

## Ensnared at the Roots

Elliot Romero walks down the silver metal walkway that is a few inches off the ground. Purple “grass” grows on either side of it. His rubber boots clink against the ground, dressed in a blue and black uniform, the tall lanky human with his dirty blond hair and blue eyes is a surprising looker despite the contradictory looks he possesses between wild and untamed and presentable with his uniform. The walkway before him intersects, the cross pathways lead to the rooms about six feet away from where he stood in the middle. The sleek silver door to his right opens, stepping out is a green scaled, stripped anthropomorphic Utahraptor, dressed in a well pressed uniform that shows off her curves, though not intentionally so.

Elliot waves to her, “Morning Kirisha, how’s the miss?” he asks with a bonjoyaval morning voice.

Kirisha stretches, “Aqua is doing fine. She has a later shift in engineering, so I’m letting her sleep in,” she says, stretching and yawning.

“Nice, how’s the eggs?”

“They’re well, still in the incubator. Another three months or so till the girls hatch. Thanks for asking.”

“Any time,” he says, whistling, looking ahead, seeing the end of the hallway as it has a T-intersection. The special glass protects him and the crew of the ship from the vastness of space. The blue pulsar shining out in the distance, “Hello little marble. I hope you’ve been good. Not going critical on us?” he asks.

Slithering past him dressed in a similar uniform as himself is a red scaled cobra hooded naga, “Morning Elliot.”

He turns to him, giving a smile, “Sylander, how’s it going this morning?”

“The snake’s tongue flicks back and forth, his yellow serpentine eyes look at him, the naga towering over the human by a foot and a half, his hood drooping, “Long shift. I had to pull a double and working with the Pflanze can be draining.”

Elliot walks up to him gently patting him on the side, “You’ll get used to it. They are an odd race of plants after all. But they get us from here to there and everywhere.”

“I just feel off that they are to a degree everywhere and we are breathing their waste products.”

“Oh come on. It’s no different than back home with the trees there.”

“Yeah... just different. The trees don’t talk back home.”

“Tell you what. After my shift today we can get a couple of friends to play zero G skee ball?”

“That would be nice. Sorry, I’ve been stressed with the pressure of what we’re watching.”

“Well the pressure there is near a critical blackhole, which is why we’re here. So there is a lot of weight involved,” he chuckles.

Sylander shoots him a look, “Your human puns.”

“Come on, lighten up a bit, it’ll do you some good.”

“I’ll try. Skee ball in nine hours then?”

“Sounds good to me. Talk to you later,” says Elliot, walking off.

It’s then, “walking” into view, along the purple grass is a mix of twisting vines hard blackish wood, with branches that spread out seemingly in odd, twisted directions, giving no real shape. The branches' limbs are twisted and intertwined into a synthetic exoskeleton that it's hard to tell if the plant has grown around the machine or the machine was built into the plant. Brilliant purple leaves sprout out and extend outward, covering much of the reflective metallic body, that’s designed for only function. Plant tendrils with the assistance of the synthetic attachments move the base across the purple glass, roots extend, dig in, absorb water and nutrients. The leaves twitch and shutter with each movement, slowing to a stop next to Elliot.

“Morning Teel. Your leaves are looking for good today,” he compliments.

A synthetic voice responds, **“Your words are graciously accepted. We wish you good health and working conditions. We appreciate you sustaining us with your breath.”**

“And there is a lot more breath where that came from,” he says with a wink, despite knowing that the Pflanze are technically blind. Feeling and sensing the world around them via the changes in pressure in the air around them, the vibrations in the ground through their roots, and direct touch.

**“We must continue. Our direct presence is needed elsewhere. May you continue to grow well,”** the plant responds, body continuing down, stepping over the walkway to make it across, heading down the opposite end of the hallway.”

“Teel has always been the friendliest one.”

“How can you tell which one is which? They’re all connected as a hive mind and to be honest it’s hard to... what’s the word. Differentiate between them. Given they have no true form... or faces, or consistent bodies of any kind, when you can’t tell which way is even the front, it can be rather weird,” says Derek. A soft skinned lithe Caucasian male, about six feet tall, which is a little taller than Elliot. His brown hair is well-combed, his suit clean and proper but his brown eyes show a hint of exhaustion.

“Derek, my man. It’s simple. All you need to do is look for that one unique thing about them and use that as a tell. Sort of like how you can recognize someone by their tattoo.

Derek nods, rubbing his stubby face, “Clever. So, what do you use on Teel?”

“Their right arm, if you want to call it that, has a twist knot in it that looks like a Jesus fish symbol. I see that, and I know who it is.”

“Huh, I never noticed that. You’ll have to point it out to me.”

“Sure. Oh, I’m going to have a zero G skee ball game with Sylander later. You want in?”

“What time?”

“After my shift today. I’m heading to my station now, so about nine or so hours from now.”

“Ah, I’d love to, but I will be dead asleep. Keeping the shields modulated with the pulsar is draining work. And my help, though a prodigy in her own right. She doesn’t have the experience necessary to fully utilize it. So, when she’s there with the assistance? Well I’ve been working a lot of double shifts.”

“Oh, the dragon Nimbus?”

“Yeah, she’s a wild one. And a bit young for the position.”

“Well how often do you get to work with a *young* dragon? Almost never. Normally they were literally born in the dark ages or something.”

Derek chuckled, “You’re just full of surprising insightfulness today Elliot.”

“It’s what I do. Perhaps I’ll see you at the skee ball. Catch you later,” he says patting him on the shoulder, heading down the hallway.

The lights overhead are unique, providing a blue light that reproduces the light wavelengths of the Pflanz homeworld. It makes everything look a little off, but by this point it’s become the norm and hardly noticeable.

He eventually makes his way to the bridge of the ship. There are humans and other anthropomorphic races moving about, with one Pflanze standing near where he enters. Wires from the exoskeleton attach to the ship. A path of purple grass outlines the entire room, with a little bridge walkway path over it that automatically extends and retracts as needed.

The captain, a dark-skinned human, stands at his command post, looking over the information being fed to him via his holographic screen. Dressed in a full-dress uniform, his hair black hair is cut short. His middle-aged face shows the experience of the many years of traversing the stars. He taps the images; the screen flickers a little. His brow furls, looking over to Elliot, his eyes lightning up, “Ah, Chief Engineer Romero. How are you doing on this fine morning?”

“Good and ready to get to work sir. What appears to be the problem?”

“Glad to hear. Right now, it’s a minor problem but being so close to the pulsar anything minor could become major. The reactive hologram has been flickering and has been not responsive. Could you check it out?”

“Sure, thing Captain Barren,” he says, going to a hidden compartment, where he grabs some tools. Captain Barren walks over to a second console, stating a series of commands to take it over as a temporary primary command post. Elliot crouches down by the deactivated command console, starting to run diagnostics, “How’s the wife?”

“She’s good. Always misses me on these long trips, but she knows what she signed up for when she married me.”

“I don’t think you did though when you married her,” he replies, looking over a stream of data.

Captain Barren chuckles, “That I did not.”

“How’s the kids?”

“They’re good, the oldest just got accepted into the academy.”

“Oh, congratulations. He’s trying to be like his old man, eh?”

“I think he just wants to show me up more than anything.”

“You know kids. They always think they can do things better than their parents.”

“Yeah, but they are doing good.”

“Glad to hear it,” he says sifting through the information, “Let’s take a look at the projection crystal. Sometimes they just get a little dirty.” Elliot begins to unscrew the panel, carefully lifting it up. The pulsar shines bright in the distance of space, visible from the front window of the command post. Everyone else working hard on their tasks.

While he works, lifting the console screen up slowly, delicately, he makes quick small talk with the others, “How’s the rest of you? Jim? Perhaps you’d like to do zero G skee ball later, after my shift?”

“Sure.”

“Diana. You’ve been good?”

“Yeah, just long hours,” she replies with a soft sigh.

“Maxwell?”

“I’m good man, thanks for asking. Amazing star we have here. But we have the easy job, keeping a safe distance from this possible supernova,” says the anthropomorphic wolf.

“Iggy, you’re fine?”

“I’m good too.”

“Lowk? You’re doing fine too?” he asks, looking at the Pflanze, the same twist of vines, of machinery and plant, impossible to tell which way is the face, the only thing that is consistent is what’s up and down, left right, front back, is completely arbitrary, and so are its following movements, simply moving as needed in the direction required, without even turning most of the time. Like now, it doesn’t turn to ‘face’ Elliot as it responds, **“We are well. Thank you for asking about us, so consistently.”**

“Not a problem,” he replies, delicately accessing the control console, inspecting the probable cause of the problem, “Huh, that’s strange,” remarks Elliot.

Captain Barren looks to him, “What is it Mr. Romero?”

“The crystal is cracked. Which is not strange, these things can crack and break, but nothing should have happened to cause them to crack,” he responds, holding the crystal in his refined tools, examining it for a closer look.

“Take it to the lab. Let them study it. Perhaps the pulsar is causing damage we are not aware of.”

“Yes Captain.”

“Has there been any other odd things breaking on the ship?”

Elliot takes a moment to think, pulling out his data pad to scroll through recent repairs and what’s in his que. “There’s been some strange issues with the food processors. Not a lot though, only three, but seeing I almost never get calls for those, three is unusual.”

“Make sure you report that to the lab, and check those out next. And if you get anything else strange. Inform me immediately.”

“Yes Captain,” he replies, giving a salute, replacing the crystal, putting everything back together, and running a few diagnostics, making sure everything is good to go before departing.

He moves through the ship, taking the elevator to the lower decks, straight towards the ship’s primary laboratory. The doors slide open revealing a hint of pandemonium. The five research assistants of different races are scrambling all over the place trying to keep up with the center of the chaos, an even quicker moving, anthropomorphic silver dragon. Her ear fins, twitched with delight, running her claws through the data on the holographic screen, blue eyes filled with energy. Her breasts bouncing as she moves, hints of her fully endowed and packaged woman that she is, is briefly visible depending on how she moves through her white lab coat. Her wings spread out elegantly at times, almost knocking down assistants, who have long ago have become accustomed to the dragon’s quick paced movements and eccentric nature.

“Where are those electro-magnetic readings?! And do we have any readings for orbital drone three yet? It should have been transmitting back readings fifteen minutes ago!” she exclaims. Her voice is soft, and elegant, despite the rushed and urgent nature of what’s going on she speaks with a respectful concern and kindness that is hidden on the layer of her core personality.

Elliot bobs and weaves through the other scientists moving his way towards her, “Hey Jane, keep up the good work. Roberto, looking good in that coat, Marseek, your claws are sharp and deadly as ever, watch the tail though!” he exclaims jumping over it, “Billy, you need a coffee, want me to get you one after this?” he asks, while pushing his way toward the center of this storm.

All sorts of advanced computer equipment and reading machinery hum and are working on overtime. The only one, who appears to be moving at a steady pace is the only Pflanze in the room, which is moving along the edges of the room, processing data, roots sinking into the ground whenever it stops before withdrawing to move again, “Chosh, you’re still in here?” asked Elliot toward the plant.

“**We always work here,**” it responds.

“Downside of never sleeping I suppose” he says, suddenly playing limbo under the dragon’s spreading wings, “Nimbus! Watch the wings my pal. You might knock someone out with those.”

“Yes, yes, this is coming along nicely. Ooo, but I wonder if... no, no, that won’t work, or could it? I’ll have to start working on that soon.”

“Nimbus?”

“If all goes according to plan, my gravitational movement theory could be proven here. All I’ll need to do is...”

“Nimbus, hello?” asks Elliot, moving around to get beside her.

“Yes, yes, if I just...”

“Nimbus?”

Nimbus jumps in surprise, “Ah! Don’t sneak up on me like that. I’m incredibly busy.”

“The captain wanted you to look at the hologram processing crystal.”

“Moment, moment! Star 41e621 is on the verge of going supernova. An intergalactic event like none other, that can be witnessed in any of our lifetimes. The mysteries before me or tantalizing that I could taste it! And it tastes like... ham-raspberries... wait no that was my breakfast.”

“But it's a mystery as to why it would break.”

Nimbus half muttering to themselves, ear fins twitching at the word ‘mystery’, “A mystery you say?” she asks, leaning closer.

“Yeah. In all my years doing this, I never saw one of these breaks without due cause. The Captain thinks perhaps the pulsar has something to do with it.”

“I'm not sure how that would be even possible. He could be mistaken perhaps?”

“Could you take a moment to look at it? I would be grateful. And perhaps you could join me for a zero G skeeball game later?”

“Hmm,” she says, leaning in close, looking down at the crystal in Elliot's hand. The dragon who has a half a foot in height over him, picks it up delicately with her claws, bringing in closer to her eye before sniffing it, giving the crystal a tongue tip lick, “Hmm,” she mutters swishing the flavor in her mouth, “Perhaps this could be interesting. And I will see about the game. There is just too much to do, and so little time! It's an exciting time to be alive! My professors say the plague was, but no, the time is now!” she says with a giggle fit of excitement.

“Well, if you come up with anything, please let me and the Captain know. If it's something that I can do to keep this ship running smoothly, all the better.”

“You helped design the ship to work with the Pflanze's technology. I'll be sure to do so. Though being a simple engineer on this mission is a little lackluster, don't you think Elliot?”

“With a mission like this, you need someone who knows this ship better than none other. Someone else might have gotten it wrong... now where did I hear those words before...” he says, muttering to himself, before shrugging, “Skee ball is an hour after my shift. See you there.”

“Yes, yes, yes. Now, let me work please,” she says, drawn into the crystal, moving it to one of the analysis machines, getting to work on it, while rebooting her other projects, the other scientists, who were glad to have a moment to breathe are drawn back into the torrent.

Elliot left them to their duties, while going back to his own. Going to fix the food processors, checking them out, and upon finish fixing the third one sometime later, he says, “Contact Captain Barren, code twenty-three, authorized user Chief Engineer Elliot Romero.”

**“Authorization accepted, contacting Captain Barren.”**

The room he's in, a small private lunch in place, for anyone on the ship that wanted to have a ‘couple's dinner’ was allowed to book, but due to the food processor issue, it was currently closed. The windows here showed the gorgeous view of the pulsar which is bright enough to cause light pollution and blot out any other stars. A holographic display of the captain by his controlled console is displayed, “Yes Mr. Romero. What is it?”

“I just finished fixing the last food processor, and I thought you'd like to hear what I discovered.”

“Excellent. What have you found?”

“Their energy to matter converters are damaged, causing the system to notify me there is an issue.”

“How serious is it?”

“Nothing very serious. This kind of damage would have made the food taste a little off and be of poor nutritional value. The gazelles were happy to have me fixed their private one. You know how the Pflanze can get when they see herbivores eating.”

“Yeah, an instinctual reaction to it... But they were damaged? Any idea how?”

“Not sure. These are over designed to be extra stable. I’ll have to turn them in the lab. Perhaps it has something to do with the Pulsar Captain.”

“Perhaps, but do you have any thoughts that the pulsar is the reason?”

“All of the processors are at the bow of the ship, which is facing towards the pulsar.”

“We haven’t gotten any strange spikes in any form of radiation,” says Captain Barren.

“Not sure what else to tell you Captain. But whatever it is, it might be that.”

“I’ll increase power to the forward shields, just to play it safe.”

“That might interfere with the readings from the Pulsar.”

“Safety over science,” he says, tapping on his holographic screen, “Thank you for the report. Good work, Mr. Romerio.”

“Thank you, Captain. Now if you don’t mind, all this time working on the food processors has made me hungry. Permission to break for lunch.”

“Go right ahead Mr. Romero. Enjoy the break. Thank you for the update.”

“Thank you, Captain,” he replies, whistling on his way toward the mess hall. There people of all sorts are enjoying their meals, surprisingly he sees Derek sitting by himself, with a cup of coffee, taking a slow sip, while poking at a hamburger, with holographic projection from a data pad before him.

Elliot passes a few other people, giving quick hello, how you’re doing. Getting a nice steak and a “meat bulb” loaded with everything. The sweet succulent smell fills the air around his tray. He sits down near Derek, who looks up at him, “Hey, aren’t you supposed to be asleep?”

Derek lets out a long-drawn-out yawn, taking another sip of his coffee, “There’s a lot of supposed to be’s, here, and sleep is one. I’ll be getting some shut eye soon, after this little midnight snack.”

“It’s not midnight.”

“For me it is.”

“Good point,” replies Elliot, taking a bite of the meat bulb, “It looks like meat, but tastes like a loaded baked potato. What a time to be alive.”

“You know the Pflanze. They feel more comfortable around carnivores.”

“We eat what eats them. It is rather amusing,” Elliot replies, taking another bite, “These food replicators are working well at least.”

“Something wrong with them?”

“A few have been a little off, but nothing major. I still have a full workload ahead of me. I’ll have to double time my work in order to be ready for skee ball after work. But what’s got you up so late?”

“I’ll give you one guess.”

“Nimbus?”

“Yup. Nothing against her. But she can’t get so excited in her work... She called me about the holograph crystal.”

“The one I gave her?”

“So it was you? You really get around everywhere on this ship.”

“What can I say. It’s a gift being me.”

Derek chuckles, “You know everyone and that’s a feat. I think only the Captain can compare to that dedication.”

“He’s the Captain, he’s on a level of his own. But I must say, you have sparked my curiosity, Derek. What has the dragon found?”

“Still working on that myself, just like she is. But to be honest I’m a bit too tired to deal with this. But once I got up, I had to eat something, and while here? Might as well look at it.”

“You know, if you can’t make it to the skee ball game. I’ll completely understand.”

“I’ll see. A bit of relaxation will be good.”

“Exactly,” he says just as a Pflanze walks into the room, following along the grass along the edges of the room toward their destination. Most people don’t even pay any heed to the walking plant, but Eliot gives a wave, “Teel, are you following me?”

The plant doesn’t turn toward him. For a moment it’s hard to even tell if it registered his presence and spoken to him, but then it replies, **“We are not. The oxygen demands require our presence.”**

Elliot nods, the plant about three yards away from where he is sitting, given a quick look around at the relatively full room, “Hmm, well it is lunch time, doesn’t surprise me. Keep up the good work Teel.”

**“Thank you. Your efforts do not go unnoticed by us,”** Teel replies.

Derek takes another sip of his coffee, “You must have good vision. I couldn’t see the giveaway marking that you spoke about.”

“Oh, well from this side, Teel’s vines twist in a way that it looks like the infinity symbol on an angle,” he says, motioning, “On the lower left tendril, second one in.”

“Looks like an angled eight to me,” replies Derek with a smirk.

“No, it’s an infin... oh, you got me there,” he chuckles.

Derek finishes up the rest of his meal, “I need to get some more sleep. I’ll catch you later.”

“Rest well.”

“Thanks,” he replies, Derek heading off. Elliot getting up, sitting next to another person, striking up a conversation, while he finishes up his meal.

The rest of his day went without a major issue. Working through the various problems the ship is currently experiencing. After a quick shower and a quicker meal, he heads down to the recreational center of the ship located in the far back underneath the main engineering. There is a menagerie of species hanging out, having fun, playing some form of recreation. There are three Pflanze that monitor the area, doing their tasks, 'relaxing' as it were, while producing valuable oxygen for those exerting themselves.

Elliot already found the small group of friends have already gathered, stripped down to light airy clothing. Around their hands and feet are specialized gloves that have metal skeleton on the outside, with round circle points around the knuckles. A similar bit is on their shoes. Though Sylander being a naga and lacking that distinction of having legs and feet, has a series of four rings along the snake half of his body. Each of them also have a silver collar around their neck that glows in a color matching the devices they are wearing.

Elliot smiles, waving to them, "Ah you all could make it, great. I'm sorry for running a little late. I got caught up at the last moment and it put me behind," he says, looking over them, "Jim, I hope your shift wasn't too hard."

"It is what it is," the human responds.

"Derek, you get some sleep?"

He chuckles, "Not enough. But I will admit I wasn't expecting to see you here Nimbus."

Nimbus gives him a little look, "What? Can't a girl relax too?"

"No, but honestly I thought work was your relaxation, seeing how you go about it."

"Even genius needs a proper break," she replies with a smirk.

"Sylander, how are you feeling? Ready for some Zero G skee ball?" asks Elliot.

"I'm up for the challenge."

Elliot looks to the last of the group, a male red scaled anthropomorphic dragon with black stripes and dazzling yellow eyes, "Thorphax, I know got you at the last minute, but good to see you could come. I needed you for this plan of mine to work."

Thorphax cocks an eye ridge, "What plan is that?"

"Well, can't have skins vs. scales without a third scaly now, could we?" Elliot says with a smirk.

He chuckles, "Ah, I see what you mean, but why would you do such a thing?"

"What do you mean?"

"It would put your team at a clear disadvantage. Two dragons? That's already a little unfair."

"Well, I see your point. It would put you at an unfair disadvantage, but I think you would like the challenge."

"Hey, that is not what I meant," he said, while everyone else has a little laugh.

Thorphax lets out a soft sigh, his massive wings drooping a little. Nimbus walks up to him patting him on the shoulder, "Don't worry. We'll make them eat those words. We have a quick reflex naga on our team. We can't lose," she explains.

Sylander slithers up to them, “Zero G skee ball is a little harder for my race, but it shall be fun. I’ll try not to let you down,” he says.

Elliot speaks up, “It’s all about having fun. Now give me a moment to get my gear on,” he says, waving to them while he heads to the nearby locker room, checking out a set of gear for skee ball. A set of sensor shoes and gloves, with the cognitive neck controller that is placed around his neck to enable the full outfit. His sensor glows a soft yellow, showing they are activated and synced up with his collar. He grabs a blue and yellow rubber ball about four inches in diameter on his way out, “Can’t forget the ball,” he mutters.

When he heads back, he’s greeted by the others having some conversations with each other, which ends when they see him approach, “Ready for the game of the century?” he asks with gusto.

“The 19th century,” chuckles Thorphax.

“We’ll see about that,” says Elliot, taking lead toward the Zero G room, which has already been set up for Skee ball. There are warnings on the doors that indicate that past this point that the artificial gravity has been disabled, and no food or liquids are allowed in the zero-gravity room.

The room is a rectangle, fifty feet in height, and width, a hundred in length. Metal rings are placed at ten feet intervals horizontally and vertically along the walls of the room, crisscrossing each other like a loose weaver’s basket. On either side of the room there are a set of rings that expand and extend like an elliptical orbit that grows more cylindrical with each ring towards the center. The outer ring is highlighted indicating 10 points. The next is 25, then 50, with the last being 100. All along the walls there are these colored circles, some green, others blue, and the last is red.

“I should have asked but is everyone familiar with rules?” asks Elliot, stepping into the threshold of the room, his body instantly becoming weightless, the drag of gravity lifted and with it he gingerly begins to float forward into the room, the others not far behind him.

Nimbus raises her claw, “I will admit I haven’t played the game before.”

Thorphax turns to her with a look of shock on his face, “What, you’ve never played skee ball?”

“I’m in my twenties, what do you expect?”

Elliot chuckles, “I hope we give you a good first game,” he says, floating across the room, “You did run the tutorial on how the sensors work?” he asks.

“I did, you use your actions and your mind to activate them to provide a shield surface to jump from or to stop yourself,” says Nimbus.

“Exactly, like so,” says Elliot, thinking on his feet, which glow brighter, the sensors across the room activating providing a on point shield for him to harmless jump from, moving across the room, using newton’s laws of physics to turn himself and activate the wall on demand again, a soft yellow glow reveals the invisible wall for just a moment before it blinks out of existence. Elliot flies across the room, activating one of the gloves to make sharp turns bouncing off the ‘ceiling’ of the room before slowing himself down to land toward the center of the room.

“If you need a moment to get accustomed to it, go right ahead.”

Nimbus puffs her chest, “I think I can figure it out on the go. I’m really on the job learning kind of gall.”

He shrugs, “Suit yourself. Now for scoring, what are we doing? A quick game? Normal game? Or a long game?”

“What’s the difference?” asks Nimbus.

Thorphax quickly explains, “A quick game is the first team to a thousand points. Which can be technically done in a single shot. If you manage to bounce the ball off the red points and into the hundred-point ring without any one’s interference.”

“The red point?” Nimbus asks.

Derek speaks up, “There are point enhancers. Bounce it off the green circle and into the circles you get double the points over a straight shot. Bounce it off the blue it’s a fivefold increase. The red is ten.”

Thorphax further clarifies, “Meaning if we are playing a short game of a thousand points. A single red bounce into the center ring, means a thousand points and game over. I vote for a normal game of five thousand points.”

Derek nods, “I’m up for that too. Any longer would be too long for me. I’m already operating on fumes here.”

Sylander slithers across, flicking his body, activating the rings around his snake body, propelling him toward the center of the room, “That’s my vote.”

“I’m already hearing a resounding majority for a normal game. Jim? You’ve been quiet, what do you think?”

“Normal will be fine with me,” he replies.

“Excellent,” says Elliot, moving to the center of the room, “Oh, one more rule you should know Nimbus.”

“What’s that?” she asks with a wing flutter which starts her to accidentally to spin around, “Oh, oh uh no. Newton you’ve won this round!” she exclaims, straightening herself up.

“If you notice due to the rings the court is split into ten-by-ten-foot cubes. While you are holding the ball, you won’t be able to take the ball out of that ten-foot cube. Meaning you will either need to pass it or move the ball with you and guard it along the way.”

“Oh, good to know, good to know,” she says, nodding repeatedly, “This game requires more brains than I thought. Far different from what I initially thought when you said skee ball.”

Thorphax inquires, “You mean the long tables where you roll the ball?”

“Yeah that. But then I realized I didn’t look up, Zero G skee ball. Boy would I’ve been embarrassed if I had no clue what we were going to play,” she says with a giggle.

Elliot replies, “Don’t worry. We’d have let you know. Now let’s have some fun. If no one else wants to take point, I will,” says Elliot.

Dereck responds, “I’ll take the right flank.”

“I’ll go left,” remarks Jim.

“I can take center for my team,” says Thorphax.

“I’ll take left,” says Sylander, slithering over to his point.

“By process of elimination that leaves me with the right,” says Nimbus, taking her position. The teams floating in the center of the room, across from each other mirroring the positions, the ball placed in the very center of the room, Elliot tapping on it to activate the “holding” position of the ball to make it perfectly centered, before he glides to his position.

“Good luck everyone. Start on three Thorphax?” he asks, taking up his position, hovering just off the edge of his cube, the shoes and feet glowing, eyes focused.

“Sounds good to me. On three not three then go?” Thorphax asks, taking up his mirrored position, wings furled, the muscular dragon ready to use his prowess.

“On three, not three then go,” Elliot clarifies.

“Got it,” he says, tensing, giving a predatory look toward the ball in the center, “You’re lucky this isn’t a heavy contact sport kind of game, but I’d be careful Elliot, the start can always be a little wild.”

“Thank you for the warning,” he replies, taking a deep breath, “One... two... THREE!” he exclaims, he and Thorphax leaping forward toward the ball. Derek and Jim move to new positions while Sylander does the same. Nimbus takes the moment to watch what is going on, taking in the first moments of chaos, processing people’s moves.

Elliot is the first to reach the ball, grabbing it, sliding right underneath Thorphax, who just missed his chance to grab it by less than a second, but the human gives the dragon no time to try to guard, he spins and throws the ball toward Derek who catches it, the force sends him back to his cube, which he bounces off, leaping forward, tossing the ball over to Jim, before he reaches the end of his cube, allowing him to be propelled forward toward the other side of the room.

“Did I ever tell you; I was the header for my state champion skee ball team?” asks Elliot to Thorphax, giving a wave to spin himself away, propelling him toward the other team goal.

Nimbus takes the moment to move toward Jim, using her wings to help make it difficult to pass the ball forward, but Jim throws the ball upward, toward the wall, bouncing it off the ceiling while he pushes himself past Nimbus, who huffs, “Three-Dimensional chess, right. This is going to be more fun than I thought,” she grins, giving chase, trying to head off the human toward the ball.

They reach for the ball the two becoming neck and neck but with a flap of Nimbus’ wings, she manages to edge out the lead, her claw tips catching the ball, as she then bounces off the edge of the cube moments later, then to the other side, bouncing twice over, the shields themselves feel like a soft force that absorbs about half the impact allowing her to quickly slow down, and give Jim time to take position to try to block her.

Derek and Elliot pull a 180, heading back across the court while Sylander waves his arms, “Over here.”

“Got it, here you go!” exclaims Nimbus, Jim just managing to tip the ball sending it going wild, but the naga coils himself forward, propelling himself like a torpedo toward the ball intercepting it before the mistake could have been fully taken advantage of.

“Thorphax, catch!” he exclaims, throwing the ball down the court toward the red dragon. The ball whizzes through the air, Thorphax turning to catch it but Elliot intercepts it two cube spaces ahead of him and before he even reaches the end of his space he throws the ball up and forward, having it bounce off a wall, while he propels himself forward, to catch it, in essence passing himself the ball.

Elliot catches Derrek off to the side closer to the goal, Thorphax and Sylander rushing to his position, leaving the other human open. He bounces it over to him

Derek prepares himself to catch the ball, positioning himself on the edge of the cube when Nimbus comes screeching through like a bird of prey grabbing the ball and throwing it straight across the room right toward the rings.

Jim the closest one there, tries to intercept the ball, his hand just missing it as he tries to propel himself forward faster, but the ball is too fast to catch up in time, and it hits dead center.

“Alright! I did it!” she cheers happily, her body showing the various parts of her that have plenty of momentum.

Thorphax smirks, “See, you are outclassed by us dragons,” he states, turning toward Nimbus, cheering “Great work hun!”

Elliot smiles, “That was an awesome shot! We’ll be in trouble if you make more of those,” he yells, the ball being reset in the center. A small crowd gathering to watch the game from the outside, as the entire length of one side of the room is windowed, giving a clear view of the entire court, “If we get a bigger crowd, they may want us to have a full-on competition.”

Thorphax looks to the small but growing crowd, “Perhaps, but that means you better put on a good show.”

“Oh, we will,” he replies, “One... two... THREE!”

Despite early successes by the scaly team, it was not a one-sided battle. Back and forth the two teams worked to edge out an advantage. Elliot being the spearhead for his team, with Derek providing lots of support. Thorphax, the strength of his team with appropriate support from Sylander, and a wild card that is Nimbus. Jim on the other hand was that silent killer type where out of nowhere he’d do well, scoring some big points that would bring the human side into an edging lead.

Elliot bounces the ball off the red square, sending it careening towards the center, but Thorphax at the last moment, tips the ball, sending it careening off course. Those watching cheer on the other side of the glass. Nimbus recovers the ball, tossing it to Sylander. The three pass the ball between them, while Elliot and his crew rush to keep up. They are all panting heavily, the humans are sweating while the dragons are glistening with a cooling scale oil, while Sylander is feeling the burn.

Another attempt to make a bounce shot, off the blue spot aiming towards the center ring but Derek intercepts the ball, catching it moments before it could reach the goal. He passes the ball to himself, bouncing it off the wall, and with a quick catch and release, he throws the ball toward Jim who redirects the ball back to Elliot, who is two thirds down the court.

The other team scrambles to catch up to him, left in the open, he takes what little time he has to position himself for a perfect red bounce shot back toward the center. He throws the ball, the red spot glowing, indicating a successful hit, the rings glowing in kind, giving the indication that if the ball gets to the center ring, it will be thousand points, and with the score 9,000 to 9250, it will be a clear win for his team.

“Come on! Come on!” exclaims Elliot, just as Thorphax and Nimbus fly past him, using their draconic heritage to full use, on a crash course with the ball, only the angle required to make this shot, and the long-distance bounce has given them any hope to tap the ball and prevent the impending loss.

They reach out, there is a sudden shake, the entire room pivots, the ball misses its mark by a wide margin. They see everyone who was watching completely knocked off their feet. The room continues to spin while things are tossed and turned in the game room. The ship’s emergency sirens blare, the lights flicker as there are short moments where gravity is lost in the main recreational room.

“Oh fuck,” says Elliot, rushing toward the door, which is constantly shifting, but steadily becoming more stable, things calming down from his perspective just he reaches the door, the others are not far behind, gravity returning to them, the ship’s backup systems automatically coming online.

The ship's automatic warning system states, **“Warning, hull breach detected in sectors 1.1, 5.1, 8.1, 9.1. Refrain from entering these sectors without atmospheric equipment.”**

Elliot felt a cold chill run down his spine. He turns to Jim, “Who was on the main deck?”

Jim swallows a lump in his throat, “I don’t know who for certain except Captain Baren.”

“Okay, let’s not panic. We’ll have to report to emergency stations,” he says, rushing to the locker room, to quickly get dressed, grabbing his communicator, tossing the skee ball equipment to the side.

Everyone else was in a similar mindset as him, Thorphax saying, “I’m going to be needed in the engine room. I’m sure they’ll need help there,” he says, the ship rattles again, albeit less than the first time.

Nimbus slips into her lab coat, “I’ll see what caused it. You coming Derek?” she asks with concern in her voice.

“Whatever it is, it can’t be good, but we’ll have to discover what happened before it happens again,” he responds.

“I don’t know how I could not have detected something like this before hand,” grumbles Nimbus.

“We don’t know what happened yet, you can’t blame yourself,” says Derek.

“Part of our job is to monitor the star, it has to be the cause behind it,” she huffs, her wings fluttering, claws shaking.

Derek places a hand on her shoulder, “Relax. We can’t predict everything. One thing at a time right now.”

Nimbus takes a slow deep breath, slowly releasing it, “You’re right. Let’s find out what happened first.”

“It’s best not to jump to conclusions before all the evidence,” he replies.

All the while Elliot is using his communicator, “Captain Baren? Captain Baren do you read me? Are you there Captain Baren?”

Jim walks up to Elliot, “Maybe the communication system is down, and we just can’t reach him.”

Elliot tenses, “Chief Engineer to engine room. Can you read me?”

“Yeah, we can read you.”

“How’s everything there?”

“Engines took some damage in whatever it was, but the cores are stable. So, at the moment we aren’t at risk of a critical meltdown.”

“That’s good. I’ll be there soon,” he replies, ending communication, looking toward Jim, “I don’t think so Jim.”

Jim’s shoulders slump, “I’ll find First mate Bartley. Hopefully, she wasn’t there at the time.”

“We can only hope,” he says, everyone taking their separate ways, the sirens continue to blare in the background, a constant reminder of the situation they are in, red lights glow through the ship giving a visual reminder of the serious situation.

Thorphax and Elliot rush down a corridor, climbing the emergency ladder up towards the engine room, the dragon speaking up, “I know this isn’t the best time to say this, but in case we don’t have a chance later.”

Elliot looks up at him, “Relax. We’ll make it...”

“Still. I want to say, good game. You really showed me up. I haven’t had a human give me such a run in a long time. I was... a little overconfident.”

“It’s fine. Right now, we’re going to need that confidence as second engineer, I know you can handle your stuff.”

The dragon huffs, “I’ve been doing this job longer than you’ve been alive.”

“There’s the Thorphax I know,” Elliot smirks, the two reaching the pandemonium of engineering. The massive spherical cores hum with energy, floating within cylindrical tubes, reverberating with energy that can be felt with every step in the room. Even here, there are plant pathways around the room, along the edges and towards the main engines, the grass shuddering from the vibrations, the Pflanze twitching, as they slowly work around the machines, using their synthetic tentacles to do most of the grunt work.

The dragon flicks his wings, “The hatchlings are purring just fine. So, the report of the damage here being minimal is about right,” he remarks.

“Good, good. I’m still impressed you can feel how they are functioning almost as fast as systems inform us,” says Elliot, waving to a few other engineers, getting some other quick reports, as they are updated on the current situation.

“I was around when the first version of these set of gonads was invented.”

“Did you just call them gonads?” Elliot asks, raising an eyebrow.

“What else do they look like?”

He shrugs, “Just checking my hearing,” he says, going over to a control panel tapping the holographic screen which feels less responsive than it should be, “The crystals must have been damaged in that jolt.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me, the ship took a tumble and a spin, but we don’t have the sensor data here to make any conclusions,” he responds, tapping his claws at a different holographic projection, having similar difficulties.

“I wonder... but first, I need to see what’s going on the bridge,” says Elliot, feeling the weight of the situation press down upon him, swallowing down his fears, braving it, he uses his authority to get a view of the bridge and what greets him and all those in engineering brings a momentary pause to everyone in the room, except for the Pflanze who continue to work, with an occasional shudder.

The front of the bridge has been completely bashed in through some kind of explosive force. Metal is sheared inward while there is no debris within the room, as it's all been sucked out into space, including those who were inside, all the only life left there, though for not very long is the purple grass which is already losing its color in the coldness of space.

“All the rooms that were damaged were in the front of the ship, towards the star. If I was a betting man... which I am. I’d bet that the star has something to do with it, but we’ll need more. First let’s make sure the shields are fully operational. And we’re able to make a jump out of here.”

“Agreed, running diagnostics now,” says Thorphax, working with the faulty holographic screen.

Moments later a female voice speaks up, “Chief Engineer Elliot, are you there?”

“First Mate Bartley are you okay?” he asks with concern in his voice.

“Yeah,” she replies with a soft cough, “Barely though. My communicator got knocked out, but I was lucky. I was just on my way to the bridge when whatever hit us just happened. I’m in the secondary control room right now. How’s our power situation?”

“Stable so far. But if whatever happens again? And our ship is facing toward that pulsar, I’m not so sure.”

“Explain.”

“All the damage is from the bow of the ship, which was facing the star. I don’t know our current orientation, but if you can have the ship’s nonessentials face toward the star. And I recommend an immediate withdrawal from the area before we are hit ag--” Elliot’s words are cut off the ship is rocked again albeit by a lesser hit than before. The force of the hit almost knocks them off their feet.

Bartley a few moments later says, “Everyone alright down there?”

“Checking now,” Elliot replies looking over the diagnostic screen which flickers more, “Our holographic crystals appear to be taking more damage with these blasts, though the engine

cores are currently at 98.32% stability. Which is down from the 99.83% earlier. Not much but not something I want to bank on us to stay here longer than we have to.”

“Agreed. I’ll be accepting your recommendation Chief Engineer Romero that we depart the area immediately and assess the situation from a safe distance. I’ll inform you when we are ready to jump. In about ten minutes.”

“Yes Captain.”

“Please... just keep it to Bartley,” she replies with a hint of sadness in her voice, that weighed down her words.

“I understand Bartley.

“Over and out,” she replies.

Thorphax, you think you can get the engines ready for the jump?” he asks, looking to him.

The dragon spreads his wings, puffing out his chest, “Need you to ask? Consider it already done.”

“Excellent. I’ll inform Derek of the situation.”

“Got it.”

Elliot is about to make the call when Bartley connects to him again, “Chief Engineer Romero. We have a problem.”

“You’ll have to clarify, which problem are you referring to?”

“Sorry. But the Pflanze just informed me we can’t jump. Something about missing the lead engineer navigator. You know how to talk to these plants better than I do. Perhaps you can figure out what’s happening?”

“Sure, connect me to it.”

“Call connected.”

“What’s the problem?” he asks, the communication is completely audible, making it impossible to know who is on the other end.

**“We are missing part of us. We cannot complete the navigation of the hyper drive system without us being complete.”**

“Who is missing?”

**“Part of us.”**

“Can you clarify which part?”

**“Lowk, Teel and Bran.”**

“Lowk and Teel were at the bridge?”

**“No. Branches were lost in section 1.1, 5.1 and section 8.1. We are incomplete. Unable to make the jumps.”**

“Shit. Do we have any other backups?”

**“All back up branches were lost.”**

Elliot feels the air around him growing heavy, “Not good, not good. What about short-range navigation jumps, using the data on the primary computer systems?”

**“Damaged by the pulsar Starburst.”**

“It was a starburst? How do you know?”

**“We are watching.”**

“That does not sound good.”

**“It is not,”** the Pflanze responds, when being caught softly on the audio transmission is Derek calling Bartley.

“Captain. We have an issue. This star is suddenly going critical. It’s going to go supernova and soon. We need to jump out of here immediately if we are going to make it out of here alive.”

“Sorry to interrupt you two,” says Barely, speaking to Elliot, “But is there a way to get a jump?”

“Without calculating a jump of the magnitude, we need to get to a safe distance. We’re as good as dead. Navigating the hyperplanes is like surfing. You need to know and feel how they work in order to make the jumps work. Otherwise, you crash and burn.”

“You have experience with jumps Chief Engineer Romero?”

“I do, but not on this kind of ship. It was designed to work with the Pflanze as they are the core component of the ship’s navigational and life support systems.”

“You helped design the ship, and you don’t have a non-race specific intergalactic navigation system?”

“We do, but this is a prototype ship that was rushed to get here due to the critical situation of the pulsar star. Which is why I came personally to help.”

“Great. There anything we can do?”

“Working on it Bartley.”

“Keep me posted. But I can’t even turn the ship to get farther away. According to this data you and Derek have given me, the ship itself is protecting the internals from damage. If we turn the ship at the wrong time, and we get hit by another pulse. We could lose our engines and that will be all she wrote.”

“We’ll think of something. We’ll just need a little time to think this out.”

“Let’s hope we have the time, but one problem at a time. I’ll face the non-essential part of the ship face towards the star and move everyone toward the other side. It’ll be a little cramped, but it will be safer.”

Suddenly Nimbus is heard in the background, “We are in the center of the ship and will be fine. We’ll get what data we see if we can predict the pulses. That might ease things if we increase power to the shields before we’re hit.”

“Good idea, do it,” says Bartley, turning her attention back to Elliot, “Do what you can. Update me when you are able. Over and out.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

**“We’ve communicated. Options are limited. Replacement chief navigator is required.”**

“And we have no suitable Pflanze operators on the ship?”

**“No. All our rooted knowledge was lost in an instant.”**

“That doesn’t sound good at all. Fuck. Is there a way to go about it? I have knowledge, but the systems aren’t designed for me. Perhaps we could rig something up?”

**“It is unknown. We will Mycorrhiza and return to you with our ideas.”**

“You are taking this very seriously. Not sure if I should be happy or worried. Adjusting ship’s internal life support systems to adjust.”

“**Thank you,**” the Pflanze says, ending the conversation.

Thorphax looks to him curiously, “I know a lot of things, but I have never heard the Pflanze use that term, what does it mean?” he asks, not noticing the Pflanze in the room are getting up and leaving, following the grass path.

“There’s no direct translation to the word, so they talk about a root relationship back on Earth between trees and mushrooms to explain them grouping up to have a conversation,” Elliot explains.

“Then why don’t they say they are going to meet up and have a talk?”

“Because they don’t talk the same way we do. But why did they decide not to say that in the first place? To be honest I never asked. Might be something interesting to talk about, but right now we have other things to be concerned about.”

“That we do. Speaking of which, what can we do? The only good thing we have going right now is that the engines are working.”

“How are the shields?”

“Let’s see,” mutters Thorphax, tapping on the holographic screen, trying a few times before it registers, the screen constantly flickering, “The shields facing toward the star are showing signs of damage, but the ones on our side are almost at peak efficiency.”

“Something about this star is messing with the transposition crystals. I need to get over to the labs and see if there is anything there that Nimbus discovered before this happened.”

“Do you think it could be important?” asks Thorphax, tilting his head to the side in curiosity.

Elliot sighs, “I’m not sure but what else do we have going for us? See if you can make a manifest of what needs to be repaired. And assign all available crew to the task, any that you feel that needs my hands-on experience, let me know.”

“I’ll be sure to do so. Hopefully we can figure something out to get out of here or survive till we can... hey did we call for help?” he asks.

“Not sure. That’s something for the captain to do..., well would have been the captain. It’s now in Bartley’s jurisdiction. We’re in charge of making sure we can transmit. But good idea, run a diagnostic on the communications array. Last we need is to have the subspace communications to be severed.”

“Already on it.”

“I knew I could count on you. I’ll be back soon,” he replies, rushing off through the ship, halfway to his destination as another rumble and jolt hits, shuddering the ship, shaking everyone inside the vessel, making everyone feel like it’s a rather strong aftershock after an earthquake.

Elliot leans against the wall, regaining his balance, feeling the ship regain its positioning, he contacts Thorphax, “Is everyone alright there?”

“Yeah, some other damages to the ship are coming in but nothing major yet. But at this rate, something is going to give. We can’t keep taking these. I’ll be making a report and handing it to Bartley in just a moment.”

“Good to know. I’m almost to the labs. Hopefully, they might have found something by then.”

“I’d say you could have called but you tend to be an in-person kind of human.”

“Sorry to give you the impersonal call.”

“Not a worry,” Thorphax chuckles.

Elliot soon enough reaches the labs, the same level of hecticness filling the area, only doubled with Derek being the island in a stormy sea. Remaining calm, albeit showing levels of exhaustion despite the hour or so since this all began.”

The human scientist walks over to him, “Elliot, what are you doing here? There something wrong with the communication systems?”

“No, but I had to come in person. I wanted to ask if there was anything found out about the damaged hologram crystal.”

Derek lifts an eye ridge, “That is one hell of a thing to be asking about at a time like this. Are you sure you, okay?”

“Yeah, there is something about the damaged crystals that has been bothering me, and more of them became damaged after the first jolt.”

“I’m not an expert on them, but wouldn’t that be expected after what happened?”

“Trust me. It’s just a feeling I’m having.”

“Nimbus was the one you had working on it if I recall, yes?”

“It was.”

Derek looks over to Nimbus who is huddled over a holographic keypad, tapping on it with some frustration. Her claws twitching, wings furling, “It’s so bothersome when the machines work slower than me,” she grumbles.

“Nimbus, I need you over here for a moment.”

Nimbus lifts her head, wings spreading wider, looking over at them, “Elliot? What are you doing here?” she asks, rushing over to them, just as a lesser shake hits the ship, causing her to stumble and fall into Elliot’s arms. Her large form, and hefty bust pressing up against him. Elliot doing his best to keep her propped up in this sudden impromptu close moment.

“Are you okay?” Elliot asks with a smile.

Nimbus gives a soft blush her cheek scales gaining a soft pinkish hue, before she regains her composure, “Yes, yes. Thank you for that. Though we have been having issues. According to what data we have managed to ascertain. There was no warning before we were hit by the pulsar star.”

“How is that possible? What about the drones near the star?” asks Elliot with concern in his voice.

“Kaputt.”

“And our shipboard sensors? Did the drones possibly send out something? Or perhaps we could send out drones and when we lose contact with them, it would give us warning that something is coming? Perhaps allowing us to supercharge the shields for just long enough to counteract the pulsar stars pulses, buying us time to solve our other problems.”

Derek speaks up, “We thought about that, but the issue is, with what we managed to get from our drones came after we were hit. In other words, the signal we get from our drones is slower than what hits us.”

“How is that possible?”

“What’s hitting us is going faster than our technology can relay back to us. The time it takes our sensors to read something and get back to us, it’s already here.”

Nimbus nods, letting out a soft sigh, “And therein lies the problem. We have to figure out how to read something that is faster than what we can do. It’s like trying to dodge a lightning bolt by listening for the thunder.”

Elliot, thinks for a moment, “Well perhaps why I am here could be of use.”

“Explain,” says Derek and Nimbus in unison, the two then look at each other in surprise.

“I had to fix a bunch of transposition crystals. They are the things that allow the hologram screens to work and enable food processors to turn energy into food. They were all showing damage, and this was before the big one hit us. Then afterwards, all of them were acting up. I am guessing that perhaps maybe...”

Nimbus’ eyes light up, “That perhaps we can use the crystals to be a canary in the coal mine. When they are acting up we can get a window before we are to be hit by the pulsar star. I did manage to look at the crystal and it was showing some peculiar damage. Though if I am to be honest, I am not sure what to make of it. Perhaps some subatomic particle or super-subatomic particle damage that is throwing the careful crystalline structure out of place, though these things not able to take a hard physical hit are not so sensitive to things like radiation, but we are protected from that. If it was something like that, we’d all be in trouble.”

“Nimbus, can you show me what you have found? Perhaps I can take a look at it. Maybe there is something there that you could have missed?” asks Derek.

“Are you suggesting that I missed something?” she asks, looking at him curiously.

“Maybe,” he responds with a smirk.

“I accept this challenge. I’d be happy to be shown to be wrong. For sometimes my own hubris gets the better of me,” she says, bringing up the data about the crystal, “Here it is,” she says, taking a step back, letting him get a good look at it.

“Hmm...” he mutters some words under his breath, scrolling through the data, “There is one thing here that is certain.”

“What’s that?” asks Nimbus and Elliot at the same time.

“Jinx, now you owe me a soda when this is all over,” remarks Elliot.

Nimbus lets out a soft sigh, before giving a draconic grin, “Well something to look forward to then. Though I never understood that human cultural thing, but I accept it.”

“Don’t fret Nimbus, I never got into that thing either, but what I do need is more samples. Which means we have to obtain some of the damaged crystals on the pulsar side of the ship.”

Elliot responds, “Are there any particular ones that you are in need of or prefer that would make your job easier?”

“If there were any fresh crystals that were put in place before this happened. I could use them to better understand the nature of the damage. The more I have the better, but that is unlikely, so any others that can be obtained would be great.”

He smiles, “Well a bit of good luck then. I just so happened to have replaced three crystals earlier today before this shit show happened.”

“Really? Great, where? There are some dangers being on that side of the ship, but it shouldn’t be too bad... I hope.”

Nimbus adds, “But if another strong burst comes, who knows what it could do to you, worse still if you... wait, are you going for the one that I think you are thinking of?” asks Nimbus, shooting him a look.

“Yeah. I am. The one at the bridge. And the two food processors that I replaced earlier today are the best bets to get an idea of what is going on.”

Derek asks with concern, “Is the one in the bridge still even there? Perhaps the food processor ones will be enough.”

“The more data you have the better. And when I saw the hologram feed I saw his console that I repaired is still there. Though it is exposed to the pulsar with zero ship there. The shields should be able to prevent any radiation though. If I am quick about it. I will be fine.”

“Elliot, do you really want to risk yourself like that? The other crystals, and other rooms should be enough.”

“I agree with Derek. We are not in a good situation, but no need to risk our chief engineer like that. We need you more than the data.”

“But I wouldn’t put anyone else to the job. Sorry but I have to do this. You need the best data. We don’t know how long it will be till we can get a rescue or get out of here ourselves with the navigational systems offline.”

“The navigation systems are offline?!” Nimbus and Derek exclaim.

“Yeah. We lost the key Pflanze crew responsible for the navigation. Including their backups. They are currently convening to sort out some kind of solution, if one is possible.”

Derek looks around, “Huh, they aren’t in here. I’ve never seen that before,” he says, focusing his attention back to him. “Alright. Do what you must, but don’t needlessly risk yourself. Get in there, get out, bring the crystals back to us. Perhaps we can work out something. Till then we’ll do all we can to try to come up with an alternate solution,” he looks over to the dragon, “How does that sound Nimbus?”

“That’s all we can do at the moment. Just be careful okay? I want to have a rematch in that skee ball. That was fun,” she replies, wings spreading with a hint of joy coupled with the strain and anxiety.

“Don’t worry. I know what I’m doing. I’ll get suited up and be back in a jiffy.”

Nimbus replies, “Technically a jiffy is three times ten to the negative twenty-four seconds... dang it! I thought I kicked that habit,” she huffed.

Derek gently pats her on the back, “Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone.”

“And neither will I. See you both soon,” says Elliot, rushing out, quickly grabbing a sliming atmospheric pressure suit. The soft white and yellow neon suit, makes him stand out within the ship. The helmet is a smooth fishbowl shaped glass that doesn’t distort his vision. Strapped around his waist is his tool belt. His heavy shoes thump on the walkway towards the bridge.

Thorphax speaks up on his intercom, “I heard what you are doing Elliot. You know anyone here would have been willing to do it.”

He smirks his voice softly echoing within the suit, “I know, but I have to do it. It’s not a difficult job. I will be in and out in just a few minutes,” he says, the lights here flickering, some are completely knocked out giving a checkered lighted halfway. There are subtle signs of some structural damage, light buckling within the walkway.

“The damage is more severe than I thought. I think our ship's internal sensors are damaged and not reporting things correctly. I want you to make a crew and check key parts of the ship and run by what you all see and compare that to what the sensors are telling you.”

“Consider it done.”

“Thank you. I’ll be back soon.”

“What you are doing is important. Just be careful.”

“I will,” he says, reaching the door to the bridge, tapping a nearby control panel, trying to get it to work.

“Elliot, what are you doing?” asks Bartley with concerned annoyance in her voice.

“Bartley ma’am! Oh... damn it. Forgot to inform you. The guys at the lab might be able to help us know when those pulses are coming. But in order to do so, I need to obtain some of the transposition crystals. I recently replaced one in the bridge, and it's a prime one to obtain to know what’s happening to our sensors. If we can discern when they are coming. We could supercharge the shields briefly to counteract the pulses. Buying us time without burning out our ship’s shield array.”

An audible sigh is heard, “I know you aren’t used to informing me. But now that the captain is gone. Please keep me noted of any plans. Run them by me. We still have a chain of command to keep.”

“Sorry Ma’am. Won’t happen again.”

“Thank you.”

“Activating atmospheric shielding behind me,” he says, seeing in the corner of his eye a quick shutter of light, “Bartley, I do have a question for you if I may.”

“Go ahead,” she says, the air from within the space before the door being sucked out, before he taps on the door... which refuses to open.

“I knew this wasn’t going to be easy,” he mutters.

“What was that?” she asks.

“Sorry Ma’am. I was talking to myself. The door to the bridge isn’t opening. I’ll have to manually do so. But my question is. How are communications?”

“Dead.”

“Dead?”

“The pulse destroyed the subspace communication array. We could send for help, but it will take longer than we’d die of old age before it would reach anyone who could have the capabilities to help us.”

“Shit. That means we need to get the navigation systems working. Any word from the Pflanze?”

“Nothing yet. They are still doing their thing.”

“Alright. Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need luck. But you get it nonetheless.”

Elliot smirks, “Thanks,” he replies, popping open a panel that has the manual door open system. Hydraulic lever, slowly, steadily the door grinds open till it’s wide enough for him to slip through.

“Activating my gravity boots,” he says, upon feeling the loss of gravity the moment he crosses the threshold of the door. At the bridge, a large section of it is completely smashed, some bits and pieces continue to float, slowly spinning around. The grass now frozen in place, the water within them bursting, frosting over, softening the purple color. The only sounds he hears are his own breath and the vibrations felt through his boots on the platform. The room itself is lit brightly by the distant pulsar, the brightness of which quickly causes his helmet to tint and darken, preventing him from being blinded by it.

“I didn’t know the thing was so bright,” he mutters, his heart racing.

“The ship automatically filters light to the point to make it safe for us to look at such objects, but the atmospheric shields don’t do that,” says Nimbus.

“How many of you are watching me get this crystal?” he asks, moving toward the control panel, grabbing his tools, slowly unscrewing the panel, glancing up occasionally at the pulsar, unsure when the next hit could come. Unsure if in the next moment he’ll meet the same fate as all those who were in this room.

“What can I say? You have a lot of friends, who want to make sure you are safe,” says Jim.

“You can say that again,” says Sylander.

“Honestly. I think there are more important things you all should be doing than watching me do my work,” Elliot responds.

“Do you think we can’t multitask?” asks Derek.

He sighs, shaking his head, “You guys...” he mutters, slowly removing the panel, digging into the console’s guts. Each passing moment increased the chance of *something* to happen. Yet he pushed past the concern, focusing on his job, “*Don’t worry about what you can’t do anything about,*” he thinks, calming himself, slowly, surely, and doing a fine good job to boot, he removes the crystal from its holding pen, giving it one quick look over before putting it

into a secure pouch, “Got it. Going to retrieve the others next,” he says, working his way toward the door.

Over the intercom there was a moment of cheering, the sound of which brought a smile to Elliot’s face, “Come on. It was a simple crystal removal. It wasn’t that impressive or earth shattering. I do it all the time as routine maintenance.”

“I think it’s more of the fact you are still safe rather than what you did,” explains Derek as Elliot only left the former bridge less than a minute and a half ago when there’s another shudder, the door behind him, bulges just as he’s knocked off his feet, landing into the soft grass of the walkway as several more lights bust leaving him in darkness.

“Are you okay? Elliot?” asks Bartley, her communication has hints of static in the background.

“Yeah, I fell into the Pflanze walkways though. I hope they can forgive me for the transgression,” he says with a chuckle.

“That’s the least of our worries right now, we just managed to keep the ship stable, and counteract the force so we’re not spinning out of control. But that’s all we can do right now. If we get a big hit like that first one... I’m not sure what we’ll do.”

“That’s why I am getting these crystals,” he says, climbing back onto the platform, “I’ll try to be as quick as I can about it. And Bartley?”

“Yes Chief Engineer Romero?”

“You’re doing a great job,” he says, feeling the smile through the intercom.

“Just get done and back safely. If we lose you, we’ll be sunk.”

“Let’s not worry about what-if’s but what we can do right now. How damaged is the subspace communication array?” he asks, moving through the ship toward his next destination.

“Completely destroyed. We had it facing toward the pulsar to keep a constant stream of data with the drones, and it was sheared off the ship.”

“Hmm, we might be able to scrounge enough parts to try to rebuild a new one, but we’ll have to check our current stockpile of supplies.”

“Not to mention we have an issue with time.”

“But we won’t know that if we can’t prepare for the current pulses.”

“Do what you can. We’ll do our part.”

“I will do my best Miss Bartley,” says Elliot, traversing through the ship obtaining the second crystal from one of the food processors that he repaired earlier in the day. Making his way to the third, there was a soft rumble through the ship, the lights above him flickered, still in his space suit, he continues forward.

Eventually he makes it toward the next area, the door yet again having to be forced open, using hand hydraulics, the atmospheric shield in place behind him, he steps into the dining room, is heavily damaged. The reinforced glass windows are cracked which spider across it. The atmosphere in this room is still intact though. Steadily he makes his way toward the food processor, the pulsar sun glowing in the distance, dimmed by the windows, but now split into dozens of reflections within the glass.

He crouches down by the food processor, he activates his communicator, “Derek, I don’t mind me interrupting what you are doing, but a thought crossed my mind.”

“It’s good to hear from you. What is it that you are wondering about?”

“Have you studied the crystal as each pulse hit us?”

“I have, and we have some so-called fresh crystals though they are all showing damage. But having ones that have been in the brunt of it all this time will allow me to complete my computations and research to hopefully come across something. This pulsar is strange, but what I can tell you is thanks to Nimbus’ hard work. We can figure that it is going supernova, but the exact time? We don’t know.”

Nimbus adds in, “Not that it will matter if we are torn to shreds before that, but regardless of if we don’t find a way to get out of here to a safe distance before the supernova event. Well, our goose is cooked.”

“I’ll be sure to get over there soon. Once I grab this crystal I will be heading back,” he says, slowly and gently reaching for the crystal within the complex machinery and other hardware.

A cacophonous explosion rocked the room, another pulse hitting the ship causing it to jerk back, shards of thick glass thrown about, the force of everything throwing Elliot back against the wall with a heavy thud before a quick pull from the atmosphere that was compressed then being sucked out, dragging him along with it, the ship’s momentum accelerating his departure from the room.

“Shit, shit shit!” he exclaims having only moments to determine what to do. The large gaping hole in the room where there used to be the large window. The sound from the explosion was snuffed out as quick as the air was pulled out of the room, leaving only the newton's laws to leave Elliot to his fate.

With quick thinking he hits a micro jet within the suit jutting him to the side, catching another glass window that barely held on. He hits it hard, with a thud he feels through the suit, the glass spidering out further partially giving in as he’s flung back to the far end of the room where he scrambles to grab onto something part of the ship as he bounces around twice more before finding his ground.

“Elliot? Elliot?! Are you okay? Can you read me Elliot?” yells Bartley over the intercom system. The human just managing to regain his senses and realize this entire time he was being spoken to, but the hurriedness of the moment, made him black out to everything else that wasn’t pertinent to his survival.

“Yeah, I’m here. I had a close call, but I’m okay... I think,” he says, checking over his suit, noticing a few bits of damage, but no punctures. He looks over to the food processor, seeing the sun side of it is completely smashed and damaged, “The food processor saved my life. Who’d of thought that,” he says, making his way back over to it, checking for the crystal only to note its gone.

“I’m glad you are okay.”

“Barely, but the bad news is I lost the third crystal. Hopefully the other two will be enough to help the boys in the lab solve one of our many problems/”

“Here’s hoping. I’ll be eagerly awaiting the results.”

“I’m sure they’ll tell you as soon as they get something, over and out,” he replies, looking over the destruction one last time, before heading out, feeling a sigh of relief that he somehow managed to escape certain doom by a mixture of quick thinking and sheer luck. Hurriedly he makes it back to the lab, not even taking the time to take off his space suit.

Derek turns to him, “Glad to see you made it... damn, are you okay? Your suit is in tatters!” he exclaims.

Elliot removes the helmet, tasting the cool air of the ship once again, “Yeah, barely managed to survive that last one, but I lost the crystal.”

“I’m glad we didn’t lose you. Currently Nimbus is trying to get a better idea of the stability. Perhaps something about it could give us a clue of these pulses,” he says, grabbing the crystals from Elliot, taking them over to his machines.

“I am too. I’ll leave you to your crystal work. I need to head back to engineering and see what the boys there have found.”

Nimbus raises her head, “Are you expecting them to have found something?”

“I have a suspicion that the sensors are not functioning appropriately, meaning our ship is taking more damage. I had Thorphax form a crew to inspect key parts of the ship.”

Nimbus wings droop along with her shoulders, sighing, “This is getting better and better.”

Derek responds, “If anyone could come up with a solution to this mess, it would be you Nimbus.”

She smiles, “Thanks hun. But my genius won’t be able to flourish without the time that I believe you will be able to provide us those crystals.”

“Doing my best. Luckily, I’m an expert at working without sleep,” he chuckles.

“Good luck all of you, keep up the good work. Especially you Marley! You’re always so quiet but a hard worker!”

The female anthropomorphic gazelle jumps, “Ah... oh yes. Thank you. You too Mr. Romero,” she says, waving him goodbye.

Once out of the spacesuit and back in the engineer, Thorphax rushes to give him a big hug, lifting the human off the ground, “I heard about what happened. You got lucky,” he says, putting him.

“I did, and I know it, but it had to be done. Hopefully they can come up with something that will buy us precious time. But what about you? I’ve been gone for a few hours. Have the crews come back with anything?”

The dragon’s wings dropped, “Unfortunately so. The sensors have been giving us false readings. Everything on this ship is far more damaged than we anticipated. I’ve already passed on the information to Bartley, but I wanted you to take a look at the current state of things.”

“What about the engines?”

“They’re still good. Mostly, about five points less than what the sensors are currently saying, but how much longer will that stay the case? I’m not sure.”

“The shields?” asks Elliot, going to the computer console just as Thorphax, the screen flickering, taking several taps to get the information up.

“These problems are getting worse.”

“Yeah, but let's see... shields are down about fifteen points more than what we thought. That’s not good. At this rate what little protection we have, and what we can do to protect ourselves will be for naught. Do we have a crew working on making some kind of repairs to the shield array?”

“Already on it.”

“Good, good. Ship structural integrity is down by more than thirty percent in some areas. She’ll hold and we’ll take a few good more hits, but I hope we don’t take too many more, or we won’t have a ship to get home with. And the side facing the star is taking the brunt of it like we thought.”

“All of which has been reported to the captain.”

“Good. I knew I could count on you. You’ve always done right by me whenever we worked together. It’s why I picked you for my crew.”

“I appreciate it, but at this point I am wishing you picked someone else,” he chuckled.

Elliot smirks, “We’ll get out of this. Let’s not give up. Let’s head down to the main shielding array. We’ll try to keep them functioning the best we can. Nothing more we can do until something else comes up,” he says, taking a step back.

“I’m right there with you,” he replies, the two of them heading down to shielding to provide hand and claw to the situation. The ship rocked by two more blasts, one minor the other more moderate, which caused gear and items to be tossed about. Precious time lost gathering the tools, and progress lost as new damages were detected upon closer inspection.

It was at this moment there’s a frantic communication from Derek, “Elliot, are you okay?” he asks.

“Yeah, just hit my head but nothing too serious. What’s up?”

“We did it. We managed to figure out what’s going on with the crystals. And with that last test, we can confirm we can get a ten second or so warning before we are hit by the wave.”

“That’s amazing! Does Bartley know?”

“She’s already been informed. But now we’re going to need your help.”

“What do you need?” he asks, as there was a sense of relief and an upswing in mood upon hearing Derek’s words.

“I’m going to send you the schematics, but what I want you to do is have this machine set up so when it detects the particle waves that run ahead of the pulses, it will automatically boost up the shields, providing us with a greater cushion against them, and hopefully preventing any more damage to the ship.”

“Receiving the schematics... got them,” he says, bringing them up, looking over them, motioning Thorphax and the crew over. Think we can make this?” he asks.

Thorphax cracks his neck, "If we can't make it. It is not possible to be made," he replies.

"Sara, Barnuckle, Breden, and Yurim, all of you stay here to keep the shields up and running the best you can. Make the adjustments here that we will need to make them compatible with this device, so we can get an automated super charge shield cycle going."

"Yes sir. We won't let you down," they respond.

"The rest of you, let's head back to engineering and get this thing built!" he exclaims, revving everyone up, heading back to main engineering. The entire process to build the machine was like bees creating their hive. Each knowing what they need to do, having a part to play in the steady construction.

The ship rocked again from another hit, everyone continued to move, not faltering for a second, merely trying to speed up as much as they can without sacrificing the quality. Wires connecting, motherboards grafted, systems steadily brought up, and diagnostics ran. A few hours into the project Derek came into engineering, "So this is what it feels like to come into the middle of the beehive. Now I know how you feel when you come to visit us," he chuckles, letting out a yawn, heavy bags under his eyes.

Thorphax and Elliot are hunched over the device, nearing its completion, sparks flying as they solder pieces together, checking over the schematics and guiding an overlay of the pieces to help make sure everything is in place. Elliot takes a step back, taking a deep breath, smiling when he sees him, "And now I can say the same about you. We're almost done," he says, just as there's a shudder. There's a soft rattling, Thorphax stumbling and catching his tool, preventing it from clattering down onto the delicate device.

"That was close," the dragon says with a sigh, looking over to the two, "And yeah, I'd say about another fifteen minutes we can get this baby build and install it. The other crew reported the modifications to the shields to work with this device have been already completed. So it's plug and go."

"Good, good. I wanted to come down and take a look at this baby."

"I'm impressed you manage to create something so intricate so quickly," he says, returning to this work.

"Nimbus has a knack for such things and was a lot of help, but we all worked together to build her, much like you all are."

"If this works, we might have enough breathing room to possibly turn this ship and put distance between us and the star."

"That wouldn't do us much good without the ability to jump."

Elliot takes a deep breath, "One problem at a time. I haven't heard anything from up above yet on that sector," he says.

Derek nods, letting out another long yawn, watching them finish, helping them take the device toward the shielding array where they work to delicately install it, placing three crystals into the machine, which hums to life.

One of the other engineers then asks, "What now?"

Derek responds, "We wait and see. It should catch the subatomic particles, detecting the specific kind of damage they cause to the crystals, using our current references from previous pulses to trip off the shields in a supercharge burst just quick enough and long enough to compensate for the pulses without burning out the shields and overly draining our resources."

Elliot responds, "We can hope. For now, we'll just have to wait and see," he replies, looking to some of his crew, "We'll take shifts keeping a watch on this. We need to get some rest otherwise we'll be too tired to be of any use," he looks to Thorphax, "You get some rest. We need to have one of us up at any one time at minimum."

The dragon tenses, wings flicking, his predatory eyes show he wants to say something but pushes the thought away, "I understand," he replies, wings dropping, "But don't hesitate to call me."

"Of course, now get some rest. I'll be here for the time being and monitor the crystal," he says, just as the machine glows and hums louder, seconds later the shield array glows, coming online, energy flowing through the conduits, everyone in the room tenses, hearts racing, hoping things would go alright and then... the faintest of a vibration through the ship. Seconds later Bartley calls the room.

"Did the shields just supercharge?" she asks.

Derek responds, "Yes Captain. The new detection system is online. Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, it was a little surprising, and don't call me captain."

"Sorry Cap... I mean Miss Bartley."

"It appears we managed to compensate for one of those pulses just in time," she says, her words causing a cheer to run through the shielding array room.

Derek says, "That means the invention worked. We've bought time to keep the ship in one piece so we can find a way to get away or call for help."

Elliot speaks up, "I'll get a crew on piecing together a new subspace array, but I'll be sending some of my people to get some rest."

"Understood. You get some rest too."

"I will soon enough, the day is still young for me, Miss Bartley."

"Normally it's unwise to disagree with your superiors but I'll make an exception this time. Thank you, for your hard work. Keep it up."

"We'll do what we can Miss," he replies, the next several hours being a moment of calmness with the occasional light shuddering as the shields get hit by a few larger pulses that aren't just quiet up to snuff.

Elliot found himself dozing off a few times, only to jerk himself awake when he hears a synthetic voice speak to him, "**Elliot Romero. Are you conscious?**"

"Huh? Wha? Yes I am. Still a few hours left of my shift. So far this shield system is working. What do you need?"

"**We are in need of your assistance. Please proceed to the gardens.**"

"To the gardens? You guys don't let anyone in there."

**“We want to discuss our proposal to get the navigational system online in person. We understand you favor this as well?”**

“Of course, I favor getting the navigational system online.”

**“We are referring to speaking in person. It is noted that you prefer this method of communication.”**

“Oh right, right,” Elliot replies with a chuckle, “I’ll be there shortly.”

**“We await your approach,”** the Pflanze responds.

He quickly heads off, tapping his communicator, “Miss Bartley are you there?”

“She went to get some rest. This is Third officer Breckel speaking. What’s going on?” he asks.

“The Pflanze just contacted me and said they had a proposal to get the navigational system online. I am going to the gardens to speak to them in person now. Please inform Bartley about the situation,” he says when there is a sudden heavy shake of the ship which almost knocks him off his feet, “Everything okay up there Mr. Breckel?”

“Yeah, only minor damages detected. That was a big one. First rumble we’ve really gotten since the system was set up.”

“I’ll get Thorphax on it right away to check if the system is working as intended. He’ll keep you updated.”

“Understood,” he replies.

Elliot takes changes channel, “Thorphax are you awake?”

“I am now after that shake. Is the shield array still functioning?” he asks with a grunt.

“Not sure, I am currently heading to see the Pflanze. They asked for me specifically. I haven’t heard anything from the crew there that there have been any damages, but I want you to take a look and be in charge of it till I get back. Do you think you can do that?”

“Are my scales red?” he remarks with a sense of confidence in his voice.’

“I knew I could count on you. Hopefully that was just a big one. I’ll talk to you when I can.”

“Understood. Good luck with the meeting with the Pflanze.”

“Shouldn’t be a big issue,” he responds, eventually reaching the room to the gardens. The only room that doesn’t have a metal platform that leads to the door. Instead, the purple grass covers the entrance points. The entire place is sealed off, with signs that read in multiple languages that this area is a “Pflanze Only” area.

He stops at the edge of the platform, toward the door, “I’m here. I don’t think you’d want me on your grass,” he says, a moment later the door opens up and a hovering metal platform comes out to him. A synthetic voice speaks out to him, **“Come Elliot Romero.”**

He steps onto the platform, bracing himself as the platform moves forward, into the room, the door behind him closing. The place has hologram projections of the Pflanze homeworld with purple and green leaf plants, and alien trees of all sorts seeming to extend out in a jungle atmosphere. The air here is humid, the purple grass is everywhere along the ground. The faux sunlight overhead has a blue-ish hue to it. Dozens of Pflanze with their twist of bark

and plant material intertwine with machinery, each Pflanze was unique, and the machinery reflected that. The older Pflanze were larger, with greater girth like an older vined tree, with massive trunks that the machinery was overgrown by it several times. Marking along their bark showed removal of damaged implants and new ones put into their place. A unique example of nature using technology to expand and thrive.

The Pflanze are formed into a forest with a pathway for him to move into the center of them all. Though there were no eyes, he felt them all watching him. Something about the situation feels off and unnerving to him on an instinctual level. Never before has he felt something like this before. The Pflanze moved, their bark creaked, the machinery whirred, speeding up their otherwise slow movements.

A soft mist fell down upon them, slowly starting to soak into his clothing, beads of water ran down his cheek and nose within a matter of moments, the soft sounds of nature enveloped him, all to mimic this one part of the ship that is a piece of their home.

**“Welcome Elliot Romero,”** says one of the Pflanze, one of the larger ones. Their roots sunk deep into the purple grass, and it's at that moment that he notices all the Pflanze are firmly planted themselves around him.

“It's a pleasure to be here? I never heard of anyone being allowed in the gardens. Heck I helped design this ship and this area was off limits in its design and construction.”

**“The purity of where we call home must be made by ourselves and ourselves alone. It is as intimate as your most private of places,”** it explains.

“I appreciate it, but what do you need of me? Something to build to compensate for the loss of navigators?” he asks.

The Pflanze adjusts itself, with louder creaking and whirl of machinery, making movements as it speaks, to give an indication of just who is speaking, a habit only done when a Pflanze speaks to a non-Pflanze, **“Yes. But there is more. We have discussed it amongst ourselves, and we have come to the conclusion that we need you to join us to complete the jump.”**

Elliot shoots them an inquisitive look, “Join you? But I'm not a plant.”

**“Yes, which was why it was a long and difficult decision to make. We do not know if it is possible, but perhaps you can sync with us and help complete the jump. Fill the void in our knowledge that was lost.”**

“I'm not saying I am against this... though I am not sure how it can be done.”

**“We will be assisting at the lab. We saw how it was managed to create the shield booster to detect the undetectable.”**

“I only helped build it, that was the guys at the lab's doing.”

**“We know. But we need you to sync with us. To be one with us for a short time. Providing knowledge and guidance as we proceed to jump us all to safety.”**

“Ah sure, though is this going to be safe?”

**“We do not know. No animal race has ever synced with us. And time is short. We are sending the knowledge now but we are coming to the conclusion that the star will supernova soon. In approximately twenty-two earth hours.”**

Elliot’s eyes go wide, “What do you need me to do? Risks be damned. It’s do or die.”

**“We felt the same way. We will do what we can, but we need a system that allows you to sync with our synthetic systems. We will make adjustments to provide a better filter and not overwhelm you, but what is needed is a way to connect to us and share your thoughts with our own. We will have little time to make the systems and less to test them before we must jump.”**

Elliot takes a deep breath, gently rubbing the back of his head, “I understand that much. I am not sure what to make of this. But I’ll do all that I can to be of aid.”

**“We know you will do what you and the rest can,”** the lead Pflanze says, the platform pulling away as one of the Pflanze follows him out.

Elliot takes a moment to look over the Pflanze while they walk toward the labs, “Breck?”

**“Yes, that is how you know us. We appreciate you recognizing us.”**

“It took a moment,” he says, the whirl of the plant and the stretching plant body easily heard, echoing down the hallway. The lights give the indication of the emergency situation, but the sirens are long since past.

“Elliot?” asks Bartley over the intercom.

“Yes? What do you need ma’am?”

“The Pflanze just contacted me and said they are working on a way to have you connect with them to get us out of here?”

“It will be a lot of effort but in short... yeah. I am the only one left with any knowledge and skill, we just lack a way for me to use said skill to get out of here. And seeing we may have less than a day before the star blows. It’s worth a shot to do.”

“I’m having the people at the lab confirm this time estimate. But don’t do anything too rash unless necessary.”

“I understand ma’am. It would be nice if it was not necessary, but I’ll do what I can to save us.”

“We all do. Good luck.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Keep up the good work.”

“Thank you,” she responds, ending the call.

Elliot looks to the plant, “Do you think this will work if we can even get something made in time?”

**“We are unsure. It has never been proposed before.”**

“Doing the never before every day. I didn’t think the hiring slogan would be so true today,” he chuckles.

**“We never understood the need for slogans.”**

“It’s to help motivate people.”

**“Why is there a need for motivation? We all exist for each other.”**

“One would hope,” Elliot replies, reaching the lab, finding it far less hectic than anticipated, “Where’s Derek and Nimbus?” he asks as Marley approaches, stiffening up when she gets near the Pflanze that takes its specific door into the lab.

“Ah... oh sorry. They are over there in the corner. They collapsed from exhaustion a few hours ago. And we didn’t want to wake them,” she says pointing to the corner, her eyes not leaving the Pflanze, that wordlessly moves past her via the grass path.

“Thanks Marley. Perhaps you should get some rest. You look a little ragged.”

“I-I would, but after what was said. I don’t think I can,” she says, giving a weak smile, “But thank you Elliot. I appreciate your concern.”

“Just take it easy. You will be no good if you collapse from exhaustion like them,” Elliot says, pointing to the two who are leaning up against each other in their chairs, having completely fallen asleep on top of the other.

“I know. A little coffee and I’ll be fine. But after the work they did, we wanted them to get some rest.”

Elliot sighs, which quickly turns into a yawn, “I can understand what you mean,” he says, walking over to them tapping on Nimbus’ shoulder who’s wing half covered Derek like a blanket.

“Nimbus, wakey wakey. Your genius is needed once again.”

“Huh? Wha? Is it breakfast time yet Mom?” she groans, stretching her wings as her mind comes back to her, “Oh my gosh I fell asleep!” she exclaims her movements jostling Derek awake.

“Damn... did I fall asleep?” he groans with a loud yawn, stretching.

“You both did, but we need your help, it’s two-fold.”

Derek stretches, “Two-fold? Good thing you woke up the two of us,” he chuckles.

Nimbus slips out of her chair stretching, her wings fluttering, breasts bouncing, “What is it?”

“First. The Pflanze state that the star is going to supernova in less than twenty-two hours. Is there a way you can confirm this?”

“What?!” they exclaim the cobwebs in their mind caused by their exhaustion being ripped from their minds. Derek jumps out of his chair.

The Pflanze, which was now across from them, says, **“Correct. Our calculations indicate anywhere between twenty to twenty-three hours from now. With a high chance around the twenty-two-hour mark.”**

“We’ll get on this right away,” says Derek.

Elliot continues, “The other thing. Is we need to make something that allows me to connect to the Pflanze.”

Derek lifts an eyebrow, “Connect to the Pflanze?”

Nimbus wings flutter, “They are a connected hive-mind like race. How could you just connect to them? Their minds don’t work the same way ours do. We have brains and such.

They are a bundle of plant material that amazingly formed consciousness, and intelligence that is on par with our own.”

“That’s the kicker. We need to find a way to have me connect to the synthetic parts of them, in order to mentally connect with them and share information. I’m the only one with any knowledge on how to navigate the jump drive. But the ship lacks the capabilities for me to do so. We’re trying to bypass that Pflanze dependency.”

Nimbus taps her claws along the desk, “That is like finding a way to have a square filter fit a round peg to keep air filters functioning.”

Derek looks at her curiously, “Are you quoting the situation from the Apollo 13 mission?”

“It’s the same situation more or less, isn’t it?”

“I suppose.”

Nimbus turns her attention back over to Elliot, “So this means we need to figure a way to get you to connect to the Pflanze?”

“Yeah.”

**“We are here to assist,”** says Breck.

“You’ve never assisted us in any of our experiments before.”

**“It was never needed till now.”**

“Touché,” she responds, turning her attention to Elliot, “Elliot, when was the last time you got some rest?”

“Ah...” he says, shrugging.

“I want you to get some rest.”

Derek nods, “I agree. You’ve been running around since before this happened. If you are going to be taking part of this. We need your mind in top condition.”

“I can understand that but everyone needs me.”

Nimbus rests her claw on his shoulder, “We need you to rest right now. You’ve done a lot, and no one is going to fault you for resting. You’re always out there talking to everyone. Now take the time for yourself.”

Elliot takes a deep breath, slowly releasing it, his hand reaching up to touch her claw, “I Understand. I’ll take a nap in the nearby communal sleeping quarters. That way I’ll be close if you or anyone needs me.”

The dragon smiles, “Good. Let us handle this part. We’ll call if we need you.”

**“We agree with this assessment. Your animals need to sleep is necessary. Please take the time to take your sleep cycle,”** says Breck.

“Well if the Pflanze are telling me to sleep. I better get to it. I’ll see you all soon then. Good luck.”

“We’ll need it,” says Derek, tapping the hologram screen, trying to get it to work to process the data given to him to try to confirm the time till the star will supernova.

Elliot walked over to a nearby room, it was small, with beds built into alcoves along the sides. There was already one person laying in one spot, getting some rest. The tables and chairs

were hastily moved off to the corner half dangling into the Pflanze walkway. The sharks and rattles of the ship having completely ruined the careful organization. With the thought of being able to lay down and rest, or more over feeling he *had* to rest made him realize just how tired he was.

He lets out another long yawn, eyes are heavy as he eyes the nearest bed, which is a total mess, but he didn't care. He sat on the bed, feeling the soft cushion that contoured to his buttocks and that's the last thing he could remember before he awoke an unknown amount of time later on the floor, his work belt still strapped to his waist, some of his tools have slid out and are pressing against him.

"Elliot!" exclaims Nimbus, rushing over to help him up with Derek a few steps behind her.

"Uh? Huh? Why am I on the floor?" he grumbles, stumbling to his feet with her and Derek's help.

"You were probably knocked off the bed by one of the heavier jolts. But you must have been so tired you slept right through it," suggests Derek.

"How long have I been asleep?" he asks letting out a waking yawn

"Over twelve hours," he explains.

Elliot's stomach growls, reminding him of just how hungry he is, but the desire to eat vanishes upon realizing just how much time has passed, "What? Did you say twelve hours?"

"We wanted you to get some sleep, seeing how you are going to be needed."

"Right, right. What's happening now?" he asks, regaining his composure when there's another rock of the ship, causing a faint groan to be heard reverberating through the ship, "That is not good."

Nimbus tenses, "Good news and bad news."

"What's the bad news?"

"The Pflanze were wrong in their time estimates. The star can supernova within the next hour, two at best."

Elliot's heart races, a surge of adrenaline goes through him, "Okay... what's the good news?"

Nimbus smiles, "We managed to craft something to get you hooked up to the Pflanze network and use the navigation system with them."

"So what? We need to build it then?"

"Thorphax is putting on the finishing touches of the device. It was a bit of a pickle too to solve. You see trying to find a way to integrate your brain waves and mind and that of the Pflanze? You know their systems are amazing with how they work. Their entire body is collectively themselves, but trying to get it to work? Well that was a fun little challenge, but more so, having the technology we have on hand that could work? You would not believe what we had to use to finagle it to work," she says with a hint of excitement.

"What is it?"

“The skee ball technology we used as a base. Could you imagine the game we were playing is now our best chance of getting out of here? The Pflanze technology is something else. Good thing they were so helpful. I never interacted with them so much till now. It's a new experience.”

“They are something else. So where do you need me?”

“The navigation room. Bartley has already prepared the ship the moment we are ready.”

“Are we going to run any tests?” he asks.

Derek responds, “We don't have any time.” The ship shudders, the force of which almost knocks them off their feet. Derek braces himself against the side of the ship, pushing himself upright, “See what I mean? And our shields are fully functioning, but they are being strained to their limit.”

Elliot nods, “I understand,” he replies, his heart races even faster, a trickle of nervousness runs down his spine. Lights here are now beginning to flicker. A few are out. When they reach the navigation room, a small garden like area where three Pflanze have gathered. Her the walkway around the room was for the people rather than them. Consoles position before them, their synthetic tendrils attached to them, branches running across the holographic screens. Purple grass along the floor.

Thorphax stands on one of these edge platforms, seeing Elliot enter the room. In his claws is this large spidering body harness. Part of it is the Pflanze synthetic tentacle technology but there are straps and connection points that run along a spine and neck piece, before it also spiders into a half helmet, “I know you are being thrust into this quickly Elliot, but here it is. It should work.”

“We'll be here to help monitor the situation,” says Nimbus.

“If it becomes too dangerous, we'll stop it. We may not have a lot of time, but I couldn't see frying your brain to save all of us,” says Derek.

Elliot chuckles, “Thanks for the vote of confidence,” he says going over to Thorphax, reaching for the harness.

“Remove your shirt. It works better with skin contact,” he says, wings twitching, when the ship feels a softer shudder.

**“We recommend starting soon. We'll have to jump between pulses in order to make it safely,”** says the lead Pflanze, a medium sized one compared to the smaller ones and the larger ones Elliot saw at the gardens.

“I got this,” says Elliot, pulling off his shirt, grabbing the harness, surprised by the weight, almost dropping it.

Thorphax flinches preparing to catch it while Nimbus and Derek are ready to catch Elliot.

“Sorry, was heavier than I thought,” he chuckled.

“Careful. We don't have time to repair it,” cautions Thorphax.

“I understand that,” he says slipping into the harness, tightening the straps, feeling the cool metal along his spine and the back of his neck. His hair brushed apart as pressure points are

pressed along the back and midsection of his skull with one last bit pressed at the forehead, his head popping into the total cavity.

Elliot leans forward to counterbalance himself, “How do I get this started?”

“The system is twofold. The first is the physical part of the device which you activate here,” says Thorphax pointing to a switch on the side, within Elliot’s reach.

“Got it, and the connection to the Pflanze?”

**“We will be in charge of the connection. You will monitor and assist.”**

“Okay, give me warning when you do okay? I never connected to anyone before.”

**“We understand. The process will probably be jarring to your singular mind.”**

“Noted,” says Elliot, flipping the switch, feeling a hum of energy through the device, a tingle along his back where the sensors made contact. The tentacles that were weight and laxed jerk to life, beginning to move.

“Ah... ah...” says Elliot feeling the tentacles weight. The coolness of the air around them, and the pressure of the air around them, giving an odd sense of those moving around him, “That’s... something. Okay let me... just give a few test moves,” he says the tentacles moving a bit wide, knocking into Thorphax who grunts, sliding back a half an inch, but holding his ground while Derek ducks, only to have Nimbus who wasn’t expecting it to get smacked in the chest.

“Sorry! Sorry!” he exclaims.

“It’s okay,” says Thorphax, taking a few steps back, but keeping ready to rush in to help.

“I’ve had worse,” says Nimbus watching with concern, going to a nearby panel, bringing up a flickering hologram screen, “How is the transmission to this console?” Nimbus asks.

**“Connection secure. You should be able to monitor Elliot Romero from there.”**

“Good,” she replies, Elliot now getting a vague idea as to how to move the machinery around him.

“I think I am getting the hang of this.”

**“Please step forward to the third console.”**

Elliot takes a step forward the tentacles moving to help him forward till he gets to the edge of the walkway path, “Onto the grass?”

**“Yes.”**

“As long as you give the okay,” he replies, sliding off the platform, the tentacles reaching down, digging into the earth with a natural grace and knowing where to go. Each dig into the ground gave a new sensation, a tingle through them, vibrations that expanded some of his senses.

Nimbus calls out, “Heart rate is elevating.”

“I’m fine. This is all new and the situation is strenuous,” says Elliot, approaching the console, his feet gently pressing into the grass. Which he feels like there’s something more there, in the back of his mind, a spreading sensation from where he is, but it’s limited, muted in some way.

The console before him shows the navigational system, which he recognizes, but it’s only part of a whole series required to ride through subspace and make the jump. The suit gives the

sensation it partially knew what to do when the Pflanze spoke, **“Connect to the console. We’ll begin the connection in one minute.”**

“Understood,” says Elliot the tentacle drives into the console connecting to it, but also into the ground finding strange connections that rise up from where he stands. The screen giving off a humming vibration that he can feel against his face, the sensitive tentacles picking it up, feeding a soft picture into his mind of what he’s visually seeing.

**“We have made adjustments to the console to provide you with visual aid.”**

“Thank you.”

“This is Bartley. How are you all holding up down there? The Pflanze just informed me we will be jumping in two minutes?” she asks.

“Yes we are. If all goes well I can be a stop gap for the navigation system and allow us to jump to safety.”

“I have been updated on it. Are you ready?” she asks, concern heard in her voice.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

**“Connecting in twenty seconds,”** says the Pflanze, giving a slow and rhythmic countdown.

Derek looks at the holographic screen, “Connection strong so far.”

Nimbus says, “Heart rate is still elevated.”

“I’ll be fine,” says Elliot, focusing on the screen before him, feeling as if his heart is about to leap out of his chest.

**“Three. Two. One,”** and at that moment there was an internal explosion. Not physical but a mental expansion of Elliot’s mind, his sensors spread outward connecting with all the Pflanze in the room within the first half a second. Time began to slow down as the roots of the grass was the highway that connects him to another and another, their feelings, their sensation of the world around them. Seeing through the vibrations and shifts in the air. But it was simply the surface, feeling out, connecting to every branch, every root, their leaves, the machinery not only a method which they use to move around but a further extension of themselves to “see” and interact with the world around them. Refined sensors that clarified their world.

A visionless world in a sense that they had eyes to see. In these few instant moments, he felt the world through the Pflanze, blind yet so open to everything around them, each shift of mood, the change in temperature, the vibrations in people’s voices, picking up their mental state in a plethora of information that made him feel like the blind one. Yet he knew the pathway was two-way street, they were seeing the world through his eyes, catching what they’ve never seen before, adding to the experience.

In these moments his mind could only comprehend so much, taking in the pressure of his feet against the grass, feeling as if he was standing on a part of himself, instantly beginning to understand why the Pflanze preferred to have the other races keep off the grass. It was an extension and by that fact a piece of themselves. They could feel everything that was on there, and it was only limiting their general discomfort and helping them keep better focus on other tasks rather than focusing on the ‘threat’ could be out there by what’s standing on them.

Nimbus' words were slow as time began to steadily catch up with him, becoming ever less dilated, "Hi..."

Thoughts and feelings were now being recognized by his brain. Voices... no not voices. But it was what his mind was trying to make him believe he is 'hearing' in his head in order to make better sense of it. Much like how the color purple doesn't really exist, but the human brain makes it exist to make sense out of the world it is seeing.

The feelings and emotions of each Pflanze was opening up to him like a dusty old book that was being cracked open for the first time. He was understanding the stress and worry they were having in the situation. The sense of loss of a piece of themselves. Individual Pflanze are connected and intertwined. Like building blocks. Each is their own but they are connected to the larger whole of which they exist.

Separate yet connected. If they had secrets they managed to keep them away from him, but at this moment he felt like he was understanding and getting to know them so intimately like never before. And he can feel them filling his mind as he fills theirs, a mutual exchange of thought, feeling, concerns, fears, hopes.

Nimbus' voice echoing in the background as she spoke, "...s brai..."

Hopes... hopes to be under a real sun again. To dig down into the ground, take a moment to relax and soak in the world around them, to spread their seeds out and grow new connective communities and build up even greater. Sorrow of having to be disconnected from their greater community to go on these space faring missions, yet it was something worked on, and volunteered for. Knowing it was good for the greater whole. A shared community and togetherness that other races could only dream of that was their norm, their reality.

"...n activity..."

He's feeling what it's like to be removed from the greater whole, like losing a hand, but you bring that hand rather than the rest of the body. Living on as a fraction of themselves yet connected to the animal races living around them. Part of a cycle yet disconnected to them. There are echoes and feelings of interactions between them and the Pflanze. Noting Elliot's unique way of simply recognizing them and talking to them by name, which is a construct they created merely for the sentient animals around them.

Nimbus voice never leaving a continuation of the time, "is through the..."

They already knew who each was, and as this part dawned on him, feeling their own feelings of himself, Elliot for the first time felt a realization of something he feared, the true thoughts of what people thought of him. Never really getting too involved or connected to a single person, the fear of connection pushing himself away to be acquaintance to all, really known by none. But now? These Pflanzes knew him, and he, them in a way that placated those fears. His senses further expanding outward feeling echoes of what the other Pflanze felt, which weakened the farther out he got till it faded into a faintest of tingle to the far ends of the ship.

"Roof."

Time coming back to its true state, thoughts growing, flowing, weaving within each other, the quickness of response and interaction dependent directly on how close Elliot is to the

other Pflanze, also how loud they were is also correlated to how close they are to his proximation.

“This might overload his brain. We should abort,” says Derek.

“I’m fine,” Elliot says, his eyes wide, pupils dilated, mind straining with comprehension as he hears his own voice but also *feels* it through the nearby Pflanze. Their entire bodies are their way they hear and translate the vibrations into the words they come to understand. The connection remained strong. Their desires, needs and actions are wordless, simply understanding being passed onto him, and steadily they onto him as they move to better understand how his mind works, like he is doing for them.

**“We are monitoring the situation. Connection is stable. We will begin preparations for the jump,”** says the lead Pflanze.

It is at this moment that their peculiar way of speaking became clear to them. Each Pflanze is an individual, but they are so connected, that there is a piece of all the other nearby Pflanze that are there with them. Meaning that unless there are no other Pflanze around they are never alone. They are speaking for those who are unable to speak, for it's only the one outlet, the tip of the iceberg that is being spoken to or speaking for the collective in the local.

Elliot speaking over the communicator, “Preparing the ship for jump, using the shield system to commence the jump between pulses,” she says as there is a shudder through the ship, which is multiplied several fold into Elliot's mind, causing him to gasp.

“Are you okay Elliot?” asks Thorphax, watching from the platform.

“I-I’m fine. Let’s do this,” he says, straining to focus himself, looking at the holographic screen, feeling it, knowing it, ready to feel his way through the jump.

**“Preparing to jump in ten seconds.”**

Time counted down slowly, time dilated once again. The Pflanze heightening their senses, a theory that they could slow the perception of time, but one that could never be tested. Something that Elliot has heard about when he first started to work with them. But now it was happening right now... three... two... one. The ship’s engines hummed to life, he felt them from here, the Pflanze there, projecting a better understanding and connection to the ship as a whole. It was almost as if he could be part of the ship through the plants that had their connections to her.

The jump commenced, the ship rattled, the start of the jump beginning, the pulsar causing major turbulence in the start of the jump, the ship groaning and rocking as they had to make instant section adjustments to the ship’s path. Feeling through the eb and flow of subspace, working to dodge objects that could be in the path that would utterly devastate the ship, especially now given the weakened and overused state of the shields.

Minutes into the trip as Elliot worked with the Pflanze to put as many light years as possible between them and the star, there was another major shudder moments later, the ship straining.

“Something’s wrong,” says Bartley.

“Something massive must have happened in order to cause this much... the star went supernova,” says Nimbus realizing.

“We’ll worry about that later, for now how’s Elliot doing?”

“It’s hard to tell, this isn’t my area, but I think he’s okay?” she says with concern, wings fluttering, glancing over to him.

Their voices are a non issue barely registered by his over stimulated mind. Helping the ship surf subspace, and over the next six or so hours they made it to a point of safety. Observation outpost six, the closest post to the star, twelve light years away. The ship comes out of subspace with a jerk, which knocks a few people off their feet.

“We made it!” exclaims Bartley over the intercom. A round of cheers going through the ship which Elliot can feel. The sense of relief felt by everyone, especially the Pflanze. A holographic projection on the screen lights up, showing the still glowing pulsar, as it will take years for the star to show what happened from here.

Sweat dripped down Elliot’s nose, his body exhausted, the hunger pains now coming back to him after seeing the projection, and then the Pflanze says, “**Ending connection.**”

Elliot feels his mind dunked like his body was pushed into cold water. A quick and jarring end to the connection, his mind left to just himself, leaving him stunned for a moment, staring out into space.

“Elliot?” calls out Derek, “Are you okay over there?”

“His brain activity is returning to normal...” says Nimbus.

“Elliot! Get your skinny human ass over here so I can give you a hug!” exclaimed Thorphax.

Slowly Elliot came back to his senses over the next minute, using the harness to slowly, gingerly bring himself over to the platform, where Thorphax gives him a big draconic hug, lifting him off his feet, “You did it!” he cheered.

Elliot smiled, “We did it,” he replies, feeling the lingering echo in his mind. That sense of community and connectivity, the joyousness of the Pflanze, comparing it to the isolated islands that he’s experiencing with those around him. It left him wanting more...