

STORIES

*BAR FIGHTS AND BURGER BUNS*

*A SHORT HISTORY OF ARCADIA*

*LORA NORACON'S LAST STAND*

*THE DISMANTLED PLATES OF JINFAR*

*WITH EYES AND EARS ACROSS THE STARS*

*THE ORACLE*

BAR

FIGHTS

AND

BURGER

BUNS

1.

There is something captivating about a run-down tavern. Enticing smells of alcohol which have corroded both brain cells and the varnish of wooden countertops; not to mention the stench of lonely aftershave or desperate perfume. For many years, The Laughing Cat had been known as the place of business. Dodgy deals had made friends with secretive job offers, and together, they had given the tavern a notorious name on the lists of local law enforcers. In local legend, the name of the tavern came from Old Toolery's pet cat, Fleas McGee. Upon the right word (and with a hint of cat nip as incentive) the ginger mouser would imitate Old Toolery's husky chuckle. The laugh was penetrating and could cause goosebumps. Folk from miles around would come along every Thursday night to hear the moggie's chortle. It made the tavern infamous, before all the shady criminal activity anyway, and so when Fleas McGee died the owners decided to rename the pub in his honour. It was for all these reasons that John Leighton had chosen The Laughing Cat to conduct a very important meeting. He liked criminality and he liked cats, it was an obvious choice in his eyes. Wherever John went, he was closely followed by his business partner, Zoe Henra. Zoe added a certain flare to meetings seeing as her grey skin and pink hair stood out in any populated room. Her background as a Munn refugee added trust, which John desperately needed. His background as a former soldier in the Ru Defence Guard meant he was not always the first choice of the local malefactors. It was for this reason that John hated waiting. If a client or contact was late, it could mean any number of things but the worst of his worries was it meant

they had backed out of working with him. Such a worry made him restless, and hungry... mostly hungry.

“What the fuck is a ‘cosmic sandwich’?” asked John

Zoe turned her attention from scanning the room towards her rambling associate. She noticed his gaze was locked on a worn chalk board that had been propped up at the end of the bar. On it were the daily specials and a brief note about not having a shit in the urinals. Below the note, in bright, white chalk paint, were the words COSMIC SANDWICH. Zoe sighed before replying.

“What are you complaining about?”

“That, there,” pointed John, “written on the board.”

Zoe read out loud, “Please flush twice — it’s a long way to the kitchen?”

“No!” Replied John, “The specials list, it says ‘try our Cosmic Sandwich’.”

“Well why don’t you order it and find out!”

“It’s 13 mynt! Who pays 13 mynt for a sandwich? Is the bread proofed in the heart of a fucking dwarf star?” Said John in a frustrated manner.

Zoe stared at John, her eyes as wide as mortal thoughts allowed.

“I think you’re broken. Your brain is broken.”

“What makes it cosmic?” Queried John.

“Perhaps it is all the bar fights. I should take you to a doctor. If we get any work of course and we can afford a visit to a doctor.”

“It’s outlandish. What an outlandish thing to state. Cosmic!”

“John! Every one of tourist trap ghettos boasts it has a Cosmic Sandwich. Different world; same crap. They charge because idiots will pay to try their famous sandwich. What makes this one better than the next bar or the previous dive? The answer is nothing! It’s a chain tavern which means the sandwiches probably come from the same supplier. It’s a great con, one of the best in the whole galaxy! The great COSMIC LIE!”

“They have a vegan version as well...” Added John.

“Oh really? Cool! Want to split it?” Said Zoe.

“I really do.” Replied John.

As John signalled for the bartender to come and take the order, Zoe returned to her observations of the room. She clocked the hooded reptilian in the corner booth selling a case of Ruman blood, and spotted the slight of hand exchange of Dorlean punch in a clear plastic baggie. Her watchful eyes however were distracted when a white hooded figure entered the tavern. The individual seemed extremely cautious; a trait Zoe was not keen on for it usually meant trouble would follow. Her concentration once again became unfocused as John ordered lunch. The bartender was an android. A dishevelled looking robot, dressed in a ropey, woollen jumper.

His face was plastic and featureless, much like the appearance of a mannequin.

“What can I get you?” Enquired the android.

John peered at the dangling name tag snagged upon the ropey jumper.

“Andru? Hi, Andru. Can we get one of the vegan Cosmic Sandwiches?”

“And a bowl of space fries.” Added Zoe.

“Oo. Make that two bowls!”

Andru stared at John. For a brief moment, he remembered his prior existence before life in the service industry. He did not like John, and had it not been tavern policy, he would have murdered him. Andru missed his life of murdering biological life forms, and resented having to quit it all due to a nasty compliance chip that had been stapled to the back of his neck. Against every wire in his casing, he decided for once to try and be helpful by abandoning his day dream of a bar fight ending in a massacre, and offering a suggestion instead.

“The Space Burger is cheaper. It’s practically the same thing.”

John and Zoe left blank expressions on their faces as their eyes narrowed.

“Practically? I don’t like that word.” Said John.

“With the Space Burger you get a pattie and bun; with the cosmic sandwich it comes in a different bun.” Said Andru.

“Well, now I need both to compare!” Exclaimed John.

“You want both?”

John nodded. His nostrils flaring in excitement at his confirmed decision.

“I am fascinated by your kind.” Said Andru

“Thank you, I think?”

“It was not a compliment.”

Andru slowly sauntered away, mumbling about birthed life forms. The grin on John’s face stretched from his right ear and nearly touched the other end of the bar. He enjoyed getting under the skin of people, it was a hobby, and now he’d annoyed an artificial intelligence. It did puzzle him as to what expression to use to describe it though. Could you get under the skin of a skinless life form? Perhaps the idiom ‘twisting the wires of androids’ suited. John’s smile faded as abruptly as it arrived when the white hooded figure approached both him and Zoe at the bar. In closer proximity, the figure turned out to be a middle-aged woman with wisps of blonde hair poking out from under her cover. The secretive woman perched beside them before leaning close to speak.

“Commander Leighton? I’m Briar Valstone and we need to talk.”

## 2.

During the Great War, which had ended 20 years previously, there had been a push from the Dorlean Alliance to develop unusual tactics. One crackpot idea involved the artist Gowen Gettar creating fourteen colossal spaceship sculptures, entirely crafted from glass. The hope was that the enemy would believe they were detecting a new stealth technology and waste resources on pursuing or destroying them. Another ploy was to create small, durable pods which could house several soldiers. These pods would then be jettisoned out with the refuse before the main ship departed. Eventually the pods would descend upon the target, thanks to miniaturised thrusters, and then the Trojan-esque band of soldiers would jump out and run riot. John had been one of the tin-can soldiers. He'd fought in over thirty-five missions by the time of The Battle of Ru. The sticky and confined booths of The Laughing Cat tavern reminded him of his days in the pods. It was cramped; it was dark, and it smelt like a large group of men had pissed everywhere. Yet no flashback or memory could distract him for too long from this meeting. Here he was, sat opposite Briar Valstone. Briar was the stuff of legends. Her family were known through all of the systems as the builders of the prison world orbiting Aetheria. She was a Technomage, a member of an elite race of vastly intelligent scientists who were arrogant and rather bastardly, their technology so incredibly advanced and imaginative that they were seen by most as magicians. John was very aware of her war record. Briar had been a Supreme General, commanding Technomage and Dorlean forces into many battles and campaigns. She was

fierce but fair; strong but merciful. And now, here she was, sat opposite and begging for help.

“I’m in need of transport to a remote world in the Aetheria System, Torberium to be precise.” Said Valstone.

“You need a ship.” Said John.

“Once there, I’ll need a scout to secure an area, and also a tracker to help me locate the item.”

“You need a crew.” Said John.

“It may involve breaking a few laws so we’ll need a getaway pilot, and a safe house to hide out. I was made aware that you don’t discriminate when taking jobs.”

“You need a rebel.” Said John.

“I do Commander Leighton, I really do. Is that you?”

Leaning back abruptly, John folded his arms and shut down his face from all emotion. He was harder to read than an obituary.

“No.” He replied.

Briar’s face snapped from desperation to one of confusion and frustration.

“Firstly, don’t call me Commander. I left the guard and now I’m just John Leighton, straight up... no titles, apart from Asshole of the Year which Zoe has awarded me 7 years in a row.”

Zoe smirked and waved her hand at the Technomage.

“Secondly, what kind of trouble are you in? Valstone is a Technomage family name. Your reputation precedes you, General... You are from a ruling family of the most powerful race in the galaxy. Why can’t you just take one of those weird ball ship things you guys have and go do this yourself? I’ve seen your kind fight.”

“One Technomage was enough to defend my home village from a regiment attack.” Contributed Zoe.

“And fourthly...”

“Third point, John.” Interrupted Zoe.

“And thirdly — and also finally, I don’t deal in hot items. No matter what you may have heard. Sure, I’ll shoot a law man if he’s in my way or looks at me funny, maybe burn down a few ships or buildings if it is completely necessary, hell, I’ve even instigated a rebellion or two because I need a diversion and was slightly bored, but I don’t, as a point, start with the intent of breaking the law. So, thanks, but no thanks.”

Briar looked away from the pair, awkward and irritated by John. Upon her fidget, she noticed several thugs entering The Laughing Cat, showing posters about and conversing with the low life scum orbiting the pool tables. She was desperate, time was running out and she needed to close the deal.

“You’re not the only one whose reputation screams trouble, John Leighton. I found it hard to track you down initially.” Valstone paused to pick a nut out of a bowl situated on the

bar, “I like information on whoever I work with or potentially work with. It wasn’t until I pulled some strings that I got your classified file. There it was, paragraph 1; line 1... John Leighton was part of Operation Pachyderm... aka Operation Thickskin.”

The roles had reversed. Now John was the uncomfortable one and fidgeting.

“So which one were you, John Leighton? Were you Nuclear? Photon? Diamond? — No, I think based on what I could read from a heavily redacted report — you were Quantum. In which case, you and I do share a past. What makes a superhero of the great war suddenly leave and turn their back on everything they believed in? What did you see? You were there at The Battle of Ru, just like me. What did you see, John Leighton?”

Sternly, John leaned in. As he moved forward — his muscles stiffened, choked by his fitted t-shirt.

“I saw,” he began, “that it was hard to distinguish between my side and their side.”

“Like I said, we share a past.”

Briar glanced around to notice an ever increasing presence of thugs in the tavern.

“We are both people who have turned away from the cloth they were cut from. Atrocity is a word that is spelt differently, pronounced uniquely, but always carries the same definition. There is never a justification.”

“What’s the payment?” Enquired Zoe.

“Paloma, the one who put me onto you, spoke of your search for mythical relics.”

“One in particular.” Scoffed Zoe.

“The Black Iron sword? Well, I can’t give it to you but I can tell you its exact location.”

John and Zoe laughed in unison. They had heard it all before.

“And how do you know where it is?” Asked John.

“Well, I’m the one who hid it in the first place.” Replied Briar. “Now, if we are agreed on our arrangements, may I suggest getting the fuck out of here before this unsightly group of mercenaries decide to come over and stop our mission before it begins?”

Before either of the relic hunters could respond, Andru the homicidal bartender appeared with their food order.

“Here is your Vegan Cosmic Sandwich, your Space Burger, and two bowls of space fries — Oh, by the way, that group of dolts that entered the bar about five minutes ago are looking to kill this woman — just a heads up.”

*Two years later...*

Corridors are fascinating things. What they witness through their existence would be a capital of conversations, shared moments, secrets, and the occasional drug using politician defecating between press conferences. The darkened hallway of Aternal Prison — in the Aetherian System, was waiting. The space contained within its walls was anticipating a momentous occasion, an event where every string and bead that comprised the fundamentals of the universe had detected and shifted, ready to receive such an imprint, experience. Nine guards dressed in thick leather coats and blackened helmets patrolled the space. They were completely unaware of the particles in the room, or how the shadows had remained still in expectancy. For them, it was another day on duty. Despite their ignorance, one of the more senior guards, a warden, had noticed something peculiar. A dulcet tone rang in his ear which drew his attention enough for him to halt the patrol.

“Do you hear that noise?” Spoke the Master Warden.

The guards ignorance was overwhelming. None of them could hear the sound and most of them assumed the warden’s agitated nature was due to the fact he’d had another run in with Prisoner X32. They shrugged a series of useless shrug.

“Maybe I was mistaken.”

“Oh don’t say that sir.” Replied a short guard, “I’m sure your hearing is fine. Did you know, most bipeds have two ears?”

The Master Warden stared blankly.

“A left ear and a right ear.”

“Is there a point to this conversation?” Queried the Master Warden.

Another guard, a lanky sort, joined the evolving discussion.

“I’ve never seen the inside of my ears.”

“What!?”

“I’ve never seen inside my ears.”

“Why would you? Why would you even want to?” Asked the Master Warden.

“I’ve seen inside everything else.” Replied the lanky guard.

“Have you?” Questioned the short guard curiously.

“Yup. I’ve seen inside my mouth, all three nostrils, I’ve even seen inside my own bumhole.”

Silence carried about them.

“Wha’ the fuck do you mean?”

The Master Warden groaned.

“I used a mirror. But that was easy. You can’t easily look in a mirror to see inside your ears.”

“That is true.” Added the short guard.

The Master Warden breathed heavily.

“I hate you both.”

As the breath escaped his mouth and misted up the inside of his already cloudy headpiece, the space around all nine guard began to warp. The edges of reality twisted upon themselves and gave birth to a flurry of heliotrope coloured light. The light shifted into mist then dust before settling upon the ground and disintegrating into nothingness. When the light show ended it revealed Zoe Henra.

The Munn refugee stood in front of the guards wearing a mechanical contraption that spun much like a fan. The rotations of the device slowed and as they rested, Zoe removed two handleless blades from her boots. Bent on one knee and moving with rapid speed, Zoe launched her attack, stabbing the calf muscles of two of the guards. Their yells pierced the air violently as they fell to the ground. It was the perfect distraction for Zoe, allowing her to remove two beautifully decorated pink guns from her belt. The guns sounded, bullets flew, and obliterated the face masks of two more armed guards. With a quick jump, Zoe spun into the air, somersaulting over the remainder of the guards, and fired shots directly into the tops of their heads. The impacts caused their skulls to rupture, and drowned their faces in a pulp of blood and brain matter. Eventually, once they too had joined the other bodies on the floor, all that remained was Zoe Henra and the Master Warden.

“The Infiltrator, we finally come face to face!”

Zoe frowned.

“Don’t. Don’t do that. Don’t pretend that we have history. You are just a chunky sack of fodder, maybe even a robot that I’m not completely sure has a face. You don’t even have a nametag. You can’t be that important.” Said Zoe.

The two individuals stood opposite each other. It was one of those skewed moments, where one individual felt they were head to head with an equal, and the other was merely stalling to allow their gun to recharge.

“Where is John Leighton?”

“You are in no position to ask questions or make demands!”  
Replied the Master Warden.

“Position? That’s ironic.”

“How is THAT ironic?” Demanded the warden.

“Oh, you don’t know. But you will know. You’ll know very soon. Oh, how you’ll know.”

Slamming her open palm into the chest piece she was sporting, the fan once again started up and Zoe disappeared into a haze of light. Behind the back of the warden, the light re-emerged and from it launched a deadly assassination from Zoe Henra. Standing over the lifeless bodies, Zoe searched for anything of value.

“You’re all dead. Fuck. I’ll find him myself then!”

All across Atenral Prison, bursts of radiant light appeared and the sounds of screaming guards soon followed. It was like a thunderstorm, in the sense that you could easily count between the screams to predict another flash. Every guard that Zoe came across soon departed from life. Each jump sent her to another part of the incredible prison, until she eventually ended up in a cell with a swan. It forced her to stop for a moment and gather herself. The swan, a large and impressive creature, honked at her.

“What are you in for?” She asked.

The swan just hissed.

“Fair enough. I’ve killed all your oppressors — a thank you wouldn’t go a-miss.”

With another aggressive honk, Zoe continued to teleport all across the prison until finally reaching a high spiral tower. There, in a round prison cell with a lovely view of an ever expanding ocean (it was seriously nice) — and sat reading the autobiography of Halo Fantango (a second century Ru politician) — was John Leighton. Without even a glance above the book he mumbled at Zoe.

“What took you so long?”

“Are you kidding?”

“I’ve been stuck in here for two years.”

Zoe’s eyes enraged.

“Do you have any FUCKING idea what I have had to do over the past two years to get your fat arse out of here? I had to run with some information scavengers and drug pushers just to figure out you were being held in Aternal. Then, I had to find out where on the seven moons of Aetheria, Aternal actually was! I had to acquire maps, a transport, and finally I have just killed thirty Dorlean Alliance guards, I met an extremely rude swan, all for you to lay your dickhead attitude on me.”

John smirked over the top of his book.

“I missed you too, Zo’. Now... where were we?”

In retaliation for winding her up, Zoe waltzed over towards the large window and forced John to wait.

“You have a really nice view. How come you didn’t escape? You’ve got a massive window!?”

“Yes. Yes. Very funny. Har-har. That’s a 120ft drop into freezing cold arctic waters. If neither of those things succeeded to kill me then the marine life certainly would have. There is a shifty-looking squid that hangs about. He’s had two trawlers and one transport in the past four months! Now, come on... let’s get out of here!”

Having had her fun, Zoe joined John in the centre of the room and grabbed hold of him. Holding him closely, she looked up into his big, dopey face.

“Don’t get any ideas.” She said.

A gaseous cloud was the only thing left in the room once Zoe had teleported them both out of Aternal Prison. When they had finally flown to safety, John programmed the ship in with a series of coordinates. The journey was short from their location which gave ample time for a shit, shower and a shave. The two years had been tough on John, not for the reason you might believe but because he hated the standard issue razors offered to cell mates. For obvious reasons they couldn't be used as weapons, so instead all male prisoners were issued with a dried Yugassian hide. The rat like creature was known for its rough skin and so for two years John sanded his beard down rather than enjoying a clean cut. He also hated sharing a toilet block. Due to his background, he'd been placed on the secure wing which included Xi raptors. The raptor digestive system was slow, therefore it took them a week to build up enough waste to actually defecate. The stench was like rotten eggs wrapped in salad cream and could knock a man flat out. By the time they reached their destination, John felt refreshed and ready. A clean chin and an enjoyable bowl movement had done him the world of good.

“Do you want to land or teleport down to the surface?” Asked Zoe.

“Teleport,” Started John, “we can arrive at the stash without being noticed.”

“I think you just enjoyed being close to me.” Replied Zoe.

With another burst of light, both John and Zoe arrived on the surface of a small moon called Doverswood. They took a moment to gather their bearings and once the site had been

checked, drew out two small handheld shovels from a duffel bag. Their digging silhouettes looked much like a marionette theatre (but without any yodelling or tangled strings) — their movements synchronised and repeated until eventually, Zoe’s shovel hit something solid. As John began to pull the large 6ft long metal box out of the ground, Zoe took a break to drink from a dented water canister.

“When you said you had a fun evening planned I pictured ripping off a Talkasii businessman or hustling a gang in a game of cards.”

“I’ve been sat in that prison cell for the past two years, trying to figure out and make sense of what the hell we stumbled into.” Said John.

Zoe shrugged.

“Bad jobs happen.”

Lifting the lid off the container with an incredible strength, John revealed its contents to be a decomposing body. The body, wrapped in a white cowl still had wisps of hair protruding off the scalp.

“So, what are you going to do? Ask the corpse? Oh, hey Briar, what the fuck happened? Can we have the last two years back?” Remarked Zoe sarcastically.

John stared down at Briar Valstone’s body.

“Yeah. Something like that...” He said.

4.

Seeing a dead body is an experience. Seeing a decomposing body that has been sealed in a metal coffin for two years is pretty gross. Zoe had an iron stomach, all Munn did, but even she struggled to look down for too long at the mess of remains swimming below her. Her companion John seemed unmoved. There he was, straddling the container and examining the body. Zoe couldn't understand as to why but she continued to watch, assuming all would become clear.

“She’s pretty dead, John.”

John Leighton held both his hands outwards. His fingers spanned a great width and from between the gaps came a slow eruption of sparks. A deep, cobalt coloured electricity surged from his splayed fingers and formed small webs of energy. The webs grew in size until they exploded into a large burst. Cobalt beams came screaming out of his hands, drowning the body in the coffin, and as it poured across the remains it began to repair the damage. Time had not been paused; the sun continued to set, but the incredible ethereal energy continued to defy all physics. Tissues and muscles reformed, skin and hair grew once again. The force of power surging from John and into Briar’s body caused the corpse to levitate and lift out of the container. Higher and higher it drifted until it stopped, mid-air, floating gloriously. And then her eyes opened. The energy stopped. Briar slowly landed upon the ground, very much alive. Turning to Zoe and panting, John mustered enough strength to crack a grin.

“And now... she’s not.” He said.

Briar, rather startled — like a newborn, looked around, grasping for some level of understanding.

“Take it easy, Briar. You’ve been gone awhile now.”

Zoe stood in awe.

“How did you do that, John?”

“You know I’m different.”

“There’s different and then there’s that! I’ve known you a long time. I’ve seen you lift things you shouldn’t be able to lift, I’ve seen you occasionally fire a blast of light from your hands to stop something or knock someone over... but that... You raised the dead!”

“It’s not something I do, just, something I can do. It relies on her genetics more than my enhancements. I’ve only ever known it to work on Technomages.”

Briar attempted to speak. Her speech was muffled as if she had got drunk on a gallon of Octavian cider.

“Where?”

“This is Doverswood. We use it as a smuggling site when trying to hide something of value.” Replied John.

“How?”

“This is insane.” Said Zoe.

“Briar, this may come as a shock but you’ve been really dead for two years.

“Fuck...”

“It’s true. You hired us two years ago but we were followed and attacked by a group of thugs. They’d been hired to capture and kill you by your people’s law officer. You told me, as we fled that the only way we could complete the mission was for you to disappear. So... I shot you.”

Briar’s eyes widened as John continued.

“I planned on waking you once you were buried but I got caught up...”

“What... took... damn long?” Asked Briar.

“He got arrested. They sent him to Aternal Prison for murdering a Technomage. It took me some time to figure out how to get him out.”

Briar laughed, although she wished she hadn’t. Her ribs still felt slightly out of place from being reformed back into existence.

“My father... des...igned Aternal... be im... pen.. trible. He’d be... so angry.”

“Well, the good news is, your people are no longer looking for you. So, once you wake properly and come around we can get on with business.” Said John.

With more awareness, Briar pulled herself up to sit comfortably. She leaned against the coffin and pursed her lips.

“Is this... temporary?” She asked.

John became slightly uneasy.

“No, no it isn’t. Though, I’m not really sure how you might be now. Whenever I did this before for a technomage, it was resuscitating within 24 hours. Some side effects but mostly okay. I have no idea how it will affect you because of how long you were dead. I’m sorry.”

“Meh, don’t worry yourself. You did me a favour and I like adventure. Give me a minute... or two and then, I think... might be able to stand.”

The night sky crept gradually around them, settling in, and bringing out the call of nocturnal life.

“I guess I picked the right man, huh? Quantum, tell me, what did they do to you to give you such a power? How did the Dorlean Alliance achieve such a thing?”

“What makes you think the Dorlean Alliance did it? Or that it was on purpose?” Replied John.

5.

Fortnight: meaning fourteen nights.

Plenty of time to do... things.

In two weeks, Captain Oreeko Binokipoe learnt all three dialects of Sharak'tor in order to secure a trade deal with the ruling monarch. The issue he found was that the Sharak'tor had four dialects and the one he left out was the business tongue. Suffice to say, he did not secure exclusive access to the route and in fact spent a fortnight in a prison cell for mispronouncing the word for 'banking'.

In the two weeks it had taken John, Zoe, and Briar to travel from Doverswood to Hurra, they had done much. None of them had learnt any dialects but they had talked. Talked about their past, discussed the mess of the present, Zoe even sang a Munn opera. What was more important was that which was left out, the business tongue. All that changed when Zoe finally mustered the courage to dig a little deeper.

“How did you come to learn of this weapon? The one you have us schlepping across the solar system to find.”

The good mood subsided. Briar shifted into a more upright position in her chair, resting a coffee mug on the console of the spacecraft.

“The Battle of Ru — the last conflict of the Xi/Technomage war. I was a General during the battle. We had taken out one of Vaylon Rothgar's main battleships yet despite our victories, their numbers were greater. The Dorlean forces

bolstered our numbers but for all our firepower... we were outmatched.”

“I remember thinking, ‘this... this is the last go.’ And then the guns stopped firing.” Said John.

“The war shouldn’t have ended in a ceasefire. They had a win in their hands and we were relentless. My people’s pride is unshakable. It should have ended in a bloodbath with both sides practically wiped out.”

“But, there was a weapon? This dangerous weapon?” Asked Zoe.

“All weapons are dangerous, right John?”

John looked down at his mug and kept his reflection trapped in his coffee.

“A new ship would have been launched; a new gun would have been fired. Whatever it is, it was enough to make Rothgar’s forces stop fighting.”

The rage in Zoe’s eyes could not be contained. Had it been able to form into a physical blast it would have shot through Briar Valstone and melted her into her chair.

“In the name of Ventrillion... what did your people make? What sort of weapon makes an empire stop dead without ever being fired?”

“I don’t know,” continued Briar, “but if I were to guess, I would guess the same type of weapon that Rothgar used on your homeworld.”

John broke his silence.

“The Technomages developed a biological weapon?”

“I believe so. Whereas Rothgar’s gas cloud committed genocide, this one must have been ten times more horrific. My people don’t do anything by half measures.”

“I see what you mean about not knowing if your side is the right side. Seriously, what is wrong with this universe? First, they make big-ass metal machines to blow each other up, tech that can travel faster than light just to kill you. Then, that’s not good enough so they start enhancing their soldiers, making people like me. But no, let’s just create deadly weapons like the enemy, ones that can kill at the push of a button. What monster thinks weapons like that are an answer?”

“It worked, didn’t it? The war ended.” Replied Briar.

“Ended in a twenty year ceasefire! At any moment they could start up again. That’s not peace; it’s patience.” Said Zoe.

Silence clouded the room. The only thing that diffused it was the alert that the ship had reached its destination. John spun in his chair to access the command console and begin the descent towards the moon’s surface.

“I want to destroy this weapon so it can’t be used. My people and Rothgar’s people did a deal. A deal based on a biological

weapon being used or not. The only being left alive in the universe who might have some idea of what that weapon is, and where it might be, lives on this rock.”

“You think he’ll just tell us?” Queried John.

“I know they will. They were the one who contacted me.”

“So what? We find this contact, they tell us, and then we go and destroy it?”

“That’s the plan.” Said Briar.

“Your plan sucks.” Said Zoe.

“I know.”

The descent was smooth. The small spacecraft landed perfectly upon the snowy mountain range, extending its landing struts and breaking into the snow gently. All three of them geared up in thermal attire and exited the craft, ready to find their contact. Trudging over the mountainside, they eventually came across a small log cabin built around the entrance to a cave. No sooner had they stopped to assess the area, they found themselves being stalked by a wild beast. A large brown feral beast — something that appeared wolf-like or cat-like. It was the size of a cow and viciously barked and snapped at them. Its eyes were orange and fiery — the drool from its fangs dripped upon the ground, melting the snow below it. John raised his hands, both of them radiating with blue light. Zoe aimed both her pistols straight at the creature whilst Briar produced from her robes a device that resembled

a hybrid of a gun and a wand. The creature stepped closer and sniffed the air before speaking...

“What are you doing trespassing on my territory?”

6.

Talking animals litter the pages of literature and old stories. It is often believed by most that this is due to an element of entertainment; to aid with storytelling. For others who have studied the intricacies of telling tales, it is much deeper. Talking animals symbolise truth. A revelation can often be hard to stomach if escaping from the mouth of a human character, but for an animal to speak or represent a quality, it is far easier to process. That said, being stood face to face with a massive wolf/cat thing that speaks is not easy to process. John, Zoe, and Briar all stood aghast at the Hurran wolf opposite them, demanding answers as to why they were there. Each of them slowly lowered their weapons in turn and held their hands up high so not to appear threatening.

“We just want to talk. We’re no threat.” Called out Briar.

The beast stared at John and sniffed the air.

“What about the Ruman with glowing hands? His hands aren’t in the snow like your wand, Technomage.”

“Wow, your people’s reputation gets everywhere.” Laughed Zoe.

“Don’t let the four legs and mane fool you, Munn. I know the systems.” Gnashed the creature.

“I’m looking for someone. Can you help? His name is Marracuba.” Asked Briar.

“I am Marracuba.” Replied the Hurran wolf.

“My contact? I’m Briar Valstone, you messaged me...”

“No. I don’t message, haven’t got the paws for it.”

John laughed but quickly tried to stifle it.

“I’d invite you in but I don’t like company.”

“Here’s fine,” began Briar, “You said you had something to tell me.”

Marracuba turned his back and headed towards the mountain behind him. The three travellers followed him cautiously. After some time they arrived at a cavern in the hillside. Once inside, the Hurrans wolf leapt up onto the wall and flipped a mechanical switch. Dangling lights illuminated the dwelling and revealed cave paintings and abstract art all around them.

“You’re quite the painter.” Said Zoe.

“This is my ancestral home. I returned here after the war. These paintings have been on these walls for hundreds of years. They come from a time when my people were nothing more than hunters.”

“What are they of?” She asked.

“Are you here for an art history lesson or to talk business?” Enquired the creature.

A few moments passed as Marracuba softened the dirt to sit. In the cave light, his coat was illuminated to reveal golden streaks of fur.

“You said you knew of the weapon that I am looking for.”  
Probed Briar.

“Correct.” Replied Marracuba.

“So... what can you tell me?”

Crossing his paws and resting his gigantic head, he began to explain.

“The Battle of Ru was planned months before it happened. The resources that had been thrown into it were such an investment that both sides continued the fight even though they had agreed to meet with me.”

“What are you saying?” Asked John.

“I’m saying that they planned for a ceasefire. To act as mediator, both sides lobbied the only neutral system, The Sharak’tor Empire. Empress Hope, the ruling monarch of the time, asked me as chief diplomat to oversee the ceasefire. I met onboard a Sharak’tor star-yacht with Councillor Highfield of the Technomages, and Vaylon Rothgar — the emperor himself. They signed an accord that ended the war.

“And...?” Briar’s question was laced with anticipation.

“It doesn’t disturb you enough that your people fought a bloody battle despite knowing they were signing a ceasefire?”

“What disturbs me is why either side would end fighting when both were foolish and stubborn.”

Marracuba smiled, or at least it looked like he was smiling. It was hard to tell.

“Their priorities changed,” he replied, “General Lora Noracon, an exceptional Technomage, was captured by Vaylon Rothgar’s forces. During the months she was captive, she and Vaylon fell in love. Lora convinced both sides to sit down together. It was to be a new era.”

“So Vaylon was all loved up, but why would the Technomages agree to this ceasefire?” Questioned John.

“There was a prisoner transfer during the meeting. Vaylon freed Lora Noracon and returned her to her people, in exchange for an end to the war.”

“I’m lost,” interrupted Zoe, “He gave up the woman he’d fallen in love with so he could have peace?”

“You said there was a Technomage weapon, a biological weapon that could cause destruction on a scale never seen...”  
Said Briar.

The strange wolf closed its eyes.

“Funny thing about biopeds, your senses just aren’t the same as other animals. I saw it though. They knew it, I’m sure.”

“Knew what?”

His eyes reopened — his pupil dilated.

“Lora Noracon was with child.”

A Short  
History  
Of  
Arcadia

1.

“We need to get a shifty-fuck on...” Called out Iona as she hurried the two teenage boys into the temple’s backroom.

“I don’t want to learn about culture and history, I want to train on the assault course again.”

Iona shoved the youngest boy, Neal, into a chair. His older brother Raul sat down on his own.

“Why doesn’t Danielle have to come and study?” Questioned Neal.

“Because,” began Iona, “Danielle isn’t old enough. She gets to enjoy her childhood for as long as you both did. You’re now of age to study and train — in equal measure.

Raul leaned towards his younger brother and whispered.

“It’s because she’s adopted. Special treatment.”

The boys sniggered.

“That’s quite enough, thank you!” Bellowed Iona Carrington as she cleared the chalk board and began sketching out the solar system.

“Right, Raul — when did recorded history begin?”

Raul slouched.

“A few weeks after Awakening.” He replied.

“Correct.” Said Iona. “Awakening happened around 1200years ago. Very little is known around what exactly happened but it is believed that The Creator made all life. Early records state a battle occurred between an angel and a demon, and that to ensure peace for all mortals, The Creator exiled itself to Ventrillion, the lost world.”

“What lies beyond the expanse; will one day be a second chance...” Said Neal eerily.

“Oh, you’ve been reading up in your own time!” Said Iona gleefully.

“I’m fascinated by Ventrillion.” Replied Neal.

“Everyone is fascinated by Ventrillion, the world of the creator that nobody has ever been able to find. Countless souls have attempted to find it. It is believed it lies beyond the expanse but some would argue it is just a myth, a story.”

“Then why is it taught as if it is fact?” Queried Raul.

“Because it brings comfort to have belief, even if that belief could potentially be utter shite.”

“Isn’t truth more important?” Asked Neal.

“Whose truth?” Replied Iona.

The boys stared, both puzzled by Iona’s comments.

“Let’s say you and your brother have a fight. You argue he did something to start it, whilst he argues you started it — who do I believe?”

Neal shrugged.

“Danielle?” Laughed Raul.

“A third account. It adds information, but nothing is truly free of bias. Perception is all we have.”

Dusting her hands of chalk, Iona reached onto a slender table and picked up an old stitched book.

“Take this for example. The Book of Killian Dross. Killian was a Ru soldier during the Xi-Technomage war. He served with your father, and several other men, as part of a weaponised division of soldiers. His account in this book is from one perspective, the viewpoint of an individual who was used by his people to fight a war on behalf of another race. The Dorlean Alliance came to aid the Technomages, believing they would be rewarded. They were not. Relations are good — but who would want to piss off the mages? Still, if you were to read a Xi or Zkaar volume of history, the story would be very different. The search for truth is a difficult one. Realisations often lead to grand changes of thinking and people don’t like having their thoughts stirred up. They like the safety. They like stories for the same reason. They’re safe.”

“So... many points of view would give you a better understanding of what actually happened?” Asked Raul.

“Of course. The more accounts, the more chance you have to determine the actual events. People lie.” Said Iona.

“It has been 14 years since the war ended.” Said Neal.

“Yes, which makes things easier for us to start to piece together — however 1200 years ago, nobody living is still alive today.”

“That’s not what I read.” Said Raul.

“And what do you mean by that?” Said Iona, raising one eyebrow off of her face.

“I read that there are a few groups who believe some of the first people are still alive today. Bane said...”

The boy was quickly interrupted by his mother.

“You’d do well to not listen to Donovan Bane.”

“But he’s the head guard...”

“Exactly, a guard. Whereas your father is sole protector of this temple and your mother is the wisest being in the whole system. Listen to us, listen to yourself — do not listen to the ramblings of a mad dog like Bane.”

The adolescent sass poured off Raul’s shoulders.

“Arcadia,” she continued her lesson, “is comprised of 11 accounted for planets and 1 mystery. The closest planet to Arcadia is Xi. The dominant species is...?”

She looked to Neal.

“The Xi?”

“Well, yes. But what are they? Classification?”

“Um.” Neal hesitated.

“They’re insectoids. Xi Religiosa.” Said Raul.

“And the second world is Zkaar. Home to the Zkaarians which are...”

“Mammanoids. Zkaarius-Thal.” Said Raul.

Iona nodded and gulped. She could feel her son’s intensity in his words.

“Xi and Zkaar form the Rothgar Empire, Vaylon Rothgar being a Zkaarian. The third closest planet is actually a planetary system comprising of Sharak’tor and Hurra. Hurra is a dwarf planet and home to the mammanoid Hurran Wolves or Blud-Therapsids.”

Neal clenched his chalk.

“Sharak’tor... they’re mammanoids as well, but like us, only they live a really long time.”

“They live to be a century, yes, but this is due to technological advancements and not a natural ability. Their ruling empress is a triple goddess, three sisters.”

“Destiny, Hope, Transcendence. They sleep whilst one rules.” Said Raul.

“Yes, and Destiny will come to power in the next 5 or 6 years.” Added Iona.

“The next world is Ru!” Bellowed Neal with much excitement.

“Yes, Rumans — us! Then after Ru we have Dorlea, home of the Dorlean Alliance. Noted for their purple pigment and vast resources. Dorlea has a ring around the southern hemisphere of the planet. Dorlea is the capital world for the alliance.”

“Along with Ru, Munn, and Octavia!” Called out Neal.

“The Alliance covers four worlds. We are made of many varied colours, the pale skinned Ru, the purple skinned Dorleans, the grey skinned Munn, and the green skinned Octavians. The Alliance is very diverse of types of mammanoids and their varying cultures.”

“Then there’s the dead world.” Said Raul.

“K9.” Said Iona.

“A dead world.”

“Well there are lots of research posts on K9 and it is a native resting ground for a pod of star whales.”

“And after K9... Aetheria?”

“Ah, the Aetherians. A supergiant of a world — mostly destroyed surface due to wars. A race of giant mammanoids is dominant but there are seven moons, each one colonised with various sentient life.”

“There are 6 moons.” Said Raul.

“No. There are 7.” Corrected Iona.

Raul stared, puzzled.

“The seventh is the prison world, Aternal Prison. Its exact location is unknown but it’s there. Trust me.”

Iona drew a small circle on her growing map of the solar system.

“And then there is Cartesia, the ice world which is home to the Technomages.”

Following her drawing, she etched a large cloud like shape on the board.

“That’s the expanse, which blocks a large area of space. Legend states the ancient world of Ventrillion lies beyond the expanse.”

She rested the chalk on the frame of the board.

“One day,” said Raul, “I’m going to stand on the surface of Ventrillion.”

“Are you now?” Questioned Iona humorously.

“I’ve seen it. I had a dream.”

“What did this legendry world look like then?”

“It was dark. Black surface. Like a world of shadows.”

Iona froze.

“And I was stood there and fighting a battle.”

“Was I there?” Asked Neal.

Raul stared through his brother.

“No. Not you.”

With Neal’s head lowering like a setting sun, Iona knew it was time to take a break.

“That’s enough for now. Go and join your sister and play...”

Neal and Raul both frowned.

“Or train. Whatever you feel like. Free time!”

Upstart and scarpering away, the boys vanished into the distance and left their mother alone. Looking at the cloud-like expanse she had drawn, Iona etched a symbol into the middle of it. A large N within a triangle. No sooner had she marked the board, she wiped the whole thing clean, dusted off her hands, and wandered off to check on her children.

LORA

NORACON'S

LAST

STAND

1.

The White Room, Cartesia. Within the curved walls of the white enamelled corridor stood a female figure, tall and broad, powerful to gaze upon; her blue robbing draped across her eloquently. It clung gently to her calf muscles, the perfect equilibrium of strength and grace. This was Lora Noracon. Beneath the strands of her long blonde hair hid a small infant. The baby was quiet and very new, only hours old. Lora held the newborn up to her face and brushed her nose upon its cheek.

“They fear you. They fear what you are.”

Startled by a roaring alarm, Lora flinched. Its piercing shriek forced the calm baby into a state of restlessness. The new mother tried to calm her child but it was an impossible feat. Her own heart beat as loud as the sirens. Both mother and infant were agitated and with good reason. Embers floated across the pale walls, sparks ignited by an impending force seeking entry into the corridor. Again Lora held her infant close and spoke.

“I will not let them have you. Stay safe little one.”

Lora moved speedily towards a wall panel which she kicked open. Carefully she placed the baby inside amongst the fibre optic tubes and crystal panels. Once nestled, Lora covered up the wall again and produced a mechanical wand from a secret holster. The wand's blue light began to radiate and from its tip extended a long sabre. The doors to the corridor burst open and twenty robotic figures marched dutifully into the

chamber. Raised guns surrounded Lora Noracon who stood patiently, waiting for them. This was her prestige. A wordless kairotic moment that would shape and define the lives of many — and she was aware of it. She knew what her defiance would bring about. And she was ready.

“Commander Noracon, you are under orders to hand over your wand and report to the council. You will stand trial for your war crimes.” Blared Centurion 23.

Lora tightened her grip upon the hilt of her wand, adamant that she would keep the promise she had made to her child. She was a master tactician, a commander of fleets and technomages, she would not be easily defeated by units of wires and flashing lights. From the left of her field of vision she saw three of the guards stood close to a lighting panel, and on her right side stood two droids too close to the glass window at the end of the long, white corridor. The centurion repeated its instructions which echoed out of the muffled voice port in time to the harmonising charge of each rifle. Abruptly, before it finished the last few words of its programmed order, Lora whipped the extended blade of her wand out towards the lighting panel, making contact with it, and forced out from her technological marvel an algorithm in electrical form. The technological spell surged the power rings of the light and unleashed an electromagnetic pulse, powerful enough to disable the three robots stood in front of it. Before the last droid had fallen to the floor, she spun around and lunged at the window, shattering the glass with a touch of the tip of her sabre. The bitter winds and icy air of the outside caused a vacuum to suck two of the guards

outwards. As they began their 90 foot fall towards the snowy terrain, Lora made her advance on the remaining horde, diving and striking each one with the flick of a wrist. She danced around them, a subtle step of deadly precision — but it would not be enough. The odds were piled against her, and the sheer number of guards, coupled with their fast reactions, meant several rifle rounds were fired off towards her. As each one hit — her body recoiled in pain, flinching in a fit, causing her to lose her balance and tumble to the ground. The guards were programmed to terminate without mercy any who would resist arrest. With the butt of their rifles they battered her and broke her bones, leaving her as a bloodied mess upon the floor. In the mist that had escaped the rifles nozzles, a shadowy shape could be seen emerging. Each moment it grew until Lora could see a distinct face — it was him, her partner, Gravalyn.

THE  
DISMANTLED  
PLATES  
OF  
JINFAR

## 1.

Neerheim City, Jinfar — Aetheria System.

Jinfar, a small moon orbiting the giant planet known as Aetheria, is known for its famous dives and hovels of misanthropic individuals, grand thieves, and general lowlife dickheads. Establishments such as Mandy's Olde Pube, The Smashed Duck, The Laughing Cat, and The Cocking Leg, were known for backroom dealings, side hustles and all the other sorts of shit you might find being negotiated out of the way of lawmen. Jinfar's largest city, Neerheim, was the only location in the whole of Aetheria that was connected to other worlds. StarBus transports from 1 to 15 would travel safe routes to Munn or Octavia, but the Number 16 would venture through the toughest region to take tourists to The Expanse.

This was fortunate for any Technomages looking to sneak on board as quite often the 16 would go past Cartesia.

Technomage ships were extremely advanced but very recognisable if spotted. Attempting a covert mission required... covertness, and the Number 16 offered such an opportunity. Two hooded figures look out of the window as the Number 16 began its descent towards Neerheim. The figure dressed in forest green robes was the war hero, Gravalyn Obsidian. The second figure, clothed in blue and grey robes was known as Quinn. Her youth was given away by her excited eyes and naive grin.

“This is my first time off world.” Said Quinn

“You'd never have been able to tell.” Smirked Gravalyn.

“That obvious, huh? Sorry.”

“Don’t apologise. Your lack of experience shapes your reactions. For you, this is an adventure and you should enjoy that feeling whilst it lasts.” Replied Gravalyn.

“Yes, Lord Obsidian.”

“Refrain from using names when walking amongst the other races. Our way is one of mystery. The less they know about our identities, our culture... the more power we wield.”

“Then what should I refer to you as?” Asked Quinn.

“I am Prime; you are Votar.”

With the final descent procedure engaged, Quinn watched on as the sunrise burnt across the sky like a curse. A warning that something was looming. Technomages rarely believed in portents, and for this reason she simply enjoyed the fire as its ignited spectrum split.

“Where are we headed?”

“Neerheim. It is the biggest city on Jinfar which orbits the near dead world of Aetheria. I remember coming here when the Aetherian Empire was at its strongest. I never considered that one day, it would be an almost uninhabited rock, surrounded by a handful of moons dominated by pirates, warlords, and cartels.” Said Gravalyn.

“Why would the council send us to here? Sounds like a fuckstorm of misfits.” Said Quinn.

“Our people, and the Aetherians, always had strong ties, a relationship which brought us into war with Vaylon Rothgar, for better or for worse. Although the Aetherians are now small pockets across many worlds, we do what we can to help them when in need.”

“Who needs our help?”

“An old friend, her name is Paloma. She helps Aetherian veterans. It gives her respect from the different races in the system, and allowed her to start a small community on Neerheim. Recently they have been experiencing issues with a stranger.”

The ship settled in the dock with a thud.

2.

Flying around the curved skyscrapers were various shuttlecraft which hovered like mechanical bees, each one emitted a sense of longing to make contact and dock — you could feel it just by watching them queue and squeeze into stations wherever they could. It was a busy place filled with various sized/shaped creatures and robots. In the centre of the dock — a ticket office, in one booth sat a young blonde female attendant. Quinn approached her.

“So this pass will get you on board the Dorlean transport vessel and then when you dock at Endersgate you want to use this seal to get passage on a Ru trading ship which will take you back here to Neerheim.” Said the attendant.

“That’s crazy. All of this to travel around one small moon?”

“Yes, my android works in The Laughing Cat, in Endersgate, and I work here in Neerheim. We both have three changes to make in order to get home to Yungst. It is crazy.”

“Thanks... um.. sorry, I forgot your name...” Said Quinn.

“I do need to say just one thing though. I mean, it wouldn’t sit right if I didn’t, y’know?”

Quinn stared in confusion.

“You’ll be fine in Neerheim, but if the cartel at Endersgate catch a technomage in their region they’ll probably kill you on sight. I know the war has been over for twenty years but those guys were allies of the Xi and are merciless cunts.”

Quinn panicked.

“Is it that obvious?” She asked.

“It’s the robes. Try Jed’s Threads on 34<sup>th</sup> Street. Get something a little less extravagant.”

The attendant looked nervous for Quinn as they shared an awkward silence.

“Well... good luck!”

Quinn smiled once more and left the ticket office. She walked past several food vendors, huffing the scents up her nose and fantasising about something other than PURE protein bars. She arrived at a news kiosk where she reunited with her mentor, Gravalyn Obsidian.

“I have the papers and passes. The Dorlean transport leaves in an hour. We can lay low until then.”

“I can’t believe that Paloma moved her settlement and didn’t tell me. Does that seem right to you? Does it seem off?”

Quinn shrugged.

“There is a small bar a street away from here.” Said Gravalyn, “I know the owner. It will be the best place to wait. Out of the way of the bustling crowds.”

They began walking.

“The attendant knew who I was. We need new clothes.”

“You’re right.” Replied Gravalyn. “I though these robes would be fine but I guess some people still remember our old uniforms. We’ll get some clothes and then get a drink.”

“A drink with the war hero himself? I feel honoured! How many Xi did you kill at the Battle of Tseng?”

Gravalyn stopped. He was tense.

“The war has been over for 19 years. War is not glorious. You younger ones would do best to forget the propaganda spewed out by the Cartesian Council. War is horror. Pure horror. Did you know the Xi had a ritual they performed when they killed one of us? They would slice the torso and hang the body using the intestines. Then using the blood from the stomach they would paint the words ‘Xixen Krass’ across the wall. There were variations, some involved removing the nails and using them to carve the words all over the body — others involved flaying.”

“They sound like they deserved being obliterated by our forces.” Said Quinn.

“Do you know what Xixen Krass means?” Asked Gravalyn

“I only know mammalian Xi... I’m not schooled in the other dialects.”

“It’s not Xi... it is the name of a covert Techana operative. He was the one who led the assault in one of the first ground battles. Rothgar’s Empire was expansive (as all empires are) and had begun attacking Aetheria in an attempt to annex a few of the moons. During the retaliation, Xixen Krass captured

300 Xi warriors after decimating their defences. Instead of returning the captured warriors or transferring them into custody, to send a message, Xixen Krass ordered humiliating deaths for all 300 warriors. He used a biological agent to force diarrhoea and sickness. He then dowsed them in bait and set them loose on several barges. As they crossed the river, the Tsengan Wasps were lured to them, and would then eat their dehydrated flesh and lay eggs in their eyes. Reports state it took a week for most of them to die, some mages claim it was longer. Xixen Krass was killed a few months after in an explosion. The Xi took their vengeance out on all of us because of him. Both sides see horror but both sides inflict horror. War is not justice.

Quinn felt ashamed. They continued to walk towards 34<sup>th</sup> street.

“Have you ever heard of The Book of the Source?” Asked Gravalyn to break the tension.

Quinn shook her head.

“It is believed to be the word of the creator by some but mostly it is a book of riddles and nonsense. There is a famous one that Techana children tell each other at the academy.”

“...the day that follows will finally end/when dreams shatter the blade of men...” Spoke Quinn in an eerie voice.

“Yes. That’s the one!”

“I always thought it was an incantation.”

“No, it is from the book. The full poem goes something like...

...to KNOW OUR builder and where he rests

ARACADIA whispers; reveals we are blessed

THE DAY THAT FOLLOWS will finally end

when dreams shatter the blade of men...”

“Why the emphasis on certain parts?” Asked Quinn.

Gravalyn shrugged.

“It’s written that way. Some devout believers see it as the revelation of a god.”

“A god? Really?”

“Yes. Even some Techana still believe in a god. The devout believers think the creator can be found on Ventrillion, but most of us believe it is just a legend.”

Quinn looked at her mentor.

“Some of us think Lora Noracon is a legend.”

Gravalyn stopped once again and looked so uncomfortable he could have slunk out of his skin and slipped down a nearby drain.

“But you were her partner. I guess... it’s a matter of perspective.”

3.

Quinn, dressed in a jumpsuit with a sparkly scarf, and Gravalyn — wearing a rainbow jacket and loose fitted cotton trousers, arrived at the bar.

“Yes, less conspicuous. Definitely.” Said Gravalyn with a frown.

Gravalyn and Quinn took a seat at the bar.

“So I’m still confused. Why send magistrates to help with a stranger spying on war veterans?” Asked Quinn.

“The stranger is not a stranger.”

“I am really fucking confused.”

“The stranger is a stranger to Paloma and her people but I recognised the individual. We have... a past.”

Quinn raised her eyebrows.

“Please explain, Prime.”

“The stranger is the hooded figure.”

“What? You’re a hooded figure...”

She looked down at his clothing.

“Well, usually, anyway.”

“Yes, well this hooded figure is THE hooded figure. The Hand of Tomorrow.”

Quinn stared blankly.

“The Hand of Tomorrow is an extremist. He often appears before trouble.”

A Dorlean barman interrupted.

“Sorry. What can I get you?”

“Is Duncan around?” Enquired Gravalyn.

The barman frowned.

“Oh shit! What happened to Duncan?”

“Duncan was killed during a robbery, about 6 months ago.”

“Fuck! I helped him buy this place way back. We’ll have two Ru-Cahols... in honour of Duncan.”

The barman poured two red coloured drinks into small glasses and passed them to Gravalyn and Quinn. They raised the glasses to their lips — it tasted of aniseed and cherry.

“That’s terrible news about Duncan. Cunt owed me money.”

Quinn spat her drink out across the bar as Gravalyn sipped his back. Her spray hit two thuggish looking walrus-like aliens who turned around and flipped their table over in anger. One of them drew a gun and pointed it at Quinn. Before anyone could gasp or be stunned, Gravalyn produced a wand shaped instrument from his robes, firing a green bolt of energy out of the wand and wrapping the beam around the armed walrus-

alien's throat. Gravalyn dragged him nearer, until his breath could be felt upon the technomages eyes.

“Put the gun away or I'll pull your tusks off and shove them up your asshole.”

The walrus aimed to put his gun away but his friend (in rage) pulled his weapon and aimed to shoot Gravalyn. Quinn removed her wand which glowed yellow and shot a similar white beam out. Her beam flung the creature backwards and left a vicious scorch mark on his chest. Gravalyn pulled his wand back so the lasso energy wrapped around the beast's neck, slicing clean through him, and decapitating him.

The rest of the bar crowd held their breath collectively.

“I suggest,” began Gravalyn, “that we get out of here before the port authorities come looking for us.”

Their feet absconded from the scene as fast as a dog licking its asshole after suffering an allergic reaction. No sooner had they put distance between themselves and the thugs in the bar, than another dilemma erupted before them. Beneath their absconding feet were tremors, large tremors shaking the very core of their being.

“What the fuck??” Yelled Quinn.

The ground began spitting, rupturing a large void that seemed to go as deep into despair as the darkle of space. Screams littered the air as various families and citizens hid in terror. Gravalyn studied the crack and noticed it widening, even branching off into tributaries of chaos. It was a moment which

could be compared to watching two starships collide. He could see what was about to happen and was powerless to stop it. The rift sunk, expanded, and with it, swallowed Quinn — whose footing had become loose on the dismantling slabs of road. Gravalyn watched as she fell down into the heart of the newly formed ravine, her face lost into the dust cloud emanating forth. No words came out of his mouth, instead he just stared into the abyss.

WITH  
EYES  
AND  
EARS  
ACROSS  
THE  
STARS

1.

On board The Great Adventure rested the enhanced telepath, Eyes and Ears. From a young age she had possessed the ability to scan and interpret the world through an extra sense, and this talent had brought her into all sorts of trouble. It wasn't until The Hand of Tomorrow, Lance Raven, had rescued her from the clutches of a nefarious scientist that she even knew her gifts could be used for the greater good. Lance had brought her aboard the incredible vessel, introduced her to ancient technology which had the ability to enhance her talents, and set her to work keeping an eye and ear on the universe. The range of her telepathic talents now stretched whole worlds, entire planetary systems, and even occasionally — time itself. She bore witness to the resurrection of the dead, a revelation of a great secret, a conversation between a mother with a hidden past and her two sons (with a hidden destiny) — to the beginning of a story, to the end of another, and... she couldn't place any of the events. That didn't matter. She wasn't a historian, nor a lawman, her task was to simply see and hear and tell.

And then she saw *it*.

Calling out to Lance, she begged him, begged him with every inch of her being. He came rushing into her observation room and knelt by her side.

“What is it?” He asked.

“You have to save them. You have to save them all.”

# THE ORACLE

