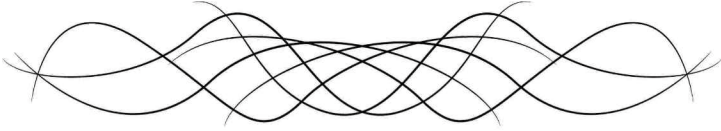


# **DARK STARS**

*Preview: Chapters 1-4*



A.K. DuBoff

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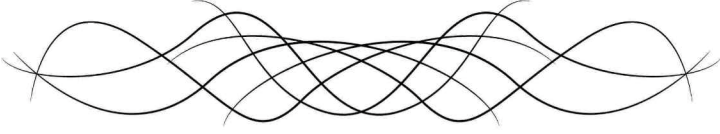
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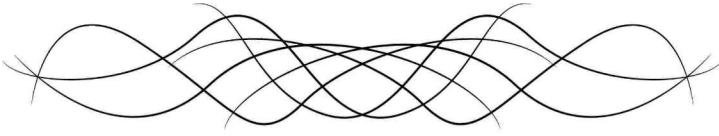
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## About Dark Stars



***"Do-overs" are possible.***

*The hyperdimensional crystalline network allows reality to be reset to past moments in time...*

After a routine 'reset' on her homeworld, Elle Hartmut instead awakens on a spaceship. Her body is different, she has new seemingly magical abilities, and she's told that the fate of known civilization is in her hands.

An alien Darkness is corrupting the Hegemony's worlds. Elle and a team of companions with enhanced abilities like her own embark on an interstellar quest to stop the advancing Darkness. The team's only clue is that fabled relics may hold the key to salvation.

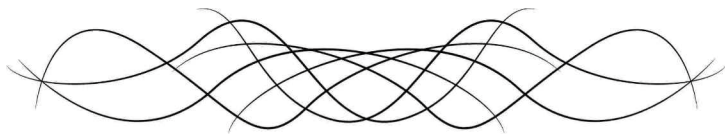
With their worlds already destroyed, the only hope is a 'universal reset' to undo the damage. However, as legends become fact and the lines between magic and science blur, Elle and her friends must unravel ancient secrets before their worlds and loved ones are lost in shadow forever.

*Dark Stars* offers a unique blend of sci-fi and fantasy adventure with a sleek high-tech skin on traditional magic. Join Elle on her adventure in a universe where second chances are real!

**DARK STARS: PART 1**

# **CRYSTALLINE SPACE**

# 1



FLIRTING WITH DEATH was the perfect way to spend an afternoon.

My slim shadow stretched behind me as I paced along the brink of the cliff, squinting into the setting sun.

Next to me, Adrienne prepared to leap. She grinned from her perch at the edge.

“Just jump already,” I urged while securing my pink hair into a braid past my shoulders.

“Relax, Elle. I’m getting in the zone.” She stretched her arms wide and leaned forward, surrendering to the wind.

I peeked over the lip as she plummeted toward the depths of the sandstone canyon.

Adrienne’s gleeful cheer echoed through the chasm as she fell. She kicked off an outcropping, launching herself into a cartwheel through the air, which she transitioned into a somersault. Every movement was fluid, reaching and twisting in ways I’d never be able to achieve myself.

While I watched her aerial acrobatics, I gripped my left shoulder in my right hand with subconscious envy—my reminder that showing off sometimes came with a price.

“Reset!” I called out to our friend Jiro when Adrienne was almost to the canyon floor.

“Loading,” he confirmed behind me.

The air electrified, tingling my skin and pulsing in my ears. White light crept into the corners of my vision, accompanied by an intensifying hum. With a flash, my vision went black.

For a moment, I floated in nothingness. Then, the physical world resolved around me once more. The blackness receded into sunlight and my feet were again solidly on the rocky ground.

I was now standing in the same position I'd been minutes before when I made the reset point at the access terminal. Suspended inside the monument was a two-meter-tall crystal that glowed with a swirling blue inner light.

It was one of four monuments in the vicinity of our community, each connected to a larger crystalline network woven throughout the planet and surrounding worlds. The remarkable properties of the crystals made our play possible.

Every time someone touched one of the crystals, it would record the precise physical state within its zone at that moment—including the kinesthetic abilities, clothing, and hair style of each person, along with the general environmental configuration. The access panel on the monument could then be used to reset the surrounding landscape and our physical forms into one of the previously recorded states with our cognition intact. Out in the remote canyon where it was just us, we could reset as many times as we wanted since the action was restricted to each crystal monument's specific zone.

Adrienne beamed, exhilarated by her recent fall that now only existed in memory. "I needed that."

I let my good arm drop to my side and stepped back from the terminal. "Showoff."

"Let's see your moves." She smirked.

Despite being an unfair competition, I took the bait. "Watch and learn."

"Be quick," Jiro instructed, sweeping aside a lock of dark hair that had fallen in front of his almond eyes. "We need to get back."

He was right; it was almost dinnertime. As much as I dreamed about ways to prolong our last summer of freedom, even resetting the physical world didn't alter the underlying flow of time, only the physical state within the crystal's zone.

"Last one for the night." I jogged to the edge of the cliff and peered into the familiar canyon. It was at least one hundred meters to the bottom, but the shadows made the depth difficult to gauge. I beckoned Adrienne over. "Spot me."

We had learned the hard way to reset before hitting the bottom. Since we retained all of our memories after each

physical reset, the splat at the end kind of put a damper on the thrill of freefall.

“I’m watching,” she assured me.

I took a deep breath and raised my arms—my left only making it forty-five degrees from my side due to the permanent effects of a childhood injury. Even though I couldn’t put on an aerial show as well as Adrienne, I could still fly.

A gust of wind crested the canyon and I leaned forward.

“Wait!” Jiro shouted.

Adrienne yanked me back by my braid.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, regaining my balance. No sooner had I spoken than I saw the reason for his concern.

The crystal that normally exuded pleasant blue light now contained a dark cloud.

Jiro took a step away from the monument. “What’s wrong with it?”

Adrienne and I cautiously approached. As I neared, the cloud took on more definition, as though individual black particulates were floating inside the prism.

“I have no idea,” I murmured.

Nothing had ever disrupted the crystal before. Its existence was a given—as much as the sun rising and having chores.

“We should go,” Adrienne stated as she backed toward the path leading to our town.

“Maybe it needs to recharge or something,” Jiro suggested, following her.

“Yeah,” I agreed, though I didn’t believe it, and followed my longtime friends away from the canyon.

“Should we tell someone?” Adrienne asked. “I’ve never seen anything like that in one of the crystals.”

“That would require explaining why we were out here,” Jiro pointed out.

“That’s *definitely* not going to happen.” There was no way my mother would approve of me repeatedly jumping off a cliff in the adjacent zone while she prepared dinner back home. Especially after what had happened six years ago, this was the



last place I wanted her to know I hung out. What she didn't know wouldn't worry her.

"If we're going to keep this to ourselves, then we should monitor it," Adrienne said.

"We could come back to check on the crystal tonight," I proposed. "If it looks good, maybe we could get in a night jump."

Adrienne beamed. "I *do* enjoy falling under the stars."

"Well, it's not like I have anywhere to be first thing in the morning," Jiro said with a devious sparkle in his eyes.

"Sneaking out for a night jump... it's like we're fourteen again." I chuckled.

"Only now we're better at not getting caught." Adrienne winked at me.

I smiled back. "22:00?"

"Works for me," Jiro agreed.

Adrienne nodded. "You know I'm in."

We picked our way through a field of boulders along our standard path. The rough terrain would be difficult for the uninitiated to navigate, but vaulting over rocks and sidestepping sticker bushes was second-nature to me.

I kept my gaze straight ahead as we crossed the border from the canyon crystal's zone to the domain of the town's crystal, trying to ignore the rock formation that had changed my life when I was twelve. My fall from the four-meter-tall boulder in the town's zone had dislocated my shoulder and broken my arm—a seemingly minor injury at first—but deeper tissue damage that knitted into scar tissue forever impaired my arm's mobility. By the time the doctors realized what had happened, it was too late to repair and the window for a town reset had long since passed.

As I'd come to grips with the injury and what it might mean for my future, I'd often fantasized about a universal-scale reset that wasn't limited by the rules governing our town. If everything everywhere could be reset, I could go back to how I was before the accident, just like everyone else would get a second chance. We could make things how they should be. Of course, that was impossible; one girl's minor injury wasn't

worth disrupting our community, let alone the dozens of planets in the Hegemony's purview.

My mom always told me what was in the past was done; the only way was forward. I'd heard it so many times that part of me believed it, but deep down there was still lingering bitterness. Thanks to that one stupid mistake as a kid, I feared I'd never be able to have the kind of future I'd dreamed about in the space force.

I suppressed the resentment welling in my chest. There was nothing I could do about it now.

Eventually, the trail became more defined, and we broke into a light jog. The sun was low in the sky by the time we reached pavement. I might be late for dinner, but not terribly.

The final path segment traced the upper ridge of the hills surrounding our town, Ochre. Stucco homes topped with solar panels were situated along meandering streets in the southern portion of the valley, and the administrative, commercial, and educational buildings occupied the north. A social square at the center of town was landscaped with mature trees, their sturdy branches distinct even from my distant vantage. The main crystal for our town at the center of the square cast a faint blue glow through the trees' shadows.

My family's house was toward the southeastern edge of town, so I'd made a shortcut trail down one of the slopes to facilitate easier access to the surrounding hills. "I'll see you tonight!" I called to Adrienne and Jiro as I dashed down my personal corridor toward home.

When I reached the bottom of the hill, I took a moment to dust myself off and smooth my hair. No need to call attention to the fact that I'd been running through bushes rather than focusing on preparations for my future.

I walked the rest of the way to the back entrance of my house. Light shone through the rear kitchen window, illuminating my path along the pavers bisecting my father's vegetable garden in the backyard.

The welcoming sight erased my apprehension about the strange cloud in the canyon crystal, but I tensed with the knowledge that these homeward treks were now numbered.

Without the adrenaline rush of a good cliff jump to clear my mind, my impending departure for the vocational academy crept into my thoughts. In a few weeks, playing in the canyon with my friends would be a distant memory. No more resets for fun—only the pressure of trying to get it right the first time.

Heart heavy, I opened the back door and braced for a berating about my tardy arrival.

“There you are!” my mother exclaimed from the kitchen when the screen door to the mud room clicked shut.

Scents of apple pie and steamed potatoes wafted toward me as I slipped off my shoes. “Sorry I’m late!”

I padded into the kitchen, my stomach letting out a low growl. Seated at the wooden table in the center of the room, my younger brother, Ben, was absorbed in a puzzle game on his tablet. At the counter along the back wall overlooking the garden, my mother was in the process of spooning freshly whipped potatoes into a blue serving bowl.

With the hope of stealing a taste, I headed for the counter, ruffling Ben’s blond mop of hair as I passed by.

He batted away my hand with more force than normal; I guess at fourteen he was getting a little old for me to mess with him. “Mom said it’s your turn to take out the trash,” he mumbled without shifting his gaze from his tablet.

“The fish from last night is... lingering,” my mother said, wrinkling her petite nose beneath evergreen eyes like my own.

“I’m on it.” I pivoted on my heel and went back to the receptacle in the mud room.

As soon as the lid was cracked open, I understood the urgency of the request. Holding my breath, I slipped out the bag while jamming my feet back into my shoes, then sprinted around the side of the house to deposit the garbage into the central collector. When the bin was safely re-sealed, I took a deep breath. “I won’t miss this—”

The chime in the town square pierced the quiet evening.

My pulse spiked as I ran back inside. “There isn’t a town meeting tonight, is there?” I asked the moment I was through the kitchen door, shoes still on.

Ben had set down his tablet, and my father now stood in the archway between the kitchen and living room with his own tablet in hand. The worried glances passing between my parents confirmed my suspicion that the alarm wasn't for a scheduled event.

"Dinner can wait," my mother stated, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "Let's go."

"Any changes to log?" my father asked as the four of us headed through the living room toward the front door.

I shook my head since I hadn't made any purchases in the last three days that had yet to be recorded in the Hegemony's central database.

Ben groaned. "My game is new. Lemme back it up real quick." He darted back into the kitchen to his tablet.

The lines of worry on my father's forehead deepened as we waited. Unscheduled meetings were a rarity, and they almost never brought good news.

However, I tried to remain positive. After all, if something terrible had happened, we could fall back on the town's archive in the event of an accident more serious than a broken arm. Any inanimate objects would reset, too, so long as the raw materials were still within the crystal's zone and the object had been inside the zone during the previous check-in. Occasionally, handmade trinkets may be lost in our local resets, but it was worth the wellbeing of our town's inhabitants—especially since digital content was always secure on the Hegemony's offworld servers.

When Ben was finished backing up his game, we stepped out into the street along with the dozen other families on our block. The group of us hurried past the row of stucco houses as we headed toward the central square.

"Have you heard anything about the meeting?" my father asked one of our neighbors.

"No," he replied. "Interrupting dinner like this—must be important."

As we merged onto the main street into the heart of town, I kept an eye out for Adrienne and Jiro. In the back of my mind, I couldn't help but wonder if the unscheduled meeting

had anything to do with the dark cloud we'd witnessed up in the canyon crystal.

My mother's hand brushed my back. "There's no need to be nervous."

"I'm not." But part of me *was* concerned. I could only remember three unscheduled meetings in my eighteen years of life; something must be seriously wrong.

"Not just about tonight," my mother continued in the tone she slipped into when she was channeling her day job as a therapist. "I've seen you reading over the course offerings at the Academy. You'll find something that's a good fit."

I stared down at my feet as I walked. "It all seems so..."

"Boring?" she completed for me.

"I was going to say 'mundane', but yeah."

She smiled and squeezed my right shoulder. "Knowing you, you'll find a way to make it interesting."

Maybe she was right, but nothing in the course catalog had piqued my interest in the slightest. The only path that sounded remotely appealing was becoming a Ranger in the Hegemony's space force, but I wasn't ready to tell my parents I was interested in applying to Tactical School. Even though I knew the Rangers would probably reject me because of my bum shoulder, I couldn't help dreaming about it. But, I needed to be realistic. And have options. To satisfy my parents and keep multiple paths open, I figured I'd try the vocational academy for one semester and then take it from there.

We arrived at the town square and found that most of Ochre's two thousand other residents had already congregated in the open plaza facing the crystal and its surrounding access terminal. Members of the crowd were shifting on their feet, eyes darting. Parents clutched their children tightly as urgent conversations buzzed throughout the square, speculating about the reason for the alarm.

The atmosphere was a stark contrast to our standard weekly assemblies, a special service where we would watch Mayor Therman touch the crystal to initiate a backup record for our community. Though he performed the task every day, watching the task was a weekly tradition; it gave us assurance

that there was always a backup, specifically to ease our minds in situations such as this.

However, assurances only went so far.

“Dad, what’s going on?” Ben asked with a quaver in his voice.

“Here’s Mayor Therman,” my father replied, his gaze fixed on the platform surrounding the crystal. “I’m sure he’ll explain everything.”

The elderly mayor approached the railing at the edge of the platform a meter above the paved square. He held up a frail hand, and the din of conversation faded to silence. “Thank you all for coming so quickly. We received a message from the Capital this evening about reports from the outer colonies related to a crystalline network malfunction.”

Conversations reignited in the crowd, overpowering the mayor’s raspy voice.

“Quiet, please!” the city manager, Dilon, cut in. He held up his hands and waited for the townspeople to settle.

“As a precaution,” the mayor continued, “the Hegemony has issued an order for us to perform a global reset. We will go back one month.”

My parents each placed a reassuring hand on Ben’s and my shoulders.

Local resets were common enough, but I’d only ever experienced one coordinated planet-scale reset before, when a transport shuttle exploded in a freak accident several years prior. We’d gone back three days to the previous check-in point that time. To go a whole month meant that something major must be going on.

“Just so long as I don’t have to retake my final exams,” I muttered in an attempt to break the tension.

“I’m sure the records have already been sent to the Academy, don’t worry,” my mother replied, missing my intended humor.

“Man, that’s going to be a pain to reset all of the clocks,” Ben added.

I wasn’t sure if it was his own attempt at levity or genuine annoyance. Keeping track of *when* we were was always a

challenge with any reset, by virtue of it being a rollback to a previous physical state rather than actual time travel. Anything outside the reset zone stayed the same, so we relied on the master clocks in the Capital for us to resync with the rest of society. We always made the town reset points for the same time of day to minimize confusion, but I couldn't remember where I may have been a month ago at the time of the reset point they intended to use.

Regardless of the logistic headache surrounding the reset, my chest tightened as I thought about why the order was given in the first place. I feared the reset must have to do with the darkness in the canyon crystal—it was too big of a coincidence. That meant it was on other worlds, too.

With a renewed wave of alarm, I realized that I had touched the infected crystal moments before the darkness appeared. “Dad, I should have said something sooner, but—”

“Resetting,” the mayor announced as he reached for the access terminal.

Before I could finish my warning, an electrical charge surged through the air and my ears buzzed. The world distorted around me into white light. Everything vanished into nothingness.

I floated in the darkness, drifting with no sense of self. I waited. And waited.

The reset was taking far too long—reality should be reforming by now. My consciousness wanted to panic, but I had no corporeal form to react.

Then, a physical world finally began to solidify at the edges of my vision. Except rather than the town square, I appeared to be in some sort of glass enclosure too brightly lit for me to see beyond its boundaries.

My eyes struggled to adjust to the dazzling light above me. A dark-haired man in a black uniform came into focus on the other side of the glass half a meter from my face.

“Are you a boy or a girl?” he asked me.

I blinked with confusion. At least, I think I blinked. Somehow I still didn't feel fully connected to myself. “A girl...” I said.

“What is your name?”

“Elle,” I replied, more certain in my response this time. “Elle Hartmut.”

A warm tingle ran through my limbs. As it passed, I was left with a renewed sense of my physical form.

Before I could look around to get my bearings, the man activated a holographic projection in front of me, depicting a sword, a shield, and a wand with a star on the end. “What is your strength?” he asked.

I evaluated the symbols. Was it a test?

The shield called to me initially, given my defensive attitude toward the whole situation. However, the wand was a much more alluring choice, almost certainly indicating magic. I was about to respond with that selection, but I caught myself. I’d always wanted to be strong—to regain the physical prowess I’d lost when I was injured. “The sword,” I stated.

“Are you sure?” the man asked.

“Yes.” Another tingling wave passed through my limbs and torso. My senses sharpened and I felt physically charged, ready to push myself to my limits.

“You are a fighter. Use your strength well,” the man stated as he stepped back. The front half of the glass cylinder, which had a frosted band in the middle, swung open. “You’re lucky you survived.”

“What do you mean?” I stepped out of the chamber, unsteady on my feet. Looking down at myself, I realized I was wearing a white, form-fitting jumpsuit that was nothing like anything in my wardrobe. My pulse spiked. “Where am I? Where’s my family?”

The middle-aged man strode across the sterile room to the side wall and touched a panel. With a mechanical whir, a section of the wall rolled down behind the smooth interior surface.

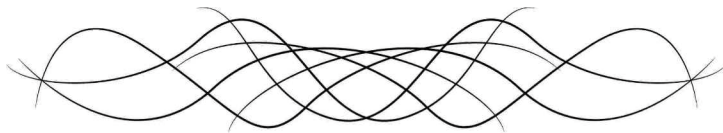
My breath caught as I stared out the newly exposed viewport. A planet—*my* planet—loomed before me, luminescent blue and brown set against a starscape. Dark tendrils were snaking through the atmosphere.

Panic constricted my chest. “What’s going on?”



“Elle, I’m Commander Alastair Colren and you are aboard the *Evangel*,” he replied. “I represent the Hegemony. We have a mission for you.”

## 2



“HUH?” I WANTED to say something more articulate, but that was the best I had at the moment.

“Forgive me, this all must come as quite a shock.” Commander Colren took a seat at a metal table near the viewport. He gestured to an acrylic chair across from him.

“You could say that.” Dumbfounded, I stumbled toward the empty seat. I couldn’t stop staring out the viewport at my home planet of Erusan. Was I really in space? I’d seen images and tried to imagine the view from a spaceship, but this... It didn’t seem possible.

I took a shaky breath. “How did I get here?”

“I’ll explain everything, don’t worry,” Colren replied.

“None of this makes any sense. What do you mean you have a mission for me? I’m no one.”

Colren examined me with his piercing hazel eyes. “Had you recently come into contact with a crystal that exhibited a dark cloud?”

I struggled to think back to the events from a few hours before. “Yeah, I was hanging out with my friends outside of town, doing localized resets. We were just about to do another reset when we noticed it.”

“In that moment, you were... altered,” he explained.

I gaped at him. “What? How?”

“It’s something like an immunity. You had a brief touch with the Darkness during the reset just prior, so when you encountered it again during the global reset, you were prepared to hang onto your sense of self.”

My heart sank. “What about my friends? They touched the infected crystal, too.”

“Unfortunately, we can only perform the extraction on one person at a time. You were the fortunate one,” Colren replied.

“What about my family? My world?” Fear and worry clouded my mind. My parents, my brother, everyone who meant anything to me was still down there. They couldn’t be gone.

The commander took a slow breath. “The world is suspended and its records are preserved in the Master Archive.”

“Suspended? What in the stars does *that* mean?”

“It’s a way of locking the records so they don’t become corrupted. It’s the best we can do once the Darkness infects a planet,” he continued. “But you can help us do more.”

I barked a nervous laugh. “Yeah. Right!” Either the last reset had messed with my head, or the man across from me was insane. I was leaning toward the former option; people didn’t randomly wake up on spaceships. I had to be dreaming.

“Elle, I know this might seem like an elaborate prank, but I assure you it’s not. You’re special and we need you.” The commander looked me square in the eyes—dead serious, as far as I could tell.

I inched back in my chair. “Whatever you think I am, I’m not. I can’t help you.” The Hegemony needed scientists or heroic soldiers. Not me. As much as I aspired to be a Ranger, I knew it wouldn’t happen. I was physically broken—and I certainly wasn’t a genius.

The commander folded his hands on the table. “You’re *exactly* who we need.”

“I’m a kid.”

He nodded. “The young do seem to be the most drawn during the extraction; there’s a fearlessness in youth. I’d never discount someone because of age alone.”

I still didn’t believe any of it was real, but he certainly did. I figured if I heard him out, maybe that would end the insanity; all I wanted was to go back home and finish my summer vacation. I crossed my arms and leaned back in my seat, studying his expression for any tells that might reveal his true intentions. “What is it you want me to do?”

“We are assembling a team of others that have been extracted like you. Together, we hope that you’ll be able to help

us track down the cause for the spreading Darkness, and stop it. With your immunity, you'll be able to go places others can't."

Articulate speech failed me again. Me, stop the Darkness? Now he was *really* talking crazy. I laughed and shook my head with disbelief.

"It first appeared three months ago," Colren continued, undeterred. "Initially, we thought it was an isolated anomaly, but when it started to spread, we had to take action. We developed the extraction procedure to give us a means to fight back."

I wanted to dismiss his statements, but I was struck by the gravity of his tone. Maybe this wasn't a nightmare after all. If I really was on a Hegemony spaceship, and if my world was now uninhabitable, as he indicated, I had no idea where I could go.

My heart pounded in my chest. "I still don't understand how I got here. It doesn't seem possible."

"We have certain technology that's not exactly public knowledge," the commander replied. "Frankly, we don't know how it works, but it does."

I raised an eyebrow. "Magic?"

He chuckled. "You joke, but it may as well be."

Crazy or not, the thought of legitimate magic use caught my attention. I leaned forward with my elbows on the table. "What was that test you gave me when I first woke up?"

"The extraction procedure is for consciousness, but your physical manifestation is more fluid based on fragmented data stored in the crystalline network. Those questions were to bring your new body into focus and solidify your innate traits."

It was then that I noticed the long hair hanging down around my shoulders—not the faded pink dye job from minutes before on my homeworld, but bright fuchsia. And it didn't look like dye. "What the—?" I nearly leaped out of my chair.

As I tensed, I noticed that my left shoulder didn't feel tight in the way I was used to. I rolled it and then raised my arm, finding that I had full range of motion.

“Stars, I—” My chest constricted.

“This is you,” Colren said. “The real you that you wanted to be.”

“How did you...?”

Colren smiled with compassion. “Think of it like this: pretend your mind is like a digital file that we would back up on one of the central servers. The original computer used to create that file became corrupted. That file has now been downloaded into a new, better computer that was optimized to run that file. Likewise, your new body was bioprinted in that chamber to fit the ideals contained within your consciousness—built to your own specifications.”

It still sounded like madness. I ran my fingers through the soft, fuchsia strands. “I guess I did have a few changes in mind.”

“Whoever you were before, you still are. Now, you’re just a different version of yourself.”

I could barely breathe. Losing my world, my family, my friends. But gaining a whole, new body? It was too much to process. I wasn’t broken anymore, yet I was separated from my loved ones and had no idea if I’d ever see them again. As much as I wanted to be healed, it wasn’t a worthwhile trade.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “And now I’m alone.”

“Not alone,” he hastily replied. “The others we’ve extracted have also found themselves to be faster and stronger than they were before.”

“Others?” My heart skipped a beat, relief washing over me with the revelation that I wasn’t the only one who’d been unexpectedly yanked from my home. If nothing else, we’d have that in common.

He nodded. “You have two companions so far, but we hope to be able to extract others. They have each manifested certain... abilities.”

“Like what?”

Before he could answer, a thud sounded through the interior bulkhead, followed by a series of scuffles and another bang.

The commander sighed. “It would seem that one of your companions is experimenting again.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“Oh, he’s only getting used to his new body.” Colren glanced at the wall. “Some of the transformations have been more substantial than others.”

Not that I’d had a choice, but I was wondering more and more what I’d been pulled into. I cautiously eyed the side wall where the sound had come from. “May I meet them?”

“No sense in waiting.” Colren rose from his chair and headed for the door on the wall opposite the viewport. “Try not to stare.”

“At what?” I asked as I followed him.

“You’ll see.”

The door automatically slid to the side when we approached, revealing a steel-lined corridor. Struck with a blast of cooler air, I folded my arms to augment the insulation offered by the ruched white jumpsuit and followed Colren through the doorway. Holopanel and information displays integrated with the corridor walls hinted at a level of technological utilization that was far beyond anything in my day-to-day life back home, and I found myself awestruck by features that were probably commonplace for everyone else on the ship. The corridor curved gradually to the side in both directions, so it was impossible to see the ends. Doors lined both sides of the hall at irregular intervals, and we headed for one six meters to the right, adjacent to the room where I woke up.

Colren pressed his palm against a panel on the smooth wall. Following a beep, the door next to it slid open with a low hiss.

Scuffling sounds echoed out into the corridor, accompanied by the shout of a youthful male voice, “Relax, Toran! It’s just the commander.”

“And I have a new member for your group,” Colren said as he stepped through the threshold.

Steeling myself, I peeked into the room.

Inside, Colren had stopped half a meter inside the door with his back to me, partially obstructing my view. To his left, I could make out the refined profile of a man in his early-twenties. His medium-brown hair was styled into a faux hawk and well-muscled arms flexed the fabric of his white jumpsuit.

The young man turned to face the door, training his captivating sky-blue eyes on me. "Why, hello there." He cracked a smile, brushing his index finger over a translucent crystal pendant hanging around his neck.

"Hi." I smiled back, hating that my cheeks suddenly felt flushed.

"This is Kaiden," Colren said, swiveling to face me. "He was the first we were able to retrieve."

Kaiden mimed tipping an invisible hat to me. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"I'm Elle," I replied.

"Nice hair," a deep voice said from beyond the commander.

Then, I noticed the behemoth of a man who had been obscured from view when I first entered. Standing two meters tall and with the broadest shoulders I'd ever seen, the other man was a solid wall of muscle. The tattered top half of his white jumpsuit was tied around his waist.

"I rather like the new color," I responded to his flippant comment while I tried not to gawk at his exaggerated proportions.

"And this is Toran," Colren continued. "It's only been two days since we retrieved him."

"I've been hitting the gym pretty hard since then," Toran said with a grin.

I relaxed, seeing his good nature beneath the chiseled exterior. "I bet I could still beat you in a footrace."

"If there's anything left to run over," Kaiden interjected.

The dented floor and walls near Toran illustrated his point, which was underscored by a pile of twisted metal that appeared to be chair remains and perhaps a handful of shelving units.

Toran shrugged. “Don’t knock it until you try it. Folding a chair or two is surprisingly empowering.”

“I’ll bet,” Kaiden muttered under his breath.

I examined Toran. “Let me guess—you chose the shield, in the test when you were waking up.”

Toran nodded.

“What about you?” I asked Kaiden.

“The wand, of course,” he responded with a matter-of-fact tone like it was the most obvious choice in the world. “Didn’t you?”

I shook my head. “No, the sword.”

“Shame. You’re missing out.” A ball of sparkling white light appeared over the palm of Kaiden’s outstretched right hand.

“Not in here!” Colren cut in.

The orb faded from his palm. “The demonstrations will have to wait for another time, I suppose.”

“Like when you can’t accidentally vent us into space by hurling a rogue fireball at the viewport.” The commander smoothed his black uniform.

“I’ve gained a lot of control since then,” Kaiden countered.

“All the same,” Colren continued, “now that there are three of you—one from each discipline—we need to seal the Master Archive.”

I glanced at the men’s faces as they each nodded gravely. “Sorry, did I miss something?”

“The Darkness is advancing,” Colren replied. “If we don’t seal the Master Archive, it will be consumed and we’ll have no means to reset the worlds after we stop the Darkness.”

“Right, I figured out that much from context. But what was that about ‘one from each discipline’, and why us?”

“Oh, we’re the divinely gifted almighty ones,” Kaiden quipped. “They do like to skip over that part of the initiation briefing.”

Colren groaned. “It’s hardly that dramatic. You see, when the part of your consciousness that exists outside of spacetime was re-knitting with your new body, you were tapping into your most ancient genetic history—drawing on fragments scattered throughout the crystal backups from back in the time



when the crystalline network was still forming. We know of a place that is believed to be the origin of the crystals, and there's a sanctuary around it to protect the Archive if ever there was a threat in the future. That sanctuary needs to be activated by three individuals embodying the tenets of ancient culture—strength, protection, and higher-self. By aligning with one of those tenets, you were imbued with the skills and predisposition to embody its ideals. Together, you can activate the safeguards around the Master Archive and buy us time while we figure out how to stop the Darkness for good.”

I pursed my lips. “Nope, that does sound pretty dramatic.”

Kaiden made a flourish of vindication with his hands.

“Regardless,” Colren pressed on, “we need you. Sealing the Archive will be your first mission as a team, and it's imperative that you're successful.”

Toran grunted. “No pressure.”

I took a deep breath, my nerves fraying. “Okay, so we have some sort of ancient abilities now. But how does the sealing work? Are there any instructions?”

“No. That is for you to figure out,” Colren replied. “I'm sure it will become clear when you arrive.”

“Yeah... not buying it,” I said. “This all still sounds crazy to me.”

Kaiden laughed. “See, Toran? It's not just us saying so.”

Our eyes locked for a moment, and the apprehension I'd been feeling since I woke up started to melt away. As bizarre as the situation was, others were facing the same set of impossible circumstances. I don't know if it was a byproduct of the extraction procedure or something else, but I felt at ease with Kaiden and Toran. I'd always been one to know within a few seconds of meeting someone if we'd get along or not, and I could tell that my two teammates were my kind of people.

“We can talk more once we reach our destination.” Colren pulled out a communicator from his front pocket and made an entry. “There's no reason for us to linger here.”

A moment later, a woman's voice came over the comm, “Jump in T-minus five minutes.”

“Not again...” Kaiden murmured.

“Get strapped in,” Colren instructed. “I need to get to my pod in Central Command.” He rushed out of the room.

“We’re about to do a spatial jump?” I asked, apprehension pitching my voice. Interstellar travel was common enough between the dozens of Hegemony systems, but I’d never left my home planet. I hadn’t yet wrapped my head around being on a spaceship, let alone the notion of traveling through hyperspace to another system.

“Don’t worry. It’s every bit as disorienting as it sounds,” Kaiden flashed me another grin and jogged toward the hallway door. “The pods are this way.”

Hesitantly, I followed him with Toran close behind.

Kaiden led us down the corridor to one of the interior doors a dozen meters past the previous room. The chamber contained six oval pods arranged around a circular center console. An open transparent cover on each pod exposed an ergonomic couch within.

Without hesitation, Kaiden hurdled into the pod furthest from the door and began securing a harness. “Make sure the straps are tight.”

“Very funny,” Toran growled as he squeezed himself through the opening of a pod to the left of the door.

I jogged around to the pod on Kaiden’s right so I could examine how he had buckled his harness. After making a quick mental note of the configuration, I reclined in my pod and began clipping the belts across myself. “Is all of this really necessary?”

“See what you think after the jump,” Kaiden replied.

Just as I cinched up the last strap, the same announcer came over the comm again. “Jump in T-minus one minute.”

“Good luck!” Kaiden called from next to me as the lids to our pods slid shut.

In the enclosed space, my heartbeat and breathing were almost deafening.

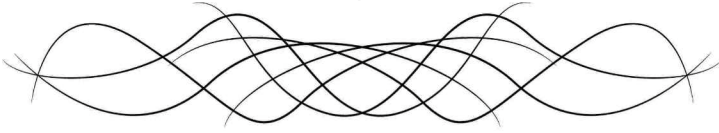
“Jump in T-minus thirty seconds,” the announcer informed through a speaker inside the pod.

A static charge hummed in the pod, and I felt heavier—like I was being sucked against the seat.

At the ten-second mark, the announcer began a final countdown. "... Two... One."

Next thing I knew, my stomach was in my ears and my heart was at my feet. Reality elongated around me, then everything went black.

### 3



“ELLE. ELLE!” A voice roused me from the blackness.

My eyes shot open.

Kaiden was leaning over me, releasing my harness. “You passed out.”

I groaned as I propped myself up on my elbows, realizing I was no longer strapped down. My head ached. “What just...?”

“Congratulations! You just completed your first spatial jump.” Kaiden smiled down at me.

“I felt like I was being turned inside out.”

“Yeah, good times.”

I pressed the heel of my right hand to my temple. “I guess being strapped into the pods is a good idea, after all.”

“I thought your opinion would come around,” Kaiden replied, pushing back from my pod to give me some space.

“You’ll get used to it,” Toran’s voice boomed from across the room. “Come on. We’re being paged.”

Still feeling like my stomach was lodged in my throat, I lurched out of the jump pod. “Where are we now?”

“That’s a very good question,” Kaiden replied as we exited the room. “They haven’t exactly been forthcoming with the logistics about our mission.”

“I feel like I’m in a dream.” The throbbing in my head was beginning to fade, but the physical sensation enforced that what I’d just been through was real.

Kaiden offered a sympathetic smile. “I’m still trying to get over that feeling myself.”

“None of this makes sense,” Toran said. “Colren’s account of why we were chosen doesn’t really explain it.”

I scrunched up my nose. “Yeah, that whole thing about getting an ‘immunity’ from the Darkness? What is the Darkness, anyway?”

“The cloud appeared after an emergency reset where I was,” Kaiden said. “I’d never seen anything like it—freaked everyone out.”

“Yeah, same with me. My friends and I weren’t sure if we should tell anyone.”

“No one else saw it?” he asked. “I thought planets like yours had a crystal in the town square or something.”

“We do, but that wasn’t where it appeared. We were out by one in a canyon.”

“A localized reset, then?”

I nodded. “We’d go up there to play around.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Doing what, rock climbing?”

“We’d jump off a cliff.”

His eyes widened. “I was not expecting you to say that.”

I smiled coyly. “I have an adventurous side.”

“I used to collect rocks!” Toran looked down at his hands and sighed. “There wasn’t a lot to do on Dunlore.”

I awkwardly patted his huge shoulder. “Something tells me we’re going to have plenty of adventure coming up.”

We took the corridor to a nearby lift, passing by two groups of soldiers and a handful of solitary officers who cast us sidelong glances. I suspected that everyone on the ship knew who we were, at least in a general sense, and I found it odd that given our apparent importance we were expected to show ourselves around. Granted, it seemed like Kaiden had been given a proper tour and knew his way to the various locations of note; maybe they considered him our guide.

We entered the lift and rode it up two decks. I barely perceived any movement, unlike the elevators I was used to back home.

Kaiden must have noticed my awed expression, because he looked me over and chuckled. “It’s just a lift, Elle.”

“To you, maybe! I still can’t get over the fact that I’m on a spaceship.”

The door opened, and he smiled. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

We stepped out and took a corridor to the left past a pod room and a weapons vault until it terminated at a door. Kaiden

placed his hand on an adjacent panel. Rather than the door opening, a blue light blinked and a chime sounded.

“What’s with the security?” I asked.

“This is the entry to Central Command,” Kaiden replied. “I suspect they don’t want people barging in right in the middle of a sensitive maneuver.”

“I guess that makes sense. It just struck me as strange after they’ve left us to wander around on our own.”

“They run the ship how they want it run,” Toran said. “You know how boss people can be.”

The door slid open, revealing Colren standing on the other side. “That’s how us boss people are, huh?”

Toran turned bright red. “Sorry, sir, I didn’t mean—”

The corners of Colren’s lips curled up with amusement. “All things considered, that’s an appropriate title. You’re not officially military soldiers, so I’m not your superior officer beyond my role as captain of this vessel.”

I eyed him. “But we also don’t have much of a choice about being here.”

“That was one of the things I wanted to talk with you about,” he replied. “Let’s get settled in the conference room.”

We followed him into the open area beyond the doorway. Central Command appeared to be a cross between an administrative operations center and the starships’ bridges I’d seen depicted in media. I knew the technology existed, but I’d never witnessed it in person. Everyone around me seemed in their element, but I couldn’t help doing numerous double-takes as I studied the room.

The area nearest the entry door was flanked by two crescent-shaped workstations equipped with monitors, a touch-surface desktop, and a number of holographic displays with complex readouts that may as well have been in another language. The four crew members working at the consoles glanced up at us as we passed by. Based on their tempered reactions, it seemed that they must have seen Toran in the past; if anything, my bright fuchsia hair drew more attention. Even as the workstations drew my eye, I was awestruck by the attention to detail in the blue and gray crew members’

uniforms and their effortless use of the complex systems around them. I'd never thought of Erusan as being a backwater world, yet seeing the Hegemony ship, I realized just how much I'd missed out on.

Further into the bridge, a single command chair was surrounded by four additional consoles, all facing toward an expansive viewscreen spanning the curved forward wall. The domed ceiling above was inlaid with a ring of lights, and additional lighting around the baseboard of the perimeter illuminated the space to almost daylight levels. The starboard wall contained a row of a dozen pods like the one I'd used for the jump, though these were arranged vertically.

My eye was drawn to the front viewscreen by the glow of a purple-hued planet below. Despite the strange color, the cloud cover looked similar to my homeworld... except it was in another star system.

I was about to visit another planet.

Excitement welled in my chest despite the confusion and uncertainty swirling in my mind. Though the circumstances were far from ideal, this was the kind of adventure I'd fantasized about for as long as I could remember. I could be scared, or I could embrace it for what it was. This was my chance to prove myself. I didn't want to mess it up.

Colren led us to the left toward a separate conference room with seating for twelve. A transparent wall separated the room from the main bridge. As the commander passed through the entry door, he passed his hand over the wall and it altered to opaque off-white.

"Please, take a seat." He gestured to the near side of the table while walking around to sit in the center across from us.

I grabbed a chair to Kaiden's right while Toran sat to his left.

"So, the mission..." Kaiden said on our behalf.

"Right." Colren folded his hands on the tabletop. "This planet, Crystallis, holds the Master Archive. Only a handful of people in the upper echelon of the Hegemony know its location. It's imperative that this site be protected at any cost."

“And all we have to do is ‘seal it?’” I asked, trying to get myself in the right frame of mind to embrace the bizarre scenario.

He nodded. “Yes, but I suspect that will be more complicated than it sounds. As we understand it, regular people aren’t allowed to access the Archive. We know it’s there, in the sense that we can see how everything around it behaves, but we can’t get to the thing itself.”

Toran tilted his head. “Like dark matter, only... not?”

“The technology behind the crystals predates our civilization by millennia. Though we don’t understand how they operate, exactly, we do know that this world is the hub of their power. What little we have been able to glean from the world has spurred all our scientific advances—from our jump drives to the device that harnessed your hyperdimensional consciousness and the bioprinter that created these new bodies for you. If we have any hope of finding a solution to this Darkness infecting our worlds, the clues will be down there.”

I crossed my arms. “And only we can access that tech, because we’re the only ones who have been modified by it. I’m not sure if that makes sense or if it’s insane.”

“Convenient, if nothing else,” Kaiden responded.

“Sounds like a safeguard to make sure outsiders can’t get too much, too fast. Need to master one development in order to advance enough to get the next,” Toran hypothesized.

Colren inclined his head. “Quite possibly.”

“Okay, say we seal the Archive. Then what?” I asked.

The commander looked each of us in the eyes. “Then we figure out how to fight back.”

“Not to be too self-deprecating here,” Kaiden said, “but are we really the right people to take that on? Three untrained strangers, and you’re pretty much tasking us with saving all of known civilization. I mean, c’mon.”

“Yeah, I just graduated secondary school a month ago,” I interjected. Opportunity or not, the realist in me recognized that I was in way over my head.

“It’s not an ideal scenario, I know,” Colren said. “We won’t force you to do anything, but I’ll lay out the case in as



compelling a manner as I can. As of right now, we don't know what this Darkness is or where it came from. All that we *do* know is that you are the only three people to have encountered it on your worlds and made it out."

I raised my hand, and Colren inclined his head for me to speak. "I still don't understand the technology behind our bodies materializing here on the ship, but I'll ignore that for now. What I really want to know is how you knew to be at our worlds to have us 'download' at that time?"

He nodded and took a slow breath. "We're still getting our bearings, as well. The short version is that we have information regarding the Darkness' advance, and we have been waiting near the impacted worlds with the hope that we might be able to extract a few people."

Kaiden folded his hands on the desktop. "You keep glossing over a lot of details. I've been here for more than a week now, and you still won't explain anything about the Darkness or how you knew our abilities would manifest."

"There's not a simple answer to that besides all of the pieces falling into place," Colren stated.

"Well, we're listening." Kaiden tilted his head.

The Hedgeman representative leaned back in his chair. "Okay, well, for starters, there's more to the Master Archive than we typically discuss on public forums," he began. "We talk about the records being a documentation of what's already happened... but there are also records of events that haven't happened yet."

My heart skipped a beat. "Pardon?"

Next to me, Kaiden froze. "Do you mean...?"

Colren nodded. "We think that at some point there must have been a universal reset."

"Stars..." My stomach clenched. Some people had suggested a reset on that scale might be possible, but I never imagined that it may have already happened. "Is there any way to know for sure?"

"Unlike the interface consoles with the colonies, there aren't dates attached to the Master Archive—at least not using a code we yet understand," Colren continued. "The only reason

we began to suspect the Archive records extend beyond real-time is because we noticed that certain branches of the records have blank spots corresponding with worlds getting consumed by the Darkness, and those blanks continue for some undetermined amount of time before resuming again.”

“So, we beat this thing?” Toran asked.

The commander nodded. “We hope so.”

Kaiden squinted. “Wait, you said that no regular people could go into the Archives, and we’re the first modified people to have a chance of entering. How have you seen any of that?”

“Like I said, it’s not straightforward. We can’t get into the vault, but we can still observe parts of it.”

“How?” Kaiden pressed.

“There are certain... relays, which enable us to access parts of the data contained within the crystals. We only know of four such devices—one of which is on this ship.”

“And that’s how you first got the tech for jump drives and the rest?” I asked.

Colren inclined his head. “That was almost two hundred years ago. The Hegemony uncovered the first device on one of the moons in orbit of the Capital world, and we’ve been following the breadcrumbs ever since. Though use of the crystals dates back to our people’s earliest records and we’ve had the rudimentary control mechanisms we use today, it wasn’t until the discovery of the interface device that we started to understand how the crystals work and where they may have come from.”

I leaned forward. “Which is...?”

“We don’t know,” the commander admitted. “Whoever made them did it a long time ago using tech far more advanced than we can comprehend.”

“I always thought the crystals themselves were natural formations,” I said.

“Yeah, same,” Kaiden murmured.

Toran tilted his head. “Meaning, these new abilities come from some kind of tech rather than magic?”

“It’s not a clear distinction,” Colren replied.

Kaiden smiled. “Whatever makes it possible, I’ll take it.”

“Says Mister Fireball,” Toran ribbed.

“Hey, we all got to choose our skills.” Kaiden shrugged.

Toran folded his arms, causing his biceps to bulge. “I regret nothing.”

“Me either,” I said, but I wasn’t convinced. The idea of having magic-like abilities still called to me, but a lot of that may be due to not having had the chance to test out the new skills I *did* have.

“The question remains, will you help us?” Colren pressed.

I met his gaze. “I will.”

Kaiden nodded after a slight pause. “Yes, I’ll never shy away from a challenge.”

“I’m in,” Toran agreed

“Thank you.” The commander looked genuinely relieved.

“Probably best not to thank us yet,” Kaiden said. “We have no idea how to do what you’re asking.”

Colren nodded. “Willingness to try is the first step.”

“Do we, like, take a shuttle down there, or...?” I prompted.

“Yes, acquire your gear and arm yourselves, then proceed to the hangar,” the commander instructed.

“Is there someone to walk us through that, or—” I started to ask.

“I trust that you don’t require supervision. Kaiden knows where to go to get everything you need. Dismissed.” Colren marched back to the bridge.

“For being the universe’s last, best hope, isn’t it a little weird that he’s turning us loose on the ship to do our own thing?” I whispered. “Shouldn’t we have escorts, or something?”

Kaiden shrugged. “I was a little thrown off by that when I first got here, too. What I’ve realized is that it’s safe here, and all of the control rooms are staffed. If we can’t be trusted to fend for ourselves on the ship, we’d be hopeless planetside.”

“True.”

We filed out of the conference room back through the bridge to the corridor.

When we were alone in the hallway, Toran let out a long breath. “Also, for getting answers, why do I have even more questions now?”

Kaiden chuckled. “The feeling is mutual.”

I shook my head. “This entire thing feels ridiculous. I mean, the tech that they’re talking about here...”

“Saying it’s from ancient aliens?” Toran sighed. “What are they going to tell us next?”

“Honestly, I’m kind of relieved,” Kaiden said. “I’ve always liked the idea of magic—“

“I know we just met, but that was pretty obvious by the fact that you picked the wand,” I interjected.

He rolled his eyes. “Well, yeah. But even liking it, it was strange to think of something like a fireball materializing out of nothing. Though that explanation we got doesn’t begin to explain how it’s possible, it does at least indicate that someone at some time figured out how to make it work. That means there are rules, so it can be controlled.”

I crossed my arms. “I hadn’t thought about it that way.”

“Yeah, I hadn’t before, either,” Kaiden admitted. “I got caught up in how fun it was to have the power at my fingertips, and then I realized that by not understanding it, I might eventually do something really bad. But if there’s science behind it, there’s also a pattern. If I can understand enough of the inner workings, I can maximize the abilities without losing control.”

“I like the idea of you not accidentally exploding a fireball on us,” I said.

Toran nodded. “Yeah, start that studying ASAP... however you’re supposed to go about doing that.”

“Says the person who ruined all of the seating in what was supposed to be our lounge room.” Kaiden raised an eyebrow at Toran.

“At least my practicing didn’t involve lobbing balls of flaming energy at an exterior bulkhead.”

I spread my hands flat at waist-level. “How about we just agree to no more magical attack spells on the spaceship?”

“Fine, so long as other practice doesn’t involve destroying furniture we might not be able to replace,” Kaiden replied.

“Okay,” Toran agreed.

“Great.” I smiled at them. “Now that we have some ground rules, I guess we should get down to that planet and figure out what we’re supposed to do.”

“You’re forgetting something,” Kaiden said.

“What’s that?”

“You.”

I tilted my head, brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Seems like we should establish some guideline for using your abilities, too,” he stated.

“Yeah, well, I don’t actually know what those abilities *are* yet.”

“You’re supposed to have strength and fighting abilities, right?” Toran asked.

I eyed him. “Maybe, but you seem to have the strength thing covered.”

“I think we’re *all* stronger,” Kaiden pointed out. “Toran was doing the chair-bending, but it looks like we’ll also be able to take a beating.”

I crossed my arms. “What other stuff?”

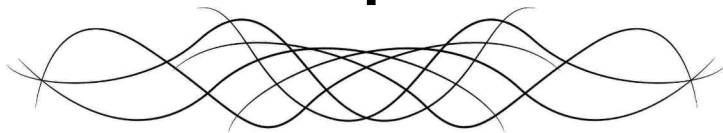
“Move fast, jump, strike, I dunno.” Kaiden shrugged. “The only way to find out is to try.”

“We already agreed no chair-bending, so Elle doesn’t get to, either,” Toran said.

“Fine, we’ll figure out some other strength and agility tests when we get planetside,” the other man agreed. “Really, I didn’t start to figure out what I could do until I played around. The first few things just kind of came to me.”

I grinned. “All right, then, I guess we should gear up.”

## 4



GETTING EQUIPMENT FOR a planetside mission wasn't as straightforward as it sounded in my head.

Following Kaiden's directions, the three of us took a lift down four decks to an area that was presented as 'the place where you get stuff'. Despite that description aligning with our present needs, I was immediately skeptical of us being able to get anything useful when Kaiden led us into an empty room.

"Take a wrong turn?" I asked.

He flashed a knowing smile. "This is it."

I looked around the plain space—approximately five meters square. "What am I missing?"

Toran sighed. "Don't we have enough to worry about without you messing with us?"

"There's nothing in here," I said. "I was hoping for a sword and some stylish armor, or something."

"Step onto the scanner," a female synthesized voice stated over hidden speakers.

I jumped with surprise as a ring of white lights a meter in diameter appeared in the center of the floor.

"Step into the scanner for equipment fitting," the voice said.

"Huh." Toran nodded. "I stand corrected."

"Colren mentioned the 3D printer when I first got here, but I haven't tried it out yet myself," Kaiden explained. "I guess it'll scan us and adapt any of its built-in patterns to our size."

Toran glared at him—a terrifying look from someone of his proportions. "You mean I could have had a shirt this whole time?"

Kaiden took a step backward. "I kind of thought you didn't want one."

"Nah, man, it's *cold*! The jumpsuit just didn't fit well."

I rolled my eyes. “Let’s note this as an example of why open communication is important.”

“My, you’re a sage advisor for someone your age,” Kaiden commented with a smirk.

“Hah!” I laughed. “No, my mom’s a therapist. It rubs off.”

He smiled. “I know how that goes... the moment you realize you’re starting to become your parents.”

“Oh, stars, don’t remind me,” Toran moaned. “Just wait until you get a little older and see it really start to come out.”

I looked him over, realizing that it was impossible to get an accurate reading of his age—not to mention the fact that all of us were in different bodies than the ones we were born into. “How old are you?” I asked.

“Forty-two next month,” Toran replied.

Kaiden tilted his head. “Really? I guess the transformation took off a few years.”

Toran nodded. “I was also skinny and thirty centimeters shorter, so there’s that.” He laughed.

“And, Elle, you said you just graduated secondary school, right? So, you’re... eighteen?” Kaiden asked.

I nodded. “A teenager with no life experience—I know, *exactly* who you want on the team tasked with saving the universe.”

“Stars, I’m only twenty-two and I won’t graduate from the Academy for another semester,” Kaiden revealed. “Not exactly the image of experience over here, either.”

“What were you studying?” I asked.

“Agriculture.” He laughed. “How’s that for useful in what we’re doing?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t have guessed that.”

He shrugged. “My family hauled grain for a living, so I decided I’d rather be on the production end and get to stay put.”

“I understand the appeal,” Toran replied. “You traveled a lot as a kid?”

Kaiden nodded. “I was on Falstan II for an internship when all this went down, but I spent most of my childhood on a freighter.”

My eyes widened. “Wow, that’s...” I couldn’t help but feel envious. The notion of being mobile all the time and getting to live in space was something I’d dreamed about since I was a kid.

He smiled. “Whatever you’re thinking, it wasn’t. A lot of crowded living quarters, bland food, and not nearly as dramatic a view as you’d imagine.”

Annoyance over his nonchalantness lodged in my chest, but I let his words sink in for a few moments. He was being sincere, and I shouldn’t fault him for that. Maybe traveling on a freighter *wasn’t* everything I’d dreamed about. “I guess living in a small town isn’t all bad,” I said after a pause. “Having an orchard in the backyard is nice.”

Kaiden got a wistful look in his eyes. “There were times I would have done anything to have that.”

“Same with me getting to travel around in space. I always wanted to go to Tactical School.”

“Ah, the age-old desire to want what you don’t have,” Toran chimed in.

I swirled a length of my fuchsia hair around my index finger while looking over Toran’s exaggerated physique. “I guess we’re kind of walking personifications of that now, aren’t we?”

Kaiden held up his hands as electricity crackled between his fingertips. “I have no complaints about the upgrades.”

“What about you, Toran?” I questioned the other man. “Did you have a career and family before you were pulled here?”

He took a deep breath and looked down. “Yes, a wife and five-year-old daughter. I’ve been trying not to think about where they are right now.”

A sharp pang struck my heart as emotion flitted across his face. I was worried about my own family, but they weren’t reliant on me to keep them safe in a way a child needed parents. Toran couldn’t do anything more to help his wife and daughter if he was frozen in suspended animation with them, but it was clear from his expression that he felt responsible for them all the same.



“They’ll be fine,” I tried to assure him.

“I was an engineer by trade, so I’m not one to sugarcoat facts,” he replied. “I know we’re in deep here. We can’t measure what we don’t know, and I haven’t heard anything about our enemy that tells me what we’re up against. Whatever happens, I’ll be fighting for the well-being of my family. They’re my universe.”

I swallowed hard, wishing I had a more tangible person or thing to fight for. I wanted my world back—my family, my friends, my last summer of being carefree. But, even after defeating the Darkness, I *still* wouldn’t have those things; I’d be leaving home. However, just because my life would change regardless, that didn’t mean others’ lives were in transition. People like Toran deserved to be reunited with their loved ones, and if I could help make that happen, I needed to do everything I could to make it a reality. After all, I’d wanted to be a Ranger. Now that my body was healed, all I had to do was prove I was ready to put others before myself.

“We’ll get them back, Toran,” I said, more confident this time.

He softened, cracking a smile. “I don’t think they’ll recognize me.”

I smiled back. “There’s more to a person than how they look.”

“That’s assuming these new bodies are permanent,” Kaiden pointed out.

“You also half your size back home?” I ribbed.

He smirked. “No, aside from the new magic, this is pretty much me. And you?”

I pointed at my fuchsia hair. “Not my natural shade.”

Kaiden laughed. “Right.”

“Aside from that, though,” I looked myself over, “pretty close.”

But I did *feel* different, even if my appearance only had minor cosmetic changes. I was energized in the way I always was right after a cliff jump—filled with a sense that I could tackle any challenge. My injury hadn’t held me back from trying most things, but now that it wasn’t pestering the back

of my mind, it was like a weight had been lifted that I hadn't even realized was there.

I didn't want to admit it to the others, but I was actually excited to face off against an unknown enemy and to have the chance to use abilities that normally were fanciful dreams. I'd been given the opportunity to be a new version of myself unburdened by my past. It would be a genuine adventure.

"Whoever we were before, we have strangers counting on us now," Kaiden said, echoing my private thoughts.

"I'll give it my all," I said.

"Me too," Toran agreed.

Kaiden nodded. "Same. I don't know what that commitment means exactly, but the three of us are in this together."

I was silent for several seconds. "We're all kinda screwed, aren't we?"

"Probably, but *magic*." Kaiden wagged his fingers.

"I can't wait to get back home and loom over the guys who made fun of me in Physical Ed at school back in the day," Toran said.

"Just a touch petty," I commented.

Kaiden cast me a sidelong glance. "Don't pretend you're not thinking of all the ways you could show off now."

My thoughts flashed to Adrienne and her aerial acrobatics—such a frivolous activity under present circumstances, but more than a little part of me wanted to see how much I could out-manuever her now. "Okay, maybe there are a few things I'd do myself. Not that I even rightly know what I *can* do now."

"Right! The equipment, and the mission." Kaiden pointed at the illuminated ring on the floor.

The computer had remained silent during our conversation, and I'd gotten so wrapped up in talking with my new associates that I'd almost forgotten why we had entered the room in the first place.

"Who goes first?" I asked.

"Congratulations for volunteering. Go on ahead." Kaiden flourished his hand.

I eyed the illuminated ring. “Any idea how this thing works?”

“Haven’t a clue,” Kaiden replied. “But it’s unlikely to vaporize you.”

“That makes me feel *way* better, thanks.”

“Only way to test out the interface is to do it,” Toran said. “We’ll be right here.”

Knowing now he was a parent back home, I could hear the measured patience and assurance in his tone. That little girl of his had a good dad, even if she wasn’t old enough to know it yet.

“All right,” I agreed, stepping into the ring.

The moment I was stationary inside, a pleasant chime sounded and a downlight bathed me in a white glow. A moment later, a holographic projection popped up at torso height, wrapping one hundred eighty degrees around me. The screen had multiple menu items, ranging from weapons to armor and other accessories.

“Welcome. Do you have a saved loadout profile?” the computer voice asked.

“No,” I replied.

“Commencing new configuration.”

A ring dropped down from a hidden recess in the ceiling, waving a light over me as it descended to the floor. It repeated the activity on the way up. When it returned to the ceiling, the holographic image around me changed to have a fine wireframe wrapping my body. I lifted one arm a few centimeters and found the wireframe moved with me.

“Make item selection,” the computer prompted.

For lack of any other instruction, I reached out to interact with the holographic menu, first selecting the ‘Armor’ icon, since that seemed like the logical place to start; I figured I’d build up from there.

The icons for the other elements shifted upward and shrunk into a mini-ring while the primary menu area altered to display various submenus for armor. Ranging from street clothes to powered suits, it looked like I could pretty much have anything imaginable.

“Powered armor, guys?” I glanced over my shoulder at my two companions.

Kaiden shrugged. “Might be a little overkill, but may as well be prepared for anything.”

I swiped my hand over the powered armor submenu.

The screen flashed red, accompanied by a harsh tone. “Insufficient privileges. Prerequisite training required,” the computer stated.

I frowned. “Guess that’s a no-go.”

“Then why give the option in the first place?” Kaiden sighed.

Toran, who I was quickly discovering was the more pragmatic of the two, stroked his chin pensively. “I wonder what kind of training is required to qualify?”

“What are the prerequisites?” I asked the computer on his behalf.

“Melee weapon proficiency, light armor proficiency, medium armor proficiency, fifty recorded combat hours—”

“Stop.” I held up my hand. “Okay, yeah, no powered armor for us.”

“Yet,” Kaiden said.

“Fifty hours of combat? Not happening anytime soon,” I pointed out.

He nodded. “Maybe we’ll get there eventually.”

That was kind of crazy to think about, but as shocking as the concept was, part of me was drawn to the idea. Essentially, it was beginning to look like I’d stumbled into being a Ranger without having to go through Tactical School.

I turned back to the holographic display, which had returned to its normal pale blue color. “Only display items that match my current clearance,” I requested.

The screen reconfigured to show one-quarter of the previous options. At first glance, it looked like anything super fancy was out.

I flipped through the items, bringing up a preview image of each. “Street clothes, an awful onesie, hazsuits.” I shook my head. “Once you see powered armor, it all seems kind of lame.”

“Go back to those street clothes,” Kaiden suggested. “I think I saw a note about ballistic ratings.”

“Oh, really?” I scrolled back. Sure enough, the fabric was reinforced with ballistic-grade fibers to deflect projectiles, and a secondary treatment was designed to diffuse energy weapons fire or, presumably, magical attacks. “Okay, that’s more intriguing than I initially thought,” I admitted.

I narrowed the available designs to cuts most suited for a female figure. Though most of the outfits struck me as rather plain and boring, one coat jumped out at me. It was ankle-length, which would offer maximum protection, and a belt would allow it to be sealed in the front when needed. The garment came in a variety of colors, and I was initially drawn to the red. However, when I thought through the potential need to be stealthy while we were on our mission, I decided that plain black was the smarter option.

“I think I can work with this.” I selected the coat, and the wireframe around me morphed to show the garment.

“Stylish,” Kaiden commented.

“It suits you,” Toran agreed.

I shrugged, and the coat moved with me. “Time to accessorize, I guess.”

Next, I browsed through pants and selected a pair of black leggings to fit over my white base layer. I paired that with a pair of black knee-high combat boots with a purple accent trim that complemented my hair—no need to compromise on style while saving the universe—and a tactical belt from the same design group.

“That should cover it.” I looked over my holographic outfit, pleased with how it had come together.

“Weapon,” Kaiden prompted.

“Am I qualified to use anything?” I asked.

In response, the holographic display shifted to the weapons menu, which consisted of various swords and clubs. “No projectiles, then,” I said. “Are the disciplines we picked literal, or...?”

“I think the icons for our disciplines are more symbolic,” Kaiden said. “I draw power from my pendant, and a wand

sounds really impractical. I'm thinking maybe a staff or something like that for myself."

The clubs struck me as a little too primitive, which left the bladed options. I looked over the menu. "Maybe a sabre? That's in the sword family."

Kaiden shrugged. "Get whatever you feel comfortable with. I doubt we'll need anything, anyway. I mean, we're just sealing the Archive, right?"

"Yeah, good point." I selected a sabre model with an electrified edge to enhance the sharpened metal. A representation of the weapon appeared in my hand and a scabbard for it at my waist. I waved the blade around. "This seems like it would be fun to use."

"Careful where you swing that when you get the real thing," Toran said with a smile.

"Confirm selections?" the computer prompted.

"Can you think of anything else I might need for now?" I asked my companions.

"Shirt?" Toran questioned.

"I don't know, I kind of like the look of the white suit under the black coat," I replied.

"Yeah, it works." Kaiden waved his hand. "Go for it."

"Confirm," I told the computer.

"Selection acknowledged. Processing." The main downlight in the ceiling and the lighted ring on the floor cut out. A moment later, a whirring sound started in the back wall of the room.

I stepped back toward the two men. "What's it doing?"

"Printing out the custom items, I imagine," Toran said.

"Step onto the scanner," the computer prompted.

"I guess we can get going on someone else while the first set prints," Kaiden said. "Go ahead, Toran."

The large man shook his head. "I don't believe that system is going to have many options for me. I'll watch over your shoulder while you go."

"All right." Kaiden stepped onto the platform and began going through the selection process.

After a few different configurations, Kaiden settled on an outfit consisting of a blue long-sleeve shirt, black pants, boots, and a black hooded cloak.

“A cloak? Really?” I razzed.

His sky-blue eyes seemed especially vibrant when contrast against the dark holographic hood framing his face. “You’re envious, I can tell.”

“It does offer better protection than your coat, Elle, with the hood up,” Toran pointed out.

“Plus,” Kaiden used one hand to draw the holographic representation of the cloak around his front, “stylish.”

I rolled my eyes. “I really don’t believe you were an agriculture major. You’re way too dramatic.”

“Never said I wasn’t in theater.”

“Now *that* I would believe.”

A chime resonated through the chamber as the back wall slid open. My new garments were arranged on a rack, ready to wear.

I smiled. “That’s service.”

“Try it on,” Kaiden encouraged.

I stepped around the scanner in the center of the room to access the rack. The pants fit well over the white suit I’d awoken in, and I slid on the boots and looped the tactical belt through the top of the pants. The belted coat fit almost like a cloak with sleeves, which seemed better suited for precise movements.

Finally, there was the sabre. I lifted it from its rack and slid it in its scabbard at my hip.

“I apologize in advance if I accidentally slice off one of your arms.” I grinned at the two men while I walked back across the room.

“I can only hope sword fighting abilities come to you as naturally as magic spells did to Kaiden,” Toran replied while Kaiden locked in his own selections.

“Well, if nothing else, the ensemble looks good,” Kaiden commented while his gaze passed over me, lingering more than when we first met. “You’ve got a little...” He gently

extracted some of my hair that was tucked inside my coat's collar and released it to fall down my back.

I tugged on some of the fuchsia hair hanging in front of me. "Thanks. It's a little longer than I'm used to."

"I like it." He met my gaze.

"Well," Toran cleared his throat, "time to get geared up myself." He lumbered into the center of the room.

Kaiden took a step back from me. "Yeah, mine should be ready any minute."

I crossed my arms and leaned against the wall while I waited for them to finish. While there was no denying Kaiden was my type, if I had to declare one, this was neither the time nor place to consider getting involved—or even to think about considering a possibility of something.

At least, not *yet*.

I caught myself. Things could get awkward and weird way too fast if I didn't divert from that line of thinking straight away. I wasn't in school anymore. I had more sense than that.

Setting aside the uninvited thoughts, I watched Toran try out clothing and armor options. He eventually settled on a new base layer and a set of lightweight, black scale armor that would accommodate his large frame, paired with a matching helmet and boots.

"If we ever have a chance to visit a city dressed like this, there is zero chance of anyone messing with us," I joked.

Toran confirmed his final selections then turned toward me. "I feel like we need a catchy team name."

"As cheesy as it sounds, I'm inclined to agree," Kaiden said.

"Yeah, I mean, if they want us to save the day, they better know who to thank," I agreed.

I evaluated our chosen outfits. "We're all wearing black. So, maybe something like 'Black Knights'?"

Kaiden scrunched up his nose. "The whole 'knights' thing might be a bit much."

"And 'black' feels a little... ominous," Toran said.

I ran through some synonyms in my head. "Something with 'defenders', maybe?"



“That’s not bad. Or ‘protectors’ could work. How about a play on ‘Space’ or ‘Void?’” Kaiden suggested.

“Or the Darkness,” I added.

Toran thought for a moment. “How about ‘Dark Protectors?’”

I shook my head. “That sounds like we’re protecting the Darkness.”

“Then, maybe ‘Dark Sentinels?’” Toran suggested.

Kaiden lit up. “Yes.”

I rolled the term around in my mind and mouthed it. It had a good ring to it, and the double meaning was a perfect bonus.

“That will do very nicely.”



*This is the end of the preview*

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

A.K. (Amy) DuBoff has always loved science fiction in all its forms—books, movies, shows and games. If it involves outer space, even better! Now a full-time author, Amy can frequently be found traveling the world. When she's not writing, she enjoys wine tasting, binge-watching TV series, and playing epic strategy board games.

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