

EMMANUEL M  
ARRIAGA

A movie poster for the film 'Foundra'. The scene is set in a futuristic, high-tech environment. In the center, a woman with long white hair, wearing a blue and silver armored suit with a dark blue cape, stands prominently. She is surrounded by other characters, including a man in a blue suit, a woman in a red dress, and several other figures in various outfits. The background is a vast, dark space filled with a large, complex structure resembling a giant robot or a massive ship, with various smaller spacecraft and debris floating around. A bright, glowing light source emanates from behind the central group, creating a dramatic effect. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, purples, and silvers, with a vibrant pink and purple energy trail swirling across the bottom of the frame.

FOUNDRA

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Emmanuel M Arriaga

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# PROLOGUE

*419879 BA (~420,000 years Before Ascension)*

The air warps as the Fallen Commander—an Eshgren of old called Sagren—materializes in the dimly lit metallic corridor, a shock wave of energy shaking the immediate area. The Eshgren surveys its surroundings, while throughout its hulking silver frame purple streaks flicker with unnatural energy. Sizing up the foreign structure from within, the Fallen Commander muses at the resilience of the insects still holding on to the last remnants of this dying world—a world that the Eshgren had wiped bare of all life and claimed as its own.

Its armies had been ruthless and thorough, no prisoners taken, no mercy shown. After the Eshgrens' conquest, they had moved on, their march of destruction continuing to other worlds still ripe with Havin life in the “normal” plane. But here, on this barren world, stands a structure that is not supposed to exist. Its mere presence is an insult to the Fallen Commander, an act of defiance by pitiful insects that this Eshgren decides to eradicate personally. Sagren's eyes rise at the corners, the expression indicating a smile. It will enjoy ripping apart those responsible with its bare hands, a pleasure rarely indulged in but soon to be relished. Reaching out with its mind, Sagren detects the faint

signs of life deep within the heart of the hastily constructed structure.

Clenching its massive fist, Sagren distorts the air around itself. The scene shifts from a metallic corridor to an elaborate chamber. Resolute glares greet Sagren. A host of people from all walks of life stand before it, each draped in long red robes. Forty-nine people stare at the monster that had destroyed their home; hateful gazes lock on to the being of horror that killed their families and friends and left them without a world to call their own. If the Eshgren had a heart, it would have felt their icy daggers stabbing at its core, but such was not the case.

Tilting its head to the side, the Fallen Commander regards the robed figures curiously.

*What is this?* the being broadcasts telepathically. Its words are powerful, painful. Not a soul moves. No words are uttered, each face a mask of anger and loathing. Reaching out again with its mind, Sagren invades their thoughts to rip from them the answers it seeks.

“NOW!” comes a shout from within their ranks.

Immediately the room comes alive, the Havins’ last desperate hope to end the war now unleashed. Black energy ripples around the edges of the room, a bubble of pure power forms around them. Their trap sprung, the Fallen Commander senses the forceful swirling of energy. Its eyes narrow. One by one, each martyr drops to the ground, their life force ripped from their bodies to fuel the impossible weapon.

With a telepathic roar, Sagren clenches its fist to escape from the rapidly closing bubble of dark energy, but its weaving of power is disrupted. The weapon severs the being’s connection to the Enesmic Plane. Staring at its closed fist, still locked on the same plane, panic overtakes the Eshgren. Its eyes go to the last standing sacrifice. A young woman stares back at the Fallen Commander, a smile on her face, as she feels the last vestiges of her life pulled from her body. Accepting her death as life for the last of her species, she collapses to the floor while the Eshgren lets out another roar, the darkness enveloping it.

# CHAPTER 1

*80121 FA (~80,000 years after Founders Ascension)*

Silence blankets the small neighborhood; the streets empty on the lackluster fringe world near the borders of Alliance space. The late afternoon sun provides just enough darkness for half of the eight-man team to make their move, with Unbreakable, Lifetime, Lancer and Nexus holding their respective positions outside as backup. Not a sound is heard as the quartet slides open the metallic door of the small house on the corner of the quiet block. One by one they converge into the dark abode, shades closed and lights out. The smell of death lingers in the air. With weapons drawn, four forms methodically fan out and sweep the room. Paragon, a young-looking man with a mane of white hair, takes point.

Directly to his right moves a powerful giant, Tempest, in silver armor. The massive frame is surprisingly quiet, not a sound made. To his left is Phoenix, a young woman with deep brown hair, orange highlights caught in the flicker of sunlight peeking in through the window. Following up the rear is Banshee, a felinesque woman covered in mixed black-and-white fur, her yellow eyes glowing in the darkness.

The brown-haired woman throws up her hand. The team halts, eyes quickly



scanning the room. She crouches down, her head slowly shaking.

Mutilated corpses of a mother, father and their small child lay broken and in pieces, their blood and gore covering the floor and furniture. Unfazed by the scene, the young woman slowly stands with a glance to her leader, the white-haired man nods. They press forward. With a thought through the mobi communicators tucked in their collars, the words *Room clear!* flash across the microdisplays etched into their eyes. Moving forward, they approach a broad staircase. The silver giant takes point, the group moving as one up the steps.

Fanning out slightly at the top, a female broadcasts into their ears, Nexus guiding their every step.

“Second room on your left, heat signature confirmed.”

Locking on to their target, the team tightens formation. They fall back behind the armored giant. Raising his massive shield equal in height to the giant himself, Tempest proceeds with caution toward the closed door. Without warning, the room explodes as flames burst at them. The giant slams down his shield, an energy barrier created to protect them from the intense heat.

A crazed laugh echoes throughout the house as the flames die down, the silver giant peering through the smoke at the source.

“So glad you could join us!” A spindly man in ragged clothing stares back at Tempest. “Although I guess...it isn’t so much *us* as it is just me now.” He presents a twisted smile.

Tempest charges, his massive armor covering the distance in the blink of an eye.

“Manners!” the spindly man yells. He throws himself backward, a quick motion from his hands causing an invisible force to pull down the ceiling, roof and all its contents into the giant’s path. Turning, the maniac leaps out the shattered bedroom window, not a second thought given to the two-story drop below.

Scrambling to pursue their target, their primary route blocked off by the impressive display of Cihphistic power, the team explodes into motion.

“I’ve got him,” comes another broadcast over their mobs.

“Lancer, fall back,” their white-haired leader counters. “I repeat, fall back.”



“Paragon, I’ve got this.”

“Fall back! That’s an order!”

Picking up the pace, the foursome race down the steps, flying out the front door and around the side of the house. The area trembles at the terrible mass of swirling Enesmic energy, clear signs of powerful Cihphistic weaving at work. The air echoes with the sounds of metal twisting and the crunch of bones and an inhuman-sounding yell of pain-filled horror. The sudden terrifying silence shattered by a laugh of sickening satisfaction.

“Oh, no...” comes a whisper of surprised shock in their ears. The hearts of every team member skip a beat.

The seasoned warriors approach the backyard. Two more members—Unbreakable and Nexus—join them en route, every mind trying to process what just happened. Sounds of heavy rifle fire resound throughout the area, as shot after shot rings out, the gunfire frantic. A powerful wave of dread assails everyone.

Nexus shouts over her mobi, “What’s going on?” while racing to see for herself.

Then stops in her tracks.

The nanoplexi—a highly durable, composite metal—of Lancer’s shining power armor glints in the afternoon sun, now a tangled mass of technology and gore. Mangled flesh greets them as they round the corner, Paragon and the others charging ahead as Nexus struggles to breathe, the sight too much. Emotions well up inside her. She stares at the clump of nanoplexi, now a bloody tomb. The contents of her stomach rise in her throat and seek freedom on the ground.

Crazed eyes stare at her, the emaciated monster drawing power from her despair in that ultimate moment of weakness. He imagines slowly ripping her apart, magnifying her torment to encompass both the mental and the physical. Yes, he decides. He will kill her too.

A glint out of the corner of his eye is the only warning of an incoming attack. Paragon comes in with his blade, a look of fury etched across the face of the silver-eyed angel of death. The murderer dodges the fatal blow,

Paragon's attack just missing his throat as they dance.

The spindly man remains out of Paragon's reach, as his Cihphistic powers enhance his movements. Spinning, Paragon draws first blood as he reverses momentum and defies physics, his impossible attacks fueled by his own Cihphistic weaving. First blood is followed by second and then third. As Paragon gains ground, the crazed killer no longer smiles, struggling to hold back the living weapon.

In an act of desperation, the monster triggers the detonation of a powerful explosive in the small defiled home. The force from the blast catches Paragon off guard, giving the killer his chance to flee. With a clench of his fist, the spindly man warps the air around him, his eyes lingering on Nexus with an unquenched hunger before disappearing completely from view.

Paragon curses. He glances back to the rest of his team, Tempest frantically tearing through the clump of nanoplexi that used to be a person. Shaking his head, Paragon looks over at Nexus, unmoving on the ground. All strength ripped from her. She stares through half-closed eyes at Tempest digging for a corpse, her eyes closing as the giant collapses to his knees in defeat when he finds one. *Lancer*.



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## *Founders Log: The Trials of Leadership*

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*Nature and technology, the constant balance. What marvels come to exist by their beautiful fusion, wonders seen even now in our shining capital? These marvels dot our great cities as purification parks and sun yards, even our vast oceanic cities where people can spend their entire lives without ever seeing the sky. As far as we've come, how inept we are truly when compared to other species throughout the Alliance. It's amazing how the Uri have been able to understand and adapt the influx of technology in their forest world, the great motherworld Peshkana. Nature and technology so perfectly intertwined, as if it were always meant to be. It's amazing how long we struggled with these concepts, the Uri broadening our understanding. To think that they have only been a part of our empire for a short time, or has it been longer? The years are beginning to blur together. I am cursed, or, rather, I am immortal. On my day of birth over eighty thousand years ago, never in my wildest of imaginations would I have dreamed up the life I have lived. Never would I have wished this...torment, on anyone. People envy immortality, but that is only because they do not understand. They have never watched all those they love grow old and die, as the immortal one remains the same. That is true torment. I remember when Huza, this shining capital of our glorious empire was nothing but a dream. I remember when we shared this world with the Tuzen, our brothers and sisters by blood, nothing but prejudice dividing us. I remember*

*the bloody war that drove them from their home and out into the great void, alone and without hope. I remember much, but there is even more that I wish to forget. I wish I could pluck them from my memory and allow them to fade into the annals of eternity. I am a Founder, yes...that is what they call us. A Founder of the Huzien Empire, an empire forged by the blood and sweat of three who have endured through history. Founder Lanrete, a name that was not given to me by birth, but that does not matter. No one remembers me as Lunam Agaira; he died when Lanrete was born. Died and then buried, surrounded by the graves of those he loved. Death. I have fed that foul beast a feast, and yet it still hungers. I have killed many. My hands are covered in blood that will not wash out, blood that will stain them for as long as I draw breath. I have killed enemies and friends, ending the lives of mortals and immortals alike. I have ordered the deaths of billions, the mighty Huzien Military crushing worlds that dared to defy ours... to lust for that which was theirs by all rights. I look back on my actions, on the actions that have shaped our glorious empire, and I see shame. I no longer lead the great Huzien Military. Not by any edict or judgment but because it no longer needs one such as me. In truth, the Huzien Empire no longer needs its Founders, but we remain, until we are freed from this curse. Some say I purposefully place myself in harm's way now, willingly provoking the hungry beast. They may be right. I have convinced others to join in my foolishness, taunting death as if a wayward child. These people, these remarkable people, stolen from this galaxy in a true act of my selfishness. Death, striking with its powerful maul. When they die, it pains me the most, because I know, without a doubt, that, because of me, they exist no more. How many allies will I watch die as I remain? When will death take its ultimate prize?*

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—Lanrete

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# CHAPTER 2

Lanrete stares out the window near the back of Ecnics's office, the immaculately decorated room situated within the grounds of the Huzien Ministry of Science. A place affectionately referred to as the MinSci. Unique, dark gray marks litter the sides of his face. Starting from his temples and continuing down his neck, the *esha* marks are visual signifiers of his Huzien bloodline. Lanrete has come all the way from the region of space known as the outer rim, a disastrous trip that resulted in the burial of his chief engineer two days ago on the Huzien capital world of Thae.

"I'm glad you agreed to come. I'm sorry for the timing," the voice comes from off to his side.

Lanrete momentarily glances toward the source, Founder Ecnics meeting his gaze briefly.

"Zun wasn't happy when I told her about this meeting."

"I can imagine. Please give my condolences to your team." Ecnics's tone is sincere.

"So where's this prodigy?" Lanrete's silver-hued gaze is focused out a large window. The panel stretches from the floor all the way to the ceiling, taking up the entire back wall.

"He's on his way. Did you review his profile?"

"Yeah, an impressive résumé for a kid barely old enough to live on his own."

“The *kid* is named Neven Kenk, and he’s a brilliant engineer, some say a genius...” Ecnics counters. His melodic voice fills the room. “And let me be very clear. He is not a permanent replacement for you.” Ecnics flashes a glance at Lanrete before returning to sort through the daily status reports generated by each MinSci division.

Lanrete lets out an annoyed sigh. “You do realize that I just buried the man he’s replacing, right?”

“I’m sure you’ll do your best to keep him alive.”

“Yeah, because that always works out so well,” Lanrete laughs.

The eclectic Founder stops and turns his large chair to face Lanrete, the action controlled electronically with a thought to his mobi.

“I get it. I really do, but he needs the experience, and I don’t trust him anywhere else except with you.”

“So you expect me to babysit him?” Lanrete turns to face Ecnics, his formal blue military cape draping his shoulder.

“I expect you to do your best to keep him alive,” Ecnics counters. The immortals—the men ageless but not invincible—lock gazes.

“Is that some kind of order?” Lanrete raises an eyebrow.

A moment of silence passes between the two Founders. Ecnics smiles, raising his hands in a submissive gesture.

“Of course not!” Ecnics gets up and moves to stand beside Lanrete, who watches him briefly before turning his attention back toward the courtyard. Ecnics takes in the beautiful sight of the MinSci campus, Thae’s white supergiant star bathing the buildings in a soft glow. The intricate designs of every structure are a testament to the architectural prowess of the MinSci’s brilliant engineers.

“Please, Lan, I need him to see the galaxy, to embrace a side of himself that he hasn’t discovered yet.”

“When did my team become a training ground for your future *Feshra*?”

Ecnics turns his head to the side, carefully observing the Huzien warrior. He resumes his gaze of the campus. “You are a great mentor for those willing to learn.”

“Ah, so you wish for me to teach him to kill?” Lanrete queries, a hint of skepticism in his voice.

“I wish...for you to teach him the hard truths of a galaxy that the hundreds of billions of people in our empire are shielded from every day,” Ecnics replies.

Lanrete takes in a deep breath, releasing it slowly. His eyes flicker to the large crowds of people walking in every direction outside the MinSci building, hundreds of individuals rushing to their labs and stations preparing for a new day of work. The primary courtyard is awe-inspiring; it encompasses the area all around the diamond-shaped administrative building at the heart of the MinSci campus.

“I’m always impressed by what this place has become.” Lanrete continues to observe the scientists and engineers from all walks of life.

“No longer the handful of volunteers working with nothing but a dream.” A sad smile crosses Ecnics face.

Lanrete glances at Ecnics, the other Founder staring out of the window with his eyes glazed over.

“Are you proud of your creation?” Lanrete turns to face Ecnics.

He halfheartedly looks over at Lanrete. Their gazes lock for a moment, time flittering across his pupils in the form of memories. Breaking eye contact, Ecnics stares back down into the courtyard.

“Nothing is ever as we originally dream, now is it?” Ecnics eyes still lost in the past.

“No,” Lanrete reluctantly agrees.

Ecnics folds his arms behind his back. He catches sight of a young human breaking off from the current of people washing through the courtyard.

“Jade eyes...”

“A life filled with wonder and great sorrow,” Lanrete finishes the old Huzien saying. He catches sight of the boy, his jet-black hair a blur, as he hurriedly makes his way toward the entrance of the building.

“Please, Lan...” Ecnics begs, after a moment of silence between the immortals.

“Fine.”



Ecnics unfolds his arms and returns to his desk to quickly finish sorting through the morning reports. The momentary silence is broken by the chirp of Ecnics's mobi. He accepts the call with a thought, pushing it through to the holographic grid matrix, or hologrid, built into his office. A beautiful young Huzien woman materializes next to his desk, the reproduction so perfect that it's hard to believe she's actually on the ground floor of the building.

"Sorry to disturb you, Founder, but Neven Kenk has arrived, as you requested."

"Send him in, Trinity."

"Right away, Founder." Giving a slight bow, she vanishes, the call ending.

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*Nanoplexi glints in the afternoon sun, Yuvan's shining power armor now a tangled mess of technology and gore.*

Zun Shan wakes suddenly, sweat-stained sheets the proof of her string of restless nights. The golden undertones in her tanned skin glisten in the starlight, large windows permitting the luminous rays entry into her quarters aboard the starship *Foundra Ascension*. Every night since that horrible day is the same dream, images of the death of Lancer—Yuvan Nolli—burned forever in her mind. Sitting up, she rests her head in her arms for a long moment. Pulling herself out of bed, she cringes at the smell. Zun sends a thought to her pin-size mobi resting on the nightstand. A nearby helper drone springs to life. Within seconds the sheets are pulled from the bed by the hovering drone and new ones quickly laid down. Rubbing her hazelnut-brown almond-shaped eyes, Zun slowly meanders to the bathroom of her expansive quarters. Stepping into the Vencom rinse chamber—the VRC—the soothing system refreshes her body and removes the traces of the past few days.

The short experience over, Zun's walks from the bathroom completely dry. She leans up against her large window with a view of outer space, her nude form resting against the cool glass. She stares at her bed, the sheets empty. She imagines Yuvan staring back at her, his face calm and relaxed as he takes in the sight of her body. She tries to remember his arms wrapping around her, his

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embrace strong yet gentle. Those images are replaced by a projection of him above his coffin, his body too mangled to display. Struggling back tears, she shakes her head and plunges into her bed, wishing for it to just swallow her up. Powerful sobs rack her body, slowly pulling her back to sleep.

# CHAPTER 3

Neven sits, staring at the rolling waterfall showcased in the elaborate reception area, its complex design taking up a large portion of the room. He had always dreamed of being summoned to this building, its sole purpose serving as Ecnics’s administrative control center for the MinSci. Neven isn’t sure why he has been summoned, but his mind races with the possibilities. His dreams play out in the pooling waters of the waterfall. The soothing sounds lull his eyes to close.

The tap of heels on the checkered granite floor jolt him awake. He looks opposite the waterfall to see an auburn-haired Huzien girl, her attractive form walking toward him in stilettos. The sight of her makes him sit up straight and try his best to look professional. His eyes linger on her body for a little too long. Neven notices her polite smile shift to a frown.

She comes to a stop a few feet away from him and extends a slight bow. She tries her best to hide her sudden dislike of him.

“Founder Ecnics is ready to see you now. Please follow me.” Triny waits patiently for him to get up and bow in kind, before turning away and heading toward a large double sliding glass door. Inlaid in the smooth glass is an impressive slide show of technological creations by the MinSci. The two pass through the doors, as Neven tries to follow Triny without staring at her butt. He chided himself for his wandering eyes, the stern

voice of his mother echoing in his mind. He lets out a sigh.

Seeking to distract his thoughts, he allows his mind to wander back to the purpose of his meeting with Founder Ecnics, truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Lost in his mental concentration, Neven trips, as he blindly follows behind Triny into a large meglift.

“Watch your step,” she says. A wicked smile creeps its way onto her face as she watches him all but hop to keep from falling to the ground.

Neven locks gazes with her candy-red eyes, catching a hint of playfulness there. *Huzien women*, he thinks to himself with a mental sigh.

With a thought to her mobi, Triny authenticates with the meglift. It hums to life, rapidly ascending to the top floor of the building. The meglift comes to a stop with Triny now facing Neven, the two staring at each other for a few moments.

“Uh, is the door broken?” he asks.

“Turn around,” Triny tries her best to keep a smirk off her face.

Neven turns his head to see the “wall” behind him gone, the meglift opening into a large hallway.

“Down that hallway is the Founder’s office. Once your meeting with him is over, just return to this meglift, and it will take you to the exit,” Triny instructs.

Neven exits the meglift. He turns around to face Triny.

“Oh, thanks for—” Neven sees the meglift door closed, Triny gone. He shakes his head, realizing that he probably deserved his short exchange with the young Huzien girl. *Young*, of course, being relative; she was probably much older than him.

Looking around, Neven catches sight of the holoframes lining the corridor, projected images of the greatest of the greats standing hand in hand with Founder Ecnics, all honored for exceptional contributions to the sciences.

*I’ll one day be up there*, Neven thinks to himself. He makes his way down the hallway, taking a few seconds at each holoframe to catch the cycling of *Feshra* legends.

Finally making his way to Ecnics’s door, Neven stops. A bout of nervousness grabs him, keeping him as still as a plexicarbonite column—the very strong

material nigh immovable. Inlaid in the frosted glass door before him is a solitary name: Ecnics. Taking a deep breath, Neven wills his body to move forward. The glass slides open, revealing an expansive room that takes up most of the top floor. In different areas can be seen pristine meeting tables, inviting lounge chairs, elaborate couches and a fine collection of art from every era of Huzien history.

At the far end of the office is a large glass-and-nanoplexi desk on which hovers a multitude of holographic display screens—holodisplays. Neven can barely make out the form behind them but catches sight of straight black hair.

“Neven, do come in,” calls the form as the holodisplays disappear, leaving a completely bare desk. Spurred on by being addressed by the silver-eyed man, who Neven now recognizes as Ecnics, Neven quickly makes his way across the room toward the desk.

Getting up from his chair, Ecnics walks around the large desk and extends his caramel-skinned hand in greeting.

Neven, surprised at the very human gesture, stares for a moment before reaching out to clasp hands with the Founder in a traditional human handshake.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Ecnics,” he says. Neven stares at the Founder, speechless.

Realizing that one of the Founders of the Huzien Empire just introduced himself to him, Neven almost laughs at the ridiculousness of it all. *Of course you are, everyone knows that*, Neven thinks to himself.

Ecnics smiles, crinkling slightly the black *esha* marks—visual signifiers of his Huzien bloodline—at his temples; he very clearly heard Neven’s thought.

“This is, of course, the first time we’re meeting in person,” Ecnics seemingly addresses the unspoken statement. He motions for Neven to sit.

The boy moves to the chair as Ecnics returns to his own behind his immaculate desk. The young human watches the Founder take his seat, surprisingly amazed at the appearance of the man who looks not a day older than the Huzien girl who had escorted him up here.

“How’s your family?” Ecnics asks.

Nervousness blanks Neven’s mind. How was his family? Taking a few

seconds to remember that he had a family, Neven speaks.

“Good, they are all good.” Neven’s words come out awkwardly, the response keeping a smile plastered on Ecnics face. *Ask him about his*, Neven thinks to himself, the soft skill training—crammed into him when he first started at the MinSci—rushing back.

“How about your family?” Neven’s words are slightly louder than he intended.

“The last time I checked, my great-great-grandchildren and the few others who can claim relation back to me are doing quite well.” The smile never leaves Ecnics face.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid*, Neven thinks to himself; everyone knew the Founder’s last *wife*, or wife, died almost two millennia ago.

“I’m sorry. I—”

“It’s perfectly all right,” Ecnics interjects. With a thought to his mobi he quickly sends a small serving drone to hover next to Neven. “Would you like something to drink?”

Neven looks at the serving drone. His mobi quickly pulls down a listing of what is available. Within seconds a glass filled with root beer appears in a small opening that Neven reaches in to retrieve.

“Thanks,” Neven says. Another thought from Ecnics dismisses the drone.

“So you’re probably wondering why I called you here.” Ecnics calculating eyes evaluate Neven.

“The thought did cross my mind,” Neven says. Ecnics’s obvious attempts to calm Neven’s nerves seems to work.

“Your performance in the few years that you’ve been here have been exceptional.” The Founder gains momentum with each word. “The strides you’ve made in the fields of robotics and suplight drive efficiency are impressive. You’ve done in four years what has taken accomplished engineers decades.”

The words light up Neven’s face at the praise being showered on him.

“But...”

Neven’s heart sinks.

“I think you are missing some key elements that would make you a true *Feshra*.”

Neven’s eyes go wild, as passion explodes on his face.

“Founder, I swear to you, give me a chance, please! I can learn, just let me try! I—”

Ecnics holds up a hand to silence Neven, the quick action immediately holding the young engineer’s tongue.

“Which is why I am offering you the opportunity to spend the next two years of your life in the field.” An unnatural calm seems to descend on the room.

“In the field?” Sitting back in his chair, Neven silently mouths the words again.

“Yes, in the field, where you can experience Secnic technology at work firsthand.”

“*Secnic technology...*” Neven’s eyes go wide in horror. “You’re sending me into the military?”

“I’m not ‘sending’ you anywhere,” Ecnics continues to visually evaluate Neven. “I’m ‘offering’ you the opportunity to gain skills which you lack, under the guidance of a close friend.”

As the Founder finishes his statement, Neven suddenly notices the man standing off to the far left of Ecnics, a blue military cape covering his shoulders and falling below his thighs. The man stares out the window, seemingly oblivious to his conversation with Ecnics. Neven can’t make out his face but can clearly see the curly mane of white hair coming down to his shoulders and his light brown skin. *Lanrete... Two Founders!* Neven thinks to himself. He clearly recognizes the silhouette of the other Huzien Founder.

Catching Neven’s thoughts, Lanrete cracks a smile but hides it well.

“Wait...” Neven says. “The Founders’ Elite...” Terror grips his stomach. He breaks out into a cold sweat. He had heard of the recent death within the Founders’ Elite, a public ceremony held for the man with the services streamed on the Gnet. Neven turns back to face Ecnics, all color drained from his face, his olive skin pale white.



“Yes,” Ecnics replies.

“As a Secnic...”

“...and chief engineer.” Ecnics brings up one of his holodisplays, now facing Neven and displaying a three-dimensional model of the starship *Foundra Ascension*.

Neven stares at the holodisplay, his mind racing as his eyes shift from the screen to Lanrete and then back to Ecnics.

“Why?” Neven asks.

“I’ve already answered that question.” Ecnics has an air of annoyance in his voice. He leans back in his chair, staring at Neven, who looks at him with a helpless expression. “The choice is yours. I’m not forcing you to do this. You know what the Founders’ Elites are and the dangers that exist there, but keep this in mind...” Another holodisplay appears on his desk, again facing Neven. This one scrolls through images of some of the top scientists and engineers of the recent era.

“Secnics are some of our best *Feshra*. The knowledge they gain in the field trumps centuries of lab work.” Narrowing his eyes, Ecnics stares into Neven’s soul. “You, my dear Neven, do not have centuries to sit in a lab with any hopes of greatness. You are human. Your lifetime is barely that of two centuries.” Ecnics pauses, while he lets those words sink in for a moment. “The experience that you would gain as a Secnic would elevate you past all that.”

Neven lets out a heavy sigh. *I don’t really have a choice*, he thinks to himself.

The thought causes Ecnics to frown.

“This is completely your decision,” Ecnics says.

Neven stares at the holodisplay, watching the images of well-known *Feshra* stream by. He thinks back to the hallway, to the legends that stood there with Ecnics, who will forever hold a place in history. A look of determination flashes across his eyes. He glances back at Ecnics.

“I’ll do it.” Neven’s heart skips a beat as the words leave his mouth.

Ecnics watches Neven for a long moment, then dismisses the holodisplays.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

Ecnics nods and stands. Neven does likewise.

“Very well. You leave in a week with Founder Lanrete. Please let Triny know if you need anything, and she will assist you in acquiring it.”

“Triny?”

“The lady who escorted you up here.”

Neven thinks back to the red-eyed Huzien girl, his thoughts flickering to his extended gaze at her approach, and then her frown.

“Great.”

Ecnics walks around the desk once more and heads toward the door, stopping for Neven to follow. With a quick look to Lanrete, who still gazes out the window, Neven turns and steps alongside Ecnics.

“He’ll take good care of you,” Ecnics says. They arrive at the door to his office. “Be careful” is what Ecnics leaves Neven with, as the young human walks through the sliding glass door.

Those last words hit Neven like a nanoplexi wall. What in Thae did he just sign up for?

# CHAPTER 4

Ecnics watches Neven slowly walk down the corridor and enter the meglift, the doors closing behind him.

“Don’t let me regret this.” Ecnics moves to his desk.

“I promise nothing.” Lanrete turns from the window and leans against it.

Ecnics stands at his chair, watching Lanrete for a long moment, subtly drumming his fingers on the nanofiber mesh back.

“I will say one thing though.”

“What’s that?” Ecnics raises an eyebrow.

“I think Neven needs to learn how to not broadcast his thoughts to the world.” Both men break out in mild laughter.

Ecnics shakes his head, dropping into his seat, bringing up all his holodisplays.

“I’m sure Soahc can fix that.”

“That’s a good idea.” Lanrete walks over to Ecnics desk and lightly knocks on the glass with his knuckles.

“Please don’t do that,” Ecnics chides. With a final defiant knock, Lanrete exits the office. Ecnics sits in silence, his mind in flux as he contemplates the decision he just made.

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As the meglift door slides open, Neven is startled to see Triny standing right across from him.

Her face is a mask—no emotion, no smile or frown, just a disinterested glare.

“The exit is this way,” she says.

“Hold on a second,” Neven counters.

She turns back to him, annoyance hanging from her like a cloak.

“I wanted to apologize. My actions earlier were wrong. I disrespected you, and I don’t even know you. I’m sorry.”

Triny looks at Neven, shocked, words escaping her as she stares at the green-eyed human.

“Th-thanks.”

Neven gives a slight bow. He walks past her and toward the exit, attempting to retrace the path they took to the meglift. He wanders for a few minutes until eventually finding the right path, his mind quickly building a layout of the floor in his head.

“Hold on!” comes a call from behind him as he exits the glass doors into the lobby area with the soothing waterfall. Neven turns to see Triny running up to meet him. With a thought to her mobi, Triny transfers a flood of information about the Founders’ Elite, his departure schedule and other important contacts to his mobi.

“All that is information you’ll need and my work contact channel, in case you require anything in preparation for your departure.” She hesitates for a moment. Biting her lip, her eyes scan Neven up and down before eventually locking on to his gaze.

Her expression sends a nervous chill down his spine. He sees a hunger in her eyes.

“And this,” Triny’s voice switches to a sultry tone, as another set of details transfers into Neven’s mobi, “is my *personal* channel.”

She flashes Neven a playful smile that causes his pants to tighten. The sudden change in her demeanor throws the young human off. He subconsciously backs up a step.

“This way,” Triny walks past him with just a little more sway in her hips.

Neven follows behind her without even thinking, as she escorts him to the exit. With an expectant smile, Triny bows. The door closes behind him. Unsure of what just happened, Neven stands outside the MinSci administration building and lingers on Triny's channel details. He wasn't sure how, but he now had the contact info of an incredibly attractive woman staring back at him from the microdisplay in his eye. His mind wanders. He imagines her looking at him with that same expectant smile, her clothes dropping to the floor. Quickly shaking away the image and chiding himself for letting his mind go there, he walks to the courtyard.

Stopping, he turns and glances toward the top of the administration building, his mind returning to the new reality he found himself in. *This is a bad idea*, Neven thinks to himself, slowly making his way back to his home away from home.

# CHAPTER 5

Soft pulsating hums emanate from the wireless field reactors sprinkled throughout the busy excavation camp. Standing in a makeshift control center, Menus Hansa stares impatiently at a nearby holodisplay, a frown etched across his face. He eyes the power output, visibly frustrated. The *esha* marks running down his temples—clear signifiers of his Huzien bloodline—bulge ever-so-slightly. Looking up, he flashes an anger-filled gaze at Justin Allie, his bronze-skinned assistant, the young man a few feet away from him.

The Huzien has blamed every failure over the past two weeks on the human, the stress of the job taking its toll on them both.

A recent graduate from the top university on Thae, this excavation dig is the young engineer's first real job. However, working with Menus has made him regret taking the position, the huge payday hitting his bank account seemingly not worth the headache.

“Fix this, now!” Menus growls. His voice sends a chill down Justin's spine.

“I know. I know! Five minutes.” Justin is heads down, immediately scanning through hardware logs.

Without another word, Menus turns and exits the control center to cool off. With an annoyed grumble, the older man determines that he is paying the kid way too much money. Eventually making his way toward the makeshift medical bay deployed onsite, Menus decides to check in on a few of his old

friends. The automatic door slides open as Menus walks in, crisp cool air greeting him, where he finds it just a little easier to breathe.

His ears pick up the sounds of incessant muttering, the voice of a veteran member of his team. The man is older than Menus by two centuries, a picture of what Menus imagined he'd look like after another two hundred years of dig sites. He slowly makes his way to his old friend, the man staring off into space, whispering something incoherent. A few feet away another man lays in the same state, both unresponsive, with fear in their eyes.

"They aren't getting any better," a female says off to his side.

Menus glances over to see a middle-aged Huzien woman watching him. She wears a formfitting white medical jumpsuit and is in impeccable shape. His eyes wander to her breasts, his mind going back to a time long ago when the two of them spent many a night in each other's company. A shrill whistle snaps his attention back to her eyes, a cold stare causing him to glance away and down at his men.

"You'd figure a man your age would have learned manners by now," she snaps.

"Not sure why you care, Laura. I've seen you naked more times than I can count." Menus' tone drops the temperature in the room a few degrees.

Laura catches herself before launching into a verbal beratement of her former lover, the man continually finding ways to get under her skin.

"Still no idea what caused this?" Menus asks.

Taking a few seconds to calm down, Laura inhales a deep breath. She brings up a holodisplay.

"I've ruled out toxins, diseases, viruses and a myriad number of neurological disorders. I'm unsure what could be causing this or why only these few are affected." Pausing for a moment, she looks back to see Menus staring at his old friend, a look of pain on his face. "Menus, if this starts spreading, I'll order an immediate evac."

*Maybe this dig isn't worth it*, Menus thinks to himself. Frowning, he shakes his head. "L.J., you just work on making them better. You let me worry about this expedition."



“Don’t call me that.” A split second of weakness flitters across her eyes as Menu glances over at her. Looking down, he turns and walks out of the medical bay.

“NO, NO, PLEASE!” shouts the older Huzien. Menu stops and spins around. “NO, NO! I DON’T WANT TO DIE! NOO!” he screams. Pure terror laces his voice.

Laura rushes to his side, restraining him in the bed, the older man’s heart racing as his levels spike. With a thought, she sends a medical drone to her side, then orders it to give a quick prick at the patient’s neck, sending a burst of nanites into his bloodstream with a powerful dosage of sedatives. Resting her arms on the hospital bed, Laura glances over to Menu with a look of sympathy; she knows how much it pains him to see the man in this state.

*Crazy coincidence, nothing but a crazy coincidence.* Menu repeats in his mind. Turning, Menu quickly leaves the medical bay. He heads back to the control center.

“Did you fix it?” Menu snarls. He comes to stand next to Justin, the young human busy at work recalibrating power fields for the entire camp.

“Five seconds.” Justin doesn’t glance up at the Huzien.

“Hey, your five minutes are almost up!” Menu fixes Justin with a look of annoyance. “Then I do it myself and start docking your pay.”

“Done!” Justin replies. He claps his hands, victory etched across his face.

Menu huffs as he glances to the large holodisplay in the camp, all field reactors showing green across the board.

“We finally ready for this?” Menu’s voice is filled with anticipation.

“It’s hard to be sure. The equipment is finicky at best. I think the five-hundred-thousand-year-old dust is messing with our gear.”

Menu grunts at the poor attempt at a joke; maybe Justin could make it in this life after all.

“I’ll tell you what. In my 537 years of digging stuff up, this is the most troublesome dust I’ve ever encountered!” the large Huzien gives a halfhearted laugh.

Justin wisely joins in, as Menu moves closer to his holodisplay.

A broadcast comes in from the equipment team. Both glance to the screen now showing an aerial view of the camp,

“Everything is in place!” comes the quick message in their ears.

Menus nods. He glances to Justin, pessimism etched across his face. “Light ‘em up!” The old Huzien slaps Justin on the back.

The young human reaches out to the excavators through his mobi, a thought initiating the boot cycles of each device. The field reactors shudder suddenly, as the power spikes out, with Justin quickly compensating by initiating a soft reboot of each reactor in sequence.

“What the heck was that?” Menus glares at Justin.

“Dust,” Justin counters. Menus grudgingly nods his head while eyeing the young man.

“Clear the area!” Justin broadcasts.

Within a few seconds an all-clear message flashes across the holodisplay. Justin nods. With a glance at Menus, Justin brings the excavators fully online. Dirt and rock are thrown with careful precision from the targeted area off to the side, a wall of earth quickly pilling high to the sky. In a matter of seconds, a massive cube-shaped hole comes into focus on the holodisplay, aerial drones returning the images to the command center.

“What in the world...” Menus whispers. He stares at the image on the screen, Justin echoing the same sentiment. The Huzien turns and breaks into a sprint toward the dig site.

Menus comes to a stop at the edge of the dig, his heart pounding in his chest, the sprint from the command center leaving him almost out of breath. He bends down in a crouch, amazed at the sight of a large black sphere hovering in the center of the excavated area. The rest of his team now stands around the large hole, a few moments of disbelief passing between them. Breaking his gaze from the strange sight, he looks around at everyone staring slack-jawed.

“Let’s get to work, people!” their leader shouts. The crew scrambles to set up gravity wells to allow entry into the new area. Within minutes Menus utilizes one of the wells to quickly traverse to the bottom of the large hole, his team speedily setting up their equipment near the strange black sphere.

Entranced by the object, Menus finds himself moving closer as he ignores every safety protocol he himself wrote. Within seconds he's standing right next to the object. Reaching up, he touches it. The ice-cold surface causes a powerful shiver throughout his body. Incessant whispers pervade his mind. He hops back and falls to the ground, the whispering instantly gone.

Shaking his head clear, Menus pushes himself up from the ground. All around him, warning sounds and worried yells alert him to new power problems, prompting the Huzien to break out in a cursing fit. Menus turns and heads toward a nearby gravity well, the older man dreaming up the verbal lashing he would give Justin. Intense heat at his back stops him in his tracks. He slowly turns around, eyeing the sphere. Intrigued, Menus slowly approaches it, reaching his hand out to touch it once more. Searing heat burns his hand as his mind yells at him to pull it back. He grabs his hand, scorch marks covering his palm. A yell from behind makes him turn. The new field reactor explodes, sending one of his veteran team members flying hard against the dirt wall, the woman collapsing in a pool of her own blood.

Menus bursts into motion, quickly running toward the injured woman. Something out of the corner of his eye catches his attention, stopping him in his tracks. Looking back, he stares at the impossible. The sphere slowly rises, up and out of the pit created by his team. A gut-wrenching fear takes hold, twisting his stomach in ways he had never felt. The whispers return like a flood. His mobi blips, the Huzien answering the call instantly with a thought.

"We need medical assistance down here now! We have injured. What's going on?" Menus yells.

"The power levels are spiking. I've never seen anything like this. I'm at a loss for what to do."

"Turn them off!" Menus yells.

"I've tried. None of the reactors are accepting my commands. We've lost full control! They were power cycling before, but...but...it looks like something is keeping them active. They're reaching critical levels!" Justin sputters out, true fear in his voice.

"Evacuate the camp! Get everyone back to the ship! We can't afford to be

here when all these reactors go critical. I'm sure your fancy education taught you what happens when they do."

With that, Menus ends the call and breaks off into a full sprint toward the fallen woman.

"I'll be damned if I leave you down here to die, Verri!" he yells to her unmoving body.

Menus reaches her side and carefully picks her up in his arms, ignoring the pain in his hand, his clothes readily stained with her blood. The Huzien watches her chest rise and fall, her weak breaths giving him a faint glimmer of hope. He takes another look at her body, his heart dropping as he realizes that some of the wounds may be fatal.

Glancing again at the sphere, the object hovering ominously above the dig site, Menus shakes his head. He breaks into another full sprint. He holds the dying woman close to his chest, hoping against all odds that the gravity well still had power. His feet pound on the hard dirt as he breathes heavily, the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

"Just a few more feet," he tells Verri. He picks up speed, the older woman's breaths becoming weaker with every passing second.

"We're gonna make it!" he yells. Optimism overwhelms Menus Hansa as the gravity well lights up at his presence, the device lifting him slightly into the air. A deafening boom rocks the area. A powerful force knocks him hard to the ground onto Verri, destroying the gravity well and sending him into the waiting darkness.

# CHAPTER 6

Neven arrives at Septna Engineering Bay on the MinSci grounds, his thoughts in a whirl from his meeting with Ecnics. His gaze slowly comes up to hang on the Biomechanical Recon Assault Support Frame, or BRAS for short. He had spent the past nine months of his life developing the prototype in partnership with his brilliant team of aspiring *Feshra*. The powerful mobile weapon stands in the center of the bay, snakes of wires coiling all around it with its innards open for all to see. The impressive feat of engineering dwarfs all the other weapons lining the walls, other mobile frames seeming diminutive and childish. His face goes soft. This was his creation, his child. It was the first of its kind, the advanced interface systems designed to allow a single Secnic—one of many combat-proficient scientists of technology—to function not only as long-range recon but heavy-fire support on the front lines. Neven watches his team busy at work and completely ignorant of his arrival. He frowns.

“So I just heard we’re losing you,” says a woman to his side, out of Neven’s field of view.

The young engineer turns to see his Project Lead, Charlene Yentu, staring at him with bright blue eyes. An empathetic smile is etched on her face, highlighted by light brown *esha* marks running from her temples down to her open-toed heels. Neven likes her. She is everything he wants in a woman:

smart, successful and a science nerd at heart. Unfortunately, like most women of her caliber, she is already married and much older than him.

Everyone in the engineering bay stops as her words register, the whole lab turning to see Neven standing near the entrance.

Neven gulps.

“What is she talking about?” Kechu says. He stands next to the BRAS Frame, his eyes wide.

Neven looks at his red-haired Huzien friend and lets out a sigh; the two had become good friends during his time at the MinSci. Neven had worked hard to build a social network, and Kechu is one of the few who had made the cut. Now with him leaving, he felt as if he was letting go of all those relationships. Thoughts of Triny flashes in his mind, her sweet lips and playful smile causing him to laugh in bitter irony. Neven’s shoulders slump, he shuffles to his primary station and flops down in his seat, staring at empty air.

Charlene walks over to stand next to Neven, sympathy tugging at her heart as she watches the new Secnic. Her memory brings back the emotions she had experienced when it had been her in that seat so many years ago. Charlene turns to look at her team, most of them still standing around looking at Neven. She shakes her head as the Project Lead in her takes control.

“Don’t you all have work to do?” she asks.

Numerous teammates scramble back to work, but Kechu ignores Charlene’s words. He joins them, pulling up a chair and sitting next to Neven.

Neven looks at him, his mind swirling at the chaotic thoughts playing out in his head. Sitting up in his chair, he latches on to one of the thoughts, his mind becoming laser focused. He brings up a piece of new information sent to him by Triny on his holodisplay. Rotating in a slow fashion is a three-dimensional model of the *Foundra Ascension*, with various readouts and schematic information flickering on adjoining holodisplays.

“I’ve been assigned to the *Foundra Ascension*, Founder Lanrete’s personal ship,” Neven blurts out, the words surreal. “I will take over as his chief engineer, and I will also take on responsibilities as a member of the Founders’ Elite—” Neven pauses. He struggles to complete the statement,

each word more painful to say. “—as a Secnic.”

“WHAT?” Kechu stands, his voice echoes throughout the massive room. “You can’t be serious! A Secnic? Why on Thae would you ever do that?” Kechu has horror etched across his face.

“That’s enough of that!” Charlene chimes in. She directs a stern look at Kechu, an edge in her voice. “While I’m sad to see Neven go, he’s been selected for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. We can’t try to keep him for our own selfish reasons.”

Kechu steps back in embarrassment.

Charlene smiles at Neven. He looks up at her, slightly comforted by her words. He could sense that Charlene had probably seen many engineers, like him, turn away from great opportunities in her past eighty years at the MinSci. She wasn’t only his boss, she was a mentor to him, and he would miss her the most. When he had first joined the Weapons Development Branch of the MinSci, it had been Charlene who took him readily under her wing, helping him get adjusted to the illustrious but brutal work environment.

Kechu flashes Charlene a defeated look.

Neven looks from Kechu to Charlene and then turns around, back to his station. His holodisplay shifts from the *Foundra Ascension* to the BRAS Frame. He falls back into his normal routine, a list of current tasks for the day sliding into his queue. The prototype is complete, the team now entering the final stages of preparation for its first field test. Neven wants to make sure everything is ready, since he won’t be present to watch it, another drawback to his current situation.

Seeing Neven dive into his work again, Kechu takes the hint and leaves his friend to work in peace. Charlene puts a comforting hand on Neven’s shoulder and then goes back to her responsibilities managing the team and the overall project itself.

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The soft white glow of tree lights illuminates the upscale neighborhood as Neven steps from his sequin blue colored *Encro 350* coupe, one of the few splurges he has allowed himself. He hears the door closing behind him as he



crosses the short walkway leading up to his posh house. Neven stops, staring at the sleek exterior, taking in the life he had created for himself. This was his; he had earned it, and now he would be saying good-bye to it all.

He lets out a sigh, something quickly becoming a trend, as he glances around his neighborhood. It is a mix of single-family homes, lush trees and well-maintained greenery hiding lavish houses from prying eyes. It has the clear feeling of wealth permeating from every window and driveway. The curious stares he had gotten when he had first moved in reminded him of how different he was from others his age. The neighbors quickly pieced together that he worked for the MinSci, many deciding to stay far away from the young engineer.

Slowly he approaches the nanoplexi door to his house. As his mobi unlocks it, the door silently sliding open, he walks through without pausing. Taking off his shoes—a habit pounded into his head from an early age—he slides them onto a little rack off to the side with his whole footwear collection. Walking utterly exhausted into his living room, Neven collapses onto his couch. He sinks into the comfortable nanofibers, another one of his splurges. The massive cushions start the process of drowning out his thoughts, replacing them with the allure of a good night's sleep.

His mind wanders to the short conversation with Charlene as he was leaving the restaurant. He couldn't resist when the team had invited him out for a farewell dinner, and he was glad he had gone. The Project Lead had told him about the curious eyes on him, most of the MinSci department heads watching his every move. Some wanted him to fail, while others just wanted him for themselves. The bloodthirsty politics make Neven cringe, the young human never wanting to enter the world of management. Remi Etwa, the current Department Head of Weapons Development, had fought tooth and nail to keep Neven from Ecnics.

Charlene told him of the tense arguments heard from Remi's office whenever she forgot to close the door. She wasn't sure what finally convinced the relentless woman, although Charlene theorized that it might have had something to do with her next-in-line spot to become Chief Assistant being jeopardized by her stubbornness. Of course those were only rumors.

Neven stares up at his vaulted ceiling. He lets out the largest sigh he'd had all day. Just eighteen hours ago, his largest concerns had been finding a girlfriend and finalizing the BRAS Frame. Now he was about to head into space as a Secnic in service to Founder Lanrete and the military.

"Mom's gonna flip..." Neven whispers to himself. He imagines the conversation with his parents. A blip from his mobi pulls him out of his thoughts.

"Aurari Netzcha..." Neven says to himself, reading the name flashed across his retinae. The contact is highlighted as one given to him by Triny. He accepts the call. A green-eyed Huzien girl appears in his microdisplay, her crisp military uniform impeccably maintained and visible from the chest up.

"This is Neven."

"Hello, Mr. Ken. My name is Lieutenant Aurari Netzcha. I am the administrative coordinator of the *Foundra Ascension* and personal assistant to Founder Lanrete." She has a slight accent.

"Hello, Lieutenant Netzcha."

"Please, call me Auri," she responds softly. Her dark-chocolate-toned face lights up in a genuine smile.

The woman's stark beauty momentarily blanks Neven's mind as he stares at her, struggling to regain conscious thought.

"Lanrete has instructed me to assist you in relocation to the *Foundra Ascension*. I have arranged for a military moving crew to arrive at your residence tomorrow morning at 0700 GST and assist with packing."

"GST?"

"Galactic Standard Time. Your mobi will adjust, once you have left the planet's surface. For now I recommend setting it as a secondary time option in your default display."

With a quick thought Neven does exactly that, an additional clock appearing in the micro-heads-up display, or the HUD, on his retinae, right below the local time.

"Wait...I thought I had a week before leaving with Founder Lanrete," Neven says.

“Yes, and no. The Founder wishes to depart the system by the end of the week, which will require you to be on the ship and settled as soon as possible. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.”

With that, Auri flashes another smile, her eyes making his heart skip a beat as the call ends. The image of Auri lingers in his thoughts for a few moments as his HUD fades. *These Founders sure know how to pick them*, Neven thinks to himself. Performing a quick search on Galactic Standard Time, Neven can't help but laugh.

“Thirty-hour days. That's...just...awesome,” Neven speaks sarcastically to the empty room. Another thought brings up his HUD again. He sees the time read 2900 GST. Releasing a sigh once more, he allows himself to fall back into the comfort of his couch, exhaustion catching hold of him and dragging him willingly into the world of the dreaming.

# CHAPTER 7

Zun wakes suddenly, her mobi chirping in sync with her doorbell. She lays in bed, staring at the ceiling, as she brings up an external view of her quarters.

“Marcus...” She watches the ebony-skinned giant standing at her door, Marcus patiently waiting outside. Zun sees his massive fist come up and pound on the nanoplexi frame, the sounds heard in parallel throughout her quarters. She continues to do nothing, the pounding coming again after a few moments.

“Come on, Zun. Open up,” Marcus Henson says. His voice is slightly muffled, as he rings her doorbell again through his mobi.

Letting out a sigh, wishing he would just go away, Zun gets up, grabbing a robe from her wardrobe. Remotely she opens the door to her quarters. She moves to stand at the entrance to her bedroom. A door two rooms across from her opens, a large dining room table in between her and the giant of a man who steps into her quarters. Zun rests her head against the bedroom doorframe as she stares at Marcus.

His bluish-gray gaze locks on her form, sympathy etched across his face. From the distance he could just make out the faded black *esha* marks running down the sides of her face and neck. The marks enter and then exit her robe, continuing to her calves and down to her feet. Even in the low light he can still make out her half-Huzien bloodline, his eyes not those of a normal human.

“You haven’t left this room since Yuvan’s funeral. Is everything OK?” Marcus asks. His tone protective, sympathetic.

“Besides Yuvan being dead, everything’s just peachy,” Zun says.

Marcus’s broad shoulders slump. He starts walking across the quarters toward her, his chiseled muscles evident through his Founders’ Elite uniform. He stops in front of her, his height towering over her. She watches him—awkwardly unsure as to what will happen next. Reaching out, he embraces her in a hug, his hulking arms gentle and comforting. She closes her eyes and leans into him, letting his hug drown out the pain.

“I miss him too,” Marcus says. He releases her and moves toward the kitchen area next to where they stood. With a simple thought to his mobi, he orders a container of fresh orange juice to slide up on a tray with two cups. Marcus opens the container and pours two full cups of orange juice, picking up both and walking one over to Zun.

She takes hold of the cup, using her free hand to keep her robe closed.

“You should get dressed.” Marcus smiles.

Zun downs the orange juice, handing the cup back to him and nodding her head. She retreats into her room, the door sliding closed behind her. A few minutes go by, the VRC—Vencom rinse chamber—humming throughout her quarters.

Marcus takes a seat on the large couch near the main entrance. The hum stops. Marcus listens to Zun exit the bathroom and shuffle around in her room for a while. The door to her bedroom eventually slides open. She walks into the living area covered in an oversized T-shirt with the symbol for the Founders’ Elite plastered across the front. The top of the design is a crescent, appearing to swallow a small orb, with three lines below it.

“Any news yet from Lanrete?” Zun moves to the kitchen area and grabs a small bag of flavored protein chips.

Marcus watches her for a few seconds, hesitantly bringing up the holodisplay built into the small table in front of the couch.

“Yeah...I talked with Auri this morning. The young engineer from the MinSci accepted the position.”

Zun frowns. She puts down the protein chips, no longer interested in eating.

“Neven, right?” Zun moves to the couch as Marcus pulls up the bio of their new team member.

“Neven Kenk, human male, has been at the MinSci for four years.”

“Only four years?” Zun looks at Marcus skeptically.

“Apparently he’s some prodigy, twenty-nine years old.”

“Interesting...” She scrolls through Neven’s history on the holodisplay. “Hmm, never went through the Huzien education system. Has been working in the field since...sixteen?” Zun flashes Marcus a surprised look.

“Must have been some kind of genius to get into the MinSci so young.”

“In the 160 years I spent there, we never hired an engineer that young.” Her mind wanders to her former life. “Most of our exceptional candidates were just finishing specialized education, the youngest maybe at thirty-two.”

“Sounds to me like you like him already.” Marcus laughs. Zun flashes him a glance tinged with a hint of anger, prompting him to raise his hands in a diplomatic gesture. “I’m just sayin’, I can see why Lanrete wanted him.”

Zun lets out a sigh. She leans back in the couch, the cushions pillowing around her as she sinks into them.

“Seriously though...are you OK? I’ve never seen you like this.”

Zun looks over at Marcus and tries her best to give him a reassuring smile.

“Yeah, I’ll be OK. It was just...so sudden.” She averts her eyes.

Marcus watches her silently for a long moment. Shaking his head, he lets out a sigh.

“Well, Arnea wanted me to check on you. And it looks like you’re still alive, so I think I’ll go,” Marcus says.

Zun looks at him with a slight smile, the truth showing in his eyes.

“Tell Arnea thanks for me.” Zun gets up behind Marcus.

The large man stops, a thought popping into his head. “Oh, and Lanrete says to stop ignoring his calls.”

“Sure, as soon as he stops calling.” Zun shakes her head as she escorts Marcus to the door.

The giant turns around and picks her up in a tight hug. She lets out a yelp

and then laughs, her feet dangling above the floor. Setting her down gently, Marcus flashes her a broad smile as he exits her quarters.

She watches the gray-haired giant leave. Suddenly alone in her quarters, she folds her arms, the air colder than it was mere seconds before.

# CHAPTER 8

Neven's mobi flares to life, the small device chirping in sync with his doorbell. Surprised, the young engineer tumbles from the couch to the floor with a loud thud. He rises slowly, confused, as he wipes the sleep from his eyes, a thought bringing up the lights around him. Ignoring the new pain in his head from his short meeting with the floor, Neven brings up his HUD, the time reading 0700 GST.

"At least they're punctual," Neven sighs, memories flooding back from the previous day. With a begrudging acceptance of being forced awake, he remotely opens the front door to let in the moving crew.

Spending the remainder of the morning packing away his life for the next few years, he makes his way into the kitchen, a growling monster in his stomach demanding food. With the moving crew gone, his possessions in tow, Neven decides to feed the beast. A thought to his mobi brings up a listing of the items in his Omnfridge dispenser, another sigh escaping his lips as he stares at the catalog, the delivery drones recently restocking his reserves.

"So much food going to waste," Neven mutters. He brings the dispenser to life, various sounds emanating from the large enclosed device. In the breadth of a minute, a plate of eggs and toast, accompanied by a cup of orange juice, rise through a hidden opening at the top. Moving to grab the tray, Neven's mobi chirps. He accepts the incoming call, pushing it through to the holodisplay



built into his kitchen counter. The image of his mother appears, looking at him with a smile.

“Hi, honey.”

“Hey, Mom.”

“How are you?”

“I’m doing well.”

“That’s good,” his mother stares at him silently for a few moments.

Neven pulls up a stool and sits down, starting on his food.

“No fruit?” His mom nods toward his breakfast plate.

An apple appears on the counter, then he reaches and pulls it next to his plate. His mother watches him with a slight smile. He takes a bite of the apple and returns to his eggs and toast.

“Oh, I received a message from a nice young lady named Triny Hazce. She said she was the secretary to Founder Ecnics.”

Neven’s stomach turns into a knot at the mention of Triny’s name.

“She was a very pretty girl. You should ask her out,” his mom continues nonchalantly.

Neven almost chokes on his food. He glances up at the holodisplay and his mother’s smiling face.

“What? You need to start thinking about these things seriously. You’re getting older!” his mom pleads with a defensive look.

“Mom! I’m twenty-nine!” Neven says. He drops his utensil and raises his hands defensively.

“And, before you know it, you’ll be 129, and I won’t have any grandchildren!” she lets out a huff. “That’s what happens when you work at places like the MinSci. Time just flies by, and you hardly notice it.”

Neven only shakes his head, fully understanding that he can’t win this battle.

“Well, dating Ecnics’s secretary won’t work out. I’ll be off planet for the next two years,” he counters, the logic of his statement seeming perfect.

“Your father and I had a long-distance relationship for three years before we got married. It allowed us to really get to know each other,” his mom pauses, “without the distractions of sex.”

“Oh, come on. I’m EATING!” Neven yells, looking at his mom as if about to gag.

“Oh, honey. Sex is something completely natural. It’s how we created you after all, once we were married of course,” she says. Neven covers his face with both palms, as he rests on his elbows. “Well, promise me that you’ll think about it!”

“I’ll think about it.” Neven flashes her an insincere look.

She lets out a sigh. Sitting quietly, she watches her son finish his eggs and toast, taking another bite of his apple. She rubs her hands for a few seconds with her eyes downcast.

“Are...you sure this is what you want to do?”

The sudden change makes Neven stop and look at his mother. Her face is tight. She is staring at him intently. Unable to take the expression on her face, Neven diverts his eyes.

“I...spoke with Founder Ecnics. He...believes that being a Secnic out in the field will give me...experience...that will help me become a *Feshra*,” Neven is suddenly unsure of himself.

“I don’t care what Founder Ecnics believes. Are you sure that this is what *you* want to do?” Her eyes narrow.

Neven looks down at his plate, staring at the crumbs left over from his toast. Clarity forms in his mind, as he remembers the images of *Feshra* lining Ecnics’s hall in the MinSci administration building.

“I think he’s right,” Neven’s tone is even.

“Honey, you’re already a *Feshra* in my book. Your father and I are so proud of everything you’ve accomplished. Don’t get yourself killed trying to please Founder Ecnics. There will be other opportunities...Trust me.”

“Thanks, Mom, but I’m going through with this.”

The determined look in the eyes of the confident boy she raised tells her everything she needs to know. Biting her lip, she looks at her son, profoundly proud and sad at the same time.

“OK. Let us know if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Mom. Tell Dad I said hi.”

“I love you, honey.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

“Be careful...” His mother stares at him for a long moment before ending the call.

Neven looks at the blank holodisplay as he stands up, moving his dishes back to the dispenser, where the items quickly disappear. He walks to a nearby wall and slumps against it, sliding down to the floor. Staring at the ceiling, Neven replays the conversation with his mother. She was right. She was always right. What had he gotten himself into?

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