



HELPER

Jordan T. Hariel

Note from the Author

Hi, reader! Thanks for taking some time to read my story “Helper.” You may or may not know me, but I’m an aspiring author trying to get my writing-in-progress ready for publication (fingers crossed!). While I’m working on this book, I’ve writing stories like this for you to enjoy.

This is one of my favorite stories I’ve written—it’s packed with action and surprises at every turn! This *is* a sequel, so if you haven’t read the predecessor “Kill Code,” you might want to do so.

Now, off you go to join Darci Mendelssohn as she enters a mysterious cave with an unexpected secret...

With love,
Jordan T. Hariel.

“What a shame, Darci,” came his groggy voice, a glint passing briefly over his gaze. “It slipped right under your nose.”

His voice echoed ever louder in her mind until she awoke, gasping for air and sweating profusely. The fact that she was often in perilous situations frequently gave her nightmares, but this one seemed different. It was so real, so vivid, so imminent.

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PART I

AS HER AND DON McKeller's lofty, six-wheeled truck came to a halt in the frigid Siberian snow, Darci Mendelssohn let out a contemplative sigh, causing a wisp of cloud to emanate from her lips. As she ran her fingers through her golden hair, she marveled at where she was now. Two years ago on this day, she fought for her life as two bullets struck her in the leg in a top-secret underground facility run by the anarchists known as Arachne. The bullets had been long removed, but the pain of that day still clung to her--she never quite walked the same as she used to, but her best friend's betrayal of her hurt the most.

The incident sent shockwaves through the intelligence community, too. As the news of Arachne's infiltration of the most secretive government agency reached Congress, tighter restrictions on where agents could go, tougher screening, and a purge of those with any suspected Arachne ties were swiftly enacted. Darci, in light of her invaluable contributions to the dismantling of Arachne, was one of the few whose job was not replaced or eliminated entirely. Soon, however, the emotional connection between her imprisoned friend, Thad Dane, and the Crypt became too much for her to bear; three months after the fall of Arachne, she left the Crypt. The Cellar, the most confidential branch of the CIA, quickly offered her a position as a top field investigator. She readily agreed. Ever since, she and Don, her right hand man in the overthrow of Arachne, had become even closer friends than before. She truly enjoyed his company, but the scars from her relationship with Thad still cast a shadow over her heart.

She shook her head to bring her focus back to the present. Don, a six-foot, muscular, brown-skinned, bald-headed man, extended his hand to help her disembark the towering vehicle. The moment her feet hit the fresh powder, she whipped out her phone, her sharp green eyes darting rapidly back and forth. "All right. Let's review." She opened the classified file detailing the object of their mission. A photograph of a yellow crystal coated in a yellow sludge pulled up. "Xanthos--named both after its color and the city in which it was first unearthed in 1372--is a rare, yellowish substance found in various places around the world. For many centuries, its extreme rarity and purported supernatural abilities relegated it to myth, blah, blah, blah," Darci said as she skimmed over the file.

"What about handling?" Don asked.

"Hmm. Handling...handling...oh, here we go. Little is known about this substance due to its apparent tendency to dissipate when removed from its natural deposits. Analysts at the Cellar have theorized that a phenomenal, synergistic bond between atoms in the deposits causes the substance to

break down into individual atoms when the bond between it and said deposit is forcefully broken. What is known is that xanthos seems to have a gravitational field ten times stronger than any other known element. It is imperative that you remove the entire deposit to allow adequate testing.

“The contents of this file and the existence of this mineral is highly classified. If you are spotted while excavating this mineral, follow protocol A-332.”

“All right, I get it. Where are we going from here?” Don snapped.

“All right, I get it,” Darci said in a mocking voice. She laughed. “What are you so uptight about?”

He sighed sharply. “Nothing! I just--something doesn’t feel right.”

Darci thrust her hand out, closed her eyes, and spun in a circle. “Mhmm. Oh, wait! I sense nothing.” She opened her green eyes and chuckled again. “Look, Don, our work is dangerous, and you know that. We’ll be okay as long as we’ve got each other’s back.”

Don bowed his head and rubbed the back of his neck. “You’re right. I’m sure it’s nothing. But for real, I’m freezing out here!”

“Same here,” said Darci, pulling her thick black jacket tighter. “The mine shaft is one click up this mountain.” She motioned to the towering peak in front of them. “We’ll need the ski poles-- it’s gonna get a little steep. Oh! And my backpack too, please.”

Don quickly retrieved the poles and the pack as Darci mapped out their route. Within a couple minutes, they were on their way upward. During the first leg of their journey, the two struck up a pleasant conversation. However, as a flurry of snow turned into a violent blizzard, and the gentle slopes of the mountain’s foot became much more severe, their voices fell hush as they pulled their ski masks over their faces and toiled through the ever-deepening snow to reach the site of the mine. Visibility slowly reduced to about ten feet, and as such, they did not realize they had reached their destination until they nearly collided with a shack just outside the mine shaft. The shack’s door flung open, and a man clad in an orange vest and yellow hard hat peeked out. He yelled at them, in Russian, “In here!”

Darci and Don stumbled towards the door, breathing sighs of relief once inside. Though not particularly warm, the shack provided a much needed shelter from the harsh outside winds. Don introduced them both to the three miners inside, his knowledge of Russian slowly trickling back into his head from his time in Ukraine. “I am Aleksei, and this is my accomplice Sasha. We are from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. We received a report that you had stumbled upon an unusual mineral.”

One man, clearly the supervisor, answered with wide eyes. “Yes. I have been in the mining industry for twenty-five years, and I have never seen anything like this before. The mineral is glowing, yellow, and oozes slime. I feared it was radioactive, so I evacuated all personnel from the area. I hoped that you might be able to help us.”

“I think we might. Where is the mineral located?”

“It is located in a tunnel branching from the main shaft. I can show you.”

The man made for the door, but Darci and Don, exchanging nods, both produced sedative injectors from their coats and thrust them into each man’s thigh, rapidly rendering them unconscious. Don immediately pulled out a cylindrical device with a display on one end. Placing the device on the supervisor’s forehead, Don swiped back and forth on the screen. With a tap, the device let out a long beep and a flash, indicating that it had erased any memory of Don, Darci, and the appearance of the mineral. Don repeated this process with the other men in the shack. He never particularly liked knocking people out or altering their memories--it all felt *wrong*, like he was prying where he shouldn’t have been. But the fact that it was for their long-term safety helped him swallow it. When he had finished, they departed for the mine shaft.

The sudden snowstorm had let up slightly, but visibility had increased to only about twenty-five feet. The two stumbled and trudged through the harsh gusts and shin-deep snow until they finally caught a glimpse of the tunnel. The opening of the mine shaft was about thirty feet wide and ten feet tall, though as it progressed, it grew much narrower. As they entered the cave, Don removed a circular object from his jacket. “Hey, is that a MFSL-2430?” asked Darci, brushing snow off her jacket.

“Oh, yeah. This thing can detect and locate the source of pretty much any magnetic field of any strength up to 1,200 feet deep.”

“Well, that’s no fair,” Darci mumbled. “They give you all the good toys.”

Don smirked. “It’s called seniority, hon. Let me see that file on the xanthos again.”

Darci, not appreciative of Don’s smug comment, begrudgingly pulled up the file and showed it to Don. “Let’s see.” Don’s eyes scanned the document. “All right.” He turned a couple of knobs on the backside of the device to tune it to search for the mineral’s specific magnetic field strength, causing the instrument to begin emanating a slow pinging noise. The two agents flipped on their flashlights and advanced into the unsettling darkness of the mine shaft. The whistling of the wind gradually faded, until all was eerily silent, save the dinging of Don’s device and the occasional drip of some water from the tunnel ceiling. For about twenty minutes of their cautious advance, they got no sign of any mineral.

Finally, the locator's pinging became noticeably faster in front of a narrow tunnel diverging from the main shaft. "This must be it," Darci remarked. She shone her flashlight into the darkling passage, prompting a barrage of bats to flutter and squeak out of it. As they entered the tunnel, they noticed that the air inside it was surprisingly warmer than that of the main shaft. The ping of Don's device became steadily faster the further they went into the passage, until a glowing, yellow light illuminating a portion of the shaft's wall signaled that they had found the mineral.

The xanthos appeared much like it had in its file: a rough, mustard-colored, translucent mineral dripping with a odorless, but nonetheless revolting, slime. What the photograph could not convey was the glow the mineral contained within it, for it was not a steady light; rather, it seemed to grow alternately brighter and dimmer every few seconds, like the sunlight on a cloudy day. Though the document had stated that its origin was unknown, to Darci, it certainly appeared otherworldly. Don pulled two sets of short picks and chisels out of his jacket.

Darci let out a low whistle. "Dang, you've got deep pock--" The sound of some falling pebbles interrupted her. Darci instinctively whipped out her pistol and flashlight and pointed them both into the darkness. "Who's there?" Nothing.

"Pebbles fall like that all the time," said Don. "You told me *I* needed to relax?"

She slowly let her pistol down. "Can you blame me? The last time I was this far underground, it didn't turn out so well for me."

"Okay, I get it. Now let's get this stuff out of here." The two cautiously chipped away the rock around the substance. Don's eyes were fixed on the mineral, but Darci's occasionally flashed over her shoulder, which on several occasions almost caused her to split the xanthos. She did not believe in ghosts, but she almost felt as if some sort of apparition were glaring at her in the cave. She convinced herself that she was just being paranoid--just having flashbacks of Arachne's lair...

Suddenly, Don fell to his knees, grasping his head and releasing cries of pain. Darci was at his side in a flash. "Are you all right, Don?"

"Geez, I don't know," Don said through gritted teeth, without any hint of sarcasm. "I just have this horrible migraine all of the sudden."

"Do you need some painkiller?"

"No, no, I'm okay." With a grunt and a shake of his head, he rose to his feet. "Let's just get this and get out of here."

Darci hesitated, but she agreed. Something wasn't right about this cave.

Finally, donning a pair of gloves to prevent the slime from getting on their hands, they freed the entire deposit from the stone. The entire sample ended up measuring about 7 inches high, 5

inches wide, and 13 inches long, and weighing about thirteen pounds. They slid it down in Darci's backpack and began to make the journey back to the surface. As they trekked, the sound of cascading pebbles began to gradually grow louder and more frequent. At first, they both disregarded it, but as the noises became more noticeable, they grew visibly concerned.

When they were only five hundred feet from the mouth of the shaft, Darci discerned a crackling noise emanating from one of the wooden support beams above them. She screamed, "Don, run!" as the beam splintered and the tunnel began to collapse. They sprinted for the daylight. Behind them, one by one, each support collapsed, raining tons of rock and dust down. The gap between them and the rockslide was large at first, but gradually it crawled closer, and closer, and closer. But just as the mine's entrance was beginning to cave in, the two dove out of the shadows and into the soft powder. The tunnel crashed down with a resounding boom, sputtering out a cloud of dust into the cold, open air.

They both rolled over onto their backs, taking in deep breaths to try to slow their rapidly thumping heartbeats. After a few moments of silence, Darci exclaimed, "Well, that does it for me! I'm never going underground again."

Don chuckled. "Yeah, I'm with ya." They sat their for another minute or so, marveling at the fact that they were alive, before Don suggested they get going. The journey back to their car was much easier for two reasons--they were traveling downhill and the snowstorm had ceased. They were grateful, too, when sunlight began to burst through the clouds about midway through their trek. When they arrived at their truck at last, they carefully arranged everything in the back, taking special care to secure the mineral sample. With that, they buckled in, turned up the heater, and left for Yakutsk.

After a boring, two-and-a-half hour drive from their location to Yakutsk Airport, they boarded a private plane operated by the Cellar. They had stops in Moscow and Berlin before flying out for New York City, the home of the Cellar's primary headquarters. Darci drifted off to sleep soon after they left Berlin and was only awakened when she felt the sudden jerk of the plane touching down at LaGuardia Airport around 9:30 P.M. the next day. The twenty hours in total flights was grueling, and she was more than happy, despite a good bit of jet lag, to get out of the plane and stretch her legs. The plane's crew promptly unloaded the cargo, among which was the mineral that now sat in a box labeled "EXTREMELY FRAGILE."

Don and Darci together carried the crate into a small, seemingly abandoned hangar close to Flushing Bay. Once inside, Don turned on his flashlight and surveyed the hangar. "I always forget..." His voice trailed off. He strolled over to a shelf coated in cobwebs and populated with

dusty aviation books, manuals, and model planes. Glaring for a few moments at the books, he pushed in the first one from the right, then the fourth, then the fifth. With a moan, one of the rusted panels in the back of the hangar squeaked slowly open to reveal a modern, well-kept elevator. The pair heaved the crate into the elevator, at which point the computer simply asked, “Regrets?”

“That I have but one life to lose for my country,” replied Don.

“Accepted,” the computer said as the doors closed. “Welcome, agents Don McKeller and Darci Mendelsohn.” The elevator descended about three hundred feet before the two were abruptly thrust forward.

“Manhattan, here we come,” muttered Darci. Turning to Don, she said, “You think Dr. Tao will be in this late?”

“He usually is. And anyway, he knows we’re coming. He’ll be all too eager to get his hands on this stuff.” He patted the box.

They stood in silence for a few moments. Darci finally spoke up. “What do you make of it? The xanthos, I mean.”

“I try not to make anything of anything before I get any facts. Why?”

“It’s just--it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before. It’s almost like...” her voice faded as she pondered.

“Like what?”

“Like it doesn’t want us to find it. I mean, what mineral do you know of that completely dissipates when you try to take a sample? And if it was uncovered hundreds of years ago, why has no one been able to study it--ever?” She leaned on the wall and bit her lip. “I feel like there’s something they aren’t telling us.”

“Who? The Cellar? C’mon, Darci. What good would it do them to hide something from us? We were the ones out on the field getting this stuff. Code says that ‘Agents on the ground...’”

“...must be aware of any known dangers surrounding their assignment,” she finished. “I know what protocol says. But it’s not the protocol I’m worried about. I’ve worked for the government for fifteen years, but not a day goes by that I don’t distrust it.”

“You trust Dr. Tao, don’t you? He’ll give you a honest answer. Don’t worry about it. Ah! Here we are.”

The transport came to a grinding halt before a *ding* notified them that they had arrived at the Cellar headquarters. Far below the noisy, winding tracks of the metro (and hence the “Cellar” name), lay the hub of the agency’s operations. Most would imagine a headquarters buried deep under Manhattan would be somewhat dingy and unappealing, but the agency’s administration had

taken great pains to ensure that agents were comfortable remaining underground for extended periods of time. The soaring ceilings, towering windows that simulated daytime and nighttime, and marble floors gave the impression of being inside a large office building. Transportation across a place the size of Manhattan Island had also been simplified with two-person, egg-shaped capsules that traveled around the premises at speeds of 50 miles per hour. The entire operation ran better than a well-oiled machine, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It had to--the Cellar's work never rested, and despite the late hour, the lobby was bustling with agents intent on their work.

Darci and Don lifted the crate once more and made their way to an available capsule on the right side of the lobby. After they had climbed inside, the glass door quickly closed behind them, and the computer asked for a destination. "Evidence Reception and Analysis," Darci said.

"Evidence Reception and Analysis," the computer repeated, and the capsule whizzed away. Within a couple of minutes, they had arrived, and with a unisonous grunt, they lugged the crate to Lab 3H, where Dr. Andrew Tao was anxiously awaiting them. He was a five-foot seven Chinese man, with pensive brown eyes and slicked-back black hair. Despite being idle at the time, he was reclined back in an office chair, stroking his chin with his pointer finger--a sign that his brain was fully engaged on some other undoubtedly complex topic. His intellect, though, was not the only thing he was admired for: he had a way of simplifying complex matters to the level of the average man. He leapt up when Don and Darci entered the room.

"Good heavens! I was beginning to believe you would never arrive," he said, rubbing his hands together. "Now, let's see it."

As they unlocked and opened the crate, a spark seemed to light Dr. Tao's gaze, as if the prospect of a new challenge excited him. "Remarkable," he whispered in awe. Donning a pair of rubber gloves, he ran his finger through the slime. "It hasn't dried out," he mumbled.

"Actually, it's probably increased," Darci remarked.

"Really?" the doctor said, half-distracted and rubbing the slime between his fingers and smelling it. "No odor. I understand I can't take any samples, correct?"

"That's right."

He chuckled. "Nonsense, I'm sure. But, all right. Let's get it up on the table, then, and I will begin inspecting it." He and Don lifted it together and set it down as gently as possible. Don's phone vibrated just a few moments after. He pulled it out, glanced at it, and slipped it quickly back into his pocket.

"Well, Doc, we'll leave you to do your thing," he said. "It appears Darci and I have some other business to attend to. We'll check in on your progress in a few hours."

“Mhmm,” replied the doctor dreamily, never taking his eyes off the xanthos. At that point, they knew his mind was already hard at work. They slipped quietly out into the hallway.

“What’s going on, Don?” Darci questioned as they made their way to the capsules once more.

“I don’t know. I just got a message from Supervisor Clement of South American Affairs. She wants us in Conference Room 3 on the lower level. Now.”

PART II

“DARN,” DARCI muttered. “We just got back. What could she need now?”

Don did not answer. That nauseated feeling he got when they got out of their truck in Siberia was back, but why he felt that way was a mystery he hadn't quite worked out yet. He did not raise his concerns to Darci, knowing she would brush it off; however, he wondered deep down if she had the same feeling. “Something isn't right,” his heart would say, to which his brain would retort, “Something's always not right. You work for one of the most top secret agencies in the world.” That argument would usually be sufficient to quell his fears, but he could not shake this one. Deep in thought, he nearly slammed into the wall when they reached the capsules.

“Watch out, hoss!” Darci exclaimed with a giggle. “I know you've probably got some jet lag, but...”

Don gave a weak laugh in reply, still in a bit of a reflective mood. He shook his head, and, casting his distraction to the side, boarded the capsule. They set their destination for the Conference Hall, and the capsule sped away through the maze of criss-crossing tracks. It stopped at the far edge of the complex, where it was lowered down like an elevator to the fourth level. With a *whoosh*, it flew in reverse until they reached the Conference Hall. Room 3 was seven doors down from their drop-off point. Entering, the two found Supervisor Deja Clement, a thin, pointy-nosed, fair-skinned woman with her black hair done neatly back in a bun. She sat with her hands folded on the long, oval table, speaking with two men seated on either side of her. Both were rather dark in complexion. One was clearly a decorated admiral of some sort, while the other man appeared to be a businessman or politician. To the agents' surprise, laid at intervals on the table, were twelve samples of varying sizes of xanthos, cleaned of their slime. All three people seated at the table rose when Darci and Don entered.

“Thank you for coming,” said the supervisor, pushing her square glasses up her nose. After shaking hands with them, she turned to the other two men and introduced them. “Agents McKeller and Mendelsohn, I'd like you to meet Admiral Santiago Gonzales and Ambassador Valentino Garcia of Argentina.” They shook hands and exchanged pleasantries before Supervisor Clement bade them take a seat.

“I'd like to apologize to everyone, first of all, for the lateness of the meeting,” she stated, “but I thought it necessary due to the urgency of the matter. I won't waste any time. Don and Darci, you no doubt noticed the samples of xanthos on the table when you entered.” She sighed. “All these arrived within the hour. We've been receiving a sudden influx of reports of findings of the mineral--an influx like we've never seen before. This includes a notice filed with the Argentinian Mining

Department regarding a mine outside of the city of Tucumán.” She handed Don a manila folder.

His eyes scanned the document. “A whole vein?” he said incredulously.

“Approximately three thousand pounds worth, according to eyewitnesses. Admiral Gonzales and Ambassador Garcia stand behind our effort to study the xanthos mineral. The more samples we can get, the better.” She laughed. “And there are a whole lotta samples here.”

“But the file on the xanthos said--”

“I know. If you take a sample, the whole thing disappears. Further study will either confirm or deny that theory. Dr. Tao is hard at work on just that, I understand. He will get to the bottom of it quickly enough. Until then, I need you two to go to Argentina and give an official report on the situation. We’ll send in an extraction team at the appropriate time. But you must leave tomorrow morning. The Argentinian government has temporarily halted the mine’s operations until we remove the mineral, so we must move quickly. Do you understand?”

As frustrated as both of them were about having to leave so soon after getting back, they both replied with an acquiescent “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. I will ensure that the Records Department provides you with all the appropriate files. And thank you, Admiral and Ambassador, for your support. We will not delay in getting to the bottom of this mystery.” They all shook hands and said their goodbyes before the two Argentinian officials departed. However, as Darci and Don went to leave, Supervisor Clement grabbed them by the arms. Her voice lowered, and she peered at them over her glasses. “Listen and let me be clear about something. This is not an extraction job. This is a land seizure and cover-up. One way or another, the Argentinians will give us that mine. Whether we have to convince them the stuff is radioactive, or we have to cause some kind of accident--I don’t care. But the longer we take on this, the more attention we draw to ourselves; and the more attention we draw to ourselves, the more things start to leak. We don’t want to have to deal with a media frenzy about some kind of dangerous mineral. The director doesn’t want to deal with that, and I sure as heck don’t want to.”

Darci swallowed hard. She hated hearing stuff like that.

“You call it a dangerous mineral,” said Don, a long blink indicating his displeasure also. “Is there something you know that we don’t?”

She smiled. “There always is. But you’ll be relieved to know that I know about as much as you do in this case.”

“Madam Supervisor, why all the sudden?” asked Darci. “How come we get four years worth of samples in twenty-four hours?”

“I don’t know, Agent Mendelssohn. Like I said, I know as much as you. But what I can tell

you is that,” she motioned to all the xanthos on the table, “is bad news. Stuff like this doesn’t happen by chance. To be honest, I don’t care what xanthos is. I’m more concerned with where it’s coming from.”

“With all due respect, Madam Supervisor, minerals don’t form this quickly.”

Clement tilted her head. “I know they don’t. That’s why I’m concerned,” she shot back with a twinge of condescension in her voice.

Seeing that the supervisor was growing testy and Darci was biting her lip, Don grabbed his friend’s arm. “We’ll keep our eyes peeled,” Don declared, nodding his head.

“As you should. Better pack your bags.” She waved them off with the back of her hand.

Knowing that the supervisor was an impatient woman, they quickly left. In spite of their concerns and frustrations, neither of them breathed a word to each other the rest of the night. They were just *thinking*--not on anything in particular, but their minds had simply strayed into place of deep contemplation with perhaps a tinge of dread. Darci desperately wanted to get to the bottom of what was going on. She hid, or perhaps suppressed, her feelings well, but truthfully, the mineral’s abrupt appearance troubled her profoundly. Experience had taught her that if it seems suspicious, it likely is, and xanthos was the most suspicious thing she had seen in a long time.

She hated to ponder too much on the nebulous future, but the uncertainty of what lay ahead still disturbed her sleep that night. In one dream, she remembered a flood of images filling her mind so rapidly she could barely process them all. She knew she saw a cave, a computer, and--suddenly, the face of Thad Dane appeared. He was seated, looking her straight in the eyes, his back against a cinderblock wall. “What a shame, Darci,” came his groggy voice, a glint passing briefly over his gaze. “It slipped right under your nose.”

His voice echoed ever louder in her mind until she awoke, gasping for air and sweating profusely. The fact that she was often in perilous situations frequently gave her nightmares, but this one seemed different. It was so real, so vivid, so *imminent*. After she had caught her breath, she lay back down. *People have realistic nightmares all the time, right?* She had her share of those, but it was almost as if she was there, with Thad, in person. *I’m just tired*, she thought. She knew she needed her rest. Convinced it was just some apprehension about what lay ahead that was disturbing her, she forced herself to go back to sleep. *Just stick with Don, and you’ll be all right...*

“Hello?” Don shouted into his phone. He and Darci were about nine hundred feet into the mine in Argentina when he received an urgent phone call from Supervisor Clement.

“I--urgent--matter,” was all that came through.

Don shuffled around in a desperate attempt to improve his signal. “Supervisor, you’re breaking up.”

“Can--hear--“

As Don continued to try different spots in the mine, Darci swallowed hard. She knew what she needed to do. Though she loathed the idea of being alone for any period of time, she knew Don had to take the call. High-ranking officials’ calls were not labeled urgent flippantly--Supervisor Clement clearly had some important information to convey to them. She pondered just going with him, but that idea almost repulsed her. What was she, some sort of child? Whatever sentiments she had about being alone were overwhelmed by her independence. “Go outside and take the call. I’ll go ahead and check things out.”

Don covered the mic and whispered, “No way! We need to stay together.”

“I’ll be fine, Don. I can handle myself just fine.”

“You know what the supervisor said about this stuff. It’s dangerous. You took down Arachne, and you made it out okay. But that doesn’t mean you can take on everything.”

“She told us to be careful. I will be. I always am. But I don’t think there are any bad guys staking us out two thousand feet underground,” she replied with a forced grin.

Don was tempted to keep arguing with her, but the supervisor was waiting, and he did not want to frighten Darci if she was not frightened already. He let out a sharp sigh and handed her a walkie talkie. “Fine. But contact me on this comm if anything seems wrong.”

“Will do.” She mustered a feeble smile, a queasiness suddenly coming over her. Hoping her stubbornness would not come back to bite her, she took a deep breath, turned around, and ventured deeper into the darkness. Distance eventually drowned out Don’s voice, and the throbbing of her heart and an occasional drip from the mine’s roof became the only sounds. The tunnel continued gently down, down, down--but she got not even a glimpse of xanthos. The deeper she went, the thicker the darkness seemed to become, and the more her paranoia grew. Though the mineral’s glow almost carried an eeriness about it, she would have given anything to see it right then in that almost tangible darkness. As she waved her flashlight about, she jumped more than once at what she thought was a shadow leaping out of the way. Things like that made her feel like she was going crazy. She had stood as a secret agent amongst armed men and made it out alive--and now, deep in a forsaken mine, she feared more for her life than ever.

“Get a grip, Darci,” she whispered to herself, almost involuntarily. She was not one who typically talked to herself, but the anxiety mounting within her forced it out. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. You are a strong woman. You are--” She stopped when something fell on her from the

roof. “Ugh!” she cried, shaking slime off her hand. Shining her flashlight above her and to either side of her, she gasped. All around her, xanthos ran like rivers through the walls and roof of the cave. She marveled at the golden light inside the mineral, which, as if it were living, seemed to flow like blood from one end of the vein to the other. For a few moments, she just stopped and admired it, the strange beauty of it soothing her distressed soul.

A buzz on her comm sucked her out of her meditative state. “Go ahead,” she said.

“Darci! I just got off the phone with the supervisor,” came Don’s voice.

“And?”

“She was right about this stuff. All the samples of xanthos are missing from HQ.”

“Missing?” Darci asked in disbelief.

“Yeah. They’ve been interrogating agents and reviewing security footage, but every rock they’ve turned has come up empty. Here’s the crazy thing, though--all the cameras show the xanthos sitting there one moment and gone the next. They just vanished. And there’s no evidence that the tapes or the cameras have been tampered with.”

Darci ignored his last statement, her attention momentarily drawn elsewhere. “Hey, Don, sorry to change the topic all of the sudden, but I found the vein. Didn’t that file say the miners hadn’t touched the xanthos at all?”

“Yeah,” Don replied with some apprehension in his tone.

“And we’re the first agents to come in here?”

“Yes. Why are you asking? What’s going on?”

She pointed her flashlight into a gaping hole in the middle of the xanthos vein running through the roof. “Well, either somebody lied, or somebody’s been in here when they shouldn’t have been. There’s an enormous portion of the deposit that’s been removed.”

“Are you sure?” She could hear his footsteps quickening.

“Positive. The hole is too uniform to be natural.”

“All right, Darci, you need to come back. Now.”

She pulled out her pistol and loaded the magazine. “We can’t just leave if someone’s been trespassing. Just get down here as quick as you can--I’m a little over two thousand feet down, as best as I can tell. And load your gun.”

“Already did,” he answered as the sound of a gun cocking came through. “I’m on my way. Stay on your guard but don’t move until I get there.”

“Copy that.” She donned her headlamp and held her gun at her side, looking around her constantly. *No one would be hiding this deep underground, right?* Of course not. It was just some

prankster. *That got past high-level security?* She shook her head. Maybe it was a drill. *Seems like bad timing for a drill, though...*

A few minutes of silence passed on the comms. Don, sides hurting and breathing heavily, buzzed Darci's comm again. "Darci, do you copy?"

No answer.

"Hey, Darce, do you read me? I'm approaching your location."

The only sound that came through was that of heavy, slow breathing. But it was undeniably a male.

A cold shiver went down Don's spine. "Who is this?" Don screamed into the mic, but again received no answer. "Whoever you are, I swear, I'll make you wish you were never born if you--"

He was interrupted by the sound of the comm hitting the cave floor. He dashed onward as quickly as his legs could take him until he reached the end of the mine. Puzzled, he searched all about him for a sign of Darci. When he found none, he slowly progressed backwards, scanning his surroundings carefully and carrying his gun in his hand. As he walked, he noticed the floor had become suddenly slippery. He bent to inspect a yellow substance under his feet, recognizing it almost immediately as xanthos slime. His eyes darted all around the cave, but the mineral was nowhere to be found. His confusion quickly became nausea as his eyes finally rested on his friend's communicator, lying on the cold floor and covered in ooze.

Darci Mendelssohn was nowhere in sight.

Darci's eyes fluttered open. She was not fully conscious, but she was somewhat aware of her surroundings. She could faintly hear an incoming transmission from a nearby radio. "Code 39-C, Code 39-C!" It was Don's voice. His tone was severely panicked, and he spoke so quickly he was almost unintelligible. "I have a missing agent! Repeat, I have a missing agent! All Cellar agents in the vicinity: I have a Code 39-C! Does anyone copy? Does..."

And she faded again.

PART III

“IT SLIPPED RIGHT UNDER YOUR NOSE.”

Darci finally awoke, gasping for air. Those dreadful words echoed in her mind as that horrendous nightmare she had experienced earlier returned in her unconsciousness. For the few moments in which she struggled to catch her breath, all her surroundings were a blur.

She suddenly realized she was soaking wet and lying on a white beach. Warm water gently lapped at her feet. She was terribly feeble, but she managed the strength to push herself up into a sitting position. After clearing the sand out of her face and attempting to fix her tangled mess of wet hair, she took a moment to get her bearings. As best she could tell, she had been dropped on a largely abandoned tropical island, as indicated by the jungle of palm trees swaying far in the distance and the carnage from countless plane wrecks littering the area before her. By her estimates, the rusting hulls of fifty planes lay in the sand, whistling in the wind. Most were civilian, but a few were military craft, which seemed to further confuse the notion of where she might be.

She pulled her phone out of her pocket to see if she could establish a communication with someone--Don preferably, but anyone would have sufficed at that moment. Unsurprisingly, it would not turn on, presumably damaged by the water. She could not even guess what time it was since the sun was hidden behind ominous grey clouds warning of an approaching storm. She was essentially clueless and completely alone--or so she thought.

After some time, she was able to gather the strength to stand. Her unconsciousness having thrown off her balance, she stumbled onward for a little while without a sense of direction. She hoped that, by doing some inspection, she would be able to deduce where she was. However, the heavens soon interrupted her effort as thunder grumbled in the depths of the clouds. She knew needed to take shelter, at least for a little while. The jungle was her best bet, but it lay a good mile and a half away. Although she realized that she might not make it before the storm began, she started trekking towards it anyway.

The severity of the storm soon became apparent as the sky rapidly darkened and the wind speed picked up dramatically. Her walk turned into a jog. Rain began to trickle down from the clouds and lightning began to illuminate the gloomy sky. Her jog became a run. Within minutes, the winds were near gale-force and thunder roared as lightning crashed on the earth. Her run turned into a sprint. She fought to keep a straight path as the violent winds shoved her back and forth, and she struggled to keep her eyes open as sand went flying everywhere. In twenty minutes, she was closing in on the jungle's threshold.

Suddenly, a lightning bolt struck one of the nearby palm trees, shattering its mighty trunk.

With a dreadful crackle, it began to topple over towards Darci. With the last ounce of energy she could muster, she leapt out of the way and into the cover of the jungle. Behind her, the tree slammed into the sand with a resounding *thud*. She gasped for breath, her heart nearly thumping out of her chest. Despite her fatigue, she leapt back up and began hastily searching for a dry place to escape the raging storm. The thought of another tree falling on her in the ferocious wind was a terrifying thought in itself, but as she looked for shelter, another thought abruptly occurred to her: who brought her here? More importantly, why, and where was he now? The radio transmission she had heard when she briefly awoke from unconsciousness came to her mind. *At least someone's looking for me*. But that thought was not much comfort considering she did not know where her captor was or what his intentions were. *In fact, he could be somewhere in this very jungle...*

She gasped as she bumped into an enormous rock that she had somehow not noticed before. At its peak, it rose about twelve feet off the jungle floor, and stretched fifty feet in either direction. She circled around it and was delighted to find an overhang in the rock more than spacious enough for her to sit comfortably under it. Her weariness was so great that she almost fell down under the rock. For a few moments, she lay on her back, just trying to catch her breath. All of the sudden, she realized that the rock was slowly sinking into the ground. An adrenaline rush forced her to her feet. She made a desperate attempt to climb out, but the top of the rock slipped below ground level before she could escape.

She braced herself to be buried in a landslide, but to her surprise, the earth did not smother her. It remained perfectly flat like a wall against the overhang in the rock. As she descended, the earth gradually transitioned into steel. Nausea settled in her stomach, and her heart again sped up.

Within a couple of minutes, the rock came to a halt, and she found herself staring into a lab or a command center of some sort, with a tall archway in the back that opened into a long hallway. The room was simple and barely furnished; the walls were clad in a smooth, white vinyl that curved down flush with the floor. Floor-to-ceiling lights embedded at various points along the wall brightly illuminated the room. In the center of the room lay a hexagonal computer of some sort laden with buttons, switches, and displays of all sizes and colors. A holographic sphere hovered over the center of the computer.

Darci approached the panel and circled it slowly a couple of times. The controls were much higher up than normal, rising about four and a half feet off the ground. All the buttons and switches were labeled in a foreign language, but certainly not one she had seen before. The screens, arrayed around the center of the panel, displayed camera feeds from what appeared to be various locations around the island. Something like *deja vu*--but much stronger--suddenly struck her. She had seen

these displays before, but where?

Just then, a door opened at the end of the hallway. The figure that emerged from behind it sent chills down Darci's spine. It was a fair-skinned, black-haired man wearing a dramatic white robe embroidered with gold lace and featuring a tall collar that nearly encompassed his towering neck--his most unnatural feature. His neck alone was probably three feet long, but it was only a fraction of his lanky, nine-foot frame. For a brief moment, the two locked eyes and remained still in utter shock. Darci placed her hand on her gun holster.

His shadowy green eyes looked her up and down for a few moments before he suddenly came bounding down the hallway. Darci reached for her gun--but it was gone. Panicking, she hastily analyzed her opponent's movements. He was tall, and she was short. The longest part of his body that she could reasonably reach were his legs. Her breaths became rapid as she waited for her opportunity.

He was within a couple of feet of her when she jumped forward, put her hand on his chest, wrapped her leg around his, and threw him to the ground. She whirled around and made for the elevator, but all at once, she found herself involuntarily being drawn back towards the man, who was now back on his feet. She toiled to escape, but she drew ever closer to his menacing figure until his fingers were wrapped firmly around her throat.

Again, he studied her face with his deep-set eyes that seemed to be enveloped in darkness save his irises. "You *are* feisty, aren't you?" came his deep, rumbling voice. "You resisted unconsciousness. How did you--?"

"Who--are--you?" demanded Darci between gasps for air.

"I am called Helper." His lips curled slightly upward. "Are you afraid?"

"I'm--suffocating," Darci cried.

"Ah, yes, of course," he said, dropping her. She choked for a few seconds, trying to catch her breath. There were a few moments of silence as he studied her. "You are confused."

"A little bit."

"It's no surprise. You are investigating a foreign substance under the auspices of the most secretive organization in the world and before you know it, you are unconscious. You find yourself stranded on a desolate island in the middle of a ferocious tropical storm with no contact to the outside world. Seeking shelter, you naturally chose this rock, suddenly being transported to a mysterious lair in which you find a man who is abnormally large for your species. I, too, would be rather dumbfounded, Ms. Darci Mendelsohn."

Darci gaped at him. "How do you know so much about me--about who I work for?"

“All your questions have answers, but I haven’t time to answer them now. If indeed answers are what you seek, then have a seat in the eatery.” He motioned to the third door on the left in the hallway.

“How can I trust you?”

He reached into a pocket on his cloak and removed her pistol. He extended it to her with the barrel facing himself. “Because I trust you.”

She snatched the weapon out of his hand. She inspected it and the magazine. “What’s to stop me from just shooting you and getting the information myself? I’ve hacked computers before--sort of.”

“That’s rather dark of you, Ms. Mendelssohn.” He smirked. “Paranoia will gain you nothing.”

“It always does,” she answered, shaking her head. “And if I can’t get it, I’ve got the best guys in the U.S. government looking for me. They’ll get what we need if I can’t.”

He gave a sarcastic gasp. “You of all people ought to know of the weakness of the governments of this world. Was it not you yourself who said they are not to be trusted? I’ve been here fifteen hundred years and have never been found.” He laughed. “Your government does not intimidate me one smidgen. Nor do they intimidate the threat that quickly approaches your world. If you wish to stop it, you’ll put your gun down and listen.”

Darci’s hands shook. His gaze at that moment showed a certain gravity that urged her to listen to him; on the other hand, she remembered how he had taken her against her will and left her helpless on a forsaken island. Her instincts rarely failed her, and her instincts told her to kill him--that he was not to be trusted. Maybe he did not actually know anything about some great threat, but his alarming amount of knowledge about herself and the Cellar was enough to make her hear him out. She slid her gun into her holster.

“Wise decision,” he said. He gestured again towards the door. “Please, have a seat in the eatery. I will meet you shortly.”

She waited for him to exit the hallway before she entered the automatic sliding door to which he had gestured. With a hiss, it opened to reveal a well-lit, largely white room with unadorned walls similar to the ones in the foyer. To her right lay a circular dining table atop a shaggy grey rug, surrounded with four curvy, levitating chairs. These chairs in particular perplexed Darci; she waved her hand underneath them and pushed on them a few times before she was convinced it was not an illusion. Straight ahead lay a long coffee table sandwiched between two floating armchairs. Behind these furnishings, a circular fireplace shaped somewhat like a pendulum

hung from the ceiling and gave the otherwise callous room a homey feel.

She took a seat on one of the gravity-defying armchairs, which fell slightly as she sat down before it rose once more to its original position. She glanced over at the two clocks on the wall behind the fireplace. One was much like a regular clock, but the other had been modified. It featured much more hour marks than a regular clock, and instead of hour and minute hands, two spheres circled around the center on concentric tracks of different sizes, almost like planets revolving around the sun. From the normal clock, she could tell that it was 1:43 in the afternoon.

At 2:00 precisely, Helper returned. He carried a long, white tray, upon which was set a transparent teapot filled with some sort of deep red tea and two matching teacups. As he set the tray down and began pouring the beverage, he said, "I apologize for the wait. I had to repair the cloaking device that should have kept you from finding me." He cast her a sneering glance.

Darci did not reply but kept her eyes locked on him.

"I must say, Ms. Mendelssohn," he said, sitting down and sipping his drink, "you are far too clever for your line of work."

She grimaced. "I'm not sure what you want--"

"What *I* want?" He straightened up. "*I* want nothing, nor do *I* need anything. In fact, I could leave your pitiful race to utter and swift extinction right now if I wished. You ask me what I want as if I am wrapped about your fingers, and yet, you are the one who sits in the unknown. I have all that I need, and all that I need to know. No, the question is not what I want. It is, in fact, what do *you* want to know?" He leaned back again and tapped all his long fingers together.

Darci crossed her legs and leaned in. "I guess I could start with who--or what, I guess--are you, and who do you work for?"

"Well, firstly, I must address your assertion that I am a *what* and not a *who*, when, in fact, it is quite the opposite. I am Helper, and I work for your race."

"Your name is really Helper?"

"In your tongue, yes. Of course, that was not always my name. I changed it when I arrived here in 1491, as I recall, in your time."

Darci sighed impatiently. "You insult my intelligence, sir."

"How so?"

"1491, seriously? I get you aren't an average human being--"

"You are a blunt woman, Ms. Mendelssohn, but you are correct. I am not an average, nor any other type of, human being. You see," he said as he removed a square device from his cloak and set it on the table, "you are a much smaller piece of the universe than you realize." He tapped the

device, and a holographic map of the solar system appeared above it. He pinched his fingers inwards several times, causing the hologram to zoom out into a sea of stars and galaxies. He drew a circle over a specific portion of the map, which zoomed in on another planetary system. “This is Nera, my home system--located nearly 500 million light-years from Earth.”

Darci stared, astonished, at the hologram for a few moments before her eyes slowly met those of Helper. “You’re an alien.” It almost seemed stupid for her to be shocked, for it was the only explanation for his eccentric appearance. Nonetheless, she was genuinely taken aback at his confession.

“To you, yes. Ludus,” he said, pointing to a planet on the map, “is my home planet.”

Darci shook her head. “This can’t be real,” she whispered.

“Don’t play stupid. Your organization has known of the existence of extraterrestrial life since the turn of the century, yet when you finally meet that which you have been looking for, you can hardly breathe. I suppose your constant coverups have wearied you.”

She let out a short breathy laugh. “Not a fan of government, I gather.”

“I like honest government, Ms. Mendelssohn. I am a critic of corruption.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“In a sense. For many millennia, Ludus has been ruled by a frightful and totalitarian leader who is called Shatterer. In the beginning of time, he and another dark lord, driven mad with jealousy, sought to weaken the power of Mura, Nera’s most powerful being. Little by little, they weakened his authority before the Council of Lords (that is, the governing body of the Nerish system), until they forced Mura to abdicate his throne. He fled, but in due time, a loyal faction of the Highmen, the greatest amongst mortals, joined him. He and his army marched upon Shatterer and the Dark-lord, who cowered within the halls of the Nerish capitol. Whilst Mura strove to break the barricade blocking the capitol entrance, Shatterer and the Dark-lord, in one last act of defiance, slaughtered many of the lords there. When Mura finally reached them, he saw the blood they had shed and banished them into isolation. Shatterer and his wife he exiled to Ludus, and the Dark-lord he sent into the Unknown.

“Upon Ludus, Shatterer raised up a great civilization, turning a barren wasteland into a thriving metropolitan superpower. All Ludusians are descended from him, including myself. For giving us life, Shatterer expected our loyalty. When I was young, I fought fiercely for him, but as I aged, I saw the great lust in his eyes for planets beyond Ludus. Slowly, the shadow of his empire grew over Nera, and one by one, defenseless planets fell to his grasp. His ambitions to grow more powerful than Mura drove him to force his subjects into slave labor while he sat in unbridled

luxury. Dissent with Shatterer grew amongst some in the Ludusian Service, and I joined them.

“But tyrants do not tolerate dissent. Without warning, Shatterer ordered the execution of anyone opposed to his regime; of those who rebelled, I alone escaped. I fled through a bridge (or a wormhole, as you call it here) near Nera, which brought me here. Of course, I wished to be hidden from Shatterer’s iron fist for good, so I made my abode here in seclusion with little regard to the outside world. That is, until I uncovered something troubling here on this very island.” He reached into his cloak and removed a yellow gem.

“Xanthos,” Darci gasped.

“Meld is what we Ludusians call it, but your cute little Earth name works well enough. I found it lying in the underbrush not five hundred yards from this spot.”

“You know what it is?”

“It is a jewel, but not like any you have here on your planet. You admire the beauty of rubies, diamonds, and emeralds: all these are dead. But meld lives, for it contains the life-blood of the Space-lord, who was slain by Shatterer thousands of years ago. To honor the memory of the fallen lords, Mura poured their blood each into a unique gem, which became imbued with their respective lord’s power. He kept some of these jewels for himself, but the rest he sent to the other Nerish planets as a gift. But tragedy struck at the worst of times.

“One convoy carrying the gems to the planet Layot was suddenly attacked by a vicious band of pirates. In the onslaught, the craft bearing the gems was destroyed; the stones therein were not damaged, but scattered across the universe and lost forever. It seems that a good portion of that meld ended up here--in fact, your world is the most meld-rich place I have ever laid eyes upon. If you humans could use it, I cannot imagine the damage that could be inflicted with it. Even so, it is a grave threat to your planet. Since I have arrived here, it has been my mission to conceal every deposit that is uncovered.

“You see, Shatterer is Time-lord, very much unlike the kind which the British have fancifully imagined. Mura, during creation, granted him governance over time; thus, it is his slave, bent always to his will. But time is a useless thing when seeking to crush rebellion in subjugated systems, and worse for him, his separation from Mura has caused his power to slowly diminish. This,” he said, holding the gem up to the light, “is the apple of his eye. Control of time alone is one thing, but control of time *and* space...” He gave a sinister laugh as his voice trailed off. “He would be immortal, indestructible, and unstoppable. This is why I have remained here, seeking to hide whatever deposits of meld is on this planet from Shatterer’s eye.”

“And what do you plan to do with it? You expect me to believe you have no evil intentions

yourself?”

“Ms. Mendelssohn, I have enough meld stockpiled in this facility to make your planet implode with a flick of my wrist. If I had any ill will, I would have unleashed it by now.”

Darci crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. “I wish I could believe you. About everything. I really do.”

Helper calmly folded his hands and put his lengthy pointer fingers on his lips. He closed his eyes for a few moments. “It slipped right under your nose.” He opened his eyes to see Darci’s face had turned pale. “Those words are familiar to you, are they not?”

She swallowed hard. “How did you know that?”
“I have seen the same thing. And I know who Thaddeus Dane is.”

PART IV

“THE ORGANIZATION WITH WHICH your former accomplice was associated made some sort of contact with a Ludusian spacecraft,” Helper continued. “I was able to trace the heavily-encoded communications to a small town in Utah. When I traveled there, every trace of their lair had been erased, save some stray documents bearing their name: Arachne. I made it a point of mine to track this organization to see if I could determine the reason behind their communications, and along the way, I collected the names of some people involved in the program. Thaddeus Dane was one of them.”

Darci rubbed her hands with her face. “This is insane.” She had not breathed a word of her nightmares to anyone. Either he was some sort of psychic, or he was telling the truth. His unusual appearance and advanced technology certainly registered as alien in her mind. These things, though, were not really what now convinced her of the veracity of his account--she could have just as easily excused all that as some type of elaborate illusion. The fact that he knew Thad’s name, something she had buried in the darkest corners of her memories, assured her he was telling the truth. Her instincts still hadn’t come to terms with Helper, but her heart told her to trust what he said. She looked back at him. “Did you ever find out what they were communicating?”

“No. But I have reason to believe that Arachne assisted the Ludusians in obtaining Earth’s coordinates.” He tapped the holographic device once. A wavy line appeared as a staticky sound played. Suddenly, a loud whir blared through the speakers and just as suddenly quieted. Helper paused the clip. “One of your search for extraterrestrial intelligence radio telescopes detected this earlier this month. Are you familiar with this sound?”

“No. I heard about a SETI telescope picking something up recently. Agents who were briefed on it believed that it was a star or something.”

Helper chuckled. “Typical. Did that make them sleep better?” His face quickly went dark once more. “I can tell you with absolute confidence that is no star. That noise was detected on the exact frequency in which Ludusian ships communicate. Before I was forced to flee Ludus, Shatterer was preparing a convoy of ships to search the farthest reaches of the universe if necessary to find the missing meld. This blip, if you will, is a sign that they have come close--all too close--to attaining what they have sought.”

“All right, so we just give them what they want. Then they’ll leave us alone.”

“You would sacrifice thousands of innocent lives on the altar of pacifism?”

“Aliens five hundred million light years away are not *our* concern, Mr. Helper.”

Helper stared at her for a few moments with a somber gaze, as if hoping that she would

recant that sentiment. He then closed his eyes and let out a melancholy sigh. "If humanity were a myth, I imagine children would fear you as the most terrifying, vicious, selfish, greedy monsters ever devised in the imagination. Ms. Mendelssohn, I stand here as a fugitive from my own race, chased from everything I ever knew or loved and forced to settle on this foreign planet. I have worked tirelessly for hundreds of years to protect your fragile world from an aggressive, power-hungry empire without any expectation of compensation. Yet you stand there as a self-righteous fool saying that those lives whom I sought to liberate from tyranny have no worth."

Darci rose. "Don't lecture me on sacrifice. I have two bullet wounds in my leg from fighting to keep people whom I would never meet safe." She started to tear up. "I've seen good people die before my eyes, and my closest friend stabbed me in the back. I had to flee my own organization when they falsely accused me of murder. Sir, you may have sacrificed plenty in your lifetime, but so have I. And I will continue to do so in the future."

A few moments of silence ensued as Helper's eyes once again looked her up and down. "You're crying."

She bit her lip. "Yeah, so?"

He rose and approached her. "So you aren't a monster after all." He wiped her tears from her eyes. "We all have our own problems, Ms. Mendelssohn. But our fight against evil is shared. Allow one regime of terror to fester, and another is empowered in its wake."

Darci nodded. "I know. I didn't mean it--"

"I know, I know. But you are an anomaly amongst your race. Many would have meant it that way," Helper replied. He bowed his head. "I'm afraid all my work to prevent them from finding this planet will come to naught soon. New deposits of meld are being discovered so quickly I can hardly keep up with them all. And I fear that there are even larger ones to be uncovered yet. But listen to me, Darci," he said as he crouched down to her level. "Your race will not be able to negotiate your way out of this. Shatterer is vicious and evil: he will not cease until he has drained your world of every ounce of meld he can. He will level cities if he must. You must fight him. It is the only way."

"You know government just as well as I do. They refuse to fight unless their hand is forced."

"People will die if you attempt diplomacy."

"Then come with me--back to the Cellar. You convinced me that you really are from another world. If you can do that, trust me, you can convince them that there's an impending war."

Helper rose and took a few steps away from her with his hands folded behind his back. "You know how that scenario would work out. I would be taken into detainment as a spy, or perhaps

worse, killed on the spot. Who benefits from that? I would be far more useful to you if I fight on my own.”

“Mr. Helper, with all due respect, I’m standing here because you wanted me to be here. If you didn’t want me to be, as you say you did, you would have killed me when you first saw me. And I’m telling you that to do what you want me to do, I need proof before they’ll take any kind of action. You’re all the proof I have. I can tell you who won’t benefit if you stay here, and that is the millions who will perish if you don’t at least try. Fight on your own, by all means. But don’t expect the Cellar to have your back.”

Helper let out a loud, almost maniacal chuckle. “You play the game well--using my own logic against me. You *are* even more clever than I first thought.” He stroked his chin for a few moments. “All right. I will attempt to reason with your delusional friends, but on two conditions only.”

“All right.”

“I will not hesitate to defend myself if I am threatened.”

“Fair enough. And the second one?”

His tone turned grave, and his eyes pierced hers. “That you will carry on what I’ve started no matter what happens.”

Darci smiled. “That’s my job, Mr. Helper.”

He nodded in satisfaction. “Very good. I trust you, Ms. Mendelssohn. Now, follow me.” Darci, struggling to keep up with his long strides, followed him out the door and down to the end of the hallway. That door slid open to reveal a surprisingly tall and spacious hangar, which housed a solitary gilded spacecraft in the middle. The ship, by Darci’s estimates, measured at least two hundred feet long and had a wingspan of about one hundred and fifty feet. The craft’s appearance was much like an eagle: the four engines in the back formed a sort of tail that propelled it, the wings were shaped much like bird’s wings, and the front of the ship came to a point, almost like a beak. Two small guns were installed below this point, in addition to the turrets mounted on the wings. The bridge sat at the front of the vessel as well.

“*Screamer A-17*. A Nerish craft more than a Ludusian one, to be sure,” said Helper as they walked towards it, “but it works well enough.”

“Kinda big to be piloted by one person,” Darci remarked.

“It was, originally. But I made some significant modifications in spite of the dated technology. She is a state-of-the-art machine now. Fully stealth capable--in fact, I wish you the best of luck finding a scanner that can detect her.”

Darci laughed. “When you’re done helping us fight an interstellar war, do you mind giving our research department some advice?”

“Please, Ms. Mendelssohn, this kind of technology has been punching you in the face for decades. I hardly think my input would make a difference.” He removed a remote from his cloak and pressed a button, prompting a capsule to lower out of the bottom of the ship. The moment they both stepped in, the capsule retracted into the ship.

Compared to the grand exterior, the craft’s interior was somewhat dark. The narrow corridor before them was lined with dark grey floors and walls, though some circular data banks (which Helper identified as “coordinate banks”) on the walls broke some of the darkness with a soft glow. Eventually, the hallway opened up into a better-lit rotunda embedded with multiple doors leading to divergent portions of the ship. Helper proceeded through the one straight ahead into the bridge.

The bridge itself was fairly small for a ship the size of the *Screamer*. Nonetheless, it boasted a spacious heads-up display incorporated directly into the windows and an expansive semi-circular control panel. Behind this panel sat a plush captain’s chair that slid along a curved track parallel with the panel. As they entered the bridge, a heavily digitized voice came over the intercom.

“Welcome, sir. Shall I initiate startup sequence?”

“Please,” replied Helper, taking a seat in the chair. “And set course for New York City.”

“Right away,” the voice replied.

After a few moments of silence, Darci spoke up as Helper flipped switches and pressed buttons on the control panel. “You said you had seen the same thing as me--about Thad. How?”

“The meld,” Helper answered, staying busy at his work, “has acquired a characteristic over time that, I think, Mura did not expect. It has sort of evolved from a stone which can only control space to a stone which can alter the fabric of time. Of course, these two things are inextricably linked in the first place, but in any case, as a sentient stone filled with the life-blood of the Space-lord, it may do whatever it likes. Discover whatever powers it wishes to acquire.” He waved his hand. “Nonetheless, a consequence of this is that visions of the future can be accessed through the stone if one knows how. Yet humans seem to be able to contract, as it were, these visions if they are to touch it.”

“Will they ever stop?”

“That I cannot say, having never experienced such an issue myself. But,” he finally turned from the controls and looked her in the eyes, “the meld is not random in how it shows the future. It has shown you those visions for a purpose. Do not disregard them just because you fear them.” He glanced back at the display. “It looks like we are ready for takeoff. You might want to take a seat,

Ms. Mendelssohn.” He nodded his head towards a chair affixed to the back wall of the bridge.

As Darci buckled in, the craft lifted off and turned around. Daylight crept into the hangar as a ramp opened in front of them. Helper slowly pushed a lever forward, rapidly accelerating the ship through the opening and releasing a screech into the air. The noise was constant and shrill, but not painful; it only ceased when the ship had reached cruising altitude and Helper had activated stealth mode. “We should be in New York in just under thirty minutes,” he announced. His gaze suddenly shifted to a flashing red warning on one section of the display. “Mm. Seems that there is a slight anomaly in the power core.” He rose. “The ship will remain on autopilot. You just stay here. I will be back before it is time to land.” With that, he left the bridge.

Darci did exactly as he said for most of the journey, remaining in her seat and watching the landscape below fly by in one blur of green and blue. In the silence, she pondered how the Cellar would respond to a new species of extraterrestrial. The Cellar possessed countless alien specimens--dead ones, to be sure--but never had they encountered an intelligent species. Her faith in government was small, but she had to muster what little faith she had for this occasion. She just hoped they had enough humanity to listen to him before they tried to detain him, or worse, kill him. Helper was mankind’s only hope for stopping this war before it happened.

Another larger warning appearing on the screen shook her out of her contemplation. She unbuckled and approached the display to get a better look, but the message was in Ludusian. Darci scanned the control panel for some way to communicate with Helper, but again, all the buttons were labeled in the same unfamiliar language. At last, she turned around, opened the doorway, and shouted into the hallway in hopes that he would hear her. “We’ve got another problem in here, Helper!”

Within moments, the Ludusian had arrived in the rotunda. “What is it?”

Darci pointed at the display. Helper darted over to control panel. “Tractor beam? Your organization has a tractor beam installed at a civilian airport?” He plunked down in the chair and began furiously pressing buttons.

Darci waved her hands in the air. “Not the last time I was there!”

Suddenly, the ship’s lights flickered out. Helper surveyed the control panel and flipped the main power breaker in an attempt to return power to the craft. “Computer, are you there?”

No response.

Digging through a cabinet to the right, Helper grabbed a lantern and, with Darci right behind, exited the bridge. They made a sharp left in the rotunda and traversed a series of winding narrow hallways. Finally, the two came to a room featuring a wide, hexagonal column in the center.

Helper approached the large, glowing display affixed to the column and punched in a password. “Access denied. All power systems overridden. Restricted emergency power only,” the display read.

“Well, it does not look like a warm welcome so far,” Helper remarked, shooting Darci a somewhat frustrated stare. He sighed. “How would they have hacked the ship’s control system? This technology is light-years beyond anything you have on earth. Someone would have had to help them. But who?”

Darci touched her knuckle to her lips. “You said Thad had contact with the Ludusian army, right? What if he got some information on their tech?”

“He undoubtedly would have. But that, Ms. Mendelssohn, begs the question: why would he help the government that brought him down?” The display let out a beep. “Landing stilts have been extended. Prepare to disembark.” They again navigated the *Screamer*’s twisting corridors until they came to the exit capsule. Darci held her breath as they stepped inside--she only hoped there was not a battalion of heavily armed guards waiting outside.

But, of *course*, there was. A long, streamlined jet along with a squadron of special operation forces, clad in black armor and heavily armed, awaited them on the tarmac. Standing in front of this squadron was Foreign Relations Supervisor Jay Lyndon and none other than Don McKeller. All seemed perfectly still despite the strong wind blowing. The two parties calmly approached one another.

“Agent Mendelssohn,” Lyndon said, extending his hand coolly.

“Supervisor,” Darci replied with caution but not so much as to seem hesitant. She shook his hand and shot Don an affectionate nod.

He looked Helper up and down a couple of times. “I do not believe I’ve met your tall friend here.”

“Helper,” answered the Ludusian with stoic face.

“Interesting name. I’d love to talk some more, but I regret to inform you, Mr. Helper, that you are under arrest for kidnapping a federal agent.”

Suddenly, Helper convulsed violently and collapsed face down. Two shocking discs were attached to his back.

“What are you doing?” Darci screamed.

The supervisor gave a sarcastic smile. “I’m sorry, was it not obvious already? He kidnapped you.” Four agents hurriedly lifted his body onto a stretcher.

“Supervisor Lyndon, wait! He has important information regarding--”

“--the aliens, I know. We are already aware of the massive craft entering the atmosphere over South Africa as we speak. We’ve been ordered to conduct diplomacy with the aliens insofar as it is reasonable. Your friend will be a much needed mediator.” He began to walk away.

“Supervisor!” Darci called after him.

He whirled around. “Mendelssohn, look. I appreciate what you did with Arachne. But your disappearance has sparked nothing short of an outrage with the Argentinians, and guess who’s been having to put up with it? Me. I’ve barely slept the last twenty-four hours searching for you. Whether you object or not, I have my orders. You would be wise not to test me.” He lit a cigar, shoved it in his mouth, and stormed away into the jet behind him.

Darci began to follow him anyway, but Don stopped her. “Wait a minute,” he said, pulling her into an embrace. “I’ve been worried sick about you, and this is how you greet me?”

Darci squeezed him back somewhat absently. “I’m sorry, Don. I’ve just got a lot on my mind right now.”

“Where did you go?” he said, releasing her.

She struggled to keep her eyes on his as the agents loaded Helper onto a jet. “I want to explain everything to you, I really do. But right now, I need to talk to Thad. Where is he being detained?”

Don blinked at her, his tone laden with bemusement. “They’re in the middle of transferring him to the detention center upstate. He’s at HQ right now.”

With a quick nod, Darci started towards the hangar connected to the Cellar’s headquarters. “Hold up!” Don shouted. “Let me come with you!”

“I need to do this alone,” she replied, briefly looking back. It broke her heart to walk away from him so abruptly, but she was being pulled in so many directions--Helper, Thad, Don. She knew Thad wouldn’t give her honest answers if Don was with her, but, on the other hand, she also knew that her former accomplice would likely try mind games with her. For a brief moment, she pondered turning around and telling him to come with her. He *was* her closest friend. Would leaving him push him away?

The gravity of the situation came tumbling back into her mind. Maybe her curtness would hurt his feelings, but the world was at stake. At least, if she could stop Shatterer, he would be alive.

Upon arriving at the Cellar’s headquarters, Darci promptly made her way to the detainee deck. An amiable clerk behind a small desk greeted her. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, where is Thad Dane being held?”

She clacked away at her keyboard. “Let’s see. Ah! Thaddeus Dane. Just arrived yesterday. Cell 93.”

“Thank you.” Darci strutted away down a hallway to the left, scanning her badge at the door. The sound of her boots echoed through the largely vacant halls. The detainee deck remained empty most of the time, as it generally served as a holding area for prisoners being transferred to another detention center. As she walked in that somber silence, she swallowed hard. This would mark the first time that she had seen Thad in person in almost two years. She had caught glimpses of him in video clips of the secret court proceedings that took place after Arachne’s fall, and the very sight of him made her lose sleep then. But this was now. *He doesn’t intimidate you*, she thought to herself. *Be strong.*

Finally, she came to Cell 93. There he sat against the wall, his head bowed and legs sprawled out. His hair had grown long and remarkably gray, so that almost every vestige of his youthful black hair had been erased. Darci couldn’t tell if he was sleeping, but she didn’t care anyway. She pressed a button jutting out from the cell, which created a temporary translucent, soundproof barrier around the inside of the cell and a small area of the outside. A loud buzz jolted Thad out of his daze. Apparently, he hadn’t been sleeping.

“Darci!” He gave her a wide smile. His dark brown eyes were now flecked with green and rimmed in wrinkles, and a thick, scraggly beard enveloped his face.

She took a deep breath in. “I am required to inform you that this conversation is being recorded. Anything you say can and will be used against--”

“I knew you’d come,” he interrupted.

Darci let out a frustrated laugh. “I’m not here to play mind games with you, Thad.”

He spread out his arms, as if to feign innocence. “I’m not playing mind games, Darci. Something else beat me to it.” He paused to relish Darci’s slightly unnerved look. “The meld. You’re searching for answers about those dreams.” He leaned in. “The truth is, you knew you would come here, too.”

Darci desperately tried to hide her utter shock. She knew if she showed emotion, it would play into Thad’s hands. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Part of her didn’t want him to continue because she didn’t know what he was plotting, but the other part of her wanted to know how he knew about the dreams.

He gave a slow laugh, almost like a drunk. “Who’s playing mind games now?”

Darci swallowed hard, trying to push away her raging emotions. “Look, I came to have a very straightforward conversation with you. You had contact with the Ludusians before. What did

you communicate with them?”

He closed his eyes and nodded, as if reminiscing. “We didn’t contact them. They contacted us. They had detected some intriguing readings coming from our “quadrant,” as they called it. If we could provide them with Earth’s coordinates, they would provide us with some important information regarding the government. Naturally, we took them up on their offer. While they taught us their coordinate system, they sent us a prediction about a certain device that was going to be invented. Most of us thought it was a little far-out, but we figured that they must be pretty advanced to be talking to us anyway, so we believed them. We followed their plan exactly to prepare for the device’s invention--creating insanely complex microchips and discreetly planting them in the offices of the most important politicians in the American government. An expensive gamble, to be sure. But the moment I laid eyes on Dr. Croy’s invention--” he sighed, a sudden glimmer passing over his eyes, “--I knew it was what we had been waiting for.

“I struggled to contain myself when the doctor said it could potentially be modified to use on humans. As soon as I got back to my apartment, I contacted Pollux to let him know that the device had finally arrived. One of our black ops teams nabbed the doc while he was on his way to his vehicle late one night. As painful as it was,” he sarcastically winced, “we had to employ some of our worst methods to get him to spill about where he had hidden the device from us.”

Darci could hardly suppress her sickness at the thought but determined to keep a straight face. “You’re saying he knew you were coming?”

He nodded. “He used to be one of us. Of course, I didn’t want *you* to know that, and neither did he. He left the group right before I joined. Apparently, he didn’t think our cause very noble.”

“Not many did.”

“Fair enough. But we knew that democracy was never about the many. It was about who held the strings. If we took out all the big guys, we would own the nation. Tragically, our plan was cut short by slick little weasels like you. We only partially transmitted the coordinates to the Ludusians before our headquarters were ransacked.”

“Then how did they get here?”

“Well,” he chuckled with pride, “we pointed them in the right direction.”

“All right, so let me clarify. You wanted to take down the American government, who is currently holding you prisoner, and now you’re trying to help them? Frankly, I don’t even know why they’re listening--”

“Whoa, Darci. Who said all *that*?”

“Of everyone in Arachne, you’re the only one still alive. You obviously had some

experience with their tech, and Helper's ship was hacked when we arrived. Who else could have done that?"

He smirked. "Nothing gets by you, does it? The truth is, Darci, the Ludusians have been communicating with me this whole time. I knew you'd be here at this very moment having this very conversation with me. I knew which prison they'd take me to and when they'd take me to it down to the minute. I knew what I was having for breakfast this morning three weeks ago--all thanks to a little chip in my head. And predicting that kind of stuff gives my words a good deal of weight. As reluctant as they were to hear me out at first, my accuracy began to intrigue them. Of course, I didn't have to worry about you getting involved, because you pretty much wanted nothing to do with me.

"My latest prediction was that you would arrive back here today in an alien vessel with an alien species onboard. I gave them specific instructions on how to hack it, because the alien on the ship would prove useful in peace negotiations with the friendly Ludusians that would be approaching earth. A bold thing to say, to be sure, and they were more than dubious, at first. But of course, I had no doubts.

"Sure enough, you arrived exactly as expected along with a large Ludusian vessel entering the atmosphere over South Africa. Darci, it's quite simple." He steepled his fingers. "I knew how much Shatterer despised Helper, and I knew that if he was the mediator of the negotiations, it would certainly be war. The Ludusians, unmoved by humanity's pathetic attempts to placate them, would drill into the planet's core--oh, did I forget to mention? The earth's core is made of meld, which you know is deeply precious to Shatterer. Scientists have said it was iron for a while, but..." he waved his hand as if to dismiss the notion. "Once he extracted the core, the planet would collapse and vengeance would finally be wrought upon the miserable, blind, greedy people of the world. For my part in helping them find Earth, they would take me with them back to Ludus, safe and sound."

Thad smiled as Darci gave him a bewildered gaze. He frowned. "Nothing gets past you, does it? You think yourself quite clever until the most obvious thing escapes you." He shook his head. "What a shame, Darci. It slipped right under your nose."

Those words resounded in her head like a rasping bell, growing louder by the second. Though the room was silent, she covered her ears to try and quiet her thoughts. She promised herself she wouldn't let Thad manipulate her, but in that moment, she couldn't stop her heart from pounding and her thoughts from spiraling out of control. How *could* she have missed it? Where *did* she go wrong? It was like the situation was slipping like sand through her fingers. For once in her life, a terrible thought entered her mind. *I was too late.*

As her thoughts swirled violently in her head, she found herself suddenly being launched backwards by a powerful blast from Thad's prison cell.

PART V

DARCI SOARED BACKWARDS into the wall behind her. As hard as she slammed into it, she remained conscious.

The dust completely blacked out her sight. She sat there, dazed and bleeding, for several moments before the dust began to clear. Alarms wailed throughout the hallway. She blinked as pale sunlight poured through an gaping hole in the cell wall.

Thad was gone.

She rubbed her bloodied head. The alarms and the shouts of agents coming towards her faded as a painful ringing filled her ears. People congregated around her. It was clear from their muffled cries that they were asking her if she was all right, but she was too stunned to answer. She just shook her head, pushed them aside, and staggered down the hall.

I'm too late. That was her only thought. More agents streamed past her, screaming things at her, but she ignored them. The sting of pure disappointment wrenched her heart around in her chest. Her very soul was consumed with that dreadful feeling of failure. There were no tears, no cries from her lips--just *failure*. The thought of what she had done bore on her so heavily that she collapsed at the threshold of the detention center. While the rest of the world panicked, she just sat there. At a loss.

It was only a matter of minutes before Don had appeared. He rushed towards her and fell on his knees. "Darci, what on earth? Are you okay?"

Darci just stared at him, a drop of blood dripping off her face. "Here," he said. He pulled a tissue out of his pocket and dabbed her face with it.

As he cleaned the blood off her, she finally grumbled, "He's gone, Don. Thad's gone."

"What happened?"

Her words were somewhat slurred. "I don't--know. There was a--blast of some kind. Next thing I knew, he was gone." She gave a resigned sigh. "The supervisor is going to his death. The whole thing was a--s--setup. The Ludusians aren't what you think they are."

"What *I* think they are? Look, the supervisor and all the higher-ups may think this whole thing checks out, but do you think I believed one thing that snitch ever said? I warned everybody about listening to a prisoner, much less one who tried to dismantle the government. It violated so many protocols--I lost count." He shook his head. "If you knew they were dangerous, why did you resist him--uh, Helper--being arrested? I mean, he *did* kidnap you and all."

"He's the only opposition. The meld--or, xanthos--is what the Ludusians are after. He's been hiding it from them for hundreds of years. That's why the other Ludusians hate him, and when they

see him, they'll only be more determined to get what they're after." She buried her head in her hands. "But what does it matter at this point? I've failed. It was right in front of my face, and I missed it."

She felt the gentle touch of Don's finger lift her chin. His tone was kindly reproachful. "Darci Mendelssohn. In all the years I've known you, not once did I ever think you were a failure. You singlehandedly brought down an organization on the brink of ruining the nation. In case you don't remember, I was there. And you know what I was sitting there thinking that whole time? 'Whether this gal dies or not, she'll die with twice the guts of all the generals I've met combined.' That sure hasn't changed since then. Darn it, if you're a failure, then I guess the whole world ought to just lay down and die. Because if Darci Mendelssohn has given up...the rest of us sure should. Your friends and your enemies might have a good deal to say about you once you're dead. But I swear the one thing they'll agree on is that you were never a 'failure.'

"And right now, as your friend," he continued, rising to his feet, "I forbid you from giving up. You know why? Because I know you would tell yourself the same thing if you were standing where I was. So either you're gonna take my hand right now," he said, extending it, "or I'm gonna pick you up and carry you until you feel like walking."

Darci stared at his hand for a few moments. Her self-pity restrained her from taking his hand right away, and a small part of her didn't want to get up--or perhaps, didn't feel like she had the strength to climb out of this pit she found herself in. But she knew he was right. What was she if she just lay there? If she got up, at least there was a chance, however small, that she could stop this disaster. Shaking off her despair, she forced her hand to clasp Don's.

A new resolve seemed to rush through her veins as she stood to her feet. She nodded towards Don. "Let's go."

Don let out an ecstatic chuckle and rubbed his hands together. "All right!"

As they began to walk, Darci asked, "So they took some of our fastest jets to South Africa. How long does that give us until they arrive?"

"About six hours with the nitrojet engine turned on, and of course, they're already en route."

"And how fast can a normal jet get there?"

"Fifteen hours, give or take."

Darci raised her eyebrows. "All righty, then. Do we have anything that comes remotely close to six hours?"

"I think R&D has been working on a second-gen nitrojet engine that's supposed to be even faster than the first."

“Great! How do we get there?”

Don paused, rubbed his head, and sighed. “I can get you there, the problem is that no one’s authorized to use it.”

“So we’d have to steal it?” Darci whirled around, her hand on her hip.

Don nodded reluctantly.

Darci tilted her head back and forth as if weighing the consequences in her mind. “I’ve been charged with murder before, so this is actually an improvement.” She turned back around and began walking towards the transport capsules.

“Yeah, but *I* haven’t!” Don cried, jogging after her.

Within ten minutes, they had arrived in the Office of Research and Development. Because they were both over Clearance Level 5, they were permitted to enter most areas of the office, but even Don, who possessed the highest clearance possible for an ordinary Cellar agent, was restricted from certain areas. Of course, the underground hangar in which the experimental jet sat was one of those areas.

They sauntered past the secretary and several researchers without raising any questions, with Don steering them towards the hangar as nonchalantly as possible. Darci was admittedly amazed at Don’s ability to navigate nearly every reach of the Cellar’s headquarters with such ease. Part of her did wonder, though, whether he actually knew where he was going or if he was just faking it just to seem impressive. Since he was restricted from the area where the hangar was, she suspected the latter.

Nonetheless, they did eventually arrive at a door that required a special pass and fingerprint to open. “Okay, what do we do now?” Darci asked.

Don anxiously rubbed his bald head.

Darci knowingly nodded, as if reading his mind. “We’ll have to knock someone out!”

“Wait, what?”

“Isn’t that what you were thinking?”

“No!” He waved his hand at her. “I was thinking the next time someone comes out, we grab the door before it shuts.”

Darci dropped her head. “Well, if you want to do it the boring way.”

They stood with their backs to the wall so that, when the door opened, they would be concealed behind it. They waited for about five minutes before someone walked out. Immediately, Don lunged for the rapidly closing door, slipping his fingers in just before it slammed shut. They

hurried to get into the room before the silence aroused suspicion. Don slid in first, with Darci following as quickly as she could on her tiptoes. To her horror, though, her shoes made a sudden, high-pitched screech on the slick floor.

The agent that had just come out of the door paused. Don reached out and pulled Darci in right before the agent whirled around.

Now safely behind the door, Darci let out a breath she had been holding. “Close!” was all she could utter.

“Yeah, a little too close for my taste,” Don shot back, clearly somewhat shaken from the incident. “Now to find the hangar.”

The two weaved their way through a labyrinth of corridors, offices, and labs, only occasionally passing a researcher and acting, to the best of their ability, as if they were supposed to be there. Every so often, a person cast them a suspicious glance, but most of the staff was preoccupied with the clipboards or folders in front of them. The longer their searching endured, however, their anxiousness became difficult to conceal. Precious time was slipping away.

At last, they came upon a long window looking into the hangar that housed the sleek, black EX-172 jet, equipped with somewhat rudimentary nitrojet engine attachments protruding out the back. Much to their chagrin, two burly agents, armed with pistols, stood guard outside the craft.

“Well, Darci,” Don said, examining the hangar, “looks like we are going to have to knock someone out after all.” He gave a pained smile.

Darci rubbed her hands together. She really didn’t like knocking people unconscious, but she knew it crawled all over Don. He was quite a stickler for protocol. It was a little fun to watch him squirm. Just a little.

They casually opened the door to the hangar and strolled towards the jet. The two armed guards accosted them. “This is a restricted area, agents,” one said. “State your business.”

“It’s none of yours!” Darci exclaimed, throwing a swift, powerful punch to his face. He stumbled backwards a few steps, but Darci stayed right on top of him, striking him again before he could recover. He collapsed on the ground, out cold. The other guard reached for his pistol, but Don grabbed his arm, twisted it, and delivered several strong blows to his stomach before striking upward on his chin. He flew backwards, landing on his back unconscious.

Darci nodded approvingly and lifted her hand for a high five. “Nice job, newbie!”

Don just shook his head in reply.

They hastily boarded the jet and plopped down in the two-seater cockpit. “Oh, yeah,” Darci said as she donned her headset, “are your piloting skills still good after all these years?” Don

opened his mouth, but Darci quickly interrupted him. “Don’t answer that, actually.”

As they prepped the plane for takeoff, they perceived a sudden commotion out in the hangar. “What’s that?” Don asked.

Darci craned for a look out the glass. “I don’t see anything.” But suddenly, her heart skipped a beat as she spotted two men in front of the plane setting up a automatic weapon on a tripod. “Don, they’re about to shoot at us!”

“All right, we’re gonna have to go ahead and takeoff,” he cried, frantically flipping switches. The jet lifted off the ground as he took hold of the control wheel. He scanned the panel above his head several times. “There’s no switch to open the hangar door!”

“What do you mean?” Darci screamed. She ducked as the ring of bullets sounded on the plane’s hull.

“There’s probably one on the ground. Go see if you can short it!”

She dashed back to the center of the plane, struggling to keep her balance as the jet swayed back and forth in the air. Opening the emergency exit, she desperately searched for anything that resembled a large button or lever. As she looked, she had to pull away a couple of times from the door as a few stray bullets pinged against the doorway. She spotted something--a long, red lever on the wall labeled in red letters and yellow tape. She didn’t take any time to read it, though; she whipped out her pistol and pelted it with bullets until it sparked. The hangar door emitted a loud *whoosh* as it opened.

“Hold on to something!” Don yelled back as the jet suddenly lurched forward.

Darci clung to a handrail next to the door as the jet went nearly vertical and screamed upwards through the exit hatch and a series of sliding doors. In mere seconds, the final door had opened, and the jet soared out of the Atlantic Ocean. Don leveled the jet, and Darci released the handrail, her arms shaking. She trembled as she approached the cockpit and let out a sigh of relief as she sat down. For a few moments, she struggled to catch her breath. “Close!” she finally exclaimed.

“I’m getting the feeling that won’t be the last time you say that today,” Don said, pressing some buttons. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but--setting course for South Africa.” The computer beeped twice to indicate it had calculated the optimal route. “Engaging nitrojet.” Don held his breath and pushed a large, blue lever next to him forward. The jet gave a piercing whine before abruptly zooming away with a deafening boom. Darci clutched her seat as everything around them, save the clouds in the far distance, instantly became one, indistinct blur of color and light. The speed at which they were going caused Darci some discomfort at first, but as the flight went on, she

acclimated to it.

Despite how fast the plane was traveling, the flight seemed to pass slowly. A good portion of their flight was consumed with conversation about what had happened to her over the past 24 hours, but while he didn't seem uninterested, Don was obviously distracted. He was the kind of guy that thought disregard of even the smallest of Cellar protocols was equivalent to treason, and he was clearly grappling with the severity his actions. Frankly, Darci couldn't blame him. In her heart, she knew what she was doing was right, but a small part of her brain urged her to consider whether she was wrong. What if Helper was the real villain in this tale? What if she were being delusional? If so, she and Don would return to the Cellar disgraced agents, perhaps charged with inciting interplanetary war; however, if she were right, they would have saved countless lives. For her, though, it was worth the risk to trust her heart. Doing so had never failed her before.

She hoped Don agreed.

A little over five hours passed before the computer announced that they were approaching Cape Town, and the jet slowly decelerated as they drew near. Darci peered into the distance, where a massive alien vessel was now emerging from behind the clouds. In shape, it was nearly like a pyramid, sloping upwards from a wide base before flattening out slightly and finally coming to a sharp peak. Emblazoned upon the peak was what was presumably Shatterer's seal, almost like an eye; from this eye, several streams of energy radiated through the exterior of the craft. The ship dwarfed Cape Town under its broad shadow. Darci sat back and bit her nail in thought. *I think you might have finally bit off more than you can chew, Darci Mendelsohn.*

Surprisingly, the airport tower permitted them to land without any questions, meaning either Supervisor Lyndon was not aware of their arrival, or they were walking into a trap. The latter was more likely.

Their plane was directed to park not far from where Supervisor Lyndon's plane was. They breathed a sigh of relief as they realized the plane had been vacated with no signs of any armed soldiers. "They couldn't have gotten here long ago," Don said. "We'll be able to catch up with them if we move fast."

After hastily grabbing some weapons, money, and field tech to bring with them, they disembarked. The airport was packed, but no one was moving. Everyone was huddled in chairs or corners, weeping. Most were worriedly conversing on their cell phones. The terror in their eyes struck Darci profoundly. Until she actually got there, she hadn't fully realized how dangerous the task she was about to take on was. Now, she could almost feel fear beginning to pulse through her chest. At the same time, their desolate looks solidified in her mind why she was there: to save lives.

And that's what she planned to do, full of fear or not.

After Don had exchanged some currency with a reluctant teller, the two exited the airport to find a similar sight as the inside. Taxi drivers, airport staff, and commuters had ceased all their bustle to gape at the terrifying vessel overshadowing the downtown area. Don approached a minibus driver, who thankfully spoke English.

"Are you for hire?" Don asked.

"Depends on where you need to go."

Don pointed at the alien ship.

The man incredulously turned to look and spun back with a horror-stricken gaze. "No, sir! I am not going there! Not for--"

Don whipped out a thick stack of South African rands. "Will this cover it?"

The man's eyes grew even larger. He pursed his lips, glanced at the ship, and looked back at the money. He sighed sharply and shut his eyes. "All right!" he exclaimed, extending his hand. "I hope you know what you're doing, sir!"

Don planted the cash in his hand and quickly slid into the car, with Darci following immediately behind. The driver reluctantly plopped down in his seat, shaking his head and repeating, "I hope you know what you're doing!"

Getting out of the airport proved quite a task, as the dazed crowds had spilled over into the streets and would be moved for almost nothing. Traffic was light if not nonexistent heading downtown; however, the eastbound lanes were full of civilians clamoring to get out of the city. "Probably what we should be doing," Don whispered to Darci without any hint of sarcasm in his voice. Darci swallowed hard. As they came closer to the city and the size of the alien vessel became even more intimidating, doubt threatened to consume her. What could she do, really, against something that size?

The memory of the civilians' horror-stricken gazes came bubbling back up. *Too many people are counting on you.* She clung to that thought.

About thirty minutes elapsed before they approached a restricted area around Signal Hill. Cellar agents stood guard at the entrance. "Sorry, can't take you there," the driver said, turning around.

"Drop us off on that street," Don said, gesturing towards a small road adjacent to the hill. The driver did so gladly, and the moment the two had gotten out of the car, he sped away.

"All right, what now?" Darci asked. "Those guards will never let us in."

Don pulled out his phone and tapped furiously away. "I'm accessing live satellite data now."

He zoomed in on Signal Hill. “Looks like they’re at the peak. We’ll need some cover, so our best bet are those trees over there.” He slipped the phone in his pocket. “We’ll still need to watch our backs. They’ve got patrols crawling all over the area.”

As they neared the thicket of trees, the last vestige of sunlight surrendered to the overpowering shadow of the noiseless ship above them. Under the cover of the darkness, they stole away into the trees. They moved rapidly, all the while being careful not to make a sound. Their eyes darted to and fro in search of any patrols, but the area appeared to be largely unattended. Even as they broke out of the tree line, the hill was peculiarly tranquil--a fact for which they were thankful. They followed the snaking dirt path up to the peak, but still never saw so much as a flashlight.

After the stillness persisted for a while, Darci was beginning to get a little queasy. “I thought you said this hill was crawling with patrols.”

“It was, according to the satellite,” Don replied as he produced his phone once more. The screen flickered, prompting him to hit it on his hand. Suddenly, the screen stabilized. Green blips each representing a soldier clustered the area around them. And they were closing in on them--fast.

They had been tricked.

Don looked down to see his torso covered in red lasers. Darci’s was likewise. Quivering, they both slowly raised their hands in the air and knelt.

A few moments of cold silence followed. To their right, three figures emerged, but they did not dare turn to look who it was.

“I thought I told you, Agent Mendelssohn, to stay out of my way,” came the familiar voice of Supervisor Lyndon, muffled slightly by his fiddling a cigar in his mouth. He knelt down in front of them, glancing back and forth between their unsettled gazes. “Do you know how many protocols you’ve broken just by standing here, unauthorized, in a restricted area? I could have you prosecuted and tossed in the slammer till your bones rot,” he snarled, leaning in. “And that’s a *long* time.”

“But you won’t.” Darci glared at him straight in the eyes.

“And why is that, Ms. Mendelssohn?” he answered with an air of amusement.

“Because we’re your best agents,” Darci shot back. “This agency wouldn’t exist right now if it weren’t for me.”

The supervisor stood and seemed to consider her statement for a couple of moments, but more likely, he was trying to swallow his anger. “Your reputation most certainly precedes you, agent. Don’t think that gives you the right to disrespect me.” He gestured at two soldiers who had been standing next to him. They jerked Don and Darci off their feet and handcuffed them.

“You’re making a mistake, supervisor,” Darci warned. “Negotiating with these aliens will

do you no good.”

“I do what I’m told, Ms. Mendelssohn,” he answered, letting out a puff of smoke from his cigar. “You would do well to learn from my example.” He whirled around and marched off towards the peak as scores of soldiers emerged from the shadows to their left and right to follow him. Amongst the throng, they spotted the unusually lanky silhouette of Helper. The troopers that had bound Darci and Don shoved them forward, but Darci needed no motivation to catch up to her alien acquaintance.

Before she could get a word in, Helper coldly remarked, “This is what I said would happen, was it not?”

“I know, I know, and I’m sorry you got dragged into this. Truly, I am. But listen, I talked to Thad, my old--friend.” The words still didn’t sound right, but she shook it off. “It’s worse than we thought. The planet’s core is made from some form of meld--that’s what Shatterer wants. If he gets to it,” she paused to look at Helper’s stoic expression, “it would trigger a planetary collapse.”

“Oh?” Helper replied drily.

Darci gave a sharp sigh. “Helper, I didn’t know this would happen!” She was suddenly struck with a strong feeling of *deja vu*, as if she had said that phrase before. It was then that she realized that she had indeed done so--in a dream.

“Yes, you did, Darci.” Seething, he turned to stare at her straight in the eyes. “You just thought you could change it. I told you not to disregard the visions from the meld, yet that is precisely what you did. You thought your dreams were a suggestion when they were really an omen.” He ground his teeth. “I listened to you despite my better judgment. Now, what have we to show for it? A dying planet with no hope of revival.”

Darci felt a stab of guilt in her stomach. Helper was unarmed, she and Don were bound, and Helper’s ship, perhaps their only chance of inflicting any damage on Shatterer’s vessel, was thousands of miles away. As angry as his words made her, she could not disagree with him. Her experience with Arachne had truly blinded her, deceived her into thinking she could fix everything. Now, everything, literally, was about to be ruined. *What have I done?* she mulled in her heart, grappling with a feeling of total resignation.

She took one glimpse of Don as they approached the ominous peak of Signal Hill, hoping it would not be her last.

PART VI

SILENCE.

Nothing stirred as they sat under the shadow of the eerily silent ship. Supervisor Lyndon had blasted a booming sound upwards in an attempt to get the Ludusians' attention, but nearly five minutes had now passed with no response. Every moment that passed only served to increase the anxiousness in their hearts. The tension was even beginning to visibly unnerve the supervisor, who, after about five minutes of waiting, finally issued the command to replay the sound.

Before he could blast it again, however, a massive hologram of Shatterer himself projected out of the bottom of the ship. He certainly bore the appearance of a cruel dictator: his dark hair was slicked primly back, his brow hung heavily over his eyes, and his cheeks were deeply sunken, giving him the appearance of having almost no cheeks at all. His eyes, like Helper's, were also set deep in their sockets, so that only the ruby red color of his eyes could be seen. Crow's eyes emanated from around his eyes, but they bore an air of hatred rather than laughter, engraved in his skin after many long years of lust and greed. At last, his rumbling voice came forth like an earthquake. "*Nashtreth dúrnibadil ti nar?*"

Without diverting his eyes, Helper turned to Supervisor Lyndon and said, "He asks, 'Who disturbs Shatterer?'"

"We do not wish to disturb anyone, Your Excellency," Supervisor Lyndon shouted in reply. "We come to seek peaceful resolution to this conflict."

"*Cethili nabarä selne yil dedonis urín, Tal Fairen. Ael nureso mísil sendadil ti mek,*" Helper translated into a microphone attached to the almost deafening speakers.

When Shatterer spoke again, to everyone's surprise, it was in English. "Ah, whose voice rasps in my ears after many years? It could not be Kelteth, who fled like a coward from my grasp after opposing my rule?" Helper did not reply. "Speak, you nymph!" Shatterer's voice roared.

Helper glanced back at Darci with a sober gaze. "Indeed, it is I, Kelteth Earth-keeper, High Guard of the Corrupted Courts of Nashtreth, which no longer serve justice but terror!"

Shatterer let out a maniacal chuckle. "Same as always, I see, Kelteth. You have grown in power, I see, for you have kept this planet from my sight for hundreds of years. You think I hate you--my own flesh and blood! But you do not know how I have longed to see your face all these years. There is no doubt your sins are great, but I am merciful." The corner of his mouth turned upward slightly. "Trouble is stirring in Nera, Kelteth. All the worlds, not just mine, face total political collapse. If you come with me to bring order--"

"I see through your lies, Shatterer!" Helper cried, but Supervisor Lyndon grabbed his arm.

“You are only to say what I command, Mr. Helper,” he said through gritted teeth.

Helper did not respond but jerked his arm from the supervisor’s grasp and turned back to Shatterer. “You speak with the tongue of Denal, Master of Deception. I know what you would have me do: abandon the people of Earth only for you to exterminate them. Even if you were to spare them, what shall I return to Ludus to do? Oppress innocent lives? I know what your eyes are set upon, Shatterer. I am Earth-keeper: so shall I remain, and you will not lay your hands upon the meld!”

Shatterer gave a melancholy sigh. “Your decision is unfortunate to me. But more unfortunate for you, your threats do not move me.” He turned to signal something to someone behind him. “Ludus and Earth will pay for your arrogance. Some keeper you are, indeed.” The hologram faded away, and his vessel began to make a loud humming sound--one that was bearable at first, but gradually grew in intensity until it was earsplitting. Stunned, everyone stood frozen, except Darci, whose knees had weakened and forced her to the ground.

“I know this sound!” Helper cried, but his voice was entirely drowned out by the noise coming from the ship. He motioned to all of the soldiers and Cellar agents to run, who did so without hesitation. Helper nonchalantly slipped a pair of keys off the dazed supervisor’s belt and unshackled Don and Darci. “Go!” he barked, running away.

Don started to dart away, but when he looked back, he saw Darci still laying motionless on the ground.

“Darci!” he screamed at the top of his lungs, but she did not stir. He glanced up to see the bottom of Shatterer’s ship opening up like a camera shutter to reveal a white light like a star blazing within. He dashed to Darci’s side and shook her violently, every now and again peeking at the rapidly growing opening. “Darci, you have to get up!” He shouted desperately at her again and again, but she refused to move.

Now the entire bottom of the vessel was open, and the light grew brighter and brighter until it was searing to the eyes. Don, a rush of adrenaline pumping through his muscles, lifted Darci into his arms and began to run. Behind him, he could hear a noise like an earthquake and a distant warmth. *Just run. Just run.* Those were the only words in his mind, the only thing he could think about. But he could feel the fire raging at his heels, inching closer every second...

Suddenly, he realized he was being thrown hundreds of feet through the air. He grasped Darci as tight as he could and braced for a brutal impact. Much to his surprise, though, he found himself floating gently to the ground. The moment his body touched the earth, he released Darci and blacked out.

He awoke to find Helper crouched over his body, shaking him vigorously. “Donald, you must wake up!”

Don instantly sat up. He briefly examined his body, finding himself largely intact but coated in a generous helping of ash. Surveying his surroundings, he caught glimpses of fighter jets launching missiles and dropping bombs in vain on Shatterer’s impregnable ship. Other small capsules attached to the mothership like tentacles thrust out from the alien vessel, blasting military craft into oblivion with bursts of yellow lasers. He peered over the hill he was lying on to see the fearsome pillar of white light emanating from the bottom of Shatterer’s ship had all but decimated Cape Town and now drilled greedily into the earth. Looking to his right, he found Darci still lying in a crumpled form, completely still.

He crawled over to her and put his fingers to her neck. *Still alive, thank goodness.* Shaking her, he called her name a few times before she woke. Her gaze floated around for a few moments before finally landing on Don. “It’s my fault,” she whispered, holding back tears.

“No, Darci. None of this is your fault,” Don answered. “This started a long time before you.” She went to lay her head back down on the ground, but Don caught her cheek and made her face him. “But we can’t give up now! Darce, there’s still a chance we can stop this.”

This time, she sat up on her own. Her lips quivered and her teeth ground against each other. “No, Don, there’s not! Stop throwing that lie in my face! You--you tricked me into believing I could do something about this because of something I did two years ago, and look where we are now. It’s over, Don!” Trembling, she stood. “We have to admit that there’s some things we can’t reverse. It’s about time we realize that this is one of them.” She spun around and stormed away.

Don went to go after her, but Helper gently clasped his shoulder. “Do not pursue her. Tensions will only worsen.” He somberly turned his eyes up to Shatterer’s ship. “She is mistaken, however, on one account. Your planet is dying because of *my* oversight. But,” he swiveled back around to Don, “I will die with it before I would sit idly by.”

“Let me come, too,” Don offered. “My job’s the same as yours, just maybe on a smaller scale. Earth is my only home. If it goes down, I go down with it.”

Helper nodded for a few seconds, as if trying to convince himself to allow it. “Then come, Donald. Your bravery is admirable.” He began to walk away, but added over his shoulder, “A pity our first meeting was not pleasant.”

His humor, which would normally feel ill-timed, actually made Don chuckle a little bit and breathed just enough hope into the situation to overcome any doubts Don had about going with him.

He felt somewhat uncomfortable going without Darci, and he even gave a quick glance behind him to see her dwindling figure; but he knew that defeating Shatterer would show he cared more than anything else. “So, what’s the plan?” Don inquired, jogging up beside the Ludusian.

“I have not devised one as yet. I know that if we are to have any hope of disabling that drill, we have to get inside the *Domineer*.” He gestured towards the imposing pyramidal ship in the sky.

“How do we do *that*?”

“The only way into it from the ground is through those Retractable radiating from the vessel.” He pointed to the tentacle-like ships protruding out of every side of the *Domineer*. “The capsules are intentionally slick, but beyond that, all the pilots are connected to the capsules in order to monitor their vitals. If the pilot dies, the capsule retracts. We have to somehow get on the arm connecting it to the *Domineer* whilst avoiding the gunfire of the capsules.”

“So not too difficult, then,” Don quipped.

The two might have seemed quite a pair if anyone were watching--a nine-foot tall alien and a six-foot man dashing for cover behind some bushes with a clear sightline to one of the Retractable. This particular capsule was caught up in a skirmish with a South African military helicopter that was barraging it with gunfire. Beams of golden light pulsed out of the capsule’s weapons, narrowly missing the helicopter.

“We need to get its attention,” said Helper.

Just then, a beam from the capsule’s guns blasted the tail of the helicopter cleanly off, causing the craft to plummet violently into the side of the hill. Barely thinking, Don leapt over the bushes towards the crash site. “Donald, what are you doing?” Helper screamed. “That helicopter is about to explode!” Don ignored Helper’s cries and kept pressing on towards the helicopter with all his strength. As he approached it, he spotted one soldier with an automatic rifle strapped to his back stumbling out of the crashed aircraft.

“I need to borrow your gun,” Don declared.

The soldier blinked his eyes at him a couple of times, apparently not sure whether or not his injuries had caused him to imagine what he had just heard. “W--what? Why--why sh--should I--?”

Before he could finish, Don suddenly grabbed him and, just in time, sprung out of the way of a powerful explosion from the helicopter. After the dust had settled slightly, Don stood, disoriented somewhat from the surge of adrenaline and force of the blast. Looking down, he discovered that the soldier had been knocked unconscious. He almost felt bad leaving the man there, but his instincts quickly overwhelmed his compassion. He slipped the gun off the man’s back and began to dash back to the bushes where Helper was hiding. As he ran, he opened fire on the capsule,

which replied promptly with an onslaught of laser beams. “Run, Helper!” Don screeched as the capsule drew closer to ground level. Helper lumbered away as Don sprinted after him. Several times, Don nearly fell flat on his face as the beams sent dirt raining down over his head.

Helper’s long gait notwithstanding, Don quickly caught up with him. “You do realize we are supposed to get on that thing, *alive?*” Helper sneered.

“Sarcasm isn’t super helpful at this moment,” Don shot back through heavy breathing.

The beams from the capsule shook the ground behind them, to their left, and to their right. They ran in an uneven, zig-zag pattern in an attempt to throw off the pilot’s aim, but the ship and the beams of light grew ever closer and ever more accurate.

Suddenly, the sound of a shout and several gunshots reached their ears, and the deluge of laser beams ceased. They spun around to see the glass of the capsule shattered, the pilot dead, and Darci Mendelssohn standing on top of his corpse. For a moment, the world seemed to still. All the rancor of the battle raging over their heads faded; even the wind seemed to be holding its breath in anticipation of what was to come of her abrupt appearance. The silence was shattered with an emotional cry of “Darci!” from Don.

He caught a glimpse of her sharp green eyes through her frazzled blond hair before the capsule swiftly retracted back into the *Domineer*.

Darci had her eyes locked on that menacing ship looming over Cape Town--or, rather, what was left of it. She hadn’t been planning on looking at it ever again; not because she merely averted her gaze, but because she would be dead along with everyone else. There was no escape from this fate, from this literal collapse of the planet. In fact, as she walked away from Don, she tried to decide where she would go to die. Eventually, she settled on the Alps: there, it would be peaceful. Quiet. Painless.

That was when her ears heard a gentle sob coming from her left.

She glanced across the dusty, cracked street to see a mother clinging desperately to her daughter. Their faces were both streaked with dirt, scrubbed away in some places by their intermittent tears. The little girl, who could not have been more than four, glared at Darci through her frazzled black hair with tearful, blue eyes. Darci wanted to tear her gaze away, but something gripped her and forced her to stare into that girl’s eyes--those eyes consumed with fear. Yet there was a hardness about them that seemed to challenge Darci. Maybe she was crazy, but Darci was almost certain that the girl whispered “What about me?” without even moving her lips.

Who are you, Darci, if you turn around? she thought to herself. Maybe thinking that she

could, in fact, stop Shatterer was a deception. What did it matter? If she raised a white flag in earth's most desperate hour, she deserved a disgraceful death--a coward's death. Her feet were heavy, but some sense of stubborn determination in her forced them to run back towards certain doom. Every step she took sent a feeling of guilt and terror surging through her body. She only hoped her change of heart hadn't come too late.

Soon, she spotted Don and Helper hopelessly trying to escape one of the capsules emanating from the ship. She took a few short moments to calculate what her best action would be; then, in a flash, she leapt onto the glass, shot the pilot to death, and went to start climbing up the arm joining it to the *Domineer*.

But Don's cry stopped her dead in her tracks.

She shot him a short glance before the capsule began to unexpectedly retract, but it was long enough for her to see the simultaneous worry, yearning, and relief on his face. Her heart nearly thumped out of her chest as something unfamiliar took hold of her. It was like appreciation, but it was much deeper and more insatiable--it filled her with joy and with sorrow all at once. Faintly, the word for it came to her, but it seemed so strange to even think: *love*. The last time she had experienced such a feeling was many, many years before, and it had not ended well. Since that time, she had tried to bury romance under her work, viewing it as a distraction or even as a weakness. Now, even with the world at stake, she could not suppress it. She shook her head and tried to focus on the task at hand, but she couldn't shake her profound regret at lashing out at him earlier. She wished she could look him in the eyes and tell him that she was sorry, tell him that she loved him more than anyone she had ever known. As much as she hated it, though, it was better this way. She knew that she would never see him again, but it was difficult to stomach the thought of his coming with her and getting hurt.

The capsule finally settled inside a tall and narrow hangar. A door behind the capsule opened with a *whoosh* to reveal two Ludusian guards clad in brilliant blue and white armor. Taken aback by Darci's presence, they reached for their swords, but not before Darci could whip out her pistol and shoot them. Realizing that the noise would get the attention of other soldiers around, Darci darted inside the ship and started down the dim corridor to her right. She did not know where she was, but she supposed that the bridge was on the top level. *There's got to be an elevator around here somewhere*, she reasoned. Gingerly yet as quickly as possible, she made her way through that labyrinth of ominous halls, ducking into corners or crevices when she perceived footsteps.

She wandered the halls for at least half an hour without a glimpse of anything that resembled an elevator. A drop of sweat rolled off her brow. The temperature seemed to be rising inside the

vessel, but in reality, it was her frustration and anxiety that were getting worse. Time was running out. She needed to get to the bridge, but she was never going to get there at the rate she was going.

Presently, she came to a well-lit portion of the ship, which would have been a welcome change from the dark hallways had she not heard footsteps coming around the corner. Her head darted to and fro in frantic search for a place to hide. *Nothing*. She took a deep breath and went for her pistol, but her hand withdrew. A gun would be like a beacon in this silence--hand to hand was her only option. She rolled her neck around a couple of times and clenched her fists.

The moment a Ludusian rounded the corner, she charged at him, but he caught her by the throat and almost effortlessly lifted her up to his face. "I'd hoped I wouldn't have to see you like this again." It was Helper.

He gently set her down, and she gasped with relief. "Oh, thank goodness, it's you!" she exclaimed. "How did you get up here?"

Regret and pain momentarily flashed across Helper's face. "It was not easy. I'll leave it at that."

"Where's Don?"

Just then, the man himself came jogging around the corner, exhausted, but his face brightened when he saw Darci. He cried her name as she ran to him and embraced him tighter and longer than she ever had before. When she released him, she simply gazed into his dark brown eyes with raptness. "What is it, Darce?" Don asked.

She pondered telling him how she felt, but she stopped herself. Her countenance fell. "You shouldn't have come here. This isn't your fault or your fight. It's way too dangerous."

"This *is* my fight, Darci. This world is just as much mine as it is yours, and I have just as much right as you do to come in here and fight for it."

"We are all here now. There is no use in arguing about it," Helper chimed in. "We have to get to Shatterer, and fast. By my estimates, his light drill will soon penetrate the outer core of the earth."

"How do we get to him?" Darci inquired.

"There is a lift not far from here that will take us to the upper decks. From there, we will have to forcibly enter the special access capsules that travel directly to the bridge. There will be some resistance, but I have a feeling we will make it."

"Why's that?" Don asked.

Helper bowed his head slightly. "Because Shatterer knows we're coming."

PART VII

HELPER PRODUCED a hilt from his robe from which a long, wave-bladed sword suddenly extended. He strutted off down the hall to the left, leaving Don and Darci in shock at his words. After exchanging confused looks, they jogged after him. “Wait, you mean Shatterer knows we’re coming?” Darci asked.

“Of course he does,” Helper retorted. “He has meld: not much of it, I’ll grant, but it shows him the same visions it shows everyone else. He is not so foolish as to think that he may alter what it shows,” and here he shot a quick, sarcastic glance at Darci, “rather, he is realistic. He would be quite all right to see us die at the hands of one of his guards, but he would much rather see us suffer by his hand.”

“Now, wait a minute,” Don interjected. “I’m no general, but I know it’s a bad idea to attack when your enemy knows when and how you’re coming.”

“I did not say he knew how we are coming,” Helper retorted, “I just said he knows that we *are* coming.”

“You didn’t say, but does he know how we are coming?” Don shot back.

Helper sighed sharply. “I don’t know. This whole thing is a gamble--a shot in the dark. I’ve only seen glimpses of the visions within the meld, things he has undoubtedly seen himself.”

Darci spoke up, having mused over his words the whole time. “But if you have seen the same visions as he has, why don’t you know? If I’ve seen the same visions, wouldn’t I know everything he knows?”

“Only certain parts of the meld can be accessed at any one point. Sometimes it’s years, and other times, mere moments. It is the consciousness of a person, remember? Thoughtful, adapting...ever-changing...” His voice trailed as his gaze examined the walls for any signs of the lift. “Here we go,” he said finally. Taking a few quick strides forward, he pressed a button on the wall, prompting a rounded door to open. Helper signaled the others to hurry inside, and the door shut immediately behind them.

Curiously, there were no buttons, levers, or any other thing inside to control the elevator. “How do we--?” Darci began, but her mouth snapped shut when she turned around. Helper had his head bowed, eyes closed, and right hand placed on the wall. All was still at first, but slowly, purple energy began to radiate out of his fingertips into the wall until the entire lift was aglow with purple light. Darci and Don sneaked a dumbfounded glance at each other. The elevator lurched upward. The soothing purple light, in at least the few moments before they arrived at the upper decks, distracted the two from the menace ahead of them. When the elevator screeched to a halt, Helper

removed his hand and opened his eyes, and all the light and warmth fled.

Helper readied his sword in his nimble fingers as the door opened once more. Three guards stood immediately in front of them, but Helper had descended on them like an eagle on his prey. The rasp of the swords meeting one another was brief: Helper easily deflected their attacks, but he still seemed somewhat cautious in his engagement. He sliced the first soldier's legs, and the others he managed to knock unconscious with either a kick or a blow with the hilt of his blade. He motioned for Don and Darci to follow him.

They dashed through a maze of corridors, passing several guards on the way. In each encounter with a soldier, Helper delivered flashes of attacks that left his assailants unconscious and continued onward. Having incapacitated everyone in their path, the three of them huddled inside the somewhat cramped special access capsule at the end of the hall, which moved slowly upwards--this time without any assistance from Helper. A few seconds of silence passed before Darci spoke up.

"Those men back there--why didn't you just kill them? Didn't they deserve it, working for Shatterer and all?"

"I did only what I needed to and no more." Helper did not flinch. "They are my brothers. Most of them are impressed into the Service by their fear of Shatterer. I cannot kill those who are without blame, especially my own kindred. Even harming them brings sorrow to my heart." He sighed. "Violence is unnatural, Darci. You humans have become far too accustomed to it."

"We don't have any other choice, Helper," Darci shot back with a hint of offense. "You think I could live with myself if I thought long and hard about every person I've killed?"

"I do." Helper's tone was stark, but it was tinged with sadness. "I've killed humans--humans, Darci. Those I've sworn to protect. Those plane wrecks you saw on that island? Not accidents." He swallowed, but he never looked her in the eyes, as if he couldn't bear to. "If there was a chance those passengers would find me, a chance that they would end my work--I knew how much worse it would be for them in the future. So I took their lives." A faint quiver passed over his lips. "Mothers, fathers, *children*. I saw humanity as worthy of protection, yet some were pawns, expendable in light of the greater good; so I thought, until in one of my travels I overheard the cries of a mother, weeping over her child. A child killed in a Caribbean plane crash. A child that *I* killed.

"I vowed to myself that night that I would never take the life of another human being in cold blood. I never thought it possible, but I spent countless hours and sleepless nights inventing a device that would cloak the entire island so that I never had to take another innocent human life. I longed for rest, for respite from my agony, but I got none. Those people that died at my hands infused me with an insatiable resolve to finish that device. I saw all their eyes. I saw their terror. I *felt* their

dying pain.” He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, a tear rolled down his cheek.

“You see, then, if we do not consider our actions, we will never try to resolve them.”

There was a long silence as Darci and Don processed what he said. Eventually, Darci gently laid her hand on his arm. “You’re right,” she said softly. “I’ve made plenty of bad calls in the past, and I never thought about what those did to people. I didn’t want to. Deep down, I knew it would tear me apart.”

Helper finally looked her in the eyes. “None of that matters now. For me and for you, we have a chance to make things right--to prove that we aren’t monsters.” He mustered a smile.

The lift suddenly jerked to a halt. The doors opened to reveal two unsuspecting guards posted at a rounded archway. Scarcely allowing them enough time to react, Helper merely swung his sword in the air, sending a burst of energy through the air that launched the guards backwards into the wall. Don and Darci followed him through the archway, drawing their pistols. They were expecting a spacious room with a large window through which this cruel dictator and his crew could watch the chaos they had inflicted unfold; instead, they found a dark room lit only by a single spotlight in the center. Under this light sat Shatterer himself in a wide armchair, his hand placed pensively on his cheek. He attentively watched a holographic wall of television news feeds from across the world before him. No one else appeared to be present in the room, and Shatterer seemed to not notice their entrance--that is, until he spoke without turning his chair.

“Look at this, Kelteth,” he rumbled. “They are *surprised* that the end has come upon them. I do not remember what it is like to not know the future.” He slowly faced them, his red eyes studying them. “Darci Mendelssohn!” he suddenly exclaimed. “At last, I come face to face with you in the flesh. You delayed my coming, clever girl.”

“Nashteth, stop this madness,” Helper interjected.

“Pardon me, Kelteth,” he hissed. “I was in the middle of a conversation.” He rose and began to approach Darci, but Helper lowered his sword in front of her.

“Touch her,” Helper threatened, “and I will lob that disgusting head clean off your shoulders.”

“We have the same genes, you fool. Your head is as disgusting as mine.” Shatterer chuckled with genuine amusement, but he stopped. He again examined Darci, but his gaze soon turned to Don. “I recognize you, too, just not from this point in the timeline.” He pressed his pointer finger on his lips. “Strange. Anomalies are not a strictly Nerish problem, then. I theorized that the Bridges--”

“Nashteth, hold your tongue,” Helper warned.

“I’m quite surprised he hasn’t vanished yet,” Shatterer continued, unfazed. “My power has

not declined as much as I thought.”

“What are you talking about?” Darci blurted out before she realized that she probably shouldn’t have asked.

Shatterer cocked his head to the side in sarcastic astonishment. “Ah, you didn’t figure it out before now? Your friend is an Anomaly--a misfit, I like to call them. A person that should exist in another timeframe, but rifts in spacetime cause them to live in a different one. The creation of the meld disrupted the fabric of the universe like nothing I’ve ever seen, and I’ve spent all this time trying to clean up Mura’s mess. The only reason your friend is still here is because *I* am allowing it. In fact, I might send him back right now if I were afraid of him.” He removed a mass of glowing meld from his robe, and Don cried out as another vicious migraine assailed him.

“That’s enough, Shatterer!” Helper barked, swinging his sword towards the dictator.

A blade seemed to suddenly manifest in Shatterer’s hand to meet Helper’s attack. “Do not profane my name with the tongue of these inferior creatures, Kelteth!” Shatterer roared, deflecting Helper’s blade. “I am a god, you insolent fool!”

Helper shook his head. “Not anymore.”

Shatterer’s lips and hands shook with anger, but for a brief moment, a look of uncertainty seemed to flash across his eyes. It was almost too short to tell, though, for he quickly turned about and sat in his chair once more. He pressed a button on his armrest, and the bridge instantly lit up. “Kelteth, you are not the only one who has taken notice of the meld’s acquired abilities.” From what had once been the shadows of the room emerged Thad Dane, armed with an assault rifle, and two Ludusian soldiers, each bearing a long, straight blade and two daggers in a belt on their side. The soldiers brandished their blades through the air. As they did so, a pulsing yellow glow began to emanate from them.

“Meld-infused iron,” Helper remarked. “Clever of you, Nashteth, I suppose. But why does a god send his minions to kill? Does he not wish to do it himself?”

Shatterer gave a dark smile. “A god need not bother himself with the petty tasks.” He motioned for the soldiers to strike.

Helper turned to Darci and Don. “Stand back.” He charged towards the other Ludusians. They swiped at him from afar, releasing bursts of energy into the air, but Helper appeared to simply absorb them. Seeing their attempts were fruitless, they resorted to stabbing the ground with their swords. The waves through the floor that resulted again narrowly dodged Helper’s feet. Somehow, Helper seemed to repulse the energy from their weapons. Fear was evident on their faces by the time he reached them. The soldiers were somewhat adept at hand-to-hand combat, but Helper was

clearly more skilled than both of them: they gradually stumbled backwards as Helper met all of their strokes with powerful parries.

Darci watched with anxiousness as Helper dueled. She wasn't worried about him so much--he could obviously handle himself--but she felt useless and powerless. Her eyes darted back and forth between Helper, Shatterer, and Thad, searching for an opening.

Helper had soon brought his assailants to their knees, stripped them of their weapons, and knocked them unconscious. Shatterer had evidently grown impatient. "Watch them!" he barked at Thad as he rose from his chair and drew his sword. With a nod, Thad raised his assault rifle, eyes locked on Don and Darci. The dictator, meanwhile, fought Helper with the skill of a master swordsman. His strokes were longer, stronger, and more confident than the soldiers that had preceded him. Helper, however, looked unfazed and met his opponent's advances with levelheaded counters.

The duel seemed to be at an impasse until Helper's blade struck Shatterer's with a low ring, sending vibrations down the dictator's sword and causing him to cry out in pain. Surprised, Thad turned his gaze towards the scuffle. Darci took her chance. She sped over to the ship's console, located several feet in front of Shatterer's chair. Inspecting the console, she realized all the controls were unfamiliar to her, a fact she had not considered until now. *Just shoot it. That's worked before!* she thought.

She pulled out her pistol and was about to fire when she heard a shout coming from the back of the room--*Helper's* shout. She whirled her head around to see Shatterer's sword piercing through Helper's back. "Helper!" she shrieked.

Her cry drew Thad's attention again, and he prepared to unleash gunfire on her. In a blink, Don, who had been standing by the motionless bodies of the Ludusian soldiers, descended upon him, grabbing his gun and forcing it upwards. A shower of bullets pinged off the ceiling and walls. Thad managed to deliver a punch to Don's gut, but Don immediately answered with a flurry of jabs and kicks. At one point, he grabbed Thad's arm and twisted it until it let out a loud pop. As his opponent screeched in pain, Don gave one final blow to his face. Thad crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

There was little time to celebrate, though. Darci felt her pistol being abruptly wrenched from her hand, and she and Don simultaneously found themselves being drawn to Shatterer's outstretched hands. In seconds, their throats were in his unmerciful grasp. He gave a deep, sinister laugh. "I like this!" he bellowed as his eyes sparkled with a flare of malice. "A pitiful attempt to stop me, really. Kelteth was perhaps your best chance, and..." his voice trailed as he gazed upon the

bloodstained body of his nemesis, whose eyes were already lifeless and cold. Nausea and unbridled anger rushed into Darci's stomach all at once, and she kicked and flailed in the dictator's hand.

But Shatterer only tightened his grip. "Do not resist what is set in eternity, Darci Mendelssohn." He leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and took a deep, satisfied breath. "I have already seen your demise. It is unavoidable." He turned to Don. "The meld would not defile itself with visions of mistakes like you. Ah, well. I enjoy surprises--especially when it's the demise of a new enemy." He cracked an impish grin.

"Me too," Don shot back. Shatterer suddenly let out a shallow gasp, and his eyes grew wide. Darci looked down to see that Don had plunged one of the soldiers' daggers into Shatterer's stomach. The dictator stumbled backwards a few steps before relaxing his grasp and collapsing on the ground against the wall. His face was plastered with shock. His breaths were short.

Don stood, dusting himself off. "Did you see that coming?"

Shatterer, though still looking stunned, let out a weary laugh followed by a hacking cough. "You imbecile! I am the only thing keeping you in this timeframe. I die, and you go, too."

Don's knees buckled, and he fell to the floor, looking unexpectedly drained. "Don!" Darci cried, rushing to his side. "Are you okay? A-are you all right?"

"No, n-not--not really," her friend stammered. "Darci, I-I feel wrong. Something's not right."

"Okay, okay. It's gonna be okay. We-we just need to get you to get you out of here. Can you stand?"

Don looked as if he was struggling to keep his eyes open. The vibrancy of his eyes was leaving quickly. "No, I d-don't think so."

"I'll carry you, then! I'll carry you just like you would've carried me!" She put her hands under his body and began to heave, but Don waved at her.

"No time, Darci. You have to stop that drill. I'm going--fast."

Tears began to pour down Darci's face; within a few moments, it had turned into a full sob. "Don, please--please don't leave me!"

He smiled weakly. "I think you'll be all right without me."

"No, you don't understand!" She took a quivery breath. "I love you, Don. Not just as a friend--I've always loved you like that. I *really* love you. I guess I always have, I just didn't realize it."

Again, Don gave a gentle smile, and for a brief moment, a flicker of recognition came to his gaze. With a grunt, he managed to place his hand on her neck. "Oh, Darci. *I* always did." He pulled

her in to kiss her, but just before their lips touched, he vanished. Darci fell face down on the place where he lay, and she wept. It was a loud weeping, laden with pain and unspeakable sorrow. Maybe the whole ship could hear her, but she could care less. It was like a part of her had just died, leaving a void in her heart that not even tears could fill. Her stomach churned at the thought that she would never see him again, and, at the same time, that he would never see her again.

Finally, after several minutes, she forced herself to sit up. She glared at Shatterer first, expecting to see some type of malicious grin on his lifeless face. To her surprise, it did not seem that he had died with some kind of morbid contentment; rather, there was a hint of horror in his eyes, as if death was not a thought that had ever occurred to him. Nonetheless, she felt no pity on him. Fury burned from her gut to her head, and she might have beat his corpse if it would have done any good. She ripped her gaze away from Shatterer to Helper. Sadness again welled up inside her as she observed his despondent face, a trickle of blood the only color remaining on it. Darci labored to stand and stumbled over to the Ludusian's body. Wiping the tears from her eyes, she whispered, "You didn't die in vain." She laid a gentle kiss on his forehead, stood, and strode with renewed determination to the control panel.

When she had reached it, she just stared. All the buttons, levers, and switches were labeled in a foreign language. She could just shoot the controls as she had originally planned to do, but she wanted to shut off the light drill and crash the ship in the water, where no one else would be harmed. *Crash the ship*. That phrase replayed in her head repeatedly. Since the drill turned on, she knew her death would be soon, but here she was--actually about to die. She took some solace in the thought that Don had possibly gone on to heaven, but even if he had, she wasn't sure she would be joining him. She closed her eyes and whispered a prayer in hopes that it would increase her chances.

As she opened her eyes again, the words of Helper instantly resounded in her mind. "The meld has shown you those visions for a purpose. Do not disregard them just because you fear them," he had said. Faint memories of her dream flashed through her mind too quickly to process. But her determination was strong; she concentrated as hard as she could. All of the sudden, she caught a glimpse in her mind's eye of a panel with a giant lever on the left wall of the bridge. She spun her head around, and sure enough, it was there. Just as she had in her dream, she strolled over to it, flipped three switches on the side, and pulled the lever all the way down. Both to her delight and to her horror, an alarm sounded throughout the ship before everything went silent, including the distant humming sound coming from the light drill.

Four guards soon appeared at the door. Darci whipped out her gun and shot the door's control panel, shorting it out and forcing it shut. She knew the closed door would stall them for a

little while, but she needed to act fast before they figured out a way to breach it. As she made her way back to the main control board, she frantically tried to recall what else she had seen in her dream. More images swirled in her head, but none of the ones she needed. She attempted to force her brain to remember by focusing on the words “control board.” Banging coming from the door threatened to throw off her concentration, but she persisted. *Control board, control board, control board...*

Finally, it came to her. She pressed a small green button on the far right of the panel, retracting the blinds covering a large window on the front. From there, she pressed and turned a large knob in the center of the panel. A large stick topped with a glowing blue ball emerged from a compartment above the knob. With trembling hands, she reached out and grabbed the orb. “Don, this one’s for you,” she said as a tear streamed down her cheek. She moved the stick around in a circular motion, rotating the ship a full one-hundred eighty degrees and away from the city. Then, easing both the ball and the stick simultaneously forward, the ship tilted down and propelled towards the agitated waters of Table Bay. Even though she knew that the water would be slow to come, she unconsciously held her breath, bracing for impact.

The swiftly moving ship slammed into the bay with violent force. Darci found herself abruptly launched forward by the collision and frantically latched her hands onto the control console. After her instincts subsided, she let go and fell mindlessly onto the slowly cracking glass at the front of the bridge. The *Domineer* was large, but it was quickly sinking--she could feel it--but she didn’t shed any tears or feel any fear. With her line of work, she always imagined herself dying a brutal death and sobbing with pain as she anticipated the end of her life. But she felt none of that in this moment. Death almost seemed like a fitting end to her story. She had made plenty of mistakes in her life, but at least her final chapter would read that she saved the world.

She laughed even as she felt a trickle of water begin to pool up under her. *You saved the world, old gal.*

The water flooded the bridge at an ever-quickenning pace. The images of her friends flashed through her mind, but at their memories, she felt no sadness, just satisfaction. Satisfaction that she had known them and loved them--that they fought alongside her and picked her up when she was down. How long she thought about them she did not know, but to her it felt like many sweet hours.

She took one final gasp of air as the glass under her finally gave way under the crushing pressure. Throbbing and pain soon overwhelmed her oxygen-starved lungs, and for about a minute, she began to panic at the thought of drowning. She clawed at her chest as if it would give her breath, but she got no relief. For a few seconds, she changed her mind about dying as she

desperately wished for a gasp of fresh air. Soon, though, her eyes grew heavy, her body relaxed, and everything faded into black...

The next thing she remembered was a searing white light.

It was not over.

Yet.

THE END