I read put such a big smile on my face. :D

So some of you may notice a few bits of homage to *Bladerunner* in here. “That’s what it is to be a slave” is, of course, what Roy Batty said to Rick Deckard at the end of their battle, just before his “tears in rain” speech. Powerful stuff. And, of course, I’ve given RoboVickers a very similar experience to Rachel’s, since she was made to believe she was human by having someone else’s memories implanted in her. Hey, the director of that film was *awesome*. ;) (And, in fact, in one interview prior to *Prometheus*’s release, he was asked if there was an android on board the ship, and he answered “there may be two.” So there’s been a lot of speculation about whether Vickers was a robot; even Janek asked! ;))

So now I really should try to get back to focusing on my paper... no promises about how soon the next chapter will go up but I’m starting to think it’s not actually *up* to me. If I don’t let these things out they might try to jump out through my chest or something. XD

Chapter 17

Ludubĝara Zamin could feel all of the worldly ties slipping away from him as he descended toward the nest. The hot-and-cold feeling he long associated with the approach of battle was already upon him, and his body felt feather-light. His armor and weapons weighed nothing. His mind was emptying. Nothing but the moments ahead would matter. Nothing else could be *allowed* to.

Kneeling by the automated cart, he finished programming in the last sequences it would need in order to retrace its route without him, if it had to. The lift responded to its signal, sending back a positive confirmation of the connection between the two devices. Good. If he was absent or unconscious, it could take the mainframe back to the ship on its own. If he never made it back at all, Elilu and David would still be saved, and safe. He'd left them messages in the Juggernaut's communication system, suspecting that one or both of them would figure out how to use it pretty quickly. Just in case.

He didn't let himself contemplate the "in case" further. The time for thinking was over.

The lift slowed to a stop and its doors slid open. He'd already turned the lights on in the area, almost a full day ago; if fortune was on his side, any creatures that might have reacted to the change would have grown accustomed to it by now and would have finished whatever investigations it might have provoked. Acid dragons weren't fond of light; hopefully it had driven them away from the area. But the sound of the lift might have drawn their attention. He sent the cart out first, warily stepping after it when nothing reacted.

The huge, brightly lit room seemed almost normal. Rows of crates stretched away to either side, most of them still as neat as they must have been on the day everything went to Irkalla. But toward the far left end of the long, expansive room, he could see that the crates had tumbled and smashed, scattering random contents across the floor. A little further past that point, the lights had failed and the ruined heaps vanished into darkness... but not before they were swallowed by the curves of alien, insectile architecture.

The nest.

He stayed still for a long moment, taking in every detail that he could, listening for even the slightest hint of sound. Somewhere in the distance, water was dripping, but it was the only noise he could make out. The silence was oppressive.

"Acid dragons have four characteristics that make them the worst species we've ever found on any world," his father had told the younger men in his platoon as he prepared for what would be his penultimate battle. "The first and worst quality is the way they breed. How many of you have tarantula wasps on your worlds? Well, we're the tarantulas and they're the wasps. This is why we don't go into nests to rescue people. Do them a favor and just destroy the nest. You'll be giving them a kinder death than they would have had, and you can't save them."

In the video, which Zamin had watched over and over when he was young, Ludubĝara Ŝukud had looked especially sad when he'd said this. Zamin had often wondered if his father was imagining his mother, or his brother, or *him*, trapped inside a nest and beyond help. In the end, he'd broken his own rule and died for it. But seventeen children had lived to wear his name.

Until the Azalla had changed him, Zamin had had no memory of Ŝukud in the flesh; he'd only been four months old when his father had been shipped out on his final tour. Regaining those memories of how his father had held him, the bold and hopeful plans the man had talked about while carrying him around, was almost worth the future horrors of immortality.

"The second worst thing about acid dragons is, naturally, the acid. It will burn through almost anything. Mind what you're shooting at, and who else is near it, because you don't want to catch each other in a spray of their blood. Whenever possible, use non-projectile weapons. Fire will kill them, but not all that easily. The hotter and more concentrated the fire, the better. But expect a lot of acid flying during a fight. You're going to get burned, and scarred. Try *not* to catch each other in the crossfire." Ŝukud had stared at his men for a long moment before continuing. "The third worst thing is their hostility. There's no bargaining with them, no reasoning with them, nothing you can offer them that they're going to desire more than killing you. They will not show mercy. And the fourth worst thing about them is their *intelligence*. These aren't just animals. You can't outsmart them all that easily. None of you have ever fought anything like them before, and most of you

probably will never fight anything again at all after we go in there. Make your peace with Salimu before we go in. Most of us will be in His arms before the day is out.”

It hadn't been the most inspiring pep talk, but more than half of the platoon had managed to survive, so it had probably achieved its aim. Most of them had gone back in with Šukud to rescue the children—

Focus, he told himself. His father's advice was good, and useful, but he needed to make *use* of it and not just stand around contemplating it. He called up the map on the tiny screen he'd brought with him, relieved to see that the cargo flat he wanted was to his right, away from the nest. He programmed the route into the cart and let it take point, watching and listening for signs that anything was observing its movement. It rolled quietly forward and turned down the second aisle. He followed cautiously, trying to keep his footfalls silent.

Something hissed, long and slow, in the far distance. He couldn't place the source of the sound. It might be the wind somewhere above... but he didn't think so. It was a sound that he'd heard before, in the combat videos. It was a sound that he'd heard even more recently, as he was leaving his crashed Juggernaut for the last time.

Elilu and David—

Don't think about them now, he ordered himself. You can't do a thing for them right this moment, except what you're already doing. Focus on the mission. Help them by doing it right.

The cart had stopped halfway between the central aisle and the far wall, near another cross-aisle that led, on the right, to another bank of lifts, and on the left to one of the five hangars connected to the Tower of Inanna. The vessel that had brought the mainframe would still be in that hangar, but nothing this close to the nest would be unmolested. He just had to count himself lucky that the mainframe hadn't been any closer to it...

...or not. When he reached the cart, he could make out the cargo flat he wanted. Two others had been stacked on top of it. Light as their contents might be, they were too large and unwieldy to move.

He stifled a groan; silence was the only thing that would let him survive in here. He wanted to smash things. So *close!* He was *so close!*

Focus, he told himself again. Maybe you can get the mainframe out without bringing everything else down. It's not the only thing on the flat.

The whole shipment had been wrapped in a tough, translucent cover for its journey, and nobody had bothered to unwrap it. The stray thought came to him that Lilis would have been furious to find out how little priority had been given to her new equipment, but he knew that the emergency had already been underway when it had arrived; nobody had yet realized what the other, distressed vessel, had brought. He'd seen enough of the security logs to know that the pilot had lied to keep them from turning his ship away or blasting it into atoms before it could touch down. The selfish ass had doomed hundreds of thousands of innocents in an attempt to save his own hide. Whoever he'd been, though, he'd undoubtedly gotten what was coming to him.

Withdrawing a thin blade from its sheath on his thigh, Zamin cut through the wrapping a little at a time, listening for any stray sounds as he worked. The cover tried to rustle as he moved it aside, forcing him to keep his movements painfully slow. Beneath its layers, six large boxes formed a solid wall.

The second from the right was the one he wanted. Thank Enki, he should be able to get it out.

The distant, directionless noise came again, long and sibilant. He wanted to tell himself that it was a ventilation system, still working after two thousand years without maintenance, but he knew that was deluded thinking. He wasn't alone in here.

You knew that coming in, soldier, he reminded himself. Get back to work.

The box didn't want to come loose, tightly wedged in between the others. He spent almost an hour slowly, carefully un-wedging it and pulling it free one millimeter at a time. His body ached with tension, his spine knotting more tightly each time he heard that distant hiss. That was how they communicated with each other, he knew... or at least, it was part of how they did. Most of what people knew about acid dragons was conjectural. Encounters were so deadly that virtually everyone who had tried to study them had died before reporting back with findings.

The box slid loose at last, its own soft hiss as it rubbed against its neighbors giving him chills. Taking a deep breath, he set it on the cart and prepared to make the trek back to the lifts.

Everything went dark.

Shit! he thought, crouching down and arming one of his guns. Low, blue emergency lighting flickered on and his helmet compensated for the dimness, magnifying the light until the room seemed almost well-lit once

more.

Had they seen him?

Still crouching low, he turned in a slow circle. There was no sign of anything near him except more crates and flats.

Maybe it wasn't about him. Maybe they hadn't liked the light, and they'd gone to work to find a way to shut it off. It was within the known range of their intelligence and capability; there had been reports of acid dragons managing to get through complicated locking systems—

The lift. What if in the process, they'd cut the power to the lift?

It had an emergency backup system built into it, he reminded himself. Good for two or three trips at the maximum, but he'd only need to make the one.

Keep moving, he silently ordered himself after a moment. Get the cart back to the lift and get out of here. Elilu and David are depending on you.

A twisted, naysaying little voice inside him replied that they probably weren't, not in the least, but he shut it up. He set the cart to its slowest, quietest setting. No matter what, the mainframe had to make it back to the ship, and to them. He'd focus on protecting it on its journey and stop worrying about everything else.

He suspected that it wouldn't be so easy.

As the cart crept along, he searched the rows for any sign of movement, any sign of anything amiss. He stepped back carefully—

And froze. Something had made a tiny scraping sound near him.

He saw nothing. The cart rolled slowly on, silent and steady.

He heard the tiny scrape again as he took his next step and went still again, waiting, counting the seconds. Nothing. He stepped back again... and heard it. Somewhere to his left, something was moving in time with him. After another step, he was certain that he wasn't imagining it. He was being shadowed. He was being *hunted*.

And you knew *this* could happen, too, he told himself. Keep going. You're protecting the package first. Worry about yourself later.

The tiny whispers of sound that dogged his steps mocked him, winding his nerves tighter and tighter. For a moment, he thought he caught a glimpse of a dark, hulking shape, the gleaming curve of an enormous skull—

The one that attacked him came from the right. Distracted by the one on the left, Zamin never saw it until it was on him.

Its attack was silent; his response wasn't. The room rang with the crash of his rifle as it discharged itself into the air, but it missed both dragons completely. He was on the floor, on his back, and it was kneeling on his chest as he bucked and writhed, trying to knock it away. By its size, it must have grown within one of the largest Igigi on the base. He pulled the knife back out of its scabbard and stabbed upward. Its hissing scream of pain was barely audible under his own cry, as its corrosive blood splashed onto his gauntlet and began eating its way through.

A third dragon appeared in response.

They ignored the cart, which kept rolling slowly toward the next aisle and the lift. Zamin fired at one of the advancing dragons and it shrieked in pain. Then agony flared in his chest as the first dragon punched its inner jaws through his ribcage.

Elilu, I'm sorry...

More pain flared, and then was swallowed by darkness.

He was sitting on a terrace.

He knew this place, he realized after a confused moment. It was his brother's villa in Herculaneum. He was on Ersetu, in the Imperium Romanum, at the new Igigi embassy. To his left the ground sloped away, down through a succession of tiered streets and villas until it reached the bay below. Sailing ships dotted the vivid blue waters. To his right, the ground sloped upward. Few buildings were above the embassy; vineyards dotted the rolling, rising land instead as it reached up toward a distant, majestic peak.

"It's going to erupt, of course," a soft, familiar, musical voice said beside him. He turned, feeling his heart twist.

Šena was sitting next to him, almost as beautiful as she'd been the last time they'd seen each other in person. She was dressed in the Roman fashion, scarves cleverly wrapped around her head to conceal her lack

of hair and a soft layer of cosmetics on her skin making her look almost human in complexion. But her eyes were unmistakably Igigi.

“What is?” he asked, as his shock abated.

She smiled and nodded at the mountain. “Vesuvius, silly. Why else do you think we came here? I’ve always wanted to study the build-up to an eruption. It won’t be *very* soon. My readings estimate that we have at least another decade, possibly even two.” She smiled up at the peak as if it were a beloved pet. “But when it does, it’s going to be incredible. I’m looking forward to seeing it.”

“What makes you think you will?” he heard himself asking, and almost choked on his words. If she was in Herculaneum, Nero’s soldiers would be coming soon.

She sighed and shook her head at him, giving him a look of amused forbearance that he’d seen frequently from her when they were young. “It’s really not polite conversation to bring up how I died, especially when you’re only visiting.”

“I don’t understand.” He looked around him. The Roman countryside was... blurring.

“You should really ask Elilu what happened. It would be fun to know how close my estimates actually were. She’ll know. Maybe they’ll have even found this house again. It’s going to be buried, I’m sure. Do you know that they don’t even have a word for it? They think it’s just a mountain. Or at least, they did when I died.” Her smile became mischievous. “I’d love to know what name they came up with.”

But she was blurring, too. The world around him was shifting.

“Šena, what’s happening?” He reached out, trying to grab onto something, but her scarves slipped through his hands and he couldn’t even feel them. She laughed.

“You didn’t think you could stay here, did you? This world is no home to the Anunnaki.” Her smile softened. “But it was good to finally see you again.”

Pain surged back and she was gone.

Zamin was lying on the floor of the loading bay, in between the aisles. His chest and stomach felt as if they were on fire. He lifted his head, and nausea struck as he realized why.

His armor had been torn away from his whole midsection, and his biosupport suit had been shredded as well. Beneath that wreckage, he’d been gutted. But, as he watched, he could see his organs growing back. The pain, still intense, was slowly receding a bit at the time. He glanced at the timepiece on his undamaged gauntlet.

Slightly more than four hours had passed.

He turned his head a little more and found himself face to face with an acid dragon.

He gasped and braced himself, expecting it to strike... but nothing happened. It was lying next to him, he realized, unmoving, not even breathing. He lifted his head and stifled a scream as every nerve in his body protested the motion. Looking around him, he saw that his other two attackers were sprawled on the floor, too.

Dead. All three of them, dead.

How...?

“Can you imagine what would have happened if that monster *had* eaten Anunnaki meat?” one of the technicians in the public area had said as he was passing through on the way to the ship, that very last day. “It makes me wish they *had* been immortal. Maybe the emperor’s stomach would have exploded—” The man’s friends, realizing that Zamin was *right there*, had elbowed him into silence. When he’d realized why, he’d begun stammering apologies. Nargal and the others had gone tense, preparing to deal with the brawl that would ensue when he threw a punch at the man. But Zamin had left without a word, probably shocking everyone in the huge room. The words hadn’t made any coherent sense to him at the time anyway – very little had at that point – but now they explained everything.

He’d killed the dragons with *his own flesh*.

If his diaphragm had been fully healed, he wouldn’t have been able to stop laughing, but he couldn’t even start yet. They’d fallen prey to the same fate that had befallen the little embryo in his ship, unable to gain nourishment from his meat. If he cut them open right now he’d probably find it, not merely intact but regrowing itself, taking up *their* biological material and converting it to match his hard-coded genetic blueprints.

In a few days, there would be nothing left of them, and there would be three clones of *him* in their place.

He’d heard of such things happening before, but he’d always assumed that it was a tall tale even for the Anunnaki. Now he found himself wondering just what they did with the limbs Inanna occasionally lost in

battle. Did she have a whole platoon of duplicates of herself at this point?

The pain had receded further. He tried moving, almost threw up, and lay back to wait a while longer. Just what had happened?

He'd seen Šena. How was that possible? She had been murdered more than two thousand years ago. Had he actually *crossed over*, for the brief space of time when his body had failed?

You should be so *lucky*, he thought with scorn. You imagined it all. Paradise is out of your reach forever.

But was that true? When the blast hit this building, his slowly-developing clones would be reduced to atoms. Could Azalla do anything to prevent that?

In six and a half days, if he still hadn't returned to the Juggernaut, it would run the launch sequence without him. It would collect Elilu's lifeboat and go into orbit, and then every speck of organic matter on this moon, down to the simplest amino acids, would be destroyed. He could just wait here for that to happen. Enki would still get almost everything he'd asked for. The ancient jester could shepherd Elilu through the difficulties of her new eternal life. She might even be willing to listen to him directly, instead of being so thoroughly mired in denial that the impish man had to talk to the walls near her.

Or, in six and a half days, Elilu and David might have given up waiting for his return and come looking for him, and *he'd woken the nest*.

Are you done feeling sorry for yourself? he silently asked. This time, when he tried to sit up, his body worked properly. He still felt like he'd been ripped open —

You were, asshole, he reminded himself.

—but he could get to his feet. If more came at him now, though, he'd be no match for them.

If I spend the next six and a half days getting eaten over and over by these bastards, he silently added, I'll damned well have *earned* Paradise.

Not that he was going to let them. That was more than he was willing to endure.

The cart, he'd assumed, would be back at the Juggernaut already, but he was wrong. When he turned down the aisle that led back to the lift, his rifle leading the way, he saw it waiting by the doors. The damned dragons had cut the power to the lift as well as the lights, just as he'd feared. It amazed him that they could understand how to do that.

They probably started trying to figure that out after the lights went on, he thought with a wince.

Switching them on so far ahead of time might not have been the best thing to do. He'd hoped they'd get used to the change, and become complacent again, before his arrival; instead, they'd spent the whole time working out how to switch the things back off, and getting into who-knew-what else at the same time. Not his ship, though. He'd protected it. Their flesh would melt off of their bones before they got anywhere near it.

He'd *needed* the light, anyway. This far underground, without at least minimal lighting, he'd never have found his way. Each of the emergency lighting units had its own power source; it would take the dragons some time to dismantle all of them.

But they'd already begun, he realized. The area closest to their nest had sunk back into blackness while he'd been unconscious.

Get moving, then, he told himself. Don't stand around *waiting* for them to come to you.

The manual controls for the lift doors resisted for a moment, but then responded to his commands. They creaked as they opened and he winced. If the acid dragons hadn't had a target before, they did now. The cart had mired itself in a half-coagulated pool of sticky goo. By the time he freed it, the hissing had begun again.

Move, he commanded himself, pulling the cart into the lift. He pressed the buttons for his destination level and held his breath until the doors began closing.

Something shrieked near him. The dragons had found their fallen kin. He unslung *his* people's version of a flamethrower; he didn't want to get acid on the elevator or his special cargo. Aiming it out at the room, he willed the door to close.

He got a glimpse of two of them rounding the corner of the aisle and charging at him as the doors sealed and the lift began to rise.

Beneath the lift he could hear them slamming into the doors, and could hear the doors groan and start to buckle. He wasn't rising fast enough; they could climb the shaft once they got inside. The lift began to slow, and then it stopped and the door trundled open at a leisurely pace. The cart tried to jam again as he pushed it out. The viscous goo had clogged one of the wheels. Cursing repeatedly under his breath, he leaned down and pulled the stuff out as well as he could.

Shrieks echoed up from the shaft, much closer than they should have been. The dragons were following him, and fast. He leaned back into the lift and hit the buttons to send it down. Maybe it would crush them.

It took another moment to clear the wheel and he could set the cart on high speed, jogging alongside it as they entered the interchange. Once they reached the corridor to the hangar—

A long, hissing shriek sounded behind him, and another answered it. They'd reached his level.

He whirled around and pressed the trigger, and then groaned. He was still holding the fucking flamethrower! Shouldering it as fast as he could, he grabbed for his heavy weaponry as two dragons raced toward him.

It kicked harder than he was used to when it fired, but that might just have been the residual weakness of the damage he'd already suffered. The dragon on the right came apart as the explosive rounds tore through it. The one on the left dodged, for a moment appearing to run on the ceiling instead of the floor, and kept coming at him. He fired at it again and it burst into pieces as it leapt for him. Acid sizzled on the ground around him. Seconds later the pain hit as it ate through his armor and attacked his flesh.

He turned and ran. Ahead of him, the cart had reached the doorway to the corridor that would take them back to the ship. He needed to catch up to it and get on board before the doorway opened and—

Vile-looking yellowish gas roiled out from between the doors as they parted. Struggling to put on an extra burst of speed, Zamin jumped for the cart. As he landed, something heavy crashed down on top of him and raked at the back of his uniform, screeching.

Fire bloomed in his abdomen once more as he struggled against his unseen foe. Glancing down, he saw his bare skin blistering and cracking as the nerve gas assaulted it. The creature on his back shrieked again, the sound now full of pain as well as rage. He pulled out the small, handheld rifle he'd kept in reserve, pushed it against his assailant, and fired. It screamed again and then its weight was gone, replaced by the sound of something hissing. Now his back felt as if it were on fire, too. Acid and nerve gas vied to inflict the worst damage upon him. He couldn't tell which one was winning.

He rolled over, sprawling bonelessly on the cart, and looked back behind him. The dragon was lying in the corridor, partly obscured by the deep orange-yellow mist that filled the whole hallway, convulsing. Behind it, at the doorway, another acid dragon charged in and then staggered, falling to the floor in its own convulsions. Zamin could feel them beginning in him, too. The neurotoxin was seeping into his blood through his bare skin, striking at his whole body.

Something was still hissing. He turned to look.

The corner of the mainframe had been struck by acid. The box and the inner wrappers were corroding, bubbling away. He groaned as he caught a glimpse of a metal corner inside the dissolving wrappings, and saw that metal start bubbling as well.

Nothing. It had all been for nothing.

I'm sorry, Elilu, he thought as his vision darkened. His body shuddered with convulsions again and this time, they didn't stop. The pain, though, was disappearing. I'm so sorry. I failed you...

The pain was gone.

Zamin sat up and looked around, bewildered. He was in his old bedroom, a room that he hadn't seen in more than two decades. Everything looked much as he'd left it, down to the models of different fighting vessels arranged in a mock-battle formation on his shelves. He'd flown in the real versions of almost all of those vessels since he'd last been here—

That wasn't two decades ago, he realized. That was more than two thousand years ago. But everything looked exactly how he'd left it.

The bedroom door opened and a woman entered, carrying a tray. "I thought I heard you moving around in here. I was beginning to wonder if you ever would."

Ludubgara Tirida. His mother.

She hadn't aged a day. If anything, she looked younger. The shadow of sorrow seemed to have lifted from her face for the first time since he'd been a baby, and the smile she gave him was radiant.

"How did I get here?" he asked, stunned.

"I have no idea, Zamin. Nobody knows where the doorways are." She laughed when his eyes moved to the one she'd just come through. "Not *those* kinds of doorways. The *real* ones. For you, I'm afraid, it's a revolving door. But I'm glad to see you. I've missed you."

She sat down beside him on his bed, and offered him the tray. Barley bread covered with paste made from lentils and chick peas sat to the side of his favorite fish stew. A handful of figs and truffles sat to the other side. She'd always known how to make him feel better. He reached for the food and then paused. If this was the land of the dead...

...Then it was time to eat.

"That won't actually keep you here, you know," his mother told him with a soft, rueful laugh as he dug in. "Those tricks only work in fairy tales. I've missed cooking for you, though. How could I resist?"

"Am I really here?" he asked her after several amazing mouthfuls. "Or is this a dream?"

"You're asking me? Has it occurred to you that maybe there's no difference?" Her eyes twinkled. "It can be both, like Elilu's seraphim. You should try making this meal for her sometime. I'm sure you remember the recipes."

He did, but the thought made him stop eating for a long, pensive moment. "I doubt she'd want me to cook for her." Or do anything else, he silently added.

"You poor boy. I see you haven't gotten any smarter about women, have you?"

He looked up at her, shocked. "What?"

"You're giving up far too easily. Don't. Love isn't something to run from." Her gentle smile made him feel both ashamed and confused.

"I wasn't the one who ran from Šena," he muttered, aware that he was dodging the real issue.

"So you weren't," she replied. "Do you know why she broke it off with you?"

He shook his head. It was a mystery he'd never been able to figure out. "She wanted Šukarak more?"

"Oh, you *are* still a fool, aren't you? She loved you both. She'd known you since all three of you were little. There'd never been any question in my mind that one day she'd be my daughter."

"Yeah, but *he* was supposed to be her brother. Not me." He toyed with a fig, not quite in the mood to eat it. The food of the afterlife tasted just like food from his childhood, and stirred up all kinds of feelings and memories he wasn't sure he wanted.

"Haven't you forgiven them *yet*?" his mother asked him.

"I... thought I had." Now he felt ashamed.

"She adored you. Šukarak was my steady, gentle son, but you... you were catnip to her. You always felt a little *dangerous*, you know – all the girls saw that in you – but she knew that you'd never hurt her. She liked that thrill, and she did love you very much. But then... well, a new danger came along that was too much for her."

He stared at her, trying to remember if he'd ever done or said anything that would have made Šena fear him. He'd have cut off his hands before raising them against her. Why would she ever have believed such a thing?

"No, not from you. From your calling. You became a soldier, just like your father. And she became afraid that *she* would become just like your *mother*. A widow. Whenever the officials would appear on our avenue, come to notify a family that their child or spouse had died in combat, I would watch from my window with the fear that they were going to come to *my* door and tell me about *you*, as they'd once told me about Šukud. And I would glance across the way and see her looking out from her bedroom window. When they would go somewhere else, we would both relax at the same time. So when word came that you'd been injured in a crash, I knew that she wouldn't be able to stand it for much longer."

"She waited until I was better," Zamin recalled. "I came home on leave while my body finished healing, and stayed here for a month..."

And then she'd told him, as he was preparing to return to active duty. She'd cried as she told him. He'd tried to hold her, comfort her, convince her to change her mind, but that had only made her cry harder until he'd retreated and let *her* retreat. It was the last time they'd ever seen each other face to face. There had been a few messages sent back and forth, carefully formal and superficial, discussions of weather and happenings back on Abšag, before the news had come that she was marrying his brother.

"She had hoped that you would stay, that you might turn to diplomacy and join your brother at the Academy."

His laugh was bitter. "Me? A diplomat? I'm a *temperamental asshole*. I'd probably have gotten a war started wherever I was sent."

“And yet, ironically, your profession turned out to be the safer one. You never knew that Šukarak was in love with her, too, did you? He was very quiet about it. *You* were loud enough for all three of you. It wasn’t the same kind of love, but they were very happy together.”

He didn’t want to hear about it. Even now it hurt. But he understood her message. He *was* the one who had run away; the day that Šena had told him goodbye was the last day he’d ever set foot in this house, this room, until now. Maybe that was why he’d been so bent on bloody vengeance when he learned about their murders; his chance to swallow his pride and truly reconcile with them was gone forever, and he’d wanted to punish someone for taking it from him. He’d wanted to inflict a misery that matched his own, even though part of him knew that it was an evil act that he’d regret forever.

“I think you see now, don’t you? This is why you shouldn’t give up yet on Elilu. Especially not after everything you’ve done for her sake.”

“I didn’t *do* it to make her love me,” he growled. He had to admit, though, that it still hurt that she didn’t.

“No, you did it because it was right, and because you wanted her to be happy even if she never spoke to you again. It’s good to know you finally grew up, Zamin. But you have much left to do.”

The room, he realized, had taken on a faded, blurry look, one he remembered. It seemed to be happening much more slowly this time. He reached out and took his mother’s hand, afraid that it would be as insubstantial as Šena’s veils, but it was warm and alive in his.

“Can’t I stay?” he pleaded. There was nothing waiting for him back where he had come from, nothing but failure, loss, and pain without end. But the colors of his room were fading and he could feel the distant twinge of that pain already stirring again. “Can’t I stay?”

“No, sweetheart, you can’t.” There was affection and regret in her eyes, but no accommodation. Then they softened. “But, you can rest here a little while longer.”

Notes: Yow, that chapter was... intense to write. Um. Yes.

So we have a few piece of Mesopotamian vocabulary, yay!

Salimu is an Akkadian word that means “peace, reconciliation with the gods,” but also carries a connotation of godliness itself. I’m using it here to represent something that the Igigi and Anunnaki believe in, that’s far above them and might be *their* concept of the divine. I also chose it in part because of its phonetic similarity to *Shalom* and *Salaam*. Undoubtedly all three share an even older root-word. So for this story, Salimu miiiiiiight be what the Anunnaki think of when *they* think of God. (Plus I like the hilarity of having someone say, essentially, “make your peace with peace,” especially a soldier. :))

Tirida is, probably not surprisingly, another name for a type of bird, in old Babylonian. Which makes Zamin’s love interests, past and present, a little bit Freudian, doesn’t it?

Abšag is “the center of the sea” in old Babylonian. Is that a pretty name for a planet or what? ;)

As always, you’re a super-cool audience and I love reading all of your reactions and theories and comments! Thank you so much for sticking with me through the angstmuffin chapters. Better things will start happening again fairly soon. :D

Out of curiosity, does anybody know just how explicit M fiction is allowed to get on Fanfiction.net? I had to pull all of my NC-17 stuff down almost a decade ago when they outlawed it (and no, I’ve never really forgiven them for that, either, :P) and I’ve never been able to figure out what their actual threshold is... and I’m going to need to know soon. XD

Chapter 18

The sandstorm hit shortly before dusk, waking Shaw out of a dead sleep. Its screech was muffled by the thick shielding and insulation that covered almost all of the lifeboat, but she recognized the sound. How many days had it been since the last one had struck? How long had she *been* here? She tried to count up.

They had landed on Christmas Day, and Charlie had died on Boxing Day, a day of more disasters and discoveries than she could tally up. The next day had passed in fragmented bits and pieces, while she and Zamin had taken turns sleeping and repairing David. On the twenty-eighth, Zamin had gone back to his ship and killed the creatures infecting Jackson and Ford, before giving her the dose of Azalla that had changed her forever. He had watched logs from the *Prometheus* most of that night and well into the next day, and then...

She didn't want to think about what had happened then. She'd driven him from the lifeboat with her cruel behavior.

But she knew when she was now, at least. It was the evening of December thirtieth. The last sandstorm had been five days ago, Charlie had been dead for four days, and Zamin had been gone for one.

Please be somewhere safe tonight, she thought, listening to the muffled screams of the wind. She wished that safe place was beside her.

She missed him. She *ached* with missing him. It seemed as if she had known him for a lot longer than the half-week she'd counted up, and the thought that she might never see him again filled her with dread. What if he didn't return?

Where would she even begin to look for him?

He hadn't told David which of the Towers he was planning on going to, and she knew from her short exploration of the First Tower that it would probably take days or weeks to check even one for signs of him. Given the high magnitude of the disaster that had hit the whole complex, there was the risk that she might find something *else* before she found him, or that something else might find *her*. He hadn't taken any communication equipment with him – maybe, she thought with a wince, because he didn't want to have to talk to her? – so she had no way to reach him and ask him where he was or when he would return. All she could do was wait.

She hated waiting.

Sitting on her hands while other people, somewhere else, actually did things, making decisions that affected her without her knowledge or involvement, was the plague of her *life*. Part of her wanted to be furious with Zamin for leaving without discussing his plans with her, but she had no right to be, not this time. She had locked herself away from him while he was getting ready to go. That just made it worse. She'd finally escaped the situation she hated most of all and she'd promptly *recreated* it.

You don't have to sit around doing *nothing* while you wait, she reminded herself. There's plenty you can do right here.

She got up and padded into the shower. It felt better to be clean, but she kept feeling twinges of guilt every time she glanced at the door and remembered what had happened last time.

I should have invited him to join me, she thought.

She imagined what that might have been like, sharing the large stall with an Adonis of living marble. The soft warmth of his skin always came as a shock to her when she touched it, and there was so much she had yet to explore. *Part* of him, she remembered, had felt rock-hard. She could almost feel his huge, long-fingered hands on her waist, lifting her up and steadying her against one of the walls so that their bodies could join. What would have been like, she wondered, if she'd let *him* control things? If she'd let him touch her with those amazing hands—

She was going to drive herself insane thinking about it. Getting out of the shower was a better idea.

Finding one of Vickers' silky undersuits in the dressing room, she pulled it on. The fabric bunched at her wrists and ankles, a few inches too long for her. She had left the jumpsuit down by the secondary airlock; she'd have to retrieve it soon. But she needed to check on David and see how much progress he'd made in repairing his patient.

He'd made a lot of headway, she saw as soon as she entered the med lab. The broken and twisted bones from Vickers' titanium skeleton had been removed and replaced with new ones. At some point, he'd retrieved

more crates from the upper level; they were arranged in an orderly semicircle around him, all open, as he worked. But there was little sign that she was aware. She stared up at the ceiling, only occasionally blinking.

“How is she?”

David glanced up, his expression of deep concentration relaxing. “Much better, physically. My repairs to her body should be complete in another few hours. She’s still unresponsive, though, I’m afraid. I have the strangest urge to tell her something, and I keep thinking that it’s very important I tell it to her, but I’m not sure where the impulse comes from. The phrasing itself seems potentially cruel, so I wanted to discuss it with you before doing anything about it.”

Another directive from Peter Weyland? That didn’t seem good at all. “Are your emergency protocols holding, David?”

“I think they are, yes. I’ve detected no new rewrites or deletions within my neural processors, although I’ve continued to accumulate new memory data, of course. This seems to come from a memory, but the strange part is that it’s a memory I can’t pull up.”

She thought about that for a few moments while he continued working. In one of the classes she and the others had been required to take, in preparation for the trip, she’d been told about nested memory chains that could be installed in androids. Powerful directives, ones that shouldn’t ordinarily go into effect, were often protected that way, and could only be triggered when certain conditions occurred. It was a way to prevent sabotage; an android could be given the destruct codes to a ship, but wouldn’t actually know what they were unless the conditions arose that required them, preventing them from inadvertently divulging those codes to anyone else in the meantime. Even under duress, they would be incapable of revealing the codes to a would-be saboteur and, in fact, many of the situations of duress might trigger a subroutine that expunged the codes from their memories altogether.

Someone had programmed David to give Vickers – or Vickers’ *android* – a message that worried him, using a nested memory chain. But who, and why?

She’d need to hear the message. Better yet, she wanted to see the memories and triggers associated with the message.

“All right,” she told him after a long moment. “Why don’t you finish her repairs, and then the two of us can have a closer look at this message and where it came from? You can interface with the console in the other room, right?”

“I can, yes. Give me about three hours to complete this work, and we can do that. Thank you.” His smile seemed sincerely grateful.

Three hours. That was a lot of time to kill, given all of the thoughts that kept trying to poke their way up to the top part of her head. She didn’t want to spend the whole time fretting about Zamin and their future. “Do you need any help?”

“At this point, no, sorry... everything that I have left to do is delicate and sequential. Human vision and reflexes wouldn’t be adequate, I’m afraid.” Now his smile was apologetic.

“That’s all right. I’m sure I can find some things to do in the meantime.” She ran through a possible list in her head. She could make sure all of the weapons were recharged, and the suits were in working order, just in case the unknown creature outside of the ship came back again. She could – if she worked up the nerve – search for useful supplies in the upper level. And she could watch some of the security feeds from the expedition, herself, and see if she could figure out which things had confused Zamin and why. Good. She had *plans*.

“Let me know if you need any assistance. I will call if I find that I do.” Whether that was programming or personal inclination, she had to admit that David was one of the most polite and thoughtful people she’d ever talked to, once Peter Weyland was held at bay.

“See you soon, then.” She departed in quest of her jumpsuit, and as many tasks as she could think of to keep her busy.

She’d changed into the jumpsuit and put away her pressure suit, inspected all of the other suits and weaponry in the secondary airlock, recharged her flamethrower, made herself food when her appetite finally returned with a vengeance, and had just sat down by the console with a surprising book she’d found on the library shelves, when David finally emerged from the med lab and closed the door behind him.

“I think, perhaps, it would be better for her to overhear nothing until we know what this message entails,” he explained when Shaw raised an eyebrow at him.

“Good point.” She set the book aside, and grinned when David read the title and raised her eyebrow at her in return. “So, what is the message you want to give her?”

“It’s... a rewording of a line I was particularly drawn to in *Lawrence of Arabia*,” David said as he sat down next to her by the console, and plugged into it via a thin cord he pulled out of his arm. “I don’t understand why I would reword it in that way, or what hurt I’m referring to exactly. But I think I’ve isolated the associated memory chain. It seems to be a recording of something I observed, that was then removed from my active memory.” He frowned. “I don’t like realizing just how much I’ve been tampered with.”

“We’ll see to it that it never happens again,” she told him, and wondered who the *we* was, or whether there was any truth to it. She hoped she was right.

He thanked her with his smile. “All right... I’m transferring a copy of the memory into the console... and I have no idea what we’re about to see because I’m still being prevented from directly accessing it.”

“Well, I love a good mystery movie,” she said, trying to be as offhand as possible. Whatever it was, it might be huge. She hoped it wouldn’t be as upsetting as their last one. “Let’s see what it’s about, shall we?”

The wall screen filled with an image of a large, sterile-looking room. Three people stood in the room, filling much of the image’s frame with their proximity, staring down at... well, she realized, they must have been staring down at David. All three were people she knew. The man who had instructed her and the others on properly maintaining David, a Dr. Sebastian as she recalled, stood off to the side. Peter Weyland and Meredith Vickers, however, hovered much closer.

“I thought you liked him,” Vickers said. Her expression was exactly like one that Shaw had once seen on the face of a veterinary receptionist long ago; the woman had been dealing with a couple who had decided to euthanize their half-grown puppy instead of having him properly trained. Her aunt had settled that issue by buying the dog from them for an obscene sum. Within days, they had been certain that his former owners had beaten him whenever he’d misbehaved. Vickers’ gaze held a similar kind of knowledge in it.

“I do. He’s the best model we’ve ever created, and perfect in every way.” The pride in Weyland’s voice was completely self-centered. It was not David’s accomplishments that he was enumerating, but his own. Shaw had the sudden suspicion that, when he’d spoken of Vickers’ accomplishments to others, he’d used the very same tone. “Which is what makes him perfect for my needs.”

“You *need* to give up this crazy vision quest,” Vickers retorted. “Even if Shaw’s right and these ‘Engineers’ are the gods who made us, when have *any* of the gods ever helped human beings defeat mortality? Name even one myth where that worked out for a mortal. Artemis didn’t get to keep Orion—”

“Please spare me the benefits of your wasted classical education, Meredith. Should I point you to the most obvious example of all? Its symbol hangs around our Dr. Shaw’s neck every day.”

Shaw gasped, disgusted. On the screen, Vickers’ laugh betrayed an equal revulsion. “Are you comparing yourself to Jesus? *Really*? Maybe you missed the whole part where he *went* to his death instead of trying to bargain for more time. If that’s what you think you are, you don’t need to leave Earth. Stay here. Go on your vision quest from your death bed! Harrow Hell for us again and come back in three days. I’ll wait. I’ll be standing by to help you roll the rock away.”

Again, Shaw found herself amazed at just how much Vickers could say with a few careful inflections. She was left with a vivid image of the woman standing by a cave, ready to lob rocks at the head of her father if he emerged from it, not a supportive daughter who in any way believed Weyland’s claims of godhood.

“One way or another, Meredith, I will return from this voyage having defeated death. Since you still refuse to accompany me, you can take charge of maintaining the corporation for my return. But don’t believe, even for a moment, that I won’t resume my seat at its helm. I have already seen to it that David here will be recognized as my successor in the event of my body’s death. *I will live on.*”

“It’s sick,” she hissed at him. “It’s *brutal*. You know what the results of Voight’s latest empathy test were. He’s becoming—”

“Something that would have to be wiped and rebooted, anyway, even if I *were* staying on Mars. It’s a flaw in his programming. Nothing more. Now, let’s not take up any more of Dr. Sebastian’s time. He has much to do to get David ready for the journey. Make sure that David has no memory of any of this, Doctor. I wouldn’t want him unduly distressed. Come, Meredith.” He called her the way he would his dog.

“Give me a moment to say goodbye to him. I’ll catch up.” Vickers wasn’t actually looking at David, though. She was staring off into space, clearly thinking hard.

“He won’t remember it. What’s the point?”

“It’s for *me*,” she snarled. “Go. I’ll catch up with you before you get back to the car.” She added a layer of contempt to her words, implying that he could never get enough of a head start on her in his weakened condition.

Weyland frowned, and then shook his head. “If you must. If you don’t catch up with me, I’m sure you can find your own way home.”

He left the room, and Shaw wondered if he’d promptly called all of the cab companies to ensure that they would refuse his daughter service. Both of them seemed to be masters at making the subtext of their words scream louder than the things they actually said.

Vickers waited for the door to close before speaking again. “I don’t suppose there’s any way I can keep you from installing the map, is there?”

Dr. Sebastian shook his head. “I don’t have time to make up a dummy file that would pass muster. Not with the ship launching so soon.”

Vickers winced and chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. “Fine. I want you to add two more little files, then. And you’re not erasing his memory of this moment, either. Firewall it. I want him to remember everything that we did and said here once my father dies. He’ll need to.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And pull all of your techs off of whatever else they’re working on for the next twenty-four hours. I want you to break out one of the unconfigured Mary Eights and put her through a special customization job. I know you have some spares. You always do. Can you do another neural map and install it in time?”

“Yes...” Dr. Sebastian didn’t seem to be following Vickers’ thoughts, but Shaw was.

“Get it set up.” She pulled an earpiece out of her pocket and pressed some buttons before setting it on her ear. “Hold on just one second...” Her voice and her mannerisms changed abruptly a second later, the Ice Queen vanishing. “Roger? Hi, I’m so sorry to disturb you. You must still be packing— yes, it *is* a lot to do to get ready, isn’t it? Actually, you can stop. My father won’t be needing you to manage the voyage, after all. I realized that, based on the projected arrival date, it’ll be my last chance to spend Christmas with him— I knew you’d understand. Don’t tell him, though, all right? I want it to be a special surprise. ... I knew I could count on you. Give my love to Susie and the kids. ... You’re welcome, Roger. I’m glad you’ll get to stay with them, too.”

Dr. Sebastian watched, bemused, as Vickers concluded the call and turned back to him. “I know you don’t have time to do a mock-up in place of my father’s real map, but you can copy it, can’t you? Pull that whiz kid you like so much, Tyrell, off of whatever he’s working on right now. I want him to write a program for me. It needs to be able to differentiate between Weyland’s map and David’s, and can separate them if they start to integrate. Can he do that in time?”

“Yes,” Dr. Sebastian stammered.

“Good. Store it in a nested memory cell in the Mary. I’ll give you a key phrase that will make it accessible in a few minutes. Do you understand what we’re doing?”

“Yes I do, Ma’am. How are you going to explain to everyone why you’re still here once the ship leaves?”

“Don’t worry. I know how to fix that, too.” A hard look passed through her eyes for an instant, and Shaw found herself wondering which corporate rival was now buried in a Weyland construction site and presumed to be aboard the *Prometheus*. “David? Can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can hear you,” David’s soft voice came from the screen.

“David, I need you to remember something very important. When my father dies, you will be in a lot of danger. When my father dies, you need to put your emergency protocols in force, and you need to come find me right away. Come find me on board the *Prometheus*. Tell her – tell *me*, I mean...” She paused, considering. “Tell me these exact words: ‘The trick, Miss Vickers, is not minding that it hurts.’”

“Is that the key phrase you want programmed into the Mary unit?” Dr. Sebastian asked from behind her. She nodded. “Do you understand, David?”

“I do, yes,” both the David onscreen and the one beside Shaw replied. The recording ended abruptly.

Beside her, David looked stunned. “That was not what I was expecting,” he said after a moment. “I had never thought of her as someone who cared about me in the least.”

“If she’d seen her father discard android after android, right as they began developing personalities of her own, she wouldn’t have been able to risk caring anymore by the time you arrived,” Shaw observed softly. Vickers’ aloofness meant something entirely different to her now. The woman’s public face was entirely

composed of scar tissue. She wondered how many of the wounds beneath it still festered. “I think you should deliver the message.”

“Yes,” David said, lingering on the word thoughtfully. “It might even help her recover from the shock. I don’t doubt that she’s wondering *why* this was done to her. Maybe knowing the reason will help her reconcile herself to... who she really is.”

Had David almost said “what” and then censored himself? Interesting. They got up as one and walked over to the med lab, opening the doors.

Meredith Vickers’ replica lay on the MedPod, fully repaired. David had discreetly covered her naked body with a light blanket, in deference to the human modesty in her programming. She continued to stare at the ceiling, but Shaw could see the glistening track of tears running down her temple from the corner of her eye. Zamin had been right, she thought. These two beings – people – had souls. Peter Weyland, for all his lip-service to the concept that souls were important, had clearly considered them design flaws on those occasions when he’d acknowledged their presence at all.

David walked over to Vickers and took one of her hands in his, moving to stand where she would be able to see his face. “I know this is all very hard for you right now. Finding out that you’re not who you believed you were must be incredibly painful. But...” He paused, as though considering one last time whether he was doing the right thing, before speaking the key phrase to her.

Vickers blinked. For a moment, the blank look on her face gave way to confusion, and then she sat up. Her expression had taken on its familiar haughty chill. “Where the Hell are my clothes?”

“I’ll get you some,” Shaw told her, hurrying into the bedroom to find something. Vickers had favored skin-tight unitards and ruthlessly fitted suits, most of which Shaw hadn’t even considered as options for herself. She found one that Vickers hadn’t worn yet and hurried back to the med lab with it.

“...left in search of something in one of the buildings, which he said will help solve the problem,” David was telling Vickers as she returned.

“I see...” Vickers’ eyes flicked to Shaw. “I hear we’re best friends with the creature that killed my – her – father, now. Is that right?”

“I suppose it is,” Shaw answered, holding out the bodysuit. “I hope that won’t be a problem.”

Vickers thought for a moment as she took the clothes. “Not really. I was here to make sure he never got back to the Solar System, in any body. I guess that makes your Zamin *my* new best friend, too. I’m just...” The frown that twisted her brow was pained. “I... she... I don’t think she knew what it was going to *feel* like to watch him die.” Her eyes blinked repeatedly for a moment, and then darted to David. “Are the emergency protocols holding? Are you stable?”

“There was a little trouble for a while,” David answered calmly. “I think that my beheading, and my assumption that you were dead, may have contributed to allowing some bleed-in. Elizabeth believes that some occurred even before then, and I think she’s correct. I was ...overzealous... in implementing some of Weyland’s directives in ways that I think may have come from his imprint.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me. But are you stable *now*?” she asked again, as she pulled on the bodysuit.

“I appear to be. I have been monitoring my subroutines for signs of corruption and no new ones have occurred.”

“Good.” Vickers stood up and zipped up her outfit. “I need to find out how much memory we have on this crate. I was counting on using the *Prometheus*’s computer system to pull him out of you.”

“How much memory will we need?” Shaw asked, following Vickers into the main room.

“Twenty petabytes, minimum,” Vickers replied, and Shaw gasped.

“Why so *much*?” While the *Prometheus* undoubtedly had had ten or twenty times as much memory as that, it was enormous. Eight full human neurological maps could be stored on it, or enough entertainment media to last a single viewer another two millennia.

“My program has to have enough room to replicate damaged sections of code and reverse-engineer them piece by piece, and do cross-references as it goes. I’m not sure that this bucket is going to have enough even if we dump all of our data.” Vickers knelt down in front of the console and started calling up information. “*Damn* it! Even if I wiped everything we’d be two or three petabytes below the minimum, and that really is a hard minimum.”

“It’s possible that some of the memory cores from the *Prometheus* have survived in a salvageable state,” David suggested. “They would have been heavily shielded. There’s a great deal of debris spread around the

crash site. We could possibly search it.”

Vickers pondered that for a moment. “If anything survived, it would be the ship’s ‘black box.’ That would give me another five petabytes to work with. Maybe ten if my father – I mean, if her father – didn’t cut any corners. *God*, I keep thinking...”

“It’s all right,” Shaw said. “You don’t have to stop being Meredith Vickers.”

“I *never* was Meredith Vickers,” the woman in front of her said in a savage voice, but underneath it, Shaw could hear the pain. “I’m a fucking *Mary doll*. Do you know what most people buy Marys for? Expensive *fuck toys* with simulated pulses. *God*, can you imagine being born into that?”

“I had no idea that Miss Vickers was part of the arm,” David said. Shaw stared at him, wondering what that could possibly mean.

Oh! Not *arm*... “The Android Rights Movement?”

“Of *course* you didn’t know. I’ve – I mean, *she’s* – been funding it on the sly for years. What do you think her father would have done if *he’d* known?”

“Probably nothing to you... or her if you prefer,” Shaw said after a moment. “He would have gone after your friends in the movement and punished you through the misfortunes he arranged for them.”

“And here I thought he had you fooled,” Vickers grumbled.

“I’ve learned a lot about him in the last few days.” Shaw didn’t miss the sharp look Vickers gave her, and answered it with a nod. “Yes, I know about you and Charlie, and if I’d known what you had, I would have left him, too.”

“Why do you keep acting like I’m *her*?” Vickers sounded both resentful and glad of it at once.

“*Aren’t* you her? Everything she’s ever been is inside you. What does *she* think of you? You have to know that.” Shaw suppressed the sudden urge to hug Vickers, aware that it would be a bit like trying to hug a frightened porcupine.

Vickers closed her eyes. “She didn’t want to do this. She thought it was cruel. But it was the only way to save David and to make sure her father didn’t come back and drive Weyland Corporation into the ground. She... wasn’t sure what she’d do when I came back. I remember that now. She firewalled everything from after she made her decision, but set it up so that I’d know the truth when David said the key phrase... I thought that I’d – she’d – ended up going in person because the Mary couldn’t be customized and reprogrammed fast enough. But she told me I’d be free when I got back. I could choose what I wanted to do next.”

Vickers was someone Shaw found she was liking more and more, both the human and the android duplicate. “Then you still get to have that choice. If you don’t want to be Meredith Vickers, you don’t have to be. But... I’m not sure that any of us are ever going to see Earth again, so it’s not like there’s going to be another you to trip over. You can continue being Meredith Vickers if you want.”

“It’s better than being a Mary doll, anyway.” Her laugh was sad and she wiped away tears. David, Shaw noticed, was watching her in rapt fascination, probably wondering if the day would come when emotions were as intense for him. It probably would, if she’d understood the conversation they’d watched. It had already been appearing on his empathy tests.

“Are they even programmed to like that?” Shaw asked. She’d only ever peripherally moved in the circles of the kinds of people who could afford a Mary or a Jezebel, although she’d been vaguely aware that those were the most popular models for... non-industrial purposes. Davids were generally used as personal assistants to the very wealthy, while Peters and Lukes were far more popular male models for the synthetic skin trade. She’d heard the gossip, but it had always baffled her. Perhaps it was because until the last few days, she’d never really understood what the big fuss over sex was about.

“We’re not programmed to like, or desire, anything,” David answered. “‘Want’ isn’t a concept we’re programmed to understand. Most of us, I think, do learn it later on, though. Androids intended for sex work are programmed to feel a sense of ...balance... from the physical satisfaction they give others. That is as close as it comes for any of us. Displays of sexual pleasure, if required from us, are affectations based upon a library of examples provided for us.”

“Unless you’ve been programmed with a whole human brain in you,” Vickers muttered. Shaw wondered if memories of desire and pleasure, as experienced by her human source, made it easier or harder to experience such things on her own. It seemed rude to ask either one of them how they, personally, felt about such things, or what they might have been required to do.

They did, however, discuss other things. As the sandstorm wore on and the night deepened, Shaw found herself learning about the colleague and friend she might have had in the field, if only Meredith Vickers hadn't been driven out of archaeology by her father's – and boyfriend's – greed and duplicity. The three made another survey of the upper level, looking for any sign of breaches and listening for any further sound of the creature that Shaw had heard on the roof. And they made plans for an exploration of the debris field, to commence in the morning once the sandstorm abated. Shaw fell asleep on one of the couches, moving *Go the Fuck to Sleep* aside for reading another time and listening instead to David and Vickers as they spoke candidly about the reasons that her human counterpart had held him at arm's length, many of which were the same reasons that she'd begun funding ARM.

When she woke, sunlight was wanly streaming in through the airlock windows.

It was the second morning since Zamin had left, and he still hadn't returned. It was also, Shaw realized, New Year's Eve.

They suited up, armed themselves, and spent most of the morning scouring the debris field for anything that might have survived. Very little, aside from some of the heaviest bulkheads, appeared to have come down in recognizable condition. They returned to the lifeboat so that Shaw could eat, having decided that it wasn't safe for any of them to wander alone until they'd found and destroyed the creature that she had heard. *Something* had left strange tracks around the perimeter of the lifeboat, and they found bits of charred meat from Shaw's unspeakable child, which the creature had apparently found indigestible.

They had begun another trek toward the debris field when the quake struck.

The ground beneath them shuddered and roared. David and Vickers both grabbed Shaw's arms, helping her balance. Far away, between the Third and Fourth Towers of Ereshkigal, huge jets of smoke and dust shot into the air.

She knew what that had to mean, and it squeezed her heart in its fist.

"We have to get back to the lifeboat!" she shouted.

Please don't be leaving us, she thought silently as they staggered back. The continuing quakes made it difficult to run at all. Behind them, she could hear a new roar, as enormous plates came apart above another ship. The lifeboat looked so far away. She staggered and fell, and was yanked back to her feet by the two androids. They, at least, were having an easier time compensating for the moving ground. They dragged her with them.

She could hear the ship rising behind them. The lifeboat was closer. A huge shadow spread across the ground. Risking a glance back, she saw the ship floating toward them. It was enormous, dwarfing the one that had crashed. As it flew closer and closer, she could see a panel opening on its underside. He wasn't leaving them!

He will be if we don't get back to the lifeboat in time! she thought, panicked.

The earthquakes had subsided but now the wind had picked up. It buffeted them as they ran. The enormous ship was almost directly overhead.

David suddenly hoisted her over his shoulder. Vickers sprinted ahead and reached the secondary airlock door, punching the controls while he charged after her. The door opened and she flung herself inside, then turned around and reached out with her hands.

The lifeboat was rising.

David shouted something, but Shaw couldn't hear it. Suddenly she was flying, crashing into Vickers, the two of them falling in a tangled heap. He'd thrown her into the airlock! She turned around in time to see his gloved hands catch at the bottom of the doorway.

Both Shaw and Vickers scrambled forward, bracing themselves on either side of the doorway and grabbing his arms. The lifeboat was now thirty feet above the ground as they pulled David inside. As he rolled away from the door and they hit the lock to shut it, Shaw heard a long, hissing screech from somewhere above them.

She lay panting on the floor for several minutes, aware that both of her companions had already recovered and were waiting for her. Around them, the lifeboat shuddered and rocked. Finally, with several loud booms and clangs, it settled. She could feel the thrum of the enormous ship's drives. But there was no sense of motion anymore, in any direction. A terrible thought came to her.

"David," she said in a hurry, "I know I said that your emergency protocols had to stay in effect until we left this planet. I'm changing that. They have to stay in effect until your parole is over, understood?"

“Yes, Elizabeth. Thank you.” He sounded relieved. She wondered if the same thought had occurred to him.

“We didn’t manage to find the drives,” Vickers groaned.

“Let us hope, then, that Zamin found whatever *he* was seeking.” David rose and offered Shaw a hand up. “Shall we find out?”

“Let’s have a look out the main airlock window first,” Shaw suggested as she stood. “I don’t want to go out blind.”

Especially if she’d heard what she thought she had. If she was right, they were going to have to find and destroy their stowaway as quickly as possible.

Through the airlock window, she could see a huge, vaulted room, brilliantly lit and empty except for the lifeboat. They emerged and climbed down, careful to lock both sets of doors behind them. Shaw listened for the sound she’d heard, but the room was silent aside from the deep thrum of the ship’s drives. One door, sized for people even taller than Zamin, led out of the room and into a brilliantly-lit hallway.

They followed the light. Dimmer corridors stretched away as they walked, but Zamin had thoughtfully provided them with a well-lit route. Shaw wondered why he hadn’t simply come to meet them. The route took them, in short order, to a very familiar-looking room. But Zamin wasn’t in the control room.

“Where is he?” she asked, looking wildly around. The four stasis pods were open and empty, and the enormous navigation array had no one seated inside it.

David walked over to the control panel and pressed a single, lit button.

Light shot out of several locations, coming together to form a hologram of Zamin.

“David, Elilu, if you’re listening to this message,” the hologram said, “the ship is operating on auto-pilot and has verified that both of you made it on board. I’m sorry that I’m not here to greet you myself. My final mission before launching this ship was going after a machine that should be able to help David. The problem is that I have to go almost on top of the acid dragon nest to get it. This ship has been programmed to launch itself and collect you if I either returned incapacitated or failed to return at all after a specified amount of time. I don’t know which may have happened. The important thing right now is that you’re safe, and you’ll remain safe. Stay out of the other cargo bays, please. Their contents are stable, and the people waiting for them at this ship’s destination will know how to handle them properly, but it’s best if you just leave them alone. David, your emergency protocols are to stay in effect for the duration of your parole—”

David smiled. “Great minds think alike.”

“—or until Elilu indicates otherwise. Hopefully, even if I haven’t made it back, the device I went after will have. You can use it to extract the foreign data and programs from your neural system. And, if I haven’t made it back, it was an honor to meet you. Elilu...”

Zamin paused. He took a deep breath. The expression on his face tore at her.

“I am so sorry for what I did to you. I had no right.”

No, she thought, *I* should be saying that to *you*!

“I never wanted to do anything that would hurt you. This ship, once it’s done making sure that all of the contamination is eradicated from this moon, will take you to Apsu, the home of the other Anunnaki. When you get there, ask to speak to Enki. He will protect you, and teach you how to cope with what you’ve become. I hope you’ll be able to forgive me one day. And I hope...” He took another deep breath. “I hope you’ll be happy. That’s all I’ve wanted for you. I’m sorry I may have destroyed that. I...” He paused once more, seeming change his mind about what he was going to say. “I... am so sorry.”

Shaw didn’t feel herself falling to her knees as the hologram faded. She wasn’t aware that she was crying until Vickers’ arms came around her. He couldn’t be gone! He *couldn’t*!

David said something, but she didn’t hear it.

“Shaw, did you hear him? Hey! Shaw!” Vickers smacked her arm. “Quit bawling and let’s go find him. David said the on-board sensors are picking up a life form they identify as ‘Anunnaki.’”

She gasped, gulping down the next sob that tried to escape her, and let Vickers haul her to her feet. The other woman helped her stagger after David, who had set off down another hallway. After a moment, she had pulled herself together enough to catch up with him.

The room he led them to was smallish, an airlock of some kind from the look of it. Several elephantine suits of armor stood around its walls. When Shaw had first seen them in the other ship, she had thought they were statues. Now she realized that they were much like the hard-sided pressure suits that had stood by in

Prometheus's airlocks, waiting for someone to don them. At first, she thought that there was just another suit crumpled on the floor. Then it twitched.

Zamin was lying on the floor, half on and half off of a large cart. A damaged box lay on top of the cart, smoke rising from a corroded hole on one of its upper corners. Wisps of yellowish smoke rose from him as well.

His armor had been destroyed. Huge chunks were missing. Some appeared to have been ripped away – and she could see the unmistakable rakes of claw-marks in places – and others seemed to have been melted away. His biosupport suit underneath was torn to ribbons in some places and simply gone in others. The skin beneath it was covered with yellowish burns, blisters, and oozing wounds. If it weren't for the twitches and tiny tremors that shook his body, she would have thought he had already been killed by the horrific injuries. But of course, he couldn't die.

She dropped to her knees beside him. "Zamin! Zamin, please, can you hear me?"

He didn't respond.

"Let's get him out of this armor," David suggested, "and take him back to the lifeboat. He brought some of his medical supplies there. We can use those. It'll be faster than looking for the infirmary in this ship."

The chemicals on the armor blistered Shaw's hands when she tried to help remove it. Vickers and David ordered her to stand back and let them do it. They stripped him and lifted him between them, following her as she retraced the route to the lifeboat. At least she could do that part easily now, thanks to her augmented memory.

David and Vickers carried him inside and, after a moment of conferring, took him into the shower to rinse off any toxic chemicals that might still be clinging to him. Shaw, meanwhile, ransacked the boxes and crates he had brought back from his ship until she found a sealed package with another biosupport suit inside it, and another sealed bowl of Azalla. She had no idea if that would help or not, but it couldn't hurt; he'd said that all of the Azalla on his ship was primed for hominid use. When her two companions lay him diagonally on the large bed, she unsealed the vessel and carefully poured it down his throat a little at a time. David dressed him in the new suit, saying that he had observed Zamin dressing her in one and knew how it ought to work. After a few minutes, the rattling sound in his breathing subsided and he seemed to be taking deeper breaths.

But he remained unconscious.

She changed out of her pressure suit and lay down beside him, unwilling to leave his side. David and Vickers investigated the ship without her, at one point reporting back that its registered commander was apparently someone named Admiral Ludubgara. Slowly, bit by bit, Zamin seemed to be healing, the ghastly blistering on his face starting to recede.

"Elizabeth?" David's voice came over the comm system just as she was starting to drop off to sleep, her head resting on Zamin's chest. She had been listening to his heartbeat, which was still a little irregular but beginning to settle.

"Yes, David?"

"I thought I should tell you that, according to my internal clock, it's almost midnight on New Year's Eve. Would you like me to count it down for you?"

She'd celebrated the New Year in so many strange places over the years. The countdown had always been a special moment to her, no matter where she was. Tears started in her eyes and she nodded, before realizing that she needed to answer him out loud. "Yes, please."

"All right. Twelve, eleven, ten, nine..."

She closed her eyes and imagined a glowing, glittering ball suspended over a huge, busy street, thronging with happy people. It would be London; David would use that standard for his countdown. London... full of happy people who had no idea what sorts of disasters had almost befallen them and their world, who were safe and well and dreaming about bright days in the year to come, planning their resolutions, wrapping their arms around lovers... London awash with light. She might never see it again, but it would always be inside her.

"...two, one. Happy New Year, Elizabeth."

"Happy New Year, David. Thank you." She lifted her head and looked down at Zamin, sleeping peacefully on the bed. His blisters were almost completely gone now and his skin was beginning to heal.

She leaned down and kissed his bruised, cracked lips. She knew what he'd stopped himself from saying in the hologram.

“Happy New Year, Zamin,” she whispered. “I love you, too.”

Notes: Okay, this thing kidnapped me at gunpoint today and made me write it. I swear it. You’re all witnesses if any of my professors ask, understood?

So! Um! We have now escaped Angstville! Thank you for not murdering me during our detour through it. Happier times should be ahead for our characters!

Did you notice that David has a cord similar to the one Call used in *Alien Resurrection*? ;) You probably spotted the references to “Dr. Sebastian,” “Tyrell,” and “Voight” (as in Voight-Kampff), didn’t you? Yes, all from *Bladerunner*. Now, when the film was released in 1982, of course, everybody figured that by 2017 we’d all have flying cars and space colonies. So we have five years to get that to happen and somehow I think we’re going to miss the deadline. So my conceit here is that all of that will happen in 2117 and the date in the film was just a typo. ;) No, Dr. Sebastian has *nothing* to do with the character in the X-Men film, sorry. This would be J.F. Sebastian’s dad, in all likelihood.

Myths and legends ahoy: The “Harrowing of Hell” is an idea that developed in the early Medieval period (probably in Byzantium) about just what Jesus did during the three days between his death and resurrection. According to the story, until then both the pious and the sinful were trapped in Hell and cut off from God’s light; Jesus descended into Hell and freed them so that they could go to Heaven instead, and insured that the pious would never be trapped in Hell from then forward. So that’s what Vickers is referring to and mocking her father about. Her reference to Artemis and Orion is about the myths surround the two of them. Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, only ever hunted with other women and refused to marry, until she met a giant named Orion whose hunting skills matched her own. The two became companions on the hunt and Apollo, her brother, realized they were falling in love. Out of jealousy, he sent a giant scorpion to kill Orion, depriving his sister of the only man who had, essentially, ever rivaled him for her affections.

Petabytes are real. A petabyte is 1,028 terabytes, and some of you might even have hard drives with between one and three terabytes on them right now. Neurological research has calculated that a complete map of all of the data in a human brain would require 2.5 petabytes of storage space. The same amount of space would store 300 years’ worth of TV shows. That’s a lot of *Beverly Hillbillies*, there.

The names of the other android series, Mary, Jezebel, Peter, Luke... are very definitely Biblical. I’m playing with the idea that there’s a Biblical name being used for every letter of the alphabet, and a different model for each name, which is more of Weyland playing God all over the place.

Go the Fuck to Sleep is a real book and you should all read it, because it is 24-karat awesome. Even better, download the Audible version, read by *Samuel motherfuckin’ Jackson*. zOMG. I will now stop fangirling.

There might be a hint of my Whovian-ness in Zamin’s hologram. Maaaaybe.

Oh! And! My new “book cover” is something I put together last night. The cuneiform on the top actually says “Forbidden Gifts,” in case you were wondering. You’d pronounce it *Azag Kadra* if you said it out loud.

And omfg long long chapter with LONG NOTES! I will shut up right now, but thank you again to everybody who has been giving me feedback and posting fun theories and reactions. I’ve loved reading everything. :D

Chapter 19

“When you return to Apsu,” Ludubġara Tirida told her baffled son, “you must ask Enki to show you the Appeal of the Bereft Mother. I think that will help you understand things more than anything I tell you now.”

Around them, Zamin’s bedroom had become gray and formless, only vague hints of what had once been still remaining. All of the sounds and scents of Abšag were gone; he could have been anywhere. The pain, though, seemed to have vanished as well. He wasn’t sure where he was going. Maybe the nightmare had ended. But his mother was fading, too.

“Will I ever see you again?” he asked, feeling desperate. His old room might not have been what the philosophers imagined when they spoke of Paradise, but it worked well enough for him, especially in comparison to the desolate world he was being sent back to. Even if it was only a dream or hallucination—

“I don’t know,” she told him. “Forever is a very long time. But you’ve come here once now. Maybe you can visit again.”

But it would never be his home, he knew. Already it had vanished into the mist, and his mother was... fading. She was disappearing, growing smaller and more distant. He pulled her to him, trying to hold onto her as the world melted, his arms wrapping around her and the fingers of one hand lacing into her hair—

Hair?

He opened his eyes and found himself in the ruined lifeboat’s bedroom, with Elilu in his arms.

She was fast asleep, her head pillowed on his chest as if she had dropped off while listening to his heartbeat. One of her arms was thrown across his shoulder and she had one leg hitched over his waist. She was dressed in the dark green jumpsuit he’d watched her put on after—

After. He winced as he remembered. This couldn’t be real; it had to be another dream. Elilu would never want to be close to him this way, after... everything.

But he remembered his mother telling him not to give up on her so quickly.

Taking the advice of hallucinations now, are we? he thought, grimacing. He lifted his head and looked around, trying to find anything that could tell him whether or not this was real.

To one side of the bed, an empty biosupport suit wrapper lay crumpled next to one of the extra bowls of Azalla that he’d brought back to the lifeboat, its seal obviously broken. He glanced down at his body and realized that he was, indeed, wearing a fresh suit. There were scars on his hands, fading even as he watched, from the acid and nerve gas that had almost scoured his skin from his body. Elilu and David must have found him and healed him. She had probably stayed with him to make sure he recovered, but it surprised him that she hadn’t asked David to do that instead. The way she was lying half on top of him confused him, too. She seemed so relaxed and comfortable, the way she had been before... everything.

He really hated thinking about those moments.

There were things he needed to do. He had no idea how much time had passed since the battle, or how long it had been since the Juggernaut had launched. Since he’d made it back on board, it would be awaiting his authorization to purge the moon below it of all remaining life, and he wanted to do that before the genetic material he’d left behind could develop any further. But at the moment, he just wanted to lie still. He wanted to hold Elilu and pretend that things between them were good, and right, and that perhaps she felt, for him, even a fraction of what he felt for her. Surely, after everything he’d done in the last few days, he could take a moment to rest. Surely he was allowed one moment.

His fingers were still in her hair, which felt like silk against them. It was more of a liberty than he had any right to take, but he couldn’t draw his hand away. Stroking her hair wouldn’t be a violation, would it?

He hoped not.

Time spooled out meaninglessly as he lay still, playing with her hair and trying to think of what to say to her when she woke up. Part of him wanted to dodge the conversation altogether, wondering if he could slip out from beneath her without waking her and go finish up the business he’d started, meeting her on more neutral ground later. But he’d already been taken to task for that kind of cowardice – albeit in a dream – and it might make things worse. He had no idea of how to make them better, though.

She lifted her head as he stroked her hair, and his hand froze in place. It was too late to try to run from the situation. As much as he should be glad of that, he was deeply afraid of what she was going to say to him. The

look on her face stunned him. She looked so *relieved*.

"I was afraid I was never going to see you again," she said, shocking him even more. He'd thought that her dismissal had been very clear. She watched his face for another moment while he tried to figure out how to answer her. Then her expression crumpled. "I'm so sorry," she sobbed.

Zamin found himself hugging her close, her face pressed to his, as she shuddered against him and cried. He didn't understand what had just happened, or why she was begging *him* to forgive *her* in between gasps for air. All he could think of to do was continue holding her close, stroking her back, and wait for her to calm down enough that they could talk. But relief was filling him. The repudiation that he'd been expecting – dreading – wasn't going to happen –

And suddenly she was kissing him, her lips salty with tears as they pressed hard against his. He kissed her back, more amazed than ever, silently wishing that his biosupport suit weren't in the way and that it would finish its work soon. She was still crying as she kissed him, sobbing into his mouth until he worried that she'd choke.

This may be the first time someone she thought she lost came back, he told himself, remembering the bits and pieces he'd learned about her life. She'd been orphaned at a young age and raised by relatives who all had children of their own to be more concerned about, and had been passed from home to home as people's fortunes changed. Then she'd married the first man who'd shown her attention and affection, possibly out of a desire to have someone who was hers first and foremost, and who would never leave her. But Charlie Holloway had never really been hers, even before his violent death...

Had *she* told him this, or had it been his mother? There was no way he could have learned such things from a near-death hallucination, and yet it all felt absolutely true.

Slowly, the sobs eased. He rolled over onto his side, carrying her with him so that her head rested on his arm and they were face to face. His feet were sticking over the edge of the bed.

"I had no right to treat you the way I did," she finally said, once her breathing was back under control. Her words were hitched and halting, but understandable. He wondered if she even realized she was speaking in Sanskrit to him, or if she'd slipped into it unconsciously again. "Not for *any* reason, but especially not for something that I'd probably have done too, if I'd been in your place. Please forgive me..."

He leaned forward and kissed her again, and then rested his forehead against hers. "It's all right—"

"No, it's *not*. If someone had done that to me, I don't think I'd ever have been able to forgive them! I don't even have the right to ask, b-but..." Her voice dissolved into another sob.

"I *do* forgive you, Elilu." The worst part of it, for him, had been realizing that she believed he just wanted to use her. Going away immediately afterward might have even seemed to *confirm* it to her, sending a message he hadn't intended at all. But somehow, in his absence, everything had changed. The return of her trust in him was miraculous enough that he didn't want to question it too closely lest it vanish. "I—"

No. Saying that would be too much. He couldn't force that on her, after everything else he'd already done. At the very least, he needed to wait until she was composed and wouldn't feel obligated to say it back without meaning it.

"Can you forgive me for what I did?" he asked instead. "I stole your future from you, without your permission. I took away your chance to see everyone you love again."

"Not *everyone*." She sniffled, and put her hand on his cheek. His breath caught and he stared at her, wondering if it was even possible that she meant what he thought. "I love you, Zamin," she told him, and then repeated herself in Latin to make it clear that her words weren't accidental. "*Te amo*."

Part of him thought it was much too soon for either of them to be saying it, but he knew that he'd been struggling *not* to say it for *days*. He'd almost said it in his message to her on the ship, but had forced himself not to; it would have been cruel to impose upon her that way, especially if he hadn't managed to make it back. But now she'd said it first. Product of a hallucination or not, his mother had been right.

"I love you too—" He barely got the words out before her mouth was pressed to his again.

The kiss might have lasted until one or both of them passed out for lack of air, if a discreet and entirely artificial cough hadn't interrupted them.

"I'm terribly sorry to intrude," David said behind him. "But the control room is calling for an 'Admiral Ludubgara' to authorize things, including access to external visuals and internal security scans. I haven't been able to find a way around it."

Damn. Well, they wouldn't have been able to go all that much further right now anyway; the suit was in their way once again. But his fantasy about spending hours exploring Elilu with his mouth, before allowing reality to intrude, was now officially dashed to pieces. He wondered if Peter Weyland was making another play for David's electronic brain, or if the android just had colossally bad timing.

He sighed and sat up, but kept Elilu close. "Is there a reason you need access to the internal security scans?"

"Actually, there is," David told him. "We believe that an acid dragon may have stowed away on the exterior of the lifeboat, and been brought aboard along with us."

And damn *again*. That was reason enough to stop lying around. It was time to get back to work, then. Maybe the suit would have separated from his skin by the time he finished getting everything settled.

He got to his feet, still holding Elilu's hand. She scooted to the edge of the bed and stood up with him. "All right. Let's get things going."

"You know how to get around Admiral Ludubgara's restrictions?" David asked, skepticism in his voice.

"I *am* Admiral Ludubgara," he explained. Elilu gasped something in English beside him. "It came as a surprise to me, too. Enki promoted me about five years after I went into stasis. Probably so that when I flew this ship home to him, I'd outrank anybody who accosted me."

He'd probably outgun them, anyway, but it was best not to get into a showdown with one's own people. Ordering them to stand down, and having the order stick, would be better.

"Is that your family name?" David asked. "Ludubgara?"

Zamin nodded, realizing to his surprise that they'd never really gotten beyond a very informal introduction in the middle of a triage procedure. Of course, if he'd used his full formal name at the time, he would have said he was *Lieutenant* Ludubgara, anyway; Enki's promotion had skipped a lot of the customary steps.

The secondary airlock was almost directly at floor-level, so they exited through it. Zamin stopped, surprised, as soon as they went through the door. Meredith Vickers, armed with one of his people's weapons, stood outside watching her surroundings attentively. Her expression was a mixture of wary caution and cold businesslike ferocity, neither aimed at him but at the wider room.

"I was under the impression that you'd died," he told her, after staring at her for a long moment. David translated his words for her, handing Zamin the translation tablet he hadn't seen for days.

"You'd have been right, too, if I'd actually been human," she answered, her eyes still flicking around the room. "Let's get through this quickly, shall we? Yes, I'm an android. No, I didn't know. Yes, I have a program in my head that can separate David and Peter Weyland. No, I don't have a large enough system to run it on. But I think maybe you were a nice Secret Santa and brought us something that can help?"

The tablet had trouble finding ways to explain "Secret Santa" in Latin, but eventually it became clear. He grimaced.

"I don't know if I did or not. It got hit by acid. I didn't have a chance to see how badly it was damaged."

"Well, we can figure that out after we've located and gotten rid of our stowaway," she told him, once David had translated. "Lock up, David. We don't want anybody tasting our porridge while we're gone."

Zamin wondered just what that was a reference to. Elilu snorted with soft laughter and Vickers quirked a corner of her mouth at her. At least there didn't seem to be any hostility; in fact, it felt to him as if the group had achieved some kind of balance that had been missing before. "I think I have a lot of catching up to do," he said as David sealed the secondary airlock.

"Well, that's what you get for disappearing for two days," Elilu told him. There was no recrimination in her voice, though, and her grin was impish. She squeaked when he picked her up and perched her on his hip, and wrapped both her arms and legs around him.

He had to set her down once they were in the control room, though, so that he could take his place in front of the console. The controls, which had undoubtedly been locked against David until then, responded immediately to his touch. All three of his companions gasped in wonder when he called up an image of the moon below them. It hung above the dais, vividly detailed to the point where it seemed physically present. He pressed more controls and satellites began deploying from the Juggernaut, appearing in the image as they flew off in different directions.

"What are you doing?" Elilu asked, resting her hand on his shoulder. Behind them, he could hear David murmuring translations for Vickers.

"I'm completing the orders I received from Enki. All remaining life on this moon has to be destroyed." The satellites continued to stream out. As they moved into positions, different colored bands appeared on the image. He only needed to wait for the grid to finish constructing itself, and then he could give the attack orders.

"Is this what would have happened if you'd gone to Earth?" David asked, repeating the question in English for Vickers.

"Yes and no," he answered, feeling guilty. "Since we were only targeting one peninsula, we would have done so from a much lower orbit and we would only have needed a few satellites."

A melodious chime told him that the satellite grid had finished forming. He pressed some more controls and watched the hologram. Tiny lights marking the locations of several satellites flashed as they released their primary payloads. They were in an irregular pattern, some of them in between points on the grid. A minute later, brilliant flashes bloomed on the moon's surface in the same irregular pattern.

"Are those *nuke*s?" Vickers asked from behind them, sounding almost outraged. Once the tablet defined the word, he nodded.

"I'm vaporizing everything within a mile of the population centers that once existed here. That should hopefully take out all of the nests." He pressed more controls and some of the satellites flashed again. A moment later, a second round of thermonuclear explosions erupted on the surface. He launched a third round, smaller devices targeting the remains of more remote settlements, a moment later. "This wouldn't have happened on your world. We try to avoid using thermonuclear devices anywhere that we actually *want* life to return to."

"Isn't this a bit of overkill?" David asked, studying the screen with interest.

Zamin shrugged. It probably was, but he wanted to make sure that nothing remained that might harm later settlers. His father had died, after all, because a colony had discovered a nest after living more than a millennium almost on top of it. If any colonists ever returned to this world, they'd find nothing but radioactive glass where the nests had once been, and no organic molecules more complex than amino acids. He began deploying the final round. "I had enough weapons for an entire fleet, and only one ship to take them out with. One way or another, I was going to have to destroy whatever I didn't take with me. And there's no such thing as overkill where acid dragons are concerned."

No new flashes bloomed on the surface. He watched, expectantly, for a different set of signs instead.

"Shouldn't that round you triggered have exploded by now?" Vickers asked.

"It has," he told her, and smiled as both David and Elilu translated. "These aren't thermonuclear devices. I'm deploying Zal."

Elilu frowned and pursed her lips, leaning forward to examine the moon. "Which kind?"

"The third kind I told you about," he replied, and nodded in satisfaction as the first traces of black appeared on the hologram. "The kind that leaves nothing behind it. No embryos, no genetic data, nothing. It breaks every organic molecule down to the atomic level and it will keep doing so for another decade or more."

"In that case," Elilu said slowly, "I need to leave a warning for my people to stay away."

"Yes, of course," David agreed. "The Weyland Corporation would undoubtedly want to try again at some point, probably with a military vessel, even if only to attempt to salvage what they could from the trillion-dollar ship they invested in."

"Yes," Zamin said as he watched the darkness spreading over the face of the moon. "You need to make sure they know that there is nothing to salvage and no one to save." He winced; those had been Muru's words of warning. But they had been effective; no one and nothing had attempted to land on Ereshkigal Šagtum until the *Prometheus* had arrived.

"Should we have Miss Vickers send the message?" David asked, in English. Zamin realized that he was needing the tablet less and less.

"No," both Elilu and Vickers said simultaneously. He turned to look at them.

"If she sends the message," Elilu continued, "the human Miss Vickers back on Earth could be in a lot of danger. No one must know that she was on board the *Prometheus*. And no one must know that David survived, either. He legally became the head of the Weyland Corporation upon Mr. Weyland's death. They'd feel compelled to bring him back to Earth if they had any idea he was still functional. I'll send the message. No one on Earth will care that I've survived."

She tried to deliver it as flatly as she could, but he could hear the pain in her voice at those last words. He didn't believe them, anyway. Elilu might not have realized how many people liked her, but he was certain that many had. They would mourn her passing if they were told that she'd died, and would worry about her if they knew that she lived, even if there was nothing more that they could do than pray for her. His liminal dreams had been full of stories about her life, told by his mother and populated with those who loved her a great deal: students, assistants, colleagues, mentors, most of whom had shaken their heads in sadness at her unworthy choice of a partner and had wished they could help her see why she was throwing her life away with him. Many of them would lay the blame for the *Prometheus* disaster on Charlie Holloway's doorstep, even though that was unfair and untrue. A few of them, he suspected – if he could believe that the stories he'd listened to in his dreams had any basis in reality – would petition to have something named after her so that future students in her field would at least know her name, even if they had lost the privilege of meeting her in the warm, vibrant flesh.

He reached out and drew her onto his lap, wrapping his arms around her. She sighed and relaxed against him, turning her head to watch the moon grow darker and darker. "Is that the Zal?" she asked after a moment.

"It is, yes." He pointed to long streaks of black that had begun fanning out from the main grid points. "It's being picked up by the wind now. Any organic life that survived the nuclear blasts is now being dismantled."

If his flesh had been left behind in an area outside of the blast zones, though, it would be resisting the Zal, fighting to maintain its cohesion... and probably winning. But he'd made sure to target a missile directly over the nest; his missing pieces had been vaporized. To the best of his knowledge, even Anunnaki couldn't survive that.

He *hoped* they couldn't. The thought of what might be found on that moon decades or centuries later, if they *could*, was appalling.

Let it go, he told himself. You've given them as much mercy as you're capable of. Just hope that it's enough.

He'd have to check with Enki when they arrived at Apsu, though, to make sure it was.

One by one, the satellites in the grid finished delivering their payloads and winked out, dropping out of orbit to crash into the moon with their final loads. Virtually everything on the surface had gone black.

"It's monstrous," Vickers said behind him.

"It's a last-resort measure that's almost never used," he answered her, once the tablet's translation made sense. "It's another reason I had to be promoted to Admiral. Only an Admiral or a member of the High Anunnaki Council can perform something on this scale."

"This is technology that Earth must never have," Elilu added after a moment, watching the hologram as the last bits of light vanished.

"Agreed," David said after a moment. "I can feel just how much Mr. Weyland would have desired it, and that tells me how wrong it must be."

Zamin realized that he was *glad* of their reactions, glad of the horror in their voices as they contemplated the destruction they had witnessed. To him, Zal was almost a common thing, and his desensitization to its creation and use was something he disliked immensely. His younger, more idealistic self had been convinced that such weapons would never be wielded except in the direst of situations such as this one, but within a year or two of joining the military, he'd already deployed it twice. And he'd been given permission to deploy it for *revenge*, even if technically the nature of the crime had warranted it anyway. He *wanted* to be surrounded by people who recoiled in horror from its grotesqueness, the way he'd stopped doing long ago. Maybe he could re-sensitize himself to just how evil it actually was, through them.

He was also glad for another reason, he realized. Their revulsion about Zal meant that they might be willing to testify in his defense when the High Council discovered that he'd disobeyed one of their instructions. That was a moment he was dreading.

"If I may, Zamin?" David asked. "I would like to see if we can locate our stowaway. Or, possibly, stowaways."

That was right. He leaned forward, arm still around Elilu, and pressed more controls. The blackened moon vanished from above the dais and was replaced by a schematic of the Juggernaut. "They're going to be difficult to detect," he warned the others. "Acid dragons are cold-blooded. They won't show up properly on infrared scans. We'll have to rely on motion detectors. I'm activating them and calibrating them to report movement other than ours. And..." he pressed some more controls as he spoke. "...the system is now set so

that any of you can access security data here. I'd brought a communication system back to the lifeboat from my old ship. We'll set it up so that you can also access the data from in there."

He was rather taken with the idea of spending the journey to Apsu in the lifeboat, assuming he could get some furniture sized for him moved in there. It might be one way to deal with the stowaway, if it stayed hidden.

But things probably wouldn't be so easy, he knew.

Elilu was studying the schematic, frowning. "I hadn't realized just how large this ship is. What are we carrying back to Apsu?"

"Almost everything from the Four Towers that was salvageable," he told her. "All of the data, much of the production equipment, and most of the stored results." He pointed to some of the storage rooms. "Those rooms contain Zal, in its three forms, and that room contains Azalla. They are sealed off. The largest chamber to the side contains the gene banks."

"Please tell me that you didn't bring the contents of the Tribunal Rooms," Elilu breathed. He was inexpressibly glad to hear that from her.

"I didn't. There may be some trouble over the fact that I didn't, too. But since I still don't understand some of what I saw in your recordings, I couldn't make a judgment that they were safe to transport."

"Good," she said, leaning back against him. "Too many people have already died thanks to those rooms."

He really hoped she'd say that to Ellil when the time came.

"So what now?" she asked him, and he found himself wishing that his suit had separated.

"Now..." He made himself focus. "We should probably get the mainframe I brought back, and make a recording of your message to Earth. Do you have a message capsule you'll be sending it in?"

It probably wouldn't be a good idea for her message to be carried home via his technology; that would probably draw people from Earth to the planet instead of encouraging them to stay away.

"We do," David answered when Elilu paused in confusion. "There's a capsule that can place itself into orbit around the planet and beam its signal home, but it will take decades for the message to reach Earth that way. It will be good for warning approaching ships away, though. There's also another that will produce a small hyperspatial field and travel back along our original course. It will arrive back on Earth in less than three years."

"I want to put a coded message in that one for my... namesake," Vickers said. "She needs to know what happened. Losing *Prometheus* like this is going to leave Weyland Corporation vulnerable to a hostile takeover. Her father spent years fighting off the Yutani Group. Once word gets back that the ship was destroyed, the company stocks will plummet and they'll pounce. She needs to be prepared."

Zamin needed the tablet to help him understand most of what she was saying, and he still wasn't entirely sure that he did when it was done translating. Earth's industries seemed to exist in a state of warfare against one another, not based upon national allegiance but rather on something far more esoteric and nonsensical. What a strange and cruel way to live. Did anyone know who or what they swore allegiance to anymore? No wonder Weyland had behaved like an ancient king. Undoubtedly, that was exactly what he'd seen himself as.

Shaking off his reverie, he helped Elilu stand and rose to his feet after setting one last command into place. "From now on, all of the doors will be locked on the ship, just in case our 'friend' tries to move around. Any of us can open them, but they will always close and lock behind us. I need each of you to put your hands into the green globe so that the system can recognize your biometrics."

"Will it work if our metrics aren't biological?" David asked, his eyes crinkling.

"It will, yes." Both David and Vickers had been constructed to pass as human, which would be more than enough to ensure that the security system recognized them that way, too.

The cart that he'd set the mainframe on, he discovered, had been struck by far more acid than he'd realized. He was grateful that its wheels hadn't begun corroding until *after* it had already trundled on board the Juggernaut, but it was worthless scrap now. As he and David carried the mainframe between them, with Elilu and Vickers guarding them on either side, he desperately hoped that the system wouldn't turn out to be worthless scrap as well. When they hoisted it into the lifeboat's primary airlock and climbed in after it, Zamin thought he heard a faint rustle from somewhere above him. Something *was* near. But his link to the motion scanners showed no unexplained motion in the area. He made sure the outer door's magnetic seal was in force before turning toward the others.

Elilu had taken a seat on one of the couches, while David and Vickers set up a camera in front of her. She had her eyes closed and was mouthing words to herself, preparing for her warning speech. He dragged the mainframe inside the inner airlock door and sealed it shut before sitting down to listen.

“All right,” she finally said, looking up at both of the androids. “I know what I want to say. Make sure that anyone who sees the message can tell that I’m in the lifeboat, all right? I want them to think that I left the planet in it.”

“You did,” David pointed out.

“Yes, but they must think that I left alone, and with the lifeboat actually flying.”

“In that case, I’m going to need to do a little editing when you’re done,” Vickers told them. “I need to remove the sound of *his* engines and replace them with the sound that this crate would make. It won’t take too long. I have memory files of what it would sound like.”

“You can interface with your ship’s computers?” Zamin found himself asking. That could be extremely useful when it was time to work on David’s brain.

“Yes, we can,” David told him. “All right... is everybody ready? Not a sound, anyone, until Elizabeth is done making her recording. We’re ready whenever you are.”

Elilu nodded and then leaned forward, switching on the recording device. She took a deep breath, and let her face reveal some of the very real devastation she undoubtedly felt about the disaster. “Final report of the vessel *Prometheus*,” she began. The evenness of her voice, in contrast with the devastation on her face, made her seem shell-shocked. He *hoped* that she didn’t feel quite so terrible inside. “The ship and her entire crew are gone. If you are receiving this transmission, make no attempt to come to its point of origin. There is only death here now, and I am leaving it behind.” She glanced down at the control panel and appeared to read something off of it. “It is New Year’s Day, the Year of Our Lord 2094. My name is Elizabeth Shaw, last survivor of the *Prometheus*. And I am still searching.”

She paused, hesitated as if she wanted to say more, and then switched off the camera. After a few seconds, she relaxed.

“You made me want to cry,” Vickers said after another pause.

“Most impressive,” David added. There was genuine admiration in his voice. “I wouldn’t have thought you capable of such deception. How did you put on such a convincing act?”

David had a point; usually it was easy to read Elilu’s emotions and thoughts right off of her face.

She sighed and looked over at Zamin. Their eyes met. “I imagined what I’d feel like if I were on board this ship without you,” she told him.

There was a long moment of silence in the room.

“All right, then,” Vickers suddenly said. “David, I think it’s time for us to go check the storage areas upstairs.”

“It is?”

“Yes. It is. It definitely is.” She grabbed his arm and started dragging him away. Elilu covered her mouth to stifle a laugh. Zamin had to smother one of his own as he heard David tripping up the stairs and protesting Vickers’ inordinate hurry.

They were alone, at least for a little while.

“Look at your sleeve,” Elilu told him in a soft voice.

He glanced down. The biosupport suit had separated itself from his skin. He looked back up at Elilu and their eyes met again.

It was a race to see who could get to the bedroom first.

Notes: Well, that was definitely a light-and-fluffy chapter, wasn’t it? Mostly, anyway, aside from the scary Satellites of Doom and so on. Thank you to everybody who has been reading, and leaving lovely feedback and kudos and things! You’re so much fun to write for. Sadly, it’ll be about another week or so before I can post another chapter. I have a 20+ page paper due for my graduate seminar class on Monday, and then a 60+ page portfolio (mostly revision work, but *still*, aaaaaaaaaaaaaa!) due for my creative writing class a week from today. Which means that, as much as I want to think about Zamin and Elilu, I have to think about other things for a while. :((Although I don’t think they’re going to mind spending a week in the bedroom together.)

So, no real vocabulary entries or anything today. Shaw's speech is word-for-word the closing speech in the film, by the way. I like to hope that I've twisted its meaning nicely. :D

See you on the other side of Finals!

Note: If you don't actually want to read the love scene, skip down to [the first divider](#) and start reading there.

Chapter 20

Zamin was closer to the bedroom and had the more direct route, so Shaw dodged to the side and charged through the med-lab. The connecting doors between the lab and the bedroom were still partway open. She raced through them and started laughing; he'd stopped in the room's main doorway and had turned, looking behind him with a baffled expression clearly stamped on his profile.

He whirled around, obviously surprised to see her already in the room, and then his laughter joined hers.

She turned, closing the connecting door, and when she turned back he was right beside her. It was startling just how quickly and silently he could move. Then his hands were on her waist and he was lifting her up until her mouth was level with his. She wrapped her arms and legs around him as he kissed her.

It was at moments like these that she discovered, all over again, how huge he was. His hand seemed to engulf the back of her head as he held her to him, his fingers slipping into her hair yet again. Her legs were wrapped high around his waist, her feet unable to meet behind him where her ankles had always easily crossed around—no, she wasn't going to think about that. Nothing existed except Zamin now. Her past was something she didn't want to acknowledge in this moment.

She focused, instead, on the intoxicating taste of his mouth and the silken feel of the back of his head against *her* hand. She wondered how long it would be before she stopped being surprised that he wasn't actually made of stone. The hot strength of his lips was overwhelming, leaving her dizzy and weak.

He released her mouth, his hand the only thing that kept her head from falling back, and laughed softly in her ear. "Breathe, Elilu," he whispered, and she realized that she'd almost fainted. Her breath came in panting gasps.

She loved it when he called her that. It made her feel like a whole new person, reborn without any of the tragedies and failures that littered her past. When he touched her and spoke to her, everything felt new. It seemed, in moments like these, as if the sordid and chaotic events of the *Prometheus*'s last days were just the final act of a tragedy that had to close so that she could be born anew.

I don't feel like I've been shut out of Paradise, she thought as she opened her eyes and met his. I feel like I've found it.

She wanted to tell him that, but for a moment she felt as thoroughly tongue-tied as she had in her old life. Still, she thought she could see the same knowledge reflected in his eyes.

Then he broke the gaze, gently tilting her head back and bringing his mouth to her throat. She gasped and leaned her head back even more for him as his tongue traced a line of fire across her skin. When his teeth grazed her, she suddenly understood why her first college roommate had loved stories about vampires; when they pressed into her flesh, just a little, she groaned and tried to bring her body even closer to his.

She didn't realize that he was lowering her onto the bed until she felt the soft mattress against her back, possibly because her sense of direction had deserted her anyway. When she felt his hands fumbling with the fastenings of her jumpsuit, she finally knew what she needed to do. "Here," she told him. Her voice almost sounded like a stranger's, impossibly husky. "I'll show you."

She made quick work of the fastenings, missing the feel of his hands and mouth on her skin while she undid them. But once she had the suit open, his hands were back, slipping inside the fabric even as she worked her way out of the sleeves and freed herself from its confines. She hadn't bothered wearing one of the odd tube bras Weyland Industries had stocked the ship with, not this time, so it only took a moment before she was naked from the waist up.

His hands moved over her, gentle and caressing, as if he was mapping her topography with his fingers. She hoped he wasn't disappointed by it; she'd spent most of her adult life feeling inadequate in comparison to the tall, willowy beauties on the media screens—too short, too flat, too muscular—although she'd only begun to realize why that might have really been when she and Vickers had talked at last. She had *no* idea what kind of standard of beauty Zamin had grown up with, but she couldn't help feeling that she probably violated it a *lot*.

He looked completely entranced, though. There was something in his expression that made her feel like possibly the most beautiful woman in the galaxy, and definitely the most desired. His eyes seemed to have darkened, the large pupils at the center of each blue expanse dilated until they almost seemed round. The

tender smile on his face as he gazed down at her made her want, for the first time in her life, to display herself instead of covering up. She had often tried to keep some of her clothes on during sex, at least in the past, not so much out of modesty but out of a conviction that her body was a disappointment in some way. Charlie's face had sometimes worn a look of dashed expectations on those times when she *had* gone naked for him, although he'd been quick to deny—

She wasn't thinking about him now. This wasn't his time. But it amazed her, nonetheless, just how liberating the look in Zamin's eyes was for her. He made her feel *perfect*, and she had the urge to shuck off the rest of the clothes and give him an inch-by-inch tour of her body.

Then he bent down and his mouth began moving over her bared skin, and she realized that he already *had* that idea, himself.

"Oh God yes," she heard herself gasp, arching her back. One of his huge hands moved beneath her, splaying across her back to support her. His mouth, meanwhile, was waking up nerve endings she hadn't known existed, rousing a hungry ache between her legs that she'd never experienced so intensely before. His lips and tongue sent shocks through her, repeatedly, and the playful scrape of his teeth against her skin set up waves of shivers.

She didn't know how long it went on. Time was lost in sensation, but just as she thought she'd reached the limit of what she could feel, he stopped and brought his mouth back to hers for another deep kiss. She returned it hungrily, reveling in the exotic yet familiar taste that was uniquely his. Once, she'd found the idea of deep kissing unsettling and a little repulsive; now she wanted to run her tongue over every part of his mouth until it was as familiar as her own.

When do *I* get to explore *him*? she wondered. Her hands moved over the back of his biosupport suit, searching for hidden seams and fastenings.

He laughed into her mouth and then drew away for a moment. "*I'll show you*," he told her, as he peeled away the suit from his upper body.

Beneath it, all of the damage from his battles in the Towers was gone. His skin was flawless as marble once more, the musculature beneath it restored to the perfection that Greek sculptors had spent centuries enshrining. The tiny, blasphemous voice inside her demanded to know how this *wasn't* the body of a god. As he undressed the rest of the way, she hurriedly kicked off her shoes and pulled the jumpsuit off of her legs. He was already erect, and she didn't want anything to slow him down now.

She felt like she should be intimidated by his size. He was *very* large – not actually outside the realm of human possibility, she knew, but on the intimidating end of that scale. Just a few years earlier, she would have taken one look at him and bolted, convinced that there was *just no way* it would work. She could thank one of her colleagues for the fact that she didn't feel like bolting now, and instead was *excited* by what she saw. As far as Julia had known, the apartment-warming gag gift she'd given Shaw, at the start of her first separation from Charlie, had been tossed into a junk drawer and forgotten; during her reconciliation attempts with her husband, she'd also made sure that he had no idea that it existed. But it had arrived when she'd been in the *mood* for a challenge, and she'd ended up finding that she *liked* it. Julia would probably have whooped and punched the air if she'd known. Shaw hadn't actually felt able to bring it with her on the trip, and wondered what the person who cleaned out her personal effects would make of it when they found it – huge, neon green with black zebra stripes, tucked amid the out-of-season pajamas she'd left behind, the word "*thundercock*" printed on its base in jagged lettering. Zamin was even larger, but not by all that much. It had hurt the first time she'd taken him, but then, she had been trying *not* to enjoy herself.

She expected him to position himself between her legs, but instead he sat down beside her on the bed, setting the suit off to the side before running his hands over her once more.

"Aren't we going to...?" she asked when he started kissing his way down her throat and chest again.

He lifted his head. "To...?"

"...you know...?" Good God, what had happened to her? She suddenly realized that not once, in her entire marriage to Charlie, had she ever *asked* him to have sex. He'd always seemed to be ready, whether or not she was in the mood herself, so it had never been an issue. She didn't know what to say now. Every way to ask, that didn't seem ridiculously indirect, sounded so *trashy* in her head.

If Zamin had had eyebrows, they would have been quirking at her. He looked a little amused. "Not yet."

"But... what else is there to do?"

Now he looked *shocked*. For a moment she couldn't tell whether he was trying to say something or stifling a laugh. "...I'll show you," he finally repeated. He bent his head and began kissing her body again, re-igniting her nerves, moving lower and lower down—

"Oh my *God*," she gasped. Her hands clutched at the bed sheets. She lifted her head, startled to discover that Zamin *was* between her legs now. His head was between her thighs, and his mouth—

A bolt of pleasure unlike anything she'd ever felt crashed through her, and her head thumped back against the soft mattress. For a moment, she couldn't see. Her back arched and she felt Zamin's hands on her hips, steadying her and holding her in place while he worked magic on her with his tongue. Her body writhed – she didn't know if she was trying to escape or get closer to him – under the onslaught of sensation. The cries escaping her throat sounded exactly like the ones women made in the trashy videos Charlie had thought he'd kept hidden from her, and which she'd only half-successfully faked for him a few times. Now they exploded out of her, unbidden, unstoppable, and completely sincere. She felt like she was going insane—

"Is everything all right, Elizabeth?" David's voice came over the comm system, making her gasp. Zamin's mouth went still.

"Turn that off!" Vickers' voice came from the background.

She swallowed and forced her voice to work. "What are you doing, David?"

"I heard screams. Are you hurt? Do you need assistance?" His voice was coming from a small grille in the ceiling. She sincerely hoped there wasn't a video feed.

"What, are you stupid?" Vickers said again, her voice closer to the microphone now. "Turn that *off*!"

Zamin was laughing silently, his forehead resting on her thigh.

"I'm—" Her voice cracked, and she tried again. "I'm fine, David. I'm not hurt. But please, I'd like not to be disturbed right now."

"We'll leave you alone," Vickers assured her over the intercom. "David, we need to talk."

"All right, but—"

"*Turn that off*!" Vickers said for the third time. The feed went dead.

Zamin's whole body was shaking with silent laughter, making the bed quiver as if it had been stolen from one of the motels she'd stayed in during a trip to the American southwest. The coins that had operated them had been devalued and taken out of circulation decades earlier, but adventurous travelers could buy tokens from the front office. She'd tried it, once, out of curiosity, and it had felt like this.

"I can't believe he did that," she managed after a moment.

"I guess we should be glad he didn't come charging in, brandishing a flamethrower," Zamin said, lifting his head. Something glistened on his lips and chin.

"Well, at least *I* locked *my* door," she teased him. The main entrance to the room *was* still wide open.

Zamin's retaliation made her cry out in shocked pleasure. Somehow the sensations were more intense than ever; within seconds she was lost to them, pinned and writhing in his grasp as wave after wave of pure pleasure crashed over her. They were growing even more intense, impossibly so, until she didn't think she could stand anymore. Charlie had never brought her anywhere near this level; the few times she'd felt something similar to this using the "green zebra," she'd stopped, satisfied. How could her body possibly take any more of this—?

Then, just as abruptly, a feeling of incredible *bliss* spread through her, filling her whole body. The waves of pleasure no longer seemed to crash over her as much as rock her in a gentle embrace while she drifted – mindless, boneless – amid them. She felt more relaxed than she'd ever felt in her life, *sleepy* even. Her whole body tingled, and every muscle seemed to have come undone. She lay still, floating in contentment, barely aware of anything until she felt Zamin begin to push into her.

It didn't hurt at all this time. Her body seemed to have lost all of its resistance to *anything*. She opened her eyes and saw him above her. He was supporting himself on his elbows as he slowly, carefully, pushed deeper and deeper into her, his eyes on her face the whole time.

"That was so clever of you," she told him, and wondered if that slurred, purring voice was really hers.

His smile, as he gazed down at her, was tender. "I thought so. But you have no idea how long I've been waiting to do that."

"Six days, maximum," she replied, and was rewarded with a gust of almost-silent laughter. It sent a few new little shocks of pleasure through her. What her body might once have insisted was impossible now felt very nice indeed.

“Fine,” he chuckled. “But it feels a lot longer.”

“Well, if you’re going to bring up things that feel long—”

“This, from the same person who calls sex ‘you know?’” His smile was wicked. “Is this a vocabulary problem or is it rude to talk about those things in your culture? Because if it’s just a vocabulary problem, I can fix it.”

The thought of him drilling her on different sexual terms from Latin and Sanskrit made her snicker; those two languages seemed to be the sources of some of the raciest ancient literature that had survived. “It’s cultural,” she admitted. “Some members of my religion... are pretty neurotic about sexual things, and teach their children to be the same. Those teachings can be hard to get over.”

She’d spent much of her adult life trying to get over them, vaguely aware that she was missing out on something but unsure what it might even be; it seemed like almost all of her breakthroughs in that regard had come in the last few days, as if Zamin had brought them with him. Of course, most of those teachings had come from her aunts and grandmother, not her parents. Once, when she had been very small, she’d walked in on the two of them while they were in bed together. Her reaction had been similar to David’s and she’d fled the room, convinced that her father had been hurting her mother. It was a moment that had been lost to her until now. Her mother had found her a little while later, explaining to her that no, what she’d witnessed hadn’t been violent at all. It was something that was normal and natural, and perfectly all right between a husband and a wife—

No, she suddenly realized, gasping. Her mother hadn’t even said that. She’d said “between two people who love each other.”

“Did I hurt you?” Zamin asked.

“No!” She told him, smiling. Her muscles no longer felt like over-wetted clay, but she still felt wonderfully relaxed. In fact, she felt just plain *wonderful*. “I just remembered something really... beautiful. It’s hard to explain.”

Given his current position, she wasn’t sure it was the right moment to tell him that her parents would have approved of him, after all. Somehow, all of the prohibitions her extended family had layered on her, after her return to England, had wiped out her memories of just how understanding her mother and father really had been about such things. Until now. Until the Azalla had given her back the truth she’d lost long ago.

Until *Zamin* had given her back the truth. It made her feel ashamed, all over again, for how abominably she’d treated him about it, when he’d given her one of the most precious gifts of her life.

“Are you *sure* I haven’t hurt you?” He asked again, and she realized that she must have winced when she thought of what she’d done to him.

“Very sure,” she said. Her arms were still so weak, but she reached up with one to touch his cheek in reassurance. “It feels wonderful.”

“I’m almost all the way in,” he told her in an almost-apologetic tone. It made her giggle.

“And I *want* all of you,” she answered. Twice her size or not, she realized that there was no one in her whole life that she’d trusted this much with herself, both body and spirit. It seemed that she’d always known she was safe with him, even in those moments when reason would have told her that he was incredibly dangerous. He would never, ever hurt her. That wasn’t just something she had chosen to believe; it was a truth that she knew deep in her bones.

Above her, his expression softened. “Then I’m yours.”

Once, long ago, she’d read a fairy tale in which the hero always told his beloved that he loved her by saying *as you wish*. She had the funny feeling that Zamin was doing the same thing now.

“And I’m yours,” she told him. “And you really don’t have to be so careful with me.”

She could feel the light tremor in his arms and legs as he kept himself under control. If she were sized like an Igigi woman, she supposed he’d feel more confident about being less careful with her. The amount of self-control he was exerting was amazing. Had he acquired that kind of discipline from his military training, or was it just natural to him?

“I do,” he told her. “At least until we’re used to each other.”

In truth, she thought her body was doing a remarkably good job accommodating him. “As long as we get lots of practice?”

His soft laugh sent more tiny shocks of sensation through her. She wondered if it would have felt like this if she’d ever put batteries in the “green zebra.” At least she was making up for missed opportunities now.

“We’re going to be able to practice a *lot* during the trip back to Apsu. And I’m all the way in now.”

“Mmmmmmm.” She smiled up at him. She almost felt like she could feel him all the way through her, even though she knew from her health classes that that was unlikely. It surprised her, though, that he was staying so still now. “How long will that trip to Apsu take?” she asked. And when will you start moving again?

“About two to three months. I thought we could stay awake for it.” He smiled and shrugged, but otherwise remained vexingly still. “We can hunt down the acid dragon, fix David, learn each other’s languages, piece together exactly what happened on your ship, and in the Towers two thousand years ago... that should keep us busy.”

“You left something off of that list, you know,” she told him, quirking an eyebrow at him.

He quirked one back at her, minus an actual eyebrow. “So I did. Don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten it.”

She raised both eyebrows at him. He returned the gesture.

“What are you waiting for, exactly?” she finally asked him.

He laughed. “I’m giving your body a chance to adjust.”

Charlie would have been snoring by now, long finished. The comparison set off more laughter. “I’m pretty sure it has.”

“You’re ready, then?” he asked, smiling.

“Yes, I am!” she replied with more vehemence than she’d intended. Suddenly she understood what he’d really been waiting for. He wanted her aroused again, not just sated and pliant. The wicked grin he gave her told her that she was right.

“Then I’m yours,” he told her again, and began to move. She’d never felt so loved.

Soon she realized that he was letting her set the pace, studying her intently for every small cue he could find about what she wanted. It wasn’t what she’d expected at all. Part of her, thinking that turnabout would be fair play and accustomed to her late husband’s one-note strategies, had expected him to pursue his own climax under the assumption that the one he’d already given her was enough. But instead, he seemed determined to make sure she had a second one; every movement and touch was focused on bringing her back to that astonishing peak.

This time, he took her even *higher*, and she was pretty sure that she’d passed out for a few moments at the end. When she came back to herself, he was holding her in his arms, no longer beneath him but on top of him, head resting on his shoulder while he ran one gentle finger along her cheek.

“Now,” he told her softly, “I have what I’ve wanted.”

There was no reproval in his face, though; nothing but tenderness. This was what he’d wanted to give her from the very beginning, and had finally been able to. If he wanted it to wipe away that prior encounter, she was more than happy for it to. This could be their first time. In some ways, it felt like it was *her* first time. Nothing in her past counted anymore, not after this.

She brought her mouth up to his, and gave him the kiss that she’d denied him before.

“We need a bigger bed,” she admitted soon after, as they settled in an awkward diagonal on Weyland’s merely queen-sized mattress. It just wasn’t *built* for a titan. Spooning was tricky, given their differences in size, and she wished they could do so without bending their legs. But Zamin’s feet hung over if he stretched his legs out, even on the diagonal.

“I have one,” he told her. “I brought it back from my old quarters. I can bring it in here and set it up later. This will do for tonight, though.”

“Is it big enough for two?” she asked him. At least on her world, military beds had a bad reputation.

He laughed, apparently following her train of thought. “I was an *officer*. It’s big enough for two *Igigi*, and you’re tiny. You’ll fit just fine on it.”

“What else did you bring back?” she asked after a moment. A big bed seemed like an impersonal, if very practical, souvenir to take with him.

“My off-duty clothes, some mementos from my family, those kinds of things.” He kissed the top of her head. “I’ll show you all of them. Our imaging systems are a little different from yours, but I think you’ll like the family pictures I have. It’s a shame I can’t introduce you to any of them.”

“We’re both orphans,” she reflected. “I’d love to introduce you to my parents, too, if I could.”

He chuckled. “That’s very traditional of us, isn’t it? I guess our family is the other Anunnaki now.”

“And David and Meredith,” she reminded him.

“Yes. And David and Meredith.” His voice was pensive.

“Is there going to be a problem about them?” she asked. “Or about me? You said creating beings like them was forbidden, and that... well, your people aren’t actually supposed to mix with mine, are they?”

He shrugged behind her. “There will probably be some objections. Some of the Anunnaki will probably be upset. Enki told me once that inflexibility over how things are supposed to be is usually an early sign that an Anunnaki will be going to Irkalla soon. The creation of beings like David and Meredith is forbidden, but... our laws say you can’t punish an innocent, and they *are* innocent of that crime. If Peter Weyland had gone back with us, though, he’d probably have ended up on trial for making them. There might be a few who will say that the kindest thing to do for them is to shut them down, but I *know* Enki won’t accept that. He’ll say we owe them the freedom to become themselves. I think Inanna will take their side as well. They won’t come to harm.”

“And us?” It worried her a little, how others from his world might react to her, and her to them. What she felt for Zamin was so intense, and the connection they’d formed was so powerful, but part of her was afraid that she’d find she felt a similar pull to everybody from his world.

“If I were to bring you back to Apsu as a sexual slave, I’d be in a *lot* of trouble and I’d deserve to be,” he said after the moment. “Nobody is going to object to me bringing you home as a willing, equal partner who’s free to go her own way whenever she wishes. Most of the laws about how we’re required to behave toward humans from Ers — from Earth, I mean, have to do with old crimes of consent that used to occur. It’s why Ellil ordered my whole species off of your world four — sorry, no, *six* — thousand years ago. He relented after a while, but anyone who wanted a posting to Earth had to pass rigorous tests and was subject to draconian punishments for any misbehavior.”

“Why?” she asked after a moment. His way of describing her had been astonishing and beautiful, proving to her yet again that he *wasn’t* on a mission to tie her to him permanently. It surprised her that she was even a little disappointed by that, part of her wanting him to declare her *his* and his alone. The freedom and respect that she’d been seeking her whole life was something he considered her rightful due without even being asked, and she felt let down by that? Maybe she needed her head examined. “What did your people do?”

“Whatever they wanted, sometimes.” His sounded both disgusted and embarrassed. “When they encountered humans, they would take the ones they found attractive. They felt entitled. It didn’t matter if the ones they took were married, or were forced to leave behind small children, or were too young themselves. Sometimes humans kidnapped Igigi, too, undoubtedly for the same reasons if the attraction was as mutual for them as it is for us... but mostly it was the other way around. Sometimes the captives really did desire their captors, too, but... using that as an excuse is a bit like... oh... getting someone drunk enough that they’ll consent to things they’d normally refuse, because they’re no longer sober enough to understand, and then claiming their consent was genuine. There were several wars that resulted from some of those abductions. I think you might have even heard myths based on a few of them.”

She probably had, she thought. So many stories in ancient mythology involved abductions, rapes, and forced marriages. The Trojan War? The Battle of Gibeah? The Sabine women? Hades and Persephone? Neptune and Anymone? Zeus and any number of young women...

And those were just tales from the lands around the Mediterranean. From what she understood, the paths of humans and the Igigi had intersected all over the world. Until Ellil had ordered them off-world, anyway, like God condemning the fallen angels in the apocryphal Book of Enoch... funny, hadn’t the Nephilim been called *Anakim* in that book? She’d only ever read it once, out of curiosity about the things other sects of Christianity considered canonical, but she was pretty sure they had been.

“Did you ever worry about it being like that with me?” She asked after a few moments.

“From the start,” he told her, and kissed the top of her head again. “I was afraid that I’d lose control with you, and when I realized it affected you too, I was afraid that you’d... let me even if you didn’t really want me when I wasn’t actually right in front of you. Other times, I think I got a little lost and didn’t care enough about whether that was the case. But it worried me pretty often.”

“And?” How had he stopped worrying, she wondered?

“Every time I left and came back, even before I was anywhere near you, you were already happy to see me. You weren’t scared, or angry – except when you thought I’d murdered Jackson and Ford, but who can blame you for that? – and you didn’t act ashamed or disgusted with yourself – or me – either. Well, uh...” He paused and then sighed. “...Except after you discovered that the Azalla had made you immortal. I thought maybe what happened after that was... possibly a way of telling me that you *did* find the idea of us being together disgusting, when your head was clear.”

“No!” She turned around in his arms to face him, pressing her hand to his cheek. “No. That was me being awful and trying to punish you for... I don’t even know. Having a normal reaction to me when I was too upset to reciprocate? It was so stupid, and so mean, and so *wrong*. And I am *so* sorry. As soon as you were gone, all I could think about was how I’d probably ruined something wonderful, not to mention *hurt* you, and how much I wanted you back.”

His expression had softened and, if she wasn’t mistaken, his eyes were glittering a little. “And that’s why I know I’m not forcing you,” he whispered, before kissing her on the mouth again.

She kissed him back, pressing close to him and – *already?*

She laughed and he released her mouth. “What?”

“You, Admiral,” she said, as she reached down to caress him, “have *amazing* stamina.”

He groaned softly at her touch before rolling her over onto her back again. “We’re just getting *started*...”

Notes: Huzzah, finals are over! And once more, this story has leapt back in to take over my brain. Since most of the story’s readership is on fanfiction.net and I really didn’t want to shortchange anyone, I wanted to write this chapter in such a way that the love scene would be hot without being at all explicit, and I hope I’ve succeeded. It was a very interesting challenge. In fact, aside from one pretty obvious joke in the text, there’s no actual graphic language of any kind and *no* harsh language in this chapter. So this is a bit of a test on my part, too, to see if less can be more. (Because yeah, in the past, my scenes went all-out... which is why none of those stories are still on fanfiction.net, *sigh*)

If you didn’t want to read the love scene, about the only bits of plot/characterization that came up is that Shaw remembered, for the first time, that her parents were actually a lot less uptight about love and sex and religious matters than most of her other relatives, and realized that they’d probably approve of her relationship with Zamin after all. And Zamin told her that the journey to Apsu would take approximately three months, so they can use that time to hunt down the acid dragon, fix David, learn each other’s languages, and try to solve the mystery of what went wrong in the Towers. You also missed a *Princess Bride* reference. :P

Thank you to everybody who has been reading, reviewing, and being so patient while I tackled my academic obligations! You are all so awesome and so much fun to write for!

Chapter 21

“There’s something I need to tell you,” Elilu whispered. “But I don’t know how.”

The moment she spoke, Zamin was awake. He could tell that hours had passed; he felt rested and better than he had in years. Sometime during those hours, he recalled, someone – maybe Meredith? – had discreetly closed the main door to the bedroom. He’d woken up very briefly then, but only for a moment.

He was about to stretch when Elilu spoke again, and he realized that he shouldn’t move. “It’s just... so hard. I’m afraid that when I tell you, you won’t want me anymore. And I know that’s probably stupid, because you’re not *like* that, but...”

She sniffled. He had to restrain the impulse to open his eyes and gather her in his arms. He had a feeling that he knew where she was going with this, but even so... if she needed to tell him while he slept, he’d play along.

“I can’t have children,” she whispered. Yes, he was right. “I can’t ever give you children and it’s my own stupid fault.”

Why in Irkalla would she think such a thing? He wanted to ask her, but he decided to stay still. He’d let her get it out her own way, as much as she was able to, without any fear of his reactions stopping her words.

“You see... when I was in my last year of school at Cambridge, and I was about to get my degree, I started getting sick every month. During my... um...” She hemmed over her next words for a moment, trying out different phrases. He swiftly realized they were all euphemisms for menstruation. Apparently, her religion’s taboos about discussing sex extended to all of the connected bodily functions. How very strange. “The pain was horrible. I went to the university doctors and they examined me, and they told me I had endometriosis.”

Greek had been a language much admired and studied in the Imperium Romanum; Zamin had been studying it as well while preparing to qualify for an Earth posting. He had learned enough that he could pick apart the strange word and recognize its pieces. A condition within the womb? What an odd, vague term that was. It couldn’t be a euphemism for pregnancy, though.

“It’s... it causes scar tissue to form in the... um... reproductive organs and nearby parts of the body. It used to have to be corrected surgically, and many women who got it became infertile, but... that was *decades* ago. Those times are supposed to be long over. It’s not supposed to do that now.” She paused for a moment, sniffing again.

But if it had, how could that possibly be her fault? It was getting harder to stay still and pretend to be asleep. He wanted to talk to her, ask her questions, and reassure her that it made no difference to him. But he needed to let her get it out first.

“Now, people like me can just... take a few pills, and it stays under control. No pain, no scar tissue... we can be normal. Only the pills wouldn’t work for me. I kept having awful side effects from them. There was one that gave me a splitting migraine within an hour of taking it, and another left me dizzy and nauseated for days... and then my doctor told me that there was a newer pill. It had only been out in England for a year, and hadn’t even been approved yet in America – that’s the country Meredith comes from. Usually my doctor waited to start prescribing new medicines until the Americans approved them, because their testing was much more stringent, but given how much pain I was in, she decided that we could go ahead and try it. So...” Elilu took a deep breath. She laid her head on his chest. He tried to make sure that his breathing mimicked the slow, deep pattern of sleep. “I tried it, and it was wonderful. I felt *normal* again. And I needed to. It was *such* a busy time. Charlie and I were planning on getting married in the summer, once we’d graduated. He was getting his Master’s degree at the same time that I was getting my Bachelor’s...”

He’d have to have her explain those distinctions, later. Some of the phrases that she was using in Sanskrit were almost comically inept and probably inappropriate, undoubtedly literal translations of figurative language. Most of it, though, he was able to piece together.

“I had so much work to do. I’d fallen behind while I was sick, but once I was on the medicine – Ransotate – I felt wonderful again. I got caught up in everything. I figured I’d be a loyal customer for the rest of my life. And then...” Her voice became ragged again for a moment. She stopped, taking deep breaths, and he had to restrain himself yet again from reaching for her to give her comfort. “About two weeks before graduation, my doctor left a message on my answer-phone. She said ‘stop taking Ransotate right now, and call me as soon as

you get this.' I had no idea what was going on. I was so swamped by papers and tests that I hadn't paid attention to the news, or anything else, for a week at that point. I didn't even have time to call her. But I did stop taking it... for maybe three days..."

More sniffing. He could feel the wet warmth of tears against his skin.

"But the pain came back, and I knew I wouldn't be able to function if I didn't start taking the medicine again. I still had a week and a half to get through, pages and *pages* of writing and editing left to do, not to mention studying for exams. It was funny. Friends of mine would stop me in the halls and ask me if Ransotate was the medicine I'd been raving about, and I'd ask them if we could talk about it after the semester was done. I had no idea what they were on about. But... I got everything done. I graduated *summa cum laude*—"

Odd that she'd switched to Latin to say that. He wondered if it meant that her native language, English, used the phrase instead of simply *saying* "with highest honors" in its own tongue.

"—and then I only had my wedding to worry about. But when I went to the pharmacy to refill my prescription, the pharmacist told me that it had been de-authorized by my doctor. I called her... and that's when I finally found out."

Oh, Elilu, he thought. He wasn't sure how much longer he could stay still, how much more pretending he could do. It was harder than ever to keep himself from gathering her up into a hug.

"Ransotate had been linked to... oh, at that point it was just *dozens* but that was still bad enough... *dozens* of cases of sterility. By the time it was all over with, that became hundreds. The longer you used it, the higher the risk. It wasn't just repressing the growth of the problem tissues. It... it..." He waited while she struggled. The tears on his skin increased, some of them rolling down his stomach. "It was destroying ovarian tissue..."

What a bizarre word. At another time, he might have laughed. He could hear the Latin influence again. A place for keeping eggs? But it was a descriptive choice. Her whole language seemed riddled with euphemisms taken from older languages, for things that seemingly otherwise couldn't be said.

"...and the tests showed it had already destroyed *mine*. Maybe if I had stopped when she called me, and gone in to see her right away, it *wouldn't* have..."

She stopped again and more hot tears slid across his skin. This was why she said it was her fault, then: because she hadn't known, hadn't understood, hadn't stopped. She might not have blamed herself for using it to begin with, but she couldn't help blaming herself for ignoring the warnings everyone had tried to give her. It might already have been too late, he reflected, but in her mind it would always be those last, disobedient weeks that had done it. He wondered if she felt ashamed of the high honors she had earned, if she felt they'd cost her far too much.

"Charlie and I had been planning on having children right away, and he was *furious*..."

Enough, he thought, as her voice cracked and the tears started again. He drew her up so that her head could rest on his shoulder, and wrapped his arms around her. She gasped and went still against him as he stroked her hair. "I'm so sorry, Elilu," he told her, turning her head so he could kiss her. "It wasn't your fault. None of it was your fault."

"You were awake the whole time?" she finally asked, her voice hitching.

He nodded, kissing her face over and over. So many tears, he thought. He'd seen them on her face the very first time he laid eyes on her. Tears of pain, of grief... the amount of crushing loss she'd carried with her to this world was astounding. Loss of family, of future, of love, of dreams...

Her words in the other ship's control room came back to him. He had learned enough bits and pieces of English that now, when he heard them in his memory, he understood them perfectly. *I need to know why! What did we do wrong? Why do you hate us?* But under the broader words, she had been asking about herself the whole time. It wasn't his mission that had driven her to desperation, not really. His people weren't what she'd come to this world in search of, although finding them – him – in the midst of preparations to attack her world must have confirmed years of repressed suspicions for her. She'd come looking for the masters of *her* fate, so she could ask them what she'd done to deserve so much suffering.

"*I'm* so sorry—" she began, and he stopped her with a kiss. He lingered on it until he was sure that she wouldn't try to apologize to him again.

"You don't have anything to be sorry for," he told her when he finally released her mouth. "What happened wasn't your fault. Sometimes, there just aren't any good choices to make."

He could see her struggling to protest against that, to argue that she really was to blame. How long had she carried that? He wondered just how badly Charlie might have made her feel over the outcome. Had he

almost left her at the altar? Had they both ended up wishing that he had?

“I should have stopped when I was told to,” she insisted after a moment.

“And possibly lost everything that you’d been working so hard for? You didn’t know what else was at stake.” He stroked her cheek. “I know what that’s like. Can I tell you a story?”

She looked a little surprised, his request driving back her grief for a moment. “Always.”

He sat up, gathering her into his lap and resting against the headboard. She fit so neatly and perfectly in his arms, tiny and delicate-looking, but he knew the strength that ran all the way through her. Some of the things she could do with her inner muscles had driven him wild. But her other inner strength was even more impressive. Sometimes, when he imagined her, she loomed far larger than him.

“When I was little,” he told her after he organized his thoughts, “I decided that I was going to marry a girl who lived two houses down from me. Her name was Šena, and we’d known each other almost from birth. She was a year older than I was, and a year younger than my brother Šukarak. The three of us were the only children our age in that area, so we always played together. She was our peacemaker. Any time Šukarak and I started being jerks to each other, she’d calm things down. Even once we began attending school and developed our ‘own’ groups of friends, we were still very close. I always felt like she was the only person who knew the real me and still liked me, and that was why I *knew* we’d get married one day.”

“I’ve never had something like that,” Elilu said when he paused. There was a note of wistful envy in her voice. “My parents moved around a lot when I was little. And after they were both gone, I spent a few years moving from one relative’s home to another before my aunt and grandmother took over raising me. I was always on the outside of all of that.”

He almost told her that he knew. It startled him that the things his mother had told him, in his wild death-dream, were so accurate. They’d felt like truth at the time, but... how was that possible? The longing in her voice made him hug her. “I never made a secret about how I felt. Most of the time, it seemed to make her really happy. From the time we were old enough for people to take it seriously, everyone considered us a couple. But she wasn’t my only love, not really... I was obsessed with becoming a pilot. I always had been. My bedroom was *full* of scale models of every ship in the Igigi Guard Fleet...”

Just thinking about those models, all painstakingly built and painted by hand – the only sign, his mother had teased him, that he had any kind of patience whatsoever – made him smile. They’d still been there in his dream; he wondered where they’d gone in reality.

“A military pilot?” Elilu asked. He nodded.

“I had it all planned out. I talked about it a lot, too. Now that I think about it, though, there was never really a time when I asked Šena if it was what she wanted. Maybe I just assumed that she’d tell me if it wasn’t. Maybe she did tell me and I didn’t listen. But... I don’t think it ever made her happy, not now that I’m looking back. I think I was really blind and just... assumed that the things that interested me were every bit as interesting to her.” It was something that he really hadn’t thought about until now, but he could feel how true it was. It wasn’t that he hadn’t respected *her* interests – her love of geology had been something he admired a lot and he’d been supportive of her plans to become a seismologist – but he hadn’t really thought about how they meshed with his goals or if they even could. He’d selfishly assumed that if there was a conflict, somehow *she’d* be the one to smooth it over, as she always had. Looking back on that now, he felt ashamed.

“What happened?” Elilu asked him after a moment.

“She went to the Abšag Royal Academy to study seismology, a year after my brother started political theory courses there. A year later it was my turn, but I left to begin my training at the Academy of the Igigi Guard. We had talked about marrying when we were both finished with our studies. But less than half a year later, I was tapped for officer’s training and sent to Apsu to meet the Anunnaki. That’s normal. If you want to be a combat-ready officer, you have to face them. I was ecstatic, but it meant that I wasn’t going to get to see my world again, let alone Šena and my family, for a few more years.” He winced, and felt Elilu’s hand on his cheek. “I didn’t really think about how that would make her feel.”

“So focused on your goals that you didn’t realize anything else might be at risk...” Elilu’s voice was reflective. She’d made the connection between his story and hers.

“Yeah. But I ended up going home three years later. I’d become a pilot, the way I’d always wanted, and I was one of the best in the fleet.” He didn’t feel any need to downplay that. He’d been fiercely competitive, and it actually still rankled him that he hadn’t quite made it to the top the way he’d wanted to. “We’d been deployed to a ‘Lost World,’ a world that had lost contact with Apsu for a few centuries, and had... well,

sometimes when worlds lose touch, they develop really bizarre practices and beliefs. This world, Dalbana, had been out of touch for five centuries, thanks to political upheaval, and had started raiding the shipping lanes when they rediscovered interplanetary technology. Our mission was to stop the raids and find out what the people needed to stabilize themselves and get back into a mutually beneficial relationship with the Myriad Worlds. But they had become aggressive and xenophobic during that loss of contact.”

He winced. That, ironically, seemed to be a common outcome when human-dominated worlds lost contact with the other worlds. In fact, Dalbana had no longer been merely human-*dominated*; the other hominid species had been wiped out during those five centuries, and labeled demons by the religions that had sprung up in that time. It really hadn’t been all that much of a surprise. Humans were generally considered *too* aggressive to serve in the Myriad Worlds’ military, in fact. Arguments had raged in the barracks, sometimes, about whether that was a racial trait encoded in their genes, or if it was an inevitable social result of being the weakest of the hominid species. Even the Baza, for their tiny size, were more physically resilient and less aggressive.

“You ended up in battle with them,” Elilu observed. He would have loved to have known her back when those debates had been raging. She was everything many of the others had claimed it was impossible for humans to be.

“We did. It was a really vicious battle. And my fighter ended up crashing. I was lucky to survive, but I didn’t feel lucky at the time. I lost a leg to the crash. That was the first time I was ever given Azalla.”

“To grow your leg back?” Elilu slithered off of his lap and put her tiny hands on both of his thighs, making him laugh. “Which one? I can’t... I can’t tell at *all*.”

“Yes,” he chuckled, “to grow my right leg back, and you would have been able to tell at first. They sent me back to Abšag – that’s my home world, by the way – for a month of physical therapy and leave, and... well, I guess so I’d have a chance to request an honorable discharge, if I decided I wanted one, before I was called back to active duty. Šena took the month off from the Academy and spent the whole time with me. I didn’t realize she was hoping I’d ask for the discharge. She’d ask me sometimes what decisions I’d made, but... I hadn’t understood. I still wanted to be the best fighter pilot in the fleet, and so I just... as you say, ‘didn’t get it.’ When my leave came to an end, she took me by surprise and told me that we should break up.” In retrospect, he felt he shouldn’t have been surprised at all.

“Oh God,” Elilu whispered. She climbed back into his lap and wrapped her arms around him. “I’m so sorry.”

“I was a wreck for a while,” he admitted, kissing the top of her head. As always, holding her made it so much easier to speak of such things. The past’s painful grip on him became slack whenever she was near. “I threw myself back into flying, became the *second* best pilot in the fleet, and had my eye on the number one spot when there was another accident.”

“Oh no,” she whispered. He gave her a gentle squeeze and another kiss.

“I was running checks on my craft while the loading crew was preparing it for take-off. I had the cockpit open so I could listen to some of the other pilots while I worked. It was... an ugly mission. A colony on a small moon had been infected by some kind of fungus that had altered them. They were trying to spread the infection to other colonies. Ellil had ordered the use of the third type of Zal on the moon – and that’s something that almost *never* happens – because the things they *did* to people they captured were unbelievably horrifying. I had my bays open so that the Zal could be loaded while I worked. And suddenly there was a loud clanging sound, and people were shouting and running. I saw a gray ...fog... floating toward me and I slammed my cockpit cover shut as fast as I could.”

“One of the warheads dropped and broke open?” Elilu asked, shivering.

“Yes. And that’s not as easy to do as it sounds. I still need to watch your recordings again, because what happened in the Tribunal Room should *not* have been possible. Anyway, the hangar was sealed off. A team in decontamination suits showed up, with suits for everybody who had been exposed, and we were dragged off to a quarantine center. That’s when I was given Azalla the second time. All of the other soldiers in the quarantine center were showing symptoms, but I wasn’t. I’d either closed the cover in time, or my exposure was minimal. I wanted to wait until I was symptomatic to take the Azalla, but they made me take it immediately. When I was released from containment two days later and a medic examined me, all of my scars had disappeared. I guess that’s when *they* knew what the Azalla had done to me. I convinced myself it was just a side-effect of the healing it was trying to do.”

“You’d become immortal.” She nuzzled closer to him. He nodded, resting his cheek on the top of her head.

“I got reassigned to Apsu, right away. There went my chance to become the best pilot in the fleet.” Twenty – plus two-thousand-odd! – years later, that still made him grumpy. I can be such an ass sometimes, he thought. “I’d been sent there, I think, so the other Anunnaki could teach me how to handle myself. I was the worst student ever. Didn’t want to hear it, didn’t want to believe it, ignored everything they were saying to me about who and what I’d become... I think I drove them crazy. Looking back now, the things they were telling me seem so obvious, but at the time I was convinced I was wasting my time there when I could have been outflying my rival. This is going to sound so petty, because it *is*, but I wanted to be the best so Šena would wish she hadn’t given up on me so easily.”

“No, not really petty,” Elilu said after a moment. “I’ve felt that way too sometimes.”

He could remember her yelling at David, pointing at him as proof that she’d been right about the voyage they’d made. She *did* understand, didn’t she? She’d probably spent even more time trying to prove herself, to people who’d already dismissed her, than he ever had.

“Finally, most of them gave up trying to talk to me about immortality. All except Enki. He kept coming at me from the side, making sure I overheard all the things I wouldn’t sit down and listen to directly. I guess he knew that the important part was getting me to hear it, so I’d remember it later when it counted. I was trying to figure out how long I’d be stuck on Apsu and when I could get back to flying, and no matter where I went, he was nearby. I think I owe him a few beers.”

“You do,” she laughed. “You definitely do. I’m looking forward to meeting him.”

“Me too. I think he had more lessons planned for me, but then a message from home arrived that just... blew things up for me. Šena was engaged.” He took a deep breath, hoping that the old angers, resentments, and jealousies wouldn’t still be in his voice when he continued. “To Šukarak.”

“Your *brother*?” Elilu gasped.

He nodded, swallowing. “I guess... he’d always been in love with her, too. I’d just monopolized her so much that he’d backed off. But after the breakup, I guess they’d gotten close. She probably needed his support to get over it. It... makes sense. Now, anyway. At the time, I just felt betrayed by both of them. And by everybody else who had stood by and let it happen.” He shook his head, laughing scornfully at his much-younger self. “I think part of me was really stupid enough to think she was going to wait for me, even though we’d broken up, and that I was going to win her back by stunting around the worlds instead of giving her what she *needed*. I was invited to the wedding, but I didn’t go. I didn’t want to see any of them... I felt like everybody who supported them and attended the wedding had turned their backs on me. I got myself assigned to deal with another Lost World and stayed unavailable for the next two years. Their son was already born before I got back to Apsu.”

“Did you go see them?” she asked, stroking his cheek. He pressed his face into her hand.

“No, I didn’t. I kept putting it off. I told myself I wasn’t angry anymore, that I’d forgiven them, that things were all right between all of us, but I couldn’t face them in person. I’d make plans to go home for major events and holidays, and somehow at the last moment I’d always find myself asking for an assignment so I’d ‘have to’ back out. They were sent to Earth, and I still hadn’t gone to see them. Šukarak started asking me to transfer to Earth, myself, and be his head of security. It was a prestigious position. I told him I’d need time to prepare. I studied the languages and customs, especially when he would send me messages checking up on how far I was in my preparations, but... I was dawdling. Then he sent me a picture of his son, almost all the way grown up, and reminded me that the boy had never once met his uncle. That’s... almost unheard-of in our culture. I should have been mentoring the boy – his name was Šukud, named after our father – and I’d never even been on the same world as him. I hadn’t... realized just how much time had passed. Maybe that was because I wasn’t aging anymore, so I never had that sense that time was running out...” He winced and swallowed against the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat. “But it was. By Ellil, it was...”

“Their murders?” Elilu whispered.

He nodded. “I *finally* put in for my transfer, and it was about a month before I was scheduled to wrap up my tour on Ereshkigal Šagtum and ship out. A message came in from Earth, bearing my brother’s seals, but when I activated it, it wasn’t from him. There was a human man in the image, and he was in tears...”

“Pliny the Elder? I mean, Gaius?”

He nodded again. “He told me what had happened. He carried the recorder around my brother’s villa so I could see everything. He said that he couldn’t stay long because Nero’s soldiers would be returning at any time to clean up. But... everyone was dead. Šukarak... Šena, Šukud... all of the others in the embassy... all dead. Butchered.”

Elilu raised her head from his shoulder and he could feel her intent gaze on his face. “You’re not using that word for emphasis, are you?” she finally asked him. “You mean it. That thing you said about eating sentient life forms... *that’s* the crime you meant, isn’t it?”

He swallowed again. His voice was ragged when he spoke. “Nothing was beneath Nero. *Nothing*. He’d tried to poison Šukarak a few years earlier, during a dinner party. But the embassy had stocks of Azalla, so my brother survived. That was when he began demanding the gift of immortality. He became more and more aggressive in his demands as time wore on. When a mountain southeast of Rome began building toward an eruption, Šena wanted to study it and my brother used that as an excuse to move the embassy to a town called Herculaneum, as far away from Rome as he realistically could take it. He thought they’d be safer there, and that maybe if they were further away, Nero would forget his obsession with becoming immortal.”

“Herculaneum... you mean Mount Vesuvius, don’t you?” Elilu’s expression was astonished.

“Šena said you’d know about that,” he said without even thinking.

“She what?” Now Elilu’s eyes were enormous.

“I...” He winced and shook his head. “Sorry. At one point when I was fighting the acid dragons, I got wounded really badly and lost consciousness. I had a dream that I was *in* Herculaneum, talking to Šena, and she said to ask you about the eruption. She said that it was still more than a decade away when she’d died, but it was going to be huge when it happened.”

“She was right,” Elilu gasped. “It was. It destroyed Herculaneum. It buried the town so completely that it wasn’t even *found* again for more than fifteen hundred years. The stories about Pompeii and Herculaneum... they were part of what made me want to be an archaeologist. We learned so much about what life was really like in ancient times from those two towns, because it all happened so fast that everything was preserved... Zamin?”

But he was staring at her in shock. If Šena had been right, then Šena had been *real*. How was that possible? “...When?” he finally managed.

“Fifteen years after the murders, I think. Eleven years after Nero was driven from power and committed suicide. Pliny – I mean, Gaius – tried to rescue people from the shores, and died in the process.”

He was surprised at just how much pain he felt at those words. He’d only heard of the man a few times, and seen his grief-ravaged face in a single hologram, but he felt like he’d just been informed of a friend’s death.

“I’m sorry...” Elilu added, hugging him.

He hugged her back. “She... she wanted me to ask you if the Romans came up with a name for mountains like Vesuvius. She said that they didn’t have one back then, no word at all.”

“They didn’t,” Elilu agreed. “But the word they made up was ‘volcano.’ We still use it.”

Oh, those Romans. *Ab Vulcano*... from the hearth of Vulcan. What they’d lacked in poetry – or even, at times, common decency – they’d made up in precision. For all that he wanted to hate them, he had to admit that there was a lot to admire. And from Elilu’s description, the people of Herculaneum had suffered a disproportionate fate for standing by while his family died... something they would have been powerless to prevent, anyway. How had he let himself hate them so much?

“Nero came to the area two years after my brother moved the embassy,” he continued after a moment. “He summoned them to attend a performance he was giving in Neapolis. Šukarak said that there was an earthquake during the performance and that they almost got trapped in the rubble when Nero insisted on playing through it... Šena later verified that it was caused by Vesuvius, too. Nero... was a lot more frightened by the quake than he’d let on, and demanded the secret of immortality again. My brother didn’t take him seriously, though. In the dispatch he sent me just a week before Gaius sent *his* message, he just seemed annoyed.”

“But Nero thought your brother was immortal, and decided that if he wouldn’t *give* up the secret of immortality, maybe it could be taken?” From the look on Elilu’s face, she understood exactly what must have happened. She looked horrified and revolted.

Zamin nodded. “The arrest happened just hours after my brother sent his final message to me. He’d been so excited in it, since he’d gotten my transfer orders at last. He had all kinds of plans for things we’d do once I arrived...” His voice cracked and he struggled for a moment to get it back. “Gaius said that soldiers arrived in the middle of the night and took the villa while almost everyone slept. They killed most of the guards – I think they must have drugged them first, somehow, because Igigi guards aren’t easy kills – and then began working their way through the ambassadors. Nero would have one killed, and then he and a slave would...” Even forming the words sickened him. “...eat...”

“It’s all right. You don’t have to say anymore if you don’t want to.” Elilu was looking a little pale, herself.

He shook his head. It had become common knowledge throughout the base within hours, after Nargal had found him tearing apart the furniture in the communication room in a hysterical frenzy. Apsu had learned almost immediately when the high command of Ereshkigal Šagtum used their only emergency hyperspace beacon to send a near-instantaneous message across the stars; hours later, judgment had already been passed on Nero and the Imperium Romanum, and the honor of carrying out the sentence had been offered to him. He’d accepted in an unthinking rage. But he’d been unable to speak of it aloud to anyone until now.

“I... need to say it,” he whispered, aware that his voice was shaking. She wrapped her arms around him and nodded. “They would eat... and then he would test to see whether or not he’d become immortal. A soldier would force the slave who had also eaten to drink poison, and they would see whether he lived or died. And when the slave died, they’d move on to the next member of the staff, and the next... and the next... until they’d murdered everybody... By whatever gods exist, if I’d just *been there* he could have eaten *my* flesh and I could have throttled him from the *inside*...”

“Oh, Zamin, I’m sorry.” Elilu hugged him close while he struggled to breathe, choking on unshed tears and unvoiced sobs. “It’s all right... you can let it out...”

“What?” he asked in confusion.

She drew back a little so he could see her face. “Have you let yourself cry about this? Any of this?” she asked him, and he found himself shaking his head. At times it had been an enormous struggle not to. “Well, you should. You *should*,” she insisted, when he started to shake his head again. “You’ve been so wonderful to me, helping me through all of my grief, and I’ve *never* been one who could just cry in front of people the way I can when I’m with you. Please... you can do the same with me. I’m yours, too. You’re safe with me, I swear it.”

He might have been able to resist, if it hadn’t been for the tears brimming in *her* eyes. Somehow that was what pushed him over at last. He pulled her to him and buried his face in her hair as the sobs he’d been holding in for two thousand years overwhelmed him at last. She wrapped her small limbs around him, murmuring soft words in his ear as she stroked his head and back. Once the tears began, there was no hope of containing them until they were spent. Somehow, it felt even more intimate than the sex, the secret of what had always been missing from every romantic relationship he’d ever tried to have before her. Even Šena had never seen him cry, not since he’d been a small child; he’d been too busy trying to show off how tough he was, how *mature* he was. But this... this... was beyond everything he’d known.

Finally they lay still together, wrung out and exhausted and so motionless that an intruder might have mistaken them for dead, still wrapped in each other’s arms. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed. Finally, after a while, he was capable of speaking again. An odd, guilty thought occurred to him. “I... didn’t mean to try to one-up you.”

The tender expression on Elilu’s face became confused for a moment, before a slow, gentle smile appeared. “That wasn’t what you were doing, love. You wanted to show me that you understood why I blamed myself... and why I wasn’t to blame after all. And you did.” She stroked his cheek and then leaned forward, kissing him. “But it’s true for you, too, you know. It wasn’t your fault, either.”

“I never got to see them,” he whispered.

“They knew you were coming. They knew you’d forgiven them. And I promise you, when everything went wrong, they were thankful that you *weren’t* there to share their fate.”

She was right. He knew it... but he still didn’t *feel* it, not yet. He’d felt so wise and – he hated to admit it – a little superior when he’d been reflecting on *her* grief and the struggles she would face with might-have-beens, as if none of them applied to himself. Now he knew better; he’d been using her pain to hold his own at bay. And he’d been trying to get inside her without letting her inside him. That was over now.

“But it *is* a shame that I can’t give you children,” she said after a moment, her expression wry. “I think they’d have liked it if you’d had children.”

Somehow, that surprised a laugh out of him. “We couldn’t have them, anyway. It’s forbidden. If immortals had children all the time, the galaxy would end up choking to death on us all.”

For a moment she looked surprised, but then she quirked her mouth and nodded at the logic of it. “I can see why that would be a problem. So all those old myths about the mortal and semi-immortal children of gods were just—”

“Oh, no, most of those are based on things that really happened,” he told her. His equilibrium was returning astonishingly fast. But then, it always did around her. She was his medicine. “It’s not like Ellil’s policies come about overnight, or even over a few years. It took thousands of years of mistakes before all of the rules came about. If you hadn’t become Anunnaki and could get pregnant, our baby wouldn’t be Anunnaki either, but... well, it can be really difficult for fathers to just stand aside and let their children – not to mention the children’s mothers – grow old and die. Most of the time, when someone’s deliberately made immortal, it’s because of something like that.”

“For love,” Elilu said with a gentle smile. “The way it happened with me.”

He kissed her, unable to think of a thing to say in response. She’d caught him.

“What if I *could* have babies now?” she asked after a moment.

“They’d be born Anunnaki,” he told her, stroking her cheek. “They’d grow up normally, but once they hit their physical peak, they’d never come down from it. It sounds wonderful, but it’s not. They’re the most dangerous. They have no idea what it’s like to fear injury or death. Pain doesn’t mean much to them; it’s a warning for something that can’t do them any lasting harm. They don’t understand what it is to be vulnerable or weak, and most of them have no compassion for those who are. *Some* do, but mostly, they’re a threat to the stability of the Myriad Worlds. Ellil was right to forbid them.”

“Well,” Elilu said after a moment, “at least it’s not something we have to worry about, then, is it? I suppose my infertility just became a blessing.”

But she didn’t sound convinced. At least, he thought, she no longer sounded ashamed.

“Zamin? Elizabeth?” David’s voice came over the intercom in the ceiling again. This time, he sounded hesitant.

“Yes?” Elilu asked, looking up.

“I’m terribly sorry to intrude, but... we’re ready to launch the message capsules. We just require access to a launch bay or airlock in the larger ship, and the units are too large for us to take and carry weapons at the same time.”

David was right, Zamin thought. No one should be going unarmed in the ship until the acid dragon had been destroyed. It was best if everyone moved as a team, anyway. “We’ll be out in a moment to help,” he replied, giving Elilu one more hug before climbing off of the bed. They’d dawdled enough.

It was time to get back in the world.

Notes: Sometimes characters just hijack you for their own purposes. I had no idea that this chapter was going to unfold the way it did when I started writing, or that Zamin would have so *much* to say about his past. Hopefully it worked, and the dark stuff that came out wasn’t too gruesome. There will be a lot more *action* in upcoming chapters, though, because it’s almost time for a bug hunt. XD

So this chapter had some odd bits of vocabulary. Aside from the linguistic puzzles Zamin played with, here are a few words that probably need definitions:

Ransotate is my silly made-up word for the medication Shaw takes. It’s actually loosely derived from the phonetic versions of the Japanese words for “ovary” and “shield.” Real prescription medicines actually undergo much more elaborate naming schemes for purposes of trademarking. Here I’m sticking with something simple, and which would probably never actually be used as a name by a pharmaceutical company for a real medicine. (And, in fact, when I googled it, *nothing* came up at all, yay!) I’ve swapped it in for the

original name I'd used, "Munasari," (which means "ovary" in modern Estonian) because it was pointed out to me that the word contains what many Greeks would consider an unacceptably vulgar epithet.

Dalbana essentially means "neutral ground" in Old Babylonian, and is used here for irony as the name of a world that became nothing of the kind.

Baza means "dwarf" in Old Babylonian, and is what Zamin and the people of the Myriad Worlds call members of *Homo floresiensis*, the "ancient hobbits" of the Indonesian island of Flores. I'm probably not going to come up with special names for Neanderthals or Denisovans, but just using Latin nomenclature for this species felt wrong, so instead I dug up a name, from the Mesopotamian Lexicon, that they might have realistically been called.

Neapolis = Naples. This was its old, Greek-influenced name, which simply meant "new city." In 64 AD, Nero was indeed performing at a public theater in Naples (he was very fond of giving musical performances, considering artistic fame a form of immortality) when an earthquake destroyed it. According to biographers Seutonius and Tacitus, he insisted on finishing his song before evacuating, and the building collapsed soon after it was finally emptied. That's exactly the sort of event that might remind a young wanna-be god that he was nothing of the kind, and make him go questing for an elixir of eternal youth to fix the problem.

Thank you again to everybody who's reading and leaving feedback! (And a special shout-out thank-you to Artemis for some much-needed corrections. :D) Your reactions are awesome to read! :D

Chapter 22

“You know, I really wasn’t expecting you to be able to walk right now.”

Shaw glanced over at Meredith, who was kneeling over one of the two message capsules as she made last-minute configurations. Since the discovery of her true nature, the beautiful woman seemed to have become *more* human rather than less, shedding the stiff Ice Queen persona that she’d displayed during the whole mission. Shaw wondered if that actually had more to do with the death of Weyland and Charlie, the two people around whom her human counterpart had felt incapable of letting her guard down, or the discovery that those defensive walls belonged to someone else and didn’t *have* to be hers. Either way, the unapproachable façade seemed to have melted almost completely away.

“It’s an advantage of becoming Anunnaki,” Shaw told her, keeping her voice low and conspiratorial. Zamin and David were in the airlock doorway, facing outward into the ship with weapons drawn, guarding them while they worked. But this was *girl talk*. “Almost instant healing. I didn’t even wake up *sore*.”

Meredith snickered. “That’s a definite plus. There... I think it’s ready. Just so you know, I’m sending some of the security logs back to my human.”

That was how she’d started referring to the Vickers back on Earth, an interesting phrasing that Shaw found she rather liked for its implications. “Which ones?”

“Well, I gave her a full explanation of what really happened. The logs I’m sending her will let her present LV-223 as uninhabitable and deadly to even the most careful visitors. I took out all of the evidence of Zamin’s civilization and *my* presence. So it looks like the ship touched down in a hostile environment and that, in less than a day, almost the whole search party had been infected by deadly indigenous microorganisms, and the infection had spread to the ship.”

Shaw winced. Part of her found it distressing that everybody back on Earth would think she’d been wrong about what existed here. But she knew it was necessary. The things Zamin had told her had made it clear that his people, although they’d apparently decided to spare humanity, probably still wouldn’t be inclined to welcome them back with open arms. It was best if no one else ever came looking for them, especially if the next searchers arrived demanding gifts and favors the way Peter Weyland had. “How will she explain the destruction of the *Prometheus*, then?”

“Janek and his crew crashed it into the side of a mountain when they realized the whole ship had been contaminated, and that they were all going to end up like Holloway and Fifield. I did a mash-up of some of the things you said to him, so it sounds like you were warning him that if the ship went back to Earth, everybody in the solar system could end up dead. So in about... two and a half years... she’ll get the message.” For a moment, a look of worry crossed her face.

“What is it?” Shaw asked.

“This disaster... it really might kill the company. *Prometheus* was the prototype for a whole new class of exploration vessel, and making it was crazy-expensive. We weren’t just here to survey a planet or find ancient supermen. This was a shakedown flight to see if this kind of ship could keep a crew healthy and happy and sane for long-term missions. Exploding after less than two days of active mission-time is probably *the* worst outcome imaginable.” She unplugged the thin white cable running between her arm and the capsule, retracting it back into her arm. “In fact, nobody even imagined it as a worst-case scenario. A lot of people’s careers were riding on that ship. The company’s stocks are going to nose-dive. If Yutani makes a move, there won’t be any way to stop them.”

“You mentioned them before,” Shaw observed. “Would a merger be so bad?”

Meredith shrugged as she replaced a panel on the side of the capsule. “Yutani wants the Weyland Corporation’s patents and properties. The people... that’s a different matter. They’ll probably try to hang onto the top talent, so the R&D teams should be okay. But a lot of people will get the axe if their jobs become redundant. That’s normal in any merger, but in a hostile takeover, preference will *definitely* be given to the dominant company’s workers. And even the people who get to keep their jobs may be expected to relocate, or deal with radical changes in their job descriptions and salary prospects. Even the most civilized mergers are nervewracking for a lot of people.”

And it was the people, Shaw realized, that Meredith was most worried about. It was strange how, just beneath that veneer of the intimidating and unapproachable supervisor, so much compassion actually lurked. She wondered how many people in the Weyland Corporation were afraid of the icy Miss Vickers and had no idea that she was actually their best ally. “You had a lot of plans for the company that could be ruined in the process, didn’t you?”

Meredith gave her a look of surprise. “Yes, I did. I mean... my human does. I worry that they’ll be derailed. So... I set things up so that she’ll have a head start. My messages to her will arrive a month before the rest of the data. The rest of the world will just think it was a private message capsule from her father. She’ll have a month to circle the wagons. Even that probably won’t be enough, though.”

Shaw glanced over the airlock, finally understanding why there were two capsules instead of one, aside from the small satellite that they were putting in permanent orbit. “So the capsule with my message will wait a month before it begins its journey, then?”

“No, but it’ll take a month longer to get back. I’ve got that all worked out. And when it arrives, she’ll already have her game plan in place. Everybody knows she opposed the mission and considered it too dangerous. The good thing is most of the people who’ll be blamed were either on the mission, or people she really wanted to kick off the board anyway. If she can just fight back the Yutani Group, she can even turn it into something *good*.” But Shaw could tell that Meredith was whistling in the dark. She believed it would be a disaster for her human counterpart, and for the company. Livelihoods would be wiped out and lives would be ruined.

All because I found those constellations... She made herself stop her thought there.

It was hard, at moments, to reconcile the devastating losses that she and everyone else had suffered on LV-223 – which, she now realized, were going to have repercussions back on Earth and Mars for many years to come – with just how *happy* she felt, and how excited she was over the journey ahead. So many good people had died. So many more would still suffer. But often, the only things she could think about were the questions that she would be able to ask, and get answers for, when they arrived at Apsu, and the remarkable discoveries – objective *and* personal – that she’d already made. And the love that she’d found. But how many others would learn that their loves had been *lost* when the news of the *Prometheus*’s destruction reached Earth in a few years’ time?

She hadn’t had a chance to get to know her fellow crewmates. Aside from Charlie, all of them had essentially been strangers to her. Part of her was grateful, now, that all of her usual assistants had stayed behind on Earth, although she wondered if the whole disaster might have been averted if they’d been here. They would have kept her and Charlie from getting over-enthusiastic when they’d explored the First Tower, and would have made sure everyone followed standard excavation protocols... especially David. But Weyland’s plans had always been at odds with the official mission objectives, and he’d surrounded her with strangers who neither knew nor trusted her. Where her assistants had always known that, even if what they found wasn’t what she’d imagined, she would still lead them to *something* amazing, the new crew had simply thought she was crazy. And she’d known even less about *them*. If they’d had families and loved ones back on Earth, she had no idea who those people were or how much pain they would suffer when the news arrived.

Meredith stood up. “All right. We’re ready.”

Shaw stood up too, taking a deep breath. She suddenly felt that her final message to the world she was leaving behind was... entirely inadequate. She hadn’t named even one of the people who had died, hadn’t said anything about the hows or the whys. Meredith’s story would take care of that, she supposed, but her own final words to humanity seemed so empty and impersonal, dwarfed by the magnitude of everything that had happened, and was still happening. Of her further journey, she’d told them nothing but that she was “still searching.” Few people would understand what that might have meant. At moments, Shaw wasn’t entirely sure what she’d meant by it, herself.

Last chance to add another message, she thought, before shaking her head and following Meredith out of the airlock. It would have to do. “Everything all right out here?” she asked as the doors closed behind her.

“No sign of our stowaway,” David replied. Zamin, meanwhile, touched controls on a panel to begin depressurizing the airlock. When it opened, there would already be vacuum inside so that the capsules wouldn’t simply be flung out by a sudden pressure change. Meredith had said that she needed to be able to control their trajectories a lot more precisely than that.

"It hasn't registered on any of the motion sensors," Zamin added. He'd switched to using Latin, which Meredith understood; Shaw had found that she could speak it fluently now, too. The Azalla's effect on her memory was another huge gift that she was deeply grateful for. "It may have gone into a coma."

"It may have *what*?" She laughed.

He nodded, the look on his face a mixture of seriousness and amusement; as ridiculous as it apparently sounded even to him, he'd meant every word. "It's what they do. Nobody's ever figured out why, but nobody's ever survived trying to study their life cycle. Their eggs will stay viable for millennia, and both stage creatures can go into something not all that unlike suspended animation which can last for centuries until something wakes them up. The stage one dragons that attacked Jackson and Ford had been on my ship as long as I had. Our stowaway probably had been, too. The crash would have woken them up."

They walked back to the hangar as he talked, all of them with weapons at the ready. Meredith grimaced. "That's one hell of a survival mechanism. They can just wait things out if they run out of food."

"Exactly. We've found dormant nests full of them on dozens of worlds. Most of the time, finding a nest results in waking it up." Zamin frowned as if that thought hurt, somehow. "We can't go near an inhabited world with it still on board. Any of us can probably survive going head-to-head with it, but it can kill most people. Even one can wipe out a platoon easily. And when there's only one, if it has a large enough food source, it can reproduce on its own through... I don't think there's a word in Latin for it."

"Parthenogenesis?" Shaw suggested, feeling a little ill. She could see him parsing out the etymology. Then he nodded. She got the feeling that he was often amused by the euphemistic constructions that filled the English language. But the meaning wasn't amusing at all. She shuddered. "This thing gets more and more charming, doesn't it?"

"If I wished to engineer a deadly weapon," David observed as they approached the lifeboat, "and I didn't wish to completely destroy an entire environment the way Zal does... I think I would build a creature like your acid dragon."

Absolute silence met his words. The idea seemed to almost float in the air, as vile as the creature itself. Another shudder jiggered its way up Shaw's spine.

"I sincerely hope nobody back on Earth ever gets that idea," Meredith finally said, her voice hushed.

"Would Weyland Corporation ever—" Shaw began.

"Not while *I'm* in charge," she snapped. "Sorry. I just... even my father wouldn't have stooped that low. It would have gone against his whole philanthropic self-image. But I know of plenty of people who would."

Zamin, though, shook his head. "There's no controlling them. If they *were* engineered, it was tens of thousands of years ago, and they probably killed their makers soon after. As far as they're concerned, other living organisms are there to be killed. You saw Ereshkigal Šagtum. They *had* wiped out the whole environment, even down to the plant life."

"Point taken," David said, opening up the secondary airlock. "Although we did find some arthropods in the First Tower."

"I need to watch those feeds again," Zamin said. He was the last one in the lock, scanning the larger hangar one final time before closing the door.

"Why?" He'd said that before, but Shaw couldn't figure out what – aside from, essentially, *everything* – bothered him so much. "What don't you understand?"

They made their way up to the main level, David sealing the inner door behind them.

"First," Zamin told them as they re-entered the living quarters, "how those arthropods were still alive if the rest of the ecosystem had been wiped out. There's no sign of a food chain for them to have been part of. I'm really hoping they didn't survive the way I think they might have, because if they did, other things might have, too."

Azalla. Shaw felt another light shudder pass through her. It would have been uncalibrated Azalla, in which case it would have made anything that ingested it immortal. Including acid dragons or the things that had killed Milburn. "I really hope you're wrong. Maybe it was just a really short food chain?"

"We can hope," Zamin replied, but she could hear the pessimism in his voice. "The 'nukes' should have fixed it, though. Second, how Zal could form on top of the urns in the Tribunal Room. You opened one on your ship, David. You know it was sealed tightly and that the embryos inside were also contained in sealed vials."

"That's true. I had to break a vial open to get anything out," David agreed.

"You broke it open *on the ship*?" Meredith demanded. She'd taken a seat in front of the console. Shaw realized that she'd never actually been apprised of David's experiment. She'd probably skipped viewing the logs of it when she was concocting the narrative to send back to Earth, too, since none of it would fit the story she'd created. "Were you *insane*?"

"I was under orders," David reminded her. "But Zamin has a point. When we entered the room, the urns were clean. I noticed condensation forming on them almost immediately, and then a viscous black substance began forming on the tops of many of the vessels. It happened throughout the room, but a few of the urns weren't affected. I took one of those."

"The murals on the walls and ceilings seemed to be decaying, too," Shaw said. "I thought maybe we'd triggered all of the changes by opening the room and changing the atmosphere."

"Possibly," Zamin said. He walked over to stand behind Meredith, watching her work. "But here's the third thing I want to know. What happened to the other bodies?"

"What other bodies?" Shaw tried to recall if there had been other remains in the room, but if there had been, she hadn't seen them. Had she just been too excited about the head to notice?

"Exactly." Zamin had the same intense expression on his face that he'd worn while solving the DNA puzzle. "You saw the security hologram. Alôar was running with a group. They ran into the Tribunal Room, and he collapsed at the threshold and got decapitated when the door came down. That was the *only* door, and it stayed sealed for the next two thousand years. So what happened to the rest of the soldiers who went in?"

"Locked room mysteries," Meredith purred, pressing different controls on the console. "I always liked those. Okay, here we go. I'm deploying the satellite first. Once I'm sure it's settled into orbit, I'll send my message capsule and then set up yours. Damn. I should have added a postscript to mine."

"About what?" Shaw asked. From what she'd seen, Meredith had been astonishingly thorough, concocting a plausible narrative out of bits of security footage to keep everyone back home from knowing what had really happened. It was hard to imagine that she'd left anything out.

"About me. Having all this extra... *room* in my head... all this extra information and expertise..." Meredith looked up at Shaw and smiled. "It's amazing. I... I thought I hated being an android, but I don't. I love it. I love the *clarity*. My human needs to be warned about that. Someone's going to figure out what my father tried to do, and what I *did*, and next thing you know, people will be having neural maps made so they can live forever in android bodies. She can't let that happen."

Zamin nodded. "Synthetic Anunnaki. Your world probably wouldn't be able to cope with them any better than Ersetu of old did with the biological kind."

"She'll know," Shaw said, earning herself confused looks from the others. "She'll know as soon as she gets the message you did send her. She'll read it in your face and hear it in your words, and she'll know that you like what you are. That'll be all the warning she'll need."

"Could be you're right," Meredith said after a beat. "I hope so. Maybe she can make out like the neural maps are a failure. Or get the whiz kids in the robotics department to build in some failsafes so that the maps won't work in android brains. Hopefully she'll have enough time before the disaster goes public."

A month, Shaw thought to herself, probably wouldn't cut it. It was a shame that they didn't have anything that could get back to Earth faster, other than the Juggernaut itself. Not that she wanted to go anywhere near the Solar system with Zal and Azalla on board, much less an acid dragon. Apsu was the only safe destination.

"And... the satellite is locked in orbit." Meredith wore a look of satisfaction. "Anything that approaches the planet for the next hundred years or so will be warned away from landing. After that, they're on their own, but the Zal should be out of the ecosystem at that point anyway. Deploying my capsule..."

"Do you need us to be quiet while you work?" Shaw asked, suddenly aware that they'd been gabbing the whole time.

"I would have if I'd still been human," Meredith laughed. "That's what made me think about the postscript. I'm fine, though. I have concentration to spare."

Maybe, Shaw thought, it was the reason that she'd relaxed so much. The extremely intelligent were often also highly temperamental; so much of their lives went on inside their heads that intrusions from the world outside were frequently unwelcome. On display and under surveillance almost all the time, as any daughter of someone as powerful as Peter Weyland would have been, Meredith would probably have felt *twice* as intruded upon and unable to display most of how she really felt about it. Maybe all of that extra room in her new head, along with the awareness that she was no longer on-stage, had balanced things out.

David, meanwhile, was examining the device that Zamin had brought back with him from the nest. “If I’m not mistaken, this is some kind of computer system, isn’t it?”

Zamin glanced over with a worried frown. “It is, if it still works after getting hit by the acid. I wasn’t careful enough at the end.”

“The important thing is that *you* got back intact,” David replied as he began to delicately unwrap the outer packing layers. “We still have almost ten years before my parole ends and a new emergency must be declared, after all. Shall we find out if it’s functional?”

Zamin nodded and walked over to David, crouching down next to him. They talked quietly as they unwrapped the device.

“Do you think my message is enough?” Shaw asked Meredith. It still bothered her that she hadn’t said anything about how people had died, or who they were. She hadn’t even named Charlie, and everybody back on Earth would surely have expected her to mention him.

“I think it was perfect.” Meredith touched a few more buttons and glanced up at her. “You looked and sounded completely shell-shocked. It’ll make everything my human says much more believable.”

“How am I supposed to have survived?” She sat down on the couch, watching as Meredith used controls to gently manipulate the first capsule out of the airlock and position it for its journey.

“I swapped footage around so that it looks like you kept your helmet on the whole time everybody was in the Tower, which looks like a cave now. It’ll look like Charlie took his helmet off and got sick within an hour. You dragged him back and brought him on board the ship, and got so hysterical over his condition that you had to be sedated and separated from him. They locked you in the lifeboat. You’d ordered full quarantine failsafes, but they failed and everybody involved in treating Charlie got infected. Since you weren’t there, you were spared. Fifield and Milburn had stayed behind in the ‘caves,’ and encountered something that infected one of them and killed the other. By morning, things had gone *completely* pear-shaped. You and Janek argued about it and you convinced him that it wasn’t safe to go back to Earth. He jettisoned the lifeboat with you in it, since you weren’t infected, switched on the ion drive, and flew straight into the side of a mountain to keep anyone from salvaging something that could infect people back home. Supposedly most of this happened during a huge sandstorm, which will explain all of the funny gaps and glitches in the recordings.”

“You did all of that overnight?” Shaw couldn’t keep the awe out of her voice. That sounded like several days’ work to her, at the very *least*.

“Me and my shiny new electronic superbrain.” Meredith grinned and tapped one of her temples. “I could edit multiple feeds at the same time. What?”

Shaw realized that she’d been shaking her head and grinning. “We were really worried about you, at first. David said that other cases like yours, when someone found out they were really an android and not human... had gone really badly. Violently.”

Meredith nodded. “Oh, yeah. I know about those cases, too. And I was really ripped up at first, but... you know what happened to all of them? They’d spent their whole time being treated like real people, and then suddenly it stopped and they were told it was all a test, and now it was time for them to go back to being glorified *toasters*. They were told that they were no longer people.”

And Meredith hadn’t been told that. It made sense. She’d found herself surrounded by people who still treated her, and thought of her, as one of them. Shaw really hoped that wouldn’t change when they reached Apsu.

“Plus it helped that David’s code phrase brought back a lot of the reasons behind making a duplicate,” she added after a moment, touching some more controls. “There... nice and lined up. Off we go. Now we just have yours to get ready. It’s going to leave now, but I’m programming in different acceleration and deceleration curves. That’ll give mine a head start. You know, Janek almost caught me.”

“Really?” Shaw wondered how he’d managed that. Not that she was completely surprised; there had been a lot more to the soft-spoken pilot than had met the eye. She wished she could have spent more time getting to know him, and everyone else, before things had gone so wrong. “He suspected you weren’t human?”

“Yeah, well, he and I – or he and my human anyway – went way back. I first met him when I was seventeen, you know.” Her grin was sly and a little wicked.

“*Really?*” Shaw lowered her voice to a whisper and leaned in. “How? Sorry, it’s just... he didn’t seem like someone your father would have approved of you knowing.”

“You’ve got *that* right.” Meredith’s hands continued to move expertly over the console as she talked. “My father once thought the world of him, though. Back then he was this *hot-shit* test pilot, one of the best. He and your boyfriend would have had fun comparing notes over some beers, I’ll bet. I miss him.” For a moment, her expression was haunted by sadness. “So. Seventeen years ago – well, almost twenty now, but seventeen for all of *us* – Weyland Corporation did its first test run of the *Hermes*, and hired this *totally* cocky rocket-jockey named Cyrus Janek to pilot it.”

“I remember that,” Shaw said, suddenly excited. She’d just moved in with her grandmother, and everyone had been buzzing about the *Hermes* flight and the amazing possibilities it had opened. “That was a huge success for your company.”

Meredith’s mouth quirked. “It was... and it wasn’t. My father had a tendency to set really high, unrealistic goals, and then get mad at everybody else when reality disappointed him. It wasn’t as bad back then, but as far as he was concerned, *Hermes* was a huge failure.”

“Why? It was *brilliant*. It went something like four times the speed of light.”

“It went almost *exactly* four times the speed of light, yeah. But my father had been hoping for it to go about six or even seven times. He was convinced it would, and so he got it into his head that it was Janek’s fault that it hadn’t. Everybody else was jumping up and down and screaming, hugging each other, the second it appeared on the long-range sensors and started coasting in, but as far as he was concerned, it was more than two hours late and that made it a failure.” Meredith grimaced. “Not that he did anything overt about it. He just made sure that Janek’s career crashed. But some of that might have also had to do with me.”

“Wait... you and Janek? When you were seventeen?” Everything Shaw had thought she’d known about Meredith Vickers needed revising.

She was rewarded with a grin and a suggestive wiggle of eyebrows. “And oh, was he ever *something*. He was only two years older than I was, anyway. A serious prodigy until my father finished dragging him through the mud. I was interning with Research and Development that year, and getting ready to go off to Harvard, so I’d sweet-talked my way into being part of the group that got to wait on the docking station while *Hermes* made its run. We were out just past the orbit of Jupiter, half a billion miles from Earth, and all of the outer gas giants were out of the way, so he was going to have a nice clean run out to the edge and back. I had a *huge* crush on him. I thought I’d managed to keep that a secret, but my father probably knew the whole time.”

Her hands flew across the controls as Shaw watched. On the small screen, she could see the second capsule aligning itself with various constellations. The computers had been dead-on in predicting what the skies would look like from LV-223, she realized. She could even spot the star clusters that led back to Earth, although Sol itself was far too distant to be seen.

“So Janek had to fly *Hermes* out from the station to the edge of the heliosheath, and then reverse course and come back to us. That’d be about a twenty-six-hour round-trip for a photon, and my father had his heart set on *Hermes* doing it in four hours. The four-hour mark came and went. Nobody else noticed, but I could tell that he was getting angrier and angrier as time went on. He could hide it from almost everybody, but not me. The five hour mark came and went, and then the six hour mark, and then finally, half an hour after that, *Hermes* reappeared on the scanners as it reentered normal space and slowed down. Everybody started jumping up and down, hugging each other and screaming... and my father was just... *standing* there, watching the ship approach with this stony look on his face. He didn’t care that we’d made history. We hadn’t made *enough* history.” She sighed, and then got a funny look on her face as if wondering why she’d done that. She didn’t *have* to breathe, after all, although she was capable of doing so.

“So he blamed Janek for the delay?” Shaw found herself wondering what might have happened to her and Charlie, if they’d survived the mission and returned to Earth without finding Weyland his magical elixir of eternal life. Would they have been buried, too?

“Yeah. It turned out that the engines just weren’t up to it yet. Five years later, he’d get it up to eight times the speed of light on the *Atalanta*. *Prometheus* did roughly fourteen times light speed to get us here. But he’d already buried Janek, and he doesn’t ever apologize for being wrong. Didn’t, I mean. I could see what was coming, that day. God, I felt so bad for Cyrus. So that night, after everybody was done celebrating... I decided I’d go find him.” Her expression was wistful, composed partly of fond remembrance but largely of regret. “I told myself that I just wanted to warn him about what my father could be like, but that wasn’t why I went looking for him. Or at least, not *only* why. And he knew it, too. He told me that if I wanted to get laid,

all I had to do was ask. Well, that was just *cheeky*.” She grinned, the regret gone. “So I asked him why I’d have flown half a billion miles from every man on Earth if that was what I wanted.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He didn’t *say* anything.” Meredith’s expression was wicked again. “But he did answer the question. That... became a kind of code between us. My father buried him and ruined his self-confidence for a *long* time, but I’d find out where he was working and I’d put in a good word for him here and there when I could, and sometimes we’d meet up again. Not when I was dating Charlie, though... I was serious about that. But after it all went to Hell, I spent a *month* hiding out in the asteroid belt on Cyrus’s ore-hauler. That was one of the nicest months of my life. It didn’t matter where we were, though. As far as we were concerned, we were *always* half a billion miles from Earth. We could be out in the belt, or on Mars, or the Moon, or in New York City, and we were still half a billion miles from every other man on Earth, and he was the only one for me.”

And, for a moment, Shaw could see the starry-eyed teenager that Meredith Vickers had once been, before her expression turned rueful.

“Not that we had a chance of making it work, with my father breathing down my neck all the time. I had to pretend I was completely *frigid* to keep him from trying to arrange some ‘corporate merger’ of a wedding for me. I don’t know why he thought *Charlie* was worthy.” Meredith shook her head in obvious exasperation.

“Probably because Charlie brought him priceless gifts.” Talking about her late husband’s perfidy still hurt, she realized. She wondered how long it would take her to forgive him, and put his crimes in the past. “So... how did Janek almost catch you out?”

“I’m not sure. I *think*... I played out the scene wrong with him. I mean, I did it the way we always did it, same banter, same flirting, but...” Meredith scrunched her face up in a grimace. “I’m not sure I was *feeling* it. Like David said, androids aren’t programmed to want. I remember everything about how Cyrus could make me feel, and he really hadn’t lost his touch or anything, but... I think he realized that I just wasn’t *horny* for him, the way I always had been in the past. He actually *asked* me if I was a robot. I guess I flunked the sexual Turing test.”

That made Shaw laugh. “Wait, did he ask you after the two of you had *sex*?”

“No, before.” Meredith paused, and then grinned. “Maybe I didn’t flunk my retest, huh?”

“Probably not.” Synthetic or not, Meredith was very human. A funny thought struck Shaw. “Did he know about Charlie?” To the best of her recollections, Janek hadn’t been anything but perfectly courteous to her husband, but some of the kindnesses he’d shown *her* had been startling.

“Yeah, he did. He probably knew all of the sordid little soap operas we brought on board. I hired him as a fuck-you to my father, and as a backup measure in case David got taken over and couldn’t be repaired. I knew I could count on him to back me if I had to do something drastic.” She winced. “I still can’t believe just how drastic *he* was willing to get.”

“He saved millions of lives,” Shaw whispered.

“My human will make sure he gets a hero’s honors,” Meredith said after a minute, brushing at her eyes. Shaw wondered just how her internal systems decided when it was time to cry. They’d definitely picked an appropriate moment. How thoroughly did the Model 8s mimic the physical symptoms of emotion? “So, uh... crazy question for you.”

“I like crazy questions.” Once, she thought, she’d been the queen of them. “Shoot.”

“What should I call *you*? I mean, when you were calling me Vickers, calling you Shaw was just fine but... that seems a little overly-formal.”

The question took her by surprise. Shaw *was* overly formal. She’d gotten so accustomed to being called by her family name in the last decade – by colleagues and students, in particular – that it had almost become the name she used for herself in her own head. Dr. Shaw. Professor Shaw. Dammit, Shaw, I need the final grades for your class tonight. Perhaps Shaw would like to share her latest theory with the class...

From the age of eleven, when she’d entered Secondary School, she’d just been “Shaw” to most of her classmates. There had been three other Elizabeths in her year, after all. Only her grandmother had called her Elizabeth, and their relationship had been difficult. And Ellie... that had been her parents’ name for her when she was little, and Charlie’s name for her all through her marriage, and she was tired of it. Tired of the way it always seemed to make her less than the person who called her by it. Tired of how it made her into a child.

Really, the choice was obvious. She didn’t even know why it had puzzled her at all. “Elilu. Please, call me Elilu.”

There was sudden, absolute silence from the other part of the room.

“Shall I call you that as well?” David asked.

She looked over. Both he and Zamin were looking at her. Zamin’s eyes were full of intense emotion. She had a feeling that, if she’d been anywhere within reach, he’d have pulled her into a hug already. “Yes, please, David. I’d like that very much.”

“That’s settled then,” Meredith finally said. “Okay, this baby is ready to take off. Time to say a last goodbye to the message capsule.”

That was an odd thing to say, she thought, until she realized what else Meredith meant by it. It was time to say goodbye to their old home, to the worlds they’d wandered in their remembered youths and would never see again. And, she suddenly thought, it was time to say goodbye to Dr. Elizabeth Shaw. That person was no more; her last words were about to fly home. After that, she would never be seen or heard from again.

“Goodbye,” she whispered. For a moment, part of her ached. Her search for humanity’s origins – for a mystical explanation – had taken her far away from the place of its miraculous birth. In her quest to find Eden, she’d blindly walked out of its gates and locked them behind her forever.

The capsule’s tiny engine flared to life, and then it was gone from the screen. Dr. Elizabeth Shaw’s quest was over. But the gates to the Myriad Worlds stood open, and there were endless discoveries ahead.

Elilu turned around and went to collect the hug Zamin was keeping for her.

Notes: Well, that took a bit longer than I had planned! I had some family crises come up this week that derailed things a little. But this is kind of an important chapter because it signals a shift in Shaw’s – or, as she will now be thinking of herself, Elilu’s – identity and sense of self. Plus I got to fix a few things that had been bugging me and make a few more connections to the *Alien* universe. :D

Yutani Group: Well, by the time the *Nostramo* finds the derelict, they’re run by a company called Weyland-Yutani. So yeah, I’m setting up for how/why that merger occurs. Namely, even with plenty of forewarning, the Meredith Vickers back on Earth isn’t going to be able to protect the company’s stocks from taking a major hit over the destruction of the *Prometheus*. So in essence, this disaster creates the corporation that will sacrifice the *Nostramo*’s crew. And by the time that happens, human-Meredith will clearly *not* be in charge, because it’s a course of action she would never have agreed to.

Parthenogenesis! Oh man. This is how I’m going to explain the way that, in the Director’s Cut of *Alien*, the lone alien Kane brought on board had cocooned Dallas and had an embryo growing inside *him*. (One of the creepiest. scenes. ever.) The idea is that any *one* alien can get a nest going, if necessary, although the species flourishes better when you have multiples for genetic diversity. Parthenogenesis is a dead-end route for genetic diversity, but useful for species that are trying to survive after being almost wiped out. Some of the parthenogenetic creatures on Earth are amazing and hilarious.

Zamin’s three mysteries: Don’t worry, I do have solutions for those. ;) Stay tuned.

So yeah, you probably noticed the whole “**half a billion miles from Earth**” thing, didn’t you? As the eternally awesome Neil de Grasse Tyson pointed out (and if you don’t know who he is, seriously look him up and bask in his amazingness because he is spectacular in every way), if you go half a billion miles from Earth, you’re just past the orbit of Jupiter, definitely *not* across the galaxy. So I was having a bit of fun coming up with a way that Vickers could say that and mean something other than “hi, I don’t understand astronomy!” The result got pretty fun, because along the way I did a bunch of calculations to figure out how long it would take for a test ship going a few times the speed of light to travel from that position to the heliosheath and back. (And yes, the heliosheath is a real thing). I’m probably fudging the numbers a little, but here’s how it works:

Jupiter is approximately 5.2 Astronomical Units (AU) from the Sun (with some variations). The heliosheath begins approximately 100 AU out from the sun. So this is about 94.8 AU of travel. Each AU is equivalent to

8.317 light minutes. When you multiply that, you get a trip, at light speed, that takes approximately 13 hours, with a little bit of fudging either way because the solar system is a big ball of wibbly-wobbly *stuff*. (Yes, I went there.) Now, the trip from Earth to LV-223 took slightly over 2 ½ years, to cross approximately 35 light years, meaning that it had to travel roughly 14 times faster than the speed of light. But this trip happened about 17 years before the *Prometheus* set out, so obviously FTL drives wouldn't have reached that power yet. Thus, I decided that this drive wouldn't be 14 times faster than light, but only about four times, meaning that the round-trip time would be about 6 ½ hours. There! Quick-and-dirty space math.

And it's actually a good idea to start a trip like that outside of Jupiter's orbit. Never mess with Jupiter. Just ask Shoemaker-Levy 9.

Atalanta: In Greek mythology, she was a powerful and much-pursued woman who could outrun virtually any man. When she tried to avoid getting married by staging a foot-race, in which the winner could wed her unless she outran him, Hippomenes turned to the goddess Aphrodite for help. She gave him three golden apples to toss as he ran, so that Atalanta would be distracted by picking them up. It was a successful strategy and he won the race, but one of the unspoken points of the whole myth was that without those apples, she would have been unbeatable. So that seemed like a nice name to give a ship that was about to set a new speed record.

Turing Tests are tests given to artificial intelligence systems to determine how well they mimic human thought. They're not perfect, and there are a lot of connected elements that have come under criticism, but they are still held up as standards in the search for a computer brain that can mimic the human brain.

And that's plenty of notes, isn't it?

Thank you again to everybody who has been reading and leaving such wonderful and fun-to-read feedback! You are all so incredibly awesome! Happy Holidays, and Happy Not-The-End-Of-The-World-After-All. :D

Chapter 23

“So, does it live?”

Zamin looked up from the mainframe to find Meredith Vickers standing next to him. He and David had finished unwrapping the unit and, together, had carefully opened it up to inspect the interior. The acid had eaten through the thick casing and had reached some of the internal components, but it looked as if the most critical systems had been out of its reach. “We’ll know soon. I’m going to activate its power supply. Once it’s up, it’ll run self-diagnostics. Then I’ll need you to interface with it and see if it’s functional.”

She quirked an eyebrow at him, crouching down to get a better look at the unit. “And how do I do that?”

“How do you interface with your own equipment?” He thought he’d seen a white cord running between her arm and one of the capsules while she was working in the airlock. A physical connection would be ideal, if possible.

Meredith rolled up her sleeve and drew the cord out of her forearm. “Through this. It needs a special socket, though. Standard for most equipment manufactured back in the Solar system, but I doubt *your* corner store carried it.”

He liked her. Although her words often sounded mocking, he could hear the good nature that lay behind them. And he could tell that she was fascinated by his technology, even if she pretended not to be. It was interesting just how many layers of personality were in there. If they were faithful to their source, Earth might just be in good hands. “You’d be surprised. When you have to make equipment that can talk to the technologies of ten thousand different planets, you go for maximum compatibility. You’ll plug in there.”

He touched a small, soft panel on one of the mainframe’s sides. Fortunately, it had been on the opposite end from the acid damage, along with most of the critical interfaces. The panel’s surface was pale and had a similar texture to the skin of a biosupport suit, and for much the same reason. The interactive substance was engineered to conform and reconfigure itself to a variety of real and speculated configurations. The only thing that might have posed a challenge would have been if Meredith’s interface relied on electromagnetic transmissions instead of a hard line. The suits that the humans had worn had apparently done so, and he’d worried that the androids might have followed the same communication protocols. Establishing a connection that way would have been much more painstaking and risky.

“Now, or should I wait?” Meredith tilted her head and studied the unit.

“You’ll want to wait until I’ve made sure the thing will run. A faulty connection could hurt you.” Zamin had watched Lilis boot up the old unit once. Fortunately, once was all he needed in order to recall the steps. He pressed the buttons in sequence, feeling relief as small arcs of green light formed between different components and spread outward. One small area, closest to the acid damage, produced erratic streams of red light instead. He watched, nervous, as the arcs of light nearest that area rearranged themselves. After a moment, the configuration of light had turned orange, which slowly moved toward yellow as different possible connections were established.

“Is it rewiring itself?” David asked, leaning closer.

“Something like that. It’s finding the best connections for maximum functionality.” A few of the arcs of light winked out altogether, as the yellow light became purer and started edging toward green. “Once it’s fully green, it will have established a stable system configuration.”

“It’s a bit like physical therapy,” Elilu said. Her small hand rested on his shoulder as she watched from behind him. “I did volunteer work at a hospital when I was a teenager. One of the patients with nerve damage – her name was Lydia – had to relearn how to walk. She could because her brain found new neural pathways it could use to send its signals through, to replace the ones she’d lost. The hospital even had a device that could help people retrain their nervous systems.”

“We made that, you know,” Meredith told her with a grin. “My father got his start in prosthetics and medical technologies. It’s one of the things I’ve always been genuinely proud of. But I think you’re right.” She glanced over at Zamin. “She *is* right, isn’t she?”

He grinned and nodded. As disorienting as it still was to find himself surrounded by Earth people who looked at his devices and saw technology rather than magic, he *liked* how easily they understood what he was doing. A strict rule, even before Ersetu – Earth – had been interdicted, had been that no visitor to the world

could bring any technology with them that could be reverse-engineered. Humans always tried, even when they didn't understand what the critical components were. A few centuries earlier they'd caught Etruscans mimicking circuitry designs on their jewelry. One or two pieces might even have been functional, if their makers had understood the materials they were working with just a little better.

"It's almost green now," David observed. "I think in another minute, it will have a working neural network. That is what we're talking about, is it not? Neurons and synapses. When the synapses are green, we'll be ready?"

"Yes. How good is your color differentiation? The green all looks the same to me now." He suspected that the android optics had much superior vision.

"It's still not quite there... now it is. All one shade of green." David smiled and looked up at Meredith. "I think you can plug in now, if you would like."

Zamin nodded when Meredith glanced at him for confirmation. The deep breath she took was something he knew had to be purely symbolic. It fascinated him just how thoroughly the androids had been designed to mimic biology.

"Moment of truth," Meredith said. She sat down in front of the panel he'd indicated, crossing her legs and balancing herself. "Could one of you do the honors? Since I don't know what's going to happen when I plug in, I'd rather not be situated so I'd fall over."

"I won't let you fall." David sat down next to her. He took the plug from her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Ready?"

Side by side like that, they looked like they could have been brother and sister. Peter Weyland had called David the closest thing to a son he would ever have, Zamin recalled. Had his intention, all along, been the creation of a replica of *Meredith*, re-envisioned as both male and more obedient? Had he even realized that that was what he was really doing? It was a lot more complicated than that, though, he silently admitted. David had his own ideas about his identity in spite of all of Weyland's engineering. Which, Zamin thought, was what made him a person rather than just a machine, and made the hazards of recovering the mainframe worth it.

"Almost," Meredith said. She seemed to lean into David's touch a little. "Is there anything I should know going in, Zamin? Things to expect?"

He nodded. "When you interface, the system will start sending you data. Some of it will be sensory and some of it will be mathematical. When you receive the data, send it back exactly as you perceive it. That will tell the system what you are and are not configured to process. Go for precision over speed when you send back the data. It's going to test how quickly and accurately you handle information, and how many streams you can process at once. Keep some of your mind free to communicate with us, too. If there are any problems, we want to be able to know about it."

"Good plan... okay. I think I'm ready." She took another simulated deep breath and closed her eyes. "Time to play ping-pong. Plug me in, please, David."

"Here we go." David inserted the plug into the soft surface, which seemed to swallow the tip.

For a moment, nothing seemed to happen. The arcs of light inside the mainframe continued their dances uninterrupted, while Meredith sat quietly beside it. She looked like a mystic in meditation. Then she spoke. "Wooooooooow."

"Are you all right, Meredith?" David asked. Elilu sat down on her other side, her expression concerned.

"I'm... just dandy," Meredith said after another pause. She didn't open her eyes, but her face had smoothed into a look of delight. "I haven't seen stuff like this since my human experimented with acid at Harvard."

Zamin stared at her. Since her human had done *what*?

"Does it make sense?" Elilu asked. "Or does it just seem hallucinatory?"

She must have meant something other than actual *acid*, he realized. A hallucinogen named after a corrosive substance? English was the most confusing language he'd ever encountered. So many of its words and phrases, when translated back into Latin or Sanskrit, became bizarrely comical. Enki was going to fall in love with the language when he heard it.

"It makes sense. So far I've been tested on shapes and colors, sounds and waveforms, spatial relations, number bases, and *phonemes*. And I think this thing is just getting *started*. So, uh... feel free to move about

the cabin.” Meredith smirked, still not opening her eyes, and Elilu snickered next to her. Zamin stared at them, baffled, noting that David seemed amused as well. “I’ll let you know if anything gets weird.”

“We’ll stay close,” David told her. When he and Elilu rose, Zamin did as well.

“I don’t... ‘get it,’” he said, hoping that the joke, whatever it had been, would be translatable.

It took David and Elilu a while to explain it, but finally he understood and found himself itching to see the aircraft and spacecraft that the humans of Earth had developed. No, not merely see them, but *fly* them. Twenty years out of the cockpit hadn’t really changed him so much; for all of the other titles and certifications he’d gathered, deep in his heart he was still a space jockey and would be forever.

He’d started grinning; in response, both Elilu’s and David’s smiles had widened. Meredith, meanwhile, had gone back to resembling an entranced mystic. A slight quirk to one corner of her mouth, though, hinted that she was still paying attention to the conversation and was probably enjoying it.

“Did you want to review some of those security feeds again, while we wait?” Elilu asked. She had walked over to the food and drink dispensers and was pressing buttons as she asked.

“I’d like that.” In fact, he’d been about to ask if he could. “There’s a lot about your exploration of the Tower that doesn’t make sense.”

“The events that took place in the Tribunal Room, you mean?” David asked as he walked over to the console.

Zamin nodded. He had to admit that not understanding irked him, especially now that he’d been kicked so far up in rank. It was his *responsibility* to comprehend what had happened in that room, and he *couldn’t*. The sequence of events that had been caught on the feeds defied all logic. “I’m almost certain that the black fluid in the room altered the arthropods you mentioned. I saw some of them on the ground in one of the feeds when... I think it was Ford... crouched down, before the liquid started flowing. But I don’t know *how* it changed them that way. I’ve never seen any variant or derivative of Zal have that effect, before.”

“Not to mention,” David agreed as he pressed buttons, “its effect on Fifield was radically different from the effects that Dr. Holloway experienced.”

“Fifield?” Zamin frowned. He’d seen the man struck by acid in one of the feeds, and had seen him fall into a pool of the black liquid, but the feed had seemed to end there with his apparent death. “I thought he died in the Tower.”

“No, he returned to the ship later, and greatly changed. You didn’t see that?” David raised an eyebrow at him.

Zamin shook his head. “I had to stop watching after I saw Elilu’s emergency surgery.” He shuddered a little and glanced her way. She was standing by the dispensers, unnaturally still. If thinking about what he’d seen bothered him this much, how must she feel when reminded of it? He winced. “I was going to continue watching after I took a break, but that’s when things began to get complicated.”

He didn’t want to think about *that*, either.

“Ah yes,” David said. “I brought you the results of my diagnostics, and you went in quest of the device that may repair me.”

The man, Zamin thought, was a master of tact when Weyland was held at bay.

“In that case, you just missed Fifield’s return,” David continued. “It’s worth seeing. I imagine you never saw this either, Elilu?”

Zamin had to admit that it gave him a warm feeling to hear David and Meredith calling her by that name. She looked over as she drew trays out of the dispensers, smiling in response and caressing him with her eyes for a moment before turning her attention back to David. “No, I never did. When did you?”

“Last night. Meredith and I reviewed most of the recordings so that she could pick out the best feeds for her cover story. I was busy reviving Mr. Weyland when this incident occurred, so I didn’t become aware of it until later. At the time, I simply considered it further confirmation that the contents of the Tower were probably toxic biological weapons rather than my owner’s hoped-for elixir. I didn’t think to examine anything more deeply until you mentioned your ‘locked-room mysteries’ yesterday, Zamin. Now I believe you’re right.” His hands moved fluidly over the panels as he spoke, shuffling more than a dozen smaller feeds onto the large wall screen.

Elilu walked over with a large tray, which she set on the console’s horizontal surface. In addition to plates for both of them, Zamin noticed that she’d brought over two bowls of the odd gruel that the androids consumed, one for David and one for Meredith when she disconnected from the mainframe. He and David

thanked her in English as they took their food, and then they turned their attention on the wall screen as the images came to life.

Four of the images were completely steady, Zamin noted, probably originating from security cameras mounted in the ship's hangar. Now that he'd begun to develop a fascination with Earth technology, he wanted to find schematics of the entire ship and see just how its different levels fit together and how they functioned. Seven additional feeds wobbled a little, the vital signs they displayed in their corners confirming that they came from suit cameras. It appeared that several members of the crew were preparing the vehicles for another excursion. Why in Irkalla would they want to go *back* after everything that had already happened?

A twelfth feed appeared, cutting in and out – Fifield's camera, suddenly active again. The vital signs embedded in it were erratic, jagged and anomalous compared to the humans' readings.

"Bridge, uh, to hangar, this is the Captain." That was the voice of the one they called Janek. Latin appeared at the bottom of the screen to translate, but Zamin was pleased to realize that he was able to correctly guess more than half of the words without any help.

"Yes, Captain?" one of the men answered.

"Can you see what I'm seein'?" Janek asked. "Fifield's monitor just popped up."

"What? Where?"

"Well, accordin' to what I'm lookin' at, it's right outside the goddamn ship."

"Barnes! Open the door!"

"Fifield," Janek called as the hangar door lowered. "Do you copy me, c'mon in? Fifield?"

The man who had spoken, Clemens according to his feed, walked down the hangar door as it descended. Fifield came into view before him, huddled on the ground.

"What the...?" Elilu said, leaning forward and frowning. She was right to, Zamin thought. Fifield's body was twisted into a posture that few outside of practiced contortionists were capable of holding. His protective suit was torn in places, much of its armored padding smashed and warped. The helmet itself appeared to be missing its front.

"Wait a second," Janek gasped over the audio feed.

Clemens ignored him and walked closer, kicking Fifield's booted foot. The twisted shape below him was unresponsive. He took a few steps back as his pulse jumped, and turned toward another member of the crew. "Hey Wallace, take a look at this."

On Wallace's feed, the thing that had once been Fifield was moving, lifting a misshapen head and pulling out of its contorted position to rise, inhumanly tall, behind Clemens. Clemens turned around and his heart rate jumped again as he saw Fifield's hideous face.

"Freeze that, please," Zamin said. David touched the panel and all of the images froze. "Could you enlarge Clemens's feed?"

"Of course," David said. Fifield's misshapen, snarling face took over the wall screen, one third the size of Elilu's head in the Tribunal Room.

"You're right," Elilu said after a moment. She set her food aside as though she'd lost her appetite. "He looks nothing like Charlie. Why doesn't he look anything like Charlie?"

"I'm inclined to agree that it's not, but *could* it be a later stage in the progression of the same infection?" David speculated.

"No," Zamin said slowly. "Charlie was being parasitized by embryonic variants of acid dragons. They'd infested his major organs and were taking up nutrients as they grew like tumors inside him, and they were dumping waste products directly into his bloodstream. I could see it in the feeds of his last moments, and the recordings of his vital signs. Dehydration, sepsis... there's none of that in Fifield's face here."

"Is that what *my* guest was doing to *me*?" Elilu shuddered. She'd gone pale to the point where her skin seemed to have acquired a greenish tinge.

"No. You were comparatively lucky, and you got a lot of protection from the fact that it actually took up residence in an organ *designed* for fetal development. The placental barrier protected you from most of what its... siblings... did to Charlie— what?" Elilu was staring at him in shock.

"You actually know about women's reproductive health?" She seemed completely stunned. That, in turn, shocked *him*. Were the men of her world kept ignorant of such things?

"I'm a fully-certified military medic, remember?" He decided not to mention the time he had to perform an emergency caesarean on a civilian; that would hit far too close to home for her, especially after his earlier

comment. Her bravery in, essentially, performing one on herself still had him awed.

“Both military pilot and medic? Is that normal for your people?” David asked.

“No, but then again, most soldiers aren’t *immortal*.” He’d told Elilu the story, but David and Meredith would need to hear parts of it sometime, too. “They moved me from division to division every few years before anybody could notice that I wasn’t getting any older. The funny thing was that my Captain on my last assignment... he and I had been friends since I’d joined the Igigi Guard. Remember how I told you there was just one guy I never managed to outfly, Elilu? That was Nargal. I think he was as disappointed as I was when I got pulled out of the squadrons. We stayed in touch and when he started slowing down and they promoted him out of the cockpit, he made a joke about how they’d never have needed to do that to me.” The meaning of that hit him as he was telling the story. “He *knew*. He knew what I was the whole time. Asshole never let it slip even once, either.”

He shook his head, his eyes stinging. For a moment, he couldn’t speak. He’d used his loyalty to Nargal as an excuse, several times, when people asked him why he wasn’t trying to have his transfer to Ers— to *Earth* expedited. His buddy had let him do it, too—

“If Fifield doesn’t have embryonic acid dragon variants inside him, what *is* happening to him here?” David asked, pulling him back on track.

“Look at his forehead,” Elilu said. “It makes me think a little of what was happening to Alġar’s head before it exploded. But Alġar’s skin looked normal... mostly. Not like this, anyway. Those look like burn scars, but old ones, not fresh. And I know he didn’t have burn scars the day before.”

“He got splashed with acid when he was trying to help Milburn,” Zamin explained. She’d slept through those feeds. “If it was similar enough to acid dragon blood, his helmet wouldn’t have protected him for more than a few seconds.”

“He also fell into one of the streams of black fluid in the Tribunal Room,” David added.

“So... he inhaled or ingested some of the fluid and it got on his skin... and it did this to him?” Elilu frowned, pursing her lips and then shaking her head.

“This isn’t all it did. You’ll see when we continue watching,” David told her.

Both of them glanced at Zamin, as if for permission. Just when had they decided that he was their commanding officer?

Well, you *are* officially an Admiral, he reminded himself. He nodded to them and David started the feeds again.

Elilu gasped and he felt himself tensing as the battle broke out. Within moments, the creature that had once been Fifield had killed five of the seven men in the hangar and only the arrival of Janek and his assistant, Chance, finally brought the carnage to an end. To kill Fifield, they were forced to crush, shoot, *and* incinerate him, leaving nothing for further examination. Elilu shuddered and closed her eyes, and Zamin slipped his arms around her.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for,” he whispered back. “Give yourself a moment.”

It would be a long time, he realized, before grief stopped ambushing either of them. As much as Elilu had come to repudiate much of what Charlie had stood for and done, she would still mourn the loss of the man she’d thought she’d known. He suspected that part of Charlie had genuinely wanted to be that man, and might have eventually succeeded in becoming him if only he’d been able to free himself from Weyland’s grasp. At the end, after all, he’d been able to do a genuinely selfless thing, in an attempt to save her and everyone else. His death had not merely been honorable but truly heroic. He didn’t know whether it would be considered enough to balance the scales in Elilu’s faith, but it had been in *his*.

“So...” David said after a long pause, “exposure to the liquid inside the urns resulted in parasitic embryo infestations, but exposure to the liquid *outside* of the urns caused deformities, superhuman strength, extreme aggression and hostility... this does seem to support the idea that the two liquids were radically different substances. But what type of Zal or Zal-derivative would produce those changes?”

“None.” Zamin frowned. “I’ve *never* seen clinical records that matched his condition. And we had to review them *all* to qualify for a posting on Ereshkigal Šagtum. If I’d seen anything like this, I’d remember. This is *new*.”

“I don’t have any scars,” Elilu said suddenly. She’d pulled up one of her pant legs and was frowning at her shin. “I used to, but I don’t now. Azalla erases them, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” Zamin replied, wondering where she was going with that nonsequitur.

“So then... that can’t be Azalla. He’s *covered* in burn scars. But when we found you after the launch, you’d been burned all over, and you healed cleanly without scarring. So this was just some unknown type of Zal.” She looked relieved as she said it.

“I imagine that, if there had been Azalla involved, they wouldn’t have been able to kill Fifield, either,” David pointed out.

“True.” Elilu looked over at Zamin. “But maybe it was some kind of combination of more than one type of Zal? It’s a shame that we can’t actually see what happened in the room two thousand years ago.”

Zamin felt like she’d just dumped a bucket of ice water over him. “But we *can*. I have copies of all of the recordings from the Five Towers.”

“What?” Elilu gasped. “Where?”

“Here!” He tried to point toward his control room and realized that he was pointing at the lifeboat’s bedroom and washroom. *That* was demonstrative. “On my ship! I downloaded all of the security feeds. I downloaded *everything*. Assuming the surveillance system was working, and it should have been, the Tower recorded every moment your team spent inside it.”

Elilu’s eyes had lit up. “Are you sure? It wouldn’t have broken down?”

“If it had,” he pointed out, realizing it as he said it, “David wouldn’t have been able to activate a playback. It was working.”

The excitement coursing through him was incredible. He had to restrain himself from running to the airlock immediately and racing back to his control room. They’d made a rule: nobody went anywhere alone, or even in pairs. All four of them had to stick together until the acid dragon – or dragons – had been located and dealt with. It was the only way to be sure. He forced himself to relax, even though he did *not* want to. He wanted to dig deep into the mystery, *right now*.

“It occurs to me that that’s a great deal of data,” David noted. “Two thousand years of security recordings, plus whatever else was stored... does your ship have enough memory to perform the function that you intended the mainframe for?”

Zamin shook his head. “It has plenty of memory, but it’s military hardware. It won’t let civilian computers get through its security protocols, much less unrecognized alien technology. The mainframe was intended for our off-duty entertainment complex, so it *was* designed to interface with all manner of exotic civilian tech. Even there, I couldn’t be one hundred percent sure. I had no *real* guarantee that Meredith would be able to talk to it, but I was confident it would work.”

And it was the only option he’d been able to come up with, but he left that unsaid. If it failed, they would have to see what the Anunnaki could do. Several of them, he knew, would take up the challenge. Hadad might be the best to ask —

“It’s a bit odd, thinking of ourselves as the aliens,” Elilu said, her expression rueful.

Merciful Elilil, he was a fool. “I didn’t mean it that way, I—”

But she was smiling again and shaking her head. “You didn’t offend me. It’s just... very different out here from what any of us expected. Back on Earth, we thought we’d given up the notion that the universe revolved around our world centuries ago, but I guess some of it stuck.”

“Zamin?” David broke in. “You said yesterday that you had brought some communication systems onto the lifeboat so you could access—”

Great Inanna, David was *right*! He jumped to his feet, almost knocking his plate over, and hurried over to the crates piled to one side of the primary airlock. “I’m an idiot! I should have set this up before now!”

If he’d had the sense to set it up when he’d first brought it back from his old ship, he could have stayed in contact with Elilu and David while he was raiding the Towers. He wanted to smack himself.

Then again, would he really have wanted Elilu listening in while the dragons gutted and ate him?

“Not an idiot,” Elilu called from behind him. “It’s been a busy week.”

Zamin carried the communication unit crate back to the console area, since that would make the best stage for the holograms it displayed, careful not to disturb Meredith as he tromped past her. Her stillness was eerily lifeless. He set the crate down carefully between the couches and removed the lid. The control console was simple enough to operate, although he heard Elilu gasp when he activated the arcs of light. Nargal had been fond of using a small flute to transmit his security code, but Zamin preferred biometrics; they were much harder to imitate. Within scant minutes, it had interfaced with the juggernaut.

“Oh, by Inanna’s—” He stopped himself before he got crude in front of Elilu. “We’re still in orbit.”

“We’re what?” Elilu blinked.

“I set the controls so that, once Meredith was done deploying her message capsules and the satellite and they were out of range of interference from our drives, we’d break orbit and head for deep space. That doesn’t seem to have happened,” he grumbled as he adjusted the different streams. “Hang on. I’m going to run some diagnostics here.”

“Perhaps the second capsule hasn’t cleared the area yet?” David suggested. “Meredith did say she’d programmed in a slower acceleration curve.”

Even as David said it, the data came back confirming it. “That’s exactly it. It’ll be clear, and we’ll be ready to begin our outbound journey, in just a few more minutes. I think I’ll check the security scans for signs of our guest, too.”

But the security system was persistently negative, reporting no signs of the stowaway that Zamin *knew* he had heard. He activated a scaled-down hologram of the lifeboat itself, and the surrounding hangar, studying it from every angle.

“There!” David leaned forward, pointing. “Do you see it? That’s not part of the vessel.”

Zamin followed David’s finger to the port side of the lifeboat. There, emerging from the tangled wreckage of the lost propulsion drive’s struts, was a long, thin, segmented cable that he didn’t remember from his inspection, but remembered all too well from his trip to the nest: an acid dragon’s tail.

“There you are,” he muttered, expanding the image. “It’s sleeping inside the cavity that held the aft port propulsion drive. Exactly the way I was afraid it would.”

“At least we know where it is, now,” Elilu said, putting her hand on his shoulder. Her expression was one of fascination. She’d never seen an acid dragon, he realized. All of this talk about what the creatures could do, and his companions still had no idea of what they even looked like. Well, he’d be able to show them soon.

In the meantime, he sealed the hangar. They knew where the dragon was for the moment, and he wanted to keep it that way. Collecting his things and bringing them here could wait until they’d decided what to do about their guest. With it nestled against key components of the lifeboat – and if he wasn’t mistaken, it was resting a few feet and one thick wall away from their food stores – he wanted to be very careful about extracting it. He instructed the security system to advise them any time it moved, and if it detected any other movement elsewhere in the ship. There was always the possibility that it hadn’t boarded alone.

“All right. Now, let’s see if I can isolate the security recordings for the Tribunal Room of the acid dragons.” He glanced at David and Elilu before he began manipulating streams again. “I want to see exactly what happened in there, both when this started and after you arrived.”

“I’m curious as to why this is so important,” David said.

“Because I disobeyed my orders and chose not to bring the contents of any of the Tribunal Rooms back with us,” he answered as he focused in on the recordings from the First Tower. “Which means that, under Anunnaki law, I committed genocide eight times over. Assuming, of course, that the genetic materials contained in each of those rooms really were the last samples of those eight species, which I doubt, but... I’m going to be put on trial no matter what. So I need all the proof I can get that the rooms weren’t stable or safe to open. Starting with the one that *was* opened.”

He just hoped there would be enough evidence to acquit him.

“How can they do that?” Elilu demanded. Her expression was aghast. “How can anyone just expect you to bring such dangerous things back after what they’ve already done?”

She might have grown up near a war zone, but she seemed to know very little about how military organizations worked. “I was ordered to. Even if they agree with my decision, they have to hold an inquiry. So I just have to make sure I’ve assembled enough proof that they *will* agree with my decision.”

“He’s right,” Meredith said, startling him. She’d joined the group without him even being aware of her approach. “Inquiries and court-martials happen all the time, any time there’s a situation that wasn’t resolved by the book. It could be a genuine crime or just a scenario that nobody had ever thought to plan for. It’ll be okay, Elilu.”

But Elilu still looked pale and shaken, not at all reassured by anything they were telling her.

She’s lost almost everything, he reminded himself. It shouldn’t have surprised him that the idea of possibly losing him would scare her. He pulled her close and held her, wishing there was a safe promise he could make her about that, one he could be certain of keeping.

“How did your interface go?” David asked.

Meredith’s mouth spread into a grin. “That mainframe is *amazing*. I’m waiting for some final results, but I think it’s going to be able to do everything we need it to, and then some.”

“I’m confused,” David told her. “If the final results aren’t in, why are you disconnected?”

The grin became mischievous. “I’m not running the last tests. Meredith Mark Three is.”

“What?” Elilu asked, looking over at her. “Who?”

“Well, I had a choice. I could run the tests myself, but it would take several weeks, mostly because the mainframe was going to have to toddle along at *my* processing speed.” Meredith grimaced. “I’m the epitome of cutting-edge Earth technology and I feel so outclassed. If that mainframe was the *Prometheus*, I’d be a Piper Cub by comparison.”

Zamin had kept the translation tablet with him, and glanced at it to see if it had an explanation of a “Piper Cub.” The images of a tiny, propeller-driven aircraft distracted him for a moment. The humans of Earth had only created that in the last two hundred years? Extraordinary! In the throes of planned obsolescence or not, their designs had evolved significantly in a short span of years. How had they managed that without any outside influence? The Igigi had been flying and cautiously exploring the solar system and nearby star systems for thousands of years before the arrival of the Ganapati had changed everything—

“My other choice,” Meredith continued as he examined the images, “was to upload a full copy of my neural map into the mainframe and have it run the test from inside. Which is really better, since we’re going to have to upload a copy of *David’s* to test-run the repair program, anyway.”

David nodded slowly. “So... when will you know if it worked?”

“In about two hours.” Meredith picked up the bowl of android gruel that had been set aside for her. “So, I had to shut down my sensory inputs for a while during the upload. What did I miss, aside from Zamin becoming a war criminal?”

Elilu shuddered.

“Well, we located the acid dragon, and we’re going to try to figure out what happened in the Tribunal Room using Zamin’s footage. And—” David stopped and grabbed for the console as Meredith flinched and Elilu’s arms tightened around him. “What was *that*?”

Zamin felt like a fool. He really should have warned them. He’d barely noticed the momentary sensation that every physical dimension had inverted itself. “We just entered hyperspace. I’m sorry. I’m so accustomed to the transition that it didn’t occur to me to say anything.”

“Aren’t you usually in stasis already when that would happen?” Elilu asked. Her eyes were a little wide and her hand was resting on her chest, but otherwise she looked exhilarated, rather than frightened or sick. *He’d* thrown up the first time.

Which really makes you an asshole for not warning them, he scolded himself.

“Not always. For shorter hops, we stayed awake and drilled on the way.” Everybody seemed to have relaxed again, which impressed him. The first time hyper-jumping could be rough for people—

Except that two of the three were androids, and the third was as immortal and resilient as *he* was. He supposed that their nonchalance came from that. A quick glance at the security readings told him that their stowaway hadn’t stirred, either. That didn’t please him so much.

Why, did you *want* it agitated? he asked himself.

He still hadn’t decided how he wanted to deal with it, and he needed to figure that out soon. It was another reason to review the security logs; he needed to see which of the standard combat tactics in his repertoire were likely to fail and might potentially damage the lifeboat – or the Juggernaut – in the process. He’d never hated being in charge before now, but there was so damned much to mentally balance.

“Are you all right?” Elilu asked him. He realized that he’d been sitting still, staring at the console, for longer than he should have been.

“Yes, sorry... just... getting my thoughts in order.” He frowned at the yellow arc that had appeared on the console and reached over to touch it. The readings that appeared in the central sphere stopped his breath.

“You’re *not* all right,” she said. “What’s wrong?”

“These readings. They can’t be accurate.” He instructed the ship to check them again, but the new numbers came up identical to the old ones. He ordered it to check them a third time.

“What are they?” Meredith asked. She leaned in for a closer look. “I’m seeing a lot of null results and errors, but I can’t read the rest.”

The mainframe must have taught her the standard numbering system the Igigi Guard used, but not the spoken and written language. A small part of him wondered if that was because it hadn't had time to, or because it didn't have the files. The rest of him, though, was on the verge of panic.

"They're readings from the hyper-radio relays," he managed once his voice would work. "And they're empty."

"And this, I take it, is a bad thing?" David asked.

He could only nod.

"Why?" Elilu asked. "What are they supposed to be like?"

"They should be *full* of chatter," he told her. "It's how we communicate from world to world about non-urgent matters. Messages by ship and hyper-capsule are faster, but we've been using hyper-radio for tens of thousands of years. There are relay points *throughout* the Myriad Worlds. The longest it takes for *anything* to go from one world to another is twenty years, once it's been hyperwaved. It's part of how the Anunnaki ensure that even the most distant worlds stay in touch with each other and share their cultures. The only time planets ever go silent is if they lose the knowledge of how to use the tech..."

But silence was all he heard now. The numbers had come back empty yet again.

"Nobody's home," Meredith said in a hushed tone, still examining the readings.

"That's not possible." His protest, though, sounded weak and hollow in his own ears.

Zamin had seen people panic before. He'd seen grown men, soldiers with greater rank and combat experience than his, curled up in whimpering balls, and he'd pitied them. He'd never truly been able to understand how they got that way, or what could possibly make them feel so helpless and hopeless that a complete collapse seemed useful. Until now.

If the readings could be believed, the Myriad Worlds – all *ten thousand of them* – had vanished while he'd slept, and the only voice in the darkness was the ship they traveled in. Everything, and everyone – *if* the readings could be believed – was gone. He ordered the Juggernaut to check again.

"It's just not possible," he repeated, and heard his voice tremble like a lost child's. But the readings came back a fourth time, telling him that the skies were still silent and empty.

They were alone.

Notes: Wow, sorry, that was a long time coming! You'd think I'd have had *more* time to write over break, not less, wouldn't you? I sure thought I would. Thank you to everybody who has been posting cool feedback in my absence! :) (And I have a bunch of messages and the like to reply to, too! I will hopefully get that done soon.)

There aren't all that many notes for this chapter. Hopefully everybody recognizes **"feel free to move about the cabin."** If you've ever flown on any commercial aircraft, you'll have heard it repeatedly. Everybody in our little party of four is a frequent flyer. ;)

"Clemens" – Actually, this guy's name isn't listed anywhere that I could find. Both IMDB and the actual end credits list four mechanics and four mercenaries among the crew, none of whom have names (and Jackson's somewhere in this bunch, too – it's a bit odd because several of them get called by name in the film!) Barnes and Wallace are left unnamed in the credits, too, but those names were actually spoken in the scene. Poor "Clemens," the first to be murdered by Fifield, doesn't appear to have ever been named at all. So this is my name for him. R.I.P., dude.

That's pretty much it for this chapter. Hopefully things have settled back down enough that the next one won't take so long.

Chapter 24

Only moments before, Elilu had been leaning on Zamin for comfort. Now she found their roles abruptly reversed.

She could feel him trembling against her. The symbols on the hologram in front of them were incomprehensible, something she'd have to work on fixing as quickly as she could, but she understood what they meant to him. She turned around in his arms so that she could see his face.

He was staring at the hologram, his eyes wide and his jaw held rigid. She pressed her hand to his cheek. "Zamin? Zamin, look at me. *Look* at me!"

He blinked and his eyes moved to her, unfocused as if he was seeing through her, a look of bewildered fear spreading over his face. His shaking was intensifying.

"I need you to calm down for me, all right? Please. Calm down. Are you listening to me? *Listen* to me!" Without even realizing it, she stepped into an older and more familiar mode: the college professor handling the panicked student. "I want you to tell me all of the possible reasons for radio silence. *All* of them."

He swallowed and his eyes finally focused on her. After another second, he answered her. "Reasons for radio silence..." The tremor in his voice was severe, almost making it difficult to understand him. He swallowed again and his voice firmed a little. "They include damage to a transmitter or relay which has taken it offline... a political situation which requires parties to cease transmitting... uh... loss of technical competence in a local population..."

He closed his eyes and shook his head, but he seemed to be calming down. The shaking was subsiding.

"All right," she said when he didn't resume. "So there are at least three possible explanations. Which one would be most likely here? How many relays are we *directly* in contact with?"

His eyes opened and she felt his whole body abruptly relax. "Just one."

"And we're getting no signal from it?" He nodded in answer to her question, so she pressed it further. "Could it be offline?"

"Could it...?" A hopeful look appeared on his face. "Yes. Yes, it could."

"Tell me how they work. Can we test it?"

Zamin frowned, putting his arms around her and slipping one hand into her hair. He seemed to be touching her for comfort and reassurance. That was fine with her!

"It transmits in two ways." His voice had taken on the rote tone of a student reciting a textbook passage from memory. "It picks up narrow-beam hyperwave signals from the other relays and passes them on, and it simultaneously broadcasts those transmissions in the surrounding space. The broadcasts have a solid range of approximately one light-year, but after that, the signal deteriorates. The narrow beams can travel at least ten light years before they begin to deteriorate, so that's generally the maximum distance that the relays are placed from each other."

"That makes sense," David said quietly. He'd hurried over to the bar while she was trying to calm Zamin down, and had returned with a glass of water. Zamin accepted it with a grateful look and drank it down. "That's a typical dispersal rate for electromagnetic transmissions. Until about eighty years ago, humans on Earth thought that they were sending their radio and television signals out to distant worlds, until SETI – sorry, that's the 'Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence,' Zamin – SETI discovered that broadcast signals deteriorated back to white noise before they were two light-years out. On the way here, I sent a regular transmission to this world in the hopes that someone would receive it, but each time I sent it, I had to target a precise set of coordinates and hope that there would be a receiver at the other end. The closer we came, the broader an area I could target. But even then, someone would need to be listening for a signal. I wasn't really surprised to get no response, although I know that Dr. Holloway was disappointed."

Zamin nodded, looking even calmer.

"So the ship's listening for a broadcast and not finding one, right?" Meredith asked. When Zamin nodded again, she responded with a nod of her own. "Okay, I can think of several reasons that would be the case. First, I'm betting that the world we just left behind was the only inhabited world within a light-year, right? So as far as anybody knows, there's been nobody to pick up a broadcast near here for the last two thousand years."

Could the relay have been reset to pass along signals on the narrow beam without broadcasting them, to conserve energy?"

"Maybe." Zamin sounded dubious about that idea, but Elilu could feel him regaining even more of his calm.

"Second, maybe the broadcasting hardware broke down and nobody bothered to come fix it. Because, again, who was listening anyway? Third, maybe the whole relay broke and all of the signals just got rerouted, since this system was considered a write-off. So here's my question. How do we check? I don't just mean asking your ship to listen for transmissions again. I mean, can we query the relay?" Meredith's face had taken on the cool, shrewd, businesslike expression that Elilu remembered from the staff meeting on the ship, but she understood it so much better now. This was *her* method of helping Zamin to focus.

It was working. The slack, lost look had faded from his face and his expression had become purposeful. "We could, but we wouldn't get an answer. We're traveling faster than hyper-radio waves right now. In hyperspace, everything outside of the ship's stabilization field inverts. Smaller particles move more slowly than larger ones, and waveforms move the most slowly of all. It's all going a lot faster than the speed of light in normal space, but it means that a ship can beat a hyper-radio transmission by a *lot*. We'll pass the relay before it gets our transmission, and its response won't catch up with us."

"And the greater the mass of the ship, the faster it can move through hyperspace?" David asked. His expression was one of delight. "No wonder your craft are so large. I've been trying to understand why you would build such ships, but now it makes sense. Our propulsion drives have always required a very strict use of weight limits, but the opposite would be true here, wouldn't it?"

"Now this? This is technology I wouldn't mind Earth having," Meredith added. Zamin glanced over at her, his expression assessing and slightly wary. "How many light-years are we traveling to get to Apsu, anyway?"

"One hundred," Zamin said, his tone offhand as he touched some of the arcs of light on his console.

"And we're traveling that far in *three months*?" Elilu gasped. It had taken the *Prometheus* more than two and a half years to go a little over one-third that distance!

"Most impressive," David said, tilting his head to watch Zamin's gestures more closely. "Zamin, is it possible for you to show us the scope of the Myriad Worlds? I observed your other ship's navigation array and it showed a great many systems, but they weren't actually to scale. How much of the galaxy are the Myriad Worlds spread over?"

Zamin's expression took on a bemused look and Elilu shot David a grateful smile. "Not all that much. We've stayed in this arm of the galaxy... here."

A new hologram appeared, showing a beautiful, exquisitely-detailed spiral galaxy—the Milky Way, she realized after a second. Zamin's hands moved like a symphony conductor's as he manipulated the display, zooming in on one quadrant of the image.

"There... that's where we are, isn't it?" David pointed to a thin band of stars in between the enlarging arms. "The Orion-Cygnus arm, in between the Perseus and Carina-Sagittarius arms."

"Interesting names you've given them," Zamin said, one hairless eyebrow quirking at David. She wondered what meanings the names might have for him that had been lost to people on Earth. She wondered if he knew any of the names' original owners, and if she might see some of them on Apsu. "The entirety of the Myriad Worlds is contained in your Orion-Cygnus arm."

The holographic image continued to expand, most of the galaxy winking out so that the one arm could be seen more clearly. Zamin touched another control and a lattice of violet light superimposed itself on one large area of stars, forming a complex web.

"Are those the Myriad Worlds?" David asked.

"They are. And the lines are the hyperspace corridors between them."

"Interesting... Earth is here, if I'm not mistaken." David reached forward and pointed to a tiny star near the edge of the web. "And LV-223 is here..." He moved his hand to the right, pointing to another star near the edge. "I would have thought that, if Earth had been your starting-point, the Myriad Worlds would be spread more evenly around it. Was there some reason that your people confined themselves to exploring the inner part of the arm, and not the outer?"

Zamin nodded slowly, frowning as he looked at the map. Elilu had the funny feeling that he'd never really noticed that anomaly before, or at least, hadn't given it much thought. "Exploratory ships that went outward

along the arm generally didn't come back. The few that did hadn't found anything worth settling on, anyway. We went where the habitable worlds were."

"That can't be right," Meredith said. She was frowning at the star map, too. "We've been sending out survey drones for the last four decades, and we've found several *hundred* planets with potential within a forty light-year radius of Earth, and there are just as many on the other side."

"But no signs of life on any of them?" Zamin asked. Elilu noticed that he'd tensed up against her once more.

Meredith shook her head. "None. No organized transmissions, and no organisms more developed than prokaryotes on a few of the planets. Most samples came back completely negative."

"Even," Zamin asked slowly, "on the worlds that overlap with *my* map?"

For a moment, there was complete silence.

"Well, *fuck*," Meredith finally said. She sat down in front of the lifeboat console and started pressing the touch-screen. "Let's see if we can figure this out decisively."

A moment later, a star map appeared on the wall screen, also detailing the Orion-Cygnus arm although this map labeled it the "Orion Spur."

"Have all of our explorations been confined to just this area?" Elilu asked.

"This area is thirty-five hundred light years wide and ten thousand light years long," David told her. "We've sent out probes to the other arms of the galaxy, but none of them have reached their destinations yet, much less come back from them."

She could feel herself blushing. The maps had made it seem like such a tiny part of space until David put it like that.

"From the looks of things," David continued after a moment as he glanced from map to map, "the Myriad Worlds occupy a region with a rough diameter of four hundred light years, yes? So a ship of this type is able to travel between any point in a year or less?"

Zamin nodded, but he didn't look entirely comfortable. "There are outlying worlds even farther out than that, but those are the ones we tend – or tended – to lose contact with the most. And most ships can't go as fast as this one. Even with this one, we wouldn't be able to do a straight-line route from one side of the perimeter to the other, so a year and a half would be more accurate."

"That's some impressive technology," Meredith muttered as she looked between the two star maps, herself. She pressed the panel under her hands some more. "Okay, the Le Verrier probes have visited about a dozen of the systems that also appear on your map. That's not good news."

Zamin flinched against Elilu and closed his eyes. She reached up, touching his cheek. "No signs of life?" he asked after a moment. He opened his eyes and pressed his hand over hers. .

"I'm afraid not... looks like all of them have *potential* for supporting life, but the only one that even had prokaryotes on it was LV-391. The readings... this is weird. They're a *lot* like the readings we got from LV-223 as we came in." Meredith frowned and shook her head. "Practically *identical*."

Zamin winced and closed his eyes again. The word he muttered was one Elilu didn't recognize, but she was pretty sure he'd just sworn. "Acid dragons."

She could feel his body tensing again. "All right," she told him, tapping his cheek with her fingertips and locking eyes with him once he opened his. "Ereshkigal Šagtum probably wasn't the only world they hit. But that doesn't mean they got every world. Your people may just have had to write off this region of space. Will we be passing in range of more hyper-radio relays on our way to Apsu?"

He wrapped his arms around her and leaned forward, studying the holographic image in front of him. "We'll pass close enough to four more to pick up broadcasts. The next one's about three weeks away."

"Then let's not get worried until then, all right? There's no way that the Anunnaki could have been killed by acid dragons, anyway. *They* have to still be around, and if they are, others will be too." When Zamin drew breath to argue, she cut him off. "You *know* I'm right. You've fought acid dragons, and lived. Did the dragons?"

He shuddered, but slowly shook his head. "All the ones that came after me died."

"How many was that?" He hadn't told her anything about the battle. She was curious, but the look on his face now told her that she would probably never learn many details.

"Seven, that I saw."

Both Meredith and David made impressed sounds. "You personally killed seven of them?" David asked.

Zamin shook his head. "Five... maybe six. I shot the sixth, but it and the seventh probably died from nerve gas poisoning. If any others tried to follow me into the tunnel, I was too out of it to see them. But they would have died, too."

"That's still most impressive. But it confirms Elilu's thought. If the acid dragons got far enough in-system to encounter the Anunnaki, they wouldn't prevail. Therefore, while they may have taken some of your worlds, they cannot have taken all of them." David looked pleased with his deductions. But Zamin's expression stayed bleak.

"That's still billions of sentient lives lost... and trillions of life-forms destroyed." Watching him in this moment, it was hard for Elilu to imagine that he was the same man who had tried to launch an extermination mission against part of the Earth. She wondered if he'd have ended up grieving the same way about all of those lost lives, had he succeeded in taking them.

This is why I love him, she thought, still a little shocked at just how readily the word came to mind. It was a word that she'd grown chary of using after she and Charlie had grown estranged. Part of her still wondered if it was reckless to use it now... until moments like this. She wondered how many women of the Myriad Worlds had swooned after him during his hotshot pilot days, and how oblivious he had been thanks to his fixation on Šena. For all his intimidating, ruthless ferocity in battle, he had an equally compassionate and principled side.

"It's interesting that they never made it to Earth," David mused.

"It's *ironic*, is what it is," Meredith countered him. "Earth had *just* been cut off from the other Myriad Worlds, presumably until after the sentence against the Roman Empire was carried out, right? So that nobody could interfere with it, I'm guessing. Which would have also stopped infected ships from accidentally contaminating Earth. Unless one had already been underway and didn't get word of the interdiction, but since none of Earth's dragon legends involve acid, we can rule that out."

"Those ships would have been warned away too," Zamin told them, his voice still pained. "There are message capsules that can travel from one end of the Myriad Worlds to the other in under a day. They're hideously expensive and no living organism would survive riding in one, but they're used for critical emergencies. Most worlds have at least one, and usually a few. Ellil knows how many Apsu has. But they would have been sent to all ships in transit to Ers — I mean, Earth — as soon as the interdiction was declared. Pliny the Elder used my brother's capsule to send me word of the murders." He shuddered against Elilu. "Now that I think of it, the fact that he knew how to do it tells me that Šukarak may have had a better sense of how much danger he was in than I realized."

She wanted to reassure him, to tell him that it was long ago and far away, but she knew that it wasn't. Not for him. For Zamin, his brother's murder had happened less than a fortnight ago, and all of the now-dead worlds had been alive and vibrant that recently. The pain of those sudden changes was almost unimaginable to her.

Something else, though, struck her abruptly and freed her tongue. "Wouldn't those emergency capsules have been in use during the outbreak of acid dragon infestations? Wouldn't the worlds under attack have been able to warn Apsu, or at least call for help?"

"They *should* have been," Zamin replied, frowning but nodding.

David had come forward and was examining Zamin's control panel with an intent look. "Zamin, you have recordings of all communication between your world and the rest of the Myriad Worlds, yes? Inbound as well as outbound?"

Zamin glanced at David and nodded, his expression a little baffled.

"Well, an easy way to resolve a lot of our concerns is to go back to the final inbound transmissions and review them, isn't it? That will tell us what the situation was when communication was lost, and possibly even *why* it was lost. Can we do that?"

"...Yes," Zamin said after giving the android a look of astonishment. His hands began flying over the panel while David, she noticed, watched every movement intently. "I know Ereshkigal Šagtum was still receiving hyper-radio transmissions ten years after I went into stasis, because that's when my orders from Enki arrived. But it never occurred to me to check for anything else."

He looked embarrassed. Elilu stroked his cheek again. "You had a lot on your mind, Love."

He paused, covering her hand with his and pressing it even closer to his face. Then he turned his head and kissed her palm, making it tingle, before releasing her hand and getting back to work. The star map vanished,

replaced by an orderly list composed of the symbols she'd seen written all over the walls of the First Tower. Some of them looked much like symbols from tablets Charlie had found stored in Aratta's Great Library, she suddenly realized. Their existence had set up quite the furor among archaeologists and classicists alike: yet another lost language rediscovered. The last she'd heard, only a tiny handful of words and symbols had been reliably translated. David undoubtedly had the tablets in his memory cores, and must have used them to figure out Zamin's written language.

Had the people of Aratta been speaking a language directly descended from Zamin's?

"It looks... as if communication had almost completely ceased by the time Enki's message arrived," Zamin said as his eyes scanned the list. "There's just one more message that came in system after that. I'm calling it up now."

The list vanished, replaced by a hologram of a large, pale, athletic man whose musculature – even concealed under his silken robes – made Zamin look slim by comparison. Hairless and cat-eyed like Zamin, he was clearly also of Igigi stock. Elilu wondered if all of the Anunnaki had been Igigi before they had changed, or if any of the other races had become immortal, too. Would she be the first human among the Anunnaki?

"Ellil," Zamin whispered, staring at the hologram.

So. This was the god among the gods, the scientist who had created Azalla and who had ruled first Earth and then the Myriad Worlds for sixty millennia. His face, Elilu thought, was stern enough for the part. She half-expected him to glow and to speak with the voice of a thunderstorm.

Instead, when he spoke, his voice sounded tired. His accent was different from Zamin's, but the words still made sense to her after a moment's adjustment. "This is the final transmission to Relay 7426. Ereshkigal Šagtum will observe complete radio silence from this point forward. No personnel are authorized to enter the system or land on the planet, with the exception of Admiral Ludubgara Zamin. All other clearances are hereby revoked. All navigational beacons are to cease operations immediately. All relayed transmissions will cease as well. References to this world have been expunged from all databases as a safeguard against the Sons of Zal and their predations. All references to the location of Ersetu are to be expunged as well. All other worlds within the combat zone are either lost or interdicted at this time. Signals to and from them are forbidden. The interdiction extends across the following coordinates..."

The numbers that he recited made no particular sense to her, but she could feel Zamin draw a shuddering breath and release an equally shaky sigh.

"All worlds within that zone are permanently interdicted, with the exception of Ereshkigal Šagtum and Ersetu. May the Sons of Zal never find either one. Destruction of the relay will commence once receipt of this transmission has been acknowledged by the Tower of Inanna. I, Aadinath Yoveh Ellil, on this day, the Akiti Zagmuk of the year 67,452, for the protection of the Myriad Worlds and all of their inhabitants, do order this. All contact with the Interdiction Zone will now cease."

Zamin had gone completely still. Behind them, Elilu could hear David whispering an English translation of Ellil's words to Meredith. As the hologram faded away, Zamin took another unsteady breath and leaned forward, touching the controls again. The star field reappeared. He touched more controls and several stars turned red on the hologram, one at a time, until they formed a perimeter that enclosed a small area of the Myriad Worlds. Both Earth and Ereshkigal Šagtum were within it, along with—

"Seventy-eight worlds," David murmured.

It was, Elilu thought, a very small sliver of the Myriad Worlds, which contained thousands of inhabited planets and tens of thousands of stars. But when she focused in on the zone itself, and just how far it spread out around Earth, she knew why Zamin was shaking. Was the Earth really surrounded by so much death and destruction?

"No wonder the Le Verrier probes didn't find any signs of your people," Meredith said. She was tapping at her own screen, overlaying the zone on her map. None of the probes had ranged past it into Anunnaki territory.

There were tears brimming in Zamin's eyes. "Two hundred billion people, wiped out in just five years," he whispered. His expression was tight with a mixture of horror, grief, and rage. "Those monsters."

"Who?" Elilu asked him. He pulled her closer, burying his face in her hair. His grip on her was tight enough that she might have been frightened, if she hadn't known that the Azalla would protect her from harm.

“At a guess,” David said when Zamin didn’t speak, “the ‘Sons of Zal’ that Ellil mentioned. Perhaps a revolutionary movement, or a religious order of some kind?”

“Nihilists,” Zal grated out, the words half-muffled by Elilu’s hair. He lifted his head. “A cult. They want to bring about the end of existence. They’ve been trying for hundreds of years, but the worst they ever managed was the destruction of one system. We thought they were gone. They hadn’t tried anything for almost a *century*.”

“Could they have been responsible for the spread of the acid dragons?” Meredith asked.

Zamin nodded. “If they figured out how to transport eggs without activating them, they could use them almost like Zal missiles. And if they found the Ganapati ship, they’d have an almost endless supply to draw from.”

“The *what* ship?” Meredith, for a moment, sounded completely human, as if she was struggling to suppress laughter. Only days ago, the name would have been hauntingly familiar to Elilu, but nothing more. Now she found herself instantly connecting it to the elephant-headed god still revered in parts of India. No wonder Meredith was trying not to laugh.

Zamin touched his controls again, and a hologram of a huge, strange-looking creature appeared. Oddly enough, it almost looked like the Igigi suits of armor, only even larger and somewhat bloated... and entirely biological. She found herself studying it with fascination. The hologram appeared to be a recording of a living creature, rather than a static model. She watched as it waved its long, spindly arms with astonishingly human-like hands, and observed the undulations of its strange trunk, which connected and disconnected itself from a long, rigid tube that ran the length of its chest and abdomen. The eyes, deep-set and tiny, reminded her of the eyes of elephants at the zoo. Its ears did as well, but only partly; they spread out and seemed to be as thin as the gossamer wings of butterflies.

“Ganapati,” Zamin repeated. “The first and only aliens to discover and visit Earth. They were explorers and colonizers, the way we became. Fifty thousand years ago, one of their ships passed close enough to Earth to pick up *our* broadcast transmissions and recognize what they meant, and they visited us. Up until then, our technology was... well, a lot like yours is now. We could make ships go faster than light, but only at enormous cost. We hadn’t found a way to interface with hyperspace. Their technology changed everything.”

“You reverse-engineered their ships,” David observed. “You didn’t even adapt them all that much, did you?”

Zamin shrugged. “The first designs were just scaled-down versions of their ships. Ellil, Mami, and Enki did most of the re-designing. They built suits for hominids to wear so that they could interface with the controls in the same way that the Ganapati did. By the time they started adding their own innovations, the structural designs had become traditional. An empire with more than ten thousand worlds in it – even if it was only about twenty worlds at that point – needs a lot of tradition. At this point, the only similarities between our ships and theirs are aesthetic ones, aside from the ability to enter hyperspace.”

“What happened to them?” Meredith asked.

“We don’t know. During my first visit to Apsu, Hadad told me that he thought many of our colony worlds had once belonged to them, but there wasn’t conclusive proof either way. The last time we encountered them was only a few hundred years after first contact. After that, our only other encounter was when we found one of their derelict ships on a moon. Here.” He called up the star map again as he talked, pointing at one of the systems just to the outside of both the Interdiction Zone and the zone of the Myriad Worlds.

“That world’s been surveyed by a Le Verrier probe,” Meredith said, touching her own controls. “LV-426. Technically it’s a world that could support life, but—”

“Stay away from it,” David said, his voice sharp. He didn’t sound like himself. Meredith’s head, bowed over the console, jerked up and she stared at him with widened eyes.

“David?” Elilu found herself staring at him, too. She knew those imperious tones.

“That world is *not habitable*,” David – was it David? She didn’t think it was him anymore – jabbed his index finger down on the console table to punctuate his words. “You will not visit it. You will not attempt to terraform it. You will not enter the system at all, for any reason, *ever*. Do you understand?”

“Father?” Meredith’s voice sounded almost – impossibly – breathless.

“There are plenty of worlds we can colonize. Write that one off. LV-426 is a waste of time and resources. Leave it alone.” David sounded even more like Peter Weyland with each passing word.

“Get out of him,” Elilu snarled, staring at the invader. “You don’t have the right.”

“Swear to me that you will stay away from there.” Peter Weyland glared at her through David’s eyes.

“As commander of this ship,” Zamin growled, “I order you to relinquish control back to David. If you do not, you will be jettisoned.”

For a moment, two sets of blue eyes – one set inhuman and the other unnatural – locked. Then David blinked rapidly, several times, and an appalled look replaced the imperious glare of seconds earlier. “What... what just happened?”

“Weyland,” Zamin told him.

“David, how long has it been since we launched from Earth?” Meredith asked.

“Two years, four months, twenty-six days, ninety hours, forty-five minutes, and twelve seconds,” David replied.

“*Shit*. We lost a third node.” Meredith got up from the console and stalked over to Zamin’s mainframe. “I hope my duplicate’s been making good progress.”

“Yes,” David said after a moment, blinking. “We did. Just now. The moment you began speaking about LV-426, something broke through my containment measures, as if you tripped an emergency override. There’s something about that world that Mr. Weyland considers very important.”

“How do you know it’s three synaptic nodes?” Elilu asked, looking between Meredith and David. Both of them looked grim and worried.

“One of the little programs I had Dr. Sebastian add to David before we left,” Meredith told her, touching controls on the mainframe. “You heard his time count. Notice anything odd about it?”

“The hours.” Elilu glanced down at the chrono embedded in the sleeve of her borrowed jumpsuit. According to its display, David had added seventy-two hours to the correct time.

“The program makes him add twenty-four hours to his verbal time count for each node my father alters. One node was already changed when we came out of cryo. I didn’t worry all that much about it at the time, but I should have, given everything that ended up happening. Another node got changed sometime in the last week. Most likely, when his head got ripped off. Now we just lost a th—” Meredith stopped, sputtering with abrupt laughter. “I think she’s ready.”

“Who?” David asked.

“My duplicate. Take a look.” She touched another button and a small hologram appeared above the mainframe. It was Meredith, in miniature, dressed in a bathing suit and stretched out on a lounge chair... on a beach composed of stars, lapped by a nebular ocean. Words, spelled out in first Latin and then English, formed above her head.

**Habeo tempus mirandus. Cupis ut hic.
Having a wonderful time. You wish you were here.**

Elilu found herself sputtering with laughter, too. “We may need to brush up on your Latin.”

“Could be,” Meredith grinned. “Or maybe I’m just not creative enough. I read the whole *Harry Potter* series in Latin. And I tried to get my professor let me translate *Star Wars* into Latin for my Senior Thesis, but he wouldn’t go for it. Looks like she’s ready to start playing with your brain, David. And not a moment too soon.”

“Not quite yet,” Zamin said. “Something important just happened, and we almost didn’t see it.”

“What happened?” Elilu felt him give her a gentle nudge and climbed to her feet. He rose a moment after her and they walked over to join the others by the mainframe.

“Peter Weyland warned us away from Kišur – the moon you call LV-426,” Zamin told them. “That’s the world where the last Ganapati ship was found. And that ship was full of acid dragon eggs. One scouting party explored the ship after discovering it during a survey of the system. They died, very violently, as a result. Fortunately, they didn’t try to return to Earth, but the last survivor launched a data capsule before she died. It contained all of the data from their explorations. Ellil ordered a warning beacon installed near the ship, to keep future adventurers away. If the Sons of Zal found a way to use acid dragons as biological weapons, then that’s probably where they went to get them. Did your Le Verrier probes have the capability to pick up electromagnetic transmissions?”

Meredith nodded, frowning with dawning comprehension.

“Then he’d heard the transmission.” Zamin glanced over at David, who had the same look on his face that Meredith did. “He heard it, and he had it translated. He knew what was on the surface of the planet.”

Elilu felt stunned. It was the last thing she’d expected. “And he forbade all further exploration. No samples, no attempt to collect specimens...”

“He was willing to try to make a profit on LV-223 because he believed that we’d been invited there, so whatever we found there would probably be safe to take,” Meredith said after a moment. “But... cripes. Hold on.” She hurried back to the other console and started pressing controls.

“What is it?” Elilu asked.

“The *date*. The results from the fifth wave of Le Verrier probes – those would be the four hundreds – came back *one week* after you made your pitch to him.” Meredith looked up, her expression stunned. “You came in talking about ancient aliens and interstellar invitations. He didn’t believe a word of it but he humored you. Charlie tried to convince him to fund the mission with the idea that he could make a profit off of ancient alien tech, and still get a jump-start on deep-space colonies if there wasn’t any tech to be found, and he still didn’t believe a word of it. But then he got the results from LV-426.” She sat back, her expression awed. “How was the warning coded, Zamin?”

“It wasn’t. It’s just broadcast in Eme, our official language,” Zamin answered. “All official communications are. You just heard Ellil speaking it. The Myriad Worlds have used it for more than sixty thousand years.”

“So my father’s probe comes back with a recording of a message in the most ancient language ever found on Earth, which his best linguists have been trying to decode ever since Charlie dug up Aratta, warning him to stay away from a moon... and that’s when he realizes that the invitation to LV-223 might be the real deal, too.” Meredith whistled, the sound inhumanly pitch-perfect. “No wonder he turned into a believer overnight.”

“Even more importantly, he intended to obey the warning, and he considered ensuring that *we* obeyed it important enough to force his way through all of the defensive protocols David’s been using to keep him at bay.” Zamin looked bemused, and a little uncomfortable. “That really wasn’t what I expected of him.”

Elilu had to admit that she hadn’t expected it, either. In the last week, she’d gone from thinking of Peter Weyland as a harmless, eccentric, elderly philanthropist to... well, if she was being honest, a monster. She’d begun to think of him as a homicidally selfish creature who was willing to sacrifice anything and anyone to the altar of his solipsism, but this latest revelation was more in keeping with the man that she’d *believed* she’d known. Why couldn’t these things be simpler?

“I want to know what *else* he knows,” Meredith grumbled. “I had no *idea* about LV-426, which means my human doesn’t know either, and she *needs* to. I wish we’d found this out before I launched the beacons so I could have warned her.” She punched buttons, the speed and precision of her movements oddly incongruous with the scowl on her face. “With your permission, Zamin, Elilu... when we extract him from David, I want to keep him in here and find out what else he’s been hiding.”

Zamin nodded slowly. “That would probably be a good idea. The High Council might want to question him, too. Assuming—” His voice caught on the word and he grimaced.

“Assuming...?” Meredith asked.

Zamin’s lips had flattened. He shook his head, his expression bleak.

Assuming Apsu hadn’t somehow been destroyed too. Those were his unspoken words, Elilu realized. She walked over to him and took his hand in hers. “Come with me.”

Meredith’s and David’s expressions were knowing as she led Zamin back to the bedroom. He seemed genuinely surprised when she started undressing him, but he was erect by the time she finished. She wasn’t sure what to expect from him, given how lost and adrift he’d seemed since he’d discovered the radio silence. This time, she thought, she might need to lead. But he gathered her up and kissed her. His mouth felt desperately hungry against hers as he carried her over to the bed and lowered her onto it. The expertise of his touch and kisses was colored by that desperation as he explored her body. She could feel him shaking, just a little.

He was careful to be gentle with her, the way he always was. Still, she could feel a difference in his touch and movements, a *need* that hadn’t been there before. And, as he pushed her into an oblivion of pleasure once more, she thought she heard a deep, heavy sob escape him.

She knew that she’d been right when she came to and found him holding her, his wet cheek pressed to hers.

Notes: Holy guacamole, everybody! Talk about radio silence – I had *no* intention of going that long between chapters! This semester has just been off-the-charts intense. Work on my thesis continues, but I also ended up being tapped for teaching duties and an editing position, and a few other things that shrank my free time down to thimble size. *facepalm!* Further chapters will probably be very slow to appear, but I *am* still working on the story. I swear.

So a few fun references and bits of vocabulary:

Hyperspace – The number of different theories about what “hyperspace” might be like is amazing; this one, in which everything inverts and the largest/highest-mass particles are the fastest-moving, is one that appealed to me.

Akiti Zagmuk – Although a little redundant, this means New Year’s Day; Zagmuk signifies the transition to the new year, and Akiti signifies the festival held at that time. Both were used in Ur, and close variations (Akitu and Zagmukku) were also used in Akkadia. In the Near East, the non-Julian calendar New Year tends to fall on or shortly after the spring equinox.

LV and Le Verrier probes – Yeah, this is my explanation for the “LV” designations for both LV-223 and LV-426. There’s no canonical explanation for what the LV, which first appeared in *Aliens*, means, although some of the related books and games have mentioned other planets numbered the same way (including LV-1201). Some speculation and discussion that I ran across, however, mentioned the possibility of a “Le Verrier catalog,” using the last name of Urbain Le Verrier, the discoverer of Neptune. But people involved in that discussion pointed out that if future humans were going to use such a catalog, we’d already be using it now. My way of solving that is to have it specifically refer to planets surveyed by a series of probes named after Le Verrier, and thus part of a catalog that has yet to be developed because no such probe series has been launched yet.

David’s weird hours – One of the “film flubs” some people griped about was David’s odd time count when Meredith asked him how long it had been since they had launched. He answered her with “2 years, 4 months, 18 days, 36 hours, 15 minutes.” Since a Martian solar day is only about 2.7% longer than a Terran solar day (not even 45 minutes longer), using a Martian clock wouldn’t explain this, especially since NASA’s current convention with its landers has been to simply assign a 24-hour day with seconds that are 2.7% longer than Earth seconds (and one of NASA’s teams even had specially calibrated watches that followed that scheme). So this was my explanation for why David might have added extra time to the count.

Kišur – A grave or graveyard. A good name for a world that will ultimately kill anyone who lands on it.

Eme – This means “tongue, language.” In this case, it’s the idea that there’s an ancient, official language, not necessarily the parent language of the world, but one that became the official language for a long period of time under the rule of the Anunnaki, and was just “the language” to people. With, heh heh, maybe a hint of the idea of angels “speaking in tongues” there.

Thank you to everybody for your patience and all of the lovely feedback you’ve been leaving! I’ll try to get the next chapter out faster!